

# Lexical Reinforcement and Maintenance of Gender Stereotypes in isiZulu

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## Introduction

In his book, *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* where Njabulo Ndebele uses fiction to explore the experiences of Black South African women, he writes:

The desire to exert total control is related to the most primal male fear: uncertainty whether the child his wife gives birth to is really his. The logic of seduction, which drives a man to seek another's wife, allows for the possibility of an infinite number of unknown liaisons, which his own wife may enjoy. So, a plethora of controls may have to be put in place (2003:3-4).

Ndebele captures one of the reasons behind the gendered social rules that society has made to control the lives of women. One of the controls that society has over women's lives is language. Language is the most important tool that perpetuates gender differences (Department of Education 2002:18) and feminists have long advocated against the use of sexist language (this has happened particularly in English). The awareness about sexist language which resulted from advocacy by the feminist movement, made authors of English language books like Kahn and Kerr-Jarret (1991:89) to caution writers not to use old-fashioned words that are discriminatory, over-deferential, belittling or conveying demeaning attitudes towards women, particularly when the corresponding male term is either absent or does not have a comparable meaning. For instance, traditional forms of words that

have sexist connotations are now often replaced by gender-neutral terms. The word, Ms is now increasingly used instead of the traditional Mrs or Miss, chairperson or chair instead of chairman, and bartender instead of barman. Thinking that arguments about sexist language were a direct attack on men, some scholars have argued that both women and men have been equally responsible to shape the language and that people have learnt to talk from women - mostly their mothers or nannies. Further, arguments were that the term sexist has been used to refer to the language that discriminates against women yet societies have used sexist language that encodes stereotyped attitudes to both women and men (Holmes 1995:336). However, these arguments reiterate the idea that “society is that human entity created by men with the compliance of women” (Ndebele 2003:3).

Similarly, many other languages—including the Nguni and Sotho languages in South Africa—have words and expressions that carry value judgments according to gender rather than individual merit. IsiZulu in particular, which is one variation and the most widely spoken of the Nguni languages, has words and expressions conveying sexist attitudes, which reproduce and maintain social stereotypes and inequalities between men and women. Among the women themselves, a range of isiZulu terms categorise them and reinforce social inequalities. These terms have become the grounds for giving different social meaning and value to women whose sexual and reproductive experiences as well as humanity are defined and described by such categories.

Xaba (1994) has explored how isiZulu words, which describe women’s sexual organs, are used as insults to harass women in the streets. According to Xaba (1994) women’s integrity is damaged because men have often come up with derogatory words referring to women’s sexual organs. Such words say more about men’s views of women. However, limited research has been done to explore how isiZulu in particular reproduces and maintains gender stereotypes as well as social inequalities between men and women and among women themselves as a group.

In this article, I discuss gendered isiZulu terms and expressions in order to examine how isiZulu colludes in the subordination of African women by stereotyping them and thereby determining their destiny (largely through the institution of marriage). To do so, firstly, my discussion draws from a well-documented theoretical framework (eg., Mersham and Skinner

2002, Dirven & Verspoor 1998, Deacon 1997, O'Grady 1997, and Steinberg 1994) that argues that language is both a system of symbols and a cultural attribute, which reveals how human beings have conceptualised the world. In relation to this, I discuss specifically the Zulu society's gendered images of both women and men. Secondly, I discuss a range of labels and examine the connotations of terms used to categorise women in order to describe and value them, and to confine them to the socially prescribed space of marriage. For contrast, I also discuss the terms that are used to stereotype men. Furthermore, I discuss how isiZulu is deployed to devalue, stigmatise and punish women and men who do not comply and assume their socially defined gendered roles. Finally, I present the analysis and implications for gender equality.

