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A comparative Paremiological analysis of sexism prevalent in select Proverbs of Assamese and Mizo Language.

Bhuyan, Debashish ^a, Narah, Niyamika ^b

^a University of Hyderabad, Hyderabad, India

^b The English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad, India

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Abstract

Nothing defines culture as distinctly as language, and the element of language that best encapsulates a society's values and beliefs is its proverbs. When examining the sociolinguistic behavior, the variations between the doctrine of languages vary from one language to another, specifically in the domain of language, culture, and gender, they are closely intertwined and they inherently form each other's meaning. Proverbs, known as the gems of a language, are not only an important part of a language but also a "window" through which one can observe the cultural facets of a community. This paper attempts to make a comparative study of proverbs of Assamese and Mizo language with the theoretical aid of both semiotic and pragmatic approaches in the study of proverbs; also known as Proverb studies or Paremiology. It is hoped that the discussion will facilitate deeper insights into the linguistic constraints and dehumanization of women through the study of proverbs in the Mizo and Assamese languages. The analysis of the proverbs is rooted primarily in descriptive analysis augmented by theories and ideas related to language and gender. In addition to the theoretical framework, we incorporate cross-cultural contrastive research methods to analyze proverbs from both languages.

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1. Introduction

Paremiology is the study of the origin and development of peremies i.e. proverbs, phrases, folks, riddles, and weather sayings (Durco, 2015). Some of the important works of this emerging field of study include Trench's *On the Lessons in Proverbs* (1853), Taylor's *The Proverb* (1931), Röhrich & Mieder's *Sprichwort* (1977), and Mieder's *Proverbs. A Handbook* (2004). The latest works of this field lay a special emphasis on the relation between theory and

practice in the study of proverbs. Moreover, there is a persistent debate amongst the scholars over whether research should proceed in the direction of making a catalog of universal proverbs encompassing the subterranean essence and thematic overlap across cultures or if such a pursuit will eventually overlook cultural differences. This created a gulf between scholars who promoted theories of proverb comprehension and interpretation (Honeck and Temple, 1994; Honeck & Welge 1997; Temple & Honeck, 1999; Honeck, Sowry & Voegtle, 1978; Lakoff & Turner, 1989; Gibbs, Colston & Johnson, 1996a, 1996b; Sullivan & Sweetser, 2010) and scholars who promoted folkloric studies of proverbs (Arewa & Dundes, 1964; Bauman & McCabe, 1970; Mieder, 1982). Over the years these proverb scholars have delineated the traditional nature of proverbs as “items of folklore, including their common use in recurring verbal performances” (see, e.g., Firth, 1926; Taylor, 1950; Mieder, 1996; among many others). Historically the origins of folklore and proverbs are indistinguishable as these are sourceless and non-literary and arise in “recurring performances” Abrahams’ (1969: 106). Now, proverbs are associated with a particular language community. This paper adopts Eckert’s (1989) concept of “communities of practice” which is a comparative approach as it encourages the association of proverbs of a particular linguistic group to another hinting at the “dialectal, sociolectal” features of proverbs. Our approach, which is aligned with Eckert’s formulations, is a two-pronged one. First, it attempts to present a catalog of the most used sexist proverbs through a careful examination of both primary and secondary texts. Instead of a vague generalization, we put this catalog to experimentation through the framework of Paremiological minimum. Once we establish these familiar proverbs, which are still in use both implicitly and explicitly in the current speech acts of Assamese and Mizo language, we then analyze these proverbs with the sociolinguistic insights drawn from the areas of feminism and gender studies. Henceforth, we engage a group of informants from the districts of Kamrup, Golaghat, Jorhat, Champai, Aizwal, and Lunglei with multiple questionnaires to gain insights into the current status, usage of these gender-biased proverbs and also attempt to understand the psychological aspects associated with the propagation of these proverbs.

