

Indigenous Languages and their Role in Women's Economic Empowerment

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Abstract

Although the linguistic approaches to the functions of language emphasise its role in the maintenance of social structures, it is important to bear in mind that language is never neutral and always represents reality from a biased perspective. Deviating from the Saussurean structuralist approach that claims that linguistic signs are arbitrary, linguistic anthropologists and ethnographers disentangle various facets of language that demonstrate that merely viewing language as a system whose sole purpose is communication fails to capture various structures, norms and taboos encoded in language that project reality from a biased perspective. In many communities in Kenya, which are overwhelmingly patriarchal, language is bound to represent social structures that are products of the patriarchal order. Against this background, our goal in this paper is to examine how the mainstream languages in Kenya limit women's access to information and services critical to their economic empowerment. We further argue that while Indigenous languages are regarded as the most accessible and logical means of communication amongst most rural women, these languages have been neglected to the extent that it appears as though they are not well-equipped to address various challenges that impede women's economic empowerment. They are hardly reformed to rid them of sexism, misrepresentations and under-representation, which makes women invisible and hence marginal participants in the economic affairs in their communities. We argue that these disadvantages notwithstanding, indigenous languages are still the best option for empowering rural women. However, there is a need for linguistic and cultural reforms aimed at minimising the possibility of these languages being misused to entrench outdated gender stereotypes or to enforce cultural norms that hinder women's economic empowerment. The data for the paper is derived through a literature review guided by the Feminist Literary Theory as expounded by Kolodny (1980). The paper posits that Women's Economic Empowerment is best achieved by utilising their indigenous languages, which is their tool of self-expression.

Keywords: Indigenous languages, rural women, women empowerment, cultural reforms, gender stereotypes

Introduction

Structural linguistics, since Saussure (1957), has always emphasised the arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign. As a result, the foundations of theoretical linguistics have mainly focused on phonetics, phonology, syntax and, to some extent, semantics. In order to distinguish linguistics as a science, the emphasis, as propagated in the Chomskyan approach, has been to ignore those areas of linguistics that lack explanatory adequacy through a set of generalisable principles. According to this approach, meaning is supposed to derive from adherence to the rules of grammar with no

regard to extra-linguistic factors such as socio-cultural background, social conventions and the local knowledge that assign meanings and different connotations to the signifiers. Indeed, the logic behind Hymes's (1972) *Ethnography of Communication* may be summed up as an outline of various social factors that define the very nature of human communication. In this model, language is just one of the elements amongst others that influence the coding and decoding of the message and how various stakeholders interpret it. This is especially evident among multilingual and multicultural settings where sense and meaning sometimes clash in spite of sharing similar physical platforms or linguistic mediums. Indeed, Whorf (1956) illustrated how different languages had different ways of representing reality, which sheds light on speakers' thought processes and how they conceptualise reality. Different languages could share the same conceptualisation of a phenomenon, but the encoding and ascription of meaning result in different denotations and connotations due to the difference in social reality that those languages represent. In essence, a phenomenon that is highly regarded in one culture might be absent in a different culture, or where present, it might not enjoy similar esteem. Descaries (2014) asserts that only a few concepts or models of interpretation can be shared among different cultures in a completely analogous fashion. This view is shared by many cognitive scientists and linguistic anthropologists. A good example is Boroditsky (2001), where German and Spanish subjects gave different qualitative descriptions for key, which they attributed the way the two languages ascribed the grammatical gender to key.

Decrying the Anglo-centric dominance in scholarship, Descaries (2014) argues that much of scholarship in languages other than English does not enjoy much attention, whether in terms of citation or readership. This scenario adversely impacts scholarship because only one perspective is advanced, thus denying English unilinguists a chance to access perspectives available in other languages. Similarly, scholars and thinkers using languages other than English are denied an audience and recognition. Given that language is a non-neutral medium (Duranti, 2012; Githinji, 2008) and favours a certain way of thinking, knowledge and human understanding is hindered when only one perspective is promoted. While Descaries was more focused on French, the same argument can be extended to former colonies that are characterised by multilingualism but still adopt the languages of former colonial masters for governance and conducting other important affairs of the state.

In Kenya, for instance, Kiswahili is the most widely spoken language and is fairly understood throughout the country, thanks to its adoption as a national language in 1974 (Harries, 1976). Although the 2010 Constitution elevated the status of Kiswahili to an official language (LOK, 2010), its function in formal domains has hardly changed from where it was before the promulgation of the 2010 Constitution. The situation is compounded by the fact that in spite of Kiswahili's widespread use in inter-ethnic interaction, local languages remain the main vehicle of interaction in intra-ethnic communication and the sole means of communication amongst the rural population without formal education. Nothing testifies to the key role played by Indigenous languages than looking at the prominent role they play in the mass media. TV and Radio stations broadcasting in local languages compete with those broadcasting in English and Kiswahili. BBC reported that by 2007, the vernacular radio stations had enjoyed a 27% market share compared to the 33% enjoyed by the mainstream media (Orao, 2012), and the number kept changing. Logistics would dictate that a product that has no demand is taken off the market, and since the indigenous radio stations continue to be vibrant, then the only conclusion is that they satisfy the demand of the market.

