

The vexing problem of gender stereotyping in world proverbs

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In the article an attempt is made to outline the foremost female/male stereotypes embodied in the content of gender-related proverbs. Beyond any conceivable doubt, the female image emerges more precisely, since women's roles and status constitute the core subject of many proverbs, regrettably of negatively-coloured perception, both at a European and a universal level, as instanced by: When woman gets off the wagon, horses have easier work (American English, Polish). On close inquiry, however, one has grounds to distinguish certain categories of proverbs which value women positively, for example the category of mother (as in e.g. God couldn't be everywhere, therefore He made mothers (English)) and grandmother (as in e.g. Respect your grandmother, because without her your mother would not have existed (Umbundu)) or the universal ones where woman is presented through such female features which men either most need or admire (e.g. A good wife and health is a man's best wealth (English)). In turn, the male sex appears much less frequently in the paremiological literature of the subject; and when it does it is mostly of positive stereotyping (e.g. A man of straw is better than a woman of gold (Portuguese)). As a result of the women's liberation movement, though, we have observed a major paradigm shift in gender-related issues manifested by, among others, the easily verifiable fact that men are slowly losing their traditional dominance within society and women frequently take centre stage both within the household and in the workplace; thereby challenging rigid, traditional gender roles (e.g. A career girl would rather bring home the bacon than fry it (American English)).

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1. Introduction

It goes without saying that proverbs, being a type of phraseological unit, constitute an attractive and valuable element of any language, which is for a number of reasons. To start with, they encode social trends, social preferences, frequently repeated behavioural patterns, and moral norms, but – above all – they tend to reflect a universal and indisputable truth based on common sense or the practical experience of humanity. Therefore, a close relationship between proverb – viewed as the world's smallest literary genre – and the broadly-understood culture of a given community is something indissoluble, and can hardly be subject to any dispute. An example of an approach that shows the direct link between proverbs and the cultural background of their users is Mieder's study (1993) of proverbs used in Vermont, USA, where the author observes that:

Proverbs do reflect to a certain degree the world-view of their users, and with caution one could say that a collection of proverbs from a particular state mirrors certain stereotypical values of its people (Mieder 1993: 178).

Such apparent mutual dependence may easily be strengthened by saying that since, by and large, a language is driven by its users, the right to exist is given to those tendencies that the

large social group considers to be either true, or useful, or both. Therefore, on the basis of a certain body of proverbs, one can inevitably draw well-justified conclusions on the perception of the world that certain social categories, id est the category of women and the category of men, demonstrate and/or are characterised by. On the other hand, already approved proverbs have a propelling function because – when frequently heard or repeated – they constantly revive the described tendencies, patterns, and truth, making them perpetually valid, and vividly alive. This should not be viewed in a negative light, but such a state of affairs leads to the formation of a kind of never-ending paremiologically conditioned vicious circle, which ultimately acquires a *perpetuum mobile* dimension and thus must be discussed in such terms.

One of the numerous social phenomena encoded in the variety of proverbs is related to sex and gender issues, thus, strictly speaking, male and female stereotypes. Note that according to the Matti Kuusi's international classification system of proverbs,¹ under the main theme "social life", one of the classes that most represents basic aspects of human life is "man and woman: ranking and position of both sexes" (see also Mieder 2004: 17).

In today's world, talking on the subject of masculine/feminine images, it is necessary to refer to the so-called *gender ideology*, which, according to Hussein (2005: 60), may be defined as "[...] a systematic set of cultural beliefs through which a society constructs and wields its gender relations and practices." Put another way, the concept of gender ideology refers to the entirety of attitudes towards men's and women's expected roles, responsibilities, and rights within the structure of society. As argued by Hussein (2005: 60):

[...] gender ideology contains legends, narratives, and myths about what it means to be a man or a woman, and suggests how each should behave in society. A society's gender ideology is grounded largely in religious and social principles, which are then used as grounds to justify different rights, responsibilities and rewards to each gender.

Thus, one may generalise and say that every society creates its own gender ideology in which men and women are placed in somewhat different/opposing social positions and patterns of expectations. However, a commonly assumed idea, observable – it is fair to say – in every culture, is that men are perceived as hard and tough, whereas women are viewed as soft and vulnerable, which – in turn – entails entirely different gender-related life attitudes.

