

Proverbs and Gender: The Interface between Proverbs and Human Relations in a Refugee Camp

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Abstract

The primary objective of this presentation is to understand how proverbs reflect society's perception of gender in a particular socio-cultural context. This qualitative study recognizes the direct experiences and insights of the 35 participants on gender relations. The proverbs provided by the participants led us to an in-depth analysis of the attitude of men toward women and their assumption of women's role in a patriarchal society which could influence the gender relationship among Sri Lankan Tamils inside Indian refugee camps. A conceptual framework was developed to aid understanding of the research findings and illustrate the interrelationship between (a) refugee camps, (b) socio-cultural context, (c) patriarchal, and (d) collective identity. This framework provides an opportunity to position proverbs in a unique context. This study identified that the proverbs validate cultural expressions, justify rituals and gender practices, impose social pressure and social control on women, and reinforce society's moral principles and values.

Keywords: Tamil Proverbs, Tamil refugees, Ethnic identities, refugee camp dialogue

1. Introduction

Proverbs play a major role in every community by integrating values, morals, perceptions, and judgments. Popular proverbs are part of communities' daily lives, especially proverbs on women are part of every community. These proverbs often characterize or express hostility or discrimination toward women. This qualitative research paper analyzes the proverbs that Sri Lankan Tamil refugees use, which define gender relationships in Indian camps.

2. Literature Review

Proverbs are the succinct form of traditional cultural expression in single sentences, playing a significant role in orthodox societies (John, 2015; Stone, 2006). Proverbs are traditional expressions that arise as part of everyday discourse (Abrahams, 1982). Proverbs tend to present a personal context in a neutral form (John, 2015). In addition, proverbs try to generalize a situation without considering the unique context (Dundes, 1975). Proverbs generally tell the commonly held truth (Akmajian et.al., 2017). Proverbs meaning are difficult to define (Kerschen, 1998). The interpretations of proverbs are greatly determined by the specific socio-cultural contexts in which they occur. When we use proverbs in different contexts, they can have diverse meanings. Proverbs from diverse socio-cultural contexts provide information on people's daily discourse of that society (Bascom, 1954). Exploring proverbs in a particular socio-cultural context is the gateway to understanding people's perceptions in a given society (Bascom, 1954). Understanding proverbs from a social-ecological framework helps us to understand them from their current living environment. This means proverbs guide us to understand the scope of Sri Lankan Tamil refugee complexities by looking beyond the individual- i.e., one that is social and ecological (McLeroy, Bibeau, Steckler, & Glanz, 1988). The socio-ecological model that aligns with this article emphasizes proverbs used by refugees are influenced by the interaction between refugees and their social and living environments.

The extreme violence unleashed against Sri Lankan Tamils during the civil war between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Government of Sri Lanka resulted in forced migration by Sri Lankan Tamil refugees since 1984

(George, 2010). The largest concentrations of Sri Lankan Tamils outside of Sri Lanka are in Canada and India (George, 2012). Today, over 125,000 Sri Lankan Tamil refugees live in India, with 90,000 living in refugee camps (OfERR 2012). It is important to understand the social and cultural structure of the geographic location (i.e., refugee camps) to learn the proverbs' association with gender relations in that society. Refugee camps became a place to keep the collective identity of Sri Lankan Tamils. They also want to transfer their collective identity to the next generation. The only way they can continue transferring their culture is through daily discourse. In certain societies, proverbs play a significant role in creating concepts such as gender, gender roles, and gender relationships and serve as a tool for intergenerational transmission.

