

‘Never Marry a Woman with Big Feet – World Wisdom and Development Cooperation’

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What we have in common as members of the human family is not only due to globalization, as some seem to believe, but also to old human universals. As human beings, we share a number of things. We belong to the human species and, so far, we live on the same planet. We have in common with both our ancestors and our contemporary fellow humans the fact that basic drives and needs such as food, shelter, safety, and procreation determine our lives.

In our research we always risk finding what we are looking for. It is a matter of perspective, are we looking for and emphasizing differences or similarities when dealing with people belonging to other cultures or the opposite sex? I have always looked into that question of similarities and differences in my cross-cultural research, and proverbs provided some intriguing answers. Everywhere in the world they refer to love, sex, marrying, mourning, and to what we are supposed to share and not to share, because of our being equipped with a male or a female body. People have been programmed as men and women mostly without being aware of it.

In their terse and memorable fashion, proverbs – the world’s smallest literary genre – reveal ways of seeing life. Musical, direct, frank, they reflect not only cultural uniqueness but also commonalities shared across the globe and throughout history, thanks to our all being equipped with either a male or a female body. Proverbial messages are also an excellent yardstick for finding out to what extent, individually and socially, we continue to swallow some stubborn ideas, or have come to look differently at the world than our ancestors did. Consciously or subconsciously, we have all been influenced by such messages, in spite of local and regional differences, and in spite of historical developments and changes. Men and women have been moulded from the same clay, a Sumerian proverb stated long ago, and we all come to the world in the same way, a more recent Russian proverb added thousands of years later. We may agree with both, but why did the small physical difference that men and women are born with have such enormous consequences?

Over the years I collected and studied more than 15,000 proverbs and sayings about women from all continents. In my research and in the resulting book, I have examined the various themes those proverbs most frequently deal with: women’s bodies, their beauty and

beautifying practices, and their various phases of life—from girls and brides to wives, widows, mothers and grandmothers; and also, no less numerous, with the basics of life, such as love, sex, pregnancy, childbirth, work, verbal eloquence and power. In spite of the differences among cultures, those numerous tiny texts reveal some strikingly common patterns in ideas about women transmitted from generation to generation in hundreds of languages across the globe, thus providing us with an intriguing cultural history of humankind.

Proverbs about women substantially help explain how and why sexual differences have resulted in a growing gap all over the world, a gap that has estranged men and women from sharing both public roles in life and responsibilities at home. Teaching and preaching the preservation of such a gender gap on the basis of relatively insignificant bodily differences, proverbs have reinforced the prevailing hierarchies and established rigid images of what it means not to be a man but a woman, thus legitimizing accessory roles in life for both sexes. The inescapable other side of this prescriptive coin is that women and men who do not fit the prescribed behaviour are stigmatized—no less by women than by men.

Privileges are never given up easily. Those used to having others do unpleasant work for them want to keep things that way. As the French writer Madame de Sévigné observed in the seventeenth century: “The humbling of inferiors is necessary to the maintenance of social order.” Or in the words of a German proverb: “One makes the bed and the other lies down in it.” Or, in Russian: “Housewife at home, pancake with honey.” Or in Arabic: “Everything comes from his wife, even the tying of his shoelaces.” Or in Dutch: “A good wife is the best piece of furniture.” Some Dutch variants add: “You can use her in every room.”

Indeed, the economic rewards of a wife’s zealous presence at home are emphasized across the world:

Take wives, they will bring you riches. (Arabic, Maghreb)

With a clever wife, a man will become rich. (Vietnamese)

A wife is a household treasure. (Japanese)

An industrious wife is the best money-box. (Romanian)

A woman with many [household] talents fills the house to the ceiling. (Portuguese)

The generous offer to equally share unpleasant tasks rarely occurs to those in a comfortable, dominant position. “A bad home sends you for water and firewood” is a Rwandan complaint; it means that a man becomes his wife’s slave if he were to accept humiliating “woman’s work” in her place. If the wife does not conform to her social role, she will suffer from social disapproval. In Europe, such a woman is said to be “wearing the trousers”, a frequently heard complaint in proverbs.

All those warnings for men, along with compelling prescriptions and rules for women, reveal a great deal of insecurity as well as fear for loss of the status quo. If women had been as subservient as they ought to be according to the endless series of prescriptions and proscriptions, the proverbs would have surely been completely superfluous.

So do proverbs really reflect “reality”? The numerous tiny texts represent ideals—as well as regretted deviations from such ideals—as imagined by those whose interests they defend. Whose ideals are they talking about? As a public genre, the proverb is believed to serve and follow “the tradition”, without ever specifying whose tradition is actually being referred to. Instead of representing the “reality” of what women were or are, the material presents an

intriguing mirror of mainly male-inspired interests and fears and inherited ideas about “ideal” and “deviant” womanhood, and in doing so also reveals inherited views of “ideal” and “deviant” norms of manhood. Thanks to the witty images and original comparisons, the material is quite striking and often amusing. In some ways, though, this is also quite disturbing material in that it demonstrates wide currency of misogynistic sentiment, especially in the proverbs about wives, transmitted from generation to generation in hundreds of different languages across the globe.

In the mirror of proverbs we meet them all—the prescribed and accepted, rejected and acclaimed, past and remaining gender roles. The mirror shows that times are changing, and at the same time reminds us that, because of those living legacies, even today, innumerable women still enjoy considerably less freedom than men. Here, I’ll briefly discuss three aspects: female stature, female talents, and the gendered spatial order imagined in proverbs.

Stature

The superior size and superior physical strength of men and the fact that women are the birth-givers have had far-reaching consequences for the gender history of mankind. In many ways, the male sex has made use of its physical size and power for its own gain and benefit.

