




Tshivenda Common Nouns and their Impact on the Dignity of Women: A Sociolinguistic Approach

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines how Tshivenda common nouns used to label women contribute to social conflict within the Vhavenda community. It explores how these nouns operate as linguistic tools that perpetuate gender bias, undermine women's dignity, and normalise patriarchal dominance in everyday discourse. By analysing the socio-cultural implications of such expressions, the study highlights the role of language in sustaining gender inequality and advocates for more inclusive and respectful linguistic practices within Vhavenda society. Adopting a qualitative sociolinguistic approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with rural-based Vhavenda women. The data were analysed thematically using Critical Discourse Analysis and Feminist Linguistics. The findings reveal that certain Tshivenda common nouns systematically diminish women's self-esteem and social standing, thereby perpetuating gender inequality both in personal relationships and within the broader community. The everyday use of these nouns operates as a subtle yet powerful mechanism of marginalisation and psychological harm. By foregrounding women's lived experiences with these expressions, the study contributes to Tshivenda lexicography and sociolinguistic scholarship. The findings offer valuable insights for language planning and education in South Africa, underscoring the need for decolonial and feminist linguistic approaches to preserve human dignity in African languages within the digital age.

Keywords: Self-Esteem, Rural-Based Women, Women's Dignity, Tshivenda Common Nouns, Inherent Dignity.

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INTRODUCTION

South Africa's Constitution (Act 108 of 1996) guarantees that "everyone has inherent dignity and the right to have their dignity respected and protected." Yet within the Vhavenda community, specific Tshivenda common nouns used to describe women are associated with conflict and everyday disrespect. This study, therefore, asks: *How do these lexical choices affect women's dignity?*

Guided by feminist theory, which recognises that women have historically been regarded as less capable and less valued, this paper situates linguistic practices within their social and cultural contexts. Selden and Widdowson cite Aristotle's assertion that "the female is female by a certain lack of qualities," exemplifying how classical thought infantilised and devalued women.¹ Similarly, Woolf illustrates in *A*

¹ R. Selden and P. Widdowson, *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*, 5th ed. (London: Routledge, 2017), 121.

Room of One's Own that patriarchy shapes language to privilege men,² while Hooks observes that “men use their power to elevate their gender over women.”³

Linguistic studies demonstrate that words once neutral or positive can acquire negative connotations over time, a process known as *semantic derogation*. By analysing Tshivenda common nouns used to label women, this study explores how language undermines women's self-worth and reinforces gender inequality. In doing so, it contributes to the broader scholarship on language and gender in South Africa and beyond, demonstrating that everyday speech can either affirm dignity or perpetuate disrespect.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Language plays a crucial role in shaping cultural norms, social expectations and ideological structures within communities. Among the Vhenda, linguistic expressions provide insight into the underlying moral codes and gender relations embedded in everyday life. In particular, the Tshivenda terms used to describe women reveal the patriarchal structures that inform cultural expectations of femininity, morality and acceptable social conduct. These linguistic labels, far from being neutral descriptors, act as discursive tools that regulate behaviour, reinforce gender hierarchies and maintain traditional power dynamics. This literature review explores four central Tshivenda terms *phombwe*, *tseramisiamelo*, *phiranawe*, and *tshifevhi*, drawing on feminist linguistic theory, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and African gender scholarship to examine their societal implications. The review also integrates Tshivenda cultural examples such as proverbs, idioms, and oral traditions to contextualise these terms within local epistemologies.

Language, Gender and Social Norms in Tshivenda

Scholars argue that language functions both as a mirror and a producer of social reality.⁴ In patriarchal contexts, linguistic structures often reflect and reinforce gendered power relations. Feminist linguistic theory posits that language contributes to the construction of gender by defining acceptable behaviours for women and penalising those who deviate from these expectations.⁵ Within the Tshivenda linguistic landscape, terms associated with women frequently carry strong moral and evaluative connotations. Words that describe women's sexuality, mobility or social presence tend to be derogatory, while equivalent male behaviours are either tolerated or normalised.

