



## Controversial Portrayal of Women in Pashto Proverbs

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**Abstract:** *This research aims to explore the controversial representation of women in Pashto proverbs. It delves into the cultural significance of these proverbs and their impact on gender roles and perceptions. Through a deep analysis of a distinct set of Pashto proverbs, this study explores the common stereotypes, biases, and gender-based discrimination fixed in these linguistic expressions. It also investigates the evolving dynamics of women's roles in Pashto society and the potential consequences of these proverbs on contemporary gender relations. The data was collected in Pashtun society, and elders were joined for this purpose. The study's findings showed that these proverbs portray women as weak and dependent, with men as their masters. The negative portrayal of women in Pashto proverbs affects their social and economic status.*

**Key Words:** Pashto Proverbs, Women, Role, Portrayal

### Introduction

Pashto, which is also known as Pakhtu or Pukhto, is a language belonging to the Iranian branch of the Indo-European language spoken primarily by the Pashtun people in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Pashto is estimated to have approximately 38 million speakers worldwide. In Pakistan and Afghanistan, Pashto is widely spoken. Around 12 million people in Afghanistan and 26 million people (almost 90% of the population) in Pakistan's Northwest Frontier Province (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) are taught to speak it as their first language. Additionally, almost two million native Pashto speakers live in Karachi, and in Baluchistan, there are also Pashto speakers. Moreover, Iran is home to about 50,000 native Pashto speakers (Rahman, [1995](#)).

A proverb, though concise in length, carries a profound essence that encapsulates wisdom and guidance. It serves as a succinct yet widely recognized expression among people, encapsulating timeless insights. These proverbs are fragments of collective folk wisdom derived from shared perceptions, observations, and experiences. Rooted in a common environment and blessings from a higher power, these proverbs reflect universal experiences but are articulated in diverse ways. They are cultural artefacts shaped by geography, individual customs, and traditions, as noted by Enevoldsen ([2004](#)). Among Pashtuns, proverbs in the Pashto language, known as 'Mataluna,' hold significant cultural value, shaping the identity and societal roles of its speakers. These proverbs play a vital role in organizing social norms and reinforcing the code of identity within the community. Tair ([1987](#)) emphasizes that the preservation of Pakhtunwali or Pashtunwali, a code of conduct, persists through proverbs. Within Pashto proverbs lies a wellspring of wisdom and faith, as highlighted by Enevoldsen ([2004](#)). They serve as tools to fortify the speaker's worldview.

Shadman's (2018) analysis of a selection of Pashto proverbs revealed a prevalent depiction of women as frail, subservient, and deficient. These proverbs often perpetuate male dominance while constraining the status and agency of women, hindering their empowerment. Rooted in the knowledge, values, and ethos of the Pashtun community, these proverbs serve as integral components of the cultural fabric. As emphasized by Enevoldsen ([2004](#)), Pashto proverbs hold significant value within Pashtun culture, acting as vehicles for communication, knowledge dissemination, and the reinforcement of societal norms.

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However, a subset of these proverbs sparks controversy due to their portrayal of women as weak, dependent, and obedient to men, thus perpetuating negative gender stereotypes. The contentious representation of women within these proverbs has garnered increasing attention. Several Pashto proverbs paint a characteristically disparaging picture of women, perpetuating entrenched gender norms and fostering segregation based on gender.

Although there's a dearth of comprehensive studies specifically examining the portrayal of women in Pashto proverbs, existing research has delved into the gender stereotypes embedded within these expressions. This study delves into the intriguing realm of Pashto proverbs, aiming to unveil their profound influence on gender perceptions. Its investigation navigates through the complexities of these proverbs, encompassing both traditional and contemporary expressions, seeking to comprehend their role in shaping, reinforcing, or challenging established notions of femininity within Pashtun culture.

Within the rich tapestry of Pashto culture, proverbs stand as enduring repositories of wisdom, reflecting the fundamental principles and ideals that shape societal norms. Much like cultural artefacts, Pashto proverbs possess a dual capacity: they can illuminate the intricacies of social customs while, at times, perpetuating stereotypes, as noted by Tair (1980).

### Research Questions

1. How are women portrayed in Pashto proverbs?
2. How do these proverbs represent cultural beliefs and values regarding gender roles?
3. What are the implications of these portrayals on women's status and empowerment in Pashtun society?