This seems to be the right background, according to some ideologists, for the formation of gender stereotypes encoded in proverbs, representation of which has become the core subject of our analysis here. It needs to be mentioned that the literature on proverbs offers, among other things, three major treatises covering hundreds of proverbs on the female kind (see Kerschen 1998; Rittersbacher 2002; Schipper 2006)², many of them are of a regrettably misogynistic nature, for instance, the 16th century ill-founded piece of wisdom that says that *A woman's tongue wags like a lamb's tail* (American English), or the 20th century vintage *Diamonds are a girl's best friend*, popularised by Marilyn Monroe, among others.³ Little wonder that feminists proposed a somewhat twisted slogan, which maintains that *A woman without a man is like a fish without a bicycle* (American English), which eventually turned into a proverb to combat such gender stereotyping (cf. Mieder 2004: 28).

Somewhat surprisingly, however, one finds that world literature lacks appreciable paremiological works on male-centred proverbs and their contribution to the stereotypical perception of the male kind. Such a highly unequal distribution of male and female proverbial repertoire may testify to the fact that either men do not provide as much interesting and challenging material for analysis as women do, or – more justifiably – "due to the male-dominated world, folklore scholarship pertaining to women had been kept to a minimum and

thus largely excluded women from the picture of civilisation's progress" (see Kochman-Haładaj 2012: 321). As a result, women have never enjoyed equal opportunities in responding to the substantial male-created proverbial stock about the opposite sex. Another important point that can be made is that paremiographical dictionaries tend to offer a considerable corpus of proverbs, where man constitutes a central element as a generic noun, not specifying either masculine or feminine gender, as demonstrated in, for example, *Every man is the architect of his own fortune* (English/Polish) or *No man is a lonely island* (English/Polish).

One significant remark that may be formulated here is that beyond any conceivable doubt there exists a general tendency, which boils down to the fact that human negative features, whether socially, aesthetically, behaviourally or morally negative, tend to be embodied in the content of proverbs. Such a ubiquitous trend has been evidenced by Petrova (2002: 342), who shows that out of 413 gender-related proverbs in the English language that were subject to her scrutiny, there are 106 negatively-tinted ones, while merely 48 of them may be said to convey some positive colouring. Moreover, proverbs may become extremely negatively-loaded when they serve to encode, as many of them do, variously charged stereotypes. This global tendency was given a neat account in Ronesi's (2000) seminal paper titled "Mightier than the Sword: A look at proverbial prejudice". The author maintains that "such negative proverbial texts appear in the earliest proverb collections, and they are still used today despite attempts to be open-minded [...]" and tolerant towards such significant issues as, among others, sexual differences (see Mieder 2004: 138).

Another point of the introductory part which is, nonetheless, of utmost significance to the present study is the fact that the analysed proverbs are approached from the perspective offered by the researchers within the relatively new field of scientific knowledge on the close relationship between language and the cultural milieu of a given community, namely *Linguistic Culturology* (otherwise called *Linguoculturology*).⁴ According to the school of thought, the proverb system of a language is viewed as "a most enduring representation of the way of life and values of the people speaking a common language, i.e. of their linguoculture" (Petrova 2014b: 850). Importantly, in the study that follows proverbs are analysed with the use of semantic approach often applied in a linguo-cultural analysis (see Petrova 2014a). Therefore, its primary purpose is to examine the selected gender-related proverbs in terms of a message or a common thought, otherwise referred to as the generalized abstract *meaning* or the proverb *idea* (Grzybek 2007: 205). Due to the fact that concepts of negativity and positivity are subjective with regard to attitude the messages of the proverbial texts referring to gender are explicated in the study either with the help of the publications given below or on the basis of common sense and intuition of the author. What is important to remember, though, is the indubitable fact indicating that proverbs are "limited pieces of folk wisdom that are valid only in certain situations" (Mieder 1997: 410) and "analysis of the use and function of proverbs within particular contexts will determine their specific meanings" (Brunvand 1996: 1254).

