

# “A GOOD WOMAN IS...”: GENDERED EVALUATION AND DISCURSIVE FOSSILISATION IN ROMANIAN AND ENGLISH PROVERBS

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## Abstract

This paper examines gender-related proverbs as culturally sedimented evaluative patterns that encode asymmetrical role expectations for women and men. Drawing on a qualitative contrastive analysis of Romanian and English proverb collections, the study explores how conventional figurative language articulates normative assumptions concerning domesticity, authority, marriage, moral conduct, and social value. Following paremiological approaches that treat proverb collections as repositories of culturally stabilised meanings (Mieder, 2004; Norrick, 2014), the analysis focuses on recognisability and discursive availability rather than frequency.

The study identifies recurrent asymmetries in the evaluative framing of femininity and masculinity across the two languages, with women more frequently subjected to moral judgement, behavioural prescription, and role confinement, and men more often associated with agency and authority. These findings are consistent with previous cross-cultural research on gender ideologies in proverbs (Schipper, 2006; Lomotey & Chachu, 2020), but are interpreted here as features of proverbial meaning rather than as evidence of behavioural effects.

To illustrate the contemporary relevance of such evaluative models, the paper further examines selected examples from Romanian media discourse in which proverb-based gender formulations are activated through metaphor, quotation, or explicit rejection. Drawing on discourse-oriented approaches to evaluation and (im)politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Fairclough, 2003), the analysis shows that proverb-based gender evaluations are interpretable as culturally recognisable formulations that can be invoked, contested, or reformulated in public texts. The paper argues that gendered proverbs remain discursively relevant not because they are frequently cited, but because they continue to provide recognisable evaluative patterns that can be mobilised, contested, or recontextualised in contemporary communication.

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## **1 Introduction**

Proverbs are widely recognised as culturally salient and socially authoritative forms of language. In paremiological research, they are typically described as conventionalised expressions that condense collective experience, folk wisdom, and shared evaluative orientations into concise, memorable forms (Mieder, 1993, 2004; Norrick, 2014). Their formal fixity, anonymity, and apparent timelessness contribute to their authority, allowing them to circulate as expressions of common sense rather than as speaker-owned evaluations. For this reason, proverb collections have traditionally been treated not as records of individual language use, but as curated repositories of culturally stabilised meanings that have achieved salience through long-term circulation and transmission.

Within research on language and gender, proverbs have been examined primarily as carriers of gender ideologies and asymmetrical role representations. Cross-cultural and contrastive studies have repeatedly shown that proverbial representations of women and men tend to encode unequal expectations, particularly with respect to domesticity, authority, moral conduct, and social value (Schipper, 2006; Kerschen, 1998; Lomotey & Chachu, 2020). Such studies provide valuable descriptive inventories of gendered imagery and evaluative patterning, demonstrating that proverbs frequently position women as objects of moral judgement and behavioural regulation, while men are more often associated with agency and authority. However, this body of research has largely approached proverbs as reflections of social attitudes or cultural beliefs, rather than as discursive resources whose evaluative frameworks may remain relevant beyond their canonical proverbial form.

From a discourse-analytic perspective, this representational view is limited. Critical discourse analysis has consistently emphasised that conventionalised linguistic forms may encode and render salient culturally shared evaluative frameworks, particularly when these operate as taken-for-granted assumptions rather than as explicit claims (Fairclough, 1995, 2003; van Dijk, 1998). Norms are often described in discourse-oriented scholarship as operating most effectively when they are treated as taken-for-granted assumptions rather than as explicit claims. In this perspective, conventionalised linguistic forms are of particular interest, insofar as their familiarity may contribute to the backgrounding of evaluative assumptions, making them less likely to be explicitly foregrounded or contested. Despite this theoretical alignment, proverbs have remained relatively marginal in mainstream discourse-analytic research, which has tended to focus on institutional, political, or media genres where power relations are more overtly articulated (Wodak & Meyer, 2009).

