

Sexism and Language: An Analysis of Sexist Idiomatic Expressions in Sierra Leone's Lingua Franca

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Abstract

A lingua franca is a common language used by people whose native languages are different. In Sierra Leone, Krio is the lingua franca. The Krio language embodies a lot of idiomatic expressions that do not mean exactly what the words say, but have a deeper or secret meaning. They are used to amplify a message and they add a uniqueness to the Krio language. Some of these idiomatic expressions, however, have negative connotations, such as sexism towards women. This in turn promotes discrimination, objectification, devaluation and violation of women. Attention should therefore be called to such expressions. This paper thereby calls attention to and analyses these idiomatic expressions that violates the rights and dignity of women in Sierra Leone. It further advocates for a societal rethink of such expressions and their subsequent modification or disuse. This paper takes a stance that whilst idiomatic expressions enrich the Krio language, those that promote sexism against women should be challenged. Drawing from textual sources and from the researcher's knowledge and experience, this qualitative study employs a feminist standpoint and motivates for a shift towards the use of non-sexist and gender friendly language in Sierra Leone.

Keywords: Sierra Leone, Idioms, Women, Sexism, Language

Introduction

Sierra Leone can be viewed as a multilingual nation as over half its population speak at least one or two other languages in addition to their mother tongue. According to Sengova (1987), there are about 16 Sierra

Leonean languages, but those generally considered to have ethnic roots in the country are Sherbro, Kono, Koranko, Krio, Limba, Loko, Mende, Temne and Yalunka. However, the four major national languages that are spoken widely are Krio, Limba, Mende and Temne. They are also extensively used in the mass media (on radio and television) and have been infused into the school curriculum (Sengova 1987). Krio, however, is considered the national lingua franca, owing to its wide use throughout the country (Sengova 1987). A lingua franca is a common language used by people whose native languages differ. The Krio language emerged from four groups of freed slaves who settled in Freetown, Sierra Leone between 1787–1850 (Finney 2013). The four groups of settlers were the Black Poor who arrived on the Sierra Leone peninsula from England in 1787, the Nova Scotians (freed slaves who had been relocated to Nova Scotia, Canada), the Jamaican Maroon settlers in 1796 and the Liberated Africans (or Recaptives) who were would-be slaves, released from slave ships intercepted by the British fleet patrolling the West African coast and who were resettled on the Sierra Leone peninsula (Finney 2013). Though native speakers of Krio comprise a small group and are found mostly in the Western area, the Krio language is the most widely spoken of all Sierra Leonean languages (Sengova 1987). Similarly, Finney (2013) avers that Krio is used as the lingua franca in Sierra Leone, though it is the native language of a small percentage of the population of Sierra Leone, who live primarily on the Western Area peninsula (including Freetown).

Krio has apparently transcended its role as a community language of the Western area to achieve the status of a national lingua franca, bridging the linguistic gap between speakers of diverse languages of the country (Sengova 1987). As a lingua franca, Krio is the default language of communication in Sierra Leone (Finney 2013). The majority of citizens are proficient enough in Krio and are able to use it to conduct a meaningful conversation in various domains of communication (Finney 2013). Fyle and Jones (1980) notes that although there is a misconception by some that Krio is a kind of English, this is not the case, as Krio is a language in its own rights. Also, it is markedly different phonologically and syntactically from English (Fyle & Jones 1980).

Krio has a rich system of idiomatic expressions. Idiomatic expressions often indicate and reflect social norms, beliefs, attitudes and emotions (Glucksberg & McGlone 2001). McCarthy (1998) notes that

idioms are highly interactive items that cannot always be identified by their formal properties. He adds that idioms should be viewed as communicative devices rather than as mere quirks of a language. Idioms and proverbs are often viewed as the same concept. Whilst they share similarities, there are differences between them.

Proverbs are generally short sentences that contain wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed and memorisable form, which is handed down from generation to generation (Mieder 1985). They help in defining moral consciousness, beliefs and thoughts and are believed to be a reflection of preserved wisdom and truth (Chikwelu 2017).

