

'Men suffer, women don't know'
Wisdom about Women from Around the World

Mineke Schipper

What we have in common as humans is not only due to globalization, as some seem to believe, but also to old human universals. Men and women have been moulded from the same clay, a Sumerian proverb stated long ago, and we all come to the world in the same way, a more recent Russian proverb added thousands of years later. Still, humanity consists of relatives who have hardly bothered to meet. And why did the small physical difference men and women are born with have such enormous consequences?

As human beings we share a number of things. We belong to the human species and, so far, we live on one and the same planet. We have in common with both our ancestors and our contemporary fellow humans the fact that basic drives and needs such as food, shelter, safety, and procreation determine our lives. Everywhere in the world proverbs refer to love, sex, marrying, mourning, and to what we are supposed to share and not to share as men and women.

In their terse and memorable fashion, proverbs reveal our ways of seeing life. Musical, direct, frank, they reflect not only cultural uniqueness but also commonalities shared across the globe and throughout history, thanks to our all being equipped with either a male or a female body. People have been programmed into behaving as men and women mostly without their being aware of it. Proverbial messages are an excellent yardstick for finding out to what extent, individually and socially, we continue to swallow some stubborn ideas, or have come to look differently at the world than our ancestors did. Consciously or subconsciously, we have all been influenced by such messages, in spite of local and regional differences, and in spite of historical developments and changes.

I collected and studied more than 15 000 proverbs and sayings about women from all continents. In my research and book I have examined the various themes those proverbs are most frequently dealing with: women's bodies, their beauty and beautifying practices, and their various phases of life—from girls and brides to wives, widows, mothers and grandmothers; and also, no less numerous, with basics of life,

such as love, sex, pregnancy, childbirth, work, verbal talents and power. In spite of the differences among cultures, those numerous tiny texts reveal some intriguingly common patterns in ideas about women transmitted from generation to generation in hundreds of languages across the globe, thus providing us with an intriguing cultural history of humankind.

Proverbs about women substantially help explaining how and why, worldwide, sexual differences have resulted in a growing gap, a gap that has estranged men and women from equally sharing both public roles in life and responsibilities at home. Teaching and preaching the preservation of such a gendered gap, on the basis of relatively insignificant body differences, proverbs have reinforced prevailing hierarchies and established rigid images of what it means not to be a man but a woman, thus legitimating accessory roles for life for both sexes. The inescapable other side of this coin is that women and men who do not fit the prescribed behaviour are stigmatized—no less by other women than by men.

Privileges are never given up easily. Those used to having others do unpleasant work for them want to keep things that way. As the French writer Madame de Sévigné observed in the seventeenth century: “The humbling of inferiors is necessary to the maintenance of social order.” Or in the words of a German proverb: “One makes the bed and the other lies down in it.” Or, in Russian: Housewife at home, pancake with honey.” Or in Arabic: “Everything comes from his wife, even the tying of his shoelaces.” Or in Dutch: “A good wife is the best piece of furniture.” Some variants add: “You can use her in every room.”

Indeed, the economic rewards of a wife’s zealous presence are emphasised across the world:

Take wives, they will bring you riches. (Arabic, Maghreb)

With a clever wife, a man will become rich. (Vietnamese)

A wife is a household treasure. (Japanese)

An industrious wife is the best money-box. (Romanian)

A woman with many [household] talents fills the house to the ceiling.
(Portuguese)

The generous offer to equally share annoying tasks rarely occurs to those in a comfortably dominant position. “A bad home sends you for water and firewood” is a

Rwanda complaint; it means that a man becomes his wife's slave if he would accept to do such humiliating "woman's work" in her place. If the wife does not conform to her social role, she will be socially disapproved of. In Europe such a woman used to be blamed for "wearing the trousers", a frequently heard complaint in proverbs.

All those warnings for men along with compelling rules for women reveal a great deal of uncertainty as well as fear for loss of the status quo. If women had been as subservient as they ought to be according to the endless series of do's and don'ts, the proverbs would have been completely superfluous, would they not?