Physical stature plays a role in power relations, probably because of the simple fact that, literally, smaller people have to “look up” to taller ones, and behaviour researchers have argued that taller people may impress simply because of their physical height. Most women and all young children are physically smaller than adult men, and thus literally looked down upon. In many proverbs, women and children are equally considered to be “minors”. Tall women, then, seem to breach the dominant norm of ideal gender stature by their sheer size. The idea that women ought to be physically smaller than their husbands is often explicitly expressed:

My misfortune is bearable, the man said, and married a small wife. (Frisian)

Of women, misfortune and gherkins, the smallest are always the best. (Hungarian)

Women and sardines, the smaller the better. (Spanish)

Women and sardines: pick the small ones. (Portuguese, Brazil/Spanish, Argentina)

A wife and a plough handle are best when shorter than the man. (Oromo)

A housewife likes a small pot; a husband likes a small wife. (Khiongtha)

Usually, a tall woman has big feet, and a small woman small feet; both small women and small feet seem to be considered more attractive than size large or extra large. In proverbs, a woman who is physically taller than her partner goes against the social norm and is considered to be far from ideal. When a man is not the tall, strong person he is supposed to be, there are plenty of comforting proverbs, especially in Africa, arguing that his smallness does not undo his superiority vis-à-vis women. He is in charge anyway:

A man, even a man of small size, will be called great in comparison to women. (Arabic, Lebanon)

Even small, a man is old. (Minyanka)

Respect for old age, and especially the prestige of old men, as formulated in the above Minyanka proverb, is thus extended to the superiority of the male sex as such. Males always come first, even as young boys, is the argument. For safety reasons, it is sometimes explicitly stressed that by their very nature men cannot be belittled in life. In the words of an Ashanti saying: “There are no small men”, because each man is automatically “higher” than any woman. The Ngbaka, who

live in the Central African Republic, have taken the small stature problem encountered by males so seriously that they have invented several reassuring proverbial metaphors in order to redress the balance:

A small string binds a big parcel.
A small squirrel can lift up a big nut.
The small hawk can carry off a big chick.

The small string, squirrel and hawk refer to a small man, whereas the big parcel, nut and chick represent a tall woman. The argument and justification is that a small man can marry a tall woman without difficulty. As this is not a common situation, the couple's physical "gender imbalance" has to be made up for by a convincing argument. The "tallness" of the parcel, nut and chick also refers, metaphorically, to whichever superior qualities the woman might own and the man possibly not. All three messages argue that a short husband can marry a large woman without any risk, because he will stay in power according to the established rule that the smallest of the strong (i.e. male) sex is always more powerful than the tallest of the weaker sex. This idea is also expressed in a Nigerian Ikwere proverb: "Whatever the size of the woman, it's the man who mounts her."

Talents

The theme of impressive female appearance not only holds for physical stature, but also applies figuratively. A great many proverbs refer to the imminent threat of female power, a power that needs to be confined and controlled. Two strategies have been developed. Proverbs either belittle and deny female qualities or they openly express fear of and warn against their destructive effects. Thus, an abundance of proverbs simply declare that women have no bright mind. Whether referred to as brains, as understanding, sense, wisdom, intelligence or knowledge, all such qualities in women are widely scorned, if they are not actually declared to be non-existent in the first place. Women's verbal qualities are either disparaged as talkativeness, chattering, twittering, cackling and so forth—whereas men's talk is praised—or men are warned against women's frightening words, as sharp destructive swords.

The principal rule for the ideal woman is never to reveal that they do have power, knowledge, and other extraordinary mental or artistic abilities. A wife in particular should not exhibit her talents and qualities (except in the domain of housekeeping and childcare), and she should certainly refrain from having the upper hand over her husband in public, unless she wants to ridicule him, thus provoking his anger, and, consequently, risking violence or divorce. Earthly prestige is the prerogative of men, or, as expressed in a Russian proverb: "A smart woman gives the man glory." Especially in the West (where ever more women have actually started wearing trousers in the past century), proverbs use trousers as a metaphor for the male roles and domains. The more smart women feel tempted to put on "male clothes", the more men are warned against the undesirable consequences of this objectionable inclination:

Each of us a trouser leg, said the wife, and she took the whole pair of trousers. (Frisian)
Where the wife wears the trousers, the husband changes diapers. (Letzeburgish)
A sensible woman leaves her husband the trousers. (German/Dutch)
Where the wife wears trousers, the Devil is the lord of the house. (German)
A woman is smart in distinguishing her skirt from his trousers. (Scottish, UK)
The cunning wife makes her husband her apron. (English, UK)
When the wife wears the pants, the husband rocks the child. (Ladino)
If your petticoat fits you well, do not try to put on your husband's pants. (Creole, Martinique)

There are numerous examples. In Italian, it is said: “Where the woman wears the trousers and the man the apron, things turn out badly”. Badly for whom? Using “the trousers” as a metaphor, a Fon proverb literally equates anatomy with destiny: “A woman in trousers, what is dangling inside?” Reluctance vis-à-vis the very idea of the woman’s knowledge and talents is expressed without the slightest reserve. The message is simply that men do not like their wife to be cleverer than them. Mediocrity scores as a highly recommendable female quality, especially from a husband’s perspective. But even if she is admittedly clever, a woman’s destiny is not to follow any other path than the prescribed female role of subservience:

If too clever a woman gets married, she does not succeed. (Twi)

A mule that whinnies and a woman that talks Latin never come to any good. (English, USA)

Women’s wisdom destroys houses. (Russian)

When a woman has no talents, she is already doing very well. (Chinese)

Knowledge

Knowledge is power, knowledge is riches knowledge is a privilege; it is never a burden. Lack of knowledge is darker than the night. With knowledge, you are never lost. This is a summary of messages about knowledge that can be found in all the corners of the globe. Development and knowledge go hand in hand, it is argued in development cooperation discussions. Those who have knowledge are more prestigious, and they usually have more authority and privileges than those who lack knowledge. Everywhere proverbs stress the great importance and impact of knowledge, learning, and wisdom:

The road to wisdom begins with reading and writing (the alphabet). (Japanese)

Learning is a treasure that follows its owner everywhere. (Chinese)

Learning has no enemy but ignorance. (English, USA)

Learning is better than goods. (Arabic, Morocco)

Learning is wealth that cannot be stolen. (Filipino)

First learn, then form opinions. (Hebrew)

Not to know is bad, not to want to know is worse. (Wolof)

It is all the more revealing then to discover that in fact proverbs shout their hardest in denying women this precious good, and in preventing women from having access to it. The same strategies as the ones discussed above with regard to women’s talents also apply here. The first one is to limit or belittle women’s intellectual capacities.