The concept of the 'context of situation' (Malinowski, 1954) gives a holistic definition for proverbs as linguistic or para-linguistic expressions within their social, physical, and cultural contexts. Our literature analysis revealed that proverbs carry certain functions of culture (Bascom, 1954). Firstly, proverbs validate culture and justify cultural practices and rituals. Secondly, proverbs let people free from repressions imposed upon them by society. Thirdly, proverbs serve as a pedagogic purpose that reinforces culture's morals and values even if they oppress individuals. Lastly, the proverb's main agenda is creating social pressure and control and transferring the culture's social structure from one generation to another. In Sri Lankan, Tamil refugees camp showed the connection between patriarchal and endogamous societies and gender-based violence. The Sri Lankan Tamils are a male-dominated society, and the proverbs in their daily discourse reflect the patriarchal perception of gender (Tharmalingam, 2016). Although both the oppressor and oppressed use proverbs to explain their worldview, it has been noted that Sri Lankan Tamil refugees use the proverbs to reflect on anyone that is below them on the social ladder (i.e., women) and justify gender-based violence against them (John, 2015). Men more often use proverbs to objectify women by creating unity among men, which means men escape from the subjugation inflicted upon them by society. They validated Sri Lankan Tamil culture and justified the rituals (i.e., prayer ceremonies) conducted only by men. Proverbs could be considered a pedagogical device that reinforces Sri Lankan women's morals, values, and practices. There is a gap in the literature studying the usage of proverbs in refugee camps, including the patriarchal Sri Lankan Tamil refugee camps.

The primary objective of this study is to understand how proverbs reflect participants' perceptions of gender relations in a refugee camp. This exploratory qualitative study examines proverbs as cultural explanations and interpretations of gender roles and recognizes the lived experiences and comprehension of the participants on gender relations. The institutional review board at the presenter's University approved all study procedures. The principal investigator (PI) has been conducting studies in the Trichy refugee camp since 2008. The PI's studies were guided by a collaborative board that includes refugees, service workers, Organization for Eelam Refugee Rehabilitation (OfERR) staff, and community elders. This specific collaborative board also guided this current study in collaboration with the OfERR at the refugee camps in Trichy, India.

3. Methodology

3.1 Setting

Interviews were conducted in the OfERR Trichy regional office based on the convenience of the participants. The study was conducted in March 2018. We had individual rooms to conduct the interviews. The research team ensured the privacy and confidentiality of the participants.

3.2 Sampling

The researcher and a team of twelve trained health workers conducted open-ended interviews with 35 participants. Participants were selected using purposive sampling techniques. The main inclusion criteria for study participation were: 1) Sri Lankan refugee status, 2) Tamil ethnicity, and 3) living in the Trichy refugee camp. The research team utilized flyers and informal presentations at community events organized by the Organization of Eelam Refugee Rehabilitation (OfERR) to recruit participants. Interested individuals contacted the researcher using a local Tamil Nadu phone number. The researcher described the study and screened potential participants with phone calls conducted in Tamil or English based on the preference of the potential participant. The researcher then contacted selected participants to arrange a date and time when the participant would review and sign the Tamil-translated consent form and attend the face-to-face interview.

3.3 Informed Consent

Informed consent was received from each participant. The research team conducted MINI Mental State Examination to assess participants' mental and cognitive status and informed consent. When more than one adolescent in the same age group from a the family wished to participate, the research team examined their MINI exam and connected with parents and health workers to select the child based on their needs.

3.4 Interviews

The researchers ensured that men and women participated in the interview on different days. The research team was keen

to ensure that all research participants were comfortable speaking to the researchers and could see them as not an authority to ensure that they felt comfortable sharing their experiences when interviewing them. After the conclusion of the interview, participants engaged in a debriefing session with the researcher, during which they had the opportunity to ask questions or discuss any concerns. After the interviews, each family was compensated \$50 (2,500 Indian Rupees) for their time.

3.5 Interview Guide

An interview guide was used to draw out proverbs to describe women's roles in the camp. Research questions were open-ended and designed to elicit proverbs with a broad range of views and opinions from participants. The research questions were:

1. Please provide proverbs you regularly use to describe women
2. Please provide proverbs you regularly use to describe your sociocultural expressions about women
3. Please provide proverbs that justify or excuse the abuse of women.

The research team analyzed interview transcripts and field notes after each interview. Random cross-checks were regularly carried out. Disagreements on the particular translation of thought or phrase were resolved through consultation with the community collaborative board.

