

## **Socio-Cultural Shifts in The Representation of Gender (In)Equality in Africa**

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**ABSTRACT:** *Like anywhere else, many African societies were historically characterised by traditional gender roles and patriarchal structures, where men held dominant positions. Over time, social and political discourse on gender (in)equality in Africa has seen growing commitments to reflecting on and addressing gender disparities and equality promotion. Outside social and political discourse, literature has provided a platform to challenge stereotypes and traditional gender-based roles. African authors have portrayed the struggles, resilience, and agency of women in navigating societal expectations, patriarchal structures, and cultural barriers preventing empowerment. Through a Critical Discourse Analysis of a set of francophone African novels, this study provides insights into socio-cultural shifts in the perceptions and representation of gender (in)equality in francophone Africa. It highlights how literary representations both reflect and shape the ongoing discourse surrounding gender (in)equality. It concludes that current socio-cultural shifts in societal expectations vis-à-vis gender-related power structures in Africa can foster impactful gender empowerment.*

**KEYWORDS:** Critical Discourse Analysis, cultural barriers, gender (in)equality, gender roles, women empowerment, patriarchal structures.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Understanding gender (in)equality in a global context involves considering insights into how gender roles and inequalities have been shaped over time (McFadden, 1999). A diachronic perspective allows to unfold ways gender (in)equality discourse has evolved significantly, reflecting the changing social, cultural, and political landscapes. On one hand, socioeconomic factors, such as labour markets, educational opportunities, and access to resources have played a crucial role in shaping gender (in)equality. On the other hand, legal and policy frameworks related to the promotion and protection of gender equality and women's rights have marked significant activism and social movements.

Throughout history, Africa's social fabric has been characterised by traditional gender roles and patriarchal structures, creating a landscape where men assumed positions of dominance across the social, economic, and political spheres (Kevane, 2004). While it is important to note that Africa is a diverse continent with numerous countries and cultural

variations, there are some overarching trends and developments in the discourse on gender (in)equality. Women were often confined to subordinate positions, relegated to the peripheries of influence and decision-making systems (Amadi-Njoku and Onu, 2021). The social and political discourse has echoed the global patterns that have marred equal opportunities for centuries, with power differentials between genders translating the key foundations of communities. Cultural changes have gradually influenced gender norms, shifting social, cultural, and political landscapes to new perspectives (Prah, 2013). African societies have witnessed the emergence of feminist movements, policy reforms, and the integration of gender perspectives into development agendas (Hendricks and Sigsworth, 2016). Beyond the realms of political rhetoric and societal discourse, literature has also been one of the powerful channels for exploring and challenging gender norms, shedding light on women's experiences, and advocating for gender equality. Gender (in)equality discourse has led to profound transformations into the African narratives. In unfolding narratives, African literature emerge as both a mirror and a beacon. African writers, including those in the francophone tradition, have used their writings as instruments of change, using narratives to both explore and challenge the constructs of gender.

The aim of this study is not to analyse the data through gender equality index. Through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis, this study rather aims to use literary representations to analyse intricacies and multi-layered dimensions of gender (in)equality issues. Three novels that provide data are : *Le Destin de Laurent Tshiosha* (Destin) by François Mbiyangandu Tshibila (2020), *Le Prostitué Politique* (Prostitué) by Jean-Marie Mbailao (2021), and *Le Pousse-Pousse de Makélékélé: Une jeunesse au Congo* (Pousse-pousse) by Bernard N'kaloulou (2021).

Even though these novels are chosen from the most recent francophone African narratives, they are just a sample reflecting socio-cultural shifts in the representation of gender (in)equality in Africa. They steep in the lived experiences of characters, unravel the complexities of gender dynamics, giving us insight into how power balances are perceived and represented within the ever-evolving socio-cultural milieu of francophone Africa. They are conduits that transport readers into the very essence of societal struggles and triumphs.

