



East African Journal of Arts and Social Sciences

eajass.eanso.org

Volume 8, Issue 4, 2025

Print ISSN: 2707-4277 | Online ISSN: 2707-4285

Title DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37284/2707-4285>



EAST AFRICAN
NATURE &
SCIENCE
ORGANIZATION

Original Article

Embracing Diversity: A Novel Approach to Deconstructing Gender Stereotyped Traits through Gender Atypical Kiswahili Children's Storybooks

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Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajass.8.4.3863>

Date Published: ABSTRACT

21 October 2025

Keywords:

*Gender-Atypical
Storybooks,
Gender Stereotypes,
Gender Traits.*

This paper explores the potential of using gender atypical Kiswahili children's storybooks as a powerful tool to deconstruct traditional, ingrained gender stereotyped traits among children. In recent years, there has been a growing concern about the negative impact of gender stereotyped traits on children's development and self-perception. Traditional societal gender schemata often reinforce stereotypical traits for boys and girls from an early age, limiting their understanding of the diverse range of personalities, qualities, and characteristics that individuals can possess. Therefore, this paper adopts a novel approach that utilises gender atypical Kiswahili storybooks to challenge and reshape these preconceived notions about gender traits. The study explores how children construct gender traits when exposed to gender atypical Kiswahili children's storybooks. Bandura's social learning theory formed the theoretical framework on which the study was underpinned. Data was generated using drawings with grade three children from a purposively selected school in Trans-Nzoia County, Kenya. The findings of this study revealed that when children were exposed to gender-atypical Kiswahili children's stories, more girls compared to boys changed from constructing gender stereotyped traits to gender-atypical traits. The findings also revealed that even though some participants conformed to gender stereotyped traits, there was a change in their perspectives to adopt gender-atypical traits. This paper, therefore, suggests that exposure of children to gender-atypical Kiswahili children's stories could deconstruct gender stereotyped traits during their early stages of socialisation. The paper recommends that Ministries of Education, Curriculum Development, and book publishers should develop guidelines and a policy framework to promote the authorship and publication of gender atypical Kiswahili children's storybooks to enable children to construct gender traits in a neutral and non-sexist manner. This will enable children to question and redefine their understanding of gender, thus fostering a more diverse, inclusive, and open-minded generation.

APA CITATION

Ekiru, S. E. (2025). Embracing Diversity: A Novel Approach to Deconstructing Gender Stereotyped Traits through Gender Atypical Kiswahili Children's Storybooks. *East African Journal of Arts and Social Sciences*, 8(4), 113-131. <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajass.8.4.3844>

CHICAGO CITATION

Ekiru, Simon Esekun. 2025. "Embracing Diversity: A Novel Approach to Deconstructing Gender Stereotyped Traits through Gender Atypical Kiswahili Children's Storybooks." *East African Journal of Arts and Social Sciences* 8 (4), 113-131. <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajass.8.4.3844>.

HARVARD CITATION

Ekiru, S. E. (2025), "Embracing Diversity: A Novel Approach to Deconstructing Gender Stereotyped Traits through Gender Atypical Kiswahili Children's Storybooks", *East African Journal of Arts and Social Sciences*, 8(4), pp. 113-131. doi: 10.37284/eajass.8.4.3844

IEEE CITATION

S. E., Ekiru "Embracing Diversity: A Novel Approach to Deconstructing Gender Stereotyped Traits through Gender Atypical Kiswahili Children's Storybooks", *EAJASS*, vol. 8, no. 4, pp. 113-131, Oct. 2025.

MLA CITATION

Ekiru, Simon Esekun. "Embracing Diversity: A Novel Approach to Deconstructing Gender Stereotyped Traits through Gender Atypical Kiswahili Children's Storybooks". *East African Journal of Arts and Social Sciences*, Vol. 8, no. 4, Oct. 2025, pp. 113-131, doi:10.37284/eajass.8.4.3844

INTRODUCTION

Gender stereotypes have long influenced the way children perceive themselves and others, shaping their behaviours, interests, and aspirations (Master, 2021; Archer, 2022). They often reinforce binary gender traits and expectations, limiting children's scope of imagination and self-identification (Bertrand, 2020; Howansky et. al., 2021). It is in the light of the negative consequences that gender stereotyped traits pose on children that this paper seeks to deconstruct gender stereotyped traits among children at the early stages of their socialisation using gender atypical Kiswahili storybooks. Gender atypical storybooks are storybooks that challenge gender stereotypes by presenting narratives that depict characters with diverse traits that transcend and defy conventional boundaries grounded in hegemonic societal gender schemata (Abad and Pruden, 2013; Ekiru, 2019). By engaging children with these kinds of books, children are exposed to alternative perspectives that encourage them to have critical reflection and open-mindedness (Kneeskern & Reeder, 2022).