This notwithstanding, it is important to remember that not all languages are impacted by Anglo-centrism the same way. Due to geographical, socio-political or historical factors, the effects of Anglo-centralism on French is less dire compared to Swahili or other minority African languages. Speakers of Kiswahili enjoy many advantages when it comes to access to information, thanks to the abundance of published works and some works translated from other languages.

Speakers of indigenous Kenyan languages with poor skills in English and Kiswahili experience a knowledge gap because there hardly exists any scholarly material in their languages. Where they exist, they are mostly oral and, therefore, difficult to retrieve. Moreover, the continued stigmatisation of local languages in the quest for fighting against tribalism erodes the confidence of their users in their languages. This is because the majority of Africans view local languages through the lens of negative ethnicity outlined by Wamwere (2003), where suspicion, tension and hatred abound among Kenyans from disparate ethnicities who blame local languages for stoking ethnic animosity. Negative ethnicity, in turn, breeds inertia in language planning, which fails to provide an incentive for local languages to adapt to contemporary challenges. Finally, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy that indigenous languages are incapable of conducting and transmitting

intellectual discourse. More so, their role as tools of empowerment that could be deployed for economic advancement is ignored and dismissed.

In this paper, we demonstrate how mainstream languages only cater to a fraction of the Kenyan population and how indigenous languages can be used to complement these mainstream languages in rural monolingual communities. We argue that indigenous languages provide effective means of communication that make their users agents with authority to dictate the rules of discourse, which enhances their social capital. Indeed, Boudet, Petesch, Turk, and Thumala (2013) have concluded that the agency of rural women is enhanced by supportive local opportunities structures, upward mobility and less domestic violence. Since these local opportunity structures are mediated by local languages, mainstream languages that are poorly mastered would not be appropriate vehicles for rural women's empowerment.

Culture, language and gender

The dialectic relationship between languages and culture is viewed as the influence of language on culture and the influence of culture on language (Dam, 2016). Language encodes cultural meanings and norms to an extent that it is almost inconceivable to understand a group's culture without understanding its language. This is because verbal behaviour is nuanced in all human interactions, both intercultural and intracultural. According to Tannen (1992), human interactions are characterised by metamessages that communicate more than what is actually said because "how we say what we say communicates social meaning". These social meaning get their relevance and norms of interpretation within a cultural set-up. Thus, a multilingual with a good mastery of many languages possesses many frames of interpretation that give him/her an advantage in navigating through different cultures. Within the same culture, different social categories have their different ways of encoding social meanings. Gender is one of the social categories where this cultural metamessaging takes place, and there are dire consequences when gendered language is incorrectly interpreted. This is attributed to the different thought processes and cultural conditioning between the two genders, as exhaustively outlined in Gray's (1992) publication *Men Are from Mars, Women are from Venus*. For effective communication to take place, gender differences, and indeed all social differences in society, do not need to be downplayed or ignored. Instead, they need to be thoroughly understood, appreciated and contextualised.

Most human cultures reflect the prevailing social order, which is essentially patriarchal, and the languages that are products of those cultures are biased against the female gender, which prompts Spender (1980) to call her book *Man-Made Language*. Patriarchal cultures perpetuate a social order that gives men supremacy while at the same time depicting women as inferior. Normative behaviour is seen as exclusively masculine, while women are seen as deficient and deviating from the norm. This is the ‘androcentric rule’ alluded to by (Coates, 2003) that looks at male behaviour as normal and desirable and women's behaviour as negative and reprehensible. In research, women's speech has been viewed as deviant because the researchers and the respondents in traditional dialectology were usually men. This ‘deviance’ manifests in language through phrases, proverbs, metaphors and names that draw the distinction between women and men. Deviance is also manifested in the addition of phonological material to feminise ‘normal’ words, such as male/female, man/woman, host/hostess, and *prophet/prophetess*. Lakoff (1975) claimed that adding these markers has some negative connotations and sometimes alters the gender asymmetry by ascribing totally different semantics.

The unequal power relations in society viewed within the dominant approach (Coates, 2003; Ndungo, 2016) are also reflected by the norms of language use sanctioned for females by the patriarchal system. The women's languages of respect or *hlonipha* among the speakers of Nguni languages that prohibit women from using words associated with senior male members of the husband's family (Herbert, 1990) is a classic example of patriarchal prescriptivism on women's language use. Women are forced to use weak language, which is then taken as evidence of deficiency. According to Lakoff (1975), women were associated with using weak language or language norms that lacked confidence or assertiveness, such as using tag questions, indirectness, preference for intensifiers, colour terms and so on (see also Coates, 2003). Sociolinguists such as Trudgill's (1972) account of gendered norms was that women were status conscious and the use of prestige language was a way of symbolically appropriating power. Gendered norms are explained by Labov (2001) in three principles as follows;

- Principle I: In stable variation, women use more of the standardised variant than men do.
- Principle Ia: In changes from above, women favour the incoming prestige variant more than men.
- Principle II: In changes from below, women are most often the innovators.