### **Language and Gendered Culture: Theoretical Reflections**

The meanings that people attach to different entities in the world are conceptualised in the mind. According to Deacon (1997:376-410), language is a symbol of the mental models that we have. And, the mental models that we have depend on what we have experienced (folk mental model) or on what we have learnt (empirical mental model). As Dirven and Verspoor (1998:14) have stated, "Language resides not in dictionaries, but in the minds of the speakers of that language". This is supported by Steinberg (1994:49) who argues that "Meanings reside in people, not in words". This indicates that language is a translation of what is in the human mind. In their minds, human beings conceptualise the world according to how they have experienced it. As human beings conceptualise the world, their view of the world translates into language. According to Dirven and Verspoor (1998:14-15) each person conceptualises the world differently, therefore, different people categorise one thing differently and each person chooses between alternatives. Further, Samovar and Porter (2001: 136-137) argue that a different language represents a different view of life. Therefore, when people use language to communicate, they share their own individual perspectives of the world, as Klopper (1999) stated, communication is a meeting of minds. As a result, people who live together and share the same natural resources end up sharing common perspectives of the world—they "see eye to eye" (1999: 293). So, the language used by any given society will reveal the lived experiences of that particular society.

### *Lexical Reinforcement and Maintenance of Gender Stereotypes ...*

According to the Conceptual Dictionary (Craig, Griesel & Witz 1994), the lived experiences of any given society become the culture of that particular society. Though most often culture has been assumed innate and God-given and therefore could not be changed, Freire (as cited in Loots 2001) argues that because of governance, which has mostly been in the hands of men, there have been gender and power differences wherever men determine culture. Since culture is the lived experiences of a society, it is therefore not neutral. It reflects the power differences existing between men and women in the society. As language is an attribute of culture, it reflects the inequalities of power between men and women. In many languages, words are culture-specific and they have language-specific meanings, which reflect the cultural experiences of the people who speak that particular language (Dirven & Verspoor 1998:145). A language might have a number of words, which describe a single domain of meaning reflecting cultural facts and that is called lexical elaboration (Dirven & Verspoor 1998:145). For example, isiZulu has a long list of terms that refer to a woman. As will be explained later in this paper, these terms reflect Zulu society's view of women.

One of the main functions of a language is to regulate and control the behaviour of others. Attitudes about how people should regard their status within society are formed and continue to be reinforced by language. Two different, but not necessarily contradictory, ideological views of the relationship between language and gender have been advanced. One is the sociolinguist's view that gender differences in language are simply a reflection of the way the society works. And, the other is the feminist's view that language serves as a primary means of encoding ideas used in constructing and maintaining that society (Southerland & Katamba 1996: 540-590). According to these views, language does mirror the society's ideas, underlying assumptions as well as practices with respect to what is seen as normal, important or moral for women and men. For instance, in Zulu culture in South Africa, like in many African societies, the dignity of Black womanhood is measured in terms of a female stereotype of the subordinate woman whose ultimate goal in life is universal wifeness and motherhood, over and above any and all the other roles that she may perform (Wolpe, Quinlan & Martinez 1997:89). She will not only keep her life solely for one man (her husband), but will also enable him to prove his fertility and

ensure that his line continues by bearing him children. Elderly women collude with men to insist that a wife has more children (SAPLER Population Trust 1994). Sons are preferred and a woman who bears only daughters runs the risk of sharing her husband with a second wife.

Generally, in Zulu culture marriage is regarded as important (Magubane 1998). Girls are socialised to believe that it is a privilege for a young woman to be chosen as a wife by a man. Therefore, there is strong emphasis that girls should keep their bodies 'pure' for their future husbands. This is reinforced by cultural practices like the current practice (in some communities) of 'virginity testing' of girls (Commission on Gender Equality Report 2000), where girls are tested by women from time to time to check whether they are still virgins. Their virginity relies on the presence of a hymen (Buthelezi 2000).