2. Literature Review

Proverbs are culture-specific and difficult to define. But as a working definition for this essay, we found Meider’s definition fairly astute when he says "A proverb is a short, generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed, and memorable form and which is handed down from generation to generation" (Mieder, 2004, p. 3). Etymologically, proverbs are known to be brief, pithy, stable, figurative, colorful, formulaic sayings expressed succinctly and in a way that makes them easy to remember (The Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs, 2004: ix). According to Neal R. Norrick, proverbs constitute a complete utterance or a speech act. Inferring from this one must also take into consideration the subtle but crucial difference between proverbs and idioms in order to avoid mixing up the two into one homogenous entity. Although it must be acknowledged that the similarities far outweigh the differences, we can still identify the points of departure in terms of meaning through some specific markers. Generally speaking, proverbs are shorter in comparison to idioms (Mieder, 2004:2) and display randomness of structural execution in the transmission of its truth claims so long as the message gets across (Turkyilmaz, 2015; Basgoz,

2006:87). These ‘truth claims’, based on the social events, lived experiences, wisdom, ethics, regimes of discipline, traditions, and customs of a particular community and nation-state at large (Bascom, 1954: 333-349), evoke multiple scenarios which are coterminous with a range of events and situations. Proverbs in this way act as a medium of transmission of values or as Yung-O biq (1986) said, can be regarded as “the linguistic crystallization of ancestral wisdom”. Idioms on the other hand are more structured, conceptual, and used as word templates (Zeynel Hayran, 2017) or as substitutes for phrases or binomials.

Proverbs play an integral part in propagating traditional knowledge systems, discourses, and wisdom which are derived primarily from folklores. Proverbs make complex regimes of knowledge of a culture accessible and memorable through the use of resourceful structures of poetic language. The use of rhyme in proverbs not only embellishes and encourages a performative stance but also “exploits and enhances the sensory information” (Tsur, 1996: 55-87). However, these discourses are replete with abstractions and dogmas which enhance the position of men through the politics of exclusion and marginalization of women. We emphasize at the outset that we do not dismiss folk wisdom altogether as constitutive of the patriarchal bias. Surely, folklores and proverbs are indispensable repositories of cultural wisdom. We are inclined towards highlighting the transmission of certain stereotypical myths relating to women through the use of proverbs.

To come back again to the definition of proverbs given by Mieder as “metaphorical, fixed and memorizable”, our paper attempts a comparative study of the way the metaphorical nature of proverbs in the Mizo and Assamese language aids in the transmission of fixed, stereotypical ideas and cultural metaphors about women and how these patriarchal truth claims propagate certain myths about women thus linguistically submerging their identity (Lakoff, 1975). This not only curbs women’s expressive potential but also systematically severs them from participating in the power relations of the society (Foucault, 1982). A sexist language is marked by the irrelevant, unnecessary, and exploitative distinction between sexes (Braggin, 1981). The location of gender bias in language defines and dehumanizes individuals simultaneously (Bosmajian, pp. 305-313). Since language is mostly skewed in favor of men (Dale Spender, 1990), women find themselves relegated to an inferior position. Assamese language, claims Hemanga Dutta (2008), shares similar patriarchal bias as it promotes gender inequalities and blatant sexism. In a questionnaire prepared by Dutta, a significant number of informants were asked to translate select English sentences to Assamese. The purpose of this experimentation was to find if the informants used male or female lexicon in the process of translation. The resultant data of this experimentation showed predominant use of masculine terms even in the referral of sex-indefinite determinants.

The Mizo society too displays gender inequalities and demarcation of gender roles through the use of language as a medium. Mizo society is impeded with more or less abundant trails of sexist lexicons registered in its language. Sexist registers of the language encourage and exhibit discrimination on the basis of gender. The Mizo society is known for its "egalitarian" way of life. Nevertheless, the societal construct of Mizoram has not always been like this. There have been many changes throughout the ages, and the culture and society have undergone many manifestations. Tracing back to its historical time frame, Mizo society was a

strongly patriarchal society, which it still is, but it is more relaxed in the present day as compared to its historical epoch. Though the patriarchal embodiment still remains.

2.1 Research questions

This study endeavors to investigate the following research questions:

1. To examine the recurrent and familiar gender-biased proverbs through the framework of Paremiological minimum of proverbs related to women as subjects.
2. To do a comparative study of the gender-biased proverbs of Mizo and Assamese language: What are the underlying patterns of the politics of representation of women inherent in the use of proverbs across the two cultures?
3. To investigate the fixity and recurrence of these proverbs in new forms: Do these gender-biased proverbs still hold a strong ideological grip over the collective psyche of the Assamese and Mizo people? If yes, then have these proverbs acquired new forms?

