

The Social Construction of sub-Saharan Women's Status through African Proverbs

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Abstract

The continent of Africa, especially the sub-Saharan Africa, is known for its rich oral traditions and practices. Proverbs are the most widely used in this genre of oral arts and practices, and thus their influence is so strong to the point that even the concept of social construction of women is so persistently carved from it. This paper examines how proverbs serve as storylines between the ways proverbs represent the roles, statuses, and identity of women in traditional sub-Saharan Africa. The paper focuses on the social construction and patriarchy as concepts and uses critical discourse as a theoretical framework explaining the status of women. The study also employed qualitative and the interpretive methods, which underscores the importance of the narratives on the lived experiences of the respondents.

Key words: social construction, African proverbs, Sub-Saharan Africa, women, status

If you educate a man, you educate an individual; but if you educate a woman, you educate a nation... KwegyirAggrey

1. Introduction

The African continent is culturally complex and fluid with diverse cultures, natural environment and different ways of living, but sub-Saharan Africa is generally known for its rich oral traditions and proverbs which are the most widely and commonly used in this tradition of oral arts (Asimeng-Boahene, 2010; Grant & Asimeng-Boahene, 2004). African proverbs are the foundation of social and cultural wisdom and therefore serve as the basis for formulating concepts that govern social relations (Asimeng-Boahene, 2009). However, largely due to the well-entrenched patrician system of organization in the sub-Saharan Africa (Tamale, 2005), and just like some societies of the world, the subordination of women has been prominently expressed in proverbs, which has further exacerbated the disadvantaged conditions of women. The use of proverbs permeates the entire African society, and it is the foundation of social and cultural wisdom (Finnegan, 1970). The influence of proverbs on African thought is so strong that even the concept of social construction of African women is persistently sculpted from it as they are coined to condition the female into accepting her position as subordinate. Thus, according to Fasiku (2006), proverbs serve as "a powerful rhetorical device for the shaping of moral consciousness, opinions, and beliefs" (p.51). No wonder that the Zulu of South Africa say, "Without them, the language would be but skeleton without a flesh, a body without soul" (Finnegan, 1970, p. 475). Thus, Finnegan (1970) is right when she posits that "in many African cultures a feeling for language, for imagery, and for the expression of abstract ideas through compressed and allusive phraseology comes out particularly in proverbs" (p. 390). Thus it can be argued that though Africa is a conglomeration of multicultural societies, in the study of African paroemiography, what is true of a particular ethnicity, may also be true in other sub-Saharan African countries.

The above suppositions clearly demonstrate the important place of proverbs in sub-Saharan African oral art. In this paper, I examine how through rationalization, institutionalization, and formalization, and even sometimes nullification of their total humankind, African proverbs have been used to situate or socially construct African women in both matriarchal and patriarchal systems in Africa. I open the discussion by examining the theoretical framework in the form of the concepts of social construction and African feminism, which serve as epistemological constructs that underlie how proverbs place the roles, statuses, and identity of women in Africa. The next discussion highlights the methods, and findings from the study are presented, and the emergent themes are discussed. Finally, it concludes with recommendations on how the problems could be addressed.

2. African Proverbs

Proverbs are interactive communication systems whereby the vast array of available sociocultural knowledge artifacts can be mined for information which can be visualized, measured, and explored over time. By and large, proverbs are universal phenomena. They open access to knowledge creation and consumption to the wider public. African proverbs are expressed not only in words, but also in the language of the drums and even in the patterns woven in cloth (Asimeng-Boahene, 2009; Asimeng-Boahene, 2010; Korem&Abissath, 2004). Almost everywhere in sub-Saharan Africa, the storytellers use stories, proverbs, and myths as teaching tools as they have authority and prestige in shaping social perception and behavior (Finnegan, 1970; Gyekye, 1996; Korem&Abissath, 2004; Reagan, 2005; Rosenfeld & Geller, 1987; Sarpong, 1974). Accordingly, African proverbs, being accumulated treasure, serve as a way of looking at things differently, as they draw on observations, knowledge, and the wisdom of ancestors who use short, witty phrases that could be transmitted from generation to generation (Makinde, 1986). Consequently, because they are the ore from which Africans mine the meaning of their past, present and future of their cultural beliefs, and practices, African proverbs have facilitated the transmission of knowledge and conventions which socially construct women's position in the society (Dogbevi, 2011; Gyekye, 1996). The above assertions about African proverbs set the tone for the study of how proverbs have defined women's status in sub-Saharan Africa.