According to Principle I, when a standard and a non-standard variant are in competition in a speech community, standard variants are more likely to be used by women, while non-standard are more likely to be dominant among men. Principle Ia captures the fact that women would opt for a prestigious variant when they are conscious that they stand to gain from its adoption. Principle II implies that women are not just recipients of imposed norms and can themselves be innovators in their local variants. Although the three principles give women agency in the use of language, we are more interested in Principle II for the purpose of this paper because it aligns with the dynamic approach of the study of language and gender (Coates, 2003) that favours social constructionist approach or performativity prominent in second-wave feminism.

In ‘doing gender,’ West and Zimmerman (1987) emphasise women's agency in making salient attributes of their personae that challenge existing norms that limit their ability to harness available resources for their advancement. When it comes to languages, appropriating local norms gives them the tools to negotiate for reform of obsolete social arrangements and outdated ideologies that impede their empowerment. Challenging entrenched norms and ideologies opens up opportunities for cultivating new ideologies to create a more equal society that uplifts women and society at large.

Our emphasis on local languages stems from the fact that gender is constituted through interaction, which, to a large extent, takes place in local languages. Social norms can constrain language practice while also offering the means for their contestation. Therefore, for languages to mediate change, they must be fair in the treatment of both genders in terms of structure, social norms and modes of expression. We shall focus on the indigenous languages in Kenya by first highlighting areas that have been stumbling blocks to women's empowerment before discussing why they are the best tools for empowerment and then suggesting what needs to be done to enable them to succeed. We are guided by feminist literary criticism in examining biases inherent in selected elements of languages that perpetuate the ideology of deficiency among womenfolk.

A brief outline of the Feminist Literary theory

The discussions in this paper are guided by the views expressed within feminist literary criticism. The term feminism was used by a French Socialist, Charles Fourier, in the early 19th Century. At

that time, it was used to refer to the woman who was agitating to transform herself and society. In contemporary society, the term is used for various conceptions of the relationship between men and women, their origins and how they might be changed for the better (Mitchel & Oakley, 1986). Feminism anchored in the contemporary scholarship on sex and gender has become more complex and has moved beyond the binary gender difference to gender diversity (Cameron, 2005). In spite of the broad conceptualisation of gender, the fundamental principles that dominate the field of feminist study all have a common aim. According to Ramanazoglu (1989:8-9), all the versions of feminism assert that:

1. Existing relationships between the sexes in which women are subordinate to men are unsatisfactory and ought to be changed.
2. It challenges what is taken for granted as natural, normal and desirable in many societies
3. It aims to change the world and transform relations between men and women so that everyone can fulfil their potential regardless of gender.
4. Advocates for change of relations between the sexes by giving women control over their own lives.

All these are highlighted in the Feminist literary theory as expounded by Kolodny (1980), who observes that there is a need to pay close attention to the power relations expressed in the art forms since they reflect society's value systems, dialectically and ideologically. According to Kolodny, there is a need to utilise the past to understand the present. She further observes that the appropriation of meaning from a text depends on the reader or the listener. In that regard, it is apparent that in order for one to understand a literary text, one needs to be familiar with the code of customs of the target society and its conceptions.

Feminist literary theory seeks to discover how aesthetic value is assigned. It is the male-oriented nature of the assignment of aesthetic value that devalued some literary works authored by women in the 19th Century (Kolodny, 1980). It is important to bear in mind that literature reflects society and is a medium through which ideology is channelled back to society. While it might breach the time and space constraint, its meaning and interpretation must still be contextualised in the local settings from where it is produced. This is due to what Cameron (2005) claims: gender identities might not be constituted so much by contrast with the other gender but by contrast with other

versions of the same gender. The lived experience of and understanding of femininity in the urban setting differs from that of a rural setting; so does that of women from other parts of the world and that of African women. Steady (1986) argues that feminism in relation to African literature has examined the socio-economic factors which contribute to the oppression of African women.

It is worth noting that male structures of power embrace phallocentrism, the belief that identifies the phallus as the source of power in culture and literature with accompanying male-centred and male-dominated patriarchal assumptions. Feminist criticism would attribute the oppression of African women evident in many literary texts to inherent sexism that exists in the social structure in many African societies. Frank (1984:35), for instance, observes that feminist literary criticism is able to examine sexist images of women perpetuated by literary artists and, by extension, by the society in question. The images perpetuated through indigenous literature and languages show that they are deeply rooted in the historical and sociological issues of the society in question. Beyond challenging androcentric social structures, feminist literary criticism advocates for equal rights for all, including women, children and persons living with disabilities in all areas of life, socially, politically, professionally, personally, psychologically and economically.