3. Materials and Method

Our demographic attempts have been limited to a small list of proverbs made available to not more than 48 informants, 24 representatives each from both languages. The prior selection of the small list of proverbs from the Assamese and Mizo language was based on extensive research of both canonical and popular literary texts, folklore, and oral traditions the language. Aware of this random and generalized nature of the selection we conducted an experiment motivated by the concept of “Paremiological minimum” initiated by Y. Permjakov which is also known as the proverbial minimum, that is the number of proverbs an adult is expected to be familiar with. We proceeded with a sociological Enquete by preparing a list of proverbs with the beginnings to which the following informants of the respective language were asked to add the missing part of the proverb. The informants were carefully investigated keeping in mind the cultural and linguistic differences that could be effaced with the presumption of a homogenous identity of the informers who were considered as the representatives of their particular language. Under this limitation, we executed our experimentation and were fairly surprised with the results. Taking necessary hints from Cermak’s essay on the issues of reliability and problems of the Enquete approach, especially when we take into consideration the aspects of linearity of speech, we provided the informants with another copy where they were given a context-specific example related to the respective proverbs structured in a way to aid the informants in the identification of the original proverb.

This questionnaire for the Assamese language representatives consisted of proverbs collected from P.R. Gurdon’s erudite collection of Assamese proverbs in the book “Some Assamese Proverbs”. Gurdon classified the proverbs into four sections with characteristic subheadings. We have sampled a few of his proverbs from the fourth section of the book with the heading “Proverbs relating to social and moral subjects, religious customs and popular superstitions”. And the questionnaire for the Mizo language representatives consisted of

proverbs collected from the oral tradition of folklore, poetry, and general usage. Here is the selected list of proverbs that we provided on the questionnaire:

3.1 Assamese Proverbs

a. Assamese recipe for managing a wife

কটাৰি ধৰাবা শিলে, তিৰোতা বাবা কিলে ।

Katari dharaba shile, tirota baba kile.

Whet your knife on the grindstone.

Sway your wife with blows. (P. R. Gurdon, 1896)

As the title indicates this proverb provides a recipe to manage women through physical means. This is a clear discourse on domestic violence. This proverb indicates a cultural sanction to normalize violence incurred on women. Domestic violence is one of the most prevalent and discreet forms of violence in India. It transcends regional boundaries and its attendant socio-cultural differences in terms of race, culture, class, and religion (Kapoor, 2000).

b. How things are tested

ঘোৰাক চিনি কাণ

তিৰিক চিনি ঠানত

খুৰক চিনি শালত ।

Ghorak chini kanat,

Tirik chini thanat,

Khurak chini shalat.

A horse is known by his ears,

A woman in times of adversity,

And a razor on a whetstone. (P. R. Gurdon, 1896)

This proverb is a discourse on the virtue of women and how it should be put to constant trials and tests from a patriarchal standpoint. According to this proverb, a women's virtuosity can be put to test during adversity. Notwithstanding the fact that the virtue of a human being can be gouged in general in adverse situations, this proverb specifically addresses the female counterpart. This is a continuation of the myth of Sita's Fire test which was sanctioned by Rama. Sutapa Choudhary rightly says that this incident has exerted a powerful influence on the collective psyche by propagating stereotypes about the 'eternal woman' who is "silent, submissive, sacrificial, and selfless" (Choudhary, 2013).

c. Childless Woman.

জাৰ নায় কেছুৱা বুড়াকে নছুৱা ।

Jar nai kechhuwa burake nachhua.

She who doesn't have a baby should keep the old entertained. Although this proverb has a jolly undertone, suggesting the remedy of humor as consolation for childless women. Yet, it also verges towards the absurd in that it contains a hidden strain of sexism under the garb of sympathy. It neatly delineates the role of women in the house. It's a tacit reminder to the woman not to dwell in her sadness for too long and resume her role as a caretaker of the family. The social regulation of grief in the case of women certainly poses some important questions. Is caretaking the sole responsibility of women? Is it ethical to require of woman to do household chores while she is in the phase of mourning?

d. Father

বাপুর গাত কাঁহনি লাগিল।

Bapur gat barhani lagil.

The broom has touched father's body!

The broom is portrayed as a dirty object and hence not to be touched by the patriarchal figure of the house. It also has a metaphorical association with adverse circumstances which befalls the male figure. Now, on the literal level, this doesn't amount to much but can be considered a mere trifle in the daily events of life. But if we probe deeper, the unclean broom can be associated with the impurity of the women. From the perspective of material feminism, this broom is an actant in the sense that it is used by women to clean the house. The dirt here offends the male figure and threatens his universe of order and cleanliness. The word "Bapu" is used to venerate an elder male figure.

e. Water Sprite

খাল খানি জসিনৌ চপাই ললে।

By digging a drain (near your house)
you have brought the evil spirit closer.