Virtuous is a woman without knowledge. (Chinese, Taiwan)

A woman’s sense is wrong sense. (Telugu)

All a woman’s intelligence is her home; if she leaves it, she will be worthless. (Kurdish)

Women ask questions, men give the answers. (Arabic)

A woman’s intellect is in her heels. [i.e. very limited] (Lezgi)

The wisdom of a woman is wonderful to hear. [Ironic] (English, UK)

The wisest of women still is the greatest of fools. (Dutch/Yiddish)

A wise woman is twice a fool. (English, USA)

The second strategy is, again, to present intelligent and knowledgeable women as a frightening force with disastrous effects, and even in some of the oldest known sources men are told to take heed: “A woman’s intelligence can cause a catastrophe” (Sanskrit). In the large bulk of proverbs on the issue, men are advised to prefer mediocre wives over smart ones: “An educated woman and too salty a soup are both unappetizing” is a German observation. A woman without learning or knowledge, it is argued, is more devoted to

housekeeping. Moreover, her lack of knowledge brings more chances of her being submissive, modest, and controllable. The choice should not be too difficult, and a French proverb underlines the immorality of women who wouldn't wear their cleaning outfit: "A woman without an apron is a woman to everyone." The best way to prevent a wife from developing bad ideas and unchaste behaviour is to allow her no leisure or idleness: "An aproned wife has no time to be bad," as it is said in Bulgarian.

Women striving for knowledge and for success in the public space is not a positive quality, at least as far as proverbs are concerned. Instead, women are reminded that for them virtue is the priority:

Men should set knowledge before virtue, women virtue before knowledge. (German)
History is being made, but household duties are neglected (Burmese)

If, in spite of all warnings, a woman does become publicly successful, this will bring her nothing but bad luck. A North American proverb expresses this dramatically: "A woman's fame is the tomb of her happiness." Schooling and knowledge are equated with having big feet, which means no husband. This issue appears in European proverbs in particular. Fathers are warned that their daughters should not have too much intellectual baggage. Somewhat sadly, a Ladino father worries about his daughter's future thus: "May you be lucky, my daughter, because knowledge does not help you much."

Apparently big feet are a problem in both the literal and the figurative sense. Larger female feet are literally regarded as a sexual turn-off, but in proverbs they mainly stand for something else. Metaphorically, women's small feet indicate "the right measure" in marital relationships. In general, women who look vulnerable seem to have more sex appeal to men than strong-looking females, as female vulnerability confirms the established gender hierarchy. The "right measure" of female feet presented in proverbs equates with a relationship on an unequal footing. The Sena, who live in Malawi and Mozambique, warn against the danger of big female feet in a proverb with several variants:

Never marry a woman with bigger feet than your own.
Don't marry the one with the big feet, because she is your fellow male.
Look for someone who has short feet, because one who has long feet is your fellow male.

No doubt such a relationship would complicate a husband's life and should therefore be avoided. The Sena explanation is that "man is superior to woman" and, therefore, when looking for a wife he must choose one over whom he can exercise his authority.¹ A few years ago, I quoted the Sena proverb that inspired the title of my book in Beijing in a discussion with two proverb researchers of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. One colleague smiled and said that in Chinese a similar proverb exists: "The woman with the long feet ends up alone in a room." Ending up alone in a room is considered to be the tragic fate of a talented woman, as she will not succeed in finding a husband. In Chinese culture, long feet in females are not only pejorative figuratively; in the past the feet have also physically been shortened for reasons of beautifying those feet.

There are other references associating the size of feet (and shoes) with competence, e.g. in India there is a Telegu saying in which young women are warned not to develop their feet: "If

¹ In J.T. Milimo, *Bantu Wisdom*, Lusaka 1972: 16

a girl develops long feet, she will be in trouble after marriage”.² Or in Hebrew: “I do not desire a shoe that is larger than my foot.” The apparent male aversion to women with bigger feet reflects a deep-seated fear of losing control. Given the fact that, usually, women have shorter feet than men, proverbs have gratefully adopted the image as a convincing metaphor of how things ought to be arranged in gender relationships.

Women who are so knowledgeable and self-confident that they dare comment are sharply disapproved of, especially in proverbs from the West—do women here talk back more than women in other continents?

A man doesn't want a woman smarter than he is. (English, USA)

A dog is smarter than a woman. It does not bark at its master. (Russian)

A hen that crows and a woman who knows Latin never come to a good end. (German/
Spanish)

In Europe, knowledge and education were in the past referred to as “Latin”, traditionally the language of higher learning. “A woman who knows Latin will never find a husband nor come to a good end” is a centuries old proverb found all over Europe, recommending that women be excluded from the academic bulwark. Some variants compare a “learned” woman to a crowing hen: neither of them are conforming to their assigned role.

The European message stressing that a woman who knows Latin will come to no good has crossed the ocean, not only to the United States, but also to a number of countries in South America, in the cultural baggage of Portuguese and Spanish colonizers, in literally the same form as well as in other variants such as:

A learned woman is a lost woman. (Portuguese/Spanish)

The glory of man is knowledge, but the glory of a woman is to renounce knowledge.
(Portuguese, Brazil)

The danger of giving a woman the opportunity to gain knowledge is considered risky. All those warnings and recommendations against women's education are obviously aimed at maintaining a precarious balance.

