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Gender and Sexuality Research in Kiswahili Children's Literature: A Review of Emerging Issues

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literature,
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This paper reviews emerging scholarship on gender and sexuality in Kiswahili children's literature with the aim of identifying dominant research themes, contemporary debates, and existing knowledge gaps. Using a qualitative review of published studies, the paper examines how researchers have explored issues of gender representation, gender equality, gender stereotypes, hegemonic masculinity, and the visibility of female characters in Kiswahili children's storybooks. The review demonstrates that although recent studies have increasingly challenged patriarchal constructions and advocated for more balanced gender representation, research on sexuality remains limited and fragmented. Emerging themes such as gender identity, gender-based violence, and comprehensive sexuality education are gradually attracting scholarly attention, reflecting changing social realities and the growing recognition of children's literature as a site of identity formation and socialisation. The paper argues that these developments underscore the need for more inclusive and critically informed Kiswahili children's literature that represents diverse gender experiences while promoting equality, respect, and social justice. It concludes that, despite notable progress in gender research, significant theoretical and empirical gaps remain in sexuality studies, calling for further interdisciplinary research and the development of children's literature that responds to contemporary social and educational needs.

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INTRODUCTION

For a very long time, gender and sexuality issues have been at the centre of research in literary studies (Demirhan, 2022). Literary scholars (i.e., Tsao, 2008; Epstein, 2013; Adam & Harper, 2023) who have ventured into this field of study have explored how literature shapes and reflects societal gender and sexuality values, norms, and power dynamics. In the context of children's literature, which this paper is premised on, gender and sexuality studies have in the recent past attracted attention from literary scholars (Adam & Harper, 2023). This perhaps could be attributed to a global urge to address problematic issues in gender and sexuality that emerge in children during the early years of their socialisation (Ekiru et al., 2024). Childhood is an important part of human development. It is the period in human life when cultural transmission and fixation occur and extend into adulthood (Kohlberg, 1966; Gottfredson, 1981; Eccles, 1994). Gender and sexuality are part of this culture that children learn and acquire from society through different media.

According to Fox (1993), children's literature serves as an important medium through which culture, knowledge, perceptions, behaviours, and beliefs are transmitted to children. He points out that the books which children read at an early age construct them and shape their personalities, enabling them to present the image of themselves as boys and men and as girls and women. His views are supported by recent scholars (Mpesha, 1996, 2007; Singh, 1998; Onyango, 2006; Mbuthia, 2018) who underline the fact that children's literature is an instrument of socialisation. The prevailing view in the arguments raised by the above-mentioned scholars is that gender and sex depiction in children's books contributes to the images and

perceptions children develop of their gender and sexuality.

It is in light of the above that Kiswahili scholarship in children's literature has embraced issues of gender and sexuality. This is because of global conversations surrounding gender and sexuality that continue to evolve in the academy of literary studies. As part of the broad-based literary academy, scholars in Kiswahili children's literature have joined the global quest to unravel and interrogate critical issues regarding gender and sexuality in literary works written for young audiences, which initially remained underexplored.

This paper seeks to explore studies on gender and sexuality in Kiswahili children's literature to understand the emerging issues surrounding them. Drawing from a range of literary studies, the paper aims to highlight ways in which genders and sex are portrayed, challenged, and redefined in Kiswahili children's literature. It also aims to establish the intersectionality of gender, sexuality, and culture, highlighting how these elements interact with social expectations and the development of young readers' identities. Through this review, the paper aims to illuminate the paradigm shifts in gender and sexuality in Kiswahili children's literature, providing a comprehensive analysis of the ways these issues are shaping the field and calling attention to the need for further exploration in the years to come.

The Concepts of Gender, Sex, and Sexuality

In many cases, the majority of people find it difficult to differentiate between gender and sex and hence often use them as synonyms (Lindqvist et al., 2021). Geary *et al.* (2014) clearly spelt out this confusion by pointing out that sex is physiological and

biological features that define women and men. He further emphasises that sex is inborn, where human beings are born either female or male. Moreover, Sex is typically categorised as female, male, or intersex (Mitchell, 2018). There are several pointers of biological sex, comprising gonads, sex chromosomes, internal reproductive organs, and external genitalia (American Psychological Association, 2015).