3.6 Qualitative Analysis

After all 35 interviews were completed, the researcher reached a saturation level where additional interviews were not expected to provide more information. The interviews were conducted in Tamil and were digitally recorded, transcribed, translated verbatim to English, and analyzed using a thematic analysis approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). First, the research staff reviewed the verbatim transcripts for both a priori (deductive approach) and emergent (inductive approach) themes based on participants' responses to the specific questions. In the second coding stage, themes were developed, and verbatim text from the transcripts was placed within these categories. We then created, refined, and eliminated codes by establishing similarities and differences in the transcribed text. The codes were grouped into a final set of themes and subthemes. Several steps were used to increase analytical rigor. Multiple coders participated in the analysis to ensure a wide range of interpretations and the research team represented these diverse interpretations. The research team resolved ambiguities and coding discrepancies by reviewing transcripts a second time and coming to a consensus as a team. Moreover, rival explanations were considered during the analysis to facilitate the trimming and validation of findings. Qualitative research gives high importance to reflexivity, and one major component of reflexivity is identifying the subjective experiences of the research team members (Barusch, Gringeri, & George, 2011). The research data analysis team included two faculty researchers and a doctoral student. The research team's expertise in qualitative methods ranged from basic knowledge to expert experience.

4. Results

At the time of the data collection, participants were living in Indian refugee camps. The inclusion criteria for the study were: 1) were a Sri Lankan refugee who arrived in India during the 1984, 1990, or 2006 migration waves, 2) were ethnically Tamil, 3) were at least 21 years old, 4) had the capacity to consent, and 5) living in refugee camps in Tamil Nadu, India. Exclusion criteria included the requirement that participants are not from the same family.

Purposive sampling was used to select thirty-five participants based on their refugee experiences and the proportional stratification of gender. All of the participants were married, with an average age of 38. The participant sample migrated to India during each of the three major migration waves of Sri Lankan Tamil refugees that occurred in 1984, 1990, and 2006. All of the participants were employed. Thirty-two participants lived with their families at the time of data collection, including spouses, children, and parents. Participants had an average of ten years of education, with women reporting less education than men. Twenty-eight participants were females and seven participants were males. All participants identified as belonging to the Hindu religion. Table I outlines the demographic characteristics of participants.

Table I. Gender and Migration wave of Participants by Location

Migration Wave	Gender		Region
	Male	Female	
1984	4	2	Chennai
		7	Trichy
		1	Tirunelveli
		1	Erode
1990		1	Chennai
		6	Trichy
		1	Tirunelveli
		1	Erode
2006	1	1	Chennai
	2	3	Trichy
		1	Tirunelveli
		3	Erode

The primary objective of this study is to understand how proverbs reflect participants' perceptions of women in a particular socio-cultural context. The proverbs provided by the participants led us to an in-depth analysis of the attitude of men toward women and their assumption of women's role in a patriarchal society which could influence the gender relationship among Sri Lankan Tamils inside Indian refugee camps. We are detailing the result based on each theme as follows:

4.1 Women

“Trust not a woman when she weeps.”

A woman can easily cry to win any situation; therefore, don't trust her.

“Woeful is the household that wants a woman.”

It is very sad for a household that wants women.

“A woman is a weather cock.”

A woman changes her opinion frequently.

“A woman's mind and a winter wind change often.”

A woman's mind changes as the winter wind.

“Women are as wavering as the wind.”

Women can not be trusted because their mind changes like the wind.

“A woman's thoughts are afterthoughts.”

Women understand a situation after it is over.

“Though the child is short, he is a male child.”

Even if a person's stature is short, he is a man, not a woman.

“A woman always thinks backward.”

Rather than what women need to do, they think about what they don't want to happen.

“A woman cuts her wisdom teeth when she is dead.”

Women achieve wisdom when they are dead.

“A woman's advice is no great thing, but he who won't take it is a fool.”

There is nothing special about a woman's advice, and only a fool will take that advice.

4.2 Socio-cultural Expressions about a Woman

“Women are the snares of satan.”

Satan catches prey through women.