In this proverb the evil spirit is gendered.

3.2 Mizo Proverbs

f. 'Hmeichhe finin tuikhur ral a kai lo'

Meaning: The intelligence or wisdom of a woman does not go beyond Tuikhur....
Reference: 'Tuikhur' here refers to the place where women in the past would go to fetch water for their families. As women in the past were treated inferior to men, all the family decisions and administration were in the hands of men, women were not regarded as wise. When the Welsh missionaries introduced education in Mizoram in 1894, men were only allowed to attend but women were excluded from it.

g. *'Hmeichhe vau loh leh vau voh loh chu an pawng tulh tulh'*

Meaning: a woman who is not tamed and a field that likewise cannot be cleared and is difficult to control.

Reference: The reference is made to an inanimate object, specifying the untamed nature of an unkempt field. As the field becomes more unkempt, harder it is to maintain. So it goes for a woman. A woman who is not tamed by her superior becomes more rustic in nature. Therefore, inflicting control and discipline on a woman is necessary in order to maintain control over her.

h. *'Hmeichhia leh chakai in sakhua an nei lo'*

Meaning: A woman and a crab do not have a religion.

Reference: Here, the reference is made again to an animate object (an animal) to indicate the statistical position of a woman, implying that an animal does not belong to a religion, nor does a woman. This is to belittle a woman and subjugate her to a level where a woman herself should understand her low position in society. This also implies that a woman must follow her husband's religion without considering her interest or feelings.

i. *'Hmeichhia leh pal chhia chu a thlak theih'*

Meaning: A woman and a broken fence can be changed.

Reference: The source of this saying comes before Christianity. Men had the belief that just as a broken fence could be repaired easily, so could their wives. This indicated the extreme patriarchal mindset of men towards women and specifically to their wives. This showed the vulnerability of women in society and exposed the extreme patriarchal construct of that society in the earlier preceding years.

j. *'Hmeichhia thu thu ni suh chakai sa sa ni suh'*

Meaning: A woman's word is not worth anything, as the meat of a crab.

Reference: Here, it clearly shows how men regarded women in terms of the value of words. In all aspects of life, men were clearly believed to be more authoritative, and women were regarded as the opposite. Again, the reference to a crab's meat is to the tasteless nature of the meat, as the meat of a crab is not regarded as real meat. This particularly shows how men regarded women's words as distasteful and insipid.

k. *'Hmeichhia leh uipui chu lo rum lungawi mai mai rawh se'*

Meaning: Let a woman and a dog grumble

Reference: A woman's unhappiness is compared to a dog's grumbling. According to this proverb, her utterances and grievances should not be paid attention to as she will be contented sooner or later. When a dog growls and grumbles, if someone gives him a morsel of food, the dog immediately forgets and becomes contented, and the same goes for a woman, without any special treatment required. So much so, no attention can be paid to a woman's unhappiness as she will be contented sooner or later.

These proverbs highlight underlying patterns of sexist slurs towards women. The thematic, as well as the schematic conceptual framework, unifies these proverbs across cultures. The experiment is not an extension of Matti Kuusi's emphatic call for an international paremiological minimum, which, if carried out, suggests Kuusi, would produce a list of familiar proverbial wisdom (Kuusi, 1985: 22-28). Our analysis aligns more with Mokijenko's position, who was skeptical of this homogenization and instead suggests a more inclusive reconsideration of proverbs while taking into account the socio-cultural setup (Mokijenko, 2012: 83f). The framework of our study provides the necessary balance between a working paremiological minimum and the socio-cultural differences of the two languages. We seek to grasp the peculiarities of the proverbs of both the languages, their variations which are context-specific while at the same time underscoring the universal patterns which transcend causal and cultural patterns of a specific locale (Tilly, 1984, p. 82).

