

Women Abuse under the Guise of Culture and Language Use: Women Narrate their Stories

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ABSTRACT

Many African proverbs that are used to define relationships between men and women, specifically the marital relationship, seem to be gender biased and focus more on women. In this study, women's narratives relating to abuse under the guise of culture and language use were explored using hermeneutic phenomenology. Language is at the core of the description and interpretation of reality to produce meanings and to understand people's lives. Therefore, societal expectations are instilled in members of a society through language as part of their socialisation process. The study sample consisted of women who had received premarital counselling and who lived in the cities of Tshwane and Johannesburg, Gauteng, South Africa. Five individual and eight focus-group interviews were conducted with 57 participants. Colaizzi's methods of data analysis were used and the findings revealed that vernacular proverb songs were used to reinforce the expectation that women in general and married women in particular had to play a submissive role.

INTRODUCTION

Language gives shape to our lives (Ellece, 2011; Ssetuba, 2002). In the African context, societal expectations are instilled in people through language as part of the socialisation process (Masenya 1998). King'ei (cited in Wanjiku, Njeri, Loise & Mutiti 2016) concurs with Masenya that language forms an essential part of society and that society members learn new skills, including the norms and values of their communities, through language. In the same vein, Grant and Asimeng-Boahene (2006) argue that most African languages are characterised by the use of proverbs that are often employed as tools to clarify situations and give guidance relating to dialectal traditions. One context in which it is used is premarital counselling, a practice common among different cultures in South Africa.

Among the Batswana, Basotho and Bapedi ethnic groups, premarital counselling is viewed as vital to inculcate values of perseverance, tolerance, patience and sacrifice

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in women entering into marriage (Ellece, 2011). Premarital counselling, referred to as *go laya* in the Setswana language, is conducted before, during or after a wedding ceremony, in other words, before a bride is escorted to her in-laws' residence. The premarital counselling ceremony is usually the responsibility of the bride's aunts and other married females. These elderly women explain to the bride how to behave as a married woman (Ellece, 2011; Maundeni 2002). Proverbs from each of the African traditions, for example, Sepedi, are used to counsel brides and many of them respect the counselling ceremony and honour and adhere to its injunctions.

The proverbs that are used during a premarital counselling session set the stage for what is expected of the *ngwetsi* or bride. The translations of most of these proverbs into English do not always capture their true interpretations; for example, the Setswana proverb *mosadi ke tshwene o jewamabogo* is translated as 'a woman is a baboon; her hands are eaten' (Masenya, 2005). In the Setswana culture, the proverb reflects the expectation that a *ngwetsi* or daughter-in-law should work hard in the new household for the welfare of the family and that she has to be available always to satisfy her husband's desires. A second example of a proverb is *monna ke tshwene o jakamatsogo a mabedi*, which can be translated as 'a man is like a baboon; he eats with two hands'. The proverb reflects the belief that even though a man is married, he is allowed to have other women outside of the marital relationship to satisfy his sexual desires. Despite the risk of contracting HIV and worsening the HIV/AIDS pandemic, this proverb is still in use (Masenya, 2005; United Nations, 2015). The use of proverbs such as these expresses and reinforces stereotypes of the self and of others and contributes towards unequal power relations in families as well as gender inequality. According to Wanjiku et al., (2016), proverbs enable language users to understand the role of culture, which is indirectly and symbolically, and importantly, reflected in the structure of the specific language. These authors posit that the use of language perpetuates the expectation that women should endure patriarchal power and accept continuous subservience to men. They add that this situation indicates profound issues of gender and power relations.

One of the Setswana proverbs used during the premarital counselling process is *lebitla la mosadi ke bogadi*, which translates as 'the grave of a woman is at her in-laws', and it reinforces the belief that a woman must stay in her marital home and observe her marriage vows. The proverb encourages women to accept a failed marriage and to endure it. According to Ellece (2011), married elders in a family advise a bride during Batswana premarital counselling not to leave her husband's home, irrespective of the challenges she experiences in her marriage. However, enduring a dysfunctional marriage may create an environment that fosters the abuse of women and subsequently leads to a rise in stress-related conditions, such as anxiety disorders, depression and

psychosomatic diseases as well as non-communicable diseases, such as cardiovascular disorders. According to McEwen & Stellar (1993), exposure to stress over a period of time can have a significant effect on individuals' immune and cardiovascular systems. Furthermore, if women engage in negotiated sex because of patriarchal issues and the expected subservience to their husbands, they may be exposed to the risk of contracting HIV and developing AIDS (Wojcicki & Malal, 2001).