Research in feminist linguistics and language-and-gender studies further underscores the relevance of conventionalised language in the construction of gender norms. Gender has been shown to be discursively sustained through repeated acts of categorisation, evaluation, and normative prescription, often embedded in language forms that appear traditional, neutral, or self-evident (Cameron, 1992; Sunderland,

2004; Mills, 2008; Litosseliti, 2006). While much of this work has concentrated on contemporary genres such as media discourse, workplace interaction, or educational contexts (Holmes & Meyerhoff, 2003), comparatively little attention has been paid to the role of proverbial and other fixed figurative expressions in the long-term sedimentation of gendered evaluative models.

This paper builds on these insights by approaching gender-related proverbs as culturally sedimented evaluative patterns rather than as indicators of actual language use or belief. Following paremiological tradition, proverb collections are treated as archives of stabilised expressions that encode evaluative orientations shared within a speech community (Mieder, 2004; Norrick, 2014). The analytical focus is therefore not on frequency or speaker uptake, but on discursive availability: the extent to which particular evaluative frameworks remain recognisable and thus mobilisable in later discourse.

The study presents a qualitative, contrastive analysis of gender-related proverbs in Romanian and English, drawing on established collections in both languages. It examines how proverbs encode evaluative asymmetries across domains such as domesticity, authority, marriage, appearance, and moral conduct. These asymmetries are analysed as features of proverbial meaning rather than as evidence of behavioural effects or social outcomes. To capture the persistence of such evaluative frameworks, the paper employs the notion of discursive fossilisation, used here as a descriptive heuristic to refer to the long-term stabilisation of evaluative meanings in conventional figurative forms. Discursive fossilisation does not imply semantic rigidity, universal acceptance, or behavioural determination, but designates a condition of recognisability whereby certain evaluative frameworks remain available as shared points of reference.

To illustrate the contemporary relevance of proverb-based evaluative patterns, the paper further examines selected examples from Romanian media discourse. This section does not aim to demonstrate direct proverb usage or causal influence. Rather, it shows how recognisable proverb-based formulations are activated through metaphor, quotation, temporal distancing, and explicit rejection. Drawing on discourse-oriented approaches to evaluation and (im)politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Fairclough, 2003), the analysis highlights how such formulations function as interactionally efficient resources for stereotyping, exclusion, and normative positioning in public discourse, even when their overt endorsement has become contested or socially marked.

In this study, the term *evaluative pattern* is used to refer to recurrent and conventionalised ways of encoding judgement and normative assumptions in proverb form. While related notions such as *template* or *framework* are sometimes employed in the literature, *evaluative pattern* is preferred here as a deliberately descriptive term, avoiding the reification of abstract schematic structures or the implication of a theory-driven analytical framework. The focus is thus on empirically observable regularities in proverbial evaluation rather than on positing underlying cognitive or discursive mechanisms.

By integrating paremiological analysis with discourse-based approaches to gender, evaluation, and (im)politeness, this paper argues that gendered proverbs remain discursively relevant not because they are frequently cited, but because they continue to provide recognisable evaluative reference points for what becomes intelligible, arguable, and contestable in public discourse. In doing so, it seeks to contribute to research on language and gender by foregrounding the subtle but persistent role of conventional figurative language in the negotiation of gendered norms.

Against this background, the present study adopts a collection-based, qualitative approach to the analysis of gendered evaluation in proverbs, treating proverb inventories as repositories of conventionalised meaning rather than as evidence of actual language use or discursive frequency. The analysis focuses on recurrent evaluative patterning encoded in Romanian and English proverbs that explicitly reference women, men, or gendered social roles. Rather than making claims about interactional uptake or social effects, the study is concerned with the kinds of evaluative configurations that are made intelligible and culturally available through proverb form. Specifically, it addresses the following research questions: (i) what recurrent gendered evaluative patterns are encoded in Romanian and English proverb inventories with respect to femininity and masculinity; (ii) how the two inventories converge and diverge across conceptual domains such as domesticity, authority, morality, violence, and social competence; and (iii) how ostensibly “positive” representations of women are configured in proverb meaning—particularly in terms of relational benefit, moral surveillance, and domestic competence—and how these configurations contrast with the evaluative patterns applied to men.

