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A Thematic Study on the Use of Gender Biased Terminology in Afghanistan Television Programs

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Abstract

This qualitative thematic study explores the use of gender-biased terminology toward Afghan women broadcast on Afghan television programs. In this study, Shamshad TV's Tawda Bahsona and Tolo News' Tawdi Khabari on YouTube were reviewed using a descriptive phenomenological approach. The study engaged a focus group of Afghan natives of diverse participants living in Afghanistan to analyze the presence and implications of biased language directed towards women. This thematic analysis of selected YouTube videos from Shamshad TV's Tawda Bahsona and Tolo News' TV Tawdi Khabari content from 01/01/2023 to 01/01/2024, along with Afghan focus group discussions. Seven key themes emerged, showing significant patterns of gender-biased language toward Afghan women that can perpetuate stereotypes and lead to social inequalities. The findings of this study highlighted a division of identities between Afghan men and Afghan women, the marginalization of Afghan women's roles, and standards of masculinity that weaken women's roles. The findings of this study highlighted the potential role of television programs' content in shaping Afghans' perceptions of gender identity. It indicates opportunities for promoting more equitable representations of Afghan women without stereotyping them in different roles and provides recommendations for enhancing positive change in representing Afghan women.

Keywords: Biased, Gender, Media, Lower-Income Countries, Stereotype

1. Introduction

Discussing the role of women in developing countries as reflected in television programming has garnered significant scholarly attention in many communities worldwide, particularly concerning the use of biased language that perpetuates gender inequality (Daalman et al., 2017). This paper aims to explore the themes surrounding the depiction of women through biased language in television programs, examining how such language perpetuates societal perceptions, and contributes to the broader discourse on gender roles in various disciplines in the community.

According to Llorns et al. (2021), feminist linguistics dissect how language contributes to the construction and preservation of gender identities and the gender-related power gradient. Study results highlight that language is not just a communication tool but also a tool that can embody societal norms and expectations regarding different genders (Meier et al., 2020). In the context of television broadcasting, programs that incorporate of biased language can potentially negatively impact gender roles (Stewart et al., 2021).

According to Valkenburg et al. (2016), media effects theory indicates that media can influence an audience's perceptions and behaviors. Russell and Shrum (2021) discuss cultivation theory which suggests explicitly that prolonged exposure to television content can shape viewers' worldviews, including their beliefs about gender roles (Santoniccolo et al., 2023). These two theories provide the framework essential for understanding how the use of biased language in television programming can normalize harmful stereotypes about women.

The use of phrases or expressions that characterize women as inherently weaker or inferior, such as derogatory descriptors or comparative weak terms, is prevalent in television programs. These terms derogate women's strength, intellect, or emotional resilience (Madani et al., 2023; Santoniccolo et al., 2023). Some studies have indicated that such descriptions can lead to negative beliefs about women's capabilities and roles in families (Gurieva et al., 2022), which in some cases can diminish their societal status.

In television narratives, such as Marvel and Star Wars franchises in 2009 and 2012 males were often described as heroes or protagonists. Conversely, females were given characters relegated to supporting roles or portrayed with flaws that undermine their role in social life (Clarke & Hines, 2024; Rasmussen et al., 2021). Gender-biased language can add to the above dynamics when females are commonly characterized with qualifiers indicating that they are more vulnerable or weaker than males (García-González et al., 2019).

Some of these qualifiers include displaying femininity as weakness and endorsing masculine norms of toughness and dominance (Connor et al., 2017; Reidy et al., 2015). This approach can influence the television audience's perceptions of women's roles in social life (Gurieva et al., 2022; Meier et al., 2020).

The description of women in violent contexts, such as combat sports or action films, often uses biased language that frames female characters as outliers or exceptions to the norm (Lwamba et al., 2022). Statements where female characters are appraised using phrases typically applied to the male gender suggest that those traits are not a natural characteristic associated with women, thus reinforcing the stereotype that women are not designed for roles that might require strength or aggression (Rasmussen et al., 2021). The attitude of questioning women's strength highlights the need for a more inclusive approach to realizing their potential and refining the definitions of characteristics that have historically limited them.