Proverbs do not reflect "reality". The numerous tiny texts represent ideals—as well as regretted deviations from such ideals, as imagined by those whose interests they defend. Whose ideals are they talking about? As a public genre, the proverb is believed to serve and follow "the tradition", without ever specifying whose tradition is actually being referred to. Instead of representing the "reality" of what women were or are, the material presents an intriguing mirror of mainly male inspired interests and fears and inherited ideas about "ideal" and "deviant" womanhood, and in doing so reveals at the same time inherited views of "ideal" and "deviant" norms of manhood. Thanks to the witty images and original comparisons the material is quite striking and often amusing. In some ways, though, this is also quite disturbing material in that it demonstrates wide currency of misogynistic sentiment, especially in the proverbs about wives, transmitted from generation to generation in hundreds of different languages across the globe.

In the mirror of proverbs we can meet them all—the prescribed and accepted, rejected and acclaimed, past and remaining gender roles. The mirror shows that times and images are changing, and at the same time reminds us that, because of those living legacies, even today, innumerable women still enjoy considerably less freedom than men. I'll briefly discuss three aspects: female stature, female talents, and the gendered spatial order imagined in proverbs.

The superior size and superior physical strength of men and the fact that women are the birth-givers have had far-reaching consequences for the gender history of mankind. In many ways the male sex has been able to make effective use of its physical size and power for its own gain and benefit. But the fear is there, underneath.

Physical stature plays a role in power relations, probably because of the simple fact that, literally, smaller people have to "look up" to, and behaviour

researchers have argued that taller people may impress simply because of their physical height. Most women and all young children are physically smaller than adult men, and thus often literally looked down upon. In quite some proverbs women and children are equally considered to be “minors”. Tall women, then, seem to breach the dominant norm of ideal gender stature by their sheer size. The idea that women ought to be physically smaller than their husbands is often explicitly expressed:

My misfortune is bearable, the man said, and married a small wife. (Frisian)

Of women, misfortune and gherkins, the smallest are always the best.
(Hungarian)

Women and sardines, the smaller the better. (Spanish)

Women and sardines: pick the small ones. (Portuguese, Brazil/Spanish, Argentina)

A wife and a plough handle are best when shorter than the man. (Oromo)

A housewife likes a small pot; a husband likes a small wife. (Khiongtha)

In proverbs, a woman who is physically taller than her partner goes against the social norm and is considered far from being ideal. When a man is not the tall strong person he is supposed to be, there are plenty of comforting proverbs, especially in Africa, arguing that his smallness does not undo his superiority vis-à-vis women. He is in charge anyway:

A man, even a man of small size, will be called great in comparison to women.
(Arabic, Lebanon)

Even small, a man is old. (Minyanka)

Respect for old age, and especially the prestige of old men, as formulated in the above Minyanka proverb, is thus extended to the superiority of the male sex as such. Males always come first, even as young boys—goes the argument. For safety reasons it is sometimes explicitly stressed that by their very nature men cannot be belittled in life. In the words of an Ashanti saying: “There are no small men”, because each man is “higher” than any woman *ex officio*. The Ngbaka who live in the Central African Republic have taken the small stature problem encountered by males so seriously that they have invented several reassuring proverbial metaphors:

A small string binds a big parcel.

A small squirrel can lift up a big nut.

The small hawk can carry off a big chick.

The small string refers to a small man, whereas the big parcel represents a tall woman. It argues and justifies that a small man can marry a tall woman without difficulty. As the reverse is no common situation, the couple's physical "gender imbalance" has to be made up for by a convincing argument. The "tallness" of the parcel also refers metaphorically to any superior qualities the woman might possibly own and the man possibly not. All three messages argue that a short husband can marry a huge woman without any risk, because he will stay in power, according to the established rule that the smallest of the strong (i.e. male) is always more powerful than the tallest of the weak.

This idea is also expressed in the Ikwere proverb: "Whatever the size of the woman, it's the man who mounts her."

Talents

The theme of impressive female appearance not only holds for physical stature but also applies figuratively. It has preoccupied proverbs enormously. In large numbers they refer to the imminent threat of female power, a power that needs to be conjured and controlled. Two strategies are being developed. Proverbs either belittle and deny female qualities or they openly express fear of its destructive effects. Thus, an abundance of proverbs simply declare that women have no bright mind. Whether referred to as brains, as understanding, sense, wisdom, intelligence or knowledge, all such qualities in women are widely scorned, if they are not actually declared non-existent right away. Women's verbal qualities are either disparaged as talkativeness, chattering, twittering, cackling and so forth—whereas men's talk is praised—or they are warned against her destructive words as sharp as destructive swords.