The major reference books on proverbs – which depict women and men in various social roles, positions and situations, as well as provide information on the proverbs' country of origin – that have been consulted are such paremiographical works as Simpson and Speake's *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Proverbs* (1998), Stone's *The Routledge Book of World Proverbs* (2006) and Arnott's *Peculiar Proverbs: Weird Words of Wisdom from Around the World* (2007). In turn, the meaning explication of proverbs coming from various world linguo-cultures is chiefly made/given on the basis of the following publications: Manser's *The Facts on File Dictionary of Proverbs* (2002), Schipper's *Never Marry a Woman with Big Feet: Women in Proverbs from Around the World* (2006) and Kerschen's *American Proverbs about Women*

(1998). It should also be noted that the criterion for selecting the proverbs cited in the analytical part (constituting the body of 92 proverbs) has been the search for texts (with the constitutive elements: *woman/man*, *female/male*, *wife/husband*, *girl/boy*, *mother/father*, *grandmother/grandfather*) which centre around gender-related messages encoded in the proverbs of different world linguo-cultures and explicitly present both sexes in the opposing social status and patterns of expectations as well as in various stereotypical features, roles and life attitudes.

2. Gender-related proverbs as groundwork for investigation of female/male stereotypes

Since the very beginning of mankind, as it might be presumed, the world of women and men, their points of view, needs and desires, manners of thinking and modes of acting, have varied in all possible respects. Accordingly, traditional gender ideology ascribed them different social roles and status, namely the man was basically assigned the role of the guardian and provider, whereas the woman that of the mother and nurturer. Even in more recent times, such significantly opposing images have been perpetuated by diversified *belle lettres* literature of, among others, moral or psychological nature, but most of all the picture of a mother-and-nurturer woman has been repeatedly accentuated in various types of prose for women or, the so-called light and pleasant women's magazines, but also within the canvas of newspapers and men's magazines.

It seems that the ideal research material that might serve as the basis for representation of differing portrayal of woman and man, resulting from the thus specified differences, are the various types of proverbs, because they provide the meeting points where, as emphasised by Schipper (2006: 87):

The difference between the sexes is not only stressed, but it takes on amazing dimensions. In most cultures, as soon as they are born, children of the two sexes are placed in opposed categories, as if they had nothing else in common than their having come into the world in the same way.

It is certainly not accidental that in most societies "[...] the birth of a boy and that of a girl are far from being greeted with the same enthusiasm" (Schipper 2006: 87), as exemplified in two proverbs drawn from two diametrically different cultures: *It is a blessing to bear a son, a calamity to bear a daughter* (Chinese); *Who leaves a son behind is not really dead* (Danish).

Following this general son-conditioned universal enthusiasm, there appear to be two completely different gender-related approaches to life or, in other words, two distinct male and female human entities that have as much in common, across the cultures, as they have differences from each other. Notwithstanding all the details of the differences, the general picture of women that emerges from proverbs operating in the English language is far from being favourable, to say the least. Such an all-abiding historical tendency for smuggling negatively-tinted female features in the content of proverbs has been evidenced by, among others, Petrova (2002: 344), who provides evidence that out of 106 English axiologically negative gender-related proverbs, as many as 83 reveal an adverse attitude and/or perception towards women.

Obviously, the easiest and most frequently repeated way of accounting for a negative perception of women in proverbs would be to blame their male contemporaries for contributing

to, or – in fact – creating humiliating stereotypes. However, on second thoughts one comes to realise that, in fact, women have not let men have it all their own way, but rather adopted a *tit for tat* attitude, making every attempt to strike back with unfavourable/critical remarks in proverbs. Thence, let us take a closer look at the perception of both sexes in proverbs, to compare whether both men and women have equally contributed to the formation of a certain image of the opposite sex. What needs to be emphasised, though, is the fact that the study which follows does not consider historical or cultural matters of proverbs from various national languages but it merely relies on the explicit messages encoded in the content of the analysed gender-centred proverbial texts, thus constitutes a source of information about various stereotypical ways of perceiving both sexes stored in and transmitted by the language. It is to be hoped that the discussed proverbial texts, both traditional and modern/new ones, including anti-proverbs, and their underlying assumptions may offer a slightly new perspective on the issue of gender stereotyping encoded in proverbs. Put it differently, reference to the contemporary academic discourse in paremiology by means of the inclusion of modern/new proverbs and anti-proverbs pertaining to gender issues is the factor which makes both additional contribution to the analysis contained in the publications mentioned in the brief literature review of the introductory part but also introduces innovative ideas on the discussed subject-matter. Notwithstanding, what needs to be stressed is the author's full awareness of the fact that such an ambitious research question and the vast dataset may require a far more rigorous and extended analysis such as that typical of a monograph.