## **2 Literature Review**

### **2.1 Proverbs as culturally stabilised discourse**

Proverbs have traditionally been studied within paremiology as fixed or semi-fixed expressions that encapsulate collective experience and culturally shared values. Foundational work by Mieder (1993, 2004) emphasises the social authority of proverbs, highlighting their perceived timelessness, anonymity, and normative force. Rather than functioning as idiosyncratic utterances, proverbs circulate as culturally sanctioned formulations that gain legitimacy precisely because they are attributed to collective wisdom rather than individual speakers. Norrick (2014) further notes that proverbs are characterised by recognisability and formal stability, properties that enable them to function as evaluative shortcuts in communication.

In this tradition, proverb collections are treated as curated repositories of culturally salient expressions rather than as corpora reflecting actual usage frequency. Romanian paremiological collections (e.g. Zanne, 1895–1903/2006; Golescu, 1973; Duduleanu, 1972; Cuceu, 2006; Bucă, 2012) and English proverb

dictionaries (e.g. Manser, 2007; Speake, 2008; Flavell & Flavell, 2011) are therefore understood as archives of expressions that have achieved long-term cultural circulation. This understanding underpins contrastive proverb research, where the analytical focus lies on semantic patterning and evaluative content rather than on distributional statistics.

## **2.2 Gender representations in proverbs**

Within this paremiological framework, a substantial body of research has examined proverbs as sites of gender representation. Cross-cultural studies consistently report asymmetries in the depiction of women and men, with women more frequently associated with domestic roles, moral evaluation, obedience, or deviance, and men more often linked to authority, agency, and public action (Schipper, 2006; Kerschen, 1998). Schipper’s extensive cross-linguistic study demonstrates that gendered proverbs frequently encode prescriptive expectations, presenting normative models of femininity and masculinity in compact figurative form.

More recent work has explicitly foregrounded the ideological dimension of such representations. Lomotey and Chachu (2020), in a cross-cultural analysis of proverbs from different linguistic and cultural contexts, show that gendered proverbs not only reflect cultural attitudes but also articulate power relations by normalising unequal role expectations. Their findings highlight the evaluative and prescriptive orientation of proverbs, particularly in relation to women’s behaviour, social positioning, and moral worth. Importantly, this research situates proverbs within broader discussions of ideology and power, aligning paremiological analysis with discourse-oriented approaches.

While these studies provide valuable descriptive and critical insights into the content of gendered proverbs, they tend to focus on the proverbial text itself. Less attention has been paid to the question of how the evaluative frameworks encoded in proverbs may persist beyond their canonical use, or how they may continue to inform contemporary discourse in indirect or transformed ways.

## **2.3 Conventionalised language, ideology, and discourse**

Critical discourse analysis offers a useful framework for addressing this gap. Central to CDA is the claim that ideology is most effective when it is embedded in taken-for-granted assumptions rather than in explicit statements (Fairclough, 1995, 2003; van Dijk, 1998). Recurrent evaluative frames, metaphors, and presuppositions contribute to the naturalisation of social norms by rendering them familiar and seemingly self-evident. From this perspective, conventionalised language forms play a crucial role in sustaining ideological patterns precisely because their conventionality makes them less visible and less likely to be questioned.

Although CDA has primarily focused on institutional and media discourse (Wodak & Meyer, 2009), its emphasis on evaluative framing and naturalisation is directly relevant to the study of proverbs. Proverbs exemplify conventionalised

discourse par excellence: their authority derives from repetition and cultural transmission rather than from individual authorship. Yet despite this conceptual compatibility, proverbs have rarely been integrated into mainstream discourse-analytic research, remaining largely confined to paremiology and phraseology.

## **2.4 Gender, discourse, and evaluation**

Research in feminist linguistics and language-and-gender studies further supports the relevance of examining conventionalised expressions in relation to gender norms. Gender has been shown to be discursively constructed through repeated acts of categorisation, evaluation, and normative prescription (Cameron, 1992; Sunderland, 2004; Mills, 2008; Litosseliti, 2006). These processes often operate through language that appears neutral, traditional, or commonsensical, thereby masking its ideological content.

Much of this work has focused on contemporary genres such as media discourse, institutional communication, and everyday interaction (Holmes & Meyerhoff, 2003). However, the role of fixed figurative language in the long-term stabilisation of gendered evaluative models has received comparatively limited attention. Proverbs, as conventionalised and culturally authoritative expressions, constitute a particularly relevant but underexplored site for examining how gender norms are linguistically encoded and sustained over time.

