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Challenging Patriarchal Proverbs: The Role of Mahosi in Transforming Gender Norms and Combating Gender-Based Violence in the Vhembe District

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Abstract

This paper explores the perceptions of Mahosi (traditional leaders) in the Vhembe District of Limpopo, South Africa, regarding patriarchal proverbs that normalize Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and perpetuate toxic masculinity. Drawing on qualitative data from in-depth interviews with ten Mahosi, the study examines the cultural implications of proverbs such as “Vhida la mufumakadzi li vhuhadzi” (“a woman must tolerate the hardships of marriage until she dies in the abusive marriage”) and “Mufumakadzi u fara lufhanga nga vuhhalini” (“a woman must bravely endure whatever challenge comes her way”). Participants highlighted the role of initiation schools as platforms that once reinforced these harmful beliefs but are now being transformed into spaces promoting anti-GBV values. Guided by transformative leadership theory, findings reveal how Mahosi-led initiatives challenge entrenched gender norms through education, advocacy, and reinterpretation of cultural practices. While the study emphasizes Mahosi’s essential role in promoting gender equity, it also identifies barriers such as deeply ingrained cultural beliefs and limited resources. Recommendations include promoting partnerships with civil society and government to enhance the sustainability of these interventions and ensure meaningful cultural shifts.

Keywords

Cultural reinterpretation, Gender-based violence, Patriarchal proverbs, Toxic masculinity, Transformative leadership

INTRODUCTION

Proverbs have long been a foundation of African oral traditions, shaping cultural norms and influencing societal behaviours. While several proverbs transfer wisdom, others, predominantly patriarchal proverbs, strengthen gender inequality by promoting the endurance of suffering as a good quality women are required to possess (Ademola-Adeoye, 2023). In numerous communities, sayings such as “Vhida la mufumakadzi li vhuhadzi” encourage women to tolerate abusive relationships, framing endurance as an expectation rather than a choice. These proverbs signal the patriarchal structures that perpetuate male supremacy and normalize GBV. By justifying the subordination of women, such cultural narratives make it challenging for victims to seek justice, reinforcing cycles of oppression and silence (Kubi, 2023).

Mahosi, hold significant authority especially in rural communities, making them important in either sustaining or transforming these cultural norms (Wood, 2019). Historically, Mahosi has been known to have played a major role in the preservation of patriarchal traditions, however there is growing recognition of their potential to challenge harmful gender norms and advocate for gender equity. As custodians of culture, they have the power to reinterpret traditional beliefs, address misconceptions, and influence societal attitudes toward GBV (Dlamini, 2023).

This study aims to examine how Mahosi perceive and respond to patriarchal proverbs that reinforce GBV. It explores their efforts to challenge these deep-rooted narratives and promote gender equality through advocacy, education, and cultural reinterpretation. The study also seeks to understand the challenges Mahosi faces in this process and identify strategies for improving their impact.

To analyze this shift, the study used transformative leadership theory as its guiding framework. This theory is particularly relevant because it focuses on leaders who drive social change by challenging oppressive structures, empowering sidelined groups, and promoting cultural transformation (Shields, 2021, Shields & Hesbol, 2020). By applying this lens, the study provides insight into how Mahosi use their authority to reconstruct societal ideologies, strip down gender hierarchies, and create safer communities for women and girls.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Patriarchal proverbs and their link to GBV

According to Ademola-Adeoye (2023), patriarchal proverbs have molded societal perceptions of gender roles, often supporting and regulating the idea that women must tolerate hardship. These proverbs serve as a channel for social conditioning, instructing women to be submissive and hindering them from questioning or resisting abuse. By inserting these sayings in daily discourse, communities tend to standardize GBV, making it difficult for victims to see it as such let alone seek help or challenge these oppressive and cruel practices. Proverbs such as “*Vhida la mufumakadzi li vhuhadzi*” underpin the concept that women must accept domestic violence as an inevitable part of any marriage (True, 2021). This regularisation gives perpetrators the feeling of being unashamed as they view their actions as culturally sanctioned (Carr, 2022).

According to Baker and Maluleke (2020), although these proverbs are deeply rooted in the cultural framework, they are not absolute. Their meanings evolve over time, and they can be reinterpreted to display modern values of equality and human rights. Confronting these destructive narratives involves deliberate efforts from Mahosi, educators, and policymakers to advance alternative messages that empower women and encourage healthy relationships. It is only through such cultural shifts that these deep-rooted and sanctioned GBV can be successfully dismantled (True, 2021).

Transformative leadership: Redefining culture to combat GBV

As mentioned earlier, transformative leadership serves as a key framework in addressing the cultural entrenchment of GBV, particularly through the custodians of tradition and culture (Shields, 2021). There are some progressive Mahosi who are actively working to reinterpret these proverbs to challenge patriarchal norms and advocate for women's rights. Literature by Lundgren (2025), has shown that they do this through community dialogues, and educational workshops.