According to Santoniccolo et al (2023), television programming plays an essential role in shaping societal norms regarding gender roles. When biased language and stereotypical terms are frequently used in dialogue within television programs, women's experiences are framed in ways to indicate that women do not have the same potential as men (Suchana, 2024). Study results have suggested that audiences can adopt gendered-biased perspectives, leading to both optimal and suboptimal perceptions of women's capacities and societal roles (Glazbrook et al., 2025).

Exposure to biased language in television can profoundly affect viewers' self-esteem and identity, particularly among women (Merino et al., 2024). Some studies suggest that terms or language that give women passive roles can lead to diminished self-worth and aspiration among women, perpetuating cycles of gender inequality in the community (Sulla et al., 2025). These negative portrayals can lead to diminishing women's self-esteem and make them less likely to pursue their goals and assert their potential.

In recent years, there has been a noticeable shift toward more empowering portrayals of women in television broadcasts in some communities. Feminist principles are increasingly woven into narratives into narrative that challenge traditional stereotypes, using language to highlight women's strength, complex, and agency across various disciplines (Stewart et al., 2021). Positive representation of women has the potential to reshape audience perceptions and inspire a more equitable worldview, especially in communities within developing countries where women do not have the same rights as men (Esquierdo-Leal et al., 2021).

The rise of media literacy campaigns accentuates critical engagement with the language used in television programming (Polanco-Levicán & Salvo-Garrido, 2022). Several activist groups including the United Nations Women and the International Federation of Journalists are advocating for fairer and more representative language

that encourages audiences, particularly women and girls, to question stereotypes and demand more accurate and equitable representation of gender roles (Ozer, 2023). This grassroots approach to recognizing e the impact of media consumption on gender roles improves awareness and activism toward gender equity (Dai et al., 2025).

1.1. Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative thematic study was to investigate the presence and implications of biased language directed towards Afghan women as represented in television channels based in Afghanistan. By conducting a thematic analysis of selected video content from popular Afghan television channels on YouTube, this study aimed to identify recurring patterns of biased language and socio-cultural narratives that perpetuate stereotypes and gender-biased language negatively affecting Afghan women.

1.2. Significance

This study is crucial for understanding the use of language and gender dynamics in Afghanistan. YouTube and other streaming platforms have become critical sources for disseminating information and shaping public perception (Zimba et al., 2024). Examining biased language in this context is vital for several reasons. It can enhance the body of knowledge concerning the negative impact of biased language on marginalizing Afghan women, and provide insights into how it can exacerbate systemic biases, with potential negative implications for Afghan societal norms. The findings of this study can be used to support the avoidance of stereotypical or biased phrases and expressions in Afghan television programs and to promote awareness of the negative impacts of stereotypical phrases and biased expressions on communication within Afghan communities.

2. Methods and Study Design

2.1. Study design

A descriptive phenomenological design was used in the study to highlight information and insight that is not generated from large amounts of data but, conversely, gathered through an intensive study of experiences (Husserl, 2012; Moustakas, 1994). A descriptive phenomenological design contextualizes the individual's lived experiences and encounters with gender-biased terminology against Afghan women (Starks et al., 2007) to assess how these biased phrases and expressions might impact Afghan women's roles in the community (Lopez & Willis, 2004). This approach provided the focus group with an opportunity to share their perceptions after watching the Shamshad TV and Tolo TV broadcasts that contained gender-biased terminology. The approach of the study is focused on asking the focus group to share their insights on the selected broadcast programs: "How did they feel after listening and watching the clips? (Neubauer et al., 2019). This study aimed to analyze gender-biased terms used in Afghan television (TV) channels Tolo News and Shamshad. The data was manually collected from 2023 to 2024 from selected Afghan TV channels on YouTube.

The selection of these Afghan TV channels (Tolo News and Shamshad) was based on specific criteria. These TV channels were chosen because they have a subscriber count of more than 100,000 as of May 2025. Additionally, the channels maintained active broadcasting on YouTube during the study period and consistently posted content on the platform.

This study assessed programs focused on the social, political, and educational needs of Afghans, published between January 1, 2023, and December 31, 2024. Special attention was paid to significant TV shows, including Shamshad TV's Tawda Bahsona and Tolo News' Tawdi Khabari, which featured discussions on gender-related issues, education, and women's rights. Tawda Bashsona (hot discussion), and Tawdi Kabhabari (hot talks) are 30–45-minute programs that feature one host, typically a TV channel employee, and one to three guests, often Afghan residents with expertise in the topic at hand. The host asks common open-ended questions related to the topic and gives dedicated time to every guest to discuss their answers.