Once the informants had a good look at the list of proverbs, we proceeded further with a new set of questions to get a better understanding of the observed material of the first questionnaire. This catalog of questions was structured not only to produce empirical data but also aimed at gathering information about the psychological aspects related to the propagation and interpretation of the proverbs (Gibbs & Nayak, 1989; Gibbs & O'Brien, 1990). Here is the list of questions asked in the second questionnaire:

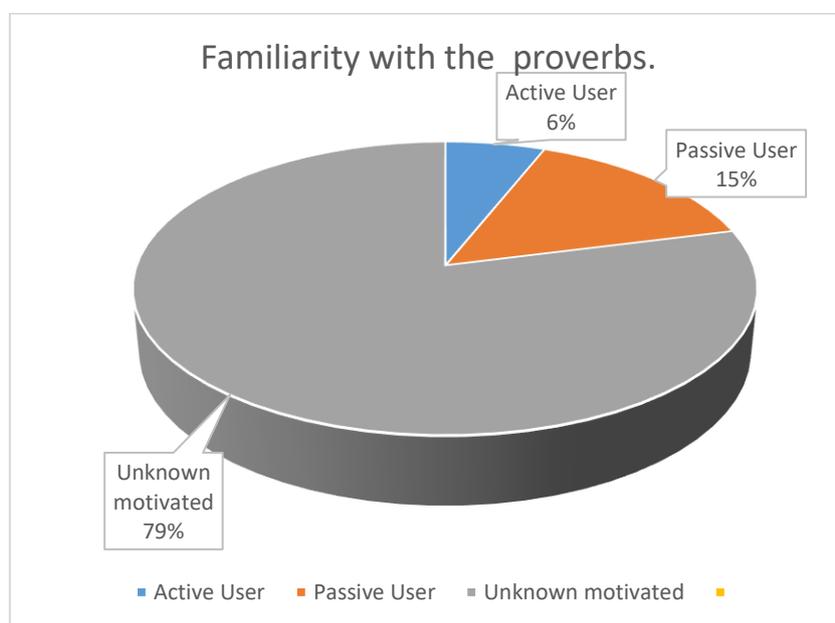
1. What is your familiarity with the given proverbs and how did you acquire them?
2. How did you associate the proverbs figuratively with the context-specific examples provided for your aid?
3. How often do you use these proverbs and in what contexts?
4. Could you identify the underlying sexist strain in these proverbs?

4. Results and Discussion

There were 48 respondents (25 men and 23 women) who belonged to the districts Kamrup, Golaghat, Jorhat, Champai, Aizwal, and Lunglei in the states of Assam and Mizoram. We called out people from different age groups, socio-economic backgrounds and gender. This array of people included a 70-year-old to a 12-year-old. We didn't include genders other than male and female due to the specificity of the issue at hand. Although we agree that this is a potential gap in research and offers exciting challenges for further research. Based on the results of the questionnaire four types of responses from the informants have been formed regarding the familiarity with the proverbs. From both the camp of representatives, only 6% of people

were observed to be active users of these gender-biased proverbs. These respondents were comparatively older than the rest. The rationale given by these actives verged on the traditional aspect of proverbs as they believed that these proverbs propagated fixed discourses of truth that are passed down from generations. The 15% of passive users were partly unaware of the gender-biasedness of the select proverbs yet hinted at a vague sense of familiarity with these proverbs. This section of people is largely comprised of middle-aged people. The last piece of the pie given below comprised 79% of people who were completely unaware of the given proverbs but when contextualized with concrete examples they were able to grasp the underlying themes of gender bias. This section of people consisted mostly of people belonging to the age group 18-35. They were able to identify thematic patterns of sexism like domestication of women, stereotypes of the “eternal women”, taming of women through physical violence and attributes, gendered spaces, and exclusion of women, silencing of the voice of the women. An example of this kind of research was done by V. N. Shoutina (2009, quoting T. P. Nikitina), in which she discussed the change of style and content in the 12th and 13th-century proverbs of France.

In order to find semantic equivalence between proverbs of two different languages, a paremiographer requires linguistic, functional, and literary abilities and use concepts like semantic analogy, semantic variation. This goes on to show that a contrastive analysis has its own challenges. This simple experiment with informants through the use of carefully scripted questionnaires goes on to show that the thematic concerns in proverbs, in our case sexism, are identifiable across linguistic and cultural borders.



Pie Chart: Familiarity and use of sexist proverbs.