The principal rule for ideal women is never to reveal that they do have power, knowledge, and other extraordinary mental or artistic abilities. A wife in particular should not exhibit her talents and qualities (except in the domain of housekeeping

and childcare), and she should certainly refrain from openly having the upper hand over her husband, unless she wants to ridicule him in public, thus provoking his anger, and, consequently, risking violence or divorce. Earthly pomp is the prerogative of men, or, as expressed in a Russian proverb: “A smart woman gives the man glory.” Especially in the West (where ever more women have actually started wearing trousers in the past century), proverbs use trousers as a metaphor for the male roles and domains. The more smart women feel tempted to put on “male clothes”, the more men are warned against the undesirable consequences of this undesirable inclination:

Each of us a trouser-leg, said the wife, and she took the whole pair of trousers.
(Frisian)

Where the wife wears the trousers, the husband changes diapers.
(Letzeburgish)

A sensible woman leaves her husband the trousers. (German/Dutch)

Where the wife wears trousers, the Devil is the lord of the house. (German)

Woman is smart in distinguishing her skirt from his trousers. (Scottish, UK)

The cunning wife makes her husband her apron. (English, UK)

When the wife wears the pants, the husband rocks the child. (Ladino)

If your petticoat fits you well, do not try to put on your husband’s pants.
(Creole, Martinique)

There are many more examples. In Italian, it is said.: “Where woman wears the trousers and man the apron things turn out badly” (Italian). Badly for whom?. Using “the trousers” as a metaphor, a Fon proverb literally equates anatomy with destiny: “A woman in trousers, what is dangling inside?” Reluctance vis-à-vis the very idea of woman’s knowledge and talents is expressed without the slightest reserve, in Chinese, for example: “A woman should never be outstanding or irregular: her face should not be too pretty, nor her words too clever or her work too good.” The message is simply that men do not like their wife to be cleverer than them. Mediocrity scores as a highly recommendable female quality, especially from a husband’s perspective, but even if she is admittedly clever, a woman’s destiny is not to follow other than the prescribed female roles:

If too clever a woman gets married, she does not succeed. (Twi)

A mule that whinnies and a woman that talks Latin never come to any good.
(English, USA)

Women's wisdom destroys houses. (Russian)

When a woman has no talents, she is already doing very well. (Chinese)

Knowledge

Knowledge is power, and knowledge is riches; knowledge is no burden, but a lack of knowledge is darker than the night. With knowledge, you are never lost. This is a summary of messages about knowledge to be found in all the corners of the globe. Those who have knowledge are more prestigious, and they usually have more authority and privileges than those who lack knowledge. Everywhere proverbs stress the great importance and impact of knowledge, learning, and wisdom:

The road to wisdom begins with the alphabet. (Japanese)

Learning is a treasure that follows its owner everywhere. (Chinese)

Learning has no enemy but ignorance. (English, USA)

Learning is better than goods. (Arabic, Morocco)

Learning is wealth that cannot be stolen. (Philippino)

First learn, then form opinions. (Hebrew)

Not to know is bad, not to want to know is worse. (Wolof)

It is all the more revealing then to discover that in fact proverbs shout their hardest in denying women this precious good, and preventing them from having access to it. The same strategies apply. The first one is to belittle women's intellectual capacities as much as possible. Thus, an abundance of proverbs simply declares that women have no bright mind. Whether referred to as brains, as understanding, sense, wisdom, intelligence or knowledge, all such qualities in women are widely scorned or disparaged, if they are not actually declared non-existent right away:

Virtuous is a woman without knowledge. (Chinese, Taiwan)

A woman's sense is wrong sense. (Telugu)

All a woman's intelligence is her home; if she leaves it, she will be worthless.