3. Theoretical Framework

This article uses the lenses of critical discourse, which according to Lewis (2006), is "both a theory and a method that examines how social and power relations, identities and knowledge are constructed through written, visual, and spoken text and their production and consumption" (p. 374) as the epistemological framework for examining how African women have been socially engineered and constructed. Furthermore, critical discourse analyses help guide my quest because they address issues such as how one's own racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds shape the nature of his or her conversation (Lindsey, 2005). Also included in the theoretical framework are radical feminist concepts, which are concerned with how patriarchy spread its tentacles in society to situate women as being held down as a result of their unequal standing in both the workplace and domestic sphere, and thus, as a result of their economic dependence, domestic work, childcare, and marriage are all seen as ways in which women are exploited by a patriarchal system that devalues women and the substantial work that they do (Lindsey, 2005).

Although patriarchy is defined differently, it simply refers to power relations in which women's interests are subordinated to the interests of men (Jenainati & Groves, 2010). These power relations take many forms, from the sexual division of labor and the social organization of procreation to the internalized norms of femininity by which women live. In terms of patriarchal tendencies, this discourse opines that women's oppression and domination by men is the fundamental oppression and at the root of other isms. Thus, it identifies suppression of distinctive different female qualities, experiences, and values as the primary cause of women's subordination.

Consequently, critiquing patriarchal structures through the context of critical analysis explains why some men use proverbs to justify and foster their hegemonic masculinity and practices in terms of legitimization of the oppression of women through political, social, economic, legal, cultural, religious, and military institutions. Men's access to and control over resources and rewards within the private and public spheres derive legitimacy from the ideology of male dominance. The understanding of patriarchy is crucial because it provides a framework within which to express the totality of exploitative relations which affect African women. Patriarchal structures privilege men over women; whether demonstrated through direct or indirect violence against women, political and economic dominance over women, or by severely restricting women's movement, education, and development, traditional patriarchal structures show great resistance to change (Beneria, 2003). Thus, social construction denotes those processes and agencies planned or unplanned, by which individuals are taught, persuaded, or compelled to conform to the usages and life values of the groups to which they belong. The ultimate aim of such an agenda is woman's "passive acceptance and respect for male domination" (Gilbert & Taylor, 1992, p. 81). Consequently, with the emphasis on normative male-dominated African society, women's roles are limited as stereotyped in the traditional narrative/literature. This epitomizes the successful construction of patriarchy and male chauvinism that continues to define the African world.

Thus using proverbs as agents of social construction/control, Peter Berger (as cited in Charon, 1993) reminds us that "every society has its cognitive policemen who administer the 'official' definition of reality" (p. 432). In their respective cases, the agents of social control (in this case it could be proverbs) provide informal and formal punitive measures that are meant to keep men and women away from behavior that disrupts the normative structure of the society. The end result is the assurance of greater conformity and order, as opposed to deviance and disorder.

Aristotle around the 4th century BC declared that “women were women by virtue of a certain lack of qualities” (cited in Jenainati & Groves, 2010, p.5). Thus, early thinking about the difference between women and men was based on essentialist ideas about gender, which maintained that women’s and men’s differences are as result of biology. The belief that biology is destiny suggests that, in comparable situations, men exhibit masculine psychological traits, such as aggression, rationality and assertiveness, whereas women will exhibit feminine traits such as gentleness, intuitiveness, and sensibility (Jenainati & Groves, 2010).