The role of books in shaping children's perspectives cannot be understated. Books play a significant role in the socialisation process of children (Lewis,

2022). This is because, like other human beings, children acquire a lot of knowledge from books, which enables them to form certain patterns of behaviours, perceptions, thinking, and beliefs. Fox (1993) says that everything human beings read constructs them and makes them who they are, enabling them to present the image of themselves as girls and women and as boys and men. Mpesha (1996, 2007) and Mbuthia (2018) also affirm that children's literature is not just a record of social events but also an instrument for socialisation. Several studies have shown that reading culture and skills are significant to the child's cognitive development (Senawati et. al., 2021; Prasetya et. al., 2022).

In Summary, this paper offers an innovative approach to leverage gender atypical children's storybooks as a catalyst for change, to deconstruct gender stereotyped traits ingrained in young minds. The paper is organised into the following sections: Literature review, theoretical framework, research design and methodology, findings and discussion, conclusion, and recommendations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Existing research highlights the influence of gender-atypical storybooks on children's cognitive

development and social awareness (Chung & Huang, 2021; Liwag, Ramirez, & Santiago, 2022). Studies (e.g., Bonus, Lynch, Nathanson, & Watts, 2022; Santiago, Santos, Ramirez, & Liwag, 2023) have shown that exposure of children to non-traditional narratives can enhance empathy, reduce prejudice, and promote a more diverse and inclusive understanding of gender identity. By subverting stereotypes and showcasing diverse representations, these books offer a platform for exploring individuality and embracing diversity among children.

The Role of Storybooks in Shaping Children's Gender Traits

According to O'Brien and Huston (1985), young children begin to form stereotypes about their gender traits by the age of 2-3 years. They exhibit knowledge of gender traits through their choice of toys and gender roles (e.g., Cherney, Herper, & Winter, 2006). Children also display their knowledge at the age of 4-5 years through their choice of friends (e.g., Blakemore & Centers, 2005). At this age, they prefer to choose friends of their own sex because they feel they share similar physical and behavioural traits. For example, boys will prefer to choose other boys as playmates when playing games like soccer because they think they are stronger, unlike girls, who are perceived to be weak (Toçi & Aliu, 2013). Similarly, girls are likely to play with other girls with dolls, or cooking toys, in fear than play soccer, which they consider a 'rough and tumble' game. In their view, soccer can only be played by boys who are strong, alert, and coordinated, while dolls and cooking toys are suitable for girls because girls are tiny, soft, and delicate (Liu, 2006).

Social learning theorists have also argued that children adopt typical gender traits due to parental or peers' influence, either intentionally or unintentionally (Gunderson, Ramirez, Levine, & Beilock, 2012). Parents and peers tend to reinforce certain gender 'appropriate behaviours in their children (Morrow, 2006; Freeman, 2007; Lamb,

2010). However, a study conducted by Hagerman et al. (2002) has shown that at the age of 6-5 years, children experiment with different roles to see what it feels like to be a girl or a boy, and to expand the traditional definitions of female and male. Even though these children try to explore different gender atypical traits, parents, teachers, or even their peers will always monitor their behaviour and shape them to conform to the traditional stereotyped traits (Freeman, 2007).

Even though the above studies have demonstrated how young children construct gender traits, we lack evidence of an empirical study that has demonstrated how children's storybooks shape children's construction of their gender traits. Studies that have been done on gender traits in children's storybooks (e.g., Oskamp, Kaufman, & Wolterbeek, 1996; Evans & David, 2000; Bevik & Liljegren, 2010; Koenig, Eagly, Mitchell, & Ristikari, 2011; Foyld, 2012) were limited to traits that authors of children's books attributed to male and female characters in their stories.

Weitzman, Eifler, Hokada, and Ross's (1972) study is considered a classical study on gender depiction in children's picture books (Worland, 2008; Foyld, 2012). In their study, they investigated gender portrayal in children's books. Their findings revealed that gender was portrayed in a stereotyped manner in children's picture books. Female characters (mothers) were depicted as passive, while the male characters were active. Fathers in the stories demonstrated dominancy in the outside activities, while mothers were confined to indoor or domestic activities. Men also demonstrated competent leadership skills, while women remained subject to the male authorities in the stories. Furthermore, men/male characters were depicted as strong and heroes who could rescue people in the stories, while women/female characters were weak and hence always looked to men for rescue and protection. These findings were supported by later studies (e.g., Oskamp, Kaufman & Wolterbeek,

1996; Kortenhaus & Demarest, 1993; Evans & David, 2000; McCabe et al., 2011).