“Women are the Devil's nets.”

Women are tools for the devil to catch good men.

“A wicked woman and an evil are three half-pence worse than the devil.”

A bad woman and an evil are three-half pence less good than a devil.

“There is no devil so bad as she Devil.”

There is no witch worse than a woman witch.

“Women are saints in Church, angels in the street, and devils at home.”

Women show their different characters in church, in the street, and at home.

“A man is as old as he feels, and a woman is as old as she looks.”

A man at his age based on how he feels, but a woman's age depends solely on how she looks.

“When an ass climbs a ladder, we may find wisdom in women.”

When a donkey climbs the ladder, we can find intelligence in women.

“Women are necessary evils.”

Women have an inescapable evil spirit.

“You are a buffalo.”

Women are donkeys.

4.3 Abuse of Women

“A woman's life is like a pot on the street; if you are lucky, you get a good husband; if you are not lucky, you will get a husband who will destroy you. It's your fate.”

If there is a pot in the middle of a road, it may or may not be hit by a vehicle. Like a pot, if a woman is lucky, she will get a good husband who won't beat her to death.

“Be it stone or grass; he is your husband.”

Whatever your husband's character, you must obey him.

“Man is always a man.”

Whatever a man does, he is still a man, the most important person.

“It's better to feed a donkey than giving her food.”

A husband prefers to give food to his donkey over a woman.

“If the mother-in-law breaks a pot, it is an earthen pot, and if the daughter-in-law breaks the same, it is a golden pot.”

When a fight happens, everyone sees the mother-in-law as a simple person but the daughter-in-law as rude.

The data emphasized that Sri Lankan Tamil women are being devalued in refugee camps. The study results confirmed that all of these proverbs are generally used to demean women in society and reflect the nature of male preference and male dominance in society.

5. Discussion

To understand the scope of this study's results entailing women's experiences, researchers must construct a model that looks beyond the interpretations of the proverbs. Figure 1 was developed to aid understanding of the research findings and illustrate the interrelationship between (a) refugee camps, (b) socio-cultural context, (c) patriarchal, and (d) collective identity. This framework provides an opportunity to position proverbs in a unique context.

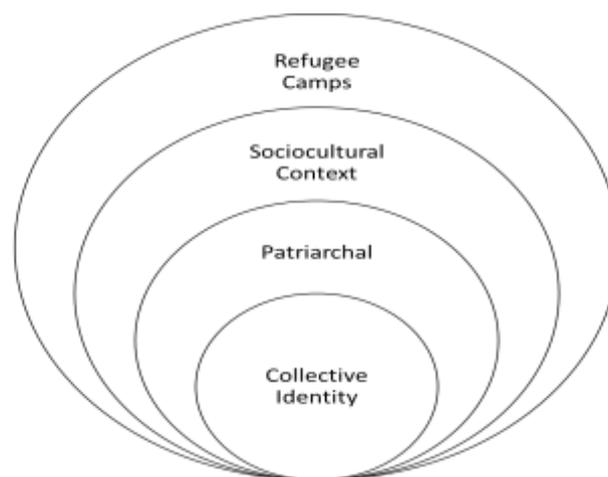


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework to understand the social location of women in refugee camps

Indian refugee camps have approximately 150,000 Sri Lankan Tamil families (George, 2017). During data collection, these camps hold refugees from 1984, 1990, and 2006 migration waves. The data collected in 2018 means three or more generations of family members live together in these camps. In addition, the refugee camps are located in India, and the refugees are from Sri Lanka, with at least one generation born in India. So, the camp refugee population's attitude towards women comes from individuals who are from different generations with different country backgrounds. This study allowed an understanding of the importance of socio-cultural expressions on women through proverbs. Proverbs provide a non-systematic discourse (Bauman, 1983) on reflecting the location of women in society. Proverbs are spontaneous and part of daily life that give meaning to social interactions and cultural context in both India and Sri Lanka. Although researchers' previous studies found specific gender roles for refugee women and men in the refugee camp, research suggests violence against women is not culture specific to Tamil Nadu. Rather, Indian women, irrespective of their age or period, defined violence against women and recognized it as rooted in power and control, where society's coercive control is expressed in different forms, including physically, sexually, psychologically, and financially. The researchers identified that the different manifestations of violence against women did have particular meanings for the Tamil community. These forms of abuse are related to different gender roles for men and women, social relationships between men and women, societal power and control by men over women, and abusive behaviors and expressions of men. Few other studies also report cultural differences in enforcing actions of violence against women (Mehotra, 1999; Sorenson, 1996; Yoshihama, 2002a, 2002b). Proverbs used in Indian refugee camps recreate a new social and cultural landscape of origin in a new locale by mixing Indian and Sri Lankan socio-cultural contexts through social interpretations

