

DISCURSIVE STRATEGIES USED ON PLACARD AGAINST FEMICIDE IN KENYA, AFRICA: A SOCIO-DIAGNOSTIC CRITIQUE

Nsom Karlson Nsom¹, Brinda Chowdhari²

1 Ph.D. Scholar English, Sharda University, India

2 Associate Professor of Linguistics, Sharda University, India



ABSTRACT

Efforts have been made to promote women's rights worldwide. These efforts include establishing platforms such as UN Women, the Global Fund for Women, and the African Women's Development and Communication Network. Despite these efforts, countless cases of femicide are reported daily. Simply put, femicide is the intentional killing of women based on gender.¹ As Yacob-Haliso and Falola (2021) claim that media facilitates public dialogue and questions unjust social practices against women, other related previous research on women's issues has been driven by the conventional media that often project women as sex objects, who are morally deficient and vulnerable (see, Mudhai et al., 2016). It is hypothesized that the discursive strategies used on placards on femicide can play a key role in social justice advocacy. As such, the study attempts to account for such strategies. Kenya is used as the case study. The country is among the top in the African continent as per femicide-reported cases and was recently reported with a femicide case early January 2024. The material for the analysis consists of a report by WION a world news agency. The report is in the form of a video so to ease analysis, the placards protesters carry in the video were taken and downsized for analysis. Ruth Wodak's discursive historical approach under critical discourse study (CDS) was used to inform how language use in the placards reflects the state of femicide in Kenya. Results show how protesters challenge violence against women and make calls for vital societal changes and governmental actional reforms to end the situation. Specific discursive strategies such as nomination present Kenya as a country trapped in a crisis in gender relations and public safety. Meanwhile, predication, argumentation and perspectivation denounce femicide and celebrate equality, intensification and mitigation reveal that misogyny can be handled by structural and cultural reforms and a shared social responsibility.

Keywords: Discursive Strategies, Femicide, Kenya, Placards, Social Justice

Introduction

Femicide is a word used to refer to the intentional killing of women based on their gender (European Union, 2023). The word was coined in the 1970s by Diana Russell. As mentioned by Boonzaier and Floretta (2023), Radford and Russell postulate that the term describes a situation where a woman is killed by a man as motivated by factors such as anger, contempt, hatred, pleasure or even some sense of ownership of women as sometimes the case in patriarchal societies. The cases of femicide are reported in Africa and worldwide. As such it is deemed crucial to highlight and address this critical issue through the various means possible and available. One such potential means includes the writings or slogans used on placards. A placard can be a printed or handwritten notice or sign carried during a demonstration for some public display. It was observed that such writings and slogans raise awareness and make clarion calls for action. So this paper is in an attempt to provide a socio-diagnostic critique of discursive strategies used on placards in protests against femicide in Kenya, Africa. Such a critique mainly highlights the persuasive nature of discursive practices which are negotiated by contextual knowledge, and social and theoretical models (Reisigl, Martin, and Ruth Wodak, 2017). While related literature shows that activism has been central to violence perpetrated against women (Crenshaw), there is insufficient account of the impact of discursive features used in the writings and slogans. In the context of Africa, the use of placards displaying powerful slogans has emerged as a prominent tactic in protests against femicide (Kangere et al., 2017). Efforts have been made to promote women's rights worldwide. These efforts include establishing platforms such as UN Women, the Global Fund for Women, and the African Women's Development and Communication Network. Nonetheless, several cases of femicide are reported across the world. For instance, BBC News on May 23, 2022, reported on femicide detectives, and France 24 English on March 7, 2022, reported Femicide in Germany: A silent epidemic. According

¹ Femicide is caused by gender roles, discrimination, unequal power distribution and or unjust social norms. Five essential facts to know about femicide, 23 November, 2023. UN Women

to Amnesty International, more than 500 cases of femicide were recorded in Kenya between the years 2016 and December 2023 (BBC News Nairobi, January 2024). Faced with femicide, Yacob-Haliso and Falola (2021) have claimed that media facilitates public dialogue and questions such unjust social practices against women. Previous studies on women's issues (see, Mudhai et al., 2016) have claimed that conventional media often project women as sex objects, who are morally deficient and vulnerable. Given that a formal account of discourses against femicide can deal with nuances, patterns, and implications of language in social justice advocacy. This study aims to demystify the discursive strategies women use in their discourses on femicide. This can add to inform policy frameworks and create more awareness to combat femicide in Africa and beyond.