Even though many studies tend to agree with the above findings, Anderson and Hamilton (2005) presented different findings. Their study examined the depiction of male characters (fathers) in children's picture books. The results indicated that fathers were depicted as unaffectionate and uninvolved in the daily care of children, while mothers were portrayed as affectionate and responsible in the care of children. Fathers relied so much on mothers in nurturing their children.

Evans and David's (2000) study formed important evaluation guidelines for the study of gender traits in children's literature (Foyld, 2012). Using Bem's (1981) theory of gender schema and Richardson's (1993), Evans and Davies examined elementary readers and developed guidelines for the evaluation of gender traits in children's literature. They developed a list of 16 gender traits, 8 masculine and 8 feminine (p. 260). For each trait, they included a definition for clarification. The list of characteristics is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Shows 16 Lists of Masculine and Feminine Traits

Personality Traits	Definition
Masculine Traits	
Adventurous	Actively exploring the environment, be it real or imaginary.
Aggressive	Actions and motives with intent to hurt or frighten; imparts hostile feelings
Argumentative	Belligerent; verbally disagreeable with another
Assertive	Taking charge of a situation, making plans, and issuing instructions
Competitive	Challenging to win over another physically or intellectually
Decisive	Quick to consider options/situation and make up mind
Risk-taker	Willing to take a chance on personal safety or reputation to achieve a goal
Self-reliant	Can accomplish tasks or handle situations alone with confidence
Feminine traits	
Affectionate	Openly expressing warm feelings; hugging, touching, holding.
Emotionally expressive	Allowing feelings to show, including temper tantrums, crying, or laughing
Impetuous	Quick to act without thinking of the consequences; impulsive
Nurturing	Actively caring and aiding another's development, be it physically or emotionally.
Panicky	Reacting to the situation with hysteria, crying, shouting and running
Passive	Following another's lead and not being active in a situation
Tender	Handling someone with gentle sensitivity and consideration
Understanding	Being able to see and comprehend a situation from another person's perspective, showing empathy

Adopted from Evans and Davies (2000, p.261)

Other studies that have also examined gender traits representation in children's literature (e.g., Bevik & Liljegren, 2010; Eagly & Mladinic, 2011) pointed out that female and male characters were depicted in a stereotypical manner similar to what was found by Evans and David (ibid). Females were portrayed as emotional, nurturing, and sympathetic, while the males were painted as ambitious, confident, and aggressive.

Scholars have shown concern over the likely impact of gender stereotyping in depicting male and female characters in children's books. For example, Kortenhaus & Demarest (1993) state that this could have a long-term influence on children's conception of behaviours that are socially accepted and how males and females are supposed to act in society. McCabe et al. (2011) also assert that stereotypical gender traits in the depiction of characters can also damage early children's understanding of gender.

These types of books can legitimise the dominance of the patriarchal system in their development of gender identity, hence promote poor self-image in children, especially girls (Aina & Cameron, 2011; Floyd, 2012).

Theoretical Framework

Social learning is a theory that was developed by Albert Bandura from his famous experiment called 'The bobo doll' (Bandura, et.al., 1961). This theory explains that human beings learn their behaviour from the environment through the process referred to as observational learning. Children observe the individuals around them demonstrating certain types of behaviours. Individuals who are observed are called models. These models could be parents, teachers, celebrities, characters in children's television and storybooks, other siblings, their peer group, and friends (Nhundu, 2007). These models exhibit feminine and masculine behaviours, which children observe and emulate. Children pay close attention to some of these models and learn their behaviour. Later on, they may copy or imitate the behaviour they have observed (Bandura, 1986). McLeod (2016) argues that children may imitate their models' behaviours regardless of whether those behaviours are perceived by their society to be 'gender appropriate' or not. However, he maintains that there is a high chance that children will likely reproduce the behaviour that society perceives as suitable for their sex. McLeod (cited) points out that social learning theory is built on three major tenets.

First, sexual similarities between the child and the model play a significant role in social learning. The child is likely to pay more attention to people it identifies as like itself and imitate their behaviours. These are models that are of the same sex as the child.

Second, the responses of the people around the child toward an imitated behaviour will also influence their imitation and internalisation of those behaviours. The people around will either reinforce (encourage) or punish (discourage) the child to

imitate their models. If a child imitates a model's behaviour and the consequences are rewarding or encouraging, the child is likely to continue performing the behaviour.

Third, social identification will also determine whether the child will imitate the behaviours of their models. This is known as vicarious reinforcement (Bandura, Adams, & Beyer, 1977; McLeod, 2016). This relates to affection for specific models that possess qualities seen as rewarding. Children will have several models with whom they identify. The motivation of children to identify with a particular model is that the model has a quality that the child would like to possess.