3. On the silhouette of women and men as emerging from proverbs

Since, as argued in the foregoing, the authors of most negatively-tinted proverbs related to women are in effect their male counterparts, on the whole, men tend to identify those female features that they either hardly approve of or seem to very much expect, to be able to get the best out of their life.

To be more specific, within the scope of men's list of expectations towards women, a huge emphasis is placed on women's thrift and resourcefulness, and this is evidenced by the semantics of such proverbs as, for example, the Japanese straightforward judgment *Look for a thrifty woman – even though it may cost you a pair of shoes*. It goes without saying that these are qualities that are essential to the male point of view, considering the fact that the set of characteristics traditionally attributed to the female kind is limited to the basic features required mainly for family life and household maintenance. Moreover, viewed from this perspective, women are supposed to be good, thrifty, and economical, as embodied in, for example, the English proverb, *A good wife and health is a man's best wealth*, or the much more straightforward Chinese piece of paremiological truth *A good wife guards her husband from bad ways*.

One must say that a fairly positively-coloured image of females is reflected in those proverbs where women are viewed as stubborn and ingenious in eliminating all obstacles, e.g. *Not even God is smart enough to catch a woman in love* (Yoruba); *Women know how to find their lover even when they are locked up in a chest* (German); *When a woman cooks up a trick, she can outwit a hundred men* (Abkhaz), and are known for their persistent willpower e.g. *A woman's willpower will pierce even a rock* (Japanese); *What a girl wants at any price, she'll get* (Rwanda); *Nothing is impossible to a woman of will* (Gikuyu). In turn, evidently positive implications are contained within the message of proverbs related to mothers and

grandmothers, as in, for instance, *Mother is God number two* (African); *God cannot be everywhere, that's why he created mothers/grandmothers* (Dutch); *Respect your grandmother, because without her your mother would not have existed* (Umbundu); *Pleasantly lives he who lets his grandmother look after him* (Russian) (for more examples see Kochman-Haładaj 2015). Regarding the role of father reflected in proverbs, there are utterances which also value it in a favourable way, as instanced by *A father's virtue is a child's best inheritance* (Unknown); *A son should treasure his father's advice* (Spanish); *No one knows a son better than the father* (Chinese), nevertheless, the consulted paremiographical sources lack proverbial occurrences where *grandfather* constitutes the key element in the wording of the text.

All these positively-loaded proverbs notwithstanding, the bulk of the proverbs are ones that constitute those proverbs that feature various stereotypical feminine traits that men particularly disapprove of, as implied or clearly expounded by such proverbs as, for instance, *Many children, many debts; many wives, much malicious gossip* (Vietnamese); *The cunning of one woman equals the load of forty donkeys* (Kazakh); *The cunning of women is strong, and the cunning of the Devil is weak* (Arabic) where women are perceived as either mischievous or cunning, or both. Additionally, this significant group of negatively-valued proverbs stereotypes a woman as, among other things, downright vain, e.g. *The fox loves cunning, the wolf covets the lamb, and a woman longs for praise* (Roman), treacherously tearful, e.g. *A woman's weapons are her tears* (French), untrustworthy, e.g. *Beware of a bad woman, and put no trust in a good one* (Spanish); *He who trusts a woman and leads an ass will never be free from plague* (French), ill-natured, often verging on the concept of a witch, e.g. *A woman turned witch is worse than a born witch* (Yiddish); *You get a woman mad and her blood good and hot, better let her blood cool for she'll sho' hurt you* (American English); *It is safer to irritate a dog than an old woman* (Roman), and known for her tendency to be obsessively vengeful, e.g. *A woman's vengeance knows no bounds* (German); *The jealousy of a woman sets a whole house aflame* (Roman); *No one rejoices more in revenge than a woman* (Roman).