Idioms can be defined as a constituent or series of constituents for which the semantic interpretation is not a compositional function of the formatives of which it is composed (Fraser 1970). In other words, idioms are expressions which have a meaning that is not obvious from the individual words. According to Moon (1998), an idiom is a particular manner of expressing something in language, music and art which characterises a person or group within a community. Whilst idioms and proverbs add a rich texture to languages, they are at times partial and sometimes paint a derogatory image about women, which in turn continues to limit and deny the notable contributions of women in the enhancement of humanity in society (Chikwelu 2017). This is true in the case of Krio idiomatic expressions as some of them promotes sexism that largely discriminates and devalues women.

Over the years, feminists and gender activists have called attention to the relationship between gender and language. According to Chikwelu (2017), gender discourse has occupied an important position in African scholarship. Chikwelu (2017) further notes that men in various cultures and societies have constructed female identity based on some gender stereotype through cultural linguistic vehicles such as proverbs. Proverbs in Igbo African culture, for instance, have perpetuated the mainstream oppression and subjugation of women in the Igbo society of Nigeria (Chikwelu 2017). Similarly, Balogun (2010) avers that there are elements of oppression in some of the Yoruba proverbs that relate to women and that these proverbs violate the rights and dignity of Yoruba women, and serve as indicators of discrimination. In a similar vein, Asiyanbola (2007) provides a syntactic and semiotic analysis of some Yoruba sexist proverbs and motivates for a gender balance in them. Like these Yoruba proverbs, some Krio idioms in Sierra

Leone also tend to be sexist and discriminatory against women.

Before moving on, it must be noted at this point, that apart from language, other factors have been used to devalue and to objectify women in Africa. African women have been devalued by various factors such as culture, traditions and religion. Hingston and Asuelime (2019) for instance, argues that whilst tradition and culture can be commended for upholding the fabric of many African societies, they also in many cases violate human rights, especially women's rights. According to them, African women are devalued mainly through cultural and traditional practices and cited practices such as early marriages, forced marriages, female genital mutilations, widow inheritance, wife assault, denial of education to girls, preference for sons and discriminatory treatment of women. Indeed, atrocities and injustice against women are justified by traditional beliefs which hamper women's equal rights (Shonayin 2012). Religion also plays a part in devaluing African women. As Wood (2019) notes, religious arguments manifests into harmful traditional and cultural practices that are used to support injustice towards women. Similarly, Ojong (2013) observes that there is gender biasness in religion as it privileges men, while weakening and devaluing the position of women. Religion therefore needs to be looked through a critical feminist lens as it effectively enshrines gender hierarchy and promotes the suppression of women worldwide (Ojong 2013). However, whilst culture, traditions and religion have been alluded to as factors that hamper the development of African women, the role of language in devaluing African women has not been given much prominence. In the Sierra Leonean context, there is a dearth of literature on the role of language in promoting sexism and devaluing of women.

As a unique cultural identity that projects a nation's heritage, language should always be used in a non-discriminatory manner and should not perpetuate gender biasness or sexism. According to Umera-Okeke (2012), sexism is generally conceived as anything that conveys that one sex is superior to the other and that in most societies, it is commonly shown in behaviours that depict males as superiors to females. In short, sexism is the discrimination of one sex over another and it encapsulates beliefs that maintain or promote inequality between women and men (Swim *et al.* 2009). Sexism within language can be described as linguistic sexism. Atkinson (1993) defines linguistic sexism as a wide range of verbal practices that include how women are labelled and referred to and language strategies that

serve to silence or depreciate women as interactants. Atkinson's definition implies that women are the most impacted by sexist language.

