

# Lingusitic Violence against Women as Manifested in Sexist Amharic Proverbs.

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## SOMMARIO

Prendendo spunto dalla mancanza di lavori precedenti sull'argomento, questo lavoro cerca di esplicitare le implicazioni dei proverbi amarici di argomento sessuale mirati a svalutare le donne. I dati necessari sono stati ottenuti attraverso interviste ad informanti, e ulteriormente arricchiti consultando opere scritte. Gli informanti sono stati selezionati con un campionamento finalizzato, consultando cinque uomini e cinque donne di 50-65 anni, sotto l'ipotesi che potessero fornire al ricercatore dati relativamente validi, avendo avuto l'esperienza di tutta una vita nell'uso paremiologico. I dati così ottenuti sono poi stati analizzati, concentrandosi in via primaria sulla descrizione e interpretazione dei diversi proverbi. Lo studio giunge alla conclusione che questi ultimi rappresentano diciassette diversi temi, identificati come unità di analisi di contenuti latenti. Questa costellazione paremiologica, cioè i temi dei contenuti latenti, risulta implicare una realtà prestabilita a carattere patriarcale, che promuove il dominio degli uomini sulle donne praticamente in tutti gli ambiti della vita. A ciò si collega la denigrazione, l'oppressione e lo sfruttamento di queste. La società presa in esame è permeata dalla convinzione che le donne siano inferiori agli uomini, e questa ideologia di genere prevenuta in favore dei maschi si riflette in un uso sessista dei proverbi, equivalente ad una violenza linguistica contro le donne.

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## 1. Introduction

According to Fasold (1990), sex-based linguistic variation is a prime example of the sort of social function that is fulfilled by language. Despite decades of feminist consciousness-raising, sexist language use still exists in many cultures. Sexist language is characterized by devaluing either of the two sexes, women being the usual subjects of devaluation in such a language use in virtually all cultures.

Jernigan (1999) contends that sexist language use has different dimensions. One of the major dimensions concerns the use of gender-specific titles and pronouns which can subtly influence our thoughts and expectations about gender roles and appropriate occupations and goals for the two sexes. The other category of sexist language is the use of linguistic forms (words, phrases, or sentences) in order to reinforce the idea of male superiority and female inferiority. In this case, sexist language use often suggests an inherent male dominance and superiority in many fields of life. Such implications are powerfully reflected through the use of sexist proverbs. According to Ssetuba (2002:1), a proverb is regarded as “a noble genre of oral tradition that enjoys the prestige of people’s wisdom and philosophy of life; proverbs are considered to be the analytic tools of thought as they are used to tell people what to do and how to act”.

As Fasold (1990) states, sexist language, and, by extension sexist proverbs, encourage discrimination and can discourage women from pursuing their dreams, hence disempowering them. Women disempowerment refers to the situation whereby women are forced to occupy a disadvantaged and inferior position within a society by depriving them of the power or authority to assume the opposite position. Sexist proverbs do so through their devastating semantic effect. By semantics we mean the conventional meaning conveyed through linguistic items (Yule 1996). Hence, sexist proverbs are said to have an overwhelming effect on woman disempowerment.

In the Ethiopian context, there are a number of sexist Amharic proverbs which disempower or subjugate women. However, this does not mean that there are no proverbs which are articulated in a way that they appreciate or empower women. The Amhara society has its own proverbs by which it reflects its positive views about women. Such proverbs are not the concern of this study, as they are not considered threats to women's normal social function. The present study is, therefore, intended to analyze the types and dimensions of semantic contents embedded in different Amharic sexist proverbs which are phrased in a way that they disempower/subjugate women.

In order to achieve the intended objective, data were collected from the target society by involving living informants, on the one hand, and by taking part in day-to-day discourse within the target society, on the other hand. Such data collection methods were further supplemented by document review (consulting different written materials, including Amharic text books and a book entitled *Amharic Proverbs* (cf. Emawayish et al., 1982). A total of ten informants (five men and five women) were purposively selected. These ranged in age from 50 to 65, so as to secure as many proverbs as possible, since elderly people are deemed to be rich in proverbial knowledge and usage. These informants were all from rural sites where Amharic is spoken as the only language, and almost all of them (except for one) were engaged in an agricultural livelihood. The following table presents detailed background information pertaining to the informants.

**Table 1: Informants' background**

No	Informant	Gender	Age	Educational level	Livelihood
1	Informant one	M	55	Uneducated	Farmer
2	Informant two	M	53	Can read and write/ Priest	Farmer
3	Informant three	M	64	Uneducated	Farmer
4	Informant four	M	58	Uneducated	Farmer
5	Informant five	M	65	Can read and write/Priest	Farmer
6	Informant six	F	51	Uneducated	Farmer/Housewife
7	Informant seven	F	62	Uneducated	Farmer/Housewife
8	Informant eight	F	57	Uneducated	Farmer/Housewife
9	Informant nine	F	50	Diploma	(Amharic) teacher
10	Informant ten	F	64	Uneducated	Farmer/Housewife

## 2. Sexist Amharic proverbs meant to subjugate women

This section deals with the description and interpretation of the sexist Amharic proverbs by way of disclosing the central meanings attached to the different target sexist proverbs, hence, a qualitative analysis. The target proverbs are subcategorized into various themes, which serve as units of analysis. For the sake of simplicity and to avoid repetition, only representative examples are addressed within the analysis, the

entire proverbial corpus corresponding to each category being indicated numerically in the following table.

**Table 2: The number and percentage of proverbs under different themes identified as units through latent content analysis.**

S.No.	Type of theme	Number of proverbs	Percentage
1	Hegemonic masculinity	19	12%
2	Evilness	16	10%
3	Women's dependence on men	15	9%
4	Lack of intelligence and critical thinking	15	9%
5	Suitability for subjection to domestic violence	13	8%
6	House wifization/Domesticity	12	7%
7	Segregation of activities	11	7%
8	Attachment to negative communal attributes	11	7%
9	Opportunistic and non-reliable behavior	10	6%
10	Non-trustworthiness/Infidelity	10	6%
11	Cowardice	8	5%
12	Talkativeness	7	4%
13	Lack of decision-making power and practicality	4	2%
14	Voracious eating	4	2%
15	Low social status/Inferiority	4	2%
16	Supersexines	4	2%
17	Irresponsibility/Negligent behavior	3	2%
<b>Total</b>		<b>166</b>	<b>100%</b>

We can observe from the table that out of the total 166 target proverbs, the identified themes subsume varying numbers of proverbs, ranging from the least, 3 (2%), which correspond to the theme signifying women's irresponsible behavior, to the highest, 19 (12%), corresponding to the theme which signals women's exclusion by virtue of promoting hegemonic masculinity. The figures imply that the target speech community tends to devalue women primarily by declaring hegemonic masculinity. A considerable number of sexist proverbs are also found to converge on the themes reflecting women's evil nature, women's dependence on men (men's control over women), and women's lack of intelligence and critical thinking; the theme which adheres to the labeling of women as evil creatures subsumes 16 proverbs, comprising 10% of the total corpus, while the themes signifying women's reliance on men and women's lack of intelligence and critical thinking subsume 15 proverbs, each which account for 9% of the total corpus. The latent contents of the different target proverbs affiliated with the aforementioned 17 themes are discussed below in detail.

### 2.1. Proverbs reflecting women's dependence on men

Proverbs categorized under this heading suggest that society considers the proper place of women that of seeking support from men, especially from their husbands. The support modality may be material, physical, psychological, and/or intellectual. This perspective of viewing women to be non-self-reliant promotes the unlimited power of men to be exercised on women in terms of controlling them and doing things for them, as if women were unable to address their concerns on their own. Such a societal perception of women's dependence on men arguably leads to suppression, dominance,

and violence by jeopardizing women's social power and status. Let us consider the following example proverbs.