Semenya (2014) refers to the process of *mahadi* (negotiating the bride price) during which the *rakgadi* (the aunt) counsels the bride before she can be accompanied to the groom's home (a process which is called *go laya*). On the other hand, the groom is counselled by the uncle who negotiated the *mahadi* and the *sego sametsi* (water calabash) for him. In addition, the groom is counselled by his uncles and other married male relatives. The teachings during these ceremonies tend to reinforce patriarchal ideologies that encourage men's domination over women (see Ellece, 2011). According to Mulaudzi (2013a), the newly-wed couple is expected to be counselled by experienced traditional kinsmen who offer their services for free, and in most instances their advice is more effective because they will have received counselling from experienced family members.

Several African societies in Southern Africa are gender based, and societies use language to convey gender-based principles, norms and values. Therefore, language affects the daily lives of women and men as it is used to tell people how to behave (Ellece, 2011). Furthermore, the language used in proverbs reflects the societies' stereotypes and may sometimes contribute towards unequal power relations in families. For instance, the purpose of the proverb *lebitla la mosadi ke bogadi*, which is often used during premarital counselling, is to instil a sense of perseverance in women, encouraging them not to give up even if they encounter hardships in marital life. Whether out of respect for the culture and traditions that govern their life or out of obedience to the instructions of older family members, many women abide by this 'rule' despite being in life-threatening marriages. The use of proverbs, especially those used in marriages, are viewed by Hussein (2009) as a patriarchal inculcation of obedience and loyalty according to which virtues of fear, compliance and guilt are instilled in women. Some women have expressed the feeling that the expectation to comply with the proverb *lebitla la mosadi ke bogadi* (the grave of a woman is at her in-laws) has a negative impact on their health. If they are expected to accept and endure hardship even though they sometimes live in fear it can lead to physical illnesses and psychosocial disorders, such as cardiovascular diseases and stress-related conditions.

Despite worldwide campaigns for the promotion of basic human rights, African proverbs reinforcing the existence of traditional patriarchal hierarchies and inflexible descriptions of married women are preserved.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

Hermeneutic phenomenology, which is the qualitative research methodology based on phenomenological philosophy, was used in this study. Participants were interviewed at different locations in Tshwane and Johannesburg (two large cities in Gauteng, a province of South Africa) where they attended social and religious gatherings. The venues for data collection were negotiated with the participants. These venues included places where women gathered to attend social or network events, for instance a church retreat, at a local guest lodge in Hammanskraal and at a restaurant in (Tshwane) and participants' homes in (Tshwane and Johannesburg).

The population included all African women in Gauteng who were married, widowed or divorced and who had experienced the influence of the language of proverbs used in premarital counselling. Although they were initially excluded, single women asked to be part of the study; subsequently, thirteen volunteers were included. They felt they too had been affected by the use of the language of proverbs through the effect it had on their close relatives.

Sampling method and size

To access the participants, snowball and purposive sampling were used. Some of the participants in the first focus group referred the researchers to other groups of women who held their social functions at their respective homes. Purposive sampling was used because at that stage the researchers were able to identify suitable participants who had experienced the counselling process when they got married (Holloway & Wheeler, 2010). A total number of 57 participants were interviewed, of which 35 were married, two were widowed, seven were divorced and 13 were single. The single women were included later at their own request because they felt they had been affected in some way by the proverbs used when their married friends or family had received counselling.

Data collection and analysis methods

Data were collected through conducting five individual and eight focus-group interviews. Each group consisted of four to eight participants. Interviews were conducted in English and Setswana and an independent translator who is competent in Setswana translated the Setswana transcripts into English. Thereafter, transcripts were transcribed verbatim and data analysis was carried out with the use of six of Colaizzi's seven steps of data analysis (Polit & Beck, 2012). The seventh step was replaced by a step comprising probing questions aimed at ongoing member checking (Polit & Beck, 2012). Meanings extracted from the data were clustered into themes and sub-themes. The researchers bracketed their views, opinions and beliefs regarding the use of language and proverbs in premarital

counselling in order to describe the participants' life experiences accurately (Holloway & Wheeler, 2010).