The continued use of gendered language perpetuates the social order in which the society displays positive attitudes towards women who conform to the stereotype of wife and mother. Women who do not conform to the stereotype - for example, single and divorced women - are labeled with negative terms. Because of the gendered culture, no corresponding labels exist for men. Instead, limited categories that have no female equivalents are used for men. These confine men within the traditional stereotypes of a masculine male who can fight, provide for the family and sexually conquers many women. In the following section, I therefore discuss the gendered terms that are used to construct, maintain and enhance the stereotypical attitudes towards women and men.

### **Gendered isiZulu terminology**

Like all other languages that undergo change over time (Murray 1996: 313-371), isiZulu has undergone dramatic and continuous changes during the pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial eras in South Africa. The main cause of linguistic change was language contact, which occurred when speakers of isiZulu interacted frequently with speakers of other languages (mostly from other parts of South Africa) as a result of labour migration, when people moved from rural to urban areas in search of employment. Interestingly, there has not been much loss of words in isiZulu. The reason might be that the language is the most widely spoken of the Nguni languages. Besides, isiZulu has long been taught as a subject in most schools in KwaZulu-Natal.

Again, the rural nature of KwaZulu-Natal province has kept most Zulu-speaking communities together and away from mixing with other language groups. This has contributed, to some extent, to the preservation of isiZulu.

Like many other languages, isiZulu has male and female terms that mark the different stages of development in the life of a person (see Figure 1). These terms are 'gender markers' and are neither sexist nor judgmental. As illustrated in figure 1, each female term has a corresponding male equivalent.

**Figure 1: Terms that mark the stages of development of a person**

Female	Male
<u>Umntwana</u> (baby)	<u>Umntwana</u> (baby)
<u>Ingane</u> (child)	<u>Ingane</u> (child)
<u>Intombazane</u> (girl)	<u>Umfana</u> (boy)
<u>Intombi</u> (young woman)	<u>Insizwa</u> (young man)
<u>Umfazi</u> (married woman)	<u>Indoda</u> (married man)
<u>Isalukazi</u> (old woman)	<u>Ikhehla</u> (old man)

(Msimang 1991: 172-192)

However, as mentioned earlier, Zulu culture tends to confine women to the stereotypical roles of wife and mother. The image of a happy, good and dignified wife created by society is a woman who serves her husband and in-laws and is totally submissive to and dependent on her husband. Blind obedience and service to men and the in-laws are demanded from women. This is framed as the good qualities of a woman and is explained as respect (ukuhlonipha), good morals (ukuziphatha kahle) and/or good Christian values like humility (ukuthobeka). Girls learn early in life about women's roles and responsibilities as they see and sometimes deputise for their mothers in the carrying out of house chores and caring for younger siblings.

The “wifehood role” of women is reinforced in everyday language and even in phatic interactions<sup>1</sup>. For example: (1) when one woman is speaking to another, she may ask her “*Usaphila umakoti wakwami?*”<sup>2</sup> (Is my daughter-in-law well?) as a phatic form of greeting, or starting a conversation. Further, a woman may say: (2) “*Angihambe manje ngingaze ngxixoshwe emzini*, (I must go home now; otherwise (my husband) will chase me out of the house), as a phatic form of leave-taking. Therefore, through language a girl learns early in life that a man is an important part of her identity and that she must strive to be chosen by a man. She learns that her role is to provide good service to her future husband and his family members.

### Categories of Women: What the Language Reveals

The labels given to women reflect the ideological views of the society about women. And, these ideologies reflect societal norms. The two broad images of women that the Zulu society has are the married woman (the ideal wife and mother) as opposed to the ‘unattached woman’ - a woman who does not have sexual relationship according to the societal norm. A married woman is afforded ‘better status’. There is a range of terms that are used to categorise women according to their sexual activity as well as their compliance with the socially defined norms of behaviour. In this section, I discuss isiZulu terms that are used to categorise women according to their relationship with men and which do not have the male equivalent (see figure 2).