Many proverbs testify to women's desire for knowledge, often qualified as “curiosity”. In the West this questionable disposition has almost automatically been connected with the story of Eve, whose curiosity brought her into contact with the devil. Or was it her wickedness that did this? Both features in the story have been stereotypically projected onto the whole of womankind. In order to control the dangers of women's longing for knowledge, this bad inclination should be suppressed right from the beginning: “Little girls shouldn't ask questions” (English, USA). Women's thirst for knowledge is also reprovably stressed in proverbs from other continents: “A curious woman is capable of upturning the rainbow to find out what's underneath” is a Chinese example.

Of course, the more knowledge is inaccessible, the more intriguing and desirable it becomes. Clearly, proverbs see a woman's being intelligent, knowledgeable and clever as a serious problem, or, in Russian: “Good luck for the stupid, bad luck for the smart.”

² Personal information: Sanjukta Gupta

Places and spaces

Women are associated and equated with home and hearth, and with other metaphors localizing them in, or rather chaining them to, the place where they belong or ought to remain, wishfully shut away, so that they do not fall prey to the greedy eyes, hands and penises of men other than their husbands. Thus, proverbs confine them to rooms, homes and houses, and would rather have them stay there until the end of their lives. A very popular message in European and Latin American proverbs compares a virtuous wife with a broken leg: both stay at home, and an English proverb from the UK observes that “The wife that expects to have a good name, is always at home as if she were lame.” Broken legs and lameness illustrate the extent to which the imposed pretext of “virtue” has been a paralyzing handicap for women in life.

There are innumerable proverbs emphasizing that by leaving their home, women “walk out of their honour”, as it is formulated in a Dutch and Flemish proverb. Some Christian and Islamic proverbs share this idea: a bride enters her husband’s house with a veil and leaves it only when she is buried, so that the ideal numbers of times in life women ought to leave the home are limited to two or three:

A woman is to be from her house three times; when she is christened, married and buried. (English, UK)

A girl must not leave the house more than twice: on the day of her marriage, on the day of her death. (Arabic, Maghreb/West Sahara)

A woman should come to her husband’s house in a veil, and leave it in a burial shroud. (Persian)

A woman is well either in the house or in the grave. (Pashto)

Separate spaces for men and women are to be respected³ as the appropriate order of things indoors and out of doors, or in the words of an American proverb: “A woman, a cat and a chimney should never leave the house.” Ovens do not travel more than wives, do they? (German/Russian). Many examples equate women with animals that stay at home or stick to one and the same place:

The men and dogs for the barn, the women and cats for the kitchen. (English, USA)

The woman and the cat have their room in the house, the husband and the dog in the yard. (Letzeburgish)

Women and cats at home, men and dogs in the street. (Catalan/French)

Women and cows do not go abroad. (Italian)

Buffalos must be kept in stables, gold in purses, and women at home. (Indonesian)

Women and chickens get lost by wandering from house to house. (Hindi)

Going to the neighbours, as the chickens do, may look acceptable. But even then, a Spanish proverb from Cuba recommends finding out where the wife really goes when she pretends that she is going to visit the neighbours. Ultimately, is she really at home when she is supposed to be there, and what is she up to when she is? “Don’t trust a horse in the field or a woman at home” a Russian proverb warns. There is no end to suspicion, to locking up and covering, to proscriptions and prescriptions. A Tamil proverb wonders whether one veil is enough to cover a woman’s wickedness.

³ One may wonder what kind of women the proverbs have in mind, because being cloistered in a house does not hold of course for women who do have to work on the land for their daily bread, clean other people’s houses, who are market women, etc.

A sensible wife enjoys being at home, and only the foolish ones seek fulfilment in going abroad, as a North American proverb stresses. Men, on the contrary, must leave their mother's house to discover other wonderful places on earth than their mother's kitchen. They are encouraged to be on the move, and the entire world is theirs to be explored. An Estonian proverb concisely defines the gendered spaces as follows: "The home is the wife's world, the world is the man's home." And in Arabic (Algeria): "There is no blessing in a woman who travels, and there is no blessing in a man who does not travel."

And thus, from Italy to India to Mexico, it has been echoed that the outside world is a man's world, and as far as travelling is concerned: men do and women don't. Travelling is believed to jeopardize a woman's chastity, as dramatically visualized in a Malay proverb: "A travelled woman is like a garden trespassed by cattle." Women's travelling, then, has come to be a metaphor for "unchaste behaviour" in much the same way as not wearing an apron.

From Human Universals to Globalization

As much as they have been under-represented or excluded from the public arena and from public functions in most societies, women's views are significantly absent in most proverbs I collected from oral sources, as well as from written sources, such as collections and dictionaries—even though I have especially looked for them and asked for them. It has always been difficult to study women's past inner thoughts and personal ideas in a systematic way, as relatively little written evidence is available. Proverbs, then, are no exception to the rule of human history in which women's views and voices were suppressed in the hierarchical order of the public space, especially the controversial ones, which are a relatively recent part of public communication. It is even likely that the silent majority of our foremothers have formally complied with the dominant social order, which the majority of proverbs refer to as the "natural" order. Paradoxically, though, the enormous impact and power of women is strikingly present in proverbs, against all odds, in remarkably persistent ways.

In proverbs, women are usually seen as economically dependent on men, and men sexually dependent on women. Proverbs about love and sex reflect the hierarchical relationships, sexual stereotypes and double gender standards in which, at first sight, women are mainly presented as objects and victims of male power. According to a number of proverbs, masculinity and being a "real" man means only to "possess" a woman, or preferably women, and not the reverse. That is why love is so often presented as a frightening emotion, a dark pit, a sea you drown in, and so forth.