Trustworthiness

The rigour of the study was maintained by using relevant criteria and appropriate strategies recommended for a qualitative design (Klopper, 2008). Credibility was assured by interacting with participants for prolonged periods of time at the venues where they were gathered to allow them to become accustomed to the researchers and to build rapport (Krefting, 1991). Data were collected over a period of three months at different times and on different days and every interview lasted an hour. Reflexivity (is the responsibility of researchers to examine their influence on the study) was maintained to prevent their becoming close to participants (Streubert & Carpenter, 2011). Even though the researchers wanted to build rapport with the participants, they remained professional and through bracketing tried to limit their influence on participants' responses. Further probing was done to ensure that the meanings and interpretations of proverbs were clearly understood, Polit & Beck (2012). Transferability of the findings in this study will be impossible because the study was conducted only in one province of the country, the method was qualitative and phenomenological designs were followed (Krefting, 1991). Consistency may not be possible in the case of a qualitative study that involves multiple realities. For instance, this study concerned the use of language and proverbs in premarital counselling, which may be interpreted differently by different participants. Dependability was maintained through peer examination: supervisors assessed the correctness of the methodology undertaken and ensured the safe keeping of all the trails of the process. To ensure confirmability, an external audit was done on completion of the research to understand how decisions taken at the start of the study were kept.

Ethical considerations

The study received approval from the relevant university's Ethics Committee. Participants agreed to participate in the study and signed informed consent forms giving the researchers permission to interview them. Participants were informed that participation was voluntary, that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time and that they would not be forced to participate. Although no potential risks could be identified that could cause harm to participants, the researchers arranged for a pastor to assist the participants should they need counselling. Confidentiality was maintained throughout the research. Participants were informed that no names would be used or revealed in research reports and scientific materials. In addition, data were kept safe in a locked cupboard.

FINDINGS

Participants' experiences relating to the language of proverbs generally used in the premarital counselling of women came strongly to the fore. Although a number of these proverbs were mentioned, most of the participants concentrated on the proverb *lebitla la mosadi ke bogadi*. The following three themes emerged from their comments: negative reinforcement by vernacular proverbs, use of songs to reinforce the submissive role of women, and the expectation that married women have to be obedient.

Negative reinforcement by proverbs

The participants' experience was that the use of the said proverb had adverse impacts on their lives. The following excerpt comes from a transcript of a narration by a participant of the way in which her premarital counselling was conducted when she got married:

Ngwanake (my daughter), you must know that the grave of a woman is at her in-laws. I come from home having been 'counselled' (*ke laiwe*). They told me that they do not want anybody who comes back from her in-laws because in their family they counted grandmother so and so who has mothered my mother. You must know that from all the two surnames no one has ever come back home from her marriage. If you do it, you would have done something unusual in the family. We are expecting you to stay and endure all. We know that it will be difficult and sometimes you will experience stress but you have to persevere.

In a similar vein, another participant related she had been told the following:

We know that you are out, you are out. There is no way you could go back according to the statement because it says 'A woman's grave is at her in-laws' place'. ...because it is said that a woman's grave is at her in-laws, and irrespective of the challenges that you come across with, you wouldn't go back home.

These quotes express the undesirable implication that some participants attached to the proverb. They viewed it as a tool used to force them to stay in marriage and endure. These participants were dismayed with the idea that the proverb dictates women have no other option than to stay in their husband's home and serve him and his family until she dies. In their dismay, participants pointed out the proverb under study clearly meant that, once married, a woman may never go back to her maternal home.

Use of songs to reinforce the submissive role of women

The second theme that emerged was the singing of songs during the marriage ceremony

that reinforced a married woman's submissive role. One of the women recited the lyrics of the Setswana song '*monnaga a batliwe payslip*' (a man is not supposed to be asked about his pay slip). This song emphasises that women must not ask their husbands how much they earn. Women have to be satisfied with and not question the way their husbands support the family financially. The singing of this song serves to continue oppressing women by reinforcing the message it conveys.

One of the participants stated that some of the songs promoted patriarchal ideologies and domination of men over women. She cited the Setswana song '*go nyalwa ke Mr X ke maemo 'makoti*' (to get married to Mr X is to be a prestige 'bride'). The song stresses the superiority of the husband's family over the wife's family, an idea supported in some Setswana songs that mention the lobola [bride price] paid: '*Mme Ma M, Dikgomo le jele, kgomo le jele, kgomo le jele, hle re refengbana*' (Mrs M, you have the cows[money] we paid for lobola, so give us our children and their mother [daughter-in-law]).

The language of these proverbs used in songs reinforces stereotypes of the self and of others and can also contribute to unequal power relations in a family, depending on how the in-laws feel about the bride price [lobola] that has been paid. The family of the groom is made to feel superior and important because they have paid lobola.