It is hence important to confirm that the theme of gender (in)equality in African literature has long been a recurring thread. The literature review on the representation of gender (in)equality in African narratives confirms that African feminists have made a significant contribution to this theme. However, what sets the novels under examination in this study apart is that the advocacy for female voices is championed not by female authors, as one might expect, but by their male counterparts in African literature. This new trend in literary representation challenges conventional expectations and offers a fresh perspective on the struggle for gender equality. The power of literature lies not only in its ability to entertain and enlighten but also in its capacity to reflect and shape societal norms. When male African novelists take it upon themselves to amplify the voices of women, it signifies an important shift in the discourse surrounding gender equality. It suggests that

the fight for equal rights and opportunities is making strides beyond traditional gender boundaries, offering a glimmer of hope that the path toward a more inclusive and equitable society is being forged by diverse voices and perspectives. In this exploration, we delve into these novels and the nuanced narratives they weave, shedding light on the evolving landscape of gender equality within African literature.

### **A diachronic perspective of gender (in)equality in postcolonial Africa**

Socio-cultural attitudes towards gender roles in Africa have always related to gender stereotypes, perceptions of women's capabilities, and acceptance of gender equality as a societal value. In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, during the period of decolonisation and independence movements, African women played crucial roles in advocating for political and social change.

The 1970s and 1980s saw the rise of feminist movements in Africa, influenced by global feminist ideologies (Gouws, 2022). In her work on *Gendered Institutions and Women's Political Representation in Africa (Africa Now): From participation to transformation*, Madsen (2020) presents an account of how women organisations emerged across the continent, fighting for women's rights, education, and political representation. These movements laid the groundwork for gender equality discussions within African societies. They aimed to challenge and dismantle traditional gender norms and address the structural inequalities faced by women. The fight focused on issues such as gender-based violence, unequal access to education and healthcare, discriminatory attitudes and practices, and economic disparities.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, there was a significant shift in gender equality discourse in Africa, particularly with the adoption of international frameworks such as the *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action* in September 1995 (UN Women, 2015). African governments committed to promoting gender equality and women's empowerment by implementing policies and legislation aimed at addressing gender disparities. National gender initiatives and women's ministries were established in many countries to drive national gender equality agendas and efforts.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century has witnessed further and significant advancements in the discourse on gender equality in Africa. There has been an increasing recognition of the link between gender equality and sustainable development (Moodley et al., 2019). Efforts have been made to integrate gender perspectives into development agendas, with a focus on women's economic empowerment, political participation, and access to resources and decision-making processes. Various African countries have made efforts to advance gender equality through legislative and policy changes. In this regard, Rwanda has achieved notable progress in women's political representation, with a high percentage of women in parliament. Countries like South Africa, Ethiopia, and Kenya have also implemented gender-responsive policies and laws.

Furthermore, grassroots movements, such as Campaign for Female Education (CAMFED), Alliance for African Women Initiative (AFAWI), Network of Grassroots

Women (NEGWO), African Women's Development and Communication Network (FEMNET), Women's Rights Advancement and Protection Alternative (WRAPA), African Women's Development Fund (AWDF), Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE) and many more, and civil society organisations have played a crucial role in advancing gender equality in Africa. These organisations work on various fronts, including advocating for legal reforms, raising awareness about women's rights, providing support to survivors of gender-based violence, and promoting women's leadership and representation.

Nevertheless, whilst it is important to acknowledge that progress was made in promoting gender equality, it is equally true to state that challenges persist in achieving gender-based ambitions in Africa. Deep-rooted cultural norms, inadequate implementation of policies, and persistent gender-based violence continue to hinder progress. Additionally, the intersectionality of gender with other factors such as class, ethnicity, and geographic location further complicates the gender equality discourse. In relation to intersectionality, few African writers recognise gender equality through other social factors such as race, class, and ethnicity. Zakes Mda (2003) and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2017) examine how these intersecting identities shape individuals' experiences and influence power dynamics.