There is, however, another side to this story. It is not only women that are seen as objects; in certain respects men are portrayed as objects too, not only because they allow themselves to be manipulated by their own desire and therefore by women, but also by their being in want of a mother. Without being aware of it, a man often sees his wife as an extension of his mother and she may intuitively respond to this need by treating him as her child.⁴ Such a wife mothers and protects (and even risks suffocating) her husband no less than his own mother did. She thus continues the spoiling praise and comforting adoration that his mother had surrounded him with right from his birth. It is possible that these spoiled boys remain immature for their whole lives, and their wives risk seeing such husbands as mere children within their power, even though these "children" hold important positions in society as soon as they leave the house. Many proverbs reflect how much men are, or expect to be, spoiled, and how

⁴ Constantina Safilios-Rothschild, *Love, Sex and Sex Roles*, New Jersey 1977.

extremely dependent they are on their wife's care, in spite of (or thanks to) all their efforts in belittling their wives.

“Being born a woman means a wasted life”, an anonymous Bhutanese rural woman observed with a sense of resignation in a television interview about development issues. Internalized gender messages had apparently convinced her that there was no way out of the hierarchy—exactly the message found in proverbs. She had given up the idea of change during her lifetime. Numerous women all over the world, however, are enjoying more freedoms than their grandmothers and even their mothers could have dreamt of, especially thanks to safe birth control. Successful women today have more education, and more prestigious jobs than women ever had in previous generations. They set an inspiring example to their sisters, friends, and daughters. In Bengali, a popular slogan encourages education for women: “Give me an educated mother, and I'll give you a prosperous nation.”⁵

Nonetheless, there are also societies and cultures in which the changing roles of women are being regarded as a betrayal of “tradition” or religion.⁶ In such societies, the boundaries between the local and the outside worlds are strictly guarded, for example, in fundamentalist circles in Islam which categorically reject globalization and, more specifically, Westernization, contesting its customs, artistic creations, ideas about love, life and death, philosophy, and especially women's rights. The resistance against globalization seems to be notably structured around female identity: “so constant has been the typology of women's roles and status for fifteen centuries, that female identity remains at the centre of Muslim society”, in the words of El-Khayat, a psychiatrist and anthropologist from Morocco.⁷ However, there are other Islamic views where signs of hybridization can be found: Mullah Mohammed Khatami was quoted in the *Herald Tribune* (10 December 1997) as saying: “Our era is an era of preponderance of Western Culture and Civilization, whose understanding is imperative. Islamic nations would succeed in moving forward only if they utilize the positive scientific, technological and social accomplishments of Western Civilization, a stage we must inevitably go through to reach the future.”

Violations of the boundaries of deeply held systems of norms (and interests) are still often considered taboo. This may explain the sometimes violent opposition to changing traditions. Globalization provokes not only new debates, but also a hardening of local perspectives on gender differences.

Gender Legacies and Development

Today, many of the proverbs in the material I have been able to collect may look disturbing from certain perspectives, and their messages quite “politically incorrect”. But it would be a no less regrettable than simply short-sighted reaction to reject, suppress or even censor those cross-cultural ideas from the past without further reflection.⁸ It is absolutely important to be aware of the sexist sentiments expressed in proverbs, because they have formed, and still form, part of the daily conversation in society after society, thus modelling people's gendered

⁵ Oral source: Manzoor Elahee (India).

⁶ Today in many communities around the globe women and women's groups are still associated with “tradition” whereas men usually allow themselves to profit from “modernity”.

⁷ 1997, Quoted in *RAWOO Report on Globalization 2000*.

⁸ Recently, specialists of Chinese proverbs in Beijing told me that the Government intends to censor Chinese proverb collections and dictionaries, so that traditional proverbs with negative messages about gender will no longer be available for study.

legacies and their identities. Negative messages about women easily reverberate in the minds of male policy makers, and risk undercutting progressive legislation.⁹

However, language and culture are not static, in spite of what the proverbs would want us to believe. Ideas about femininity and masculinity are located in both men and women, and these ideas are changing along with people's positions, experience, and awareness of their own situation.

However, in order to change formerly accepted mentalities, we first need to get back to the underlying thoughts and beliefs. In this respect, the examination and re-quotation of proverbs about women definitely have an awareness-raising function—as women's groups in Southern Africa demonstrated and later confirmed in enthusiastic letters to the publisher after they had worked with one of my early collections of proverbs from all over sub-Saharan Africa.¹⁰ The women reported that in their meetings they had discussed the proverbs about women's phases of life, basics of life, power, etc. They found the proverbs intriguing, both in the way they mirrored their own lives and their own internalized ideas about “being a woman”. After intense discussions, they had started turning the messages in the proverbs upside down by replacing in each statement the word “man” by the word “woman” and vice versa. This appeared to be a hilarious exercise that provoked roars of laughter, but also served as a great eye-opener vis-à-vis their own situation, in the ways straightforward male dominance was revealed. Their practical strategy was not one of avoiding or boycotting the legacies of oral tradition, but rather to re-appropriate those legacies. They succeeded not only in exposing the implicit meanings, but also to subvert those meanings. Thus, for them, looking into proverbs became a way of looking back to “the tradition”, and a way of looking forward to gender relations in a changing world. This is a refreshingly relevant way of reflecting on cultural legacies.