This process of cultural redefinition, however, necessitates more than just ordinary advocacy; it demands active engagement with communities to encourage a shift in mindset. Transformative leadership accentuates not only challenging oppressive structures but also inspiring marginalized groups to involve themselves in societal change (Baird, 2023). By incorporating this approach, Mahosi can pilot profound conversations around gender roles, encouraging men to see women as equivalent partners rather than subordinates. This shift is central for long-term cultural transformation and the purge of GBV (Onyesoh, 2020).

Challenges faced by Mahosi

Irrespective of their efforts to contest GBV and promote gender equality, Mahosi faces extensive barriers in their pursuit for change. One of the most significant barriers is resistance from community elders, who view these cultural shifts as a direct threat to longstanding traditions (Hodzi, 2024). Many elders believe that altering proverbs and challenging patriarchal norms weakens the cultural customs, leading to pushbacks against progressive Mahosi who advocate for gender equity. This generational conflict often holds back the acceptance of new ideas, making it difficult to effect transformative changes inside communities (Lundgren, 2025).

In addition, the problem of limited resources, lack of formal education among some Mahosi, and inadequate institutional support cause further challenges. Many Mahosi also lack access to formal training in gender studies or legal frameworks, making it challenging for them to successfully advocate for policy changes or engage in structured interventions (Magwegwe, 2024). Moreover, financial and logistical constraints also prevent them from establishing extensive community programs that could speed up cultural transformation. This problem of lack of support systems in place challenges their capacity to effectively fight against patriarchal norms (Harry, 2022).

Collaborative efforts: The role of government, NGOs, and civil society

Given the above-mentioned challenges, it is quite evident that it's impossible for Mahosi to take down patriarchal norms on their own. It is a necessity for Mahosi to establish and maintain effective collaboration with government agencies, non-government organisation, and social workers to promote sustainable change (Harry, 2022). Joint initiatives such as educational campaigns, gender sensitivity training for law enforcement, and community-based workshops can help bridge the gap between traditional practices and modern gender policies. By working jointly, these stakeholders can initiate a comprehensive support system that strengthens gender equity at multiple levels of society (Nasir & Halim, 2022).

In addition, policy frameworks should recognize the role of Mahosi in shaping cultural attitudes and provide them with the necessary resources to effect change. Governments and civil society organizations must actively engage with

Mahosi to develop strategies that integrate cultural sensitivity with progressive gender policies (Mensah, 2024). Through this multidisciplinary approach, Mahosi can be better equipped to challenge GBV and change harmful gender narratives toward more comprehensive and equitable perspectives (Wanyoike, 2023).

Redefining proverbs for a progressive society

The best way to fight GBV is by redefining the meaning of patriarchal proverbs and empower women and girls to promote gender equality. Rather than encouraging submission and endurance, these proverbs can be reshaped to emphasize mutual respect, partnership, and shared responsibility in relationships (True, 2021). This is where Mahosi can play a decisive role in this transformation by incorporating revised proverbs into cultural ceremonies, initiation schools, and community education programs, helping to impart values of gender equity in future generations (Lundgren, 2025). For instance, instead of directing women to endure abusive relationships, proverbs can be adapted to emphasize the importance of standing against injustice and promoting healthy family dynamics (Baker & Maluleke, 2020). Incorporating these revised messages into school curricula, public debate, and traditional gatherings can gradually modify societal attitudes and challenge harmful cultural beliefs. Transforming the way language is used within cultural contexts is an essential step toward constructing a society where GBV is neither normalized nor tolerated (Ademola-Adeoye, 2023).

METHODOLOGY

Research design

This study utilised a qualitative research design to examine the role of Mahosi in addressing GBV by challenging patriarchal proverbs and restructuring cultural narratives in the Vhembe District of South Africa. A qualitative approach is specifically appropriate as it provides a deeper insight into Mahosi's perspectives, lived experiences, and interventions in modifying traditional norms that enable GBV (Poth & Shannon-Baker, 2022). This design facilitates an exploration of complex social and cultural dynamics that influence gender relations within rural communities.

Sampling

A nonprobability, purposive sampling method was used to select participants who could provide meaningful insights into the impact of patriarchal proverbs and the role of Mahosi in addressing GBV. The study included ten Mahos from all municipalities within the Vhembe District, picked based on their involvement in community leadership and GBV-related discussions. Efforts were made to ensure diversity in terms of geographical location, gender, and leadership experience, allowing for a more comprehensive representation of views on cultural transformation and gender equity.