### **Representation of gender (in)equality in African narratives**

Gender equality in African literature, viewed through a diachronic perspective, reflects the changing societal attitudes, challenges, and aspirations regarding gender roles and relationships. Feminist perspectives and themes have become increasingly prominent in African literature. Authors have explored feminist ideologies, denounced patriarchal systems, and advocated for women's rights and empowerment. Works by authors like Nwapa (1966), Gordimer (1982), Emecheta (1983, 1979), Bâ (1979), Saadawi (1983), Beyala (1988), Tlali (1988), Djébar (1993), Aidoo (1994), Head (1996), Vera (1998), Ogot (2000a, 2000b), Adichie, (2006, 2017), Dangarembga (2021), Ishola-Ayodeji (2022), Guene (2023) have significantly contributed to the discourse on gender equality in Africa. These African female writers contribute to the reimagining of gender roles and inspire readers to envision more egalitarian futures. They celebrate the strength, resilience, and empowerment of women.

Through a diachronic perspective, it is evident that African literature has evolved in its portrayal of gender equality. While earlier works may have focused on the struggles and constraints faced by women, contemporary literature increasingly explores themes of resistance, empowerment, and transformation. African authors have unquestionably contributed significantly to the discourse on gender equality, reflecting the changing dynamics and aspirations of African societies.

These women's narratives that portray female characters who challenge societal expectations, overcome adversity, and assert their agency have drawn particular attention from literary critics. Nicki Hitchcott's *Women Writers in Francophone Africa* is a very rich critique in this domain. Other researchers subscribe to the same approach, including Kandé and Moudileno (1996), Ijem and Agbo (2019), Larrier (2000), and Garane (2002).

## METHODOLOGY

The analysis of the three novels adopts a critical discussion analysis. This approach enables to explore the narratives, characters, and themes within the context of broader literary, cultural, and societal discourses. The aim of employing a critical discuss analysis is to unearth the underlying meanings, perspectives, and implications reflected by these literary works. Indeed, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a methodology used to analyse various forms of texts to understand the ways in which language constructs and reflects power relations, ideologies, and social dynamics. It has been widely applied to the analysis of literary representations to uncover underlying meanings, social contexts, and ideological influences.

*Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language* by Fairclough (1995) is one of the key works that emphasise the importance of CDA in examining the relationships between language, power, and ideology. Applying CDA to literary representations can therefore unveil hidden meanings and power dynamics within the text, thus enhancing the understanding of how ideology is embedded in literature.

Elsewhere, Van Dijk's paper on *Principles of Critical Discourse Analysis* (1993) outlines the key principles of CDA, including the analysis of social power relations, socio-cognitive processes, and the role of context. He argues that these principles can be applied to explore how literary representations reinforce or challenge dominant narratives, reflecting broader societal power structures. In *Feminist Stylistics*, Mills (1995) argues that CDA can be particularly insightful in examining gender representation in literature. In this regard, applying CDA to literary texts can uncover how language choices contribute to the construction of gender roles, stereotypes, and power imbalances.

An edited volume under the title of *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis* by Wodak and Meyer (2001) provides a comprehensive overview of various methods within CDA. One chapter focuses on the application of CDA to narratives, which can encompass literary texts. In this chapter, authors argue that analysing literary representation through CDA can involve investigating narrative structures, character portrayal, and the implicit messages conveyed.

Finally, a paper on *Critical Discourse Analysis and Literary Studies* by Luke (2012) highlights the potential of CDA to enrich literary analysis by examining how language constructs meaning and reflects socio-political contexts. It concludes that integrating CDA into literary studies can unveil the ideological dimensions of texts and contribute to a deeper understanding of their implications.

Incorporating Critical Discourse Analysis into the analysis of literary representation can hence provide a multidimensional understanding of how narratives construct meaning, reinforce or challenge societal norms, and reflect power dynamics. In this regard, CDA application allows this study to uncover the ways in which literature is not only a form of

artistic expression of fictional gender (in)equality but also a platform where related ideologies and cultural transactions are contested, negotiated and reconstructed.

## DATA AND DISCUSSION

The data gleaned from the three novels constitute a valuable lens through which we can gain profound insights into the multifaceted landscape of gender (in)equality within African societies. This corpus of literary works provides a rich and textured narrative that paints a vivid picture of the prevailing attitudes and evolving perspectives concerning gender roles and disparities across the continent.