Proverbs are part of humanity's eventful cultural history, and we have to understand its lessons before deciding which part of our various “traditions” we want to pass on to our children and grandchildren. Thanks to globalization, cultures have become more intertwined than ever before, and we have more access to and more information about each other's traditions than ever before. We know more about our respective cultural differences, and we know more about what we have in common. Because of increased travel and migration, foreign cultures interact with local realities in many ways, both positively and negatively, and so it becomes highly rewarding to re-examine our various traditions together—in mixed company (in terms of both gender and culture) .¹¹

⁹ In a review of my African proverbs collection in *Revue de Littérature Comparée*, 1993 (1), Liz Gunner, for example, mentioned a Ugandan speaker at a recent conference in Germany who “complained bitterly about the negative pull of proverbs embedded in the minds of male Ugandan policymakers. He claimed, both in sorrow and in anger, that proverbs maligning women whispered stubbornly in the subconscious of the most progressive of men working under the new order.” p193.

¹⁰ “*Source of All Evil.*” *African Proverbs and Sayings About Women*, published in Nairobi in 1991 and in Johannesburg in 1992.

¹¹ Such dialogues reveal no less effectively what we share - globally - than what divides us. There is a growing awareness worldwide of the irrationality on which most existing gender dichotomies have been based, an awareness that has become more confident than ever before. Still, the mecca of equal opportunities looks rather remote for those who look into the global human rights situation. In the late 1990s, the Japanese Soka Gakkai Peace Committee organized a Travelling Gender and Human Rights Exhibition, which also came to Europe. This exhibition presented, and provided statistics and photographs to underscore its argument that in virtually all societies women continue to confront discrimination as women: their labour is rewarded at an average of 40 percent less than for the same job performed by a man. Women do about two-thirds of the world's work and produce, process and market three-fifths of the world's food; they receive one-tenth of the world's income, and own less than

As humans originating from widely different cultures across the world, and still quite unfamiliar with each other, we now meet for conversation in unexpected ways and previously unthought-of places—quite *étonnés de se trouver ensemble*. No less astonished than the proverbs which, like us, originate from all continents, and meet each other in one and the same book, we are globally meeting for conversation in the human family. In our time, this cosmopolitan conversation has begun thanks to globalization, but this conversation is no less rooted in what people already had in common: their male or female bodies, and their basic human needs shared within living memory.

Proverbs reveal two main views of both men and women, views which are constantly echoed. Men are inexorable tyrants and shameless profiteers, and men are insecure, fearful beings. Women are lamentable victims, but also extremely powerful human beings. Powerful in their appealing beauty, their awesome (pro-)creativity, their vigorous working capacity, and their strong will. Both contradictory gender views are made visible in proverbs about women, one openly and directly, and the other mostly hidden between the lines. Another conclusion is that the world imagined in proverbs is changing rapidly in some respects, and slowly but surely in other respects, thanks to the ongoing integration of male and female education, roles and domains.

In their own oral and written means of expression, people from different backgrounds relate the contemporary problems of daily life by referring to culture and tradition whereby local identities, in particular those centred around gender and the body, appear to be a unifying, recurrent theme. Cross-cultural comparison shows that gender is crucial to the ways in which cultures all over the world deal with processes of change. And such reactions are important factors in development cooperation.

One substantial way of sealing off one's culture from the perceived onslaught of modernity seems to be found in opposing modernity to 'cultural tradition' and 'cultural identity'. In the ongoing quest for authenticity, women's bodies serve as central markers of 'tradition' as well as of 'modernity', as the signifiers of both the morally just society and the morally corrupt society. Thus the female body often becomes a marker of boundaries between those who belong and those who do not, between 'good' and 'evil' (see for example negative comments on Western "modern" female behaviour which has come to be negatively associated or even equated with "immoral" images in advertisements using female bodies as powerful seductive commercial objects). The focus on women's bodies marking local cultural and religious identities is particularly evident in religious discourses which anchor 'tradition' in supposedly age-old religious practices and beliefs in which women are positively cast in the role of the guardians-of-culture in their capacity as adorable mothers and chaste wives: or negatively blamed for the decay of society when not keeping to these roles.

People's cultural legacy of oral traditions is meant to teach them what to think in a given situation. Oral literatures justify cultural norms and sanctions. They formulate how things ought to be, i.e. from a certain public point of view. Such public views have contributed to people's roles and identities in the cultures concerned, and continue to do so, even today. In the past, women's voices have hardly been heard in the public arena of oral and written traditions, but in

one-hundredth of the world's property. Nevertheless, it must be stressed that everywhere in the world, human rights discussions have made a difference. In the majority of countries laws have been or are being created to protect women's rights and to prevent violence against women, and equal opportunities become ever more self-evident globally.

our contemporary world women do have a public platform: they speak and write, and reveal their perspectives on the modern world, and doing so they risk breaching norms and violating taboos. Contemporary oral and written literature is an indispensable source of information on today's developments in sex and gender matters, as I have found over the years in my own cross-cultural research.

The basic common question is, then, whether 'traditional' notions of gender are fading away with modernity or, on the contrary, are being emphasized more and more in contemporary codes referring to 'tradition' and 'modernity'.

In an age of globalization, a cross-cultural analysis of gendered identities contributes to a greater awareness of cultural legacies which people either still accept as 'natural' or, conversely, believe to have left far behind. To some extent, such legacies are indeed disappearing and partly they have already disappeared, but there is quite some baggage, even in our part of the world, which we still carry along—for reasons of self-evidence, social pressure, and/ or to safeguard individual or collective interests—often even without questioning whether we agree or not, brainwashed as we are by a varied "traditional" gender chorus that seems at times alien, but at other times also strangely familiar.

Debates and policies related to issues such as veiling, segregated education, job and payment policies or bus compartments, are all related to the emphasis on difference and the association of women with their exclusive roles of wife and mother. The embodiment of 'traditional' and 'modern' women in contrasting roles is particularly evident in the urban context, where women from diverse backgrounds, among them a growing number of rural migrants, meet each other on a daily basis. Women, however, are not the silenced victims of their fellow men. Coming from different backgrounds, they tend to strategically use the space allowed by the ambiguity of moral discourses and the contingency of gender definitions to their own advantage.