- (1) a. **ሚስትና ዳዊት በብብት**  
*mistənnā dawit bābəbbət*  
'A wife and psalms should be kept under one's (a man's) armpit'
- b. **ሴትና በቅሎ እንደገሪዋ ነው**  
*setənnā bāk'lo əndägäriwa näw*  
'A woman and a mule behave like their trainer'
- c. **የሴት አገሯ ባሏ ማደሪያዋ አመሏ**  
*yäset agärwa balwa madäriyawa amälwa*  
'A woman's country is her husband and her livelihood is her character'
- d. **ወንድ ልጅ በተሾመበት ሴት ልጅ በተዳረችበ**  
*wänd lədz bätəfoməbbät set lədz bätadarätʃtəbbät*  
'A man is in his kingdom as a woman is in her marital destination'
- e. **አለባል ሴት ወይዘሮ አለማንገቻ ከበሮ**  
*aläbal set wäyzäro alämanggätʃa kəbäro*  
'A lady without a husband is like a drum without suspenders'
- f. **አለሰራ አይበላ እንጅራ አለባል ቆጥ አይሰራ**  
*aläsəra ayəbbälla əndzära aläbal k'ot' ayəssärra*  
'A perch<sup>1</sup> cannot be made without a husband as food cannot be eaten without work'
- g. **ባል የሌላት ሴት የመንገድ ዳር እሸት**  
*bal yäləllat set yämängäd dar əʃät*  
'A husbandless woman is like a ripened fruit near a main road'
- h. **በጋለሞታ ቤት ሁሉ ይጣላበት**  
*bägalämota bet hullu yət't'allabbät*  
'Everyone fights for a widow's home'
- i. **ሴት ከገለሞትች አውራ ዶሮ ይዞራታል**  
*set kägälämmotätʃtə awra doro yəzoratal*  
'If a woman becomes widowed, even a cock hovers around her'
- j. **ነፍስ በፈጣሪዋ ሴት ባሳዳሪዋ**  
*näfs bāfät'ariwa set basaddariwa*  
'As a soul is in its creator, a woman is in her master'

All of the examples cited above, in one way or another, reflect men's control over women. For instance, the example in (1a) articulates that a woman must be kept under a man's armpit just as is the case for psalms (a prayer book). This clearly entails that men are expected to impose their power in order to control women by following their every move. This ultimately deprives women of their freedom and independence. The example in (1b) dictates that women need guidance from men; women are viewed as behaving in the way in which they are trained by men, which implicitly means women are incapable of doing things in the absence of men's intellectual support. Women are

<sup>1</sup> ቆጥ 'Perch', in this context, refers to a kind of traditional sleeping place, especially in the rural sites of Amhara, constructed approximately half-way between the floor and the roof of a house. It can also be used as a place where hens and roosters sit at night.

also considered as depending on their husbands in order to survive. The examples in (1c and d) encode that women's livelihood is primarily based on the existence of their husbands.

Proverbs given in (1e and f) may be interpreted to mean that women are meaningless or at least insignificant without men (their husbands). This is viewed to be analogous to the existence of a drum without suspenders and eating without working. In the same fashion, women are viewed as disguised unless they get married. In order for women to be respected and psychologically rescued, they are expected to have husbands; otherwise they are more and more likely to experience sexual assault by everyone (male) as reflected by the examples (1g, h, and i). The worst scenario is the fact that women are assumed to be in a creation-creator relationship with men. The proverb in (1j) tells us about such a society's view concerning the relationship between men and women; this is performed by means of analogy to the relationship between God and the soul.

## 2.2. Proverbs reflecting women's lack of intelligence and critical thinking

In the target socio-cultural setting, women are viewed as possessing few or no intellectual qualities and little critical thinking ability. All the proverbs categorized under this theme portray women as lacking objectivity in how they think and what they do. Let us illustrate this by the following data.

- (2) a. **ሴት ምን ታውቃለች አዋቂ ትወልዳለች እንጅ**  
*set mən tawk'allätʃʃ awak'i təwäldallätʃʃ əndʒ*  
 'A woman does not know anything, but she gives birth to a knowledgeable child'
- b. **ለሴት ምክር አይገባትም**  
*läset məkər aygäbatəmm*  
 'A woman cannot understand advice'
- c. **ብልህ ሴትና ቀንዳም አህያ አይገኙም**  
*bələh setənnä k'ändam ahəyya ayəgäñnumm*  
 'It is impossible to get a wise woman and a donkey with horns'
- d. **ከባልሽ ታረቂ ቢሏት ልመና መሰላት**  
*käbaləʃ taräk'i bilwat lömmäna mäsälät*  
 'When advised to make peace with her husband, she thinks that it is a special request'
- e. **ሴት ሲያፍዋጩላት ያረሱላት ይመስላታ**  
*set siyafwatʃʃ'ullat yarräsullat yəməslatall*  
 'If a man boasts by whistling, his wife considers him a wonderful farmer'
- f. **በፋሲካ የተቀጠረች ገረድ ሁሌ ፋሲካ ይመስላታል**  
*bäfasika yätäk'ät't'ärätʃʃ gäräd hulle fasika yəməslatall*  
 'A maid servant employed at Easter thinks that it is always Easter'
- g. **የቄስ ሚስት አወቅሽ አወቅሽ ቢልዋት መጻፍ አጠበች**  
*yäk'es mist awak'ʃ awak'ʃ bilwat mäs'af at't'äbätʃʃ*  
 'A priest's wife washes a book when she is repeatedly told that she is clever'

- h. **ከባልዋ ብትጣላ ብልትዋን በካራ**  
*käbalwa bəttət't'alla bəltwan bākarrā*  
 ‘While she quarrels with her husband, she hurts her vulva with a knife’
- i. **እንስራዋን ረስታ ወደወንዝ ወረደች**  
*ənsərawan rästa wädäwänz wärrädätʃtʃ*  
 ‘Having forgotten her pot, she goes to a river’

All these proverbs directly or indirectly deny women’s intellectual capacity and wisdom. The examples in (2a, b, and c) directly assert that women lack intelligence to the extent that they are compared with an animal which is considered the most stupid by the society, i.e., a donkey. The society thinks that getting a wise and intellectual woman is like getting a donkey with horns, which is quite unrealistic. The examples in (2d, e, and f) present the message that women lack objectivity in the way they think. Women are viewed as thinking in a way such that they cannot distinguish between good and bad phenomena. They are represented equating advice with a request even if the advice is to their own advantage, for instance, making peace with their husband.

Women are also portrayed as failing to critically evaluate things or phenomena, so that they tend to be cheated in superficial matters. For example, if a husband boasts with whistles, a wife considers him a wonderful farmer, no matter how lazy he might be. Finally, the proverbs given in (2g, h, and i) deny women’s objectivity in what they do. Women are assumed to do things which would have negative impacts on themselves by virtue of lacking critical thinking. For instance, a wife is assumed to hurt her own vulva with a knife by thinking that it would offend her husband. Similarly, it is presumed that if a wife is repeatedly acknowledged for what she does, she tends to wash a book, an operation which is not expected of a normal person, in order to be further appreciated.

All the aforementioned scenarios clearly indicate that women are perceived by the society as lacking intelligence, wisdom, artistic qualities, and critical thinking. The proverbial expressions implicitly suggest that women cannot learn. Through such expressions, the community reflects its ideology that trying to teach women is all worthless and futile. This, in turn, dictates parents to teach their sons and not their daughters, hence, disempowering women.

### 2.3. Proverbs which reflect attachment of women to negative communal attributes

At a very basic level, the proverbial utterances grouped under this theme have some thematic feature which they share with those which are presented in the preceding section. This common feature has something to do with the reading related to lack of intelligence and critical thinking. Nonetheless, the following proverbs are distinguished from the previous ones basically because the message they hold could apply to both men and women. Despite the fact that the intended meanings can be attributed to both sexes, the proverbs are grammatically phrased by referring exclusively to women. This grammatical attachment of women to negative communal attributes obviously devalues women. The following proverbs exemplify this kind of female subjugation.

- (3) a. **ትለብሰው የላት ትከናከው አማራት**  
*täläbsäw yällat tækkänannäbäw amarat*  
'She who does not have anything to wear wishes to have veils'
- b. **የሌላት እራት ደም ምሳ አማራት**  
*yälellat ərat dämmo məsa amarat*  
'She who does not have anything for dinner wishes to have something for lunch'
- c. **አላንድ የላት ጥርስ በዘንዘና ትነቀስ**  
*aland yällat t'ərs bāzänāzāna tənnäk'k'äs*  
'She who has only a tooth gets tattooed with a pestle'
- d. **አይነጋም መስልዋት ከቋት አራች**  
*ayənägamm məsəlwat kāk'wat arratʃf*  
'She defecated on a mill thinking that the day does not come back'
- e. **የራስዋ ሲያር የሰው ታማስል**  
*yāraswasiyarr yäsaw tammassəl*  
'She takes care of others' while hers gets scorched'
- f. **የቆጡን አወርድ ብላ የብብትዋን ጣለች**  
*yäk'ot'un awärd bəla yäbəbbətwan t'alätʃf*  
'She who seeks to own something from the perch<sup>2</sup> loses what she has already held in her armpit'
- g. **ስታብጀው ውላ ባትላ**  
*səttabädzdzäw wəla batāla*  
'Having spent the day in preparing, she destroyed it with dregs'
- h. **ግማሹን ተላጭታ ግማሹን ተቀብታ**  
*gəmmafun tālatʃ'ta gəmmafun tāk'äbbəta*  
'She gets half of her head shaved and half of it buttered'
- i. **ጾማ ጾማ ለጸሎተሀሙስ እርጎ ትልስ**  
*s'oma s'oma läs'älotä hamus ərgo tələs*  
'Having been fasting, she licks yogurt on the prayer Thursday, the day just before good Friday'

The target society utters any of these proverbs to address unexpected activities which could be performed by either of the two genders. For example, the proverbs in (3a, b, and c) are sarcastic utterances which can be articulated to ridicule somebody, irrespective of gender distinction, in situations where s/he aspires, thinks, or does beyond what is expected in the current state of affairs (status quo). If someone fails to critically think and be objective in what s/he does, s/he tends to aspire to something that is hardly possible to achieve. In such cases, s/he becomes the target of gossip by means of proverbs of the type presented in (3a-c).