Expectation that married women have to be obedient

Participants indicated that their cultures expected them to be obedient to their husbands and their husbands' families and to persevere in marriage. According to one participant, the expectation to be submissive, to persevere and to be obedient was emphasised during her premarital counselling as follows:

When we get married our cultural law is that you must be obedient and take whatever comes to persevere (*go kgotlelela*). You are to swallow whatever comes and persevere (*o kgotlelele*).

Participant were expected to be submissive and persevere to show that they are obedient.

Another participant said:

Eh ... you have to be *boikokobetso* [obedient] and show respect to all when you are married even though you are against what is happening.... When we get married our cultural law is that you must be obedient and take whatever comes to persevere [*kgotlelela*].

The above two quotes indicate that participants were expected to be obedient without fail because it was cultural law to do so.

As indicated in the next verbatim quotes, the older women who counselled the young brides tended to choose texts or verses that, in essence, contained messages about a wife's duty to show obedience to her husband:

Prior to my wedding my aunts called me. They also called women from the church. The emphasis was on Ephesians 5, verses 23 to 24 which say '... for a husband has authority over his wife just as Christ has authority over the church', and so wives must submit completely to their husbands just as the church submits itself to Christ. I felt like I was being blackmailed emotionally.

I was told that the Bible says 'man' is the head of the family and you have to agree otherwise you will never be happy if you disagree.

In my case they used Mark 10, verses 8 to 9 which say that in marriage the 'two shall become one flesh in union joined by God and therefore what God has joined together' no human being must separate.

Judging from the participants' narratives, not only proverbs but also verses from the Bible are used to counsel women and to encourage and coach them to persevere and observe Christian values in marriage. Using proverbs to teach women the importance of exercising perseverance and resilience in marriage has always been the core of premarital counselling. Women are taught that their happiness in life depends on whether they obey the Word of God.

DISCUSSION

This discussion revolves around the perceptions of African women of the use of proverbs in premarital counselling. In the interviews conducted in the current study, most participants focused on particular proverbs. Most of them were dissatisfied with the interpretation of the proverb *lebitla la mosadi kebogadi* (of which the meaning is that a woman should die at her in-laws home). According to them, the way this proverb was interpreted (also by the families offering the counselling) was oppressive to women only. The findings revealed that returning to one's paternal home after divorce would never be an option for a married woman; if that was ever done it would be unusual because families believed in the words *lebitla la mosadi kebogadi*. This belief is held by more than one African culture. According to traditional Zulu culture, a woman should leave her father's house, marry and remain in that marriage irrespective of the problems she encounters in the marriage (Mbatha, 2011). In the Zulu tradition, a wife may 'only leave in a coffin' if she leaves a marriage (kaNdlondlo, 2011), and, in the end, her grave is expected to be next to her husband's. If the husband dies, the widow is expected to remain with his family until her death (Masenya, 2010). Proverbs, such as *lebitla la mosadi kebogadi*, which clearly state it is prohibited for married women to return to their maternal

home even when in the midst of life-threatening challenges, were regarded by many participants as sad and oppressive and as lowering their self-esteem. Hoza (2013:149)) affirms that in South Africa 'a woman has been socialised to accept the traditional marriage system whose power relations are skewed in favour of men'. This socialisation often causes women to have negative experiences of the expectation to accept as a way of life the messages contained in the language of the proverbs. The thrust of the proverbs directed at conveying societal expectations is to guide women to make sure they behave as expected (with resilience and endurance) in marriage. They are socialised to believe a proverb represents their cultural and traditional heritage and that their families and communities expect them to abide by it. The proverb that conveys the message that a woman's grave is at the place/home of her husband is meant to discourage divorce and encourage perseverance.

The expectation that a married woman should not go back to her parental home is also subscribed to in the Tshiven a culture. This message is conveyed in the Tshiven—a proverb *vhuhadzindi Kamayathole, yafhufhumari a fhunzhela* (a wife's relatives-in-law are like lean meat, we keep the froth from boiling over with a spoon) (Mulaudzi, 2013a).

The findings of the current study also showed that some traditional songs are used to emphasise teachings done in private to make them public knowledge. For example, the song about not asking for a husband's payslip conveys the message that a woman is not supposed to know how much her husband is earning because the husband will buy everything for the wife. In an article on the Batswana, Ellece (2011) explains that a married woman should be meek and humble and should not ask for money from her husband because he will automatically provide what is needed.