Sexism influences languages (Aghayeva 2010) and Sierra Leonean languages are no exception as they embody sexist nuances to some extent, in particular against girls and women. Indeed, as Aghayeva (2010) notes, sexism in language devalues members of one sex, almost invariably women. According to Brandt (2011), the manifestations of sexism are multi-fold, as they range from overt, clear demonstrations of hostility to much subtler, unconscious expressions of assumptions regarding gender predispositions and roles. As indicated earlier, Sierra Leonean languages embody some amount of sexism, particularly those that negate against women. This has become so normalised, that many are not aware of its implication and negativity. Even women themselves have become accustomed to such language, not fully grasping the impact it has for them. This in turn hinders women empowerment initiatives and serves as a fundamental challenge in addressing gender inequalities. There is therefore an urgent need to engage with language that are sexist. In recognition of the negative implications of the normalisation of sexist language in Sierra Leone, Feminist United Sierra Leone and Allies (FUSLA), initiated a short media production in March 2021. This short media production known as *Sabi Sabi Corner* runs as a series and is aired on electronic and social media platforms. It raises awareness of the negative implications of sexist language in local Sierra Leonean languages, particularly on how it compromises the fight for gender equality. Although the intention of *sabi sabi corner* is to call attention to language that promotes sexism for both sexes, those that are biased towards women are prioritised as women are the sex impacted the most.

This article also prioritises sexist language that has negative implications for women and focuses on idioms as they are the main linguistic vehicle used to justify and promote discrimination, abuse and devaluation of women. Krio sexist idioms have been selected as Krio is the lingua franca of Sierra Leone. This paper thus identifies and calls attention to those idioms that promote sexism against women. It further takes a stance that whilst idiomatic expressions enrich the Krio language, those that promote sexism against women should be challenged. The paper further motivates for a rethink of idiomatic expression and motivates for action to discourage the use of these sexist idioms. However, this paper does not, like Asinyanbola (2007), attempt to rewrite the identified idioms in gender-neutral terminology. In-

stead, it focuses on highlighting them, calling attention to their role in the devaluation of women and motivating for a societal rethink of their use. Drawing from textual sources and from the researchers' knowledge and experience, this qualitative study employs an interpretivist paradigm. An interpretivist paradigm is used, as it allows researchers to contribute to the research. It is important that the researcher contributes to this researcher as she is a Sierra Leonean, a native Krio speaker, a woman and has a broad knowledge of Krio idiomatic expressions and their meanings and implications.

Furthermore, this study is underpinned by a feminist standpoint epistemology. Feminist standpoint epistemology is a unique philosophy of knowledge building that challenges us to see and understand the world through the eyes and experiences of oppressed women and to apply the vision and knowledge of oppressed women to social activism and social change (Brooks 2007). This epistemology is apt, as this study aims to provide an insight into how women are disadvantaged and disempowered by sexist idiomatic expressions and to motivate for social activism against sexist idioms and other forms of sexist language. In concluding this section, it must be noted that a qualitative approach was used as it allows for interpretation and observation of the social world.

An Overview of the Status of Women in Sierra Leone

In order to fully grasp the rationale for this research, it is important to provide an overview of the status of Sierra Leonean women. Sierra Leonean women are among the most marginalized in the world, socially, economically and politically (McFerson 2011). They face a number of challenges such as lack of economic independence, high illiteracy and entrenched discriminatory customs and traditions (USAID 2020). In comparison to men, a substantial number of Sierra Leonean women are poorer, more illiterate and overworked (McFerson 2011). They also lack a strong voice in decision-making and lag behind in governance and leadership.

Women account for 52% of the total population in Sierra Leone, yet occupy fewer than 20% of elected positions (USAID 2020). Their voice, visibility, participation and representation in elective and appointment positions remain very low compared to men (USAID 2020). The political and decision-making systems and processes of Sierra Leone are fraught with

grave gender inequalities that disadvantage women (Rogers 2011). While women have not been formally barred from standing for political office or even participating in decision-making, the history of the nation, systemic and structural factors and forces continue to restrict women's access, resulting in wide gaps in the participation of women and men (Rogers 2011). There are systemic and structural factors with an emphasis on the socio-cultural forces and factors that limit women's political participation. These moribund cultural structures impede women's right and gender equality (Rogers 2011).