Moreover, it is not surprising to find that in a large proportion of paremiological gender-related proverbs it is either directly advised or indirectly emphasised that men must keep women in obedience, and in any case they should in no way allow women to have any advantage, as in, for example, *When women reign, the Devil governs* (German). It is only natural that the male master of the house, a man that features in proverbs and folk wisdom has a great physical advantage over the female, and the somewhat tacitly justified right to physical violence against women. Abominable as it is, in many cultures of the world there are proverbs that seem to openly recommend “[...] wife beating as a ‘natural’ tool for forcing women, and especially wives, into submissive behaviour” (Schipper 2006: 260), though – to be fair – they are not universally equally numerous in all parts of the world e.g. *Women, like gongs, should be beaten regularly* (American English); *A bad woman and a good woman both need the rod* (Spanish, Argentina); *Good horses and bad horses need the spurs, good women and bad women need the chip* (there are many variants in both Europe and the Americas).

As if to save face for the male kind, there are a number of delicate voices – even in those cultures that warmly recommend violence – that also question wife-beating, and/or are categorically against it, for example, *Women should not be beaten, not even with a flower* (Portuguese, Brazilian, Polish) or *A good man does not beat a woman; a good dog does not fight with a chicken* (Chinese). Furthermore, according to some feminist opinions, wife-beating is regarded as a by-product of the Christian view of woman as a man's property (see Kramarac et al.: 486). In several paremiological units, men who exercise their control through beating are presented as villains or “losers”, as in, for example, such proverbs as, *A real man hugs his wife,*

a weak man hits her (Adyg); *No-one beats a woman except the wretched man* (Arabic, Lebanon); *A man beats a wife at home only when he has no public status* (Bengali).

Numerous as they appear to be, the female negative qualities that are repeatedly the topic of proverbs are frequently ignored altogether because women are needed by men due to the fact that the former are frequently seen as the foundations upon which the household must rest, as in the selected proverbs: *The house does not rest on earth, but on the woman* (Mexican); *A house without a woman is like a body without a soul* (German); *A hundred men may make an encampment, but it takes a woman to make a home* (Chinese). Yet, on the other hand, it must be pointed out in the context of the household that such proverbs as, for example, *A woman and a stove may not leave the house* (German) or *A man is a king in his own house* (Roman) testify to the all-pervading male-dominated power in the patriarchal social system, and restrict female presence to the home and home-related environment and the whole panorama of family and home-related activities.

Yet, male-dominated as the social system is, a man cannot do without a woman in real life situations because – as the semantics of numerous proverbs seems to suggest – it is mainly women who overcome the difficulties that daily life and the wheel of fortune offer, and here they may be said to defeat their husbands and partners on all fronts, for example, Spanish men are jokingly advised in the proverb *When your wife tells you to jump off a roof, pray God that it be a low one*. Furthermore, every man needs the unique female ability to solve knotty problems, especially in seemingly irresolvable circumstances, as encoded in the proverb of Hebrew origin *When Satan is likely to fail, he sends a woman* or Russian provenance *Where the Devil is powerless, there he sends a woman as messenger*. Tacitly appreciated as it is, such a woman-exclusive feature is in no way openly approved by men, due to the overwhelming fear that women might wrap them around their finger, manipulating and directing them to their own needs and expectations to their hearts' content, so that men must use any means possible to take precautions and defend against such a situation.

The matters get even worse when men are unable to keep pace with their female counterparts because of them being so changeable, as suggested by the contents of, for example, such a proverb as *Women are as wavering as the wind* (German). Furthermore, men believe that a woman is a creature that can in no way be comprehended by males with their miserable five senses. Oftentimes, a woman is revealed to them as a great and inscrutable mystery, who is half a little truth, half a small lie, and all the great unknown. The mysterious and somewhat sinister powers ascribed stereotypically to women are demonstrated by, for instance, the Frisian proverb *A woman can turn a man into whatever she wants, even into an old woman*.

Another significant feature repeatedly highlighted in the proverbial phraseology is that, a woman – perceived as a member of the weak and fragile sex – tends to attract men only because of her physical appearance, as in, for example, *Even an angel cannot resist a beautiful girl* (Hebrew); *Beauty in women is like a flower in the spring; but virtue is like a star in heaven* (American English); *A woman wants to be pretty rather than intelligent and shrewd, because men, in general, see better than they think* (Hebrew). At the same time, having a beautiful and attractive wife is a tricky and uncertain business from a male perspective, because although female beauty and general attractiveness are normally experienced as a pleasure to the male senses and a source of pride and prestige, a pretty woman is frequently viewed as an endless source of anguish and trouble (see Schipper 2006: 85), as in, for instance, *A beautiful woman never stays with one man* (African); *Pity the man who marries a beautiful woman; until she grows old, fear will not leave him* (Spanish, Colombia).