A study protocol was in place to ensure a thorough extraction of data. The manual data extraction process began by accessing each selected TV channel on YouTube and selecting the societal/culturally focused TV programs through each channel's playlist. The researcher then selected the programs that focused on women's rights, women's education, women's access to work, and women's economic independence. The principal researcher navigated through the timeline of posts for each TV channel within the specified timeframe.

First, the Afghan TV program was identified from selected Afghan TV channels that met the inclusion criteria, based on its content. Sonix, an automated transcription application, converted the selected audio/videos recordings into written text. After the video was uploaded to Sonix, the focus review group reviewed and edited the transcription for any errors, and the clean transcript was exported for thematic analysis. Nvivo, which is a qualitative data analysis tool, was used to organize, code, and conduct thematic analysis. When the data was imported into the qualitative software, codes were organized into themes and grouped to form overarching categories. Every theme was reviewed by the focus group for coherence, ensuring it entailed the essence of the data.

The focus group preidentified the pejorative terms typically associated with gender bias. The focus group listened to the broadcast. They then identified relevant phrases from each of the identified TV shows. They recorded these terms on individual sheets of paper which included the TV channel name, the identified phrase and expressions. Then the focus group written evaluations were compared with terms recorded in a spreadsheet based on the thematic analysis of the recorded transcripts of the same broadcasts. The Excel spreadsheet included details such as the TV channel name, the identified phrase and expression, and appropriate engagement metrics (likes, shares, and comments).

2.2. Validation Process

Different Afghanistan television programs were used to ensure a comprehensive representation of perspectives, including programs that featured discussions on Afghan Women's issues. Moreover, programs with time periods exceeding one year were used, which may have influenced language, attitude, and perception toward Afghan women.

The focus group was involved in the analysis, coding decisions, and identifying the themes. For data confirmation, we engaged peers with a background in qualitative research to review the thematic interpretation and coding scheme. After the codes, subthemes, and the themes were developed, we shared the findings with an expert familiar with Afghanistan television programs and culture to validate the interpretation. We incorporated their feedback to reflect the nuances of language use accurately.

3. Results

The thematic analysis of biased language on the Shamshad Tawda Bahsona and Tolo News Tawdi Khabari TV channels in Afghanistan revealed significant patterns of gender-biased language used in these programs covering women's rights, women's education, and other daily social problems in Afghanistan. Seven key themes and 28 subthemes emerged from the data analysis using Sonix, a qualitative software, and a review of the focus group responses (see **Figure 1**). Each theme reflected a sample of the ongoing societal perceptions regarding masculinity and femininity among Afghans within their community. (Identified focus Group in the results are reported using pseudonyms to protect confidentiality; see **Table 1**).

Figure 1: Themes and subthemes

Table 1: Socio-demographics of focus group

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Residence	Education	Ethnicity
Ms. Karimi	24	Female	Urban	Bachelors	Tajik
Mr. Khan	30	Male	Urban	Bachelors	Tajik
Mr. Qader	24	Male	Urban	Bachelors	Pashtun
Ms. Haider	25	Female	Rural	Bachelor	Tajik
Ms. Faroqi	18	Female	Urban	High School	Hazara
Mr. Nazi	26	Male	Urban	High School	Pashtun

Mr. Pushton	30	Male	Urban	Doctorate	Tajik
Ms. Afghan	31	Female	Rural	Bachelor	Pashtun
Mr. Akbar	35	Male	Urban	Master's	Tajik
Ms. Najem	28	Female	Urban	Medical Doctor	Pashtun
Mr. Wardag	24	Male	Suburb	Medical Student	Pashtun
Ms. Homa	28	Female	Urban	High School	Tajik
Ms. Nazari	24	Female	Urban	Bachelor	Tajik

3.1. Theme 1: We are men, not women

The first theme highlighted a division between men's and women's identities, represented in broadcasts from Shamshad Tawda Bahsona and Tolo News Tawdi Khabari TV channels in Afghanistan. The focus group interpreted this theme as a prevailing notion that suggested that Afghan men have strength and dominance while relegating Afghan women to a position of inferiority. This binary perception was observed in Tawda Basoona and Twade Kabari during discussions, where masculinity was frequently asserted as a source of pride. Ms. Najem (pseudonym) had the following comment:

> "When I heard this phrase, as a woman who was born and lives in a traditional patriarchal society, it was not a simple sentence for me. It reminded me of all the discrimination, inequalities, and injustices that men in such a system impose directly on the women and girls of their own families, and indirectly on women and girls outside their families.
> In my view, men's superiority over women is irrational, because both are human beings and creations of Allah. Neither has any inherent advantage or weakness over the other, and therefore no one should be given priority or higher value based solely on gender".