In addition to the above challenges, Sierra Leonean women also suffer from gender-based abuse. Forms of violence are normalised in relationships at times and there is a tendency to mediate and resolve these issues rather than report to the police or to an appropriate authority (Schneider 2020). Women who do report, face enormous stigma and the risk of losing security for themselves and their children (Schneider 2020). The marriage, property, and inheritance laws in Sierra Leone, as well as the persistent issues of hunger and poverty must be addressed constructively if any progress is to be made in the fight against gender-based violence (Beoku-Betts 2016).

The end of the civil war marked the beginning of women's rights initiatives on the part of the Government of Sierra Leone, in conjunction with a push for gender equality by the international community (Borishansky n.d.). Since then, numerous strides have been made by the government, women's organisations, non-profit organisations and other stakeholders to empower the women of Sierra Leone and give them a voice in leadership and decision making. Whilst some gains have been made, the majority of Sierra Leonean women continue to be marginalised and disempowered. Also, whilst there have been considerable efforts to expose the sources that devalue women in Sierra Leone, little attention has been given towards the role played by language in this respect. This could be attributed to the normalisation of such utterances.

Based on the above, it is important that the role of language in the devaluation of women be called to attention and a societal rethink of their use be motivated. This paper is therefore significant in that it will provide the much-needed knowledge and insight into the role of language in the devaluation of women in Sierra Leone. Hopefully it will also serve as a reference point for sensitisation on the importance of using non-sexist and gender-friendly language and as a catalyst for social activism against the use of sexist idioms and language.

Idioms that Promote Domestic and Sexual Abuse of Women and Girls

Domestic abuse is rife in Sierra Leone and a significant number of women suffer physical, verbal and emotional abuse from their partners. However, women are often encouraged to stay with bad partners rather than being single or alone. The ideology that having a man is everything is drummed into the minds of women, to the extent that some women consider themselves a failure if their marriage or relationship is broken. Certain idioms are used to urge a woman to stay with an abusive partner. One such idiom is *Bad man betɛ pas ɛmti os* (A bad husband is better than an empty house). This idiom encourages women to stay in abusive relationships and to be thankful that they have a man rather than none at all. The idea of being alone is made to be so much worse than a bad man. Women who are encouraged to endure abuse from abusive partners rather than leave or divorce them often suffer negative consequences such as depression, scarring, disability, poor health, unhappiness or even death. Another idiom, *shub yanda betɛ pass ɛmti bed* (It is better to tell someone to move away from you in bed, rather than sleep alone) is also used at times to urge women to stay in abusive relationships. Although this idiom can be applicable to both sexes, it is mostly said to women to coax them to stay in abusive, strained or loveless relationships.

In Sierra Leone, various forms of sexual violence are experienced such as domestic violence, sexual assault, rape of adults and minors, marital rape, and school-related sexual abuse (USAID 2020). Sierra Leone could also be said to have a rape culture. The rape of women and girls especially, has become a silent epidemic in the nation. Colomer (2020) states that sexual violence against women and girls is widespread in Sierra Leone. She cites that according to statistics drawn from the Rainbo Initiative, 3 137 and 3 695 cases of sexual violence were reported in 2018 and 2019, respectively. In fact, the rape culture against girls and women became so rife that in 2019, the head of state declared a state of public emergency over rape and sexual violence. As Shour, Anguzu and Zhou (2020) express, Sierra Leone declared a national emergency over rape and other forms of sexual violence in 2019 and diverted resources from other areas to tackle it. The Sierra Leone Parliament later passed the Sexual Offences Amendment Act, which states that all trials for sexual offence cases will proceed to the High Court without having to be heard in a Magistrate's Court to determine the sufficiency of

evidence (Colomer 2020). The law also further prescribed life imprisonment as a maximum penalty for perpetrators of rape of a child (Colomer 2020). According to the Rainbo Initiative (2020), from 2015–2019, a total of 15 401 survivors have been supported. Of that number, 14 009 (93%) were rape survivors and 7% were sexual assault survivors. From that total number of rape and sexual assault survivors, 94% of cases were girls of 17 years and under, with 29% under 11 years (Rainbo Initiative 2020). In 2019, recorded cases of sexual and gender-based violence reached 8 505 in a population of 7,5 million and a third of that involved the rape of minors (*Mail and Guardian* 2019).