4. Methodology

This study employed qualitative research and the interpretive method. The qualitative approach was accentuated because it allows the researcher to gain insight into the organizational structures and settings, social processes, and more poignantly underscores the importance of personal interviews and narratives on the lived experiences of the respondents (Strauss and Corbin, 1994). In addition, it also privileges the perceptions of the participants and allows for the development of a rich and in-depth understanding of the community from the viewpoint of its members (Maxwell, 2005). By giving precedence to the voices of the participants through their lived experiences, the researcher was better placed to develop a better understanding of individual and group experiences of the research participants. Thus, the essence of this methodology, according to Strauss and Corbin (1999) is its holistic characteristics in evaluating research, as well as its ability to resist standardized categories that have been prearranged. I found the qualitative research method suitable for the design of the study because of its inductive property of flexibility and amenability, which falls in tandem with the dynamics of the natural settings for the study.

4.1 Constellation of Research Participants

The participants included both Western-educated and non-Western-educated women with traditional beliefs to find out whether or not Western education has influenced African women’s views about traditional proverbs dealing with perception and suppositions of women’s positions in the traditional cultural landscape. This enabled me to gain insight into the historical, cultural, and contemporary significance of African, particularly (Akan of Ghana) oral literature in terms of proverbs. As repositories of traditional oral wisdom, I interviewed about 200 Akan women between the ages of 45-70 and of different sociocultural beliefs, educational levels, and religious backgrounds. They comprised 50 non-Western-educated women and 50 Western-educated women based in the Ashanti, Eastern, and Central Regions of Ghana. Also included were 25 Western-educated foreign-based women (mostly UK, USA, and Canada) and 25 foreign-based non-Western-educated women (Canada, USA, and UK). I employed a purposeful sample as this is the most common sampling technique, which enables the researcher to identify and actively select the most productive sample that provides in-depth information that would help to answer the research questions (Burgess, 1989; Frenkel & Wallen, 2000; Marshall, 1996). Potential participants were informed that pseudonyms would be used to protect their confidentiality and anonymity. Also, the participants’ selection was based mainly on their expressed interest and availability to be part of the study.

4.2 Research Questions

The study sought to find answers to the following research questions:

1. What do you think about proverbs in general?
2. Do you think some proverbs devalue women? Why?
3. Who do you blame for some of the negative portrayal of women in proverbs? And why?
4. How do these proverbs that devalue women perpetuate patriarchal tendencies in African cultural heritage?

4.3 Data Collection Process

Contacts and solicitations for participation were made through telephone calls, home visits, and introduction by other participants resulting in one-on-one interviews. The one on one interviews were complemented by three focus groups meetings in Ghana. The first focus group was comprised of non-Western-educated participants. The second consisted of Western-educated, and the third a combination of both Western and non-Western-educated participants. The focus group process was tape recorded, and the focus groups deliberations were used to evaluate and make comparisons with the responses captured from the one-on-one interviews that had earlier been conducted. The data so collected from the interviews and the focus groups provided materials for highlighting and providing emerging common themes for

analysis. It also provided a rich opportunity for both the participants and the researcher to gauge how the individual responses during the discussion differ from or underpin those of colleagues.

In addition, data collection of existing literature was conducted to gain insights into conceptual, cultural, historical, and contemporary issues concerning the topic. Ethical issues in a research study of this nature are extremely critical. The fact that I am an African male did nothing to mitigate the ethical dilemma. My ethnic background and the prior knowledge of the area where I conducted the study gave me a considerable advantage and access and made my work easier than if I were a foreign researcher as I speak the same language and share the same culture with the participants. I did not hide my status as a researcher, and in spite of the nature of the topic under investigation, most participants spoke freely and fully.

4.4 Limitations

I began this study with a realization of the existent inherent limitations a study of such a nature with data collected across a vast area of the country (Ghana). The limitations may result from such things as techniques of sample determination, e.g., focusing mostly on the women in the Akan-speaking areas of Ghana, which may have created problems of certain biases and generalization of findings throughout Africa. Other non-controllable factors that may have affected the research were the psychological set of the minds of the respondents at the time of my interview.