The texts serve as both mirrors and chronicles of African society, reflecting the historical and contemporary complexities surrounding gender (in)equality. They offer a compelling exploration of the roles assigned to women, often portraying them as housewives confined to domestic realms or relegated to peripheral and insignificant professional positions. Yet, these narratives are not merely static depictions of gender norms; they are also dynamic and evolving, representing a profound societal consciousness that strives for change and progress.

### **Socio-cultural shifts in the representation of gender (in)equality: The contested social and professional role of women**

*Destin's* narrative vividly underscores the pervasive and deeply ingrained gender inequality practices that persist in many African societies. It portrays an image of an African woman enduring the burden of labour disproportionately borne by women in African agricultural communities. This poignant portrayal serves as a microcosm of the broader issues surrounding the roles and expectations placed upon women, particularly in rural settings. Laurent represents the characters of Tshibila's novel who castigate this role:

« Ma mère revient des champs, un panier de manioc en équilibre sur la tête, un enfant sur le dos et, dans une main, une minuscule houe »  
(*Destin*, p.81).

[My mother returns from the fields, carrying a basket of cassava upright on her head, a child on her back, and holding a tiny hoe in one hand]

The depiction of the mother holding a hoe symbolises the traditional gender roles that confine women to manual labour in agriculture, while men often occupy positions of authority and control over land and resources. This division of labour reinforces gender disparities and restricts women's ability to participate in decision-making processes that impact their lives and communities.

This traditional role of women shouldering the responsibility of tending to crops, harvesting, and carrying heavy loads, all while at the same time caring for their children characterises many African societies. This dual role not only places immense physical strain on women but also restricts their opportunities for personal and economic

development. It perpetuates a cycle of limited access to education, employment, and decision-making power.

In one of his interactions with Laurent, one character named Marco presents vividly an account of factors contributing to gender inequalities in Africa, which lead to a despicable injustice that he wholeheartedly denounces. These include, being childbearers, enduring social injustice due to patriarchal attitudes and practices, illiteracy and ignorance of rights due to lack of education, early marriages, uncontrolled pregnancies, hard work in both fields and at homes, and many more.

« Il saisissait l'occasion pour me faire une petite dissertation sur la misère de nos mères, pauvres femmes condamnées au rôle de reproductrices inconscientes, victimes de l'ignorance, de l'injustice et des croyances rétrogrades. [...] 'N'as-tu pas remarqué combien injuste est leur situation? Analphabètes, ignorantes de leurs droits, trop jeunes mariées, condamnées à des maternités fréquentes, ininterrompues, jusqu'à épuisement et, pour la vie, livrées aux travaux harassants des champs et du ménage. À y penser, j'en éprouve le vertige et je verse des larmes pour ma mère. Pauvre femme ! Elle n'aura vécu que pour accoucher, travailler, nourrir ses innombrables enfants! Quinze maternités! Te rends-tu compte ? [...] C'est cette injustice-là que je dénonce et voudrais qu'elle cesse une fois pour toutes' » (*Destin*, p.78).

[He often took the opportunity to give me a lesson on the plight of our mothers, poor women condemned to the role of reproducers by default, victims of ignorance, injustice, and retrogressive beliefs (...). 'Have you not noticed how unjust their situation is? Illiterate, ignorant of their rights, married too young, condemned to many uncontrolled pregnancies until exhaustion, and for life, subjected to the exhausting toil of the fields and household chores. Thinking about it makes my head spin, and I shed tears for my mother. Poor woman! She will have lived only to give birth, work, and feed her countless children! Fifteen pregnancies! Can you imagine? (...). It is this injustice that I denounce and wish to end once and for all']

Indeed, in many African societies, women are primarily seen as childbearers and caregivers. This default expectation reinforces the notion that women's primary purpose is to bear children and serve as homemakers. This traditional role places a significant burden on women, often limiting their opportunities for education, employment, and personal development.