This pattern aligns with Schulz's concept of semantic derogation, which refers to how words relating to women often become negative over time.⁶ Eckert and McConnell-Ginet similarly note that women's behaviour is frequently judged through narrow moral lenses, especially in societies where cultural honour is closely tied to women's conduct.⁷ In Tshivenda, women are expected to embody virtues such as modesty, chastity, humility and domesticity. Any deviation from these norms is linguistically marked, indicating the community's discomfort with female autonomy.

Tshivenda proverbs also reinforce these expectations. Expressions such as “*Musadzi u fhaṭa muṭa*” (A woman builds the home) emphasise women's domestic role, while “*Mbeu ya musadzi i vhonele nga mikhwa*” (A woman's character is known through her behaviour) links women's morality directly to their public reputation. Such sayings create a cultural framework in which women's behaviour is constantly monitored and publicly evaluated.

According to Raphalalani, some Tshivenda proverbs are biased in favour of men and disadvantageous to women.⁸ These proverbs create unequal treatment for men and women in their application. This bias may stem from the patriarchal nature of African customary law, which is prevalent

² V. Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: Hogarth Press, 1929).

³ B. Hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2000), 180.

⁴ N. Fairclough, *Language and Power* (London: Longman, 1989).

⁵ D. Cameron, “Language, Gender and Sexuality: Current Issues and New Directions,” *Applied Linguistics* 26, no. 4 (2005): 482–502; J. Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

⁶ M. Schulz, “The Semantic Derogation of Women Revisited,” in *Language and Gender: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. C. Kramer and B. Thorne (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 3–22.

⁷ Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet, *Language and Gender* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

⁸ T. Raphalalani, “Gender Bias in Tshivenda Proverbs: A Feminist Analysis,” *South African Journal of African Languages* 41, no. 3 (2021): 250–59.

in many African countries, including South Africa. Patriarchy grants authority and power to men.⁹ Consequently, it is evident that men, rather than women, have traditionally been the authors of proverbs.

The same can be said about the crafting of certain Tshivenda terms, which appear to be derogatory. Below is a critical exploration of four Tshivenda terms: *phombwe*, *tseramisiamele*, *phiranawe* and *tshifevhi*.

Phombwe: The Extramarital Woman

The term *phombwe* refers to a married woman who engages in extramarital relationships, particularly with married men. This label carries a strong moral judgement and is used to shame or discipline women who violate expectations of marital fidelity. From a CDA perspective, *phombwe* can be understood as part of a “discursive regime of moral regulation,”¹⁰ where language is used to police sexuality and maintain social order.

Feminist linguistic theory suggests that such labels operate as regulatory mechanisms that define what constitutes “respectable” womanhood.¹¹ Notably, Tshivenda lacks an equivalent term for men who commit adultery, reflecting a gendered moral asymmetry. Men’s extramarital activities are often framed casually or even humorously frequently normalised by expressions such as “*Mufana ndi mufana*” (A man is a man). This demonstrates an androcentric moral framing where women are viewed as the primary custodians of sexual morality.

Tshivenda cultural expressions reinforce this double standard. Proverbs such as “*Mulomo wa musadzi a u koni u shuma pfumo*” (A woman’s secret can destroy a family) illustrate how women’s sexual behaviour is constructed as a threat to family stability and community honour. The biblical narrative of the adulterous woman in John 8 similarly reflects societal tendencies to target women for sexual wrongdoing while excusing male behaviour. This selective moral scrutiny reveals how *phombwe* functions as a linguistic tool to regulate women’s sexuality and reinforce patriarchal values.

Tseramisiamele: The Flirtatious or Seductive Woman

Tseramisiamele is applied to a woman perceived as flirtatious, seductive, or overly friendly towards men. The term is often invoked when women exhibit confidence, social openness, or assertiveness traits that challenge traditional norms of female modesty. Feminist linguistic theory argues that women who occupy public space confidently are frequently subjected to sexualised interpretations of their behaviour.¹² As a result, *tseramisiamele* becomes a label that enforces gendered expectations of reserve and propriety.