In this study, these three tenets were useful because they provided a base to understand why children identified themselves with characters of their sexual similarity and were reinforced to imitate their traits and personalities, as exhibited in the findings of this study.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The paper was grounded on the interpretivist paradigm with a qualitative research approach. It adopted the participatory visual methodologies design (PVM). Data generation techniques were the drawings and discussions with grade three children from a purposively selected primary school. Drawing method was suitable because it is the simplest method of data generation in social science research for children and other individuals in the society who might have difficulties in expressing themselves due to language difficulties or other constraints that encompasses the topic of discussion (Mitchell, Theron, Stuart, Smith, & Campbell, 2011; Mitchell, De Lange, & Moletsane, 2017).

The school was purposively selected because it had functioning reading classes from grades one to three, which were properly monitored and supervised by the teachers. The school also had a library which had enough Kiswahili children's storybooks that learners read during their reading lessons and at their leisure time. The participants of

the study were fifteen grade three children (ten girls and five boys) of the selected primary school. The study incorporated all fifteen children because they willingly expressed interest in participating in the study. The study also engaged children at this grade based on their age, which ranges from 8 to 10 years. This choice was influenced by Kohlberg's (1966) ideas of cognitive development; that at this age, those children would have formed a stable gender identity and sexuality and start adopting gender-stereotyped behaviours, activities, preferences, etc., exhibited to them by either the environment or social models (Gooden & Gooden, 2001; Clarke & Stermac, 2011). Their development of gender identities occurs alongside the desire and passion to read and re-read their favourite storybooks (Bender and Leone, 1989).

The paper sought to answer the question: How do children construct gender traits when exposed to gender atypical Kiswahili storybooks? Ten gender atypical Kiswahili children's storybooks that were purposively selected were used in the study. The selected Kiswahili children's storybooks had characters who displayed gender atypical traits. These storybooks were: *Sungura Mjanja* (Islam, 2003), *Siku za Juma 1a* (Nyakeri, 2006), *Atoke Asitoke?* (Mwangi, 2009), *Mama Mwizi* (Mutuku, 2014), *Kombo Arudi Shule* (Lewela, 2008), *Zawadi ya Rangi* (Karan, 2005), *Vitendo vya Jamila* (Mogambi, 2006), *Tuzo ya Baba* (Zawadi, 2013), and *Furaha ya Arope* (Walibora, 2013).

The participants were given drawing prompts during the pre-exposure evaluation to make drawings of work and activities they like doing at home and school. They also drew their future career goals and aspirations. After the drawings, each participant gave an oral explanation for each drawing he/she had made. Thereafter, we exposed the participants to read gender atypical Kiswahili children's storybooks for a period of 4 weeks. After the exposure to reading gender atypical Kiswahili children's storybooks, a post-exposure evaluation was administered to the participants. The

participants were advised to use pseudonyms in their drawings to conceal their true names and identities. Data review and analysis were done thematically and were concurrent with data generation.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

After doing a thematic analysis of the pre-exposure and post-exposure drawings and their explanations, the study revealed that children, through their drawings, constructed gender traits in two ways: There were those who conformed to gender stereotyped traits and those who adopted gender-atypical traits. Therefore, this section presents study findings and discussion under two sub-themes: Conforming to gender stereotyped traits and adoption of gender-atypical traits.

Conforming to Gender Stereotyped Traits

The findings in this study showed that most participants constructed gender traits that are traditionally associated with their gender. For example, the data showed that most boys view themselves as being strong, courageous, fast, ambitious, aggressive, and intelligent. This was even manifested by the choice of gender roles and gender plays during the pre- and post-exposure evaluation. On the other hand, girls made drawings that depicted them having gender traits such as being soft, affectionate, submissive, fearful, caring, and slow, weak, and dependent, among others. These findings correspond with the 16 masculine and feminine stereotyped traits that were developed by Evans and Davies (2000) after their review of Children's literature books. The masculine traits were adventurous, argumentative, competitive, aggressive, risk-taking, assertive, and decisive. The feminine traits were affectionate, passive, impetuous, emotionally expressive, tender, panicky, nurturing, and understanding. These findings by Evans and Davies (cited) were supported by a later study conducted by McCabe et al (2011), which showed that female characters were portrayed as passive while the male characters were active. This

could perhaps explain why our participants preferred specific gender roles and gender plays.

Scholars (Eccles et al., 1995; Stockard & McGee, 1990) have argued that gender identity dictates a child's preference for gender roles and behaviour over any other factors, such as the perceived job importance, difficulty, and salary, among others. Data from our participants shows that most girls preferred doing domestic chores such as washing utensils, fetching water, watering flowers, washing

clothes, cleaning the environment, looking after the siblings, and sweeping the house. During their oral and written explanations, most of them asserted that the rationale behind their preference in doing the above tasks was their desire to be smart in a clean environment. Looking smart would make them attractive. Some girls expressed their desire to be policewomen because female policewomen look smart and attractive in their attractive attire as depicted in the storybook, *Mama Mwizi* (Mutuku, 2014).