Factors such as culture, patriarchy, toxic masculinity, the effects of the ten-year civil war, stigmatisation, power, sexism, misogyny, lack of reporting channels, ignorance and poor prosecution have all been cited as causes of the escalating rape culture in the nation (Rogers 2011; McFerson 2011; Schneider 2020; Colomer 2020). Language should also be added to this list. The following Krio idioms, for instance, justifies and rationalises sexual abuse of young girls to some extent. The idiom *Pikin yuba nor day go ɲng* (A young vulture does not go into town) justifies the sexual abuse of a young girl. It means that a young girl who ventures into the world of adults should not be considered as a young girl and should be treated as an adult. In other words, an adult male can have sex with her. Another idiom that rationalises sexual abuse of young girls is *Yɲng kokumba nar hin swit pan salad* (A young cucumber tastes better in a salad). This means that a young girl is sexually more enjoyable than a mature woman. Whilst such idioms cannot be solely responsible, they do contribute to the sexual predation of young girls and even women. The idiom *Cow big tae na for sup* (However big a cow is, it will end up being meat in someone's pot) also has sexist connotations. This alludes to the perception that the age, size, intelligence, class and wealth of a woman is of little or no consequence, as she will end up being a sexual partner for a man or used for a man's sexual pleasure. This idiom is also used to demonstrate male superiority and power over women.

Idioms that Promote Patriarchal Power and Male Superiority over Women

According to Borishansky (n.d.), the family structure and property rights in Sierra Leone are both patrilineal by nature, thereby making most women

entirely dependent on their husbands or male members of their families for sustenance. Furthermore, women who lack connections to males by family lines or marriage are particularly vulnerable and widows especially struggle to make ends meet (Borishansky n.d.). Patriarchy dominates many structures and practices in Sierra Leone. In local governance, for instance, men are mainly the power holders and are therefore the ones who settle disputes, serve as guardians of the land and manage mining activities. Interwoven with patriarchy is that of toxic masculinity and male superiority. The bulk of Sierra Leonean men have been socialised to be power holders, to be in leadership and decision-making positions and to assume a superior position over women. Men enjoy patriarchal dividends from these unequal power relations and structure. Connell (2002) defines patriarchal dividend as benefits to men as a group from maintaining an unequal gender order. This includes economic advantage, prestige, authority and access to institutional power, among other things. Keeping women in lowly or subjugated positions therefore serves a purpose and this supposedly male superiority of women is reinforced through various ways, including language such as the following idioms.

An idiom that reflects the marginalisation of women is Uman fol nor de crow (A hen does not crow). A hen does not crow means that a woman (hen) has no voice and is voiceless. This idiom aims to silence the voices of women. It indicates that women should be quiet and should not be involved in leadership and decision-making initiatives. This proverb encourages the marginalisation of women and endorses that it is a man's world. Another idiom worth unpacking is Kɔba u en, mi kak go waka free (My cock can roam free but you should keep your hen caged). This saying suggests that boys (cocks) should be given freedom to roam about and sow their wild oats. Girls (hens) on the other should be sheltered and not be allowed to roam around. In short, boys are expected to be let loose and do whatever they desire, whilst girls should be sheltered and regulated.

The next idiom succinctly captures the gender expectations of men and women – *u na man insay uman kanda* (You are a man in the skin of a woman). When women act tough, display strength and power and do not comply with the societal expectations of women, they are described as men in women's bodies. This means that women are not expected to behave as such and should be content to take a back seat to men. In line with the expectations of women, an idiom worth calling attention to is *bifo ar bon president, make ar born d fos lady* (It is better to give birth to the first lady

rather than the president). This idiom suggests that a daughter who is the first lady can do much more for a parent than a son, who is the president. Whilst this may seemingly extol the value of having a daughter, it also assumes that women cannot be presidents and that this position is limited to a man. It further assumes that the place of women should be limited to first ladies, rather than the presidential seat of power.