The participants in the current study indicated that wedding songs were used to convey messages – they were used as channels of communication within communities. The findings further revealed that some of the wedding songs promoted inequality and the domination of men over women, although most of them are thought to give advice to both the bride and the groom. Mulaudzi (2013b), in his study on the role of indigenous wedding songs in modern times, concurs with the findings of the current study for example a woman should not ask for money from her husband because he will provide for her, but he asserts there should first be an understanding of how marriage works in African cultures. The participants in the current study reported that wedding songs also sent messages to the community and to the bride during the ceremony. This confirmed the finding in the literature that the singing of traditional songs at weddings is mostly spontaneous and that these songs deliver messages carrying ideas, wisdom and emotions (Mulaudzi, 2013b). In the same study, Mulaudzi reports that songs sung at weddings often reflect cultural and societal aspects that cannot be over looked by the community because they clearly illustrate issues relating to the

values and morality of the community. A case in point is the song *kgomo le jelejaanongrefengbana*, which can be translated as 'now that you have received the lobola, you have to give us our children and their mother'. These wedding songs are considered as indigenous music and are used to convey messages to all the wedding guests. Although the words of the songs were written a long time ago, the same songs are sung today during wedding ceremonies in different communities. Even though the songs are sung for the bride and sometimes the groom, the community is also reminded that married women must be subservient to their husbands and in-laws. The singing of wedding songs and ululations are used to entertain the people who have gathered to witness the marriage and to encourage the bride to persevere in the marriage.

The language of the proverbs used during premarital counselling bears testimony to the fact that women are not encouraged to question certain issues in their marriages as it will be seen as a sign of disrespect (Ellece, 2011). They should never speak about situations that hurt or compromise them. The expected subservience of women leads to inequality and the disempowerment of women and subsequently to the impossibility of achieving the sustainable development goals that were set relating to the equality and empowerment of women (United Nations, 2015).

The payment of lobola (the bride price, in the form of money or cattle) by the husband to the family of the woman (Mbatha, 2011) was cited by participants as supporting and promoting the superiority of the husband's family. In this regard reference can be made to the Tswana song according to which 'to be married to Mr X's family is to be a prestige bride'. As stated earlier, this custom (variously called *lobolo*, *mahadi*, *roora* or *magadi*) is practised by most African cultural groups. The findings of the current study supported the findings of Struber (2008) that stereotyping in wedding songs justifies gender discrimination and perpetuates structural formations of discrimination against women.

Paying lobola is a cultural practice that has been applied from time immemorial and is common throughout Southern Africa, and it became evident in the study that this practice was likely to be perpetuated. Sometimes a husband pays 'big money' for his wife, and some participants regarded the payment of lobola as prestigious for a woman. They expressed the belief that no one would change this highly respected cultural practice of paying lobola. These participants indicated that they felt valuable and respected after lobola had been paid, especially if it had been paid by a respected family in the community. Other participants felt that the song referred to above upset them because it carried prejudiced messages, such as that the bride was supposed to be thankful for getting married. Such prejudices can lead to exploitation, which can evoke negative feelings that can be detrimental to the health of individuals (Shope, 2011).

In many instances, women's voices are significantly absent when the issue of lobola is discussed, despite women being at the centre of the tradition (Ondicho, 2013). Sometimes the status quo of lobola makes it impossible for women for whom lobola was paid to leave an abusive relationship as leaving would make her vulnerable (Streubert & Carpenter, 2011). Because many black cultures believe in paying lobola for the bride-to-be, women are unable to negotiate their rights, including their right not to be forced to have sex with their husbands. Abuse of this right may expose them to HIV/AIDS and stress-related conditions. According to Wojcicki and Malal (2001), several countries have reported an increase in risky sexual behaviour, such as a decrease in condom use and/or an increase in the number of sexual partners, which lead to an increase in sexually related infections.

Participants indicated that during premarital counselling they were told to be obedient and persevere (*go kgotlelela*) in marriage. Some felt they had no choice but to persevere in order to satisfy family members at the expense of their own life and well-being. It was evident from the findings that premarital counselling was given to a woman to encourage her to observe values of perseverance, patience, sacrifice and obedience in a marriage. However, observing these values may lead to psychosomatic disorders and low self-esteem because women are forced to try and cope quietly with marriage problems (Ellece, 2011). Women are encouraged to be meek and silent and not to question any difficult situation, such as abuse by husbands. For example, abused women in Kenya are expected to be submissive, follow the rules set by their husbands and show obedience and respect (Schipper, 2014).

