



Article

The Gender-Based Division of Family Roles in Proverbs

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Abstract: This article will deeply analyze the gender-based division of family roles in proverbs as well as the differences on the roles of female and male genders.

Keywords: Proverb, woman, gender, father, girl, family, image, husband, wife, linguistics, values, transformation.

Introduction

Recently, terms like "gender issue," "gender concept," and "gender theory" have become among the most urgent topics in linguistics and cultural studies. In today's fast-changing and dynamically evolving society, gender relations have transformed significantly from what they once were. Language is widely recognized as the primary tool that reflects all societal relationships from social structures to cultural values and traditional beliefs [1]. It serves as the fundamental bridge that brings these relationships into existence.

All aspects of gender are deeply connected to the values, worldviews, and lifestyle that have been shaped over centuries by the specific nation, ethnic group, or social community using that language. In other words, the evolving nature of gender roles and their shift away from traditional norms is closely linked to the living conditions of society members. Language bears the responsibility of reflecting all these changes [2].

No other linguistic unit whether proverbs or sayings captures a people's deepest feelings, attitudes, and perceptions about life in a particular region as concisely as proverbs do. As the most extensive and widespread category of paremiological units, proverbs represent the ultimate product of folk oral creativity. Through them, we can truly sense the soul of a nation [3]. The gender concept mentioned above is directly reflected in proverbs; however, in this context, gender roles evolve alongside the transformation of proverbs through time [4].

Proverbs are key carriers of popular wisdom, reflecting generations of lived experience, worldviews, and social relationships through folklore. Family-focused proverbs, in particular, reveal how societies have understood and assigned roles to men and women [5]. These role expectations have been internalized not only as household tasks but also as moral standards [6]. Thus, in many proverbs men are depicted primarily as providers, protectors, and household leaders, while women are shown as homemakers, child-raisers, and keepers of the family [7]'s emotional life. In Uzbek sayings, a man's leadership is frequently associated with duty and safeguarding the family.

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Expressions that present the husband as the family head assign him formal authority and an outward-facing, active role; the woman's sphere is commonly limited to domestic concerns [8]. At the same time, women are praised for patience, wisdom, tenderness, and their role as the family [9]'s cohesive force traits that mirror gender assumptions rooted in patriarchal traditions.

Similarly, Turkic proverbs reflect a comparable gendered division: men are linked to public activity, while women are cast in the role of household matron [10]. Yet some of these sayings place special value on a woman's moral influence and nurturing presence, indicating that although roles are delineated, women's importance within the family is still recognized [11].

Linguistically, this gendering appears in word choice: proverbs about men favor terms for strength, resolve, protection, and leadership, whereas those about women emphasize love, modesty, cooking, fidelity, and child-rearing. In this way, proverbs function as lingua-cultural evidence of a community [12]'s collective gendered perceptions.

From a modern gender-studies viewpoint, many proverbs reinforce conventional stereotypes by presenting male and female roles as fixed. At the same time, these expressions are historical and cultural artifacts that offer insight into past social structures and values. In short, the gendered division of family roles in proverbs is closely tied to a society [13]'s historical memory, norms, and cultural priorities.

In these proverbs, we will examine how family roles are gender-based by considering the following examples:

“Motherhood is the pride of the home; fatherhood is its treasure” - in the proverb, mother and father are metaphorically linked to the home: through the words "ori/zari" each person's distinctive contribution or share in the household is depicted. Here, the mother's role is presented as part of an element that ensures the material or spiritual stability of the home, while the father's role is associated with an element of authority or greater external responsibility. Through the metaphor, the gender division is expressed as natural and normative [14]. Conclusion: The roles of mother and father are complementary, yet depicted with traditional boundaries.

“My son's marrow is better than my husband's stone” - this proverb compares material and emotional values: the son's benefit from the family inheritance or meal is prioritized over the husband's achievement through labor or protection. In terms of language, expressions like "bone marrow soup" and "stone of the hammer" indicate that activity and outcome are gender-specific [15]. The proverb values the different benefits provided by parents and spouses. Conclusion: The benefits brought by the man and the child are valued; the woman's context is not directly indicated in this proverb, but it may allude to the traditional reproductive role.