The issue of female beauty and general attractiveness is of a bipolar nature because, simplifying things a little, women are either considered pretty, beautiful, and hence attractive, e.g. *A beautiful woman is a feast for the eyes and loneliness for the soul* (Filipino), or – on the other end of the axiological scale – they are categorised as ugly and hideous, hence unattractive, e.g. *An ugly wife is a good hedge around the garden* (German); *One's house is best protected by a wasted garden outside and an ugly wife inside* (Chinese). Yet, the so extremely unwelcome and undesirable lack of female beauty, if not the presence of well-pronounced female ugliness, may – if viewed from another perspective – serve good purposes in men's world. In the United States of America, it is argued that *Ugliness is the guardian of the woman* and of her chastity, and what is more, *The ugliest girl makes the best housewife*. In a substantial number of world proverbs beauty is usually set against intelligence and, as a rule, beauty is associated with women, whereas intelligence goes hand in hand with the representatives of the male species, which may be illustrated by the semantics of the Vietnamese proverb *The girl is looking for a clever husband; the boy, for a beautiful wife*. As a sign of beauty, attractive long hair has also been widely associated stereotypically with an alleged lack of brains in women, as illustrated, for example, in *Women have long hair and a short mind* (Swedish).

When we turn our attention to the body of male-centred proverbs, which are definitely a minority group here, we observe that man is interested in nature of his chosen woman. And here comes a surprise because actually *Curiosity is the habit of women* as the saying goes, pointing out yet another stereotypical feminine trait, as in, for example, the following proverbs: *A curious woman is capable of up-turning the rainbow to find out what's underneath* (Chinese); *Woman, thy name is curiosity* (all over Europe, American English).

Women's talk has become an important focus for recent research, in part because it is so important in women's lives. Many feminists hold the opinion that in male supremacist society where women are devalued, their language is devalued to such an extent that they are required to be silent. Then it should come as no surprise that in a number of English-language gender-related proverbs, men complain about females' talkative, gossip, and quarrelsome predispositions, as illustrated by, for example, the message encoded in such proverbs as *Women are nine times more talkative than men* (Hebrew); *The woman who sits at the window gossips about everyone, and everyone about her* (Portuguese, Brazil); *A quarrelsome woman is rightly hit* (Latin/German). What is also worth stressing is that not only are women's words compared with men's words, but also women's words are set against men's actions, as exemplified in, for instance, *Words are for women, actions for men* (Italian); *Thoughts are male, words are female* (Italian); *Words are female, deeds are macho* (Portuguese, Brazil). Moreover, the female manner of speaking, often pictured as chattering, twittering, cackling and the like, is simply universally disparaged, whereas men's talk is uncritically praised, as in, for example, *A woman's word is wind in the wind, a man's word is rock in the wall* (Arabic, Morocco). According to folk wisdom, a silent woman does best, as demonstrated by, for example, *A silent wife is a gift from the Lord* (Hebrew), because silence creates the impression of depth and covers the deepest shallowness, giving a woman irresistible charm. Nonetheless, ladies can eloquently stay silent, making men believe they are the dominant party and giving them the impression of being rulers.

As a result of the women's liberation movement, though, we have certainly observed variously manifested major 'paradigm shift' in gender-related issues mirrored by, among others, the easily verifiable fact that men are slowly losing their traditional dominance in every walk of social, political, and professional life. Women, in turn, have frequently taken centre stage both within the household and in the workplace; thereby challenging rigid, traditional

gender roles, as exemplified in *A career girl would rather bring home the bacon than fry it* (American English).⁵