This linguistic pattern aligns with Butler’s notion of gender performativity, where deviation from expected gender behaviour attracts punishment. In Tshivenda culture, public mobility and expressive behaviour by women are often viewed with suspicion. Common sayings like “*Musadzi a si wa u tshimbatshimbila*” (A woman is not meant to wander around) demonstrate the restrictive behavioural corridor imposed on women. Even clothing choices may attract scrutiny, highlighting how female respectability is policed through everyday discourse.

Biblical imagery reinforces these anxieties. Proverbs 7:12 portrays a seductive woman as morally dangerous, an interpretation echoed in many African Christian communities. This discourse frames women with social visibility or charisma as potential threats to moral order, thereby discouraging female autonomy. Being labelled *tseramisiamele* can therefore lead to heightened surveillance, reputational damage, and victim-blaming, reinforcing patriarchal notions of womanhood.

Phiranawe: The Serial Partner

The term *phiranawe* describes a woman who has multiple romantic partners within a short period. It is a strongly judgemental term grounded in cultural expectations that women should pursue monogamy, stability, and chastity. African feminist scholars such as Amadiume and Oyèwùmí argue that African

⁹ W Bradford Wilcox and Steven L Nock, “What’s Love Got to Do with It? Equality, Equity, Commitment and Women’s Marital Quality,” *Social Forces* 84, no. 3 (2006): 1321–45.

¹⁰ Fairclough, *Language and Power*.

¹¹ J. Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

¹² Cameron, “Language, Gender and Sexuality: Current Issues and New Directions.”

patriarchal societies have historically regulated women’s sexuality as a means of preserving lineage and maintaining social control.¹³ The label *phiranawe* reinforces this regulatory framework by condemning female romantic autonomy.

Semantic analysis reveals that *phiranawe* carries connotations of instability and immorality. Tshikota refers to the term as describing “a loose woman,” indicating how language constructs certain forms of female sexuality as deviant.¹⁴ Cultural sayings such as “*Musadzi wa thonipfho u dzula nga ndothe*” (A respectable woman stays with one man) reinforce the ideal of female sexual containment. In contrast, men who frequently change partners are rarely condemned; instead, they may be praised for their virility. This double standard reflects the patriarchal privileging of male sexual freedom.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, the label *phiranawe* can have material consequences. Women so labelled may be denied respect, excluded from certain social spaces, or viewed as unsuitable for marriage. The stigma attached to the term therefore disciplines women into conforming with restrictive norms, reinforcing patriarchal gender hierarchies.

Tshifevhi: The Immoral Woman

Among the terms analysed, *tshifevhi* carries the strongest negative connotation. Defined by Van Warmelo as “an adulteress; a woman of loose morals,” *tshifevhi* is more than a descriptor of behaviour: it represents a complete moral condemnation.¹⁵ Foucault’s theory of moral discourse suggests that terms like *tshifevhi* operate as mechanisms of social control by marking certain identities as undesirable or corrupt.¹⁶

The term aligns with Gilligan’s argument that women are often held to stricter moral standards than men.¹⁷ Tshivenda cultural expressions such as “*Tshifevhi tshi a kanganyisa muṭa*” (An immoral woman destabilises the home) suggest that female sexuality has the power to disrupt social harmony. This symbolic burden places responsibility for moral preservation solely on women.

Women labelled *tshifevhi* may face extreme social consequences, including exclusion from community events, loss of marriage prospects, and enduring reputational damage. Butler’s concept of “injurious speech” is relevant here, as *tshifevhi* functions not merely as a word but as a performative act that inflicts social and psychological harm.¹⁸ The label becomes a permanent moral stain, illustrating the harshness with which female nonconformity is punished.

Table 1: Tshivenda Proverbs and Their English Translations

Tshivenda Proverb	English Translation	Relevant Meaning in Context
Musadzi u fhaṭa muṭa	A woman builds the home.	Emphasises women’s domestic responsibilities and moral role in maintaining family stability.
Mbeu ya musadzi i vhonele nga mikhwa	A woman’s character is known through her behaviour.	Suggests women’s public behaviour directly reflects their moral worth.
Mulomo wa musadzi a u koni u shuma pfumo	A woman’s secret can destroy a family.	Frames female sexuality as dangerous and potentially destabilising to the household.
Musadzi a si wa u tshimbatshimbila	A woman is not meant to wander around.	Restricts women’s mobility and discourages their presence in public spaces.