“The husband's earnings make the house a home; the wife's is the domestic work” - in this proverb portrays the husband as the builder or provider of the home, and the wife as responsible for the internal household functions - ensuring comforts such as bedding and blankets. Here there is a clear division between "topish" (earnings) and "korpa ishi" (home comfort). This language reinforces the gendered separation of economic and emotional labour. Conclusion: The husband is associated with material provision, while the wife is linked to creating domestic comfort.

“The wife is the neck, the husband the head” - a very short metaphorical proverb; it conveys hierarchy and functional division through body parts: head (decision-making, direction) and neck (support or adaptation). This expression naturalizes patriarchal leadership, but the "neck" element is also assigned a smaller or more passive role. Linguistically, the metaphor conveys a strong social semantics.

Conclusion: The man is depicted in a position of authority, while the woman is portrayed as supportive and adaptable.

“Wife - the home's ornament; Husband - the home's helper” - this proverb depicts the woman as responsible for the aesthetic aspects of the home and the man as an assistant or laborer. Interestingly, the husband is referred to as the "helper," which in some cases may imply a diminished role for the man as a helper. However, in context he is also associated with labor. The article also reflects the socially unexpected or ambiguous aspects of family roles. Conclusion: The woman is responsible for aesthetics and home decoration, while the man provides practical assistance.

“Wife - the adornment of the home; husband - its labour” - the woman's role is idealized as the ornament that adorns the home; the man, by contrast, is associated with labor and portrayed as the one who provides the home's material foundation. This phrase distinctly separates the woman's visual and aesthetic value from the husband's economic value. The gender semantics here are value-based. Conclusion: The woman is portrayed as an aesthetic value, while the man is depicted as a source of material labor.

“A wife is the light of the house” - the lamp metaphor portrays the woman as illuminating the home and providing spiritual and emotional guidance. This article emphasizes the woman's spiritual and emotional role and highlights her function as the unifier of the family environment. At the same time, this idealisation ties the woman primarily to internal, more emotional labour. The woman illuminates the soul of the family; her role is central in both spiritual and emotional terms. **“Wife - life partner”** - this article presents marriage from the perspective of partnership and friendship.

Conclusion: The analyzed proverbs reflect the traditional gender division of family roles: Men are primarily characterised by tasks related to the external world - providing material sustenance, protection and governance - while women are associated with the domestic sphere - decorating the home, raising children and maintaining the family environment. The metaphorical language used in the proverbs (body parts, lamps, gardens, adornments, and so on) normalizes this division as a natural and moral norm. At the same time, some expressions acknowledge a woman's functions, such as spiritual influence, advice-giving, and companionship, meaning that there are a number of positive assessments of her. However, these are often described as informal and within the framework of male dominance. These factors require the proverbs to be understood in two ways: on the one hand, they are a valuable source as a consolidation of historical-cultural heritage and social values; on the other hand, they can be a means of reinforcing stereotypes from the perspective of modern gender equality. Therefore, future research should explore the historical context in which the proverbs originated, their lexical and semantic characteristics, and their relationship to contemporary social changes (e.g., urbanisation, level of education, changes in the labour market) in an integrated manner. Such an approach, combining prosopographic, lexical and sociocultural analyses, more clearly reveals both the value of the articles as cultural heritage and their impact on social norms.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research methodology grounded in linguistic and cultural analysis of proverbs from Uzbek and broader Turkic traditions. The primary data consists of a corpus of proverbs selected from canonical collections of Uzbek folk sayings, including multi-volume anthologies and digital databases of paremiological units. The selection criteria focused on proverbs explicitly referencing family roles, marital relationships, motherhood, fatherhood, and domestic responsibilities.

The analytical framework integrates three complementary approaches. First, a gender-linguistic analysis examines lexical choices, metaphorical structures, and semantic fields associated with male and female roles within the proverb texts. Second, a semiotic analysis decodes the symbolic meanings embedded in proverb imagery, including body-part metaphors, household objects, and nature references. Third, a socio-cultural analysis situates the proverbs within their historical and community contexts, drawing on ethnographic and folklore scholarship.