Importantly and interestingly, in the contemporary academic discourse in paremiology one can find an evidence for the above-mentioned aspect of ‘paradigm shift’ in gender-related matters. For example, a number of modern/new Anglo-American women-centred proverbs included in *The Dictionary of Modern Proverbs* (2012) edited by Doyle et al. (coined primarily in the United States during the past one hundred years)⁶ illustrate the discussed tendency by displaying messages which are far from being stereotypically unfavourable, but rather challenging male dominance and establishing women equality or even their superiority, as in, e.g. *A woman’s place is any place she wants to be*.⁷ Another issue which deserves our due attention is the recent coinage of Anglo-American proverbs referring to a male sex, in which, contrary to the overall advantageous perception of man in paremiology, he is perceived in a negative manner, as demonstrated in the following: *The (only) difference between men and boys is the price of their toys; Men are only good for one thing; Men are only good for one thing – and sometimes they aren’t even good for that; The best man for the job may be a man; The man who marries for money earns it*. The progressing linguo-cultural equality of genders can also be observed in the emergence of modern/new Anglo-American proverbs existing in an identical wording for ‘man’ and for ‘woman’, as exemplified in *Girls just want to have fun/Guys, Boys just want to have fun; A good woman is hard to find/A good man is hard to find; A woman without a man is like a fish without a bicycle/A man without a woman is like a fish without a bicycle*.

Furthermore, there is a substantial amount of anti-proverbs, otherwise called, among others, proverb alterations/transformations whose messages apparently challenge the firmly established gender stereotypes and, as postulated by Litovkina (2018: 186), might be considered as “a way to look forward to the change in gender relationships in the modern world”. A case in point are proverb transformations which portray women as good candidates for certain professions and occupations, encouraging them to enter jobs which were traditionally considered to be a male domain, as in *A woman’s place is in the White House* (Mieder 1989) (*A woman’s place is in the house* (Anglo-American)).⁸ Moreover, numerous anti-proverbs refer to the changing tendency which questions women’s roles and responsibilities restricted to the household jobs, as in e.g. *Behind every successful man there’s a woman – competing for his job* (McKenzie 1980) (*Behind every great/successful man there is a woman* (Anglo-American)) (see Litovkina 2018: 196-197).

Last but not least one needs to make a reference to the fact that some women intentionally create anti-proverbs to counter sexist messages encoded in proverbial texts and allow for the true liberation and empowerment of women for contemporary challenges. The attempt of reconstructing oppressive Yoruba proverbs against women is taken by, for example, Balogun (2010) who, following Raji-Oyelade’s (1999) call for a post-proverbial exercise in contemporary African discourse, makes an effort to reconstruct some traditional patriarchal proverbial representations in order to make proverbs reveal the reality of African women’s liberated lives. In order to exemplify the point let us take a look at the following: *Pashan ta fi na yale, oun be laja fun’yawo* (“The whip that was used to beat the first wife is kept for the second wife”) whose underlying assumption is that a woman is regarded as a child, to be disciplined anytime she errs, and that a man has the right to beat his wife is reconstructed into *Pashan ta fi na oko kini, owa ni pepe fun oko keji* (“The whip that was used to beat the first husband is on the shelf for the second husband”). Yet, as emphasized by Balogun (2010: 32)

“a post-proverbial like this would be grandeur feminine delusion” as it only swaps the positions of the oppressor and the oppressed and thus does not entirely solve a problem.

Upon reflection, a question that may be formulated is that of whether there is anything that can combine these two worlds, so different and yet so close to each other, or at least provide a bridge between them. Obviously, there is no single all-encompassing answer to the question; however, it seems clear that the evident distance, if not gulf, of variously pronounced otherness may be zeroed or at least minimised and neutralised by a man and a woman combined by the depth of feeling of true love and mutual dependence. Indeed, already from the days of earliest childhood we are taught that the very opposites always attract each other, and – if they are so very different – a woman completes a man, and vice versa. Moving on this trail, it should be pointed out that the world of women and the world of men often overlap with each other, and both sexes need each other because *A man without a woman* [also: *A woman without a man*] *is like a field without a fence* (Swedish/ Norwegian/ Danish/ German/ Finnish). It remains to be hoped that, in spite of all the existing dangers, these two complementary poles will never, contrary to appearances, be strangers to each other, but will naturally remain very close, if only because of all these differences and apparent contradictions. This final idea may be expressed by the saying that shows that despite the numerous differences between men and women, men need and cling to women, and vice versa, as in *Women: can't live with them, can't live without them* (American English).