The society also expresses its observation about one's lack of ability to think/plan ahead. The proverb in (3d) reflects this view by analogy to a woman who defecates on a mill thinking that because the day will not return, she will not need the mill any more. The rest of the proverbs, i.e., (3e-i) also deliver a message associated with one's (male or female) lack of intelligence and critical thinking. The example in (3e), for instance, is meant to convey the reading that someone fails to understand priorities, so

<sup>2</sup> See previous note.

that s/he jeopardizes his/her own fate while devoting to help others in an illogical manner.

As noted earlier, the constellation of proverbs under this theme reflects the society's perspective about negative qualities which can be attributed to everyone. However, since the society is predominantly patriarchal, it tends to associate such negative attributes only with women, at least at the surface level of the proverbs. If the proverbial utterances are articulated by using masculine marked predicates, they do not make sense and the intended message tends to lose its strength. The proverbs get their explanatory power only if they are expressed with reference to feminine gender. This is evidently due to the fact that the society stereotypes women to be linked with negative attributes, such as lack of intelligence and critical thinking, as opposed to men, who are assumed to inherently possess a higher level of intelligence, artistic ability, critical thinking, and so on. This gender-biased ideology has led to addressing people characterized by stupid behavior or deeds with proverbs phrased in a way that they grammatically point at women. This unquestionably turns out to be disempowering to women.

#### 2.4. Proverbs which reflect women's house-wifization/Domesticity

This theme subsumes proverbs which reflect the society's ideology that women should be attached to (traditional) domestic activities. Such a stereotypical view of women's domesticity is used as justification for mistreating and exploiting them. Men are meant to dominate and control influential positions within the society by restricting women to domestic spheres, where they serve mainly as wives and mothers. The following data support this fact.

- (4) a. **የሴት ቀበጥ የበቅሎ መድን ለመሆን ገበያ ትወጣለች**  
*yäset k'äbät' yäbäk'lo mädən lämähon gäbäya təwät'allätftj*  
 'A brat woman goes to market in order to mediate a mules sale'
- b. **ሴት ይወዷል ማጀት ያንጎዳጉዷል**  
*set yəwädwal madzät yangodaggudwal*  
 'Loving a woman leads to hovering around the kitchen'
- c. **ሴት በማጀት ወንድ በችሎ**  
*set bämädzät wänd bätfəlot*  
 'As a woman is in a kitchen, a man is in a court'
- d. **የሴት ሞቷ በማጀቷ**  
*yäset motwa bämädzätwa*  
 'A woman's death is in her kitchen'
- e. **ሴት ለቤት ወፍጮ ለዱቄት**  
*set läbet wäftf'o läduk'et*  
 'As a woman is to home, so a mill is to powder'
- f. **ቤት ያለሴት ከብት ያለበረት**  
*bet yaläset käbt yaläbärät*  
 'Home without a woman is like cattle without a corral'

- g. **አይብ ከአግዋቱ ልጅ ከእናቱ**  
*ayəb kagwatu ləገz kännatu*  
 ‘As cheese is with its whey, so a child is with his mother’
- h. **በቅሎ ገዝቶ መጭ መጭ ሚሴት አግብቶ ምሳየን አምጭ**  
*bäk’lo gäzto mätf’ mätf’ mist agbəto məsayen amtj’*  
 ‘Buying a mule is riding as marrying a wife is ordering lunch’
- i. **እንጨት እይሸከሙም ላመድ እርጊት አያገቡም ላትወልድ**  
*əntfät ayəffäkkämm lamäd arogit ayagäbumm latwäld*  
 ‘It is not good to carry a [piece of] wood as it turns to ash and to marry an old woman as she cannot give birth’
- j. **የታደለች ሴት በፊት ትወልዳለች ሴት**  
*yätaddälätfj set bäfit təwäldallätfj set*  
 ‘A lucky woman gives her first birth to a girl’

All of these proverbs are phrased to reflect the society’s belief that men and women assume different roles, which have great affinity with public and domestic spheres, respectively. The examples in (4a-f) clearly disclose the fact that the target society views women, as opposed to men, as unsuited public activities. A woman is portrayed as being affiliated with the kitchen within her home as she is thought of being especially suited for cooking and other domestic tasks. If a woman tends to participate in public spheres, she is considered deviant. The proverb in (4a), for example, implies that going to market for the selling of cattle is a man’s job; and if a woman intends to mediate cattle’s sale, she is stereotypically labeled a brat.

The example proverbs given in (4g-j) indicate that women are expected to serve men as wives and mothers. They are supposed to cook food items at home. A wife is compared to a mule serving for transportation; this carries the clear implication that men exploit women through the act of domesticity. Again, women are used as instruments for reproduction and are expected to perform the task of child rearing. If a woman is infertile, the society neglects and discourages her to the extent that she should not get anyone to marry her, since she cannot succeed in perpetuating the lineage. An infertile woman is compared to firewood soon turning to ash, as in the example (4i).

Generally, the constellation of proverbs under this heading demonstrate that the target society views women as suited only for domestic roles. The ramifications are that the society has a socially established reality which deliberately narrows women’s vision and relegates their economic and social positions to the secondary levels. This is done by introducing a cult of domesticity in order to limit women’s chance of competing in the outside world with men, so that women are left with the only option of depending on men for all decisions in the world outside the home.

## 2.5. Proverbs indicating segregation of sexes

In this context, segregation of sexes is used to refer to the situation whereby the target society assumes men and women should perform distinct activities. This notion of separate role assignment suggests that women should not engage in certain activities which are meant to be performed by men (but not the other way round). Such an act of segregation even extends to the level of dichotomizing some natural phenomena, such as behavior and physical appearance, as the domain of only one of the sexes. The

following proverbs indicate that the society subjugates women by limiting their activities and behavior to those not performed by men.

- (5) a. **ሴትና ውሻ በእንክሻ**  
*setonna wəſfa bänkəſfa*  
‘Women and dogs defend by biting’
- b. **የሎሌ እልቃሽ የሴት ቀዳሽ**  
*yälole alk’af yäset k’äddaf*  
‘A vassal mourner is like a woman sanctifier’
- c. **የሀምሌ ብራ የባልቴት ወበራ**  
*yähamle bərra yäbaltet wäbära*  
‘A cleared-up July is like a communal labor of elderly women’
- d. **የፈረሰኛ ጥለት ለባሽ የሴት ትምባሆ ጎራሽ**  
*yäfaräsājña t’älät läbaf yäset təmbaho goraf*  
‘A cavalry wearing decorative bands is like a woman chewing tobacco’
- e. **የሴት መጠጥ ደፋር የወንድ አይናፋር**  
*yäset mät’ät’t’ däffar yäwänd aynaffar*  
‘A woman fond of liquor is like a shy man’
- f. **ለሴት ጠላ ለፈረሰ ቆላ**  
*läset t’älla läfäräs k’olla*  
‘Local beer is to a woman as the lowlands are to a horse’
- g. **የሴት ረዥም የግቅ ውዥምዥም አያስጎመዥም**  
*yäset räzzəm yämak’ wəzəmzəm ayasgomäzzəm*  
‘A tall woman and an over sized garment are not attractive’
- h. **የሴት አመዳም የአሮጌ ሆዳም**  
*yäset amädam yaroge hodam*  
‘An ugly woman is like a greedy elder’
- i. **የሴት በራ የበቅሎ ደንባራ**  
*yäset bära yäbäk’əlo dänbarra*  
‘A bald woman is like a startled mule’

The examples in (5a-f) externalize the societal belief that women are not in a position to handle some activities and/or their consequences. Proverb (5a) expresses the belief that women fail to beat others by fists unlike men. The major defense mechanism that women resort to is assumed to be biting just like dogs. This implies that defending oneself is attributed to men and women are viewed as incapable of doing so.