Gender is defined as behaviours, attributes, and activities that are socially constructed and associated with men and women in different societies (Lips, 2020). These characteristics entail: behaviours, roles, norms, and interpersonal relationships between men and women in a particular society. Furthermore, these characteristics vary from one society to another and can always be changed to conform to what that particular society considers appropriate for women and men (Hawkes & Buse, 2013b).

Sexuality refers to gender development in individuals of a particular sex (Cense et al., 2020). It is how human beings attach their genders to sex. It entails how men and women develop and explore their gender identity, interpersonal relationships, affection, sexual development, intimacy, and body image for themselves (Bolin et al., 2021). Lorber (1994), cited in Lorber (1996), gives the most practical analogy to elucidate the difference between gender, sex, and sexuality. This is what she says:

“In rethinking gender categories, it is important to split what is usually conflated as sex/gender or sex/sexuality/gender into three conceptually distinct categories: sex (or biology, physiology), sexuality (desire, sexual preference, sexual orientation), and gender (a social status, sometimes with sexual identity). Each is socially constructed but in different ways. Gender is an overarching category—a major social status that organizes almost all areas of social life. Therefore, bodies and sexuality are gendered; biology, physiology,

and sexuality, in contrast, do not add up to gender, which is a social institution that establishes patterns of expectations for individuals, orders the social processes of everyday life, is built into the major social organizations of society, such as the economy, ideology, the family, and politics, and is also an entity in and of itself (Lorber 1994). Gender is constructed by society; sex is inborn, where human beings are born either female or male, but gender is constructed by society.” (Lorber, 1996, p.146)

THE CONCEPT OF CHILDREN’S LITERATURE

Defining children’s literature is a bit more complicated (Barone, 2010). This complication is attributed to the broadness of the term ‘child’, which is essential in defining children’s literature. Barone also adds that the complexity of its definition could also be attributed to the audience of this literature. He gave an example of the most common definition that children’s literature is literature written for children. However, he disputes this definition by arguing that it is too shallow, as it restricts children’s literature to only being meant for a children’s audience. He gave an example of a book like *Harry Potter* (Rowling, 2007), which is appealing to adults and children’s audiences and asks if that book can be considered an adult book taken over by children or a children’s book loved by adults. Another example of this was a book called *Northern Lights* that was written by Philip Pullman. This book was sold as a book for adults in Britain and as a children’s book in the US (Mohammad, 2013).

Rice (2002) defines children’s literature as good-quality trade books that cover topics of interest and relevance to children of ages ranging from infancy to adolescence, through prose and poetry, fiction and factual. Even though this definition is helpful, its details are elusive. It is difficult to determine what a good quality book is because what is good for one person might not be good for another person.

The goodness of a book depends on the readers' interest, taste, and preference.

Madumulla (2001) emphasises age as an important factor in defining children's literature. He defines children's literature as books that are written specifically for children between 3 and 15 years old. He further stresses that these ages (3-15 years) are very important in children's social and cognitive development. Children at these ages are socialised to learn societal culture, norms, behaviours, and values. Madummula's (cited) views concur with those of Bishop (1990), who asserts that literature is a major socialising agent in children's growth and development. It informs young children about the cultures and values of their societies, the kinds of acceptable behaviours, and the importance of being a decent person in their respective societies.

According to Knowles and Malmkjær (2002), children's literature refers to any narrative that has been written and published for children. However, this definition disregards some poetry written for children and assumes that 'written for children' and 'published for children' are the same. Contrary to Knowles' and Malmkjaer's views, Wamitila (2010) argues that children's literature is not limited to narratives only but also includes novels, short stories, plays, poetry, and short forms. He also points out that children's literature is not only intended to target the children's audience, but it also targets young adults and adults who are interested in reading issues relating to children. Wamitila (cited) clearly specifies that what differentiates children's literature from youth and adult literature are themes in children's literature. The themes in children's literature revolve around childhood, even though characters in those books may be children, animals, or adults. Due to the contrasting arguments raised by the above literary scholars, Lesnik-Oberstein (1996) concluded that defining children's literature lies at the heart of its endeavour.