Data collection instrument

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data collection approach. These interviews permitted participants to share their experiences and opinions freely while maintaining a structured discussion on key topics, such as the role of patriarchal proverbs in shaping gender norms, the challenges of advocating for change, and the strategies Mahosi use to promote gender equity (Rahman, 2024). Conducted in the local language, the interviews encouraged open and honest dialogue. Each session lasted between 45 minutes to an hour, ensuring that participants had enough time to elaborate on their perspectives without constraint.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the interview data, following a systematic process of familiarizing with the data, coding key themes, and refining interpretations (Majumdar, 2022). The analysis focused on finding patterns related to the influence of patriarchal proverbs on GBV, the strategies used by Mahosi to challenge harmful cultural beliefs, and the barriers they face in their advocacy efforts. This reiterative process ensured that the findings correctly reflected the complexity of cultural transformation in rural communities.

Ethical considerations

The researcher made ethical considerations key priority throughout the research. It was ensured that informed consent was obtained from all participants, certifying they were fully aware of the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights, including the option to withdraw at any time (Rahman, 2024). To protect confidentiality, participant identities were anonymized (referring to them as participant 1, 2, etc.), and data was securely stored. Ethical approval for the study was granted by the institutional review board (clearance certificate number: FHSSE/2023/ASS/02/2208), ensuring adherence to ethical guidelines in conducting research with human participants (Majumdar, 2022).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The study revealed that patriarchal proverbs continue to influence gender roles and perceptions, often reinforcing the dismissing of women and legitimizing GBV. Several Mahosi disclosed that they had grown up believing in these sayings and, at some point, even upheld them in their leadership roles. Nevertheless, through engagement with GBV awareness initiatives and observing the struggles of women in their communities, some have begun to question and reinterpret these harmful cultural beliefs.

A common proverb that emerged in discussions was *"vhuhadzi ndi nama ya thole, ya fhufhuma ri a fhunzhela"*, which translates to "A woman must endure suffering in silence, because talking about it further complicates things." This belief has been deeply set in community lessons and has extensively contributed to women's unwillingness to report cases of abuse (Radzilani, 2022). One Mahosi from Thulamela related an instance where a woman was recurrently battered by her husband but refused to pursue intervention from authorities, believing that doing so would bring shame to her family. When she was encouraged to report the problem, she hesitated, saying, *"If I go to the police, they will judge me as being an insubordinate wife. My mother suffered worse, and she never left my father."* The Mahosi admitted that even as traditional leaders, they had initially discouraged women from exposing marital problems ("dirty laundry"), considering them private family matters and not meant for the public to see. However, as cases of femicide increased, they realized that such silence was costing lives.

Another widely cited proverb, *"Musadzi ha bvumbi mutsho"*, meaning "A man is superior to a woman; he cannot be questioned," has also played a considerable role in normalizing male authority and suppressing women's voices (Ademola-Adeoye, 2025). Mahosi shared an incident of a young woman from Musina, who had recently married, requested counsel from Mahosi after her husband forced her to step down from her job, asserting that a woman's place was at home. She had been hesitant to challenge him, fearing she would be seen as disrespectful. The Mahosi acknowledged that, in the past, they might have supported these beliefs, but via engagement with gender experts, they have begun to advocate more for women's economic empowerment. The case reflects what Mkhize and Dlamini (2023) describe as the cultural entrenchment of male supremacy, where traditional sayings are applied to maintain structures that limit women's autonomy.

Furthermore, Mahosi indicated that the decline of initiation schools (*such as Domba, Musevhetho and Hogo*) has more complicated gender socialization within communities, mainly among young men and women who no longer obtain structured guidance on relationships, respect, and responsibility. Historically, initiative schools played a crucial role in instilling discipline and gendered expectations, but with modernization and legal restrictions, their influence has extensively weakened (Wood, 2019). This has established a void in traditional mentorship, leaving young people to rely on social media, peers, and external influences that often distort cultural values. It is however important to note that these initiative schools, amongst the positive role they facilitated, they also played a part in imparting some harmful ideology that help perpetuate GBV (Talakinu, 2023). Nevertheless, with the new knowledge acquired these initiative schools would mainly focus on upholding gender equality.

Mahosi from Makhado recalled a disturbing case involving a teenage girl from a poverty stricken family was manipulated into a violent relationship with a much older man. A man, in his early forties, managed to convince the girl to marry him and consequently she ended up dropping out of school. After a while she found the relationship unbearable and communicated with her inlaws and parents about the issue, however they stood by the man and told her that *"Nyavhumbwa wa dagaila, matshelo wa kanda vho u vhumbaho"*, a phrase which means a person mocking a person who once assisted them (Ramavhunga and Mulovhedzi, 2024). They all justified her suffering using a distorted interpretation of traditional teachings' guilt trapping her into thinking that she is just being ungrateful. When the matter was brought before the Mahosi, community elders were divided, with some contending that a wife's duty is to respect her husband, despite of circumstances. This incident signifies findings by Ramavhunga (2019), who argues that without traditional mentorship, young people construct gender identities based on misinformation, making them vulnerable to abusive relationships that they perceive as normal.