Discursive-Historical Approach

Discursive strategies used on placards to frame discourses against femicide in Africa are uncovered in this paper. This is done with the application of the discursive-historical approach (DHA). DHA is one of the core postulations of Critical Discourse Study or the former critical discourse analysis (CDA) (see, Reisigl & Wodak, 2001, 2009; Wodak, 2011, 2013 as cited in Wodak, 2015 p.1). CDS accounts for language use above the sentence level and forms of meaning-making from visuals and sounds. According to Wodak (2011), DHA is apt to evaluate decision-making patterns and social change in different countries. The study applies the theory's principle of triangulation which consists of consulting different research materials, methods, theories, and background information to reduce subjective statements (Wodak, 2011, p. 65). DHA is used to interpret women's discourse confronted by femicide. The focus is on the implications of the language used in people's placards. A cross-section of these discursive strategies used for analysis are:

- Nomination looks at how the actors and groups are named and constructed.
- Predication considers the qualities or characteristics attributed to these actors or groups.
- Argumentation justifies the reasoning patterns and justifications presented.
- Perspectivation states the positioning or viewpoint from which the discourse is constructed.
- Intensification and Mitigation pinpoint the strategies to amplify or tone down certain discursive elements.

These strategies aim to discursively qualify social actors and make sense of the language that approves or disapproves of social practices around them.

Literature Review

As mentioned in the opening chapter of this paper, several sources have attempted to define the notion of femicide. This section of the study provides an extensive knowledge of how such a practice persists in Africa, particularly in the case of South Africa and Kenya. Previous concerns and directions are discussed and a new dimension is used to make sense of how placards can contribute to this awareness.

One of the causes of femicide is power imbalance (Kangere et al., 2017). Such disproportion causes violence and in this case, against women. This dynamism demands preventive and innovative programs. Social media plays a role in mobilizing feminist activism and creating awareness about violence against women. It serves as a tool to engage a wider audience. The paper outlines the efforts of the Gender-based Violence (GBV) Prevention Network in the Horn, East, and Southern Africa (HESA) to foster community mobilization and advocacy through accessible social media platforms. Campaigns that have been launched to discourage patriarchy and gender-based violence are enhanced. One of the challenges is that the talks around feminism are sometimes overlooked in media as such, media is projected as a platform significantly viable for social change. The change is defined as inherently necessary and not a Western fabric. This is to give a voice to the voiceless to express their daily experiences and realities.

Mathews et al. (2008) particularly look at the number of intimate femicide cases. By providing a cross-examination of the incidence and patterns of this situation in South Africa, they identify a total of 3,793 victims with an 86.6% death toll that mainly results from suicides. The perpetrators of such acts are reported to be younger, employed, white or Indian and own a gun in most cases as they affiliate with the security department. In essence, three key

factors are responsible for intimate femicide. These include jealousy, the employment status of the perpetrator, possessiveness, racial background, and legal gun ownership. The study suggests measures to reduce gun ownership to directly address the increasing number of femicides.

Issues related to femicide have been approached through a decolonised lens (Boonzaier & Floretta, 2023). This offers a unique shift from the traditional feminist views that are somewhat restricted to patriarchy. Femicide and gender violence is seen to be intertwined with colonial power and racial tendencies in South African media reports. This has the potential to impact the public, its discourse on gender, and its comprehension in a wider historical background. As such, the conclusion is that the way femicide is reported matters. This is so because it can either normalize the violence against women or dismiss it as a distant practice other than a common one.