(Kurdish)

Women ask questions, men give the answers. (Arabic)

A woman's intellect is in her heels. [i.e. very limited] (Lezgi)

The wisdom of a woman is wonderful to hear. [Ironic] (English, UK)

The wisest of women still is the greatest of fools. (Dutch/Yiddish)

A wise woman is twice a fool. (English, USA)

The second strategy is, again, to present intelligent and knowledgeable women as a frightening destructive force with disastrous effects, and men are told to take heed already in some of the oldest known sources: "Woman's intelligence can cause a catastrophe" (Sanskrit). In the large bulk of proverbs about the issue, men are advised to prefer mediocre wives to smart ones: "An educated woman and too salty a soup are both unappetizing" is a German observation. A woman without learning or knowledge is more devoted to housekeeping. Moreover, lack of knowledge brings more chances of their being submissive, modest, and more easily controlled. The choice should not be too difficult:

Women's striving for knowledge and for success in the world is no positive quality. Instead they are reminded that for them virtue is the priority:

Men should set knowledge before virtue, women virtue before knowledge.
(German)

History is being made but household duties are neglected (Burmese)

If, in spite of all warnings, a woman does become publicly successful, this will bring her nothing but bad luck. A North American proverb expresses this dramatically: "A woman's fame is the tomb of her happiness." Schooling and knowledge means growing big feet which means no husband. Especially in European proverbs this is an issue. Fathers are warned that their daughters should not have too much intellectual baggage. Somewhat sadly, a Ladino father worries about his daughter's future thus: "May you be lucky, my daughter, because knowledge does not help you much." Apparently big feet are a problem. A small woman has usually small feet; both small women and small feet seem to be considered more attractive than size large or extra large.

Large female feet are not only literally regarded as a sexual turn-off but, when referred to in proverbs, they usually stand for something else. Metaphorically women's small feet indicate "the right measure" in marital relationships. In general, women that look vulnerable seem to have more sex appeal to men than strong looking females, as female vulnerability confirms the established gender hierarchy. The "right measure" of female feet presented in proverbs equates with a relationship on an unequal footing. The Sena who live in Malawi and Mozambique warn against the danger of big female feet, in a proverb with several variants:

Never marry a woman with bigger feet than your own.

Don't marry the one with the big feet, because she is your fellow-male.

Look for someone who has short feet, because one who has long feet is your fellow-male.

No doubt such a relationship would complicate a husband's life and should therefore be prevented from happening. The Sena explanation is that "man is superior to woman"; therefore, when looking for a wife, he must choose one over whom he can exercise his authority.¹ Recently, I quoted the Sena proverb that inspired the title of my newest book in Beijing, in a discussion with two proverb specialists at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. One colleague smiled and said that in Chinese a similar proverb exists: "The woman with the long feet ends up alone in a room." Ending up alone in a room is considered to be the fate of a talented woman, as she will not succeed in finding a husband. In Chinese culture long feet in females are not only pejorative figuratively; in the past the feet have also physically been shortened for reasons of beautifying.

There are other references associating the size of feet (and shoes) with competence, e.g. in India there is a Telegu saying in which young women are warned not to develop their feet: "If a girl develops long feet, she will be in trouble after marriage".² Or in Hebrew: "I do not desire a shoe that is larger than my foot." The apparent male aversion to women with bigger feet reflects a deep-seated fear of losing control. Given the fact that, usually, women have shorter feet than men,

¹ In J.T. Milimo, *Bantu Wisdom*. Lusaka 1972: 16.

² Personal information: Sanjukta Gupta

proverbs gratefully taken the image on as a convincing metaphor of how things ought to be arranged in gender relationships.

Women who are so knowledgeable and self-confident that they dare comment, are sharply disapproved of, especially in proverbs from the West—do they talk back more than women in other continents?

A man doesn't want a woman smarter than he is. (English, USA)

A dog is smarter than a woman. It does not bark against his boss.

(Russian)

A hen that crows and a woman who knows Latin never come to a good end.

(German/Spanish)

In Europe knowledge and education were in the past referred to as “Latin”, traditionally the language of higher learning. “A woman who knows Latin will never find a husband nor come to a good end” is a centuries old proverb found all over Europe, recommending that women be excluded from the academic bulwark. Some variants compare a “learned” woman to a crowing hen: both deny their due role.