¹³ I. Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society* (London: Zed Books, 1987); O. Oyèwùmí, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

¹⁴ F. Tshikota, *Tshivenda Lexical Semantics: A Study of Meaning Change in Selected Terms* (Thohoyandou: University of Venda Press, 2006).

¹⁵ N.J. Van Warmelo, *Venda Dictionary: Tshivenda-English* (Pretoria: Government Printer, 1989).

¹⁶ M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1 – An Introduction* (New York: Pantheon, 1978).

¹⁷ C. Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).

¹⁸ J. Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

Musadzi wa thonifho u dzula nga ndoṭhe	A respectable woman stays in one place (with one man).	Promotes monogamy and moral stability for women.
Tshifevhi tshi a kanganyisa muṭa	An immoral woman destabilises the home.	Links women’s sexual behaviour to the stability and honour of the entire family.
U vha tshifevhi zwi ita u shonisa vhutolo ha musanda	Being immoral shames the entire clan.	Suggests individual female behaviour affects the honour of the broader community or lineage.
Vhasidzana vhaṭuku vho no ḍiita phiranawe	Young girls who move from boy to boy behave like a “phiranawe.”	Stigmatises female romantic exploration; labels it as socially improper.

The Tshivenda terms *phombwe*, *tseramisiamelo*, *phiranawe* and *tshifevhi* reveal deeply embedded patriarchal ideologies that shape social expectations of women. These linguistic labels operate not only as descriptions of behaviour but also as powerful tools of social control that regulate female sexuality, autonomy, and public presence. Through the lenses of feminist linguistics, CDA, and African gender theory, it becomes evident that such labels reinforce gender hierarchies by prescribing restrictive behavioural norms for women. The integration of Tshivenda proverbs and cultural expressions further illustrates how language is intertwined with broader cultural beliefs and moral frameworks. Understanding the societal implications of these terms is essential for addressing gender inequality and challenging the linguistic structures that uphold patriarchal power within Vhavana society.

METHODOLOGY

This paper employed a qualitative research design to explore how Tshivenda common nouns used to label women shape gender relations and contribute to social conflict within the Vhavana community. Qualitative research is particularly suited to examining complex social and cultural phenomena because it prioritises depth, nuance and contextual understanding over numerical generalisation. As Creswell and Bryman argue, qualitative designs are appropriate when researchers seek to understand how individuals interpret their experiences, construct meanings, and navigate socially embedded practices.¹⁹

Because gendered linguistic expressions in Tshivenda are culturally loaded and symbolically powerful, a qualitative approach allowed the study to capture the lived realities of women who directly encounter these labels. It made it possible to investigate not only the definitions of words, but the emotional, social, and moral implications attached to them. The design was also informed by feminist research principles, which prioritise women’s voices, challenge patriarchal structures, and seek to uncover how language can reproduce gender inequality. Through this framework, the research aimed to foreground women’s perspectives and provide an interpretive understanding of the cultural meanings embedded in derogatory labels.

Study Population and Sample

The study population comprised rural Vhavana women residing in the Vhembe District of Limpopo Province. This area was selected because it is a key cultural heartland where Tshivenda language and traditions remain central to everyday life. Women in these communities often interact with indigenous linguistic expressions and are therefore well-positioned to discuss their meanings and social implications.

A purposive sampling strategy was used to select ten information-rich participants. Purposive sampling is commonly used in qualitative research when the aim is to gather in-depth insights from

¹⁹ J. W. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 4th ed. (SAGE Publications, 2014); A. Bryman, *Social Research Methods* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

individuals who have specific experiences or knowledge relevant to the research question.²⁰ The inclusion criteria were: (1) fluency in Tshivenda, (2) personal familiarity with gendered terms used in the community, and (3) willingness to discuss sensitive issues relating to gender, morality, and language. Although the sample size is relatively small, it is entirely appropriate for a qualitative study focused on interpretive depth. Smaller samples facilitate deeper engagement, allow participants to express themselves freely, and support thematic saturation when no new ideas emerge.

The selected participants represented a range of ages, marital statuses, and social backgrounds. This diversity ensured that the data captured a wide spectrum of lived experiences while remaining grounded in a shared cultural context.

Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected from both primary and secondary sources to develop a holistic understanding of the linguistic and cultural significance of the selected terms.

Primary Data: Semi-Structured Interviews

Primary data were generated through semi-structured interviews, which were conducted face-to-face in Tshivenda. This method was chosen because semi-structured interviews allow participants to speak freely while still enabling the researcher to explore specific areas of interest. Open-ended questions encouraged reflective storytelling, personal examples, and emotional insights into how labels such as *phombwe*, *tseramisiamele*, *phiranawe* and *tshifevhi* are experienced and interpreted.

Interviews were conducted in locations chosen by the participants, usually their homes or community spaces, to foster comfort and trust. Each session lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes. With participants' permission, interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy. Field notes were also taken to capture contextual details, nonverbal expressions, and the researcher's reflections.

Secondary Data Sources

Secondary data were utilised to complement and contextualise the primary data. These included:

- Tshivenda English dictionaries²¹
- Published literature on Tshivenda linguistics, gender studies, and socio-cultural norms
- Social media discourse illustrating contemporary usage of gendered terms
- Academic works on patriarchal ideologies and linguistic sexism

These secondary sources enhanced the reliability of the study by offering historical, cultural, and lexical background information, enabling triangulation of meanings and strengthening the cultural interpretation of participants' accounts.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's six-step method: familiarisation, coding, theme generation, reviewing themes, refining themes, and producing the report.²² The analysis began with repeated listening to audio recordings and reading of transcripts to immerse the researcher in the data. Interviews were transcribed verbatim in Tshivenda and translated into English. Bilingual language checks ensured that translations retained the cultural nuances and connotative meanings of the original expressions.

Initial coding involved systematically identifying interesting features, including emotional reactions, cultural explanations, moral judgements, and contextual information. Codes were grouped into potential themes based on shared meanings. These preliminary themes were then refined and interpreted using feminist linguistic theory, semantic derogation, and African gender epistemologies.

²⁰ Lawrence A Palinkas et al., "Purposeful Sampling for Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis in Mixed Method Implementation Research," *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research* 42 (2015): 533–44.

²¹ Van Warmelo, *Venda Dictionary: Tshivenda–English*.

²² Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 77–101.

The thematic analysis made it possible to identify how the selected Tshivenda terms regulate women's behaviour, reinforce patriarchal ideologies, and shape social relations. It also helped illuminate the contrast between male and female moral expectations and demonstrate how linguistic expressions contribute to gendered double standards.

Ethical Considerations

High ethical standards were maintained throughout the study. Participants received a written and verbal explanation of the study's purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits. Informed consent was obtained voluntarily, without coercion.

Participants were assured of confidentiality, anonymity, and their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Because some interview topics involved sensitive issues relating to sexuality, morality, and stigma, interviews were conducted with care, empathy, and cultural sensitivity. The interviewer adopted a non-judgmental approach and offered participants the option to skip questions or take breaks. This ensured psychological comfort and protected participants' dignity.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that Tshivenda common nouns used to label women carry significant socio-cultural weight and play a central role in shaping gender relations within the Vhavenda community. Four major themes emerged from the data: *phombwe* (the extramarital woman), *tseramisiamelo* (the flirtatious woman), *phiranawe* (the serial partner), and *tshifevhi* (the immoral woman). These terms illustrate how language functions as a mechanism of social control, moral regulation and patriarchal authority. They also reveal how linguistic labels shape women's identities, enforce gender expectations, and entrench unequal power dynamics. The themes are discussed below with reference to participants' voices and supporting literature.

Theme 1: *Phombwe* – The Extramarital Woman

Participants consistently associated the term *phombwe* with moral decay, social shame, and gendered discrimination. They highlighted that the label carries long-standing consequences, extending beyond the individual to her family and community reputation.

One participant emphasised:

“Once you are called *phombwe*, even your children are ashamed. People don't care about the truth; they just believe you are a bad woman.”

Another added:

“Men do the same thing, but nobody calls them names. Only women are called *phombwe*.”

