

# Education Research in African Contexts

Traditions and New Beginnings  
for Knowledge and Impact

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# CHAPTER 12

## Using gender-atypical Kiswahili children's stories to deconstruct gender-stereotyped roles among learners

*Simon Ekiru, Mathabo Khau, Sammy Chumba*

### Introduction

Gender stereotypes impact negatively on children when exposed to them during the early stages of their socialization (Onyango, 2007; Floyd, 2012; Toçi & Aliu, 2013). They shape children's conceptualisation of gender roles and can influence in them the development of notions that one gender is weaker in certain societal spheres of influence (Floyd, 2012). When this notion is consistently propagated in their lifetimes, there is a danger of creating a society where individuals discriminate against others based on their gender identities. Despite this fact, few studies on gender have focused on children, even though childhood is an important stage in human development.

A number of studies in child psychology (Kohlberg, 1966; Gottfredson, 1981; Eccles, 1994) have revealed that fixation in adulthood can be traced back to childhood. It is in light of the above that global strategies to address gender stereotypes were formulated. One of the proposed strategies was to deconstruct gender stereotypes using children's books. This is due to the fact that books play a significant role in the socialization process of a child because, like other human beings, children acquire a lot of knowledge from books which enable 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 (2007, 1996) and Mbuthia (2018) also affirm that children's literature is not just a record of social events but also an instrument for socialization. A number of studies have shown that a reading culture and skills are significant to the child's cognitive development.

Singh (1998) argues that, apart from being a significant resource for developing language skills among children, children's books play an important role in transmitting societal culture to children. Gender roles are an important part of this culture. How genders are portrayed in children's books contributes to the images children develop of their own roles and that of their genders in society (Onyango, 2006). It is in light of the above that this chapter examines how exposure to gender-atypical Kiswahili children's stories influenced learners' understandings of gender roles.

## Background

This section of the chapter presents global interventions to curb gender stereotypes, rationale to deconstruct gender-stereotyped roles, and empirical studies on the deconstruction of gender-stereotyped roles among learners.

### Global interventions to curb gender-stereotyped roles

The pursuit of eliminating gender stereotyping has been a focal point in global discourse for decades (Tabassum, & Nayak, 2021). This has led to the development of global strategies such as Sustainable Development Goal 5 on gender equality and continental frameworks like the African Union's Agenda 2063, specifically Target 5 on gender equality and women's empowerment (African Union, 2015). These initiatives aim to foster equality and empowerment for all individuals regardless of gender. Furthermore, various countries, including Norway and Zimbabwe, have devised national strategies to combat gender stereotyping.

Norway and Zimbabwe have endeavoured to address gender-stereotyped roles by implementing action plans for gender equity (Floyd, 2012). For instance, Norway introduced the Action Plan for Gender Equity (2008) to tackle long-standing gender stereotypes prevalent in their kindergartens. The objective of this plan was to ensure that kindergartens and basic education systems foster a society where individuals can utilize their interests and abilities irrespective of gender. Floyd (2012) emphasises the importance of promoting gender equity in early education, noting the stance of the 'Gender Equality in the Kindergartens' (2008) position:

*Preschools must remain places where boys and girls have the same opportunities to participate in activities and work together. Early education should focus these activities on preparing young children to live in a society that is based on gender equality and avoid stereotyping children based on gender expectations.* (Floyd, 2012, p. 8)

She believes that preschools must serve as environments where boys and girls have equal opportunities to engage in activities and collaborate. Early education should orient these activities towards preparing young children for a society grounded in gender equality, avoiding the pigeonholing of children based on gender expectations (Floyd, 2012, p. 8).

In Zimbabwe, Nhundu (2007), highlighted the establishment of Gender Equity Initiatives (GEI) to tackle gender stereotyping. This initiative was founded in 1995 following the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. Zimbabwe developed a policy on gender equity and established a dedicated ministry to empower women and girls facing vulnerability due to gender inequality pervasive across all spheres. Additionally, the Zimbabwean government enacted an Education Act advocating for the gradual integration of gender education into curricula and teacher training. The Ministry of Education introduced the Gender Equity in Education Initiative

(GEEI) to address gender disparities in education. Under GEEI, the Role Model Reader Project (RMRP) was launched to counter traditional gender role stereotypes by using children's literature to inspire girls in primary schools to cultivate positive, non-stereotypical career aspirations

### Why deconstructing gender stereotypes is important

When children encounter stereotypical notions and behaviours early on, they often internalise and conform to them. This impact is compounded when they are exposed to negative stereotypes, hindering, and adversely affecting their learning processes (Ambady et al., 2001).