5. Analysis of findings

This study is informed by grounded theory techniques for data analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1994), which involved making sense of what the researcher has seen, heard, and read. It also involves analyzing, categorizing, searching for patterns, and interpreting the data (Glesne, 1999). The significant themes that emerged from the interviews and focus groups, which were applied in analyzing and understanding the study, are discussed below.

5.1 Patriarchy and Male Chauvinism: Proverbs as a Tool for Objectifying Women

As indicated by the respondents, a lot of underlying sociocultural conditions produce images of women as “commodities.” Women struggle to gain ownership of their bodies, which are continually discussed and objectified by traditional stereotypes of femininity through proverbs, which help internalize gender identity.

The analysis of the findings revealed that the use of proverbs has become the tool through which men control positions of social and economic influence by limiting women’s participation to domestic spheres. The non-recognition of women’s labor reinforces the perception that they are nonproductive “dependents” and subjects them to circumstances that exacerbate their material poverty and weaken their bargaining positions, both within the household and in society at large. For instance, traditionally, the Akan (Ghana) society functions on male dominance over women. This position is amplified and legitimized by the belief systems of the society. Most of the belief systems in the Akan ethnic group in Ghana are woven around proverbs. For example, there is a proverb that says, “Woe betide you if you have no male figure in your family.” The meaning is that the family is only “whole” when there is a male figure.

One of the most patriarchal and chauvinist arrangements in Ghana’s Akan society is the fact that childbearing and childrearing are regarded as the sole responsibility of women. There is an Akan proverb, “*Obaaanuonyamne se wa ware*” (only a married woman commands respect). This high value placed on fertility means that girls, even in their teens, are under tremendous pressure to marry and bear children. Thus, young women often hold the culturally centered belief that their worth is tied to their fertility (Population Report, 1995). The woman who is not married has a limited role in society in the African (Akan) traditional world view as it is expected that all women get married. So a proverb states: “An ugly girl does not become old at home.” It means that the looks of a girl should not stop her from getting married. Otherwise this would deny her the role of womanhood (Mbiti, 1988). This thought is bound up with the value of bearing children. The childless woman goes through deep sorrows in African society. So it is said, for example, “The woman who has children does not desert home” (Dalfovo, cited in Mbiti, 1988). This means that bearing children gives the woman the security and joy of a society. So “the woman whose sons have died is richer than a barren woman” (Barro, as cited in Mbiti, 1988). The above is intended to say that people will excuse a woman for losing her children through death, but the one who does not bear is hardly “excused.” Consequently, people say, “A barren woman never gives thanks.” Nothing else is as valuable as children.

Thus, if a woman has everything else except children, she would have no cause or joy to give thanks. So the Ghanaians say, “A serviceable wife is often blessed with the birth of a 10th child.” It is therefore not surprising that when a woman bears a 10th child, her family is expected to buy a sheep to present to the husband as their appreciation for

increasing their family with more children. The effort, pain, and all the work the woman has undergone in bearing and raising 10 children is not recognized.

5.2 The Cult of Domesticity: Gendering of the Proverbs

The analysis of the findings revealed that the Akan of Ghana also have a situation in which females are regarded with little respect when it comes to assigning negative traits. The gender issues (demeaning females) are represented by the following proverbs:

Table 1: *The cult of domesticity*

African Proverb	Meaning
If you marry a woman in a pub, you divorce her at a pub.	The determining factor for a marriage is the environment where you meet the women.
A women sells egg plant not gunpowder (<i>Obaa ton nyaadoanaontonatuduro</i>).	Women should do what is appropriate to them and not to interfere in men's affairs.
<i>Obaa to etuo a etwereobarimadan mu</i> (If a woman buys a gun, she keeps it in a man's room).	Whatever a woman may do, she needs a man.
<i>Obaawompempem a, obarimanaohwe ne so</i> (If a woman has thousands and thousands, it is a man that looks after her).	Whatever a woman may do or have, she needs a man.