Figure 2: IsiZulu lexicon reflecting positive categories of women

Categories	Meaning
<i>Itshitshi</i>	A young virgin female at puberty stage
<i>Iqhikiza</i>	Slightly older than <i>itshitshi</i> —a trusted peer leader who has a lover
<i>Ingoduso</i>	<i>ilobolo</i> <sup>3</sup> has been paid to her home

<sup>1</sup> Phatic messages that have no factual content but help maintain a comfortable relationship between people.

<sup>2</sup> In this context the term “daughter-in-law” might be used to refer to a baby girl.

<sup>3</sup> Cows or gifts of money paid by the bridegroom’s family to the bride’s family.

<u>Inkehli</u>	A senior <u>iqhikiza</u> who is about to get married as all the necessary practices have been completed
<u>Umlobokazi / umalokazana</u>	A newly wed female
<u>umfazi</u>	A married woman

(Msimang 1991; Nyembezi & Nxumalo 1995)

From girlhood, the first category of womanhood is itshitshi, which means a young female who is not yet in love. This term refers to a girl at the stage of puberty (Msimang 1991: 237) when her breasts start to grow and is approaching or has started menstruating. This young (probably virgin) female is not allowed to have a male partner and has not started to have a relationship. However, many males seduce her because of her innocence with regard to sexual matters (since she is not yet in love) and her healthy young body, which is perceived as 'fertile'. The puberty stage is regarded as a sign of healthiness and fertility.

The second stage is when a young woman has a male partner, and she is called iqhikiza, which means a female of a marriageable age. (Msimang 1991: 237). This term is not much used because of the changes in society, which occurred when the community structures that existed in the pre-colonial era disintegrated. In these structures, girls were formed into groups or regiments under the leadership of amaqhikiza (a plural form of the word iqhikiza). In these groups amaqhikiza taught girls everything about sexuality and sex. Therefore, at the stage of iqhikiza, the woman was regarded as experienced, knowledgeable and a peer leader and educator for other young women on sexual matters. She did not only educate them but looked after them everywhere they went. Young women had to report to her when they decided to start relationships with men. A man who wanted to speak to one of the younger women (even his lover) would ask permission from this "peer leader" (Nyembezi & Nxumalo 1995:110). All members of the community respected her and she gained status not only because she kept her body "pure" for her future husband, but also because she educated and guided younger women in her group on sexuality and sexual matters.

Once negotiations about ilobolo have started, the young woman moves to the stage where she is called ingoduso, which means a betrothed



woman (Msimang 1991). When *ilobolo* has been paid and the engaged young woman is about to get married, she is called *inkehli*. As soon as she gets married, she is no longer called by her name. At this stage, the woman is called *umlobokazi* or *umalokazana* (the newly wed woman). She is under the guidance of her mother-in-law. She would become a wife (*umfazi* or *inkosikazi*) as she gains her status in marriage by giving birth to a number of children. However, the term *inkosikazi* only assumed the meaning of wife later in Zulu communities. Originally, this term referred only to the first wife of a man, i.e., the wife who will give birth to the heir.

### IsiZulu Lexicon and the Male Stereotype

Labels that are used for men confine them within traditional stereotypes and reinforce the sexual double standard. Manhood is therefore explained in terms of the ability to have many female lovers, to fight, or to provide for the family, hence the positive terms that define males as illustrated in figure 3. These age-old stereotypes and double standards about sexual choices and relationships are still reinforced.