Research by Golshirazian et al. (2015) indicates that gender stereotyping introduced during preschool can have long-term effects, extending beyond adolescence into adulthood. They argue that such patterns persist, with girls often relegated to supportive roles, while boys take centre stage in society. Children who diverge from these gender stereotypes risk feeling isolated and ridiculed, impacting their ability to learn (Fagot, 1977; Fagot & Leinbach, 1987; Thorne, 1993; Kao et al., 2014). Thus, addressing gender stereotyping early in a child's development is essential, as it occurs during an important stage of socialization and knowledge construction.

Miller (2013) suggests various methods to address gender stereotyping in young children. One approach is for parents, teachers, and authors to convey non-sexist messages. She advocates nurturing children in environments that foster diversity in gender roles, providing equal opportunities regardless of gender. Miller proposes exposing children to gender-neutral career puzzles and images depicting women and men in non-traditional roles. For instance, women and girls can be portrayed as physically strong leaders in fields like science, mechanics, and sports, while boys can be depicted expressing emotions beyond anger, participating in domestic chores, caring for families, and pursuing careers in nursing, dance, and cooking. In a gender-neutral environment, children can freely explore their ideas without gender constraints, laying a positive foundation for their future gender identity development (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010; Miller, 2013).

It is in light of these considerations that this study explores how gender-atypical Kiswahili children's stories can be utilized to address gender-role stereotyping among young learners. Specifically, the study seeks to answer the question: How do learners construct gender roles when exposed to gender-atypical Kiswahili stories?

### Empirical studies on deconstruction of gender-stereotyped roles among learners

According to Liben et al. (2001), young children have preconceived notions about what roles are suitable for females and males, and have a tendency of selecting roles that are stereotypically associated with their gender when inquired about their future careers (Morgan, 2008). However, 5-6-year-old children are more likely to

remember individuals displaying gender-atypical roles and activities, than those portraying gender-stereotyped activities (Wilbourn & Kee, 2010). Furthermore, children still attribute knowledge about roles or activities to individuals portraying gender-atypical roles (Gregg & Dobson, 1980; Shenouda & Danovitch, 2013). For example, when children are presented with a female mechanic and male nurse and asked who knows more about a number of occupation-related items, children would attribute mechanic-related knowledge to a woman and nurse-related knowledge to a man, despite the fact that their occupations defied stereotypes.

In light of the above arguments, empirical studies (e.g. Scott & Feldman-Summers, 1979; Trepanier-Street & Romatowski, 1999; Nhundu, 2007; Karniol & Gal-Disegni, 2009) have shown that, reading gender-atypical storybooks changes children's stereotypes notions about gender appropriate occupation and activities. The above studies suggest that, when children are exposed to storybooks with female central characters displaying atypical gender roles (i.e. occupations, activities), their belief in the number of occupations appropriate for women is likely to increase.

For instance, the study conducted by Scott and Feldman-Summers (1979) on third and fourth grade children who read gender-atypical stories, in which female main characters were involved in gender-atypical roles and activities (e.g. a story about a female explorer). Those children who were exposed to those significantly reported that girls could participate in the gender-atypical activities depicted in the stories. Another similar study to this was an experiment study done by Trepanier-Street and Romatowski (1999) on 4–6-year-old children to examine their gender attitudes concerning occupation roles. At the pre-test of the study, children distinguished occupations appropriate for male and female. Later in the study, children were carefully read selected books of males and females portraying gender-atypical occupational roles by their teacher. After reading and engaging in teacher-guided activities related to the gender-atypical stories, more children judged the occupations as suitable for both male and female.

Similarly, studies on young children by Karniol and Gal-Disegni (2009) also revealed that gender-atypical books shape children's notions of occupational roles and activities. The study involved first graders who were categorised into two groups. The first group was assigned gender-fair basal readers while the second group was given gender-stereotyped readers. At the end of the study, the evaluation results of the two groups indicated that those children who were exposed to gender-fair basal readers judged more activities (e.g. baking a cake, playing in mud) as suitable for both females and males than those children assigned gender-stereotyped basal readers. The above studies suggest that children's exposure to gender-atypical stories defy children's stereotypes about gender-appropriate activities and occupation.