The European message stressing that a woman who knows Latin turns out badly has crossed the ocean, not only to the United States, but also as part of the cultural baggage of Portuguese and Spanish colonizers. It took root in a number of countries in South America, in literally the same form as well as in other variants such as:

A learned woman is a lost woman. (Portuguese/Spanish)

The glory of man is knowledge, but the glory of woman is to renounce knowledge. (Portuguese, Brazil)

Giving a woman the opportunity to gain knowledge was (and often still is) considered risky. All those warnings and recommendations against women's education obviously aim at keeping a balance considered precarious.

Many proverbs testify to women's desire for knowledge, often qualified as “curiosity”. In the Western part of the world this questionable disposition has almost automatically been connected with the story of Eve whose curiosity brought her into contact with the devil, or was it her wickedness that did so? Both features in the story

have been stereotypically projected on to the whole of womankind. In order to control the dangers of women's longing for knowledge, this bad inclination should be suppressed right from the beginning: "Little girls shouldn't ask questions" (English, USA). Women's thirst for knowledge is also reprovably stressed in proverbs from other continents:

A curious woman is capable of up-turning the rainbow to find out what's underneath. Chinese)

Woman, thy name is curiosity. (English, USA)

Of course, the more knowledge is inaccessible, the more intriguing and desirable it becomes. Clearly, proverbs see a woman's being intelligent, knowledgeable and clever as a serious problem, or, in Russian: "Good luck for the stupid, bad luck for the smart."

Silent majority?

As much as they have been under-represented or excluded from the public arena and from public functions in most societies, women's views are significantly under-represented in the proverbs I collected from oral sources, as well as from written sources such as collections and dictionaries—even though I have especially looked for them and asked for them. It has always been difficult to study women's past inner thoughts and personal ideas in a systematic way, as relatively little written material is available. Proverbs, then, are no exception to the rule of human history in which women's views and voices, especially the controversial ones, are a relatively recent part of the public space. It is even likely that the silent majority of our foremothers have formally complied with the dominant social order, which the majority of proverbs refer to as the "natural" order. Paradoxically, however, and against all odds, the enormous impact and power of women is strikingly present in remarkably persistent ways in all those proverbs which are desperately trying to control them.

Globalization

In proverbs, women are mainly seen as dependent on men economically, and men on women, sexually. Proverbs about love and sex reflect hierarchical relations, sexual stereotypes and double gender standards in which, at first sight, women are mainly presented as objects and victims of male power. According to a number of proverbs, masculinity, and being a “real” man, can only mean to “possess” a woman, or preferably women, and not the reverse. That is why love is so often presented as a frightening emotion, a dark pit, a sea you drown in, and so forth.

There is, however, another side to this story. Not only women are “objects”; in certain respects men are objects too, not only because they allow themselves to be manipulated by their own desire and therefore by women, but also by their being in want of a mother. Without being aware of it, a man often sees his wife as an extension of his mother and she may intuitively respond to this need by treating him as her child. Such a wife mothers and protects (and even risks suffocating) her husband no less than his own mother did. She thus continues the spoiling praise and comforting adoration his mother had surrounded him with right from his birth as a male child. Possibly such spoilt boys remain immature for their whole lives, and their wives risk to see such husbands as mere children within their power, even though these “children” hold important positions in society as soon as they leave the house. Many proverbs spread the message how much men are, or expect to be, spoilt, and how extremely dependent they are on their wives’ cares, in spite of or thanks to all their efforts of belittling those same wives.

“Being born a woman means a wasted life”, an anonymous Bhutanese rural woman observed resignedly in a TV reportage about development issues. Internalised gender messages had apparently convinced her that there was no way out of the hierarchy—exactly the message found in proverbs. She had given up the idea of change during her lifetime. Numerous women all over the world, however, are enjoying today more freedoms than their grandmothers, and even their mothers could have dreamt of. Successful women have more education, and more prestigious jobs than women ever had in previous generations. They set an inspiring example to their sisters, friends, and daughters. In Bengali, there is a recent popular slogan

encouraging education for women: “Give me an educated mother, and I’ll give you a prosperous nation.”³