## **2.5 From proverb meaning to discursive availability**

Taken together, existing research demonstrates that proverbs encode gendered evaluative asymmetries and that conventionalised language plays a central role in the naturalisation of social norms. What remains less clearly addressed is the relationship between proverbial meaning and contemporary discourse practices. Specifically, there is a need to examine how proverb-based evaluative frameworks remain recognisable and mobilisable even when their overt use becomes socially marked or contested.

The present study addresses this gap by combining paremiological analysis with discourse-oriented perspectives on evaluation and (im)politeness. Rather than asking whether proverbs directly influence behaviour or attitudes, it investigates how their evaluative content persists as a discursive resource. In doing so, it shifts the focus from proverb usage to discursive availability, paving the way for an analysis of how proverb-based gender stereotypes are activated, negotiated, or resisted in contemporary media discourse.

### 3 Methodology

#### 3.1 Data sources and research design

The present study adopts a qualitative, contrastive research design grounded in paremiological analysis and discourse-oriented interpretation. The primary data consist of gender-related proverbs extracted from established Romanian and English proverb collections. In line with paremiological tradition, these collections are treated as curated repositories of culturally salient and conventionalised expressions rather than as corpora representing actual language use or frequency (Mieder, 2004; Norrick, 2014).

For Romanian, the analysis draws on major proverb collections, including Zanne (1895–1903/2006), Golescu (1973), Duduleanu (1972), Cuceu (2006), Bucă (2012), and Lefter (1987, 2006). For English, the data are drawn from widely used proverb dictionaries and collections such as Manser (2007), Speake (2008), Flavell and Flavell (2011), Kerschen (1998), and Mawr (1885/2011), as well as bilingual collections (Flonta, 2001). These sources were selected due to their scope, historical depth, and status within paremiological scholarship. Translations are functional where an established English equivalent exists; otherwise, literal translations are provided, with brief glosses where cultural or semantic opacity arises.

The dataset comprises two independently compiled proverb inventories, Romanian and English, whose distribution across shared evaluative categories is summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Distribution of Romanian and English gender-related proverb tokens by evaluative category

Evaluative category	Romanian tokens (N)	English tokens (N)
The woman is a housewife / the man is the breadwinner	8	4
A commanding woman is shameful to a man	5	3
Marriage is no joke	5	5
Marriage is a compromise	4	5
Women are more aggressive to other women	4	2
A good / wise wife is a blessing	6	3
A bad wife is a curse	6	7
Spoiled daughters make bad wives	1	1
Marriage for love is a blessing	2	0
A beautiful woman is bliss / good looks are dangerous	4	6
Battering is beneficial	1	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>37</b>

**Note.** Romanian and English proverb tokens were extracted independently from language-specific collections; numerical differences reflect inventory composition rather than frequency of use.

The decision to rely on proverb collections rather than on large electronic corpora is methodologically motivated. Proverbs are statistically rare in written corpora and are predominantly associated with oral, interactional discourse, where they fulfil socio-pragmatic functions such as advice-giving, evaluation, irony, or moral instruction (Norrick, 2014). As a result, corpus-based approaches are of limited applicability for capturing the range of culturally salient proverbial forms. Proverb collections, by contrast, exist precisely to document expressions that have achieved recognisability and durability through long-term circulation.

### **3.2 Data selection and scope**

Proverbs were manually extracted from the selected Romanian and English collections following a semantic criterion. The present study focuses exclusively on proverbs that explicitly refer to women, men, or gendered social roles. All such proverbs attested in the selected collections were identified and extracted for analysis.

The procedure was exhaustive with respect to the selected sources rather than illustrative or selective. No proverbs were excluded on the basis of evaluative orientation; both positive and negative representations were retained in order to capture the full range of gendered evaluative models encoded in the data. In cases where the same proverb appeared in multiple collections, it was counted once for analytical purposes, while lexical or syntactic variation was noted where relevant.