In this study, we define children's literature as material written and produced for the information or entertainment of children and young adults. It

comprises all fiction, non-fiction, literary and artistic genres and physical formats. The genre that this paper will be focused on is Kiswahili children's stories, which include children's novels and short stories as outlined above by Wamitila (2010).

Aspects of Kiswahili Children's Literature

Wamitila (2010) and Bakize (2014) identified certain features in Kiswahili children's literature. These features are:

- The focus of the literature is on children.
- It uses simple language that suits the language abilities of children.
- It usually has simple plots.
- Its stories always have vivid descriptions of settings or contexts.
- Stories are usually characterised by fantasy.
- Most stories are accompanied by visual illustrations, drawings, and pictures.
- They are usually short in length.
- Characters are usually children of male, female, or both genders.
- The theme is usually centred on childhood or children's daily life experiences.
- Main characters are usually the winners/heroes at the end of the stories.
- Good characters are usually rewarded or glorified while evil characters are usually punished at the end of the stories.

METHODOLOGY

This paper adopted a qualitative research approach based on the interpretivist paradigm. It is also premised on a document analysis design, which employs document analysis methods to generate and review data. Data were generated and reviewed from published journal articles, research papers, and books that explored gender and sexuality issues in

Kiswahili children's literature. Qualitative data were analysed thematically. Findings and discussions have been presented concurrently with data analysis in the various themes that are outlined in the paper.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

After doing a thematic analysis of the data that was generated by reviewing published journal articles, research papers, and books that explored gender and sexuality issues in Kiswahili Children's literature, several themes emerged. These themes are what is referred to in this paper as emerging issues. Therefore, this section presents findings and discussion under sub-themes: Gender parity, gender equality, gender stereotypes, gender equity, gender depiction and representation, masculinity and power dominance, gender-based violence, and gender identity.

Gender Depiction and Representation

Gender depictions and representation refer to how male and female characters are portrayed in the storybooks. This sub-theme emerged in Karuga's (2005), Kairu's (2005), Bakize's (2007), and Miricho's and Mbuthia's (2017) studies. For instance, Karuga's (2005) study emphasised the characterisation and how important it is to depict children's characters in a proper manner in Kiswahili children's stories. Her study was based on literary analysis of Kiswahili children's storybooks, where she analysed themes and styles that authors of Kiswahili children's storybooks use to represent both female and male characters in the stories. Her findings revealed that authors of Kiswahili children's storybooks use different themes and stylistic devices to depict female and male characters in the stories.

The study by Kairu (2005) explored realism and how literary stylistic devices are used to achieve realism in Kiswahili children's storybooks. The study employed content analysis techniques and realism theory of literature on the selected Kiswahili children's storybooks that are written by Ken

Walibora. Her findings revealed that Ken Walibora's children's storybooks reflect reality in the community life of children. The study demonstrated how community realities determine the depiction of genders in children in the stories.

Miricho and Mbuthia (2017) also explored how male and female characters are depicted in Kiswahili children's stories. Their study assessed whether there were changes in the gender depiction brought about by new trends and developments in the 21st century, such as societal female empowerment. In their findings, the girl child was found to be portrayed in a positive manner, while the boy child was portrayed negatively. A similar study to that of Miricho and Mbuthia (cited) is a study that was conducted by Bakize (2017). In his study (Bakize, 2017) explored the liberation efforts that have been employed in Swahili children's literature. He aimed to assess whether Kiswahili children's literary works embraced the global and changing social perception towards women's status in society. Using the content analysis of five selected Tanzanian Swahili children's literary works and the feminist theoretical approach, he found that the status of female characters has changed in those storybooks as compared to previous books, where they were portrayed as inferior to male characters. This is an indication that the liberation efforts, new trends, and the development in the 21st century have ignited a paradigm shift in the authorship of Kiswahili Children's literature. From the above findings, it is evident that authors depict characters in Kiswahili children's storybooks in a fair manner regardless of their genders.