Researcher: How was she in the story?

Shantel: She was smart.

(Oral explanation, Shantel, post-exposure, p.2, {18/7/2018})

Researcher: What can you say about the policewoman in the story?

Rehema: She looked beautiful in a police uniform.

Researcher: Would you wish to be like her when you grow up?

Rehema: Yes.

(Oral explanation, Rehema, post-exposure, p.2, {18/7/2018})

Even though the policewoman in the story *Mama Mwizi* (Mutuku, 2014) exhibited traits such as being tough and intelligent, the two girls admired her physical attractiveness and beauty. This finding is consistent with Weitzman, Eifler, Hokada, & Ross ' (1972) argument that girls like associating themselves with physical attractiveness as opposed to boys who have a preference for intellectual attractiveness. An explanation for this could emerge from the way society treats boys and girls regarding their gender traits. According to Chick, Heilman-Houser, and Hunter (2002), the caregivers of a child (e.g., parents, relatives, friends, teachers, etc.) influence how the child develops gender traits. The findings in their study revealed that gender-

stereotyped traits were typically reinforced when the caregivers praised girls for their clothing, hairstyles, neatness, and helping behaviours. This was contrary to the boys who were applauded for their strength, physical skill, size, and academic achievements. Perhaps this could be the reason why girls in the current study presented drawings of themselves that were very colourful, decorated with colours, wearing beautiful dresses, and having beautiful hairstyles, as opposed to the boys' participants, who presented dull drawings even though they depicted themselves engaging in careers perceived to be prestigious. A good example was the post-exposure drawing by participant Brown on future career goals and aspirations.



(Source: Primary Data, Year: 2018)

Brown presented a drawing of himself in a helicopter as a pilot. However, he did not decorate his plane or himself with colours, even though I had provided him with a packet of colored pencils. According to him, what was important was the prestige associated with the career of the pilot and the intellectual connotations that accompany it.

The findings in this study indicated that choices made by girls' participants in pursuing careers such as doctors and teachers were greatly influenced by the desire to help other people in society. This was evident in the written explanations on their drawing prompts regarding gender roles.

'I would like to be a doctor so that I can help different types of sick people.'

(Written explanation, Maureen, Drawing caption 3 on gender roles: Future career goals)

'When I grow up, I would like to be a teacher so that I can teach my students the way I was taught.'

(Written explanation, Shantel, Drawing caption 7 on gender roles: Future career goals)

'I am a doctor. I am helping the sick people so that they cannot die early.'

(Written explanation, Annete, Drawing caption 11 on gender roles: Future career goals)

'I would like to be a doctor when I complete school so that I can help sick people, including my father.'

(Written explanation, Fatuma, Drawing caption 13 on gender roles: Future career goals)

(Source: Primary Data, Year: 2018)

This therefore suggests that girl participants in the current study, just like those in prior studies (Chick, Heilman-Houser & Hunter, 2002; Nhundu, 2007), displayed the helping behaviour which is perceived to be a feminine trait. From our class discussions, after reading Kiswahili children's storybooks, most girls seemed to support the 'helping behaviours' that were displayed by girl characters in the stories, such as Nanjala and Jamila. Nanjala, for example,

was a girl character in the story *Kombo Arudi Shule* (Lewela, 2008) who helped her friend Kombo (a boy) to return to school when his father tried to make him drop out of school. Jamila was also a female character in the story *Vitendo vya Jamila* (Mogambi, 2006) who mobilised her friends to help her clean their village and school environments. When I asked the participants moral lessons that they had learnt from the story, the answer I received

from almost all the girls was “we should always be helpful to others.” This even inspired some of the girls, such as Princess and Rehema, who testified in

their post-exposure evaluation that they wanted to be like Nanjala and Jamila in the stories.

Researcher: What else can you say about Nanjala?

Rehema: She was caring and determined to help her friend come back to school.

Researcher: Did she succeed?

Rehema: Yes

Researcher: What did you learn from that story?

Rehema: We should always be concerned and ready to help our friends.

Researcher: Would you wish to be like Nanjala?

Rehema: Yes, I would like to be like her.

(Oral explanation, Rehema, post-exposure, p.2, {18/7/2018})

Princess: Yes. I saw in a story.

Researcher: Which story?

Princess: ‘Vitendo Vya Jamila’

Researcher: When you saw Jamila, a small girl like you, cleaning and conserving the environment, how did you feel?

Princess: I felt good (smiling).

Researcher: Would you wish to be like her and do what she did, or you want to do something different from what she did?