Activities such as sanctifying, chewing tobacco, and drinking liquor are also linked to men. It is believed that finding women to perform such activities challenges the status quo. In some cases, women could engage in the activities, but the end result would be disastrous to them. For instance, the examples given in (5d, e, and f) tell us that if women dare to chew tobacco or to drink much liquor, the consequences would possibly be self-detrimental. Such women are equated with a horse in the lowlands which is likely to die quickly. This is, however, assumed to be manageable for men; no matter how much liquor a man takes in, he is expected to handle the effect.

Similarly, the proverbs in (5g-i) display the society’s stereotyped segregation of some natural phenomena. A woman, unlike a man, is disregarded if she is ugly, bald, or too tall. These attributes are preferred to be possessed by men. This discloses the fact that

the society intends to subjugate women even by challenging physical appearances that are naturally determined for them. The same attribute is viewed differently according to gender: it is taken as something bad and destructive when it is attached to women, but it is acceptable when it characterizes men, hence, disempowering women via segregation.

## 2.6. Proverbs reflecting the acceptability of subjecting women to domestic violence

In the target socio-cultural setting, and evidently in many other cultures, women are vulnerable to domestic violence. Apart from doing tiresome physical labor, they are beaten by their husbands in situations where disagreement arises in the home environment. The society has socialized this phenomenon and takes it as something normative, so that people, including women themselves, do not consider it crime or abuse. The following data show that there is a long-lived act of abusing women within the domestic sphere.

- (6) a. **ሴትና አህያ የማችሉት የለማ**  
*setənnā ahəyya yāmāyʃəlūt yällämm*  
‘A woman and a donkey can tolerate everything’
- b. **የድንጋይን ጦርነት፣ የሸሮን ቀለብነት፣ የሚስትን ባርነት**  
*yädəngayən t’orənnät yäʃəron k’älləbənnät yämistən barənnät*  
‘Conflict using stone is analogous to supplies of mush and slavery of a wife’
- c. **አህያና ሴት ቢረግጥዋት አይከፋት**  
*ahəyyanna set birägət’wat aykäfat*  
‘A woman and a donkey do not refuse being trampled’
- d. **እናት ትረገጣለች እንደመሬት**  
*ənnat tərriägät’allätʃʃ əndämäret*  
‘A mother is trampled like the earth’
- e. **ሴትና አህያ በዱላ**  
*setənnā ahəyya bādulla*  
‘A woman and a donkey are controlled by a stick’
- f. **ከሸንጎ ቢረታ ከቤት ሚስቱን ሙታ**  
*käʃāngo birräta käbet mistun mätta*  
‘When a man was beaten in a forum, he went home and beat his wife’
- g. **ማንን ታሸንፋለህ ቢሉት ሚስቱን አለ**  
*mannəntaʃʃännəfalläh bilut misten alä*  
‘When a man is asked over whom he enjoys victory, he said, “my wife”’
- h. **አማቱን ምታ ቢባል ሚስቱን በየት አልፎ አለ**  
*amatun məta bilut misten bəyät alləfə alä*  
‘When a man is ordered to hit his mother-in-law, he said “how can I skip over my wife”’
- i. **የምታሸንፈውን ምታ ቢባል ወደሚስቱ ሮጠ**  
*yämməttaʃʃännəfawən məta bilut wädemistu rot’ä*  
‘When a man is ordered to hit the person over whom he has won, he runs to his wife’

The proverbs in (6a and b) disclose the fact that women are socially viewed as servants. They are thought of as complaining for nothing despite the overwhelming burden they experience in fulfilling the family's needs. Worse, women are considered as slaves and are equated with supplies of mush, which is the most frequently accessed (abused) food within the society. As indicated by proverb (6c), women are assumed to enjoy beating, especially at the hands of their husbands. By virtue of considering this ideology, men believe that women can be corrected from their wrong deeds only through physical punishment. Women are compared to the earth, which people always trample, to convey the message that they are suitable for beating. What is worse, a woman is taken to be analogous to an animal which is considered the most stupid within the society, i.e. a donkey, and both a woman and a donkey are supposed to tolerate beating.

There are situations where a husband projects his failure to succeed in a public concern on his wife after he is back home. Proverb (6f) suggests this. This implies that women are used as instruments to regulate men's disturbed feelings via physical punishment. Women, especially wives, are perceived by the society as being subordinates to men (husbands) and any husband believes that he can beat his wife to the extent that husbands immediately think of their wives in times when they are looking for someone against whom they can win. Proverbs in (6f-i) reflect this socially established reality.

To sum up, the conglomeration of proverbs related to the current theme demonstrate that the target speech community has long established a reality which dictates that women are eligible for domestic violence. Women, specifically wives, are abused at home in many ways, the worst scenario being beating. This fact is externalized by the society's long-lived folk literature, in general, and by its proverbs, in particular. The target proverbs are constructed in a way that they can promote the necessity and perpetuation of domestic violence against women. This is, therefore, taken as another obvious form of women's devaluation through the use of sexist proverbs.

## 2.7. Proverbs reflecting hegemonic masculinity

The notion of hegemonic masculinity refers to the material and social representation of the psychosocial and physical potency of men in a sexist society (cf. Hussein 2005). The stereotype about what constitutes masculinity is emphasized in the proverbs of the target speech community. The proverbs under this theme play an important role in reinforcing the socio-cultural ideals of masculinity, such as competitiveness, dominance, forcefulness, endurance, self-reliance, and readiness to take risks. The following examples directly or indirectly communicate notions related to this.

- (7) a. **ሴት የወለደ መቀመቅ ወረደ**  
*set yäwellädä mäḳ'ämäk' wärrädä*  
 'Someone who delivers a baby girl goes down to a hell'
- b. **ሴት አግብቶ ሴት ቢወልዱ የት አለ ንግዱ**  
*set agbäto set biwäldu yät allä nägdu*  
 'Marrying a woman and giving birth to a baby girl offers no benefit'
- c. **ከሴት ጠብደል የወንድ ኮሰማና ይሻላል**  
*käset t'äbdäl yäwänd kosmanna yəššalall*  
 'A skinny man is better than a huge woman'

- d. **ሴት ውፍረት እንጅ ትልቅነት የላትም**  
*set wəfrät əndzi təllək'ənnät yällatəmm*  
 'A woman has a huge body but not greatness'
- e. **ከሴት ልብ የወንድ ሳምባ ይሻላል**  
*käset ləbb yäwänd samba yəጃገገ*  
 'A man's lung is better than a woman's heart'
- f. **አላባት ቢዛቁን ይባክን**  
*alabbat bizak'k'un yəbakkən*  
 'Dedication without a father is wastage'
- g. **እላባት ኅመን ባግዋት**  
*alabbat gommän bagwat*  
 'Absence of a father offers cabbage with whey'
- h. **ተእናት ቀን ይሻላል**  
*tännat k'än yəጃገገ*  
 'Good fortune is better than a mother'
- i. **አባት የሌለው ልጅ መዝጊያ የሌለው ደጅ**  
*abbat yälelläw lədz mäzgiya yälelläw dädzdz*  
 'A child without a father is like a compound without a door'
- j. **ማን ይሙት ጠላት ማን ይኑር አባ**  
*mann yəmut t'älat mann yənur abbat*  
 'Who should die? an enemy; and who should survive? a father'
- k. **ወንድምና ወጥ ማስፈራራያ ነው**  
*wändəmmənnä wät' masfärariya näw*  
 'A brother and stew are used for threatening'

In all these examples, it is articulated that men are preferred over women, as the society holds the view that women are unable to fulfill the various male-associated societal demands. The proverbs (7a and b), for instance, point out that the society views a woman's birth as a mess. The implication is that women are considered to be less significant within the society than men, whose birth is celebrated with a higher level of familial satisfaction. It is also understood that even a non-prestigious man is far more valued than women. The proverbs in (7c-e) clearly evoke this meaning. Even though a woman appears physically huge, no one trusts her to accomplish fruitful tasks pertaining to any social sphere, such as confrontation, competitiveness, decision making and taking risks; this is deemed to be better done by a man who is physically less visible since men are presumed to inherently possess the aforementioned attributes. The examples provided in (7f-j) picture men as the masterminds of the society, who manage the normal functioning of the system within the family, in particular, and within the community at large. Someone who grows up in the absence of a father, for example, is thought not to be successful in his/her endeavors (cf. 7f and g). This has the implied meaning that women are not as good as men in terms of serving as role models to their children; and even good fortune is taken to be better than women in shaping the lives of children. This is clearly disclosed by the examples (7h and i). Children growing up in a woman-led family are believed to face an inordinately large number of hardships. The overall connotation of the proverbs related to the current theme involves the society's advocacy of the idea that men can manage their engagements, which may even be quite difficult in whatever kind of field

they are deployed; women are, however, prejudicially assumed to fail in doing so. This view, in turn, results in an ideology whereby men are preferred for survival at the cost of women.