### Research Objectives

1. To explore the portrayal of women in Pashto proverbs.
2. To explore the representation of gender roles by these proverbs regarding cultural beliefs and values.
3. To explore women's empowerment and status in Pashtun society.

### Literature Review

The exploration of women's representation in Pashto proverbs remains an area of limited scholarly inquiry, yet several studies have illuminated prevalent gender biases and stereotypes within these expressions. Sanauddin (2015) analyzed a sample of proverbs in Pashto and showed the patriarchal society of Pashtoon. Similarly, Rahman (2017) emphasized the cultural ramifications embedded in these proverbs, underscoring their role in reinforcing patriarchal norms and curbing women's empowerment. Movahhed et al. (2012) specifically traced the portrayal of Lamerdi women, highlighting their oppression under patriarchal structures, predominantly serving men. Meanwhile, Ardakani et al. (2015) collected proverbs depicting women without critical evaluation. Sattari (2009) delved into Iranian women's historical and literary roles, which are evident in Iranian proverbs.

An intriguing perspective shared by Sajjadi (2008) attributes women's lower status to mythical beliefs in Mesopotamia and Rome, where men symbolize the sky and spirit while women embody the earth. Throughout history, women have been perceived as inherently weak, a perception perpetuated by changing societal sentiments. Negative attributes associated with women are often entangled with power dynamics, leading to the creation of negative gender discourses (Lazar, 2007). Talbot (2003), cited by Lomotey and Chachu (2020), suggests that these colloquialisms perpetuate male dominance and female subjugation.

According to Lomotey and Chachu (2020), the Pashtun society, rooted in a defensive male-centric ideology, has perpetuated enduring perceptions about gender roles over generations. Women have been historically depicted as powerless, deceitful, and fragile, perpetuating the norm that men embody strength and dominance. This perception has led women to accept their supposed weakness in comparison to men's physical prowess, authority, and control. While Pashtuns align with Islamic principles, they often fail to acknowledge women's property rights, clinging staunchly to cultural norms that restrict women's agency. Kun (2022) advocates for women's awareness to combat gender discrimination, suggesting a linguistic shift from offensive to empowering language, aiming for genuine gender equality.



Proverbs hold immense significance across cultures, acting as readily comprehensible expressions embedded in everyday life (Tair & Edwards, 1982). Shinwari (1999) underscores their significance, emphasizing their emergence from experienced individuals, becoming popular through their meaningful and impactful nature, though often detached from their original context. Ahmed (1980), Shaheen (1984), Enevoldsen (2004), and Tair and Edwards (2006) highlight the profound cultural roots and social underpinnings of proverbs. Katozai (2005) emphasizes the core value of proverbs, serving as guiding principles that offer direction in every facet of life, reflecting cultural values, moral concepts, religious beliefs, attitudes, and gender relations.

Pashto proverbs tend to reflect a masculine ideology, projecting male figures as epitomes of strength, courage, and endurance (Tair and Edwards, 2006). Conversely, they often portray women in negative contexts, perpetuating gender stereotypes and advocating gender segregation through concepts like Pashtunwali (Khan et al., 2014). Women are frequently depicted as weak, less intelligent, and subservient in these proverbs, reinforcing patriarchal norms and emphasizing their secondary roles in decision-making processes (Lashkari, 2005; Tair & Edwards, 2006).

Proverbs often dictate women's obedience to their husbands, warning against actions that might destabilize family harmony (Tair, 1980; Lashkari, 2005). Women are socialized to fulfil their husband's wishes, while men are cautioned against discussing important matters with their wives (Tair, 1982; Lashkari, 2005). The discourse in Pashto proverbs emphasizes gendered power structures, advising women to safeguard family honour by adhering to domestic roles, mainly centred around cooking, while men are encouraged to be providers (Lashkari, 2005; Tair & Edwards, 2006).

## Research Methodology

This study endeavours to delve into a compilation of Pashto proverbs with the aim of discerning prevalent themes and patterns in the depiction of women. Specifically, it focuses on proverbs that potentially perpetuate gender biases, reinforce traditional gender roles, or propagate negative stereotypes. By exploring the historical and cultural contexts that have shaped these proverbs, this research aims to unveil their influence on perceptions and treatment of women within the Pashtoon culture.