Researcher: I would wish to be like Jamila.

(Oral explanation, Princess, post-exposure, p.2, {18/7/2018})

Other ‘feminine’ traits from the stories that inspired some of our participants, especially girls, to choose their models’ careers were the politeness of the models and the loving and caring personalities. For example, Evelyne said she wanted to be a teacher just like the teacher in the story, *Furaha ya Arope* (Walibora, 2013).

Researcher: How did she inspire you?

Evelyne: She is polite, loving, and caring.

(Oral explanation, Evelyne, post-exposure, p.2, {18/7/2018})

Regarding gender atypical play activities, most of the participants, both boys and girls, decided to conform to gender stereotyped play activities due to personality traits associated with those play activities. For example, data generated during pre- and post-exposure revealed that girls feared playing football with boys because they perceived boys to be strong, rough, fast, aggressive, and skillful players. Boys on the other side viewed girls as

weak, soft, fearful, panicky, and passive, who couldn't sustain the rough and intensive game like football. Even in their drawings, it was seen that

girls made drawings of 'girls who were playing with girls' while boys also presented drawings of 'boys who were playing with boys'.



Drawings made by girl participants, Pinky and Precious, displaying girls playing with girls.



Drawings made by boy participants, Brown and Specks, displaying boys playing with boys.

(Source: Primary Data, Year: 2018)

In their oral explanations, this is what some of my participants reported as the rationale for the above

Researcher: Do you think you can also play football with boys?

Evelyne: No

Researcher: Why?

Evelyne: They play a rough game and can also kick a hard shot at me.

(Oral explanation, Evelyne, post-exposure, p.2, {18/7/2018})

Researcher: Why are girls afraid of playing football with boys?

Specks: They are afraid of the rough games we play. They can't sustain our shots.

(Oral explanation, Specks, post-exposure, p.1, {18/7/2018})

I interrogated some of my boy participants as to why they refused to play 'girls' games. Most of them could not account for their reasons for doing so. Interestingly, when I proposed to some of them to

consider playing ‘girls’ games, they just laughed. This indicated that it was an embarrassment for a boy to play with girls or even a ‘girl’s play’. An explanation for this could be derived from societal responses towards children when they display certain behaviours. As pointed out by Thorn (1993), the label of ‘sissy’ is given to boys who avoid tough, aggressive play and those who display any ‘weaknesses through affection and tenderness. This explains the claim made by Pierre Bourdieu (1998, p.22) cited in Fowler (1999) that” ... [The] worst humiliation for a man is to be turned into a woman.” Hence, to have their gender identities as boys, they must show their aggressiveness and toughness by playing tough games like football, and of course, with boys. Through this, boys become victims of the patriarchy since they must live according to the expectations of their societies (Mutunda, 2009). Therefore, this demonstrates that societal pressure dictates who children should be and not what they would like to be. Thus, the negative external reinforcement they receive after learning an atypical behaviour inhibits their internal reinforcement to internalise or exhibit that behaviour.

Adoption of Gender-Atypical Traits

Even though the above findings showed that most of the participants conformed to gender stereotyped traits, some data from this study indicated the adoption of gender atypical traits by participants of

both genders. Data generated during post-exposure evaluation revealed that some of the girls in this study exhibited traits such as aggressiveness, being ambitious, intelligence, courageousness, and bravery. This was displayed by their choice of preferred tasks and future career goals. For example, 5 out of 10 girls who participated in this study (e.g., Annete, Maureen, Shantel, Pinky, and Rehema) preferred to do tasks like looking after the sheep, cow, and cattle. According to the context under which the study was conducted and the ethnic background of most of the participants, the task of looking after the cattle is a role for boys and men. In the Turkana community, from which most of the participants came, looking after the cattle is an important task that requires courageous and brave boys and men to undertake (Ekiru, 2023). This is because, among the Turkana community, girls and women are perceived as weak and timid; thus, their roles are limited to domestic chores that do not require mental and physical strength (Ekiru, 2019). Hence, the act of these girls to exhibit interest in doing the above tasks showed that they perceived themselves as being brave and courageous, just like boys, thus they had the power to perform those tasks. This is an indication of the influence they got from the stories of girl characters such as Arope (Walibora, 2013), who defied the societal gender stereotyped roles and looked after cattle.



A picture derived from page 1 of the storybook *Furaha ya Arope* showing Arope looking after the cattle.

This therefore suggests that the so-called 'masculine' and 'feminine' traits are human qualities and not specific to either men or women. Connell (1995), in his work, 'Masculinities', argues that masculinities are not a natural state, but a socially constructed fluid, collective gender identity. He therefore asserts that women, too, can possess and demonstrate the features of masculinity. This is evident from our findings that these girls were socialised by gender-atypical stories they read to exhibit the masculine traits that they portrayed.