Such perceptions are entertained by social structures in many African communities and perpetuate gender injustice. These disparities reinforce the subordination of women and contribute to their unequal status in society. This can manifest in unequal access to decision-making power.

In relation to illiteracy, the World Bank 2020 data show that "Adult literacy in Sub-Saharan Africa is lower among women than among men [...] While the trend across

countries and regions shows more girls completing secondary school than boys, Sub-Saharan Africa is the only region in which the regional rate is higher for boys than for girls” (World Bank, 2020). According to Statista (2020), adult literacy rate is 72.5 for men against 58.9% for women.

It is this level of limited access to education for women that is a key driver of gender inequality. Hence, illiteracy not only limits their economic opportunities but also leaves them unaware of their legal rights. Without knowledge of their rights, women are less equipped to advocate for themselves or challenge discriminatory practices.

Furthermore, as Marco argues, early marriages, often arranged by families, result in young girls being married off before they are physically, emotionally, or mentally prepared. This practice not only curtails their educational prospects but also puts them at risk of early and frequent pregnancies, limiting their ability to engage in income-generating activities, pursue education, and perpetuating gender disparities. Early marriages and high fertility rates, coupled with inadequate healthcare, can have detrimental effects on women's health and well-being.

The exchange between Laurent and Marco serves as a powerful reminder of the need for comprehensive efforts to challenge and dismantle the deeply entrenched practices and norms that perpetuate gender inequality in Africa. It demonstrates that addressing gender inequalities in African societies requires a comprehensive approach that addresses the root causes, including challenging traditional norms, and empowering women economically, socially, and politically. It calls for a reimagining of gender roles and a commitment to creating more inclusive and equitable societies where women can fully participate in economic, political, and social life. By dismantling the barriers created by these discriminatory factors, African societies can work towards a more equitable and just future for all.

### **Representation of women as the foundation of family and social solidarity for sustainable development**

In *Destin*, entrepreneurial efforts and their success are closely linked to social solidarity, at the heart of which community spirit is the driving force. The participation of both men and women, alongside children, has yielded results beyond expectations. According to Munyangayo (2023a), “solidarity provides the opportunity to take advantage of the available skills, knowledge and resources. By creating partnerships and collaborations, people can use solidarity strengths of different stakeholders to achieve greater results” (p.71). He further argues that “True solidarity requires breaking down the barriers that prevent genuine integration and creating pathways for mutual growth and prosperity” (Munyangayo, 2023b, p.58).

Indeed, beyond the narrow context of the nuclear family, the conceptualisation of solidarity in African societies primarily relies on the extended family linked by kinship. This relationship is based on either consanguinity or various alliances that bind



individuals together. It is this conception of solidarity that constitutes physical, psychological, and social strength.

It is in this line of thoughts that Laurent TSHIOSHA reminds his uncle that nothing is impossible when you have united people around you, because unity is strength: « Oui, notre nombre est notre force. Tous, hommes, femmes et même les enfants, nous formons ce nombre qui nous rend forts » (*Destin*, p. 133) [Yes, our number is our strength. All, men, women, and even children, together we make up this number that makes us strong]. The number of people involved or likely to contribute to solidarity efforts is generally a key factor that plays a significant role in planning and perceptions of expected outcomes in African societies. In most of African societies, the notion of having many children is deeply intertwined with cultural, social, and economic dynamics (Geschiere, 2020). This factor of number becomes a potent force that fosters solidarity that ultimately drives development.

Firstly, in agrarian African societies, having a large family is traditionally considered advantageous for labour-intensive activities such as farming. Many hands are needed for cultivating the land, and a larger family can harness collective efforts, increasing agricultural productivity. This physical strength also extends to other communal tasks, creating a labour force capable of undertaking substantial projects.

Secondly, the concept of the extended family, rooted in African kinship systems, promotes social cohesion and security (Goody, 1973). A large family network provides a safety net during times of hardship, ensuring mutual support and a sense of belonging. Moreover, it strengthens social bonds, promoting community development initiatives and cooperation. Psychologically, a large family offers emotional support, fosters a sense of identity, and provides a support system in times of distress. This psychological resilience can empower individuals to pursue opportunities, contributing to societal progress.