With a particular spotlight on the contentious aspects of Pashto proverbs concerning women, this study seeks to contribute to a wider discourse on gender equality, cultural norms, and the imperative for positive transformations in the portrayal and valuation of women within the Pashtun community. Furthermore, to gain insights into how both male and female Pashto speakers interpret these proverbs, interviews encompassing both genders are conducted. Thematic analysis is employed to unearth recurring themes and patterns derived from the data obtained through content analysis and interviews.

## Results and Discussion

Language serves as a universal tool for communication across diverse cultures worldwide. Embedded within these languages are varied expressions, some carrying profound and nuanced meanings that reflect the societal roles of men and women within their respective cultures across time. Every culture boasts its own collection of proverbs, encapsulating unique worldviews. These proverbs, easily comprehensible yet laden with enduring significance, play a pivotal role in shaping perceptions by creating an idealized portrayal of a society or community. Moreover, they often highlight the ongoing discourse surrounding the roles of men and women in a particular culture or society.

Examining the Pashto language, widely spoken in the northern province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in Pakistan and in Afghanistan, reveals its ancient roots, dating back 5000 years. Its extensive historical backdrop enriches the language with numerous proverbs, each carrying profound historical insights. The Pakhtun people, firm believers in the adage "sharing is caring," gather together to resolve problems, drawing wisdom from various ages. Within these gatherings, words and phrases steeped in wisdom are employed to address diverse situations, gradually becoming integral components of the language's rich collection of proverbs. Despite their integration into everyday conversations, the origins and narrators behind these proverbs often fade into obscurity as they remain primarily in oral rather than written form, leaving their backgrounds and original authors shrouded in mystery.

Women have long been a focal point of study and debate throughout various periods of time. This research delves into the realm of proverbs within the Pashtun community that specifically depict the role of women. Within the Pashtun community, women are often depicted as fragile, delicate, and positioned as beings of fragility. This characterization of women is reflected prominently in numerous Pashto proverbs, shedding light on the societal perceptions and roles attributed to women within the Pashtun community.

### Gendered base Discrimination

Upon examining Pashto proverbs, a clear pattern of gender discrimination emerges. Men are often glorified and deemed capable, depicted as brave and powerful—the proverb "Son of Pakhtun is an army (د پښتون يو (زوی هم پوخ دی)" exemplifies this sentiment (Lashkari, 2005). In stark contrast, women are consistently portrayed as weak and lacking agency. Proverbs such as "Listen to women, don't obey them (د بنځو خبرې اورئ، (خو اطاعت يې مه کوئ)" and "If she is a woman, she is wrong (که هغه بنځه وي، هغه غلطه ده)" reinforce this notion, depicting women as unreliable or inferior. These proverbs collectively illustrate a societal imbalance within the Pakhtun community, where women are marginalized and stripped of significance while men are elevated and granted paramount importance. Moreover, the proverb "Woman is in a home or in the grave (د بنځي لپاره کور يا قبر)" starkly reduces the value of women to mere confinement within the household or their place of rest in death, further highlighting the systemic devaluation of women within the Pashtun community.

These proverbs underscore the profound marginalization of women, depicting them in a derogatory light and relegating them to secondary roles within society. For instance, the proverb "If women have no noses, they would have glutted on filth (که ده بنځو پوزي نه وي نو غول به خورل)" diminishes women's worth to an appalling extent, positioning them as subservient and inferior, thus perpetuating their dependency on men. Another proverb explicitly dictates that women should endure hardships silently without voicing grievances, likening them to the silent earth: "The earth and the Pashtun women don't speak (خمکه او پښتنې (بنځي خبرې نه کوي)". Furthermore, the saying "Women's earnings are worthless (څه به بنځه وي او څه به يې گټه وي)" epitomizes the societal perspective on women's contributions, deeming their earnings as valueless and insignificant. These proverbs collectively establish a societal framework where women are expected to submit to men, conform to their decisions, and rely on men for sustenance. Men are positioned as the primary breadwinners and guardians of family honour, further solidifying the subordinate status assigned to women within the community.