Gender Parity

Gender parity refers to relative equality in terms of numbers and proportions of men and women, boys and girls, and is usually determined as the ratio of male-to-female values for a certain indicator (Jarman et al., 2022). In Kiswahili children's literature, the topic of gender parity has emerged in studies (i.e., Matundura, 2007; Ekiru, Kandagor,

Wafula, & Toboso, 2024), which explored the number of male and female characters found in Kiswahili children's storybooks. For example, Matundura's (2007) study examined whether authors of Kiswahili children's storybooks use an equal number of male and female characters in their stories. His study findings revealed that there was unequal numerical representation of male and female characters in Kiswahili children's storybooks. The results indicated that male characters outnumbered and dominated female characters in the Kiswahili children's storybooks.

On the other hand, Ekiru et al. (2024) also explored gender parity in Kiswahili children's storybooks. However, their focus was to examine whether authors' numerical representation of characters in Kiswahili children's storybooks is fair and balanced for both male and female characters, especially in Kenya, where there has been a governmental directive to all spheres of influence to embrace gender parity. This is because gender parity is one of the fundamentals of Kenya's 2010 constitution. The study adopted a quantitative research approach underpinned by descriptive statistics. Qualitative data were generated through textual analysis of 11 selected Kiswahili children's storybooks. Data was tabulated and analysed using descriptive statistics. The findings of the study revealed that there was fair and balanced numerical representation of characters in 64% of the selected Kiswahili children's storybooks. The results, therefore, indicate that the authors in those selected storybooks used an equal number of female and male characters.

Even though the above studies present contrasting findings, this paper argues that perhaps the conflicting results could be influenced by the time when these two studies were conducted. For example, Matundura's study was done in 2007 prior to the promulgation of Kenya's 2010 constitution where as Ekiru et al.'s study was conducted in 2024 after the promulgation and the implementation of Kenya's 2010 Constitution. This finding signifies that authors of Kiswahili children's storybooks have

positively embraced and heeded the government's call that aims to promote gender parity in all its spheres of influence. By giving male and female characters equal chances in terms of numerical representation, authors of Kiswahili children's storybooks demonstrate that individuals of both genders are important and therefore should be given equal chances to showcase their diverse potentials in the societal spheres of influence.

Gender Equality

Gender equality refers to the equal rights, responsibilities, opportunities, and treatment of women and men, as well as girls and boys, in all aspects of society (Smith & Sinkford, 2022). Within the context of Kiswahili children's literature, however, this theme has received relatively limited scholarly attention despite the increasing global emphasis on gender equality as articulated in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5). One notable contribution is Bakize's (2017) study on gender balance in Tanzanian Kiswahili children's literature. Employing content analysis and feminist literary theory, Bakize examined whether Swahili children's storybooks reflected global efforts toward gender mainstreaming. The study established that both male and female characters were represented in comparable social, economic, and political roles, suggesting that contemporary Kiswahili children's literature is gradually moving away from traditional gender stereotypes and embracing more equitable representations of boys and girls.

Building on this emerging theme, Ekiru's (2025) study, *Embracing Diversity: A Novel Approach to Deconstructing Gender Stereotyped Traits through Gender Atypical Kiswahili Children's Storybooks*, advances the discussion by demonstrating how children's literature can actively challenge deeply rooted gender stereotypes rather than merely represent gender balance. The study argues that storybooks featuring gender-atypical characters enable children to question conventional beliefs about masculine and feminine roles. Through such

narratives, girls are portrayed as courageous, independent, and capable of occupying leadership and professional positions traditionally reserved for men, while boys are encouraged to participate in nurturing and domestic responsibilities without fear of social stigma. Drawing on Bandura's Social Learning Theory, Ekiru (2025) contends that children acquire values, attitudes, and behaviours by observing and identifying with literary characters. Consequently, exposing young readers to gender-inclusive stories broadens their understanding of what both boys and girls can achieve and contributes to the development of more equitable perceptions of gender.