What is very relevant in the texts of the corpus is not just the simplistic view of solidarity based on the number of people, but rather and above all, the participation and contribution of women to collective entrepreneurial endeavours and actions.

« Il y a un avenir dans ce village, comme il y en a partout où des hommes et des femmes ont assez de foi et d'imagination pour monter des projets et les mener à bonne fin. Je suis persuadé que mon frère appartient à cette trempe de personnes et que des projets, il en a pour lui-même et pour ce village qui lui est cher comme il l'est à nous » (*Destin*, p.127).

[As it is the case everywhere when men and women have enough faith and imagination for innovative projects to be carried out successfully, this village has a bright future. I am convinced that my brother belongs to this kind of people and that he has projects, both for himself and for this village that is dear to him as it is to us].

Traditionally, discussions surrounding solidarity have often centered around the sheer number of individuals involved in collective efforts. While numerical strength can indeed be a source of power, the nuanced perspective offered by the corpus texts emphasizes that true solidarity transcends this simplistic view. It goes beyond mere headcount to recognize the diverse skills, experiences, and perspectives that individuals, particularly women, bring to the table. If in many societies, women have historically been relegated to the sidelines when it comes to entrepreneurial activities and decision-making processes, the corpus texts however shed light on the transformative role that women can play in collective entrepreneurship. They underscore the fact that women's active participation is not just a matter of gender equality but a crucial component of building effective and resilient collective enterprises.

Women's contributions to collective entrepreneurial actions encompass a wide range of skills and attributes. They often bring innovative ideas, strong organisational capabilities, and a deep understanding of community needs to the table. Moreover, women's involvement often fosters a more inclusive and diverse decision-making process, which can lead to more comprehensive and sustainable entrepreneurial initiatives.

Furthermore, the corpus texts challenge the notion that women's roles should be limited to providing support behind the scenes. Instead, they highlight how women can be key drivers of change and progress within collective entrepreneurial ventures. This shift in perspective has the potential to challenge and redefine traditional gender roles and empower women to take on leadership roles. It is clear the literary texts provide a critical perspective on the concept of solidarity in collective entrepreneurship. By embracing and empowering women as integral members of collective entrepreneurial actions, societies can unlock new possibilities for economic growth and community development.

### **Socio-cultural shifts in the representation of gender (in)equality: the determination of women to take a stand within patriarchal societies**

In African societies, despite women's pivotal role in providing various family care services, men have always served as the preferred reference for important decisions, often excluding the women and rendering them passive partners and interlocutors. Within and beyond the family settings, women have also been excluded from debates. Nevertheless, as gender equality initiatives gained momentum, there has been a significant determination among women to step up and take a stand against patriarchal pressures. In the novels of the corpus, some female characters are resolved to challenge the dominance of their husbands. In *Pousse-pousse*, Jean-Marie's wife rebels against the burdens of a marriage that demands from her unconditional acceptance of her husband's actions and practices, including their children's relationships and having extra-marital children that she refers to as «balles perdues» [wasted bullets].

« Écoute-moi bien, Jean-Marie ! À choisir entre ma fille et toi, je choisirai, sans la moindre hésitation, ma fille. Je la soutiendrai toujours, singulièrement dans cette dure épreuve qu'elle traverse. Y en a marre de faire peser sur mes enfants le poids de tes sottises. Si tu

veux qu'on divorce, et bien divorçons ! Je suis prête. De la sorte, tu pourras plus librement t'occuper de tes balles perdues de Paris » (*Pousse-pousse*, p. 192).

[Listen to me carefully, Jean-Marie! If I have to choose between my daughter and you, I will definitely choose my daughter without the slightest hesitation. I will always support her, especially during this challenging time she is going through. I have had enough of burdening my children with the consequences of your foolishness. If you want divorce, then let us get divorced! I am ready. That way, you can focus more freely on your wasted bullet in Paris].