The findings of this study supported the findings of Ellece (2011) in a study conducted in Botswana on premarital counselling. She found that the women who gave premarital advice to a bride reinforced all the things that were detrimental to the bride's welfare. This could be ascribed to the fact that most of these women operated within the patriarchal structures of their cultures; hence they promoted these patriarchal ideologies even though these ideologies might not promote the equality and empowerment of women.

Some respondents in the current study expressed a need for the continuation of premarital counselling using the language of proverbs, particularly *lebitla la mosadi ke bogadi*, as these proverbs inculcated perseverance and enhanced the sanctity of marriages. While most participants saw the use of specific language in some proverbs used during premarital counselling in a negative light (for instance its aim to promote patriarchal principles), others reported experiencing premarital counselling in a positive way. The positive aspects of premarital counselling have also been highlighted in the literature. Mulaudzi (2013a) points out that a society has defined sets of rules, expectations and values that are important in maintaining stability between married couples and which

have to be communicated to couples. To give one example; a woman is expected to take care of her in-laws and to respect them and to carry out the household chores.

In a study conducted by Khwathsa (2009) that explored a married woman's respect for and obedience to her husband, one woman indicated that she accepted her husband as the head of the family and insisted his word had to be made law in his home. Another woman reported it was taboo for a woman to challenge her husband's power and, therefore, a woman had to be submissive and obedient to her husband.

Married women in the current study indicated that they were expected to express obedience by being humble and submissive. They also discussed the expectation that a woman had to endure, be respectful and ignore her challenges in order to build a strong family. The inference here is that women are required to persevere and be resilient so that they can hold their marriages together even if they sometimes experience extreme challenges such as infidelity and physical abuse. Women often found themselves trapped in relationships and they felt alone because they were unable to ask for the support of their families or friends and to talk about their challenges. The feeling of being trapped made them vulnerable; they isolated themselves from other people and their self-confidence tumbled. The fear of stigmatisation and humiliation caused some women not to tell anyone about the challenges they experienced in their marriages. They also felt guilty about allowing the abuse to continue and keeping quiet about it.

Another point the participants in the current study raised was that perseverance was emphasised in the socialisation of women and that this contributed to the fact that women who experienced problems in their marriage relationships felt trapped. This finding confirmed the finding of Ondicho (2013) that abused women in Kenya were expected to be submissive, respectful and follow the rules set by their husbands and that those who attempted to leave the marriage were sent back to their husbands by their own family members who encouraged them to persevere. As a result their feelings of being trapped and helpless were intensified.

A further finding of the current study was that Biblical verses were often used to create awareness with regard to perseverance of women in marriage. This confirmed the finding of Chitando (2004) who conducted a study in Zimbabwe and reported that many preachers used the book of Proverbs to encourage women to be good in their marriages. A passage used often was Proverbs 31, verses 10-31 that specifically state 'a good wife' is one who is praised for taking care of her husband. A finding in the current study that concurs with that of Chitando is that the Bible is used to justify the traditions and practices that frustrate African women.

Perhaps attention should be paid to the finding that these days, elders apparently deviate from the tenet of using traditional, cultural proverbs to using Bible verses in

premarital counselling to encourage women to be obedient and submissive wives. All African women who participated in the current study belonged to the Christian faith. One participant who had been exposed to premarital counselling, felt using Bible verses was acceptable but that it was equal to indoctrination.

In essence, Christianity lays down strict rules for women and the encouragement to persevere is imparted through Christian principles. No God-fearing woman of the Christian faith would like to go against the will of God; therefore, elders often fall back on Bible verses to expound patriarchal ideologies that oppress women. Rakoczy (2004) argues that the continued use of Biblical texts has an impact on women's dignity. Mistreatment and oppression of women can indeed be ascribed to a certain degree of misinterpretation of Biblical verses, abuse of traditional idioms and cultural proverbs.

CONCLUSION

In their narratives, the women who took part in this study revealed the abuse of married women under the guise of culture. Language is at the core of the description and interpretation of reality to produce meanings and come to an understanding of people's lives. Using specific language and proverbs, African cultures instil societal expectations in their members through the socialisation process. During premarital counselling, the language of proverbs and songs is used to counsel women to meet certain expectations relating to their behaviour in their marriages. This paper recommends that further research be conducted in South Africa, especially in rural areas, on the influence of the relationship between a *makoti* (new bride/daughter-in-law) and her in-laws.

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