Kolodny (1980) enunciates the key pillars of feminist literary criticism as follows;

1. Literary history (and with the historicity of literature) is fiction.
2. Insofar as we are taught how to read, what we engage are not texts but paradigms; and finally,
3. That since the grounds upon which we assign aesthetic value to texts are never infallible, unchangeable, or universal, we must reexamine not only our aesthetics but the inherent biases and assumptions informing the critical methods which (in part) shape our aesthetic responses as well.

These pillars not only allude to the mutability of artistic representation in literature through various historical epochs but also to the fact that literary work is open to a plurality of interpretations. In addition, the standards for assigning aesthetics can be contested and redefined. This perspective informs our discussion as we demonstrate how certain features of local languages and literature have reflected the disempowered women. As Kolodny (1980) notes, feminist criticism has to go

beyond only exposing sexism to recording new choices and a new literary history. It is from this locus that we can propose a way forward on how the indigenous languages can be transformed into vehicles for women's economic empowerment. The main objective of this study is to advocate the logic of using indigenous languages in women's economic empowerment by reforming the gendered ideologies that have hindered their full participation in economic activities.

Data

This is a library research that combines text analysis and a critical reading of available literature. Materials were sought based on whether they addressed key issues such as linguistic structure, language and thought, norms of language use, literature, sexism, feminism and empowerment. The data on folklore is mostly taken from Ndungu (2002, 2006, 2016 and 2022). This data focuses on Gikuyu proverbs, names and gendered expressions. Complementary data comes from other scholars like (Barasa & Opande, 2017) for Gusii and Bukusu proverbs and Karakacha (2021 for Swahili phrases. Other data cited in the article is contextualised and acknowledged.

Methodology

The data was subjected to critical interpretation based on the tenets of feminist literary criticism. Although the theory and some parts of the discussion, especially that of proverb and folklore, are literary features, the main focus is language, especially the local languages and how they treat gender issues. We did not focus on the complexities of the conceptualisation of gender mentioned in the theory section, but we were biased towards the entrenched ideology, how it impedes women's empowerment and how it can be rectified. The arguments that have informed the discussion were derived after critically examining the available information as presented in scholarly research. Literary theory is chosen out of the appreciation of the dialectic relationship between literature and culture. Indeed, a large part of literary criticism focuses on stylistics, which is basically the artistic use of language. In addition, the feminist literary criticism's recommendation for creating new standards and norms for evaluating aesthetics was regarded as useful in proposing suggestions for the way forward in reforming indigenous languages to create positive imagery to serve as tools for women empowerment.

Folklore and symbolism in representing disempowered women.

Gendered ideologies that portray women in subordinate roles abound in many African societies (Barasa & Opande, 2017). Folklore and other genres of artistic expression provide many examples of the asymmetric relations of power. For a long time, they have functioned as tools for cementing truisms that are difficult to challenge. Many studies on African proverbs, for instance, show that they have been used to sustain gendered life by showing people's understanding of masculinity and femininity (Hussein, 2009). Some of the uses of proverbs mentioned by Ndungo (2002) are rejecting or supporting arguments, starting discussions, stating uncontested truth, and concealing content in a discussion, among others. Their representation of women is usually harsh and critical (Barasa & Opande, 2017), normally depicting them as inferior, weak and powerless. Moreover, they are usually shown as deviant, and their failures are harshly censured, while men's failures are normally overlooked or rationalised. Although the prevalent imagery in proverbs is highly symbolic, it is important to pay keen attention to them to understand the aesthetics in framing the gendered ideology that shapes people's 'philosophy of life' (Ndungo, 2002). Given that the dominant ideology in many African societies is patriarchal, women participate in the patriarchal discourse by using and maintaining proverbs that disparage them or articulate their subordinate position (Hussein, 2009) because ideology predisposes them to act within circumscribed cultural norms. The implication of women's economic empowerment follows from the logic that the proverbs that portray men as superior and women as inferior convince them to accept the economic status quo as naturally ordained. On the other hand, depicting men as strong and women as weak creates low self-esteem among women and discourages them from having ambition or engaging in high-risk economic activities. In addition, women might avoid engaging in activities doomed to fail because they are subconsciously convinced that they will not succeed. Moreover, a society that does not expect them to succeed will not support their enterprise, which then becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. A few examples of proverbs depicting women's negative portrayal will suffice.

1. *Mũici na mũndũ mũka akenaga akua no mũici na kīhĩ akenaga kīarua* /One who steals with a woman stops worrying only when she dies but one who steals with a boy stops worrying once he gets circumcised)
2. *Aka na igũrũ matimenyagĩrwo* (Women and weather are unpredictable)

3. *Nyoni ya njamba ndĩrĩ gĩtara* (A male bird has no nest)

These three proverbs from Kikuyu are examples of the different standards for males and females. In (1), the focus should be on the transgression of ‘stealing’, but it shifts to the person who outs the wrongdoer. A male, irrespective of age, is shown as more reliable in keeping secrets than a mature woman. In (2), comparing women to weather not only alludes to the menstrual cycle, which men view as unpredictable but is also pushed to imply their stereotyped mood swings. Cameron (2005) refers to some of the scientific studies that claim that the natural endowment of women is as hard-wired as Neo-Darwinism. This school of thought would claim that women are hardwired to multitask while men are hardwired to single tasks. Although there is no consensus, and sometimes the results are the exact opposite, many people still believe women multitask more often than men (Szameitat et al., 2015). What is important here is that something positive, like multitasking, is made to look bad because it is unpredictable, just what you would expect in a highly patriarchal society. Proverb (3) excuses male philandering by comparing them to a bird with no nest giving it freedom to sleep anywhere. Women, on the other hand, are expected to be limited to their own nests.