4. Concluding remarks

As results from the foregoing discussion, the stereotypical features attributed to women and men and encoded in the spectrum of proverbs serve to form two different/opposing portrayals of females and males. When we consider the English and world languages data, it must be unambiguously concluded that female-centred proverbial lore that may be said to contain some axiologically negatively-charged argument very much preponderates over the quantum of world languages data that deserves either positive axiological charge, or may be said to be altogether neutral. Thus, in many world cultures, a woman is typically perceived by her male counterparts as, among others, cunning: *The cunning of one woman equals the load of forty donkeys* (Kazakh), talkative: *Women are nine times more talkative than men* (Hebrew), changeable: *Women are as wavering as the wind* (German) or treacherously tearful: *A woman's weapons are her tears* (French). However, on close inquiry, one has the grounds to distinguish certain categories of proverbs and their representative samples, which operate positively for the image of females. These are either globally-recognised positive stereotypes of the mother: *Mother is God number two* (Chewa) and grandmother: *Pleasantly lives he who lets his grandmother look after him* (Russian), or the universal ones where woman is presented through such female features as men either most need or admire, e.g. *A good wife and health is a man's best wealth* (English); *A good wife guards her husband from bad ways* (Chinese).

In turn, the male sex – by and large – appears much less frequently in the paremiological literature of the subject, but, where it occurs, men tend to be characterised by – among other things – masculine intelligence, toughness, and action, e.g. *Thoughts are male, words are female* (Italian); *Words are female, deeds are macho* (Portuguese, Brazil). Furthermore, due to the increasing overall awareness of the gender equality fight, such male stereotypical features as – widely understood – chauvinism and egocentrism: *A man of straw is better than a woman of gold* (Portuguese) are frequently brought to the fore. Notably, evidently positive implications

are encoded in proverbs with the constitutive element *father*, as illustrated by e.g. *No one knows a son better than the father* (Chinese).

Even though one may speak of various encouraging changes, in the form of modern/new proverbs and anti-proverbs referring to both sexes included in the analytical part, there are also continuities along the lines of age-old hierarchical legacies such as, among others, the stereotypical male and female social roles and status. The ways in which people relate to each other as men and women, publicly and privately, to a considerable degree reflects the contents of historically accumulated proverbial messages that tell us, guide us or directly order us to accept what male and female behaviour ought to be like, as exemplified in an English proverb of Italian origin *Words are for women, actions for men*. However, proverbs and the messages they encode make us aware not only of the impact they have on us, but also of the ways in which we can change our lives as men and women today. Yet, one must conclude that the stereotypical image of both men and women has remained basically unchanged for many centuries, only to recently experience a stage of transition into gender equality.

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¹ See *The Matti Kuusi International Database of Proverbs* (<http://lauhakan.home.cern.ch/lauhakan/int/cecpint.html>).

² Notably, these highly informative studies do not consider the proverbs from a historical perspective, also ignoring cultural issues for the various national languages involved. They merely amass proverbial texts and draw conclusions from their semantic content without information whether the proverbs are still up-to-date, when they were used, and how they appeared in contexts.

³ Other publications addressing the question of gender stereotypes embodied in proverbs of various languages are, among others, Webster (1982), Mieder (1985), Storm (1992), Arora (1993), Yusuf (1994), Amoah (1997), Nuessel (2000), Petrova (2002), Kansu-Yetikiner (2006), Litovkina and Mieder (2019).

⁴ See *Linguistic Culturology* (http://lingvocult.uni-ruse.bg/en/index_en.html).

⁵ Regrettably, the quoted proverb still shows sexist bias because of the use of the immature and derogatory word ‘girl’ instead of ‘woman’ which indicates the patronizing attitude towards the female sex (Kerschen 1989: 123).

⁶ Note that, as stated by Doyle et al. (2012) in the Introduction, ‘modern’ means that the proverbs have not been found before the year 1900.

⁷ Other modern/new Anglo-American gender-related proverbs challenging male dominance by their implication of female superiority, which are, however, beyond the scope of present analysis, are, among other, *Chicks before dicks*; *Blondes have more fun*.

⁸ Another example of an anti-proverb to illustrate the point is: *Old female lawyers never die; they just lose their appeals* (Berman 1997) (*Old soldiers never die, they just fade away* (Anglo-American)).