Nhundu's (2007) study of Zimbabwean girls is considered one of the most exciting results in children's stories and gender-stereotyped literature (Abad & Pruden, 2013). This study was conducted on young Zimbabweans' girls enrolled in the fourth grade

until their completion of the seventh grade. The study used an experiment design where girls were put into two groups (the experiment and control groups). In the experiment group, girls were exposed to biographical stories of women succeeding in non-traditional careers, while the control group was not exposed to those stories. During the pre-test, girls in both groups showed an interest in gender-stereotyped careers and occupations. However, during post-test, the girls who were in the experiment group reported that all jobs were equally appropriate for both female and male. When asked to mention the careers they aspired towards in future, they mentioned gender-atypical careers similar to those done by the successful women in the biographical stories. In contrast, almost all the girls in the control group, who had not been exposed to gender-atypical biographical stories, still showed desire for stereotypically traditional careers rather than gender-atypical careers. Hence, this finding indicated that reading gender-atypical stories can shape young girls' future career goals and ambitions. Nhundu's study is similar to the current study because they both explore the use of children's stories with characters engaged in gender-atypical roles. However, Nhundu's study adopted an experimental design, while the current study adopted the participatory visual methodologies (PVM) design. Moreover, Nhundu's study was limited to female learners as its participants, while the current study used both male and female participants.

In conclusion, it is evident from the reviewed literature that there is still a deficiency in empirical research, despite the urgent need to combat gender stereotyping in learners' constructions of gender roles during the early years of their socialization. This is more surprising in Kiswahili children's literature, given the fact of its swift growth and popularity among Kiswahili literary scholars (Bakize, 2017). Therefore, this study sought to fill the empirical gap in research done in Kiswahili children's literature and awaken future scholarship debates in pursuit of addressing gender stereotyping.

## Research design and methodology

As noted earlier, the study sought to answer the question: how does exposure to gender-atypical Kiswahili children's stories influence learners' understanding of gender roles and how do learners construct gender roles when exposed to gender-atypical Kiswahili stories? With the help of experts in Kiswahili children's literature from the Department of Kiswahili & African Languages at Moi University, we carefully selected gender-atypical Kiswahili children's stories that were used in the study. The selected Kiswahili children's stories were those stories which had themes and content that exhibited gender-atypical roles. Moreover, these stories were found in storybooks that were recommended by the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD) to be used in primary schools for reading lessons. The selected gender-atypical storybooks were: *Sungura Mjanja* (Islam, 2003), *Atoke*

*Asitoke?* (Mwangi, 2009), *Siku za Juma 1a* (Nyakeri, 2006), *Mama Mwizi* (Mutuku, 2014), *Kombo Arudi Shule* (Lewela, 2008), *Zawadi ya Rangi* (Karan, 2005), *Tuzo ya Baba* (Zawadi, 2013), *Vitendo vya Jamila* (Mogambi, 2006), and *Furaha ya Arope* (Walibora, 2013).

The study was grounded in the interpretivist paradigm with a qualitative research approach. It adopted the participatory visual methodologies (PVM) design. Data were generated using drawings and discussions with Grade 3 learners from a purposively selected primary school. The drawing method was used because it is the simplest method of data generation in social science research involving children and other individuals in society who may have difficulties in expressing themselves due to language or other constraints that encompass the topic of discussion (Mitchell et al., 2011; Mitchell et al., 2017). Drawings were suitable for this study because they not only gave children aesthetic pleasure, but also crystalized their thoughts to produce artefacts that could be drawn on to tease them into a discussion of their viewpoints (Mitchell et al., 2011; Mitchell et al., 2017).

The school was selected because it had active reading classes from Grade 1 to Grade 3 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 also in their leisure time. The participants of the study were Grade 3 pupils of the selected primary school. The study focus was on exploring the use of gender-atypical (GA) Kiswahili children's stories to deconstruct gender-stereotyped roles among Grade 3 learners in the selected primary school. The study used learners at this level because, according to the school enrolment policy by the Ministry of Education in Kenya, children aged 9 years are supposed to be in this grade (Muthara, 2012). This study also incorporated learners at this age based on Kohlberg's (1966) ideas of cognitive development, namely that at this age, children would have formed a stable gender identity and sexuality and start adopting gender-stereotyped behaviours, activities, preferences, etc., exhibited to them either in their environment or by social models (Gooden & Gooden, 2001; Clarke & Stermac, 2011). Bender and Leone (1989) reported that the development of gender identities in children occurs alongside the desire and passion to read and re-read their favourite storybooks. This occurs when children are between the ages of 8 and 10. They begin to integrate abstract notions and concepts, such as the concept of femininity and masculinity, into their representations (Eisenberg et al., 1996). The selected school had fifteen Grade 3 learners (ten girls and five boys) who willingly showed interest in participating in the study. They also had good reading, writing and communication skills, which made them suitable for this study.