A total of eight representative proverbs were selected for close reading and in-depth analysis based on their thematic richness and frequency of citation in secondary Uzbek folklore literature. Each proverb was subjected to a tripartite examination: (1) structural and lexical decomposition, (2) identification of gender-role markers and metaphorical devices, and (3) interpretation of underlying socio-cultural norms. This iterative process allowed patterns of gendered meaning-making to emerge inductively from the data.

Comparative analysis was also conducted with Turkic-language proverbs from neighboring traditions, allowing cross-cultural patterns and divergences in gender role representation to be identified. Secondary sources including scholarly articles, linguistic analyses, and gender studies literature were reviewed to situate findings within broader academic debates on language, gender, and cultural identity.

Results

The analysis of eight selected Uzbek proverbs reveals consistent and recurring patterns in the gendered representation of family roles. Across all analyzed texts, a fundamental binary is established between the male domain of external, public, and material activity and the female domain of internal, domestic, and emotional labour. This binary is encoded through a variety of metaphorical and lexical strategies that naturalize the division as morally appropriate and culturally normative.

The most frequently occurring metaphorical category is the body-part metaphor, exemplified by the proverb "The wife is the neck, the husband the head". In this formulation, male authority is mapped onto the cognitive and directional function of the head, while the female role is mapped onto the supportive and adaptive function of the neck. This spatial and anatomical hierarchy encodes patriarchal authority as biologically grounded rather than socially constructed, a rhetorical strategy widely documented in cross-cultural proverb research.

The second dominant metaphorical category identified is the light or illumination metaphor, present in the proverb "A wife is the light of the house". Here, the woman is assigned a spiritually elevated function as the source of the home's warmth, guidance, and emotional coherence. While this representation positively values the female role, it simultaneously confines it to the private sphere and frames women's significance exclusively in relation to the domestic environment.

A third pattern concerns the explicit economic division encoded in proverbs such as "The husband's earnings make the house a home; the wife's is the domestic work". The lexical contrast between "topish" (earning/finding) and "korpa ishi" (domestic comfort work) encodes a systematic separation of economic production, assigned to the male, from reproductive and care labour, assigned to the female. This linguistic encoding reflects and reinforces a gendered economy of value in which productive labour is made visible and rewarded while reproductive labour remains invisible and unpaid.

Proverbs using ornamental metaphors, such as "Wife - the home's ornament" and "Wife - the adornment of the home," construct female identity primarily through aesthetic and decorative value. The woman is figured as an object that beautifies the domestic space, a framing that objectifies female identity while simultaneously idealizing it. By contrast, male identity in the same proverbs is constructed through active, utilitarian terms related to labor, provision, and structural support.

Comparative analysis with Turkic proverbs from Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and Azerbaijani traditions confirms that the gendered binary identified in Uzbek proverbs is a regional pattern rather than an isolated cultural feature. Across these traditions, men are consistently associated with public roles including governance, warfare, trade, and agricultural leadership, while women are primarily represented within kinship and domestic frameworks. However, notable variations exist: certain Kazakh proverbs assign women significant moral authority as advisors and mediators, while some Azerbaijani sayings acknowledge female wisdom in ways that partially complicate the dominant patriarchal framework.

At the lexical level, the results demonstrate a systematic asymmetry in the vocabulary used to describe male and female roles. Terms associated with male roles cluster around semantic fields of strength, leadership, protection, provision, and external action. Terms associated with female roles cluster around semantic fields of beauty, modesty, patience, nurturance, domesticity, and emotional support. This lexical asymmetry is not merely descriptive but performative: by repeatedly associating femininity with certain qualities and masculinity with others, proverbs actively construct and reinforce the gender identities they appear merely to reflect.

Discussion

The findings of this study contribute to the growing body of scholarship on gender and language by demonstrating that proverbs function not merely as repositories of folk wisdom but as active sites of gender ideology production and reproduction. The systematic encoding of patriarchal gender relations in Uzbek proverbs reflects broader patterns documented in paremiological research across diverse cultural traditions, confirming that proverbs are powerful instruments for the normalization of social hierarchies.