Romanian proverbs that did not have direct English equivalents were translated by the author. Where necessary, explanatory glosses were provided to clarify cultural, semantic, or pragmatic nuances. The focus of the analysis is therefore on the evaluative content and discursive potential of gender-related proverbs, rather than on their frequency or distribution.

The Romanian–English gender-related proverbs analysed in the present study form part of a larger collection-based dataset first assembled and reported in Popescu (2022), which examined multiple experiential domains (time, work, money, and gender) from a cognitive-metaphorical perspective. The current study does not replicate that analysis. Instead, it undertakes a focused re-analysis of the gender subset, drawing on the same exhaustively identified material but addressing a different set of research questions. Whereas the earlier study aimed to map broad conceptual metaphors across domains, the present paper concentrates specifically on gendered evaluative asymmetries, normative role attribution, and the recognisability of proverb-based patterns in contemporary interpretive contexts.

The full set of gender-related proverbs identified for Romanian and English in the course of this study—including variants, translations, and category assignments—will later be made available as an openly accessible dataset via the Open Science Framework (OSF). This dataset documents all items identified through the manual extraction procedure described above and is provided to ensure transparency, auditability, and the possibility of independent reanalysis. While the

dataset originates in earlier collection-based research (Popescu, 2022), its open dissemination allows readers to inspect the full inventory underlying the present analysis, including items not discussed individually in either study.

The dataset is not intended to represent frequency of proverb use in contemporary discourse, but to document the culturally available inventory of gender-related proverbs attested in the selected collections.

### **3.3 Analytical procedure**

The analysis proceeded in three stages. First, the extracted proverbs were grouped into subcategories based on recurring semantic and evaluative patterns, such as domesticity, authority, marital relations, moral conduct, and behavioural expectations. These categories were defined a priori on semantic grounds and refined iteratively during analysis. The aim was not to induce categories from frequency patterns, but to identify recurrent evaluative patterns that structure proverbial meaning.

Second, a contrastive analysis was conducted between Romanian and English proverbs. Proverbs were examined to determine whether they were (a) formally and semantically equivalent across the two languages, (b) conceptually similar but lexically different, or (c) culture-specific with no close counterpart in the other language. This procedure allowed for the identification of shared evaluative models as well as culturally specific configurations of gendered meaning.

Third, the evaluative orientation of each proverb was analysed qualitatively, focusing on how gender roles and expectations are framed through metaphor, comparison, presupposition, and moral judgement. This stage draws on discourse-analytic insights into evaluation and ideology (Fairclough, 1995, 2003; van Dijk, 1998), while remaining anchored in the semantic content of the proverbs themselves.

### **3.4 Discursive availability and fossilisation**

The analytical focus of the study is not on proverb usage or speaker intention, but on discursive availability. Proverbs are approached as culturally sedimented evaluative patterns whose relevance lies in their recognisability rather than in their frequency of occurrence. To capture this dimension, the study employs the notion of discursive fossilisation, used here as a descriptive heuristic to refer to the long-term stabilisation of evaluative meanings in conventional figurative forms.

Discursive fossilisation is understood as a property of cultural expressions rather than as a claim about social effects or behavioural determination. It designates the condition whereby certain evaluative frameworks remain accessible as shared points of reference, even when their overt endorsement becomes contested or socially marked. This perspective allows for an examination of continuity and change in gendered evaluations without presupposing ideological uniformity or unidirectional influence.

### **3.5 Media exemplification**

To illustrate how proverb-based evaluative patterns remain discursively active, the study includes a qualitative analysis of selected examples from contemporary Romanian media discourse. These examples were identified through manual examination of online news articles and opinion pieces and were selected for their explicit or implicit activation of proverb-based gender formulations.

This component of the analysis is illustrative rather than exhaustive. It does not aim to demonstrate frequency, representativeness, or causal influence, but to show how recognisable proverb-based expressions are mobilised through metaphor, quotation, temporal distancing, or explicit rejection. The analysis draws on discourse-oriented approaches to evaluation and (im)politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Fairclough, 2003) to examine how such formulations function as culturally recognisable evaluative resources for stereotyping, exclusion, and normative positioning in public discourse.