We gave our participant Grade 3 learners drawing prompts during the pre-exposure evaluation to make drawings of work and activities they like doing at home and school. We also asked them to draw their future career goals and aspirations. After the drawings, we asked each participant to give an oral explanation for each

drawing he/she had made. Thereafter, we exposed the participants to gender-atypical Kiswahili children's stories for a period of 4 weeks. After the exposure to gender-atypical Kiswahili children's stories, we conducted a post-exposure evaluation of the participants. We advised the participants to use pseudonyms in their drawings to protect their true identities. This ensured that all the information they gave, which included drawings and discussions, was protected and concealed. We labelled our participants' data using their pseudonyms, when data were generated (i.e. pre-exposure or post-exposure), page number (i.e. p. 1), date, month, and year (i.e. 18/7/2018). Data review and analysis were done thematically and concurrently with data generation.

## Research findings and discussion

After analysing the pre- and post-exposure evaluation drawings and their explanations, we came up with a table that summarized the 30 drawings presented by the learners. The drawings depicted how learners constructed gender roles in two ways. First, the drawings showed how they constructed work and activities they normally do at school and at home, and second, how they constructed their future career aspirations.

**Table 1:** *Categories of Gender Roles Portrayed by the Participants during the Pre-exposure Evaluation and the Post-exposure Evaluation*

Participant	Age	Gender	Pre-exposure Drawing on Gender Role: Work & Activities	Post-exposure Drawing on Gender Role: Work & Activities	Pre-exposure Drawing on Gender Role: Future Career Goals	Post-exposure Drawing on Gender Role: Future Career Goals
1. Jack	9 years	Male	Playing football	Farming	Teacher	Soldier
2. Maureen	10 years	Female	Fetching water	Looking after sheep	Doctor	Doctor
3. Pogba	10 years	Male	Washing utensils Playing football	Cooking food Washing utensils	Soldier	Soldier
4. Shantel	11 years	Female	Washing utensils Fetching water	Looking after the cow Farming	Teacher	Police officer
5. Brown	8 years	Male	Playing football Drawing a car	Fetching water Slashing grass	Footballer	Pilot

6. Annete	11 years	Female	Watering flowers Weeding plants	Looking after the sheep	Doctor Teacher	Police officer
7. Fatuma	11 years	Female	Washing clothes Singing Playing 'kati'	Fetching water Washing utensils	Doctor	Teacher
8. Evelyne	11 years	Female	Washing clothes Picking up litters	Cooking food Washing clothes	Driver	Teacher
9. Maria	10 years	Female	Farming Cooking food	Washing clothes Watering plants	Doctor	Teacher Police officer
10. Princess	11 years	Female	Sweeping Washing clothes Fetching water Farming	Fetching water Cleaning the environment Watering plants	Doctor	Bus driver
11. Rehema	8 years	Female	Washing clothes Fetching water Skipping a rope	Looking after a cow Sweeping the house	Doctor	Police officer
12. Pinky	10 years	Female	Singing Washing clothes Skipping a rope Reading a book Planting maize	Looking after a cow Collecting and burning rubbish	Police officer	Soldier
13. Mos	10 years	Male	Farming	Washing utensils	Pilot	Police officer
14. Specks	10 years	Male	Fetching water	Fetching water	Soldier	Singer / musician
15. Precious	11 years	Female	Sweeping	Watering plants	Police officer	Doctor

*Source: Primary data (2019)*

### Learners' construction of gender roles

The tabulated summary of findings (Table 1) demonstrates how learners constructed gender roles. The construction of gender roles entails work and activities they like doing at home as well as their future career goals and aspirations. Table 1 presents a summary and categories of gender roles constructed by the learners during the pre- and post-exposure evaluations. The learners, both boys and girls, constructed their gender roles by drawing what they liked doing at home and also their future career goals. Work and activities that were most preferred by boys in the pre-exposure evaluation, as shown in Table 1, were drawing a car, farming, washing utensils and fetching water. On the other side, girls reported in the pre-exposure evaluation that they preferred doing tasks such as fetching water, washing utensils, watering flowers, weeding plants, washing clothes, picking up litter, cooking food, sweeping the house, reading a book, and planting maize.

However, after being exposed to GA Kiswahili children's stories, boys seemed to present work and tasks in their post-exposure evaluation which were similar to what they presented during pre-exposure evaluation. These works were farming, fetching water, and slashing grass. Interestingly, two participants (Pogba and Mos) presented different findings in their post-exposure evaluation from what they had presented in their pre-exposure evaluation. Mos, for example reported in the pre-exposure drawing that he likes farming but later, in the post-exposure drawing, he changed his work of preference to washing utensils. Pogba on the other hand changed his preferred work from washing utensils to cooking food even though he still reported in the post-exposure drawing that he still likes washing utensils.