From the above proverbs, it is not difficult for one to establish the mindset of the African male. That males sought to belittle their female counterparts should not be surprising because in the traditional African society, the male has always been on top of things. This mindset is exposed by the gendering that occurs in these proverbs.

5.3 Proverb as Tool for Social Engineering: Marriage and Sexual Practices

These findings revealed how proverbs have served as tools for social engineering in terms of marriage and sexual practices. This notion of control is reflected in the practice of female genital mutilation (FGM) in some ethnic communities. The idea is to deny women the ability to have sexual pleasure because the woman is thoroughly an object of a man's pleasure. Women do not even have the right to their own sexuality. Women, especially wives, are socially engineered and not supposed to express their satisfaction or otherwise during sex as this expression is frowned upon. A woman who does so is regarded as sexual maniac or prostitute. Consequently, sexual politics in terms of inequality, oppression, or behavior that have been imposed on African (Akan) women by social custom in terms of patriarchy's sex/gender system denies the woman her right to sexual pleasure and should not be seen as a natural consequence of her biology. Thus marriage practices in some African societies undermine women's autonomy, increase women's exploitation, and exacerbate their vulnerability to different risks in terms of sexuality.

5.4 Narratives

When asked to comment on the proverb, "If a woman is going to commit adultery, it does not matter that she has a good marriage," the response was that if a woman is not sexually satisfied in her marriage life, she might seek it outside or may stay in the marriage because of her children for security and economic reasons (a common statement from both the Western and non-Western-educated participants).

5.5 A Penology of Servants: Female Subordination and Subservience

Another finding from the analysis reveals female subordination and subservience. A Ghanaian proverb says, "If a woman buys a gun, it should be kept in a man's room," which means that a woman is not capable of taking care of precious items. Society, therefore, does not look kindly on women who are wealthy. This is regarded as outside the norm, which reinforces male dominance and female subordination.

Again, traditionally, most African societies, especially the Akan of Ghana, do not take kindly to women who are assertive. When a woman is assertive or portrays confidence and independence, she is stigmatized and given all sorts of

derogatory names like “obaaakokonini” (a woman cock), “Obaabarima” (woman man), “odeenden” (tough cookie). All these are designed to keep women in their subordinate and subservient roles. Again, in terms of subordination, one should be reminded that every society has its cognitive policemen who administer the official “definition of reality” (Assimeng, 2006, p. 59). In other words, their role is principally the defense of societal norms. Thus, the way African proverbs and other oral traditions are used to legitimize inequalities can be explained using Michel Foucault’s (1980) “Regime of truth”:

Each society has its regime of truth, its “general politics” of truth: That is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; that status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (p. 131)

From the above, one can argue that African proverbs as obviously discursive habits in the patriarchal system have been created and recreated to reinforce the myth of male superiority.

A proverb like “the hen says, I have a voice to declare daybreak, but I listen to my husband” (Ewe of Ghana) further establishes men’s prerogative to the allegiance and subservience of women and legitimizes men to exercise their power over women to sustain the latter’s subordination and marginalization (Dogbevi, 2007).

Narratives: To comment on “Tears do not shy away from a woman’s face,” most respondents agreed with the proverb “because by nature women are more emotional than men.”

5.6 Sense and Sensibility: Women and Intelligence/Education

This theme from the analysis deals with femininity and its insistence on equating men with “mind” and women with nature and “body.”

Well-educated African (Akan) women are/were normally not the norm. Some members of the society frown on women who have more or higher education. Highly educated women are sometimes mocked with derogatory jokes and through proverbs like “Go and marry your books” or “a woman’s place is not the classroom. It is in the kitchen.”