Collectively, the findings of Bakize (2017) and Ekiru (2025) demonstrate that Kiswahili children's literature is increasingly becoming an important vehicle for promoting gender equality and social transformation. While Bakize's study shows that contemporary authors are creating more balanced representations of male and female characters, Ekiru's work goes further by illustrating how literature can reshape children's attitudes and aspirations through the deliberate deconstruction of gender stereotypes. This shift has significant educational and social implications because children are introduced to values of fairness, mutual respect, and equal opportunity from an early age. As a result, gender-inclusive Kiswahili children's literature has the potential to nurture a generation that appreciates diversity, rejects discriminatory gender norms, and supports equal participation of both women and men in social, economic, and political development. These findings also underscore the need for authors, publishers, educators, and curriculum developers to produce and promote literary texts that align with contemporary goals of gender equality and inclusive education.

Gender-Based Violence (GBV)

Gender-based violence (GBV) is defined as the abuse of human rights based on gender (Ott, 2024). GBV is violence that is directed at individuals based

on their biological sex or their gender identity. It includes physical, sexual, emotional, verbal, and psychological abuse, coercion, and threats, whether in private or public life. A study conducted by the United Nations Population Fund reported that in three women, one has experienced sexual or physical violence in their lifetime (UNFPA, 2021). While most research focuses on addressing GBV violence against women, research on combating GBV among men and boys is emerging as an area of interest in research on Kiswahili Children's literature. For instance, a study conducted by Kubai and Kevogo (2024) explored GBV experienced by male characters in Kiswahili children's novels. The selected children's novels were *Nguu za Jadi* (Momanyi, 2021) and *Watoto wa Mwelusi* (Mbatiah, 2018). The study adopted a qualitative research approach using content analysis techniques as a method of data generation.

The findings revealed that male characters' face GBV such as violation of their sexual rights, discrimination in ascending to leadership positions, being denied to access or own properties, abandonment by their parents and the society, harsh treatment from their family compelling them to escape and seek refuge in towns and streets, forceful involvement in wars and revolutions, and obliged to submit to female characters in all spheres of influence. The perpetuation of GBV against male characters, especially boys, has profound and lasting impacts on their emotional, physical, and psychological well-being in these novels. These male characters experience severe trauma, including emotional distress and physical injuries, which leads them to suffer mental health challenges such as anxiety and depression. Furthermore, male characters were surrounded by stigma, which led some of them to seek help and intervention from their counterparts, the female characters. In some instances, some male characters succumbed to death due to isolation, feelings of shame, and physical injuries.

The study therefore underscores the initiatives of authors in Kiswahili children's literature for exploring GBV perpetuated against male characters as one of the strategies of addressing them. The study also suggests that by highlighting this prevailing violence against male characters, the authors reveal how male children, in real life, struggle with similar distorted perceptions of masculinity and interpersonal relationships, like their counterparts in the novels. Therefore, Kubai and Kevogo (cited) warn that repetitive exposure of children to GBV can affect their future interactions and gender development. They recommend that society needs to establish appropriate support systems and awareness about male victims of GBV. This will help in curbing the perpetuation of GBV and the cycle of abuse.

Gender Identity

Gender identity refers to an individual's internal sense of being female, male, or another gender, and shapes how individuals perceive themselves and relate to the social world around them (Barnes, 2022). In Kiswahili children's literature, gender identity is influenced by the ways in which literary characters are portrayed and the social expectations attached to them. Mbuthia's (2018) study on the role of Kiswahili children's literature in shaping children's worldviews established that children's storybooks play a significant role in influencing how young readers understand themselves and their environment. However, the study also observed that some Kiswahili children's books continue to portray boys and girls through rigid gender stereotypes, thereby limiting children's understanding of their identities and reinforcing socially constructed expectations about appropriate behaviour for each gender. Mbuthia (2018) therefore cautions that repeated exposure to stereotypical representations may negatively affect children's development of healthy and inclusive gender identities.