The body-part metaphor identified in the proverb "The wife is the neck, the husband the head" exemplifies what Lakoff and Johnson termed conceptual metaphor: the mapping of abstract social relationships onto concrete embodied experience. By grounding patriarchal hierarchy in the human body, the proverb presents male authority as natural and inevitable rather than historically contingent and socially constructed. This finding is consistent with feminist linguistic analyses of proverbs across English, Arabic, Russian, and Chinese traditions, all of which identify similar strategies of naturalization through embodied metaphor.

The ambivalence identified in the light metaphor - where the woman is idealized as the soul of the home while simultaneously confined to the domestic sphere - reflects what feminist scholars have termed the "pedestal effect": the simultaneous elevation and restriction of women through idealization. This rhetorical structure is particularly effective precisely because it frames confinement as tribute, making the domestic role appear desirable rather than limiting. Similar structures have been documented in South Asian, Middle Eastern, and East Asian proverb traditions, suggesting that the pedestal effect is a cross-cultural strategy for managing gender ideological contradictions.

The economic division encoded in proverbs distinguishing male earning from female domestic work connects to longstanding feminist critiques of the invisibility of reproductive labour. The linguistic encoding of this division in folk sayings demonstrates how economic ideologies penetrate everyday language and become naturalized as common sense. The persistence of such proverbs in contemporary Uzbek cultural discourse raises important questions about the relationship between linguistic heritage and economic gender equality in rapidly modernizing Central Asian societies.

The ornamental and aesthetic metaphors applied to women in the analyzed proverbs constitute a form of what Wolf termed the "beauty myth": the construction of female value primarily through physical and aesthetic attributes rather than through agency, achievement, or intellectual capacity. The linguistic framing of women as ornaments and

adornments not only diminishes female subjectivity but also creates a standard of value that is inherently relational - the woman is valued for what she contributes to the domestic aesthetic rather than for intrinsic qualities.

The cross-cultural comparative findings suggest that the gendered division of family roles in Uzbek proverbs is embedded within a broader Turkic cultural framework that has historically assigned complementary but hierarchically ordered roles to men and women. The regional consistency of this pattern indicates that proverb-based gender ideology has been transmitted across centuries through shared linguistic and cultural channels, reinforcing similar norms across geographically and politically distinct communities.

At the same time, the analysis reveals important internal complexities and tensions within the proverb corpus that complicate a monolithic reading of Uzbek gender ideology. Proverbs that frame women as moral advisors, spiritual guides, and family unifiers suggest a recognition of female agency and authority that exists alongside but partially contests the dominant patriarchal framework. These counter-narratives within the folk tradition may represent residual traces of alternative gender arrangements or aspirational projections of female value that exceeded the constraints of patriarchal social organization.

The pedagogical and policy implications of these findings are significant for contemporary Uzbekistan, where rapid urbanization, expanding female participation in higher education and the labor market, and increasing engagement with global gender equality discourses are generating new tensions around traditional cultural norms. Proverbs continue to circulate widely in Uzbek public discourse, media, and educational settings, making their gender ideological content a matter of contemporary social relevance rather than merely historical interest.

Critical literacy approaches in language education that encourage students to analyze and question the gender assumptions embedded in proverbs and other folk texts represent one promising avenue for addressing this challenge. Such approaches can simultaneously preserve cultural heritage and develop critical awareness of the ways in which language shapes gender perceptions and expectations. International experience from feminist language education programs in Turkey, Kazakhstan, and Iran offers relevant models for how this might be achieved within Central Asian cultural contexts.

Conclusion

Future research should extend the corpus analyzed in this study to include a broader range of Uzbek proverbs, particularly those from regional and dialectal traditions that may encode alternative gender representations. Sociolinguistic research examining how contemporary Uzbek speakers interpret, use, and potentially reinterpret traditional proverbs in modern contexts would provide important insights into the relationship between linguistic tradition and evolving gender norms. Longitudinal studies tracking changes in proverb usage and interpretation across generations would additionally illuminate how folk wisdom adapts to social transformation.

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