On the other side of girls, the results presented during their post-exposure evaluation indicated a majority of them had changed from their previous work of preference during the pre-exposure to different work in the post-exposure, even though some of the work they reported in the post-exposure evaluation was earlier mentioned in the pre-exposure evaluation of other female participants. The preferred tasks among the girls in the post-exposure evaluation were farming, looking after sheep, looking after cow, fetching water, washing utensils, cooking food, washing clothes, sweeping house, collecting and burning rubbish and watering plants.

Regarding their future career goals and aspirations, most boys in the pre-exposure evaluation reported their preferences for careers such as teacher, soldier, footballer, pilot and police officer, while girls indicated their partiality towards careers such as doctor, teacher, driver, and police officer. During the post-exposure evaluation most boys' future career preferences revolved around soldier, pilot and police officer. It was only one male participant (Specks) who aspired to be a musician. On the girls' side, the post-exposure results indicated that a majority of them reported different future career choices from what they had presented earlier in the pre-exposure. The most preferred careers among girls were doctor, police officer, bus driver and soldier.

The findings show that the majority of the participants showed gender-stereotyped role preferences during the pre-exposure evaluation. The gender roles presented above in the pre-exposure evaluation correspond to what previous scholars from different African backgrounds termed as traditional stereotyped roles. For example, a study conducted by Mosley (2004) in Ethiopia reported that cleaning the house, fetching water and cooking are perceived as feminine roles, while agricultural activities such as ploughing are believed to be masculine. In South Africa, a study conducted by Mwaba (1992) reported that most boys and girls in South African secondary schools considered that nursing, housecleaning, and sweeping as primarily jobs for women. In another study conducted in Kenya, Wanjeri (2006) reported that gender dictated the division of roles among the Kikuyu communities. Boys were taught and expected to undertake masculine roles such as herding cattle, hunting, building houses, ploughing, among others. On the other hand, girls were taught and expected to perform ‘womanly’ roles such as cleaning, cooking, and taking care of their younger siblings.

In the current findings, few boys during the pre-exposure evaluation presented drawings that showed a deviation from the traditional gender-stereotyped roles for men. These participants (Pogba and Mos) reported that they liked washing utensils and fetching water, respectively. Accounting for their preferences for work that is predominantly considered for girls and women within the societal context in which the research was conducted, this is what they said:

*Pogba: I have drawn myself washing utensils.*

*Researcher: It seems you like washing utensils?*

*Pogba: Yes.*

*Researcher: That is good. Why do you like washing them?*

*Pogba: I don't like dirty utensils. I wash them so that they become clean.*

*Researcher: Are you the only one who washes utensils at home?*

*Pogba: No. All of us wash. Each one of us has a duty to wash the utensils.*

(Oral explanation, Pogba, pre-exposure, p. 1, [15/6/2018])

*Researcher: I can see you have drawn a good picture. What have you drawn?*

*Mos: It's me. I am weeding crops.*

*Researcher: Do you weed crops alone or you are helped by other people?*

*Mos: My brothers and sisters help me. We have duties to weed crops.*

(Oral explanation, Mos, pre-exposure, p. 1, [15/6/2018])

From the explanation above, it is revealed that the participants developed interest in those roles because they are used to doing them at home as required by their respective home duty routine, which dictates gender roles in their homes. This means that gender roles are not innate but rather a product constructed by the society. The society then socializes children to acquire those gender roles. Quite a number of girls showed preferences for farming during the pre-exposure evaluation though their interest was only limited to watering flowers, weeding, planting crops but not digging and ploughing. Girls reported that they do not like digging because it makes them tired as evident in the following sample extracts:

*Researcher: Okay. Apart from fetching water what other activity do you like doing?*

*Maureen: I also like sweeping, moping,*

*Researcher: Okay. What are those activities that you don't like doing?*

*Maureen: I don't like digging. It makes me feel tired.*

*Researcher: Who then does digging at home?*

*Maureen: My brothers.*

*Researcher: Don't they as well get tired like you?*

*Maureen: No.*

(Oral explanation, Maureen, pre-exposure, p. 3, [15/6/2018])

Some reported that they would rather do other activities for the boys in exchange for them doing the digging task on their behalf as revealed by the girl participant Annete below in her oral drawing explanation.