The use of the term “foolishness” to describe the communicative encounters and actions of her husband who is publicly referred to by honorary titles of “Honourable Dignitary” and who is traditionally the sole holder of the right to speak and reason, demonstrates the extent to which the woman's determination to take a stand asserts itself.

This exchange shows that as gender equality initiatives gain momentum across Africa, there is a tangible and impactful determination among women to assert themselves and challenge deeply ingrained patriarchal pressures. One of the key drivers of this determination is education. As more African women access quality education, they are exposed to new ideas and perspectives that empower them to question the status quo. As education fosters critical thinking, it equips women with the tools to challenge societal norms that have perpetuated gender inequality for generations. It provides them with a platform to voice their concerns but also reduces their dependence on men, making it easier to challenge patriarchal authority. This justifies why Jean-Marie's wife remarks leave him speechless, feeling powerless and yet able to realise how intransigence would work against him and his interests.

« L'homme en est estomaqué. Jamais, il n'aurait imaginé pareils propos sortir de la bouche de sa femme, lui le chef de famille sur qui repose le bon pouvoir d'achat du ménage. Pourtant, peu à peu, ce dernier prend conscience que cette affaire pourrait bien lui nuire s'il n'y prend pas garde » (*Pousse-pousse*, p. 192).

[The man is stunned. As the head of the family on whom the household's purchasing power depends, he would never have imagined such words coming from his wife. However, he gradually becomes aware that not being on his guard could bring him negative consequences].

In summary, the current narratives portray African women demonstrating remarkable determination to challenge patriarchal perceptions that work against gender equality. Education leading to economic empowerment is contributing to a powerful wave of change that is breaking down traditional barriers and paving the way for a more equitable future in both social and professional contexts.

### **Socio-cultural shifts in the representation of gender (in)equality in strategic professional sectors in Africa**

In the realm of literary representations, the pivotal role of education in women empowerment emerges as a prominent theme in Africa. This narrative shift underscores the transformative power of education in challenging traditional gender norms and enabling female characters to access careers in sectors historically dominated by men. This profound transformation is not merely a literary device but reflects the evolving social and professional landscape across the continent.

Speaking about the future of his friend Marco's daughter, Laurent is convinced that « La fille, libérée des entraves discriminatoires des sociétés traditionnelles, pousserait les études le plus loin possible » (*Destin*, p.78) [His daughter, free from the discriminatory constraints of traditional societies, would push her studies as far as possible].

Furthermore, one employer in *Pousse-pousse* is stunned to meet a young woman who is highly qualified trying to compete in a globalised market: « Voici un jeune, de surcroît une femme, qui a cravaché dur pour parvenir à ce niveau, mais qui se heurte à un marché de l'emploi quasi inexistant pour ses compétences acquises » (*Pousse-pousse*, p.273) [Here we have a young person, and unbelievably a woman, who has worked tirelessly to reach this level, but who faces an almost non-existent job market for her acquired skills]. According to one of the main characters Marco, the issue of gender inequality is purely systemic. To achieve equity goals, it is necessary to dismantle such a system.

« L'exploiteur, c'est le système. Tout le système de nos traditions villageoises où règne la loi du plus fort, la domination du chef sur les sujets, de l'homme sur la femme, de l'aîné sur le cadet, de l'adulte sur l'enfant, et cetera, et cetera. Règne de l'ignorance aveugle et aveuglante » (*Destin*, p.79).

[The system is the exploiter; the entire system of our traditions in the village where the law of the strongest prevails, the chief rules over the subjects, men over women, the elder over the younger, adults over children, and so on, and so forth. It is a reign of blind and blinding ignorance]. It is this awareness aimed at rejecting discriminatory attitudes and practices that underpins the changes in socio-cultural perceptions, enabling gender equality. Hence, the narrative representation portrays African women with social forces using education to break free from the shackles of patriarchal constraints. African literature vividly portrays the journey of female characters who, armed with education, navigate their way into sectors that were once exclusively reserved for men. A good example can be drawn from *Prostitué* where the character Yolande displays impressive skills in collecting and managing information for intelligence and national security purposes.