These reflections expose the pronounced double standard in Vhavenda society. Although extramarital affairs are frowned upon for both genders, women alone are subjected to linguistic punishment. This aligns with Schulz's argument that women's sexuality is disproportionately monitored, rendering female behaviour the primary site of moral scrutiny.²³ Men, by contrast, often face minimal criticism, and their infidelity may be trivialised or dismissed.

From a sociolinguistic standpoint, *phombwe* serves as a moralising label that positions women as the guardians of sexual purity. This finding echoes Van Warmelo's definition and illustrates how the term regulates women's behaviour to uphold patriarchal moral codes.²⁴ Tshivenda cultural expressions reinforce this notion. For instance:

- *Mulomo wa musadzi a u koni u shuma pfumo*
(A woman's secret can destroy a family.)

²³ M. Schulz, “The Semantic Derogation of Women,” in *Language and Sex: Difference and Dominance*, ed. B. Thorne and N. Henley (Rowley, MA: Newbury House, 1975), 64–75.

²⁴ Van Warmelo, *Venda Dictionary: Tshivenda–English*.

Such sayings reflect the belief that a woman's sexuality, if unregulated, poses a threat to family harmony. Thus, *phombwe* functions not merely as a descriptive expression but as a tool of moral control embedded within patriarchal structures.

Theme 2: *Tseramisiamele* – The Flirtatious Woman

Participants described *tseramisiamele* as a term used to restrict women's social presence and behaviour, particularly in mixed-gender environments. The label is frequently applied even in contexts where no inappropriate conduct has taken place.

One participant stated:

"If you are seen talking freely to men, people say you are *tseramisiamele*, even when you are just being polite."

Another reflected:

"Some women fear laughing or dancing in public because people will think they are *tseramisiamele*."

This demonstrates how the term is used to police women's visibility and confidence, reinforcing the belief that respectable women should be quiet, reserved, and modest. Tshikota observes that *tseramisiamele* enforces behavioural conformity by framing women's openness as sexual availability.²⁵ Feminist linguists such as Spender similarly argue that language often serves to silence women or limit their expressions of autonomy.²⁶

Cultural sayings further entrench this restriction:

- *Musadzi a si wa u tshimbatshimbila*
(A woman is not meant to wander around.)

This adage highlights a traditional expectation that respectable women should remain within domestic spheres. Fear of the label *tseramisiamele* leads many women to self-censor, restrict their participation in social settings, and avoid certain public behaviours. The term thus functions as a linguistic barrier, preventing women from fully occupying public spaces.

Theme 3: *Phiranawe* – The Serial Partner

Participants described *phiranawe* as a harsh and stigmatising label directed at women who have had more than one romantic relationship, regardless of context or personal circumstance. The term is often applied simplistically, without consideration for why a woman may have multiple partners.

One participant explained:

"Even if a woman leaves a violent relationship and finds another partner, they still call her *phiranawe*."

Another remarked:

"When a man has many girlfriends, he is called a hero, but when a woman does the same, she becomes *phiranawe*."

These accounts highlight the enduring double standard within gendered expectations of sexuality. Men's multiple relationships are often normalised or even celebrated, whereas women's are harshly criticised. This finding resonates with broader research on African patriarchal norms, which frequently impose stricter expectations of sexual discipline on women.²⁷

The label *phiranawe* reflects a cultural expectation that women should pursue monogamy, emotional stability, and modesty. It positions women who do not conform as morally unreliable or lacking virtue. This interpretation is reinforced through culturally embedded expressions such as:

- *Musadzi o dzula haṭhu ndoṭhe*
(A respectable woman stays in one place/with one man.)

Thus, *phiranawe* functions as a mechanism of social discipline, limiting women's romantic autonomy and sustaining gendered moral hierarchies.

²⁵ Tshikota, *Tshivenda Lexical Semantics: A Study of Meaning Change in Selected Terms*.

²⁶ D. Spender, *Man Made Language* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985).

²⁷ *Frontiers in Sociology*, "Gender and Power in African Sexual Cultures: A Review," *Frontiers in Sociology* 8 (2023): 116122.

Theme 4: *Tshifevhi* – The Immoral Woman

Participants identified *tshifevhi* as the most damaging and severe term among the four labels. It signifies not only inappropriate behaviour but a complete erosion of moral character.