and norm-building about women's social position.

Although we often use socio-ecological theories to examine the migrants' struggles, greater consideration must be paid to the cultural context. These findings suggest that sociocultural theories of violence against women apply to participants in refugee camps. Sociocultural theory emphasizes the role of sociocultural interaction impact on individual behavior and interaction. Sociocultural theory suggests that human learning is largely a social process and that our cognitive functions are formed based on our interactions with those around us (Vygotsky, 1934). For example, each culture promotes certain values, beliefs, and social interactions, including attitudes toward women. The patriarchal notion of power and control over women may cross cultural lines. This means children from different cultures adapt to what their cultures teach them and transmit to the next generations. The specific attitudes towards women could have developed from the intergenerational transmission of behaviors across generations.

The in-depth examination of study results showed that the Sri Lankan refugee community's focus on transferring their patriarchal views across generations establishes their collective cultural identity in two ways: 1) It provides a collective voice for its members, which validates their unique attitude towards women. 2) It stresses the need for collective silence from its members, where the patriarchal views will not be challenged (Dalgaard & Montgomery, 2015). Harmony is maintained in the refugee camp when individuals behave per hierarchically prescribed roles emphasizing physically and psychologically forceful subordination to men. Often extreme silencing strategies can curb female refugees' psychopathology and restrain them from their growth. Only if the community members can guarantee a voice against women's silence can they develop community resources and other support networks to empower women. This creates codependent, like-minded people with shared perspectives on their identity (Nguyen, 2017; Simonen & Törrönen, 2017).

The highlight of the current study results was helping the Sri Lankan Tamil refugee community understand their culture-specific, codependent, patriarchal social structure, which demands a collective voice for its men and collective silence from women (Dalgaard & Montgomery, 2015). The study results suggest that interventions are needed to ensure culture-specific, collective interdependent family relationships instead of codependent ones. For example, they would involve release from gender-based practices and would ensure that both men and women have fair responsibilities inside and outside the family. Interdependent family relationships will recognize the importance of keeping each family member's unique identity and feel confident in expressing their supportive and conflictual opinions while being sensitive to the other family members. Interdependent relationships among Sri Lankan refugee families create gender relationships based on equality and balance in how each member's needs are met.

6. Conclusion

This study is not generalizable because the participants were from one of the 123 refugee camps in Tamil Nadu, India. Tamil culture is abundant with proverbs. The social-cultural context that is discussed in this paper is broader in nature, and proverbs need to be studied in the 'camp context' of their performance. It is very difficult to gather proverbs in any context because the usage of proverbs is unforeseeable and spontaneous in daily discourse.

The nature of male dominance in the Sri Lankan Tamil community is rationalized by the proverbs that degrade women and validate socio-cultural practices. Proverbs provided by the participants also described cultural norms preserving biases as benefitting men over women. Using proverbs as a communication tool reinforces men's power towards women to practice these abusive actions across generations. In addition, the knowledge gained through experience is transmitted intergenerationally to train them through proverbs to keep the collective identity. Proverbs transmit the users' worldview, wisdom, experience, and emotions. Proverbs also help to deliver the philosophy of life of certain communities. In the modern socio-cultural context, the usage of proverbs in daily life may be notably lessened. Still, the practicality and merits of the proverbs in people's minds remain vibrant.

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