4. *Obea mao okhabea raro tawe.* (Cheat your mother and not your father).

5. *Omukhasi sakambila omusecha ta.* (A wife does not reprimand/advise a husband).

In these two, Bukusu (4) shows that lying to a mother has no consequences, but lying to a father is prohibited. Given that mothers are the ones who spend most of their time with their children, this proverb is harmful because it can cause women to make serious mistakes, which they are later blamed for, resulting in a chain of mistakes. Men, on the other hand, are not likely to make lots of mistakes because they are only told the truth. Proverb (5) highlights the unequal power relation between the husband and wife where reprimand is only one way, from husband to wife and not vice versa. A reprimanded woman will live in fear of making mistakes lest she is reprimanded. This will not be limited to home environments but also to other areas, such as economic activities.

6. *Ngongo machaywa imbamura etabwati* (If a region is disrespected, it is because of a lack of boys or men.)

7. *Basacha mbaniberani, ko' nabakungu mbaiborerani.* (Men help fellow men in creating wealth as women help fellow women in begetting children.)

Proverbs (6) and (7) from the Abagusii further illustrate the pervasive negative perception of women. No reason is given why boys are able to make society respected in proverb (6); they are just naturally endowed with the capacity to bring respect, while girls do not possess that capability. The implication in (7) is that boys are the sole creators of wealth while women only bear children. It is ironical that a man with wealth but no children would not be regarded as wealthy, yet the important role of a woman is devalued. A society that denigrates a woman's role in wealth creation is unlikely to provide the incentive, encouragement and support that they need in order to be economically empowered. These kinds of proverbs illustrate how the ideology of inferiority and inability is cultivated amongst women in a patriarchal culture. It is important to remember that women play a critical role in development, in most cases surpassing their male counterparts. Society cannot develop economically unless both genders work in unison.

Ideology encrypted in names, metaphors and oral narratives

Onomastics is one area that has not received much attention in linguistics. However, literature and folklore are critical areas because many works of art assign names to characters as part of the plot. The assignment of names to both genders reveals much about society's value system and the attributes associated with men and women. Ndungo (2016) has illustrated how communities around Mt Kenya (Kikuyu, Embu and Meru) assign names of powerful and strong animals to males but not to females. Names like *Mūrũthi/Ngatia* (lion), *Ngarĩ* (Leopard), *Mbogo* (Buffalo), *Njogu* (Elephant) and *Ndegwa* (bull) are exclusively male. They embody the qualities valued in men, such as strength, bravery, aggression and capability. Swahili also assign the names of strong and powerful animals like *Simba* (lion), *Tembo* (elephant), and *Mbogo* (buffalo) to boys.

On the other hand, the names given to girls emphasise adoration, beauty, admirable attributes, or work. In Swahili, for instance, some notable girls' names include *Zawadi* (present), *Amani* (peace), *Amina* (honest, faithful), *Furaha* (joy), *Bahati* (luck), *Lulu* (pearl), *Zumaridi* (emerald), *Salama* (safe), indicating that aesthetic value in girls' names is equated with precious stones, positive qualitative modifiers and desirable items. Amongst the Kikuyu, there is a bias towards describing

the physical qualities, mostly on the lower side such as *Mũkuhĩ* (short), *Waceke* (thin), a girl's place of origin as in *Warũgũrũ* (from the west) *Waitherero* (from the low side) *Wamaitha* and *Nyokabi* (From Masaailand) and also the names of activities such as *Mũkami* (one who milks) *Nyawira* (one who works) *Nyakĩo* (The hardworking one) and *Mũmbi* (one who creates).

Similar to Boroditsky's example cited above, ascription of linguistic values such as name or gender of a name can trigger certain subconscious reactions. If assigning nouns to the masculine, feminine or neutral gender may lead language users to attribute certain qualities to the named item, then the dichotomy in the naming system reveals the different perceptions as well as the expectations that the society has of the two genders. Names of males show that they are expected to wield power, be strong and always be above women, while names of women imply they are expected to display amiable behaviour, possess attractive visual qualities, be conscious of their subordinate role and work hard. Their names also remind them that they are alien to the homestead and do not have the same rights as their husbands. Another illustration of gender dichotomy is in the common phrases and metaphors that denigrate women while praising men. Some of the Kikuyu phrases cited in Ndungo (2016) are;

kaana kogĩ ta ithe	a child as clever as the father
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kaana gakĩgu ta nyina	a child as foolish as the mother
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Similar phrases and metaphors are also found in other communities, such as Swahili. What stands out about Swahili phrases *simama time stand like a man*, *Kufa kiume die like a man* and *jikaze kiume endure like a man* (Karakacha, 2021) is the lack of their feminine counterparts, which demonstrates a disregard for women's stance, bravery or endurance. The common saying for praising masculinity and deriding femininity in the examples below will fall into the same category of sexism metaphors.