« Elle utilise sa connaissance des dossiers criminels dont elle parle parfois avec volupté tout en condamnant à chaque phrase les bourreaux du régime de Hassal pour attirer ses proies qu'elle choisit minutieusement » (*Prostitué*, p.117).

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[She uses her knowledge of criminal cases, which she sometimes talks about with delight, while condemning the executioners of the Hassal regime in every sentence to attract her carefully chosen prey].

These literary representations serve as a reflection of real-life progress. Across Africa, as educational opportunities expand, more women are gaining access to knowledge, skills, and opportunities that were previously denied to them. This newfound empowerment not only challenges gender stereotypes but also contributes to the economic and social development of communities and nations.

These literary narratives capture the essence of changing gender dynamics on the continent. Women are breaking through traditional barriers, asserting their capabilities, and contributing significantly to strategic sectors such as business, politics, and science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) fields. However, this shift is not without its challenges; it signifies a growing recognition of the untapped potential of Africa's female population.

Finally, African literature's portrayal of the transformative role of education in women's empowerment reflects a broader reality in the continent's evolving social and professional landscape. As education continues to provide women with the tools to challenge traditional gender norms and access strategic sectors, Africa is witnessing a profound shift in gender dynamics, ultimately contributing to its progress and development. These literary representations serve as both a reflection of this transformation and an inspiration for future strides towards gender equality in Africa.

## **CONCLUSION**

At the heart of the narratives lies the recognition of the transformative power of literature. These novels are not just stories; they are testaments to the shifting ideologies and cultural paradigms that underpin the discourse on gender (in)equality in African societies. By delving deep into the narratives and voices within the corpus, the study unravels the intertwined threads of gender dynamics, unveil the stories of resilience, and uncover the aspirations of communities and individuals working toward equitable access to social, political and professional decision-making bodies.

From the portrayal of women as household caretakers to their perseverance in the face of societal constraints, these narratives have offered a panoramic view of the multifarious challenges that women navigate daily. Furthermore, this research paper has illuminated the stories of resilience that permeate these novels. Through the characters' experiences, the reader witnesses the indomitable spirit of African women who, despite societal limitations, continue to strive for personal and collective empowerment. These narratives serve as a source of inspiration and empowerment, amplifying the voices of women who have defied the odds and broken free from the shackles of gender inequalities.

The narratives explored in this study illuminate the multifaceted roles that men play in shaping and challenging the gender dynamics within their communities. They provide glimpses of African male authors who defy traditional gender norms and actively support the empowerment of women, advocating for their equitable participation in political and professional spheres.

## **CONTRIBUTION**

One of the paramount contributions of this study lies in its ability to provide a nuanced understanding of the roles, expectations, and struggles faced by women in diverse African contexts. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of the ongoing struggle for gender equality on the African continent, highlighting the nuances triumphs that shape this pivotal societal narrative. By doing so, the study not only highlights the stark realities but also underscores the urgency of addressing gender inequality from a holistic perspective.

While numerous studies have rightly emphasised the heroism and resilience of women in their battle against gender inequalities, this research takes a distinctive approach by focusing on the often overlooked but significant contribution of male authors in addressing these pressing issues in patriarchal societies. This particular focus on the contributions of men to addressing gender inequality issues in African societies provides a fresh perspective and enriches the existing literature on gender studies. It not only recognises the agency of men in promoting gender equality but also encourages a more inclusive approach to tackling these deeply entrenched issues.

By highlighting the contribution of male authors to addressing gender inequality, this research underscores the importance of engaging men as allies in the fight for gender equity. It recognises that achieving true gender equality requires the active involvement of all members of society, irrespective of their gender. The narratives examined in this study offer valuable lessons and insights for policymakers, activists, and community leaders seeking to promote gender equality and social justice.

In addition to shedding light on the positive contributions of men, this study prompts further exploration into the complex interplay between masculinity, traditional norms, and gender dynamics within African societies, offering fertile ground for future research and advocacy efforts.

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