Studies on children's literature have demonstrated that children's books are powerful socialising tools for young children, more particularly in their construction of gender identities. Bender and Leone (1989) reported that the development of gender identities in children occurs concurrently with the desire to read and re-read their favourite books. This occurs when children are between the ages of 8 and 10. They begin to incorporate abstract concepts, such as the concept of masculinity and femininity, into their representations (Eisenberg, Martin, & Fabes, 1996). Hence, looking at the age bracket of

the participants in the current study, most of them were between 8 and 10 years old.

Other atypical traits portrayed by girls in this study, as mentioned above, were aggressiveness and being ambitious. These were demonstrated by their choice of future career goals after being exposed to stories of female characters engaging in those careers. For example, most girls preferred to be doctors, policewomen, soldiers, and pilots. According to Nhundu (2007), the above-listed careers, over the decades, have been stereotypically associated with men. One of the most obvious reasons is that the above tasks require an individual who possesses traits such as being intelligent, aggressive, ambitious, strong, and fearless. The above traits have been linked to men as opposed to women. Therefore, this has resulted in low desire and aspiration for women to pursue those careers. However, the scenario seems different with the participants in this study after the exposure to gender-atypical storybooks. Most of them challenged the above notions embedded in the gender stereotypes. Some of the reasons that the participants gave were that they aspired to provide security and good health care for their country.

'I would like to be a doctor so that I can help different types of sick people.'

(Written explanation, Moreen, Drawing caption 4 on gender roles: Future career goals)

'When I grow up, I would like to be a police officer. In this picture, I have killed a male thief who was caught stealing a lot of properties from the people.'

(Written explanation, Shantel, Drawing caption 8 on gender roles: Future career goals)

'I am a police officer. I am arresting a male thief. He had stolen shoes, vegetables, and cassava.'

(Written explanation, Annete, Drawing caption 12 on gender roles: Future career goals)

'I have arrested a thief. She had stolen a cooking pan, a plate, and a jiko. I am a soldier.'

(Written explanation, Pinky, Drawing caption 24 on gender roles: Future career goals)

(Source: Primary Data, Year: 2018)

Regarding the participants who were boys, the findings showed that some boys who had constructed gender stereotyped traits during the pre-exposure evaluation constructed gender-atypical traits in their post-exposure evaluation. This was

evident from their choice of gender roles, such as washing utensils and cooking food. Boy participants (e.g., Mos and Pogba) preferred tasks such as washing utensils and cooking, respectively.



Drawings made by boy participants Mos and Pogba, during the post-exposure evaluation, showing them washing utensils at home.

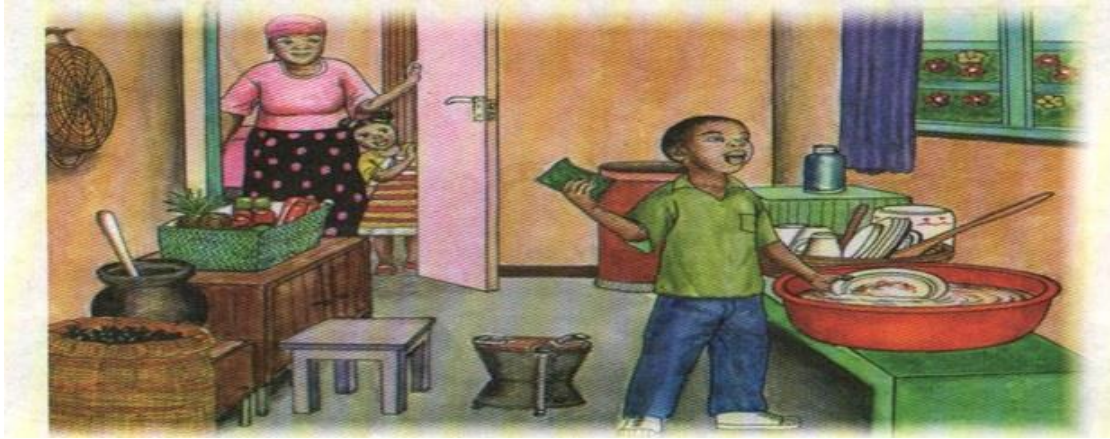
(Source: Primary Data, Year: 2018)

These tasks within the cultural context of the present study are perceived to be feminine roles done by girls and women. According to Ezenwa-Ohaeto (2015), the patriarchal system in most African communities dictates that women and girls do supportive roles in homes (e.g., domestic chores) while men do the main and important tasks of providing for the families. This means that women and girls are accustomed to doing the domestic tasks because they are and unable to engage in the 'main' tasks, and depend on men to provide for them.