How far have we progressed along the road towards cosmopolitan citizenship? The outcome of cross-cultural information, such as that presented here, can make us aware of the world's common legacies and thus enlighten discussions about future gender orientation. To a basic extent, we come from common gender traditions, which have left a clear mark on our contemporary world.

In order to define where we want to go, and where we do not want to go, we need first of all to be aware of where we have come from as men and women performing our roles today. And, for those who want a visionary guideline for the future, there is a wonderful Tibetan proverb reminding us that: "A hundred male and a hundred female qualities make a perfect human being."

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Discussant Petra Stienen¹²:

Before I go into the thought-provoking lecture of Professor Schipper, I'd like to tell you about the background on why I was asked to do this. Our department was asked whether we could provide someone to respond to the RAWOO lecture: 'Don't you have a man?' As it happens, ours is the only section in the Ministry with a female majority – working on women is apparently not 'sexy' enough for most high-profile career men. Anyway, I don't take it as an insult because, having worked in the Middle East, I am used to being considered the 'honorary man' in the company of men. In the Middle East, it is common for working women (especially foreign women) to be considered the honorary man and thus have access to both worlds, the male and the female. This gave me a unique position from which to observe the Arab world.

At the gender department, we constantly notice that when we mention gender, people think it's only about women. This is a misconception of course: we work on lifting the inequalities between men and women from both sides. It is clear, however, that even now gender is considered a female affair.

There are three elements in your lecture that I'd like to comment upon. The first is fear and insecurity, the second is honour and shame, and the third is positive language. And to provoke things a little, I will try to focus on the male perspective.

1. Insecurity

Yesterday evening, I saw an episode of 'Sex and the City', and the theme was the question of does size matter or does it depend on what you do with it? I am 1.82 metres tall, I have shoe size 41 and I have had quite a number of boyfriends, so I do think that size matters in many ways. Size makes many men worried. Why is that? Does it perhaps touch right where it hurts? In my view, fear, power and sexuality are closely related. From an early age, men are expected to perform all the time, and if the man is smaller (in whatever way) it makes him insecure. As a tall woman, I've met quite a number of men with a Napoleon complex. Maybe you know one yourself. There are quite a few at the place where I work.

In many societies, the segregation of spaces between men and women makes it very difficult for them to get to know each other. That is not only bad for women. In my view, this is also difficult for men. Imagine that you cannot meet your wife before marrying her; that your sister, mother or aunt picks out your wife. I sometimes sympathize with male friends in the Arab world who have to deal with all of this, because for them the question is: what does it mean to actually be a man? To ask this question is not very common.

2. Honour and shame

This brings me to honour and shame. Somehow men also suffer from the responsibility that they have to protect the honour of their womenfolk. The question is: do men have honour? If I were an Arab girl and my brother sleeps with my girlfriend who is unmarried, her honour and that of her family is destroyed. But nothing happens to my honour. Does that mean that my brother has no honour?

¹² Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Gender and Development department, former diplomat at the Dutch Embassies in Cairo and Damascus.

The honour and shame question makes men protective of women and provides an excuse to discriminate against them. They allow themselves – and are also pressured – to make women smaller and make their own role larger. So tall women – with big feet – who can take care of themselves do not need this protection. The question is: why is it that powerful women instil the feeling of emasculation in men? Do men need the honour of their women to be real men?

3. Positive language

This brings me to the last part: positive language. Even at my organization, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the language of the organization tells the story of hidden myths and traditions. Diplomacy is traditionally a typically male profession. It is about the relations between states, it is about waging war and making peace. These are very male activities. Now more and more women work at the ministry, but still a lot of the language is not gender-neutral. For example, the deputy chief of mission is called the ‘second man’, even if it is a woman. Often people have asked me: do you want to be an *ambassadrice*¹³? My reply to this is: ‘Well, my career must be going down hill, because an *ambassadrice* is an ambassador’s wife’.

I also feel that the expectations in our ministry are still hindered by images and myths. Only yesterday when I discussed my future job, the man who interviewed me said: ‘But I have a problem: because you are a woman I can’t take you to Saudi Arabia.’ I asked: ‘Why not?’ He replied: ‘They won’t accept it.’ I inquired further: ‘Did you ever try, because as a diplomat in an Arab country, I can meet more than 50% of the population, as I know that there are men who want to meet me. You could only meet less than 50%, as women are not allowed to meet with you.’

The male role model has determined the language of the workplace. One has to wonder whether the fact that more women have entered the workplace provokes the same fears and insecurities that are present in most of the proverbs you have quoted. The question is how to break this cycle. This is the question I would like to end with: can we find more proverbs that celebrate the language of humanity where men and women are considered equals.

Questions from the audience

Ms Schipper, when you were gathering the proverbs, were you looking for specific proverbs regarding women?

Schipper:

I collected as widely as I could. I could have gone on for many years. And probably I would have found some exceptions to the general picture, but more than likely I would have found many more of the same. I collected from oral sources as well as from books. Let me give you an example. I was in a Turkish restaurant in London, and the owner came to sit at our table. I asked him the question that I always ask, and he said: ‘I only know one proverb, but I feel embarrassed to say it. And I don’t agree with it.’ I said: ‘Don’t worry, I’m used to it.’ So he continued: ‘A stick on the back and a child in the womb: that is what my father used to say and that was, according to him, the way to control women.’ You can hear that there is a lot of fear there.

¹³ [Language editor’s note: there is no female form of the word ‘ambassador’ in English, hence the italicized use here of the term that was used by the author in her native Dutch.]

One of the things Ms Stienen said was that gender is still considered a female affair; this is even truer in Africa. What I would like to ask is whether you looked for the origins of the proverbs? Were they devised by men or by women? What I am curious to learn is the extent to which women are responsible for building the ego of men through the proverbs?