*Researcher: How do you divide activities that you do at home?*

*Annete: My brothers usually farm at the shamba while my sister and I washes clothes for them.*

*Researcher: Okay.*

(Oral explanation, Annete, pre-exposure, p. 3, [15/6/2018])

Another interesting finding is that a majority of the girls changed their preferred tasks after the exposure to gender-atypical Kiswahili children's stories which corresponded to the tasks exhibited by the female characters in those stories. These tasks were: looking after the cows, looking after the sheep, collecting garbage/litter and burning them. The above-mentioned tasks, for example, looking after the cows were portrayed by female characters such as Maria (*Siku za Juma*), Arope (*Furaha ya Arope*) and Jamila (*Vitendo vya Jamila*). Similarly, participants Mos and Jack presented task preferences in the post-exposure evaluation that resembled

the task that was undertaken by the male character, Baraka (*Tuzo ya Baba*). The above-mentioned tasks that those girls showed interest in after being exposed to GA Kiswahili children's stories are predominantly perceived to be male gender roles. In the same way, those tasks preferred by a minority of the male participants (Pogba and Mos) are stereotypically considered to be tasks meant for girls and women. However, during their oral explanations, the participants attributed the change to their desire to emulate the characters in the stories as highlighted in the excerpts below.

*Researcher: Apart from seeing that girl looking after the sheep what else motivated you or is there any movie or story you read about looking after the cattle?*

*Maureen: Yes. I read about the girl looking after the sheep.*

*Researcher: Which story?*

*Maureen: Ndoto ya Arope.*

*Researcher: What was the story about?*

*Maureen: The story was about a girl called Arope who helped her mother to look after sheep, goats and cattle.*

*Researcher: When you saw her looking after the sheep, how did you feel?*

*Maureen: I felt good.*

*Researcher: Does it mean that you have drawn this picture as result of seeing Arope looking after the sheep?*

*Maureen: Yes.*

*Researcher: Do you think you can do the same as her?*

*Maureen: Yes*

(Oral explanation, Maureen, post-exposure, p. 1, [18/7/2018])

Annete and Rehema share the same sentiment as Maureen, saying that seeing fellow girls in the stories (Maria and Arope) inspired them to develop an interest in looking after the cattle.

*Researcher: How did you feel, seeing small girls like you looking after the cattle?*

*Annete: I felt good. I felt I can also look after the cattle like them. (Smiling)*

(Oral explanation, Annete, post-exposure, p. 3, [18/7/2018])

*Researcher: How did you feel when you read the story?*

*Rehema:* I felt good (Smiling). I was happy to see Maria looking after the cow.

*Researcher:* Could she have inspired you to look after the cow?

*Rehema:* Yes.

(Oral explanation, Rehema, post-exposure, p. 1, [18/7/2018])

The findings on future career goals and aspirations also revealed that boys preferred careers such as being a teacher, a soldier, a footballer, and a pilot during the pre-exposure evaluation. According to Nhundu (2007) the above listed careers over the decades have been stereotyped to be male-gendered occupations. This therefore suggested that boys' choice of future careers echoed societal gender stereotypes. Insignificant change was seen in their post-exposure evaluation since the previous career choices (e.g. soldier, pilot and police officer) were replicated. It was only one boy participant (Specks) who presented a different career aspiration of being a musician in future. Conversely, the story was different with girls. The most preferred career choices among girls during the pre- and post-exposure were doctor, teacher, driver and police officer. During the post-exposure evaluation, a majority of the girls aspired to be policewomen, soldiers, doctors, and teachers.

The above data reveal that participants gave varied responses related to gender-role construction after exposure to GA Kiswahili children stories. The majority of the girls adopted gender-atypical roles, while the boys still conformed to gender-typical roles even after being exposed to GA Kiswahili children's stories.

### Adoption of gender-atypical roles

The above findings revealed that a majority of the girls, as compared to the boys, adopted gender-atypical roles. The adopted gender roles by girls corresponded with the atypical roles displayed by model characters in the stories (e.g. policewomen, soldier, drivers, doctor, looking after the cows, collecting and burning rubbish, farming, etc.). The only atypical roles adopted by boys were washing utensils and cooking food. These results therefore suggest that the girls found roles perceived to be predominantly male much more appealing to them than the boys found the female-stereotyped roles. This may mean that girls identified more with the role models in the stories than boys did. This indicates that the attraction to and admiration of the role model characters in the story was more prevalent in girls than in boys, and that the stories influenced them to adopt gender-atypical roles. These findings are supported by previous studies on gender-role preference (Nhundu, 2007). These results could have two possible explanations.

First, the fact that all of the role model characters in the stories, except one, were girls and women who were engaging in gender roles traditionally conceived of as male might have made it easier for girls than boys to identify with them and imitate

their behaviours. According to the social learning theory, sexual similarities between the child and model play an important role in learning and imitating behaviours (Bandura, 1986; McLeod, 2016). The child is more likely to pay more attention to those people it perceives as similar to itself and imitate their behaviours. Hence, this could be the possible reason why more girls imitated the gender-atypical roles displayed by the models in the stories who were girls and women.