According to Oboler (1985, as cited in Bullock, 1993), traditionally in patriarchal Africa, men are believed to be more intelligent than women. Women are thought particularly to be incapable of foresight and lack the ability to make and carry through sensible and realistic plans. For this reason, it is generally agreed that husbands should administer the family estate and wives for the most part must concur with the husbands’ plans. An Akan proverb entrenches this idea when it says, “When a woman buys a gun, it is kept in a man’s room.” This proverb shows that women do not have the capacity and ability to manage valuable property, an indication that they must play insignificant and subordinate roles to men with regard to property ownership.

Another Akan proverb says, “The man is the woman’s honor.” Therefore, if a woman marries a man who is poor and owns no property and she, on the other hand, is materially endowed, she would have to pretend that all the wealth belongs to the husband because it is the only way the man could become her symbol of honor. Consequently, the roles and responsibilities, constraints, opportunities, and the needs of men and women in some African societies have largely been identified and established through proverbs.

5.7 Narrative:

When asked to comment on the proverb “Women are like goats, feeding makes them immune to abuse,” a respondent stated it is true because women want security, so there is the tendency to overlook the abuse and stay in the marriage/relationship.

Another opined, “It is true because if you get a well-to-do husband and gets used to the lifestyle, you would not go anywhere even if you’re being abused.”

5.8 African proverbs depict women in terms of biology (Biology of Destiny: sexism)

The sexist proverbs not only marginalize women’s role, they also communicate the perception that women are difficult to manage/understand. This is illustrated by the following proverb: “A wife is like a woolen blanket; if you cover yourself with it, it irritates you; if you take it away, you feel cold” (Akan, Ghana). According to this proverb, women are difficult to manage, first and foremost, because they are not endowed with the faculty to manage themselves.

5.9 Narrative:

Commenting on the proverb “A woman’s worth is determined by her marital status,” a respondent stated, “I don’t believe that; it depends on the way you carry yourself” (Western-educated).

Another comment from a non-Western-educated respondent: “This is true because in our society if you’re a woman without husband, you do not command respect. Anyone can say anything to you and get away with it.”

5.10 Distrust/Opportunists

“*Emaapeneadeewo*” (Akan), literally means “Where gold dust is, that is where women like to be.” In patriarchal societies, women are not trusted, even when they reflect the most fundamental and highly valued social behavior or standards of life: men are thus advised not to forget themselves with their womenfolk. Such a view is clear in the following proverb, which portrays women as a group with moral laxity: “When women say to you, ‘You are a handsome fellow,’ it means you are going to run into debt” (“*Yeekanfowahoofe, nayeekanfowakyakya*”). The tone of this proverb is reiterated with equal strength in the following Ethiopian proverb: “Women, their heart swing like their breast” (Hussain, 2009). Akans (Ghana) say, “*Obampewo a ompewoka*” (women tend to be spendthrift) because “*emaampehyia*” (women don’t like poverty) as if men do? Women proverb: “A lazy wife will bring you bankruptcy.”

Commenting on “If a woman gets a fortune, no one hears of it; if she has trouble, then, a man has trouble,” a respondent stated:

Yes, it is the man’s responsibility to take care of me, not vice versa (Non-Western educated participant).

Another responded, “No! This is not true because African woman who goes into marriage goes with the intention of helping the man to be successful. A woman may only do that if she detects that the man is hiding some things from her or if there is no understanding in the marriage.”

5.11 Positive Proverbs

However, there are some the other proverbs in African oral tradition that reflect women as warm and all-nourishing symbols.

Hard working: Women are extremely valuable in the sight of society. Not only do they bear life, but they nurse, they cherish, they give warmth, they care for life since all human life passes through their bodies. The following proverbs bring these points out clearly: “Wives and oxen have no friends.” This indicates that a wife is so valuable that she cannot be given over to even the best friends. For that reason, another proverb reminds us that “a woman must not be killed.” She is the mother of life, and to kill the woman is to kill children.

Thus, ironically, though, a woman, in spite of her perceived “weakness,” is supposed to be very hard-working. Her role in subsistence farming is crucial in the sustenance of the husband and the family. Thus, a woman is an economic asset in terms of supporting her menfolk in manual farm chores. In Ghana, elderly women are much revered, hence the popular Akan (Ghana) notion of consulting the “old woman” (“*yenkobisananaaberewa*”) for counsel anytime there is a deadlock or difficulty in making a decision.