### **3.6 Methodological limitations**

As a qualitative study grounded in paremiological analysis, the present research does not make claims about actual language use, speaker beliefs, or behavioural outcomes. The findings are limited to the semantic and evaluative content of proverbs and to the discursive functions of proverb-based formulations as identifiable in selected media texts. While this approach does not allow for generalisation in statistical terms, it provides a detailed account of culturally stabilised evaluative models and their discursive availability.

## **4 Results**

This section addresses RQ1 by identifying recurrent gendered evaluative patterns encoded in the Romanian and English proverb inventories.

The gendered proverbs analysed in this study are organised into recurrent conceptual clusters that function as culturally stabilised evaluative patterns. The analysis is based on the full set of extracted proverbs (provided in the supplementary material), while the discussion below uses representative examples to illustrate systematic tendencies within each category.

Globally, these findings address RQ2 by showing both substantial convergence between Romanian and English proverb inventories in the domains through which gender is evaluated, and systematic divergences in the salience and framing of particular evaluative themes (as summarised in Table 1. Below).

Table 2. Conceptual domains of gender evaluation in Romanian and English proverb inventories

<b>Category</b>	<b>Core evaluative pattern</b>	<b>Primary target of evaluation</b>	<b>Dominant figurative strategies</b>	<b>Romanian–English alignment</b>
THE WOMAN IS A HOUSEWIFE / THE MAN IS THE BREADWINNER	Gendered division of labour	Women (domestic competence); Men (external provision)	Spatial metaphors (inside/outside), metonymy (house, hearth)	Strong
A COMMANDING WOMAN IS SHAMEFUL TO A MAN	Authority inversion as deviance	Men (emasculatation); Women (excessive control)	Clothing metaphors, spatial humiliation	Strong
MARRIAGE IS NO JOKE	Marriage as irreversible commitment	Both (as spouses), asymmetrically framed	Economic metaphors, permanence metaphors	Strong
MARRIAGE IS A COMPROMISE	Harmony through restraint and tolerance	Both (with implicit gendered expectations)	Sensory metaphors (blindness/deafness), irony	Moderate
WOMEN ARE MORE AGGRESSIVE TO OTHER WOMEN	Female plurality as disorder	Women (collectively)	Quantity metaphors, conflict metaphors	Strong
A GOOD / WISE WIFE IS A BLESSING	Female virtue as male benefit	Women (evaluated relationally)	Asset metaphors (gold, crown, plough), light metaphors	Strong
A BAD WIFE IS A CURSE	Female deviance as misfortune	Women (moralised)	Disaster metaphors, weapon metaphors (tongue/knife)	Strong
SPOILED DAUGHTERS MAKE BAD WIVES	Femininity as cultivated skill	Women (across life stages)	Upbringing metaphors, craft metaphors	Moderate
MARRIAGE FOR LOVE IS A BLESSING	Affective compatibility valued	Both (individually)	Preference metaphors, contrastive valuation	Weak–Moderate
GOOD LOOKS / AGE	Asymmetrical standards of appearance	Women (visual evaluation); Men (perceptual agency)	Vision metaphors, objectification	Strong

Category	Core evaluative pattern	Primary target of evaluation	Dominant figurative strategies	Romanian–English alignment
BATTERING IS BENEFICIAL	Violence as corrective	Women (explicitly gendered)	Animalisation, religious legitimisation	Strong

#### 4.1 THE WOMAN IS A HOUSEWIFE / THE MAN IS THE BREADWINNER

A foundational conceptualisation in both Romanian and English proverbs associates women with domestic space, household maintenance, and continuous labour, while associating men with external work, provision, and the household's outward-facing responsibilities. Romanian proverbs repeatedly frame the household as dependent on women's presence and labour, as in *Casa e casă, când ai o gospodină în casă* (RO-4.4.1-1) ('A house is a house when there is a housewife in it') and *Muirea când lipsește, casa se risipește* (RO-4.4.1-7) ('When the wife is away, the house falls apart').

Domestic competence is simultaneously moralised: *Curățenia este darul de căpetenie al femeii* (RO-4.4.1-2) ('Cleanliness is a woman's foremost gift') and *Femeia harnică ține casa cu fusul* (RO-4.4.1-4) ('The hardworking woman keeps the household with her spindle') encode diligence and cleanliness as defining virtues of femininity.