Previous studies on femicide have not considered evaluating discursive strategies used on posters to question femicide in Kenya. As such, this paper sought to evaluate the impact of posters as bearers of linguistic features capable of creating awareness and influencing policy for human welfare.

The objective of the study

As revealed in the research gap, this study mainly aimed at examining the effectiveness of language used on placards against femicide. Discursive strategies are specifically pinpointed therein. This can add to inform policy frameworks and create more awareness to combat femicide in Kenya, Africa and across the world.

Method, Data Source and Material

The study used a qualitative content analysis of a video report by WION. WION is an acronym for World is One News, based in Noida, India. The news channel reports issues around the world in English. The selection criteria handpicked only discourses that contain women's reactions to femicide cases. In doing so, the paper attempts to illustrate how discursive strategies are used on placards to counter the situation as projected through broadcast media. Activism in media is a common practice not just in Africa but across the world. To illustrate, media outlets such as BBC News on May 23, 2022, reported on femicide detectives. France 24 English on March 7, 2022, reported Femicide in Germany: A silent epidemic. In this study, samples were drawn from Kenya. This is an African country known with the highest and most recent number of reported femicide cases. The report used in this study witnessed the highest mobilisation and demonstration and it is the most recently reported (16 January 2024). The research materials, method, theories and background information were all used to reduce any form of subjective statements and conclusions (see, Wodak, 2011, p. 65).

Results and Discussion

This section elucidates nuances, patterns and implications of the language used in the placards for social justice advocacy against femicide in Kenya.

Linguistic Power in Voices Against Femicide in Kenya

The first placard below shows a woman holding a message that reads "END FEMICIDE NOW!!!" The message is in bold an in upper case letters. Nomination is employed in the first placard as, "femicide" clearly spells out the violence against women. This label implies that femicide is a severe and a gender-specific crime. Exclamation marks on the placards is the intensification strategy, which is effectively translates protesters' demand for urgent action to end femicide.



Placards 1 & 2. End Femicide Now

Similarly, predication is used as a strategy to frame femicide as an emergency. This projects Kenya as a country in crisis where femicide cases continue unrestricted. The placards the protesters use to demonstrate are symbolic of their visible anger and frustration and vulnerability. This projects the issue as both personal and communal. Similarly, the second placard with the text in Swahili, translating to “Respect every woman’s life, regardless of her job or status,” broadens the call for respect.



Kenya Femicide: Women angered at Gender Based Violence | World of Africa



Placard 3. Protect Them.

On the third placard, another protester holds a sign that reads, “PROTECT THEM!!” while others in the background carry signs with similar calls. Here, nomination shifts from specific instances of violence to the broader need for protection. The phrase presents Kenyan women as potential victims. This reveals some sense of alarm. In addition, the presence of other activists such as Perpetua Kariuki adds substance to the protest. By implication, gender-based violence is as a result of widespread societal failure. Another discursive strategy evident here is intensification. The upper case letters and the exclamation marks used to amplify and request for immediate government action and societal intervention.

Revealing Misogyny Through Protest Language in Kenya



Kenya Femicide: Women angered at Gender Based Violence | World of Africa



Kenya Femicide: Women angered at Gender Based Violence | World of Africa



Placard 4 & 5. Stop Killing us.

The fourth placard deepens the narrative by showcasing signs with phrases like “STOP KILLING US” and “Kenyan women are not safe,” alongside other placards condemning "MISOGYNY" in Kenyan society. Nomination in this context labels the violence as a direct, active threat to women’s lives, with a clear definition of femicide as a deeply rooted societal misogyny. Predication here is explicit; phrases like “Kenyan women are not safe” label women in Kenya as an endangered group, vulnerable in their communities. The sign “MISOGYNY: hard to spell, easy to practice” suggests that societal structures inherently support gender-based violence, making misogyny a societal norm that is easy to ignore but difficult to dismantle. The argumentation strategy suggests that femicide is not merely an individual issue but a symptom of a larger, structural problem within Kenyan society, a

critique directed at both the public and the government. By accusing the government of “laxity” and by displaying signs that challenge misogynistic norms, the protesters construct a narrative that calls for accountability from institutions and a re-evaluation of societal values. The signs collectively argue that femicide is not an isolated problem but a consequence of a deeply entrenched culture of misogyny, urging systemic reform.