Wewe ni mwanamume wa kweli	You are a real man"
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Kama wewe ni mwanamume, karibia hapa.	If you are a real man, come near me
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Wacha kulia kama mwanamke	stop crying like a woman
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Absence of counterparts for the phrases above *Wewe ni mwanake wa kweli* ‘you a real woman’, *kama wewe ni mwanamke karibia hapa* ‘if you are a real woman, come near me’ and *wacha kulia kama mwanamme* ‘stop crying like a man’ is another demonstration of masculinity discourse. A former powerful Kenyan politician referred to himself as a real man, ‘a total man’ after his amorous behaviour was publicly censured by his colleagues. His case exemplifies qualities associated with masculinity, such as virility, integrity, courage and fortitude, as captured by the three phrases above. These metaphors and phrases are embedded in folk etymology or reanalysis, which is usually misanalysis since it negates the Saussurean notion of the arbitrary nature of linguistic signs. Some vocabularies in Kikuyu have been reinterpreted and given far-fetched derivations that deviate from their original meaning.

Mwanake	young man	mwana ke	child, take (this)
Mũirĩtu	girl	mũ-irĩi tu	one who eat (them) only

A young man is viewed as a scion who can be bequeathed everything, while a girl impoverishes her parents by always eating. Interestingly, *mũirĩtu* is a cognate of Kamba *mwĩĩtu* with a similar meaning, but the Kamba reanalysis yields *mwĩĩ tu* ‘body only.’ Kamba folk etymology focuses only on her body, ignoring any other useful attributes.

The last element of folklore to be mentioned is the characters in oral narratives (see Ndungo, 2016). In myths, legends and folktales, female characters are depicted as subservient, docile, ignorant and foolish on one end while on the other as jealous conspirators and evil schemers. Girls are naive and gullible and fall for any trick, hence the need to be monitored by their parents and male siblings. Women, on the other hand, poison their husbands, wives conspire with their sons and daughters against their father, and the evil stepmother kills her innocent stepson. Ironically, the telling of stories in many societies is associated with women, especially aunts and grandmothers. This role makes them the custodians of language, which puts them in a position to change the trajectory of society’s perception through characters in the stories or the qualities of characters in those stories. This, however, does not happen because the social institutions are structured only to produce that kind of art. Just as women are themselves users of sexist proverbs, their transmission

of oral narratives with negative feminine characterisation makes them accomplices in the perpetuation of patriarchal ideology.

Complying with the social norms and taboos

Herbert's (1990) example about the practice of *hlonipha* amongst the married Nguni women mentioned earlier is a good example of how taboos can dictate the norms of language use. Many societies expect women to use polite language and avoid transgressive languages like profanities, curse words and taboo words, especially in public, though studies have shown that women do use profanities and taboo words within their networks in certain contexts. Usually, norms of deference are unidirectional, where the rules apply to women with no similar requirements for men. Not only are wives expected to use deferential terms, but they are also expected to talk less, not raise their voices and not talk back, even when they disagree, in order to preserve their husbands' faces. Tannen's approach of associating men and women with different subcultures espouses this view of men and women being subjected to different language norms. When these norms of use extend to the public sphere, they become stumbling blocks to women who cannot actively participate fully in social affairs in the same capacity as their male counterparts. In addition, these norms choke their freedom to explore all possibilities where their linguistic innovation could be deployed for self-advancement. A good example would be leadership, where they are judged unconvincing and ineffective because they cannot use strong language like their male counterparts. Other areas, such as the creative industry, confine their language use to safe contexts, such as the textile industry and religion. Kanga writings, which mostly target women, sustain the social ideology, while religious teaching always favours the status quo. Although some female participants in secular music take the liberty to breach social norms, their number is not significant enough to make an impact.

Language and economic empowerment

Having looked at how the dichotomy between men's and women's norms of language use and the different ways that the two genders are represented in language, we can now focus on the link between languages and development before placing Indigenous languages at the centre of African women and especially Kenyan women's economic empowerment agenda. The relationship

between language and economic development is self-evident but less acknowledged. Language choice influences the way people make their decisions on economic matters. Proficiency in the language used in economic activities can lead to economic success, while lack of proficiency can doom it. Companies use popular language with the masses to influence the perception of their product or business. The reason behind massive investment in literacy in official or national languages is that proficiency in the language of business is a key criterion that employers use when hiring. In the US, for instance, migrants with high skills in formal English are more likely to advance economically than those with low English skills. Similar scenarios abound in many third-world countries where skills in ex-colonial languages are associated with upward mobility. The marginalisation of indigenous languages stems from the belief that they cannot deliver economic success (see Bamgbose, 2011). This results in two parallel economic systems in a society where the formal economy chiefly relies on the mainstream languages, with the informal economy largely conducted in non-mainstream languages.