Second, previous studies (e.g. Bussey, 1983; Green et al., 2004) that explored rigidity and variability of gender roles among boys and girls showed that boys conform more rigidly to gender-stereotyped roles than girls. The reluctance among boys to detach themselves from male gender-stereotyped roles is due to the fear of the consequences that befall them when they counter stereotypical gender roles. Prior research has revealed that boys are treated more harshly than girls by peers (Fagot, 1977) and adults (Langlois & Downs, 1980) for engaging in behaviours and activities that go against the 'gender-appropriate' roles constructed by the society. This is why girls find it easier to adopt gender-atypical roles than boys because society shows more tolerance for 'tomboys' than for 'sissies' (Fagot & Leinbach, 1987). The intolerance and pressure put on boys by society discourages them from imitating and adopting gender-atypical roles. Perhaps this is what could have discouraged one of our boy participants (Mos) who had tried to engage in a gender-atypical role and received severe criticism and discouragement from his grandmother.

*"... one day my grandmother and my sister were not at home, so I decided to go to the kitchen and cook 'ugali' for them. When they came back at home, my grandmother was angry at me and said that the 'ugali' was badly cooked and being a boy, I was not supposed to go to the kitchen to cook because it is women's responsibility to prepare food for men. She cautioned me from going to the kitchen."* (Oral explanation, Mos, pre-exposure, p. 1, [16/6/2018])

According to the social learning theory (Bandura et al., 1977), 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 from imitating their models. If a child copies a model's behaviour and the consequences are rewarding or encouraging, the child is likely to continue engaging in that behaviour. However, if the consequences are harsh, the child stops or becomes reluctant to perform that behaviour.

Therefore, the case for the two boy participants (Specks and Pogba) who challenged gender stereotypes by adopting gender-atypical roles after being exposed to gender-atypical stories could have been influenced by the gender role structures at home and school as well as the reinforcement of the male role model in the story

(Baraka, a boy character in the story, '*Tuzo ya Baba*'). During their oral explanations of their drawings, the two participants said that they preferred to do those roles (washing utensils and washing clothes) because that is what they normally do at home and school. They said that at their respective homes and at school, they have a chore routine where all children participate in household duties such as washing utensils and washing clothes irrespective of the gender, as shown in the interaction below.

*Researcher:*            *That is good. Why do you like washing them?*

*Pogba:*                 *I don't like dirty utensils. I wash them so that they become clean.*

*Researcher:*           *Are you the only one who washes utensils at home?*

*Pogba:*                 *No. All of us wash. Each one of us has a duty to wash the utensils.*

(Oral explanation, Pogba, pre-exposure, p. 1, [15/6/2018])

*Researcher:*           *Here you also said that you like washing clothes?*

*Specks:*                *Yes, I like washing my clothes.*

*Researcher:*           *Do you wash them here in school or at home?*

*Specks:*                *In school. It is always mandatory for everybody to wash his/her clothes on Saturday before we go home.*

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

### Conforming to gender-stereotyped roles

Table 1 reveals that all the boys conformed to predominantly male gender-coded careers. Their future career choices during the post-exposure evaluation entailed careers such as soldier, pilot and policeman. It is only one of them who chose to be a musician, a career that can also be categorised as one of those occupations that enjoys male dominance. These findings are similar to the findings of a study conducted by Nhundu (2007) in Zimbabwe which showed that boys conformed to gender stereotyped roles even after being exposed to Role Model Readers which contained stories of role models engaging in gender-atypical roles. When we asked the participants for reasons behind their choices of those careers, most boy participants preferred those careers because they believed they would give them higher status in society such as being custodians that provided security in the society. This was contrary to girl participants who asserted that the motivation behind their choices in future careers was influenced by their aspiration to help the society. Prior studies have demonstrated that boys tend to prefer more 'self-oriented careers', while girls prefer 'people-oriented careers' (Levy et al., 2000; Morgan, 2008). Self-oriented careers are those careers that enable one to have a higher status and value in the

society, while people-oriented careers are associated with working with people, serving others and helping others in the society.