Figure 3: Positive terms used to define a male

Categories	Meaning
<i>ibhungu</i>	A young man
<i>Isoka</i>	A man with many (female) lovers—one noted for sexual prowess
<i>Ingqwele</i>	A boy who can fight and conquer all other boys in a group
<i>Iqhawe</i>	A man who is a good fighter

In Zulu society, like in many other societies, men who have many sexual relationships are viewed as studs whereas women who have many sexual relationships are viewed as sluts. Women are often referred to by terms that stereotype them; yet, no male equivalents with similar connotations are available (Dept of Education 2002). The term *ibhungu* (young man) (see Figure 3), which is sometimes used as an equivalent of *itshitshi* (young virgin female at puberty stage), does not carry the same connotation as *itshitshi*. It is not linked to either the puberty stage or virginity since males

are not expected to be virgins. Another negative term, *isifebe* (a promiscuous woman), which refers to a woman with more than one lover, is not equivalent to the male term *isoka*, which means a male with many lovers. *Isoka* has a connotation of celebrating the victory of a man who has many girlfriends—one who is noted for his sexual prowess.

### **Language as a Weapon**

Zulu societies expect that women will conform to and live the stereotype of wife and mother. Any young woman who deviates from the expected norm is stigmatised and scorned by the society. IsiZulu is harsh on the woman who does not comply with the set life path. As such, several negative terms are given to the women who do not conform to the stereotype (see Figure 4).

**Figure 4: Negative labels given to women**

Terms	Meanings
<i>Igqinkehli</i>	Unmarried woman who got pregnant and has a baby
<i>Umjendevu / uzenda zamshiya</i>	Unmarried woman who has gone past the socially expected stage of marriage
<i>ingobhiya</i>	A woman who has no lover (from a dialect).
<i>Iphuma ndlini / umabuy'emendweni</i>	A divorced woman
<i>Isifebe / unondindwa / unovile</i>	A woman who has had more than one lover
<i>Abaqwayizi</i>	(Female) sex workers
<i>Inyumba</i>	A married woman who cannot bear children
<i>Iqhalaghalala</i>	A (young) woman who is more assertive
<i>Umfelokazi</i>	A widow

Young women are discouraged from asserting their views. It is believed that in this way a woman will learn to argue with her husband, which, according to society, does not show respect for the husband. Young women are

therefore encouraged to keep quiet, suppress their views, and any young woman who does not comply is referred to as *iqhalaghalala*—one who is not well groomed and has no respect (Nyembezi & Nxumalo 1995). A woman, who has never married, even if by choice, is referred to as being ‘unfortunate’ through words like *uneshwa*, *unehhadi*. She is also called by derogatory terms like *umjendevu*, *uzenda zamshiya* (meaning they all got married and she was left behind). A woman is obliged to have a man in her life. If not, in some communities, the language is harsh on a woman who does not have a relationship with any man as she is negatively called *ingobhiya*. However, any woman should only have a relationship with one man, because there is a range of negative terms, which refer to a woman who has many lovers like *isifebe*, *unondindwa*, *unoyile* - these terms mean a promiscuous woman. With the language shift that resulted from migrant labour, where men were forced to leave their families to go and find work in the urban areas and where some families moved to urban areas, newer terms for example, *isikhebeleshe*, *iseqa mgwago*, (both terms also meaning a promiscuous woman) have emerged in addition to the older isiZulu terms mentioned above.

While fertility is of extreme importance, it must be proved in the context of marriage. Wifehood and motherhood are never distinguished from each other. Fertility outside marriage and marriage without *fertility* are not celebrated. A woman who gives birth to a child before she gets married is referred to as *igqinkehli* (half-betrothed woman) (Nyembezi & Nxumalo 1995), which is a negative term. This term is formulated from the word *inkehli*, which—as I explained earlier—means a betrothed woman who is about to get married. The stage of *inkehli* lies between the “unmarried and married” stages in the life of a woman. Therefore, the term *igqinkehli* carries a sarcastic notion and it means the woman is “half-married and half-unmarried”. She is, in other words, a pseudo-*inkehli*. Her child will be referred to as *umlanjwana* (a negative term that may be equivalent to an “illegitimate child” in English). Submissiveness and dependence to a husband in marriage have no value if they are not accompanied by proven fertility. A married woman who does not bear any child is stigmatised and is referred to as *inyumba* (the barren). It is unlikely that the marriage will continue happily if the woman cannot get pregnant. There is great possibility that the man will take another wife to bear him children.