## 2.8. Proverbs reflecting women's talkativeness

Within the target society, women are presumed to spend their time in talking about worthless matters. Regardless of their active vocalizations, the society portrays women as gossipers and chit chatters. This societal labeling of women is manifested proverbially in the following examples.

- (8) a. **የሴት ጉልበቷ ምላሷ**  
*yäset gulbetwa məlaswa*  
'A woman's power is her tongue'
- b. **የማይመስል ነገር ለሚሰትህ አትነገር**  
*yämmaymäsaḥ nägär lemistəh attəngär*  
'Do not tell your wife a stupid matter'
- c. **የበሬ ዶሰኛ የሴት ወሬኛ**  
*yäbäre dosäñña yäset wärejña*  
'A wild ox is like a talkative woman'
- d. **ወሬኛ ሚስት ዘርዛራ ወንፊት**  
*wärejña mist zärzarra wänfit*  
'A talkative woman is like a sieve with dispersed holes'
- e. **የበሬ ዳተኛ የሴት ምላሰኛ አታምጣ ወደኛ**  
*yäbäre datäñña yäset məlasäññaatamt'a wädäñña*  
'A sluggish ox and a talkative woman, do not bring to us'
- f. **የሴት ክፉ ምላሰኛ የበሽታ ክፉ መጋኛ**  
*yäset kəfu məlasäñña yäbäffəta kəfu mäggajña*  
'The worst woman is a talkative one and the worst disease is a devil possession'
- g. **የሴት ክፉ አፈኛ የጎረቤት ክፉ ምቀኛ**  
*yäset kəfu afäñña yägoräbet kəfu mək'k'äñña*  
'The worst woman is a talkative one as the worst neighbor is a jealous one'

As hinted earlier, women are stereotyped to be weak and powerless both physically and psychologically. In order to hide such obvious weaknesses, they are supposed to be given to much talk even about stupid and non-feasible issues. This is taken to be their compensatory defense mechanism. The example in (8a) suggests this view. As communicated in the proverb (8b), women are notorious for being unable to keep secrets. They are judged to be quick to disclose confidential matters; the proverb depicts that it is advisable not to tell women about an issue as long as the issue is wished to be kept confidential. The level of women's talkativeness is magnified by creating different analogies. As in the example in (8 d), talkative women are represented as analogous to a sieve with dispersed holes. Note that a sieve with dispersed holes does not filter the required cereal seed from unwanted residuals; it leaks whatever is put into it. This analogy implies that women cannot discern what is mysterious from what is not; they tell everyone about everything. This may possibly

result in dangerous situations, such as strife among members of a family or a neighborhood. The society pronounces this by comparing talkative women with a demon possession, as in the proverb given in (8f).

## 2.9. Proverbs reflecting women's evil nature

This category is composed of various proverbs which are intended to denigrate women as an evil sub-species of humanity characterized by trouble-making. In such a representation women are identified by sinful and horrible nature. This destructive quality of women is viewed to extend to the level of leading men to be engaged in unexpected and dangerous affairs. Let us consider the following examples.

- (9)
- a. **ሴት የላከው ጅብ አፈራም**  
*set yälakäw dzəb ayfäramm*  
‘The one sent by a woman does not fear a hyena’
  - b. **ሴት የላከው ሞት አየፈራም**  
*set yälakäwmot ayfäramm*  
‘The one sent by a woman does not fear death’
  - c. **ሴት ከጦር ሜዳ ታስቀራለች**  
*set kät’or meda task’ärrallätftf*  
‘A woman advises a man not to go to a war front’
  - d. **ከሴት መምከር ደግሶ መስከር**  
*käset mämkär däggəso mäskär*  
‘Seeking advice from a woman is like getting drunk at one’s own party’
  - e. **እሳት ከበረበረው ሴት የመከረው**  
*əsat kəbäräbbäräw set yämäkkäräw*  
‘The one who experiences a fire attack is better than the one whom a woman advises’
  - f. **የሴት ምክር የእሾህ አጥር**  
*yäset məkər yäšoh at’ər*  
‘A woman’s advice is like a fence of thorns’
  - g. **ሴት የፈረደበትና አህያ የጋጠበት መሬት ውሃ አያፈ**  
*set yäfärrädäbbätənnā ahəyya yägat’äbbät märet wəha ayafälk’əmm*  
‘Land where a woman has given a verdict and where a donkey has grazed does not yield any water’
  - h. **ሴት አማት የመረዘው ኮሶ ያነዘዘው**  
*set amat yämärräzäw koso yanäzzäzäw*  
‘The one whom a mother-in-law poisons is like the one who goes numb because of traditional medicine’
  - i. **ከሴት ነገር ከበቅሎ መደንበር አይጠፋም**  
*käset nägär kəbäk’lo mädänbär ayt’äfamm*  
‘As a mule cannot be free of startling, a woman can never be free of trouble making’
  - j. **ሴት ያመጣው ጠብ አይበርድም**  
*set yamät’t’aw t’äb aybärdəmm*  
‘Strife caused by a woman does not end’

- k. የእናትን ክፋትና የደመናን ጥግት ባለቤት ያውቃል  
*yännatən kəfatənnā yädämmānan t’əmat baläbet yawk’all*  
 ‘The one who experiences knows a mother’s spite and thirst on a non-sunny day’

All of these proverbs emphasize the bad side of women. The examples in (9a and b) clearly spell out the patriarchal pronouncement of the dangers that presumably surface as a result of women’s agency within the society. The proverbs disclose the fact that the society holds a view that women are masterminds of wicked instigation; women cause men to rush to perform tasks without the fear of danger. This implies that men take both psychological and physical risks in response to women’s evil provocation.

In a similar fashion, the proverbs given in (9c-f) reveal the society’s representation of women as inherently fail to reflect good qualities of humanity. Women are portrayed as putting a tight rein on men’s dedication to confrontation and success. Even though women may provide advice to men, their advice is thought to lead men to hell; seeking advice from women in times of difficulty is tantamount to adding fuel to an already-burning fire so as to extinguish it. Women’s thoroughly devilish nature is further magnified by the examples in (9g and h), which reflect women’s association with wrong deeds that are cursed. In these proverbs the society intends to promote a message explaining that whatever a woman does, it ends up as an annoyance and danger to the society. As communicated in the proverbs (9i and j), women and trouble-making are analogous to two sides of the same coin. The society discloses this ideology by comparing women to mules; as a mule is identified by an inherent tendency to be startled, so a woman is characterized by trouble-making (cf. 9i). This manifests the societal view that trouble-making is a behavior intrinsic to women, even to the extent that a danger instigated by women is viewed to be hardly possible to handle, as indicated by example in (9j).

In the target society, it is normative that mothers are expected to love their children; they are supposedly thought to nourish children by providing whatever is good, even by sacrificing themselves. However, the society paradoxically believes that mothers are not free of harshness, including harshness directed toward their children, due to their womanhood. Though the harsh and evil treatment of their children may not explicitly surface, children are presumed to encounter their mothers’ abusive treatment. As shown in (9k), the implicit nature of women’s mal-treatment of their children is compared with the extreme thirst that one experiences on a non-sunny day, though superficially it seems that cloudy seasons do not cause such a situation, hence, magnifying the inherent evil nature of women.

## 2.10. Proverbs reflecting women’s opportunistic and non-reliable personality

All the proverbs grouped under this heading suggest that the target society identifies in women opportunistic, inconsistent, and unreliable behaviors. The society stereotypically characterizes women as changing their views to take advantage of nurturing situations, no matter what adverse effects the situations may impose on others. This patriarchal ideology is manifested in the following example proverbs.