Another interpretation for this could be the fact that women like smartness and attractiveness, hence they are capable of cleaning utensils and cooking more appealing and delicious meals as compared to men. One interesting scenario happened during the data generation that can support the above claim. It was during game time after we had just completed our reading session for that day. We went to the staffroom together with the class teacher to have a cup of tea. Unfortunately, we found out that the cups were dirty, so we needed them to be cleaned. We gave the boy who had accompanied us to the

staffroom to wash for us, but the teacher refused. Instead, he went ahead and sent the boy to call for us a girl who would help in washing the cup. When we asked him the rationale for his action, he said that a boy can't clean utensils well. It is better we use a girl because girls are smart.' The above sentiments and views negatively reinforce boys to associate those tasks with femininity. Therefore, those boys who attempt to engage in them become the culprits of self-police peers for showing feminine traits (Morrow, 2006).

The decision of some boys' participants to show a preference for the atypical tasks, which are usually believed to be inappropriate for the male gender, is an indication that gender stereotyped traits can be challenged among boys. The above change could be attributed to gender atypical stories that displayed the male character (Baraka) washing utensils and cooking food. In that story, Tuzo ya Baba (Zawadi, 2013), Baraka helped his mother in the kitchen as well as washing the utensils. The mother and his sister were happy and praised him for doing that work.



A Picture derived from page 13 of the storybook, *Tuzo ya Baba*, showing Baraka's mother and his younger sister, Zawadi, happily watching Baraka (a boy) washing utensils in the kitchen.

The above-mentioned participants (Mos and Pogba), during their oral explanations, testified that they were inspired by Baraka in the story to engage in those activities.

Mos: Yes, I saw Baraka cooking and washing utensils.

Researcher: Who is Baraka?

Mos: Baraka is a boy in the story we read in class.

Researcher: Were you inspired by his work?

Mos: Yes.

Researcher: Could this have motivated you to aspire to cook and wash the utensils?

Mos: Yes.

(Oral explanation, Mos, post-exposure, p.1, {18/7/2018})

Researcher: What motivated you to wash utensils?

Pogba: Baraka.

Researcher: What did Baraka do?

Pogba: Washing utensils in the kitchen while singing and dancing happily.

Pogba: Washing utensils in the kitchen while singing and dancing happily.

Researcher: When you saw a boy like you washing utensils in the kitchen, how did you feel?

Pogba: I felt good.

(Oral explanation, Pogba, post-exposure, p.1, {18/7/2018})

The External reinforcement received by Baraka from his mother in the story could have resulted in internal reinforcement in our two participants (Mos and Pogba) to imitate and perform the behaviour learned from their model in the story (Baraka). According to social learning theory (McLeod, 2016), parental reinforcement has a greater influence on the child's internalisation and replication of the model's behaviour. Mother's reinforcement, for instance, has greater power on the child's learning process. This argument is supported by the findings of a study conducted by Leaper (2000) showed that a mother's reinforcement was more likely than a father's to encourage both sons and daughters to engage in play activities. This, therefore, suggests that parent reinforcement, either physically or through characterisation in children's storybooks, enhances the ability of children to challenge gender stereotyped traits.

For the above reason, scholars (e.g., Gooden & Gooden, 2001; Lundgren & Khau, 2015) advised teachers, parents, schools, and other stakeholders in education to be careful when selecting books for children's educational and recreational use. This will save the children from exposure to biased notions and beliefs about the gender appropriate traits.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the findings of this study have demonstrated that gender-atypical Kiswahili children's storybooks can be transformative tools in challenging and deconstructing gender stereotyped traits among children. Exposure of children to gender atypical Kiswahili children's storybooks at an early stage of their socialisation offers a valuable resource for deconstructing gender stereotyped traits and promoting diverse social change in how they construct their gender identities. By incorporating diverse narratives into educational curricula and home environments, we can enable young minds to embrace diversity, challenge prejudice, and envision a more equitable future.

Through collaborative efforts between educators, parents, authors, and publishers, we can create a world where every child feels seen, heard, and valued for who they truly are.

Recommendations

Considering the above conclusions, this paper recommends that curriculum developers should infuse gender education into the curriculum to enable children to broaden their understanding of gender identities and sexuality. This can be done by the purposeful insertion of content in children's books that are gender neutral. These books can be used in schools and other learning environments as instructional materials. Secondly, curriculum developers, ministries of education, and book publishers can develop guidelines and policies on gender mainstreaming that will ensure all books written and published for children contain non-sexist notions. Lastly, the paper recommends that ministries of education should employ the use of gender atypical children's storybooks in Early Childhood Education Development (ECDE) reading programs. This will empower the minds of these young readers to question societal norms and embrace a diverse spectrum of possibilities.

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