One of the proverbs illustrates a stark inequality between men and women: "A man is irreplaceable with a woman no matter how good she is (بنځه سړی ځای نشی نوي، که څه هر څومره بڼه وي)". This proverb reinforces the notion that no matter a woman's excellence or accomplishments, she remains unequal to men, inherently inferior. Furthermore, another proverb equates women to shoes, suggesting that if a man doesn't favour a woman, he can easily replace her: "Women are like shoes, if you don't like, change it (بنځه)". This proverb devalues women's status, likening them to possessions that can be discarded if they do not adhere to a man's preferences or expectations. It implies that a woman's worth is contingent upon pleasing her man, perpetuating a culture where a woman's value is determined solely by her ability to comply with male desires.

### Women, Tongue, Secrets and Eavesdropping

Women are consistently portrayed negatively within Pashto proverbs, depicted as inefficient and lacking in competence. For instance, the proverb "A woman's work is always spoiled (د بنځي کار خراب ي)" insinuates that women are incapable of performing their tasks adequately and often spoil their work. Another proverb, "Women have no village (بنځي کلي نه لري)", signifies that women must adhere to their men, implying a necessity for women to obey and depend on men for direction. Moreover, proverbs such as "A woman's tongue is twenty meters long (د بنځي ژبه شل گزه ده)" and "Woman's hair is long, but her tongue is longer (د بنځي (ويښته اوږده وي، خو ژبه يې لا اوږده وي)" emphasize women's perceived propensity for excessive talk without substantive contribution, labelling them as verbose and trivial. Additionally, the proverb "Women's mouths have holes (د بنځو خولي سوري وي)" implies that women cannot keep secrets, cautioning against entrusting them with confidential information. Lastly, the saying "Under every hair of a woman, there are





a hundred treacheries (د يوې بڼځې د هر ويښتو لاندې سل مکرو نه وي)" depicts women as inherently deceitful and untrustworthy, advising against placing trust in them due to their perceived deceptive nature. These proverbs collectively perpetuate negative stereotypes and reinforce the notion of women as unreliable and deceitful, undermining their credibility and worth within the societal framework.

Marital life, as depicted in certain proverbs, diminishes a woman's role to that of a tool solely for sexual gratification. For instance, the saying "When it is night, all women are the same (کله چې تياره / شپه وي، ټولې بڼځې)" reduces women to objects used for sexual pleasure, reinforcing a disturbing stereotype where women are viewed merely as instruments of men's desires, devoid of any other societal value. This portrayal enforces gender-based stereotypes, emphasizing women's sole purpose as providing pleasure to men. Furthermore, the proverb "A daughter is like a basket full of shame, it's better to put it on another shoulder (لور له شرمه ډک ټوکر ډه. څومره ژر چې تاسو دا ټوکر ډه د بل سړي په اوږو کېږدئ، دوره غوره ډه)" further demeans women, likening them to burdens or sources of shame that need to be passed on to others through marriage hastily, reinforcing the notion that women are objects to be disposed of rather than individuals with inherent value in society.

## Conclusion

Pashto proverbs serve as crucial indicators in the study of women, offering insights into their empowerment, status, and the prevalent discrimination they face. These proverbs, while showcasing diverse ideologies about women, also perpetuate conflicting representations. Despite their substantial impact, these proverbs have been largely overlooked by scholars and researchers. This research delves into specific proverbs within the Pashto community, revealing a contentious portrayal of women as voiceless entities bound to obedience. Women, in these proverbs, are confined to domestic spaces depicted as fragile and subservient. Their rights, especially regarding property, are restricted, marking their exclusion from familial ties upon assertion. Such proverbs liken women to shoes at the whims of men, highlighting their disability if disobedient. This analysis underscores the confinement of women to household chores, cooking, and caregiving for men. Proverbs depicting women negatively garner increased attention, perpetuating detrimental effects on various aspects of their lives. The comparative portrayal of men and women reveals men as dominant providers, while women are depicted as dependent, weak, and confined caretakers.

In conclusion, exploring Pashto proverbs offers a crucial vantage point to comprehend the evolving status of women within Pashtun culture. Acknowledging the significance of these proverbs in shaping societal perceptions prompts discussions on reinterpreting and reframing them to mirror the shifting gender dynamics. Understanding the controversy surrounding these proverbs is a step towards fostering a society that values diversity and contributions rather than perpetuating stereotypes. It calls for the celebration of women's multifaceted roles, ultimately aiming for an equitable and inclusive society where women are liberated from limiting stereotypes.

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