3.2. Theme 2: We are not women who sit at home

The second theme that was noticed on Shamshad Tawda Bahsona and Tolo News Tawdi Khabari TV channels in Afghanistan, was the dismissal of domestic roles typically associated with women, suggested a desire to separate men's identity-related tasks from traditional women's tasks. The focus group presented a narrative for this theme, indicating that men pride themselves on activities and engagement in public spheres. This notion perpetuates the idea that value is derived primarily from accomplishments outside the home rather than tasks completed within it. Ms. Karimi (Pseudonym) had the following comment

> "Although we can say in today's world that yes women are more in charge of domestic responsibilities, this sentence is more about conveying the sense of "we are stronger and more capable" so not only this sentence, but any sentence that stereotypes any particular race or gender MUST trigger the anger in people".

3.3. Theme 3: We are not weak like women

The third theme that was observed during discussions among participants, as they answered the host's questions on Shamshad TV Tawda Bahsona and Tolo News Tawdi Khabari programs in Afghanistan, specifically highlighting the contrast between strength and weakness, was expressed in the form of a third theme: harmful masculinity standards. Mr. Akbari (pseudonym) had the following comment:

> "Anyone who says such a thing and believes it has, in fact, insulted half of the human society—that is, women—and has overlooked and underestimated their unique abilities and characteristics. How can one call a mother, who is a woman, weak when she rocks the cradle with one hand and the world with the other?"

3.4. Theme 4: A woman's place is inside the home, not outside

During the discussion on Shamshad TV's Tawda Bahsona and Tolo News Tawdi Khabari, participants statements in one of the programs reflected this theme. According to the focus group interpretation, this theme reflected a clear bias towards traditional domestic roles for women, frequently highlighting that the home is the primary domain for women. Continuously raising this theme in daily conversations and in the media may lead to societal expectations that devalue women's participation in the workforce and public life. Mr. Wardaq (pseudonym) had the following comment:

> "It's absurd to limit women to the home and waste their potential. Women's roles are equally important as men's roles in society. A small illustration: imagine how a society would look without female doctors."

3.5. Theme 5: We are not women to be afraid

According to the focus group interpretation, this theme conceptualized fear, particularly in vulnerable situations, noted in conversation on Shamshad TV's Tawda Bahsona and Tolo News Tawdi Khabari. This theme was linked to femininity, suggesting that men are expected to be fearless and assertive compared to women. Persistent use of this theme can lead to stigmatizing emotional expressions as a sign of weakness. Ms. Haider (pseudonym) had the following comment:

> "We are not women to be scared. We've realized our strength, our power, and our role in society. We're not afraid of being judged by others. We're not afraid to take part in any role or to share our ideas in a discussion. There's nothing a woman should be afraid of. "

3.6. Theme 6: We do not wear women's bangles

Like many other cultures, bangles are traditional accessories for Afghan women. The theme identified by the focus group was "We do not wear women's bangles". The theme was featured on broadcasts on Shamshad TV's Tawda Bahsona and Tolo News Tawdi Khabari during discussions among on-air participants. According to the focus groups' interpretation, this theme symbolizes a broader rejection of traits or behaviors associated with women, and this language reinforces the boundaries of acceptable expressions or traits related to men. Ms. Nazari (pseudonym) had the following comment:

> "When I hear the phrase in the conversation 'We do not wear women's bangles, ' it actually hurts me. I find it disrespectful because wearing bangles is not a sign of weakness, nor should it be looked down upon. For many women, bangles are a symbol of femininity and culture. I feel like some men say things like this to separate themselves from women, as if being a woman means being weak which I find both hurtful and, in a way, a bit ironic. It reveals a mindset that still looks at women as 'less, ' and that's not okay. "