The perceived weakness of women is further debunked if one considers the following by a renowned Ghanaian sociologist when he opines:

A significant aspect of economic activity, especially in West Africa, involves the status and role of women. While a large number of women still operate on subsistence farms in villages in support of their menfolk in farming and fishing, the pattern in urban communities is different. From the urban centers of Cameroon to Senegal, women are “famously prominent” as market mammies. These shrewd traders, largely illiterate, deal in merchandise ranging from foodstuff, to textile, to beverages. A visit to an Accra Central market, such as Makola, will challenge any assertion that women in Ghana are an inferior, marginalized group, especially in the economic sphere. (Assimeng, 2006, p. 43)

The above statement establishes the fact that before the patriarchal predispositions about women of being weak and subservient become self-fulfilling prophesy, women can show their true colors if given the opportunity. This argument gains a stronger currency if one considers the fact that African women’s participation in the struggle against European domination went unnoticed despite their actual leadership in some of the emancipation struggles. A classical example was the initiation of wars of resistance against colonialism. One of the most noteworthy examples is the 19th century queen mother of Ejsu- Asante, (Ghana), YaaAsantewaa’s role in leading the Asante Kingdom against British colonizers in 1900, one of the Anglo-Asante Wars (Boahen, 2000). The Aba women’s riots against some of colonialist Britain’s policies in Nigeria also illustrates African women’s role in resistance to colonial rule (Boahen, 1987).

6. Discussion

An interesting issue that emerged from the study is the fact that the use of proverbs as tools for socially positioning women in society is central to the cultural norms of some African societies. Also, it disputes and challenges some of the Western notions that African women have been passive and overwhelmed by their cultural landscape. The findings from the study confirm that Western-educated women participants tended to refute the proverbs while non-Western ones tended to affirm the statements. We can therefore conclude that the more an African woman becomes Western-educated, the greater the tendency for her to refute the patriarchal-oriented proverbs in Africa.

7. Recommendations

Based on the analyses of the interviews and focus group deliberations, the following views are recommended:

1. There is the need to create an androgynous society in which men and women lead equal lives. This involves rethinking and revising language so that male definitions of the world can be appropriated to reflect women's experience and participation in it.
2. Oppressive practices made sacrosanct by culture can be interrogated and transformed by both insiders and outsiders working separately and together in a range of sectors.
3. A transformational process can be accomplished through educational, legal, political, and cultural approaches, and by organizations set up to advance gender equity and healthy communities. The first step is to recognize the attitudes, beliefs, and practices of a society and their consequences on gender equality. The second is to recognize that culture changes and evolves as individuals and communities evolve. As such, it can be molded in ways that enhance gender equity.
4. Stake holders need to ensure the ongoing commitment from government to spearhead educational, legal, and economic policies that explicitly empower women as equal citizens with full rights, including equal protection under the law and property ownership.
5. There should be national sensitivity exercises directed toward the articulation that women's cultural role, status, positions, and dealings as projected through African proverbs, which more often than not assign inferior or lesser identities to women, have no biological basis and are, instead, the product of socially constructed beliefs.

8. Conclusion

It is quite evident from this study that thanks to cultural enhancers like proverbs, patriarchy as a social system has held firm in the African cultural landscape for ages. It can also be deduced from the analysis and the narratives that the interpretations and the acceptance or otherwise of the proverbs depend on the level of Western education of African women as the mode of thinking can be influenced by the educational systems and values. The changes in African societies have affected the meanings and interpretations of some proverbs with regard to the role of women in some African societies. These days, women in some African societies who hitherto had no right to own property and assume leadership roles have taken up such roles with ease and immense success. Thus, one may argue that the unflattering identities African proverbs mostly assign to women may have no biological basis and are instead the product of socially constructed beliefs.

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