Schipper:

Western researchers have to be careful not to construct a gender gap where there is none. For example, in Congo, where I lived for many years, there is a proverb: 'Eating with a woman is eating with a witch'. Mothers said this to their sons right before they married. So if you think that women say this and men say something else, this is often wrong. And you have to look at their interests. That is the decisive point. And yes, women do help build the egos of their men. 'A woman who loves her man will say: I look up to you'; that's an Ashanti proverb. The glory has to go to the man. In Kenya, I was invited to an academic women's lunch. All the women were complaining about their husbands. One of them said: 'Men are like children, we have to confirm them, build up their ego. If you do that, then they're so happy that we can do our own things.' What I told them was: 'You are all hiding your big feet, things can only change if you put your feet on the table and show them that you're not scared.'

To what extent do the proverbs represent current thinking?

Schipper:

Although it is perhaps true that we do not use a lot of the proverbs anymore, the baggage is still on our back. In our sub-conscious, the mentality is still there. I still receive many letters beginning with: 'Dear Sir'. I am sure we all have that experience. This mentality is surely not limited to the Third World. Petra Stienen said that she would talk from the male perspective, but these proverbs also mainly represent the male perspective. Maybe she actually contributed from the female perspective.

Stienen:

What I wanted to do was raise the question why. In the gender discussion, we usually talk about 'those poor women', but I wanted to point out the male side of the discussion.

Schipper:

When I collected the proverbs, I did not expect to find so many similarities between proverbs from different cultures. In particular, looked for differences and, of course, I found many, but I also mainly found similarities.

The World Bank says that development reduces gender inequalities. Did you find that proverbs change along with development?

Schipper:

To a certain extent, gender inequalities do change with development. If we look at the differences between our mothers, our grandmothers and ourselves, our lives are very different. One of the absolute crucial changes is birth control. The stick on the back may still be there, but the 'child in the womb' weapon can be resisted. On the other hand, as long as we have separate spaces, things will prove hard to change. That was an important remark by Petra Stienen. If men do not have the opportunity to meet women, they will remain scared: what are the women talking about and what are they saying about me? And there is also the power of the mothers. The mother's role is crucial, because mothers spoil their sons and the daughters

think 'nobody takes care of me, so I'll just go ahead'. When his mother died, a Moroccan man I know wanted to jump out of the window. He cried: 'Now I have nobody!' His wife complained to me, 'But he has me and four children!' That shows the important role of the mother: they have to change in order to break the cycle.

Stienen:

I think that diplomats from the European Union should be more modest in their claims of being developed in regard to gender issues. In the Arab world, I learned a lot about respect and dignity, in spite of the ideas that still persist there. As a civil servant working for the 'women and development' department, we have the opportunity to 'empower' and to 'encourage'. We try to enable people to break age-old boundaries that are obsolete in the 21st century.

We all assume that your book is about women, but maybe your book says more about men than it does about women?

Schipper:

That is correct. Most of the proverbs at least confirm the male interest. Many of the proverbs are still quoted in the public space. Students of mine in Africa confirm that men gain prestige by quoting many proverbs. What the women say is much less frequently heard in the public space. Only today are their voices heard and their songs, for example, collected.

Is it possible to write a similar book with proverbs about men?

Schipper:

No, I do not think so. I have tried to find proverbs from a female perspective, but there are only a few. Women tell me: we have songs and stories, but no proverbs. In Kenya, I talked to researchers, and they only started to collect women's songs about twenty years ago. Their songs were always considered less important than men's songs.

On the development issue, there is no straight line between development and gender equality. In Saudi Arabia, for example, the oil riches and the development had a negative effect on gender equality. When it was still a poor country, they could not afford to waste the academic talents of women. Just recently they decided to shun all the women from academic responsibilities and positions. At the same time in the poorer Yemen, the participation of women has increased. So there is no automatic relation between gender equality and development.

My second remark is about the building of men's egos by women in order for them to have their own way. That strategy is also a trade mark of hierarchical organizations like the Ministry. For example, the practice of saying to people higher in the hierarchy what you think they want to hear. This is really dangerous, because it obscures the view from the top of what is really happening in the organization and in the world around us.

Schipper:

If you do not already know enough about the female perspective, I would advise you to you read women's novels, poetry and plays. Your eyes will be opened. This is perhaps easily forgotten at the Ministry.

About the role of language, the metaphors that are used are often full of gender associations, for example, about food. Everywhere women are associated with food, and men are the eaters. In the rare proverbs where women are the eaters, the message is terrible: women are condemned for eating. But in the proverbs, men are seen nibbling and tasting women as if they are cookies, porridge, fruit, etc.

Catholic bishops in Spain have warned against the emancipation of women because wife beating was becoming more serious. Their message was that less emancipation will lead to less wife beating. Yet there are thousands of proverbs advising men to beat their wives, and those proverbs have been around since early humanity.

Did you collect the proverbs from both older and younger generations? If so, did you find differences between the developing countries and Europe? In my experience, the younger people in the Netherlands use proverbs frequently, but they use them wrongly, because they do not know the original meaning of the proverbs they use.

Schipper:

I got the proverbs from all age groups. What I found was that there is usually more than one version of a proverb, but the basic message stays the same. Take for example the proverb 'A whole night of labour and then only a daughter'. This becomes a metaphor for other situations, for example, if you worked hard on a project, but it didn't pay off then you might quote this proverb. In the end, the basic message that one would have preferred a son to a daughter still lingers on.

Stienen:

I take it as a personal challenge to see myself as a role model, and I encourage every man and woman at the Ministry to do the same. Break the boundaries, dare to do things differently. Why should we stick to old ideas and ideologies: go and prove them wrong!

Schipper:

That is a very good remark. And do not forget the Tibetan proverb, my favourite one: 'A hundred male and a hundred female qualities make a perfect human being.'