Similarly, Ekiru's (2025) study, *Beyond Balls and Dolls: Deconstructing Gender Stereotyped Plays through Gender-Atypical Kiswahili Children's*

Storybooks, demonstrates that Kiswahili children's literature has the potential to reshape children's understanding of gender identity by exposing them to characters who engage in activities that challenge conventional gender norms. Using participatory visual methodologies and Social Learning Theory, the study found that although most boys and many girls continued to prefer to play activities traditionally associated with their gender, exposure to gender-atypical storybooks encouraged several girls to express interest in football, a game traditionally perceived as masculine. More importantly, some boys who maintained their own gender-stereotyped play preferences nevertheless began to acknowledge that girls could also successfully participate in football alongside boys. These findings suggest that children's literature can gradually broaden young readers' perceptions of gender identity by encouraging them to recognise that abilities and interests are not determined solely by gender. At the same time, the study reveals that the construction of gender identity is strongly mediated by wider social influences such as parents, teachers, peers, and what Ekiru describes as the "gender police," who reinforce traditional gender expectations through approval, ridicule, or exclusion.

The findings further imply that while gender-inclusive Kiswahili children's literature alone may not immediately transform children's gender identities, it provides an important foundation for challenging stereotypical beliefs and promoting more inclusive ways of thinking. Ekiru (2025) concludes that sustained exposure to gender-atypical storybooks, accompanied by guided classroom discussions and supportive learning environments, can strengthen children's acceptance of diverse gender identities and reduce prejudice against those who do not conform to traditional gender expectations. The study therefore recommends integrating gender-inclusive children's literature into early reading programs and curriculum materials to enable young readers to develop self-confidence, appreciate diversity, and

construct gender identities based on individual abilities and interests rather than restrictive social stereotypes.

Gender Stereotypes

Matundura's (2007) study examined gender stereotyping in Kiswahili children's stories. His study aimed to investigate whether gender stereotyping exists in Kiswahili children's stories. His study revealed that gender stereotyping is dominant in Kiswahili children's stories. The findings reported that girl characters are portrayed as weak, while boy characters are depicted as heroes.

Another study that explored gender stereotypes was a study done by Ekiru et al. (2024). In their study, they explored how authors of Kiswahili children's storybooks depict characters in a manner that defies societal construction of gender stereotypic roles. Using the deconstruction theory of literary studies, the study findings revealed that authors of Kiswahili children's storybooks deconstruct gender stereotypic roles by engaging female characters in careers such as teachers, doctors, police officers, army officers, pilots, farmers, lecturers, businesspeople, and magistrates. In addition, female characters in the stories are also portrayed performing activities such as farming, slashing, pushing wheelbarrows, and cattle grazing, while male characters engage in activities such as washing utensils and preparing dinner. This clearly demonstrates that the authorship of Kiswahili children's storybooks has witnessed a paradigm shift where gender role depictions among the characters defy the ingrained societal gender stereotypes.

Related research to the above study is a study conducted by Ekiru et al. (2024). This study explored how gender atypical Kiswahili children's storybooks can be used to deconstruct stereotypic gender roles among children. The study adopted a participatory visual methodology design and Bandura's (1977) social learning theory. Data was

generated using drawings with fifteen grade three children from a purposively selected school. A pre-exposure evaluation was done with the selected children to understand how they construct their gender roles. Thereafter, these children were engaged in reading eleven gender atypical Kiswahili children's storybooks for a period of four weeks post-exposure evaluation. The findings of this study revealed that when children were exposed to gender-atypical Kiswahili children's stories, more girls than boys changed from constructing stereotypic gender roles and traits to gender-atypical roles. The findings also revealed that even though some participants conformed to stereotypic gender roles, there was a change in their perspectives to adopt gender-atypical roles. Therefore, Ekiru et al. (cited) suggest that exposure of children to gender-atypical Kiswahili children's storybooks could address gender stereotyping during their early stages of socialisation. The study recommends that the education curriculum in Kenya and other countries that use Kiswahili children's storybooks in teaching early language education should incorporate the use of gender atypical Kiswahili children's storybooks to enable children to construct gender roles in a neutral and non-sexist manner.

Masculinity and Power Dominance

Masculinity refers to the set of behaviours, attributes, and roles associated with men and boys (Kincaid, 2022). It comprises a range of traits that society often perceives as "masculine," which can vary across different societies, cultures, and historical periods (Stoller, 2020). Some of the notable aspects of masculinity entail: Cultural constructs, traits and behaviours, gender roles, intersectionality, changing perspectives, among others. In the context of Kiswahili children's literature, the concept of masculinity and power dominance has been explored in a study that was conducted by Onyango in 2007.