Nonetheless, there are also societies and cultures in which the changing roles of women are being regarded as a betrayal of “tradition” or religion.⁴ In such societies, the boundaries between the local and the outside worlds are strictly guarded, for example, in fundamentalist circles in Islam which categorically reject globalization, and more specifically Westernization, contesting its customs, artistic creations, ideas about love, life and death, philosophy, and especially women’s rights. The resistance against globalization seems to be notably structured around female identity: “so constant has been the typology of women’s roles and status for fifteen centuries, that female identity remains at the center of Muslim society”, in the words of El-Khayat, a psychiatrist and anthropologist from Morocco.⁵ However, there are other Islamic views where signs of hybridization can be found: Mullah Mohammed Khatami was quoted in the *Herald Tribune* (10 Dec. 1997) thus: “Our era is an era of preponderance of Western Culture and Civilization, whose understanding is imperative. Islamic nations would succeed in moving forward only if they utilize the positive scientific, technological and social accomplishments of Western Civilization, a stage we must inevitably go through to reach the future.”

Violations of the boundaries of deeply held systems of norms (and interests) are still often considered taboo. This may explain the, sometimes violent, opposition to changing traditions. Globalization provokes not only new debates but also a hardening of local perspectives on gender differences.

A cross-cultural analysis of gender traditions contributes to a greater awareness of legacies we either still accept as “natural” or, on the contrary, believe we have left far behind us. Such legacies are gradually disappearing, and partly they have indeed disappeared, but there is quite some baggage we still carry along, often even without questioning whether we agree or not, brainwashed as we are by a varied “traditional” gender chorus that seems at times alien but at times also strangely familiar.

Today, from certain perspectives, many of the proverbs discussed in this talk may look disturbing, and their messages quite “politically incorrect”. But it would be a no less regrettable than simply short-sighted reaction to reject or suppress, or even

³ Oral source: Manzoor Elahee (India).

⁴ Today in many communities around the globe (groups of) women are still associated with “tradition” whereas men usually allow themselves to profit from “modernity”.

⁵ 1997, Quoted in *Rawoo Report on Globalisation 2000*.

cancel those cross-cultural ideas from the past, without further reflection.⁶ It is absolutely important to be aware of the sexist sentiments expressed in proverbs, because they have formed, and still form, part of the daily conversation in society after society, thus modelling people's gendered legacies, and their identities. Negative messages about women easily reverberate in the minds of male policy makers, and risk undercutting progressive legislation.⁷ In order to change formerly accepted mentalities we first need to get back to the underlying thoughts and beliefs, as the Southern African women's groups' example below will aptly illustrate.

Language and culture are not static, in spite of what the proverbs would want us to believe. Ideas about femininity and masculinity are: located in both men and women, these ideas are changing along with peoples' positions, experience, and awareness of their own situation. In this respect, the re-quotation of proverbs about women definitely has a consciousness raising function—as women's groups in Southern Africa confirmed in enthusiast letters to the publisher, after they had worked with one of my earlier books analysing proverbs from all over Africa south of the Sahara.⁸ The women reported that in their meetings, they had discussed the proverbs about women's phases of life, basics of life, power, etc. They found the proverbs intriguing, both in the way they mirrored their own internalised ideas about "being a woman", and in the ways straightforward male dominance was revealed. After intense discussions, they had started turning the messages in the proverbs upside down, by replacing in each statement the word "man" by the word "woman", and vice-versa. This appeared to be a hilarious exercise that provoked roars of laughter, but also served as a great eye-opener vis-à-vis their own situation. Their practical strategy was not one of avoiding or boycotting the legacies of oral tradition, but to re-appropriate those legacies. They succeeded not only in exposing the implicit meanings, but also to subvert those very meanings. Thus, for them, looking into

⁶ Recently specialists of Chinese proverbs in Beijing told me that new editions of Chinese proverb collections and dictionaries will be 'cleaned' from traditional proverbs with negative messages about gender. If ideas are no longer in print, it does not mean, unfortunately, that we have also got them out of our minds. It would also be unfortunate for the traditional material to be no longer available for comparative study, and also, practically speaking, it would prevent us from holding up the mirror of the past to ourselves as a reminder of where we have come from, locally, regionally, and globally.