Language plays a central role in anchoring the main pillars of any developmental model, which are education, health and food security. Skills that are necessary to drive the economic machine are acquired through the education system. Without mastery of the language of instruction, success in education is impossible. Yet the question of the language of instruction has been mired in a tug-of-war between mainstream languages versus vernaculars. While scholars agree that the best language of instruction is a child's first language (Wa Mberia, 2016; Kioko, et al., 2008)), many believe that vernacular languages doom the child's economic prospects. Lost in this debate is whether education is supposed to focus on delivering the skills necessary for development or producing good speakers of mainstream languages. In terms of health, many diseases could be avoided through access to information regarding diet, exercise, and knowledge about the causes of many diseases. This seals the spending that goes to medical expenses, which could be channelled to other economic activities or plugging other budget holes. In addition, it saves time when visiting health centres and allows people to engage in other meaningful activities. Access to information about medication and taking care of the sick saves the family money by avoiding deterioration and facilitating faster recovery. Moreover, many diseases are misdiagnosed because patients cannot express themselves well to the physician or the physicians' instructions are laced with medical vocabulary beyond the patient's or caregivers' comprehension. Language is also tied

to food security in that proper diet and production of food necessary for nourishment not only saves money that would have been used for buying food but is also a source of livelihood for many families. In a nutshell, education must be delivered in a language that the learner understands, and health information must be accessible in a language that facilitates proper interaction between patients, physicians, and caregivers. In addition, it must be able to deliver information regarding sustainable agriculture or livestock keeping needs to align with the community's cultural environment.

Indigenous languages and women's economic empowerment

Prah (2012) has claimed that African languages are the missing link in African development. He further claims that no country can develop using a borrowed language. Asians have developed using Asian languages, Europeans have used European languages, and Arabs have used Arabic, but Africans, especially sub-Saharan Africans, are expected to develop using foreign languages. In support, Bamgbose (2011) lamented the failure to recognise that African development lagged behind because the development strategies relied on foreign languages that excluded the majority of the population from the formal economy. Ironically, the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), namely poverty eradication, universal primary education, gender equality, reduction of child mortality, maternal health, combating HIV/AIDS and other diseases, environmental sustainability, and global partnership are all women's issues. Empowering women empowers the whole society, which contributes to poverty eradication. Local languages are key to mainstreaming economic activities that many women engage in.

In education, gender parity is far from being achieved, in spite of some cases where girls' school enrolment surpasses that of boys. Still, more girls than boys drop out of school for reasons ranging from female genital mutilation, early pregnancy and marriages, lack of fees and uniforms, and other classroom challenges, including the inability to comprehend the language of instruction (UNICEF, 2004). Since 1953, UNESCO has been emphasising the logic of using the early years of school for the child. This has been emphasised by various scholars (e.g. Wa Mberia, 2016; Agoya-Wotsuna, 2012; Kioko et al., 2008, among others), supporting the pedagogical approach of the learner moving from the familiar to the unfamiliar. Reducing the language barrier eliminates one barrier to girls' education, achieving gender parity and attaining the education MDG. Civic

engagement is one way to promote gender equality, and local languages could be useful tools for negotiating policies that favour all genders. While recognising that even urban women experience marginalisation, the status of rural women is more complex and dire. Rural women can be trained to claim their voice in languages they are comfortable with, allowing them to gain agency as they “dance through the gender landmines” (Kolodny, 1980). Gaining their voice and working within the local cultural structures will eliminate the suspicion that gender equality is something brought by foreigners or elite women from the city.

Reduction of child mortality, maternal health, combating HIV/AIDS and other diseases are all health-related matters. Health matters affect women more than any other category in society. During childbirth, they have to endure mental and physiological challenges, which take a toll on their health. Those not in formal employment with guaranteed maternity leave have their source of income suspended, sometimes losing it forever. In many cultures, women are the primary caregivers. When children are sick, they are more likely to miss work to care for children and are more traumatised by the child’s demise. On HIV/AIDS, when women are not victims, they are expected to take care of their sick husbands or children. Finally, environmental sustainability is especially important for rural women because rural livelihood heavily relies on climatic conditions. Whether in agriculture or livestock farming, they stand to suffer more from environmental disasters.

In stressing the role of local languages in achieving MDGs, we must appreciate that as products of the local socio-physical environment, local languages embody local identity and serve the key function of enshrining social norms. The critical skills that spur humans to innovate are those that are internalised and, hence, require the least effort to store and retrieve from memory. Indigenous languages and first languages are generally the most unmarked codes of communication for their speakers. In the education sphere, they reduce the gap between formal settings at school and the informal settings at home, enable the sharing of knowledge gained in school with the parents and society at large, and are the catalysts for innovations that are aligned with the society’s needs because they are closely linked to the social norms (see Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, 1986). Since they are mastered by everyone in society, they allow everyone to participate in all socioeconomic activities. Bearing in mind that these MDGs are mostly women-centred, women will influence major decisions necessary for the transformation of existing structures, hence ushering in envisaged

change in social norms. This is because negotiating through existing local structures yields more socioeconomic advancement than counterproductive, confrontational approaches (Boudet, Petesch, Turk and Thumala, 2013).