Idioms are even used to justify men cheating. *No to ɔl tem for eat cassada leaf* (You do not need to eat cassava leaves all the time) provides a rationale for men to cheat. It is assumed that a man gets tired of sleeping with the same woman all the time and it should be understandable if he has multiple sex partners. It must be noted that some idioms have more than one meaning, and it is in this vein that that reference is once again made to the following idiom – *Cow big tae na for sup* (However big a cow is, it will end up being meat in someone's pot). It also promotes the ideology that a woman can never be in a higher rank than a man. Thus, despite the status of a woman, it is assumed that she will end up under the control of a man or be handled by a man. This idiom is similar to the following – *motoka nɔ big fɔ in drayva* (A vehicle is not too big for its driver), meaning a *small man can handle a big woman*.

Idioms that Demean and Devalue Single and Unmarried Women

Encapsulated within the patriarchal power structures is the demand put on women to marry or have a male partner, probably as a way of controlling women. There is a high onus on women to marry, to the extent that most women feel unfulfilled if they get to a certain age and remain unmarried. In fact, families and friends get worried when their daughters get to their late 20s and are not yet married. Derogatory remarks are used to deride unmarried women. This can be seen in the following idiom, *E don rich hin evin tem* (she is in the twilight years of her life). This statement is usually made with reference to women who are considered to have passed marriageable age or those who can no longer attract a suitor. It is a sort of derogatory statement that views women of a certain age as undesirables and people who should be pitied. At times, the phrase *in na big miss* (She is a big miss) is used to demean a middle-aged unmarried woman. Another demeaning remark is *uman we Nɔ get, man, na in na rare gyal na Tɔng* (A woman without a man

is like a prostitute in a town). This idiom views a *man-less* woman as a city prostitute. Similarly, the idiom *E nor get trɔ̃sis biɛn dɔ̃* (She has no trousers behind the door) can be used derogatorily to refer to a woman who has no husband or partner. A variation of this idiom, *trɔ̃sis no day biɛn dɔ̃* (There are no trousers behind the door), is used to refer to a situation where a child who does not live with the father or a male figure misbehaves. The bad behaviour is attributed to the lack of a father or male figure in the house, thus implying that men can better instil good behaviour in children than women.

The Way Forward

In true feminist standpoint epistemological style, this study has exposed the status of Sierra Leonean women and shown how sexist idioms serve to devalue and to discriminate against them. In line with this epistemology, this study calls for social activism to minimise or dissuade the use of such idioms. Concerted efforts must therefore be made by all stakeholders to become sensitised to the use of gender-friendly language, as it has the potential to make significant contributions to the reduction of gender stereotyping and discrimination. If Krio speakers are prompted to use gender-friendly language in everyday life, the linguistic and social treatment of both women and men in society will hopefully improve. Education and sensitisation on this issues should be supported by well-informed discussions (Szesny Formanowicz & Moser 2016). Taking into consideration that Krio is just one language in Sierra Leone, further research must be conducted to expose sexist idioms in other Sierra Leonean languages.

Conclusion

An introductory section was provided at the start of this paper to provide context to the study. This was followed by a section that provided an overview of the status of Sierra Leonean women. In line with its main aim, the paper called attention to and analysed sexist Krio idiomatic expressions that violate the rights and dignity of women in Sierra Leone. This was done by looking at idioms that promote patriarchal power and male superiority over women, idioms that promote domestic and sexual abuse of women and girls and idioms that demean and devalue single and unmarried women. It also motivated for a societal rethink of these expressions and their

subsequent modification or disuse and this is encapsulated in the section on the way forward.

Whilst this paper accepts that idiomatic expressions enrich the Krio language, it takes a stance that those that promote sexism against women should be challenged. A feminist standpoint was used to expose how language can have a negative effect on women and to motivate for societal activism. Textual sources were used to provide context to the study and the researcher's knowledge and experience were also used to contribute to the study.

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