One participant noted:

“Being called *tshifevhi* is the worst insult. It means people see you as having no morals at all.”

Another explained:

“Even after you change, the name stays with you. You can never be respected again.”

This indicates that the term carries enduring stigma. It can permanently damage a woman’s reputation and social standing, creating barriers to reintegration even long after any alleged wrongdoing. Van Warmelo’s definition aligns with this interpretation, describing *tshifevhi* as denoting a “woman of loose morals”.²⁸

From a feminist perspective, labels such as *tshifevhi* constitute what Butler describes as “injurious speech” language that inflicts harm by attacking an individual’s identity and social worth.²⁹ Participants observed that once labelled *tshifevhi*, women may be ostracised, excluded from communal activities, or viewed as unworthy of respect or trust.

The cultural significance of the term is further evident in traditional proverbs, such as:

- *Tshifevhi tshi a kanganyisa muṭa*
(An immoral woman destabilises the home.)

This proverb suggests that female immorality threatens the stability of the entire family, thereby heightening the punitive impact of the label. Consequently, *tshifevhi* is not merely descriptive but functions as a powerful mechanism of social judgement and control.

Synthesis and Interpretation

Taken together, the four themes reveal a coherent pattern: Tshivenda common nouns used to label women are overwhelmingly negative, morally loaded, and socially punitive. They collectively reinforce patriarchal authority by:

- regulating women’s social behaviour, sexuality, and mobility;
- imposing stricter moral standards on women than on men;
- silencing women through fear of reputational damage;
- socially excluding women who deviate from gendered expectations; and
- sustaining cultural beliefs that position women as responsible for upholding communal morality.

These findings support previous linguistic and sociological analyses, which highlight the patriarchal nature of gendered expressions.³⁰ However, this study extends existing scholarship by providing contemporary qualitative evidence from Vhavenda women, illustrating the lived effects of gendered language today. Participants’ narratives demonstrate not only the functional role of these labels in policing women’s behaviour but also their emotional and social consequences.

Importantly, the findings also reveal a growing awareness among women regarding the need for linguistic reform and gender-sensitive language practices. This awareness echoes Cameron’s call for feminist intervention in the transformation of linguistic norms.³¹

RECOMMENDATIONS

To mitigate the harmful effects of derogatory Tshivenda labels, this paper recommends the following:

- The **Tshivenda National Language Body (TNLU)** and **Pan South African Language Board (PanSALB)** should revise dictionaries and endorse gender-sensitive terminology.

²⁸ Van Warmelo, *Venda Dictionary: Tshivenda–English*.

²⁹ Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*.

³⁰ Van Warmelo, *Venda Dictionary: Tshivenda–English*; Tshikota, *Tshivenda Lexical Semantics: A Study of Meaning Change in Selected Terms*; Schulz, “The Semantic Derogation of Women”; Spender, *Man Made Language*.

³¹ D. Cameron, *The Feminist Critique of Language*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 1998).

- **Educators, media practitioners, and community leaders** should promote public awareness campaigns challenging sexist language.
- **Feminist linguistic literacy** should be incorporated into school curricula to foster critical engagement with gendered language.
- **Psychosocial support systems** should be strengthened for women affected by linguistic stigma.
- **Media platforms** should be mobilised to promote positive representations of women and counter gender-based shaming.

CONCLUSION

This paper has demonstrated that Tshivenda common nouns such as *phombwe*, *tseramisiamele*, *phiranawe* and *tshifevhi* operate as linguistic mechanisms reinforcing gender inequality and diminishing women's dignity. Drawing on feminist linguistics and critical discourse analysis, it affirms that language is not merely communicative but deeply ideological. There is an urgent need to interrogate and reform linguistic practices that perpetuate marginalisation. Revising dictionaries, embedding feminist linguistic perspectives in education, and promoting respectful speech are key steps towards gender justice and the protection of human dignity.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future studies should examine the intergenerational transmission of linguistic sexism and undertake comparative analyses across other African languages. Such research will deepen understanding of how language encodes power and contributes to decolonial efforts promoting equality in African societies.

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