⁷ In a review of my African proverbs collection in *Revue de Littérature Comparée*, 1993 (1), Liz Gunner, for example, mentioned a Ugandan speaker at a recent conference in Germany who "complained bitterly about the negative pull of proverbs embedded in the minds of male Ugandan policy makers. He claimed, both in sorrow and in anger, that proverbs maligning women whispered stubbornly in the subconscious of the most progressive of men working under the new order." p193.

⁸ "Source of All Evil." *African Proverbs and Sayings About Women*, published in Nairobi in 1991 and in Johannesburg in 1992.

proverbs became a way of looking back to “the tradition”, and a way to look forward to gender relations in a changing world. This is a refreshingly relevant way of reflecting on cultural legacies.

Proverbs are part of humanity’s eventful cultural history, and we have to understand its lessons, before deciding which part of our various “traditions” we want to pass on to our children and grandchildren. Thanks to globalisation cultures have become more intertwined than ever before, and we have more access to and more information about each other’s traditions than ever before. We know more about our respective cultural differences, and we know more about what we have in common. Now that globalisation and migration interact with local realities in many ways, positively and negatively, it becomes highly rewarding to re-examine our various traditions together—in mixed (gender and culture) company.⁹

As humans originating from widely different cultures across the world, we are still quite unfamiliar with each other, but in today’s world we have come to meet in unexpected ways and unthought-of places, talking about our old traditions in new ways. Thanks to globalization, a cosmopolitan conversation has begun in the family house of humanity, a new conversation rooted in what people already had in common: their male or female bodies, and their basic human needs shared within living memory.

In proverbs, we can conclude, two main views of men as well as women are constantly echoed. Men can be inexorable tyrants and shameless profiteers, but also insecure, fearful beings. Women are presented as lamentable victims, but also extremely powerful humans, powerful in their appealing beauty, awesome (pro-)creativity, vigorous working capacity, and strong will. Both contradictory gender views are made visible in proverbs, one openly and directly, and the other mostly hidden between the lines. Another conclusion is that the world imagined in proverbs

⁹ Such dialogues reveal no less effectively what we globally share than what divides us. There is a worldwide growing awareness of the irrationality on which most existing gender dichotomies have been based, an awareness that has become more confident than ever before. Still, the Mecca of equal opportunities looks far away for those who look into the global human rights situation. In the late 1990s the Japanese Soka Gakkai Peace Committee organised a Travelling Gender and Human Rights Exhibition, which also came to Europe. This exhibition presented, and provided statistics and photographs to underscore its argument that in virtually all societies women continue to confront discrimination as women: their labour is rewarded at an average of 40 percent less than for the same job performed by a man. Women do about two-thirds of the world’s work and produce, process and market three-fifth of the world’s food; they receive one-tenth of the world’s income, and own less than one-hundredth of the world’s property. Nevertheless, it must be stressed that everywhere in the world human rights discussions have made a difference. In the majority of countries laws have been or are being created to protect women’s rights and to prevent violence against women, and equal opportunities become ever more self-evident globally.

is changing rapidly in some respects, and slowly but surely in other respects, thanks to the ongoing integration of male and female roles and domains.

How far have we progressed along the road towards cosmopolitan citizenship? The outcome of our comparative efforts might serve as an enlightening beacon for future gender orientation. In order to define where we want to go, and where we do not want to go, as men and women today, we first of all need to know where we come from. Finally, let me share with you my favourite proverb which is Tibetan: “A hundred male and a hundred female qualities make a perfect human being.”

About the author:

Mineke Schipper is professor of Intercultural Literary Studies at the University of Leiden in The Netherlands.

She is the author of numerous books including *Imagining Insiders. Africa and the Question of Belonging* (1999) and *Unheard Words. Women and Literature in Africa, The Arab World, Asia, The Caribbean, and Latin America* (1985). She has also published three novels. Her most recent book *Never Marry a Woman with Big Feet. Proverbs about Women from Around the World* (Yale University Press 2004) has been translated into many languages, and appeared most recently in Turkish as *Erkek Acı Çeker Kadının Ruhu Duymaz. Dünya dillerinden atasözleriyle kadınlar* (NTV 2010).