Making local languages work for women and society

Earlier, it was mentioned that languages are a non-neutral medium that presents reality from a biased point of view. Even the local languages we are advocating for were shown to be sexist and guilty of sustaining an ideology tilted against women, which hinders their socioeconomic empowerment. This contradiction can be resolved by social and language reforms. Social reforms will target those social structures that sustain unequal power relations between the two genders to eliminate social barriers that discourage women's agency in economic development. This includes all cultural institutions that perpetuate the patriarchal ideology, such as gendered division of labour, gendered taboos and misleading cultural expressions in artistic representations. The biased characterisation in oral narratives and songs that denigrate women needs to be discarded. However, just removing negative portrayals of women in oral stories and songs while leaving out those that portray men as superhuman will not be sufficient. All aspects of culture that give an advantage to one gender need to be re-evaluated. This will create room for the emergence of new narratives, mythologies and songs aimed at creating new ideologies aligned with the ideals of a fair society, a just society that emancipates women and men and hence makes obsolete those elements of culture that portray women as weak or deficient.

Language reform is another way of changing the ideology that entrenches unfair representation. This involves deliberate efforts to eliminate those parts of the language that emphasise gender differences. In Swahili, for instance, activists have succeeded in dropping words that portray people with disability negatively. Morphologically, words for humans are classified in the M/WA noun class, which is also called 1 and 2. However, the classification of the words for *kipofu* (blind), *kiwete* (crippled), *kiziwi* (deaf) in the KI/VI noun class, which is associated with inanimate, things were considered demeaning to people living with those disabilities. Eventually, *asiyeona* (one who does not see), and *asiyesikia* (one who does not hear) replaced *kipofu* and *kiziwi*, respectively (Ndungo, 2016). When it comes to names, there is no reason why a female name cannot be used for males. Unisex names are now common in the English language. Names like Robin, Hillary,

Ashley, Aiden, Taylor and Carey, among others, are all unisex. In many African societies, children take their father's surname, but a trend is emerging where children are taking their mother's surname. Many Kenyans do not know the late Olympian Samuel Wanjiru's middle name because he only used his mother's last name. This emerging trend among the Kikuyu Community attracted the attention of panicked Kikuyu elders who were reported in the Star Newspaper on January 7, 2020, denouncing the practice of single mothers giving their male children their surnames. This development demonstrates that norms can be challenged and changed.

Finally, language reform must aim at proverbs, metaphors and idioms that misrepresent women. Archaic expressions that reinforce the ideology portraying women as inferior must be discarded, and new ones created to reflect mutual engagement among the genders. In Kenya, the rules proscribing hate speech make offenders liable to prosecution in a court of law. There is a need for appropriate action to be taken in the fight against sexist language. One of the ways this could be achieved is sensitisation of broadcasters, especially vernacular broadcasters on the phrases and proverbs to avoid and inform their listeners about the harm they do.

Conclusions

We have pointed out that local languages require the least effort to retain and retrieve in the users' memory. They are the best mediums in which local development should be anchored. However, for them to achieve their task, there is a need for a shift in paradigms through deliberate steps to rid them of biases perpetuated by the social ideology that inhibits the empowerment of women. Reforming African languages and placing them in the nexus of economic development will not only unlock their potential to integrate the rural economy into the mainstream. They will also contribute to preserving linguistic diversity, thus preserving the country's linguistic heritage.

For these reforms to be effective, they must not be aimed at gendered language alone. They have to be part of a larger project of modernisation of local languages to make them compliant with contemporary realities. Making them adapt to new domains in key areas like education, health, science and technology will enhance their appeal and eliminate the perception that they can only be relics of culture. We have already witnessed their use in the creative industry like religious music, secular music and folk art. Extending their use to other areas of the creative economy,

especially with the help of the new media, can only create more economic opportunities for their users. For the women, using local languages is emancipatory; opportunities for leadership which were out of reach for the rural women due to their low skills in mainstream languages will now open up, making women key decision-makers in the community. At the table where policies impacting the community are made, women's participation can lead to favourable policies, thus accelerating their economic empowerment.

As the main victims of biased language, women have the capacity to lead in the reform of local languages by changing norms at all linguistic levels. Moreover, as the primary caregivers, the likelihood of passing the new norms to their offspring provides a natural way to ensure the norms diffuse throughout society. Modernised local languages will become important resources in the development agenda, allowing access to services and opportunities to rural women that were previously inaccessible due to centuries of subjugation, lack of confidence and negative self-perception resulting from adherence to norms imposed by an ideology designed to eternally marginalize them.

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