- (10) a. **ገበያ ቢያመቻት ልጇን ሸጠቻት**  
*gäbäya biyamätʼʼfat lədzwan fätʼätʼʼfat*  
 ‘When she gets a good market value, she sells her daughter’
- b. **ሴትና ዶሮ ዶሮ ሲሄዱ ቤታቸውን ይከዱ**  
*setänna doro dur sihedu betatʼʼfäwən yəkedu*  
 ‘A woman and a chicken forget their home when they go to a forest’
- c. **ውሸጣዋን ብታየው ባሏን ጠላችው**  
*wəʼšəmmawan bəttayäw balwan tʼällatʼʼfəw*  
 ‘When she sees her adulterer, she hates her husband’
- d. **ጨረቃና ሴት ዛሬ ብርሃን ነገ ጽልመት**  
*tʼʼäräkʼanna set zare bərhan nägä sʼəlmät*  
 ‘The moon and a woman are brighter today and darker tomorrow’
- e. **ትፈጭ የነበረች ግንጉዋለል አቃታት**  
*təfätʼʼ yänäbbärätʼʼtʼʼ mangʷaläl akʼatat*  
 ‘She who used to grind failed to winnow’
- f. **ፊጨታ የነበረች ላመልጣሎ ኮራች**  
*fätʼʼtʼʼ itta yänäbbärätʼʼtʼʼ lamälmallo korratʼʼtʼʼ*  
 ‘She who used to grind refuses to spin’
- g. **አግብታ ብትመለስ የውሀ መንገድ ጠፋት**  
*agbēta bəttəmmälläs yäwəha mängäd tʼäffat*  
 ‘When she comes back from her husband, she forgot the way to a known river’
- h. **እናቷ ዘንድ ሄዳ ከመጣች ከንብላው በቀር ስራ አጣች**  
*ənnatwa zänd heda kämätʼʼ tʼatʼʼtʼʼ kännəblaw bākʼär səra atʼʼ tʼatʼʼtʼʼ*  
 ‘After she came back from visiting her mother, she tended to do nothing but eat’

As signaled in examples (10a-c), the society pictures women as opportunistic creatures. They are thought of as being merciless in the sense that they trample others as long as doing so might give them some advantage. Women’s opportunistic personality is presumed to lead them even to deny their home, children, and husbands, so long as they think that there is some other overwhelming benefit. This implies that they tend to secure their advantage at the cost of denying humanity. The proverb given in (10b) seems to have another implied meaning, i.e., it promotes a strict view according to which men should exercise their power in order to control women. This act of controlling is implicitly indicated to be in the form of prohibiting women from public exposure. This indirectly declares men’s superiority and women’s subordination, hence, subjugating women. Women are also proverbially denigrated as inconsistent and unreliable in nature. They are assumed to behave in some way in some situations and they tend to automatically change their behavior in some other situations. The proverbs in (10d-h) clearly depict this biased view of the society. As communicated in these examples, women are presumed to hide their history once they join another episode in their life to the extent that they pretend as if they forget the way to a known river in a village where they grew up fetching water when they are back after sometime staying elsewhere. This non-reliable (changing) behavior of women is compared with a natural phenomenon, i.e., the status of the moon which oscillates between being brighter and darker.

## 2.11. Proverbs reflecting women's cowardice

Within the target society, there exists a long-lived prejudiced representation of women as lacking the attributes of charisma, boldness, and bravery. Boldness is considered an expression of wholeness since a bold individual is assumed to be able to manage anything through charismatic confrontation. Since the society is characterized by patriarchy, these positive qualities are attached to men, while women are generally considered inherent cowards. The following data illustrate this prejudiced identification of women.

- (11) a. **ፈሪ የእናቱ ልጅ ነው**  
*fāri yännatu ləḍጅ nəw*  
 ‘A cowardly man is a son of his mother’
- b. **ወንድ ልጅ ተወልዶ ካልሆነ እንዳባቱ ስጡት አመልግሎ ይፍተል እንደቱ**  
*wänd ləḍጅ tewäldo kalthonäändabbatu sət’ut amälmalo yəftäl əndännatu*  
 ‘If a boy does not become as brave as his father, give him a spin so that he can weave like his mother’
- c. **ተሴት ትብሱ ትመለሱ**  
*täset təbsu təmmälläsu*  
 ‘You came back with no success as you (M) are sillier than even a woman’
- d. **ሴት ጅብ ትፈራለች አጥር ትመዛለች**  
*set dʒəb təfärallätʃf at’ər təmazzallätʃf*  
 ‘A woman fears a hyena and pulls down a fence’
- e. **አረጉዴ ባሌ ገደለ በጎራዴ**  
*ärägude bale gäddälä bägorade*  
 ‘Oh my God! My husband killed someone with a sword’
- f. **የቄስ ምንደኛ የሴት ብትረኛ**  
*yäk’es mändäገገna yäset bəttərəገገna*  
 ‘A priest with pay and a woman with a stick are senseless’
- g. **የካህን አፋር፣ የአህያ እውር፣ የሴት ደፋር አይረባም**  
*yäkähən affar yahəyya əwwər yäset däffar*  
 ‘A shy priest, a blind donkey, and a brave woman are senseless’

The constellation of proverbs given above conveys the societal view that women cannot be characterized by boldness and bravery. In the normal state of affairs, a man is expected to be bold and brave. If this status quo is violated by a situation in which a man turns out to be coward, he is categorized as a woman. This is clearly communicated in examples (11a and b). Someone (a man) who fails to confront and beat somebody else in times of strife is ridiculed by being compared with a woman, as in proverb (11c). Offendingly, if a woman proves her boldness, she is considered deviant and is given the nick name ‘manlike’ which jeopardizes her social value as a woman. Such an unreasonable labeling of brave women as deviant is apparently articulated in proverbs (11f and g). In these examples, a brave woman is compared with a blind donkey and a shy priest, which are both unpleasant. Apart from the proverbial utterances, the term woman in its Amharic version is connotatively attached to cowardice. This indicates that the society has established a reality of labeling

women as silly and cowardly members of the community, as opposed to men, who are considered the de facto possessors of bravery. The act of labeling women as lacking charisma, boldness, and bravery, in turn, encodes an implied reading that women cannot safeguard themselves against attacks by others, including attacks by animals, such as hyenas and snakes. This tells us that the society evidently takes for granted that men are the ones who rescue women in times of trouble. Once again, this promotes the perpetuation of inequality between the two genders by subjugating women.

## 2.12. Proverbs reflecting women's non-trustworthiness/Infidelity

This theme encompasses proverbs by which the target society reflects its patriarchal ideology of labeling women as unfaithful and unreliable members of the society. Women are portrayed as pretentious, mischievous, liars, and untrustworthy in many respects. They are compared with animals and things which are hard to catch, due to their unpredictable behavior and/or nature. The following are examples of proverbs which are phrased to communicate this socially established fact.

- (12) a. የምትነቃነቅ ግንድና የምትስቅ ሴት ልብ ሩቅ ናት  
*yämmättännäk'annäk'gändanna yämmättəsək' set læbb ruk' nat*  
 'The center of a moving tree and the heart of a smiling woman are far away'
- b. ሴት ካልዋሸች ባሏን ትወዳለች  
*set kalwaffätſf balwan tawäddallätſf*  
 'If a woman does not lie, she likes her husband'
- c. ሴትና ቤት አይታመንም  
*setanna bet ayəttammänəmm*  
 'Women and home are unbelievable'
- d. ሴትና ድመት የኔ ናት አይልም  
*setanna dämmät yäne nat ayəbbaləmm*  
 'No one can say that a woman and a cat are mine'
- e. ለሴትና ለጉም አይዘናጉም  
*läsetanna lägum ayəzzänaggumm*  
 'It is not good to be careless for a woman and a mist'
- f. ሴት ያመነ ጉም የዘገነ  
*set yammänä gum yäzäggänä*  
 'One who trusts a woman is like one who holds mist'

All these proverbs designate the society's perspective of denigrating women as deceptive and unbelievable creatures. The examples in (12a and b) reveal the fact that the target society identifies women as behaving in a pretentious and unrealistic manner. Even though a woman may smile, she does not approach others from her heart; women pretend as if they were open-hearted by using their thorny mask, i.e., smiling. This pretentious behavior of women's is thought to extend to the level of trying to deceive their husbands by acting as if they do not love them, the fact, on the ground being completely different. Proverbs (12c-f), in a similar vein, disclose the societal ideology that it is hard, if not impossible, to trust women. The proverbs

instruct the society not to be fooled and deceived by women. This implies that whatever women say or do, or in whatever manner they behave, they can never be fully genuine. They may even cheat their husbands by committing adultery with somebody else as indicated in (12d), which claims that women cheat through adultery by comparing them with a cat, a domestic animal which renders the service of rat catching for everyone in the neighborhood. Women's mischievous nature is further magnified by comparison with mist, which no one can catch. As communicated by examples (12e and f), women are quite crafty and unpredictable, so that no one is supposed to trust them. Men are advised to carefully watch out for women's moves. This in turn implies that the society views women as demanding men's control in order for the society to enjoy a genuine, healthy and normal communal life.

### 2.13. Proverbs reflecting women's lack of decision-making power and practicality

This theme concerns the societal conspiracy against women's participation in making decisions that concern their own lives, in particular, and the community, more generally. Women are stereotyped as lacking the capacity to decide and make things operational. This indirectly encourages men to snatch women's power and decide on their behalf about issues which directly or indirectly affect their existence. The following proverbs communicate such a masculine biased idealization of the target society.