Similarly, another Mahosi in Collins Chabane related an incident where a young man physically assaulted his girlfriend for refusing to give him access to her phone. He further highlighted that this behavior has been widely normalized in the community, and he believes these young men's irrational behaviors are influenced by portrayals of masculinity in music videos and movies. The Mahosi further expressed frustration, stating, *"If our initiation schools had not declined, these boys would be taught that being a man means protecting, not harming, women. Now, they are learning from the streets."* Edwards (2020), support this assertion, emphasizing that the collapse of traditional mentorship has led to the rise of toxic masculinity, where young men associate strength with dominance rather than responsibility.

Recognizing the harmful impact of outdated gender norms, some Mahosi have taken practical steps to oppose harmful beliefs by reinterpreting cultural doctrines and promoting dialogue on gender equality. Many have introduced community discussions where traditional proverbs are critically examined to determine their relevance in contemporary society. In one such discussion in Thulamela, the proverb *"Vhanna ndi vhanna, vhasadzi ndi vhasadzi"*, meaning "Men are men, and women are women," was debated. Initially, most participants insisted that men must always lead and that women should submit. However, after a lengthy discussion, one elder admitted, *"I always thought this meant that women must stay in their place, but I now see that being a man should mean being responsible, not just being powerful."* Such engagements align with research by Mukungu (2022), who argue that cultural narratives can only be successfully transformed from within, rather than being dismissed entirely.

Mahosi have also started incorporating gender-sensitive teachings into cultural ceremonies such as weddings and initiation rites. A Mahosi from Musina described how, at a recent wedding, he highlighted that marriage is a partnership, not ownership, telling the bridegroom, *"Your wife is not your servant; she is your equal."* This approach has proven more effective than rejecting cultural customs entirely, as it presents gender equality as a normal progression of traditional values rather than an external concept forced on communities.

Even with these efforts, Mahosi, however, continues to confront substantial challenges in implementing change. One of the most constant difficulties is resistance from older community members, several of them view reinterpretation of proverbs as a destruction of cultural identity. A Mahosi from Makhado described a intense exchange with an elder who insisted that *"If we change these sayings, we are moving away from our true Venda nature."* He indicated that he responded by questioning, *"Does being Venda mean letting our daughters suffer?"* This encounter reflects the struggles outlined by Hodzi (2024), who notes that Mahosi who attempts to challenge patriarchal norms often face backlash from those who equate cultural preservation with maintaining gender hierarchies.

Another challenge is the shortage of institutional support for Mahosi's efforts. Many struggles with insufficient funding and limited collaboration with government agencies and civil society organizations. A Mahosi from Collins Chabane complained that while they would like to execute structured gender education programs, they lack the resources to do so successfully. Most Mahosi indicated that they have no transport to reach all villages, no materials to distribute, and no training on how to handle cases of GBV. They also highlighted the need to have strong partnerships to strengthen their work. This challenge is well documented in research by Dlamini (2023), who argues that while Mahosi plays a fundamental role in shaping community values, their impact remains limited without external support from policymakers and NGOs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Mahosi should work with cultural scholars and gender activists to create gender-equitable interpretations of proverbs.
- Mahosi should work on the Revitalization of Initiation schools with gender-equitable teachings emphasising mutual respect and gender equality.
- Mahosi should receive strengthened institutional support and collaboration to enhance their advocacy efforts.
- Community education and awareness campaigns such as public forums and media campaigns should be used to challenge harmful gender norms.
- Capacity building for Mahosi should be prioritised – these training programs should equip Mahosi with skills to promote gender-sensitive leadership.

CONCLUSION

The study highlights that while Mahosi are central figures in influencing gender perceptions, they continue to struggle with fixed patriarchal ideologies that make the fight against GBV difficult. However, their willingness to engage in dialogue, reinterpret cultural teachings, and integrate gender-sensitive messages into traditional practices provides a promising ground for change. To realise sustainable transformation, greater institutional support, community engagement, and educational programs must be developed to support their initiatives. By combining cultural authority with contemporary gender awareness, Mahosi can redefine leadership in a way that protects both cultural heritage and human rights.

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STATEMENT AND DECLARATION

As the authors of this paper, we confirm that the study was conducted in adherence to ethical standards, with all participants providing informed consent. We further declare that the findings and conclusions presented are based on our original research and that this manuscript has not been submitted to or published by any other journal. Additionally, all authors have reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript and accept full responsibility for its content.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest associated with this study.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data collected during this study can be accessed by researchers upon request.

FUNDING STATEMENT

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ETHICAL APPROVAL STATEMENT

Ethical approval for this research was granted by the University of Venda research ethics committee (clearance certificate number: **FHSSE/2023/ASS/02/2208**).

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