From their explanations of the drawings, boys choose those careers which would enable them to have higher status, value and respect in the society such as soldier, policeman, musician and pilot. In many African societies, Kenya included, the police forces and the army are one of the most feared and respected groups by the members of the society because of the consequence that may befall any member of the public who disrespects a police officer or a soldier. This fear could be attributed to the colonial imperialism in Africa, where colonial police forces used coercive means to exert rule over Africans. After independence, African police forces emerged which conformed to their predecessors' ideology of using coercive means (Ndege, 2009). However, these traits are usually understood by children, especially boys as heroic, courageous, superhuman, among others which they find attractive to (Evans & Davies, 2000). This could be the possible reason why some of the boy participants aspired to be police officers and soldiers so that they can provide security as well as terrorize criminals or those participating in antisocial behaviours, and by doing so, they would gain more status and value in the society. Another wanted to be a musician so that he could go far and have adventure. All the above career choices centre personal status development as opposed to societal development as evident in the following extracts:

*“When I grow up, I would like to be a soldier so that I can protect my country.”*

(Written explanation, Pogba, Drawing caption 5 on gender roles: Future career goals)

*I would like to be a footballer because I normally see footballers being given presents.*

(Written explanation, Brown, Drawing caption 9 on gender roles: Future career goals)

*“I would like to be a soldier because I would be helping my country to catch robbers and thieves.”*

(Written explanation, Specks, Drawing caption 15 on gender roles: Future career goals)

*“I would like to be a musician because I believe it would take me far like Tanzania and America. I am an artist.”*

(Written explanation, Specks, Drawing caption 16 on gender roles: Future career goals)

*Source: Primary data (2019)*

Contrary to boys, most of the girl participants' choices of career were driven by their motives to help society as opposed to status-development that was witnessed in boys.

This is similar to the previous studies (Levy et al., 2000; Morgan, 2008; Nhundu, 2007) which found that girls and women expressed greater preference for helping careers, such as those of nurse, teacher, secretary and doctor, among others. Even from their written explanations in their drawing captions, their interest in helping society was evident.

*“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)

Scholars (e.g. Liben et al., 2001) have argued that boys are reluctant to adopt feminine activities such as gender roles because they see lower value in them and associate that lower value with them. Hence this demotivates them as they do not satisfy their quest of achieving a higher status and value in the society. This little or no motivation, according to social learning theorists (Bussey & Bandura, 1992), discourages them from adopting those behaviours and activities.

Nevertheless, even though in the current study most of the boys conformed to gender-stereotyped roles in their drawings, they still showed change in their perspective towards feminine roles. During their oral explanations, most boys expressed their personal feelings and desire to perform the feminine roles. They also supported the view that girls were capable of doing the masculine roles effectively. Similar views were expressed by girls who believed that just like the male characters in the stories (Juma and Baraka in the stories, *Siku za Juma* and *Tuzo ya Baba*), boys can also perform domestic activities such as cooking food, washing utensils and fetching water. Even though this is what they purport to believe, most of them (both boys and girls) still presented drawings of themselves and their friends doing

gender-stereotyped roles. This resembles the findings of previous studies done by Gregg and Dobson's (1980) and Nhundu (2007) who found that children expressed liberal views of what they could do but were more gender-stereotypical in their choice of future occupations. As discussed earlier, the long period of their socialization to gender-stereotypes and the societal pressure for them to conform to gender-stereotyped roles could be the possible reason for the above. However, the change in their views and perspectives towards gender-atypical roles during the post-exposure evaluation is an indication of the influence of the gender-atypical Kiswahili stories to deconstruct gender stereotyped roles.

## Conclusions

The study examined how exposure to gender-atypical Kiswahili children's stories influenced learners' understanding of gender roles. By analysing drawings and explanations from the learners before and after exposure to the stories, the researchers found that the stories did have an impact.

Girls, for the most part, began to see themselves as capable of traditionally masculine tasks like caring for cows and sheep. This suggests that the stories challenged their earlier ideas about what activities were appropriate for each gender. Boys, on the other hand, were more consistent with traditional gender roles in their drawings. However, during discussions about their drawings, some boys expressed a willingness to do tasks typically seen as feminine. This hints at a potential change in attitudes even if their drawings reflected more traditional views.

There are possible reasons why girls might have been more open to adopting new ideas about gender roles. Social learning theory suggests that people are more likely to imitate behaviours of those they see as similar to themselves. The girls might have identified more closely with the female characters in the stories, making them more likely to want to be like them. Additionally, societal pressure might be stronger on boys to conform to traditional masculinity. This pressure could discourage them from trying out behaviours that go against gender stereotypes.

Interestingly, boys' career aspirations remained mostly focused on traditionally masculine careers like soldier or pilot. Their reasons for wanting these careers seemed to be about achieving status and respect in society. Girls, on the other hand, were more drawn to careers that allowed them to help others, like doctor or teacher. This aligns with what other researchers have found about how girls and boys tend to gravitate towards different career paths.

Overall, exposure to the gender-atypical stories appears to have the potential to challenge traditional gender roles, particularly for girls. While boys' actions

still largely reflected stereotypes, their expressed willingness to do feminine tasks suggests a shift in attitudes. More research is needed to see how long-term exposure to these stories might influence behaviour and how societal pressures interact with these influences.

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