- (13) a. **ሴት ብታውቅ በወንድ ያልቅ**  
*set bəttawk' bāwänd yalk'*  
 'Though a woman proposes, a man decides'
- b. **ግዑራት ነው ሴትነት መስራት ነው ወንድነት**  
*mawrat nāw setənnāt mäsrat nāw wändənnāt*  
 'Talking is womanly while doing is manly'
- c. **ወንድ ባለ በእለት ሴት ባለች በአመት**  
*wänd balä bälät set balätʃf bamät*  
 'If something is said by a man, it gets completed within a day, but if it is said by a woman, it takes a year'
- d. **የግትሄድ መበለት ዞራ ዞራ ትሰናበት**  
*yämmattəhed määbällät zora zora təssänabbät*  
 'A girl who does not go says goodbye now and then'

Proverb (13a) clearly depicts a society in which women are discouraged from taking part in decision-making scenarios. A woman may bring about an idea which would be much more spectacular and fascinating than the one which a man could think of. But, when it comes to decision making, men appear on the forefront and pose their own speculations, without giving space to women's ideas, regardless of their potential value. The proverbs in (13b-d) suggest the society's representation of women as lacking the ability to bring things into effect. Women are pictured as talking much and doing little or nothing in terms of operationalizing social concerns. Practicality is taken to be a man's attribute, while talkativeness is attributed to women as in (13b); and whatever is said by women is less likely to be operational, as opposed to what is articulated by men, which gets completed within a short period of time (cf. 13c). In general terms, proverbs grouped under this theme reflect the society's patriarchal

ideology that women are not born with the capacity for decision making and practically realizing things. The society has broken the bridge which would help women to cross the biggest chasm prohibiting them from joining decision-making spheres. This is done by linguistically portraying women as powerless in terms of decision making. As such, the only choice left to women appears to be accepting whatever men decide, irrespective of its consequences for women's interests and preferences. This is unquestionably meant to disempower women, since their voices are not heard and incorporated in decisions that affect their own lives.

#### 2.14. Proverbs reflecting women as voracious eaters

The proverbs associated with this theme indicate the society's prejudice against women by denigrating them as causes of economic deficiency and poverty in the broadest sense. Men are viewed as the productive members of the society in contrast, with women receiving the opposite idealization. Let us illustrate this view by the following data.

- (14) a. **ከሴት ሆዳም ያንድ አመት በረዶ ይሻላል**  
*käset hodam yand amät bärädo yəššalall*  
 'A seasonal disaster is better than a woman who is a voracious eater'
- b. **እርግን ጠምቃ ፈጅቶው ጠልቃ**  
*ərm<sup>w</sup>an t'äm<sup>k</sup>'a fädzdzätʃəw t'älk'a*  
 'She prepared local beer for the first time and exhausted it on her own'
- c. **ሴትና ፊረስ የሰጡትን ይቀምስ**  
*setanna färäs yäsät't'utən yək'äms*  
 'A woman and a horse taste whatever they access'
- d. **የሴት ልብዋ እንጅ ሆድዋ አይመርጥም**  
*yäset läbwa əndzi hodwa aymärt'əmm*  
 'A woman's heart is selective, but not her abdomen'

The data articulate women's representation as voracious eaters in the eyes of the society. This results partly from the stratification of men and women in different patterns of space. As noted earlier, women are assumed to be engaged in domestic spheres, whereas it is assumed that men should dominate public enterprises. This in turn leads to blaming women for spending the whole day eating whatever food is available at home. They are assumed to exploit and exhaust supplies on hand prior to the arrival of the next harvest season. The expected fate of the family members is, therefore, hunger. As indicated in proverb (14a), the degree of women's voracious eating is compared a seasonal disaster which destroys the entire harvest while it is on the farm land. Proverbs (14c and d) supplement the idea that women are characterized by eating too much; they compare women to a domestic animal that spends the whole day and night eating such as horse, as in example (14c).

The worst scenario is the fact that the society assumes that women eat whatever they are provided without prioritizing one or the other sort of food (cf. 14d). There exists a belief that some food items (for example Injera with fungi accumulates) are less likely to be given to men, especially husbands. If a wife offers her husband such food, he believes that she has eroded his dignity. Women, by contrast, are supposed to eat any sort of food, whether rotten or fresh, without worrying about their social status. The

society's belief about women's non-selective eating behavior identifies women as catalysts of societal economic deprivation.

### 2.15. Proverbs reflecting women's low social status

This theme is composed of different proverbs which collectively convey the society's view of women's frustration, low self worth, and inadequacy. In other words, the proverbs disclose that the society holds a view that women and men are not equal; women are marginalized to assume low social status and are considered to be inferior to men, who are viewed to inherently occupy the top most position within the hierarchy of social stratification. The following proverbs signify such a societal representation of women.

- (15) a. **ለርስት ሴቶች እንኳ ይምቱለታል**  
*lärəst setotʃtʃ ənkʷa yəmotullätall*  
 'Even women fight for an estate'
- b. **ወንዶች ምን ያወራሉ የሚመጣውን ሴቶች ምን ያወራሉ ያለፈውን**  
*wändotʃtʃ mən yawärallu yämmimät'awən setotʃtʃ mən yawärallu yalläfäwən*  
 'Men talk about the upcoming issues, while women talk about the past'
- c. **ሴትና ፊረስ እንደኩራ ውሀ እያደረ ማነስ**  
*setənnā färäs əndekure wəha əyyaddärä manäs*  
 'A woman and a horse get lower and lower like a stagnant water as time goes by'
- d. **ሴትና ዶሮ ሳያብድ አይውልም**  
*setənnā doro sayabd aywələmm*  
 'A woman and a chicken can never spend a day without getting crazy'

Proverb (15a) conveys the message that an estate is something that everyone should confront, since it is an expression of identity. The implied meaning of the proverb, however, is that women are not as courageous as men to take part in confrontations. It indicates that men are the default front-liners for various undertakings that require one's scarification. Similarly, proverb (15b) reveals the society's prejudice against women via inferiorization. The proverb is intended to convey the meaning that women, unlike men, tend to be engaged in silly and worthless enterprises. It is known that talking about what is already passed yields few or no results. Regardless of this fact, women are portrayed as focusing on past events, while men anticipate the future; men's tendency is supposedly much more appreciative and life-changing than women's, which hinders one's progress to success. Both proverbs (15a and b) also denigrate women as inferior. Women's inferiority is assumed to get worse instead of improving as time passes. This is reinforced by comparing women with the water level in a pond which gradually gets lower and lower (cf. 15c). Such a stereotypical inferiority relating to women serves as the ideological grounds for their mistreatment and exploitation by virtue of limiting their roles to domestic spheres. This promotes men to control almost all influential positions within the society. It is quite evident that inferiorization of the subordinate group by the dominant one results in deprivation and disadvantages, hence, disempowering the subordinate, in this case women.

## 2.16. Proverbs reflecting women's irresponsibility/Negligent behavior

Another form of denigrating women exercised by the target society is found out to be labeling them as being irresponsible and negligent members of the society. They are assumed not to properly accomplish tasks due to their carelessness and inconsiderate behavior. The following proverbial utterances clearly reflect this view of the society about women.

- (16) a. **ውሃ ልትቀዳ ሄዳ እንስራዋን ረስታ መጣች**  
*wəha lətk'äda heda ənsərawan rästa mät't'atʃf*  
 'Having gone to fetch water, she came back without her pot'
- b. **ዘር ልትበደር ሄዳ እህል ቢሽት መጣች**  
*zär ləttəbäddär heda əhəl sifət mät't'atʃf*  
 'Having gone to borrow seeds, she came back while cereals ripen'
- c. **ሴትና ቁስ ቀስ**  
*setənnā k'es k'äss*  
 'A woman and a priest are sluggish'

All of these examples illustrate the society's designation of women as lacking responsibility. Proverbs (16a and b) state that women are not concerned with what they should do in the required time frame. They neglect their duties or tend to perform them haphazardly. This negligent and irresponsible behavior is viewed as extending to the level of coming back home having forgotten the pot after going to a river to fetch water, on the one hand, and coming back when the harvest season approaches after going to borrow seeds to be sowed on the other hand. Women's negligence and irresponsibility are also thought to be manifested in their sluggish execution of activities. Though women may be engaged in doing some activities, they are presumed not to accomplish them as soon as they are required to do so. In this regard, women are compared with priests, whom the society characterizes as being slow in all respects. This is clearly depicted in the example (16c).

## 2.17. Proverbs reflecting women's supersexiness

This theme subsumes proverbs which are meant to convey the society's stereotyping of women as super-sexy. Women are viewed as being concerned with sexual activities much more than other issues. The following proverbs are reflections of such a prejudicial denigration of women.