Onyango's (2007) study explored physical, social, economic, and political manifestations of

masculinities in selected Kiswahili children's storybooks. Onyango (cited) examined Ken Walibora's three children's storybooks, namely: *Mtu wa Mvua* ('The Rain Man'), *Ndoto ya Amerika* ('The Dream of Going to America'), and *Mgomba Changaraweni* ('The Banana Plant in the Pebble'). In his study, he aspired to show how power and ideological features of masculinities are rooted in childhood. The study adopted content analysis techniques to generate data and critical discourse analysis theory to analyse and discuss the findings from the selected Kiswahili children's storybooks. The study findings revealed that male characters outshine female characters in terms of numerical representation, structural power, and social position in all the selected storybooks. These findings indicate that gender imbalance exists in children's storybooks, with male characters consistently portrayed in greater numbers and in more powerful, influential roles than their female counterparts. Onyango (2007) noted that these imbalances in characters' representation witnessed in Kiswahili children's storybooks, particularly in the domain of politics, society, and the economy, are not just a game of quantity, but also about the quality of roles that are given to male and female characters.

Structural power, such as leadership roles, decision-making positions, or figures of authority, tends to be predominantly occupied by male characters. Similarly, in terms of social position, males are often portrayed as respected, admired, or central figures within the narratives, reinforcing traditional gender hierarchies. Female characters, in contrast, are either underrepresented or often depicted in supportive, passive, or secondary roles, such as caregivers, assistants, or background figures. This pattern of representation has significant implications for young readers. Storybooks are important media that children use to learn about the world and build their knowledge of social norms, values, and identities (Mbutia, 2018). When men are consistently represented as leaders and women are pushed to the periphery, children may learn and internalise the message that power, authority, and

visibility are naturally associated with men (Ekiru, 2019). This can serve to limit gender expectations, discouraging girls from aspiring to leadership roles and perpetuating a narrow conception of masculinity among boys (Miricho & Mbutia, 2017). Furthermore, the lack of strong female role models can affect the way girls perceive themselves and their potential in the real world (Ezenwa-Ohaeto, 2015). It also affects boys, who may miss out on seeing diverse models of empathy, strength, and cooperation that female characters can embody (Ekiru, 2023).

In general, Onyango's (2007) study highlights that there is a serious need for more balanced and inclusive Kiswahili children's storybooks where girls and boys can see themselves represented in a variety of empowering and diverse political, social, and economic roles. Creating gender-equitable narratives is important in creating more inclusive attitudes and dismantling harmful stereotypes at a young age.

CONCLUSION

This paper has revealed that there exists a complex and evolving landscape of gender and sexuality research within Kiswahili children's literature. The paper demonstrates that Kiswahili children's storybooks remain an effective medium for constructing, reinforcing, and occasionally subverting conventional gender and sexual constructs. Recurring themes across the literature reviewed herein are gender equity, gender parity, and gender equality, all of which underline the continued efforts to achieve balanced representation of both genders in Kiswahili children's storybooks.

Furthermore, the persistence of gender stereotypes, the hegemonic constructions of masculinity and power, and the underrepresentation of female characters portray a broader societal failure in deconstructing patriarchal structures. The review also points out more nuanced and contemporary issues, such as gender-based violence and the visibility of gender identity, that are gradually

gaining space in academic circles but remain underexplored in popular Kiswahili children's literature.

These emerging issues point to a pressing need for more inclusive and critically aware Kiswahili children's storybooks that reflect the diversity of children's gender identities. The representation of gender and sexuality in Kiswahili children's storybooks not only affects young readers' construction of self and others but also plays a critical role in shaping future societal attitudes. As such, educators, researchers, authors, and publishers must continue to interrogate and transform the storybooks that children read towards literature that challenges harmful norms, promotes equality, and embraces the full range of gendered experiences.

In conclusion, while progress has been made in gender discourse, it is notable that significant gaps remain in sexuality studies. Continued research attention and concerted literary production are necessary to promote Kiswahili children's literature that supports the development of inclusive, socially conscious, diverse, and critically literate young readers.

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