In Zulu culture, divorce is not acceptable, as it is not supposed to happen in the first place. But when it does occur, the woman is stigmatised and is viewed with suspicion by the society. She is taken as a bad example to other young women who are still going to get married. Generally, neither her first family nor the society accepts her and she is called by negative terms like *iphumandlini* (the one who has come out of the house) and *umabuy'emendweni* (the one who has come back from marriage).

When the husband of any married woman dies, the woman is called *umfelokazi* (widow) and she loses her place completely in her second family unless she marries one of her brothers-in-law by a practice called *ukungenwa*. In this practice, the in-laws facilitate marriage of the widow to one of her brothers-in-law or a male relative of her deceased husband.

While the language has a list of negative terms for women, no comparable wealth of negative terms exist for men (see figure 5).

**Figure 5: Negative terms that stereotype males**

Terms	Meanings
Isishimane / isigwadi	A male who is not popular with females and does not have many (female) lovers
Impohlo	A bachelor (Not really negative as it is often used in lighthearted ways.)
Umnqolo	A young man who is often at home and not out with other males
Umahlalela / uqhwayilahle	An unemployed man
Ivaka / igwala	A coward (male)

While there is a corresponding term for a widower (*umfelwa*), this does not carry the same stigma as the female equivalent, *umfelokazi*, who is viewed as carrying a bad omen in the community particularly during the mourning period. The same can be said of the term *impohlo* (a bachelor), which should be the equivalent of *umjendevu*. However, the term *impohlo* does not carry a negative connotation and is used in jokes or in phatic interactions. For example, a married man who is alone at home because his wife is away might joke and say to his friends, "*Namhlanje ngiyimpohlo.*" (Today, I am a bachelor.)

As indicated in Figure 5, the language is harsh on a man who is not working, cannot fight or is not popular with females. A man with one or no girlfriend is referred to as *isigwadi* or *isishimane* terms that have negative connotations, such as one who is not successful in courtships and thus has no girlfriend. No man would like to be called by such terms.

## **Analysis and Implications for Gender Equality**

Zulu culture views men and women within the social contract of marriage. In essence, a woman does not have a home and a life of her own. Most often, when a girl is born she is socialised and prepared for marriage. Her whole life before marriage is a preparation for wifehood and motherhood. During the initiation practices, young girls learn manners that will direct their lives in adulthood (Vilakazi-Tselane 1998).

Although the cultural practices and rituals that mark the different stages of development of girls are no longer strictly followed in many Zulu communities, the language that stigmatizes and punishes a girl who does not fulfill the stereotype is still used. At her home, a girl is expected to fit the stereotype of a young woman who is focused on attaining qualities necessary for her destiny (marriage) and is keeping herself 'pure' for her future husband. There is a socially determined age when she is expected to get married and move to her second family. After marriage, the bride has to show deference and respect to her husband, parents-in-law and all other members of the family. In this second family, she is expected to fulfil the two main roles of wifehood and motherhood.

While some gains have been made in sensitizing people to avoid sexist language in English, there has not been much focus on the sexist language in isiZulu. As a result, there is not much gender sensitivity in the use of over-differentiated or devaluing terms that convey demeaning attitudes towards women in isiZulu. More awareness and advocacy is needed to change sexist language in isiZulu.

## **Conclusion**

In this article, I have discussed how isiZulu reflects aspects of Zulu culture that indicate a gendered view of women. IsiZulu categorises women according to their sexual activity and reproductive capacity. The categories

reflect positive labels that describe women who fit a socially determined stereotype of womanhood and wifehood, whereas women who do not fit the stereotype are described by negative terms. In contrast, the men are located within the traditional masculine stereotypes. The article therefore seeks to raise awareness and sensitivity to the use of sexist language in isiZulu.

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