- (17) a. **የሴት ልቧ ብልቷ ላይ ነው**  
*yäset ləbwa bəllətwā lay näw*  
 'A woman's heart is in her vulva'
- b. **የሴት ጋለምታ ባለትዳር ታፋታ**  
*yäset galāmota balätədar taffata*  
 'A widowed woman causes married couples to separate'
- c. **አመንዝራ ካሏት ብትቆርብም እያኗት**  
*amänzəra kalwat bətk'orbəmm ayamənwat*  
 'Ones a woman is judged as an adulterer, no one ever trusts her, even if she receives a holy communion'

- d. **ሸርሙጣ ስታረጅ አቃጣሪ ትሆናለች**  
*färmut'a səttarädz ak'k'at'ari təhonallätšif*  
 'When a prostitute gets older, she becomes an agent for prostitution'

All these examples are phrased in line with the society's conceptualization that women are attached to extraordinary sexual desires. As communicated in proverb (17a), women are portrayed as measuring things in terms of their sexual gratification. According to this proverb, women's thoughts are tailored to fit with their sexual fantasies. A woman is assumed to nourish and respect her husband only if she secures her sexual benefits from him; otherwise, she tends to look for some other man for merely sexual purposes, due to her being weak-hearted. If a woman is widowed, she is thought not to be able to tolerate life without sex. Such a woman is expected to hover around men, who might offer to fulfill her desires. She is assumed even to seduce married men. This arguably disturbs the life of the man, as his wife turns out to be jealous; in such a conceptualization, women are considered causes of divorce and related social unrest. Hence, the connection between women and social crises pertaining to their destructive sexual activities, as in example (17b). As indicated by proverbs (17c and d), the society believes that women's extraordinary sexual desires are something inherent. For this reason, women are viewed as unable to refrain from voraciously thinking about sex even in situations when they cannot realize the desire. Proverb (17c) reveals that the society does not take for granted that women stop adultery even if they receive holy communion. A promiscuous woman may stop having sexual intercourse; but, psychologically, she is thought to remain tightly attached to it; she is believed to trigger others to engage in adultery and to be a cause for prostitution. This entails the society's belief that women are inseparably linked to exaggerated sexual enterprises, be it psychological or practical (cf. 17d).

### 3. Conclusion

This research undertaking has aimed to disclose the manifestation of disempowerment or violence in sexist proverbs as used for or about women. The target society for this study is predominantly patriarchal; hence, violence against women is taken for granted. Within the target socio-cultural setting, linguistic violence serves as an instance of power-play enacted by men in their relationships with women. The society generates sexist proverbs for the unfair portrayal of women. Even women themselves are found to adapt to such linguistic oppression and abuse, which declare their secondary citizenship. This is in line with Adetunji (2010), who stipulates that linguistic violence is a concept used to capture the psychological and social use of any instance of language to abuse, offend, or hurt somebody or people. The emphasis is on the linguistic representation of two people or groups asymmetrically, along the lines of power or status, whereby one person or group occupies a higher, and therefore oppressive, position in relation to the other.

The society has long accumulated a significant number of proverbial utterances which pertain to the denigration, exclusion, and exploitation of women. This situation has created and reinforced socially established realities and expectations as to how men and women should act and behave. This in turn is a reflection of the society's gender ideology affiliated to its patriarchal nature. This tallies with the articulation by Hussein (2005) who contends that in gendered cultures, expectations about how men and

women behave in their society are the most fundamental distinctions made between people rooted in patriarchy.

As an aspect of sexist language use, the target proverbs are found to powerfully communicate the society's masculine-favored gender ideology. They portray women as inferior and powerless compared to men in virtually all spheres of life. This has created a societal norm whereby women and men are conceived as assuming different rungs of social status and clear cut roles which seldom overlap. Men are perceived to occupy prestigious positions within the society, such as managing economic resources outside the home and taking part in decision-making engagements, while domestic activities and reproductive roles are taken for granted to be under the de facto control of women. The situation in the target society seems to share features of other African cultures. According to Hussein (2005), gender ideology in Africa is largely determined in line with sexist proverbs and the gender ideology loaded in such proverbs usually reflects the dichotomous place of men and women in different socioeconomic configurations.

The linguistic representation of women in all the scenarios addressed in this study is tailored in a way that women are disempowered or subjugated. As noted above, women are portrayed as powerless and inferior. Such deprivation of power and influence is reflected by proverbs which are meant to deny women's participation in decision making in every aspect of their lives. This in turn confines women to depend on the powerful members of the society, men. This complies with Weber (1946), cited in Cheryl (1999), who states that in traditional social-science approaches, power is often related to our ability to make others do what we want, regardless of their own wishes or interests. It is emphasized that power is taken as influence and control.

Apart from power, women of the target society are proverbially pictured as lacking positive and socially valued attributes. This is an apparent indication of women's disempowerment via linguistic violence. Chamberlin (2011) is in favor of the idea that disempowerment relates to an individual or a group lacking various positive attributes. The writer has identified such positive qualities to include: self-esteem, having decision-making power, having access to information and resources, having a range of options from which to make choices (not just yes/no, either/or), assertiveness, a feeling that the individual can make a difference (being hopeful), learning to think critically and seeing things differently (e.g., learning to redefine who we are (speaking in our own voice), learning to redefine what we can do, and learning to redefine our relationships to institutionalized power), effecting change in one's life and one's community, etc. Women of the target society are denied all these qualities and/or rights. The society has long established a reality which dictates that such attributes inherently belong to men. This is clearly manifested in its sexist proverbs, hence, subjugating women and declaring gender inequality acceptable.

#### **4. Implications for policy and/or social-work practice**

As noted earlier, the target society for this study has an established system of patriarchy. In order to reflect this socially established reality, the society largely makes use of sexist proverbs which dictate how men and women should behave and relate to each other. The relationship mainly takes a form of dominance and subordination by which men, the dominant groups, exercise their oppression and prejudice against women, the subordinate groups. This phenomenon has been perpetuated for so long

primarily due to the society's lack of awareness about the fact that men and women can equally take part in virtually all spheres of the societal life. Hence, there is great potential for social workers to penetrate into the target society so as to perform a task of re-education through repeated awareness campaigns, so that the society's male-biased gender ideology might be compromised, which might in turn pave the way for gender equality to be introduced.

Critical feminist theory informs that it is imperative to figure out the ways in which an individual or group of individuals is oppressed in order for appropriate actions to be taken, so that the oppressed can be emancipated from the oppression. In light of this, the present study has attempted to pinpoint one aspect of linguistic violence against women, the use of Amharic sexist proverbs in the devaluation of women. However, there are still other forms of sexist Amharic language use pertaining to women's subjugation which require investigation. These include grammar, narratives, riddles, idiomatic expressions, and myths. Hence, social workers can also be involved in researching the ways in which women of the target society are disempowered by the employment of such dimensions of sexist Amharic language use.

## 5. Recommendations

As pointed out above, there is a long-lived patriarchal ideology within the target society and this ideology is largely reflected in the use of sexist proverbs. Women are proverbially portrayed as powerless, inferior, and marginal members of the society; hence, they experience linguistic violence. In order to compromise this deep-rooted male-biased gender ideology, which disempowers women, the following recommendations are offered to concerned bodies.

1. The target society lacks awareness about the fact that women can think and participate in the way men can in almost all spheres of life. As such, the society still believes that women are inferior to men and reflects this through its sexist proverbs. Hence, a continuous awareness creation campaign should be launched so that the long-lived masculine-biased gender representation of the society can be undermined, which can, in turn, help introduce the notion of gender equality. This can be done by employing government media (for those who can have the access to media broadcast), on the one hand, and by deploying professional social workers for face-to-face discussion with the community (especially for people who are deprived of the access to media), on the other.
2. As indicated earlier, language is a powerful tool for establishing and perpetuating social realities. In this regard, sexist proverbs take the lion's share and are considered to be the most powerful socialization tools. The target proverbs for this study favor the societal male-biased gender ideology. Such proverbs are evidently incorporated in different books, such as Amharic novels and short stories, textbooks and other reference materials prepared for Amharic language learning at various grade levels. The inclusion of sexist proverbs in such books, especially in teaching and learning materials, should be challenged by concerned bodies so that children do not internalize a male-biased gender ideology, as a school is one of the major environments which mold children's personality and

perspective. Hence, those individuals who participate in Amharic textbook preparation and writers of various genres of Amharic literature should be selective in terms of incorporating proverbs by focusing on gender-neutral ones so that the new generation tends to internalize the idea of gender equality.

3. Women themselves often accept the societal masculine-biased ideology and behave accordingly, even articulating the very sexist proverbs that are meant to devalue them. This arguably emanates, at least partially, from lack of well-organized initiatives to empower women. Hence, concerned bodies, including professional social workers, should work hard on empowering women of the target society through capacity-building schemes, such as training, which can build up women's awareness through face-to-face discussions, so that women can more realistically hold a view that they are equal to men in all societal spheres of life and they become less inclined proverbially to represent themselves as inferior and marginal members of their society. They may even challenge male-biased gender representations articulated by men.

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