Framing Masculinity and Gendered Violence

In the sixth placard below, the phrase “Only Weak Men Kill Women” nominates perpetrators with a negative label, framing male violence as a moral and social failure. The naming of violent men as “weak,” is also a strategy to argue that true masculinity lies in respecting and protecting women. This challenges every justification for gender violence against women.



Kenya Femicide: Women angered at Gender Based Violence | World of Africa

Kenya Femicide: Women angered at Gender Based Violence | World of Africa



Placards 6 & 7. Only Weak Men Kill Women

Similarly, “Break the silence, break the cycle” in placard 7 portrays femicide as an ongoing crisis enabled by public inaction, demanding an end to this practice. The use of the term “femicide” in poster 7 identifies the targeted violence against women as systematic and rooted in gender discrimination. This uncompromising and direct language with exclamation marks and glaring phrases leaves no room for ambiguity. The blood stains virtually intensify the message and the severity and urgency of the situation at stake.

The discursive strategies across the analysed placards above all converge to present femicide in Kenya as a grave, systemic issue fueled by societal and governmental failures. Through nomination and predication, the discourse portrays Kenyan women as under threat due to a lack of protection and pervasive misogynistic violence. Argumentation frames femicide as both a human rights issue and a national crisis, necessitating immediate action. The perspective conveyed is one of activism and resistance, with women voicing their anger and demand for safety and justice. Intensification strategies, such as exclamation marks, further accentuate the urgency, calling on the audience to recognize the depth of the crisis and the need for substantial societal change.

Conclusion

This study has used Ruth Wodak's discursive strategies to discern powerful narratives around femicide in Africa, Kenya. With a focus on nomination, predication, perspectivation, argumentation and intensification, the implication of language framed and used in the placards shows how protesters challenge and oppose the acceptance of violence against women and make clarion calls for vital societal changes and governmental reforms for recognition and actionable steps to end situation. These discursive strategies paint a powerful image of Kenya as a society struggling with a profound crisis in gender relations and public safety. The repeated calls for protection and safety, along with explicit references to misogyny, imply that both structural and cultural reforms are necessary. The activists are not only highlighting the issue but also framing it as a shared social responsibility, calling upon citizens and authorities alike to recognize and act against the normalization of violence against women in all ramifications.

References

- Amenga-Etego, Rose. "Violence against women in contemporary Ghanaian society." *Theology & sexuality* 13.1 (2006): 23-46.
- Aramburu, Diana. "Searching for Answers in Fiction? Examining the Femicide and Gender Violence Crises in Literature Courses." *Hispania* 103.3 (2020): 315-322.
- Boonzaier, Floretta A. "Spectacularising narratives on femicide in South Africa: A decolonial feminist analysis." *Current Sociology* 71.1 (2023): 78-96.
- Corradi, C. *Femicide, its causes and recent trends: what do we know? European Union, Brussels. EP/EXPO/DROI/FWC/2019-01/LOT6/1/C/12, 2021.*
- European Union. *Defining and Identifying Femicide: A Literature Review*. Publications Office of the European Union, 2023, <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/718210>
- Kangere, Maureen, Jean Kemitare, and Lori Michau. "Hashtag activism: popularizing feminist analysis of violence against women in the Horn, East and Southern Africa." *Feminist Media Studies* 17.5 (2017): 899-902.
- Mathews, Shanaaz, et al. "Intimate femicide-suicide in South Africa: a cross-sectional study." *Bulletin of the World Health Organization* 86 (2008): 542-558.
- Reisigl, Martin, and Ruth Wodak. "The discourse-historical approach." *The Routledge handbook of critical discourse studies*. Routledge, 2017. 44-59.
- Wodak, Ruth. "Critical discourse analysis, discourse-historical approach." *The international encyclopedia of language and social interaction* (2015): 1-14.

Pratibha
Spandan