It is a common belief that proverbs provide advice and wisdom about personal and public matters through the social norms and beliefs presented. The present study, however,

found that not all proverbs offer good advice, as there are some that carry within them gender discrimination and stereotypes. It was found that although women are not under-represented in all Mizo or Assamese proverbs, over half of the proverbs describing women are about their physical attributes, implying that a woman's life was completely dependent on Men. While men are treated as superiors and the controllers of their inferiors (women) solely because of their designated gender. Through the Proverbs, we could witness the predicaments of women as they were portrayed and expected to be submissive to men. These traditional images and stereotypes, nevertheless, do not accurately represent the status of women in Assam or Mizoram.

5. Conclusions

The survey, although limited in its scope, highlights various intuitive evaluations of respondents hinting at future research through the frameworks of cognitive linguistics. Future research will also have to take into account the real linguistic competence, the linguistic correctness, and also to examine the accuracy of the understanding of proverbs through cognitive tests. Although the method of comparative/contrastive Paremiology is still in its nascent stages, it can be a powerful tool in future research to reveal dominant cultural values and ideological representations across cultures provided the Paremiographer is well equipped to interpret the cultural nuances. The experimentation carried out in this research to highlight gender-biased proverbs across two languages, although limited in scope, throws light on the predominance of masculine interpretations and underscores the hierarchal power dynamics in the propagation of myths, traditional dogmas relating to women. Since proverbs are rhetorical devices and recurrent in the lexical domain of a particular culture through various transmutation, we encourage more studies like these to unearth the fixities of these ideological constructs in our languages.

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AUTHOR BIODATA

Debashish Bhuyan received his master's degree in English Literature from the University of Hyderabad, Hyderabad, India in 2019. He is now interested in the interdisciplinary field of Environmental Humanities.

Niyamika Narah received her master's degree in English Literature from the English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad, India. She is now working in the domain of Ecofeminism.

Appendix

A sample of Questionnaire format for the Mizo representatives.

- 1) Here are some proverbs In Mizo, tick against the Box if you find them Sexist against women. If not please add your remarks or response in one or two lines in the space given below the question and state your reason.

“Hmeichhia Thu thu ni suh, Chakai sa san i suh’

What is your familiarity with the given proverbs and how did you acquire them?
How did you associate the proverbs figuratively with the context-specific examples provided for your aid?
How often do you use these proverbs and in what contexts?
Could you identify the underlying sexist strain in these proverbs?

“Hmeichhia leh uite a chul nel peih peih”

What is your familiarity with the given proverbs and how did you acquire them?
How did you associate the proverbs figuratively with the context-specific examples provided for your aid?
How often do you use these proverbs and in what contexts?
Could you identify the underlying sexist strain in these proverbs?

“Hmeichhia leh chakai in sakhua an nei lo”

What is your familiarity with the given proverbs and how did you acquire them?
How did you associate the proverbs figuratively with the context-specific examples provided for your aid?
How often do you use these proverbs and in what contexts?
Could you identify the underlying sexist strain in these proverbs?

“Hmeichhia leh pal chu a thlak theih ”

What is your familiarity with the given proverbs and how did you acquire them?
How did you associate the proverbs figuratively with the context-specific examples provided for your aid?
How often do you use these proverbs and in what contexts?
Could you identify the underlying sexist strain in these proverbs?

“Hmeichhie finin tuikhur ral a kai lo”

What is your familiarity with the given proverbs and how did you acquire them?
How did you associate the proverbs figuratively with the context-specific examples provided for your aid?
How often do you use these proverbs and in what contexts?
Could you identify the underlying sexist strain in these proverbs?

“ Hmeichhia leh uipui lo rum lungawi mai mai rawh se”

What is your familiarity with the given proverbs and how did you acquire them?
How did you associate the proverbs figuratively with the context-specific examples provided for your aid?
How often do you use these proverbs and in what contexts?
Could you identify the underlying sexist strain in these proverbs?

“ Vau vaih loh leh hmeichhia vau loh chu an pong tulh tulh”

What is your familiarity with the given proverbs and how did you acquire them?

How did you associate the proverbs figuratively with the context-specific examples provided for your aid?

How often do you use these proverbs and in what contexts?

Could you identify the underlying sexist strain in these proverbs?

The above Questionnaire was distributed amongst 10 (Mizo) boys and girls.

Based on the above Survey, here is the report:

Number of Questionnaires distributed : 24

Total number of participants : 24

Male : 11

Female : 13

No of participants	No of male	No of female	No of participants who found the proverb sexist	No of participants who did not find the proverb sexist
24	11	13	21	3