3.7. Theme 7: We can take care of our women

This theme was featured on Shamshad TV's Tawda Bahsona and Tolo News Tawdi Khabari during discussions among on-air participants, indicating an ostensibly protective theme when it comes to the cultural protection for women. This sentiment implied a paternalistic view of women. According to the focus group interpretation, this theme suggests that men provide protection to women in Afghan society, which can reflect the minimization of women's autonomy. This implies that women's primary role is to be reliant on men, and these statements can potentially diminish women's independence in the Afghan community. Ms. Faroqi (pseudonym) had the following comment:

> "When I hear the phrase "We can take care of our women, "honestly I get two different feelings. On one side, it sounds good like showing care, support, and responsibility. It gives me a warm feeling that women are valued and protected.

But on the other side, it feels a bit strange, as if women cannot take care of themselves and always need someone else to protect them. That part makes me uncomfortable, because I believe women are strong and independent too. So, for me, this phrase has both a positive and a negative side. Mostly, it depends on how people mean it".

4. Discussion

The identified themes in the qualitative study on the use of gender-biased language and the role of Afghan women as reflected in local television programs may indicate how the Afghan population perceives women's roles in society. These identified themes through the use of a transcript analysis of on-air programs and focus group review of the broadcasts demonstrate attitudes that can perpetuate stereotypes for women in Afghan society, highlighting the media's role in preserving these narratives.

The phrases "We are men, not women or We do not wear women's bangles" can highlight an adherence to traditional concepts of masculinity in Afghan communities. Exposure of the general population to such stereotypical phrases, can impact all aspects of daily life where men are often considered to have strength and authority, while women are positioned in inferior or supplementary roles (Kim & Park, 2018). It has been widely studied how media can influence public perception of how both men and women view their identities and roles in society (DeLay et al., 2018). According to Andersson and Harnois (2020), the effects of this gender bias on women have been indicated in their experiences of gender discrimination with elevated rates of depression and psychological distress, poorer mental functioning, and lower life satisfaction.

The second identified theme "We are not women who sit at home" and the fourth identified theme "A woman's place is inside the home, not outside" reflected of traditional gender roles that restrict Afghan women to functioning primarily in the home. These themes were aligned with Santoniccolo et al. 's (2023) findings, which highlighted the need for women to have varied roles in the community to change the perception that the role of women indicates passivity. This perception has been historically underrepresented in some traditions, including in communities Afghanistan (Merone et al., 2022).

The third theme "We are not women to be afraid" and the fifth theme "We are not weak like women" were interpreted by the focus group as an association between Afghan women and weakness. These themes align with the findings of Bareket and Fiske (2025), who noted that the presence of attitudes and stereotypes similar to the third theme. This theme of weakness related to women undermines women's roles and constrains the perception of strength as a trait of men (Smith et al., 2021). According to Graham et al. (2024), the implications of attitudes similar to theme three can lead to an environment with aggressive behaviors and potentially increasing violence against women.

5. Limitation

The investigation of only two Afghan television channels, Shamshad and Tolo News, can limit the generalizability of the findings, as they do not reflect broader trends in programs related to Afghan social life. Additionally, reliance on an Afghan focus group for the review of selected transcripts and the content and interpretation of Shamshad and Tolo News television programs could have introduced subjectivity into the interpretation of the findings. Furthermore, the one-year temporal scope may not have adequately captured fluctuations in programming or shifts in language use over time in Afghan social life, and the analysis may have overlooked the cultural and contextual differences that influence language and phrase usage in social programs on Afghan television.

6. Conclusion

This study provides a unique analysis of gender biases in terminology noticed in the television broadcasts that limit Afghan women's roles and puts them in a weakened position. Through the study of broadcasts from Shamshad

television's Tawda Bahsona and Tolo News' Tawdi Khabari on YouTube, seven key themes were identified that reveal underlying potential societal perceptions and attitudes toward gender roles in Afghanistan.

Moreover, the findings of the study highlight the presence of a dichotomy between Afghan men and women in the context of discussions on the aforementioned television programs. Such gender-biased contents in the language perpetuate dominance for men and reinforces traditional gender roles for women that limit Afghan women's roles to domestic tasks. In summary, the findings of the study emphasize the need for Afghan television programs to adopt a gender inclusive and equitable approach and avoid gender-biased language when representing Afghan women's roles within their community. This practice will enhance the perception of gender equality among people in Afghanistan.

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