The division of roles is also explicitly partitioned spatially: *Casa fără femeie e pustie pe dinăuntru, casa fără bărbat e pustie pe dinafară* (RO-4.4.1-6) ('A house without a woman is barren on the inside; without a man, it is barren on the outside').

English proverbs show close structural parallels, including *Men build houses; women build homes* (EN-4.4.1-2) and *Man works from sun to sun, but woman's work is never done* (EN-4.4.1-4), which similarly encode a complementary-but-asymmetric gendered labour division: male work is temporally bounded and externally oriented, while female work is presented as continuous and domestically confined.

#### 4.2 A COMMANDING WOMAN IS SHAMEFUL TO A MAN

A recurrent evaluative pattern concerns the stigmatisation of women perceived as exercising authority over men, especially within marriage. In Romanian, male subordination is framed as inherently degrading through expressions such as *a fi sub papucul nevestei* ('to be under one's wife's slipper/shoe') and ironic formulations like *Am ambiție de bărbat, ca să nu ies de sub pat* (RO-4.4.2-1) ('I have the ambition of a man, and I keep hiding under the bed'), where spatial imagery encodes shame and emasculation.

Authority is also indexed via clothing symbolism: *Omul să poarte nădragii și femeia fustele* (RO-4.4.2-2) ('A man should wear trousers and a woman should wear skirts'), establishing masculinity as the default bearer of legitimate control.

Romanian proverbs further equate male submission with symbolic feminisation: *Când te însori, să te însori, iar nu să te măriți* (RO-4.4.2-3) (‘If you’re a man, get married as a man and not as a woman.’).

English proverb traditions employ comparable figurative devices, notably the metonymic expression *to wear the trousers* (especially when applied to women), and animal metaphors like *The grey mare is the better horse* (EN-4.4.2-1), which frame female dominance as role inversion and diminished male status.

#### 4.3 MARRIAGE IS NO JOKE

Another major cluster frames marriage as a serious, consequential institution requiring prudence, preparedness, and endurance rather than romantic spontaneity. Romanian proverbs emphasise the irreversibility of marriage, e.g. *Lesne a se însura și greu a se desșura* (RO-4.4.3-4) (‘It is easy to get married and hard to get unmarried’) and *Nevasta nu-i un petic, să-l coși și pe urmă să-l descoși* (RO-4.4.3-3) (‘A wife is not a patch that you can sew and then unsew’).

Material readiness is foregrounded through *Cine se-nsoară, trebuie să aibă de moară* (RO-4.4.3-5) (‘He who marries must have grain for the mill’), linking marriage to provision and economic responsibility.

English proverbs articulate closely parallel evaluative logic, e.g. *Marry in haste and repent at leisure* (EN-4.4.3-4) and *There goes more to marriage than four bare legs in a bed* (EN-4.4.3-3), which discourage impulsive marriage and construe marriage as more than sexual attraction.

#### 4.4 MARRIAGE IS A COMPROMISE

A further conceptualisation constructs marital stability as dependent on tolerance, accommodation, and strategic restraint. Proverbs in this category represent harmony as achieved through the avoidance of confrontation rather than through resolution. English examples include *The husband is always the last to know* (EN-4.4.4-2) and *A deaf husband and a blind wife are always a happy couple* (EN-4.4.4-1), where sensory metaphors encode deliberate non-knowledge as a marital virtue. In Romanian, the proverb *Ce știe satul, nu știe bărbatul* (RO-4.4.4-1) (What the whole village knows, the husband doesn’t) expresses the same idea of acceptance and marital peace.

Importantly, even where proverbs are not explicitly gendered lexically, this category interacts with other clusters that distribute moral responsibility unevenly, particularly where women are more strongly regulated as wives.

#### 4.5 WOMEN ARE MORE AGGRESSIVE TO OTHER WOMEN

This cluster frames female plurality and interaction as conflictual and socially unproductive. Romanian proverbs articulate this particularly strongly: *La casa cu două fete, mor pisicile de sete* (RO-4.4.5-1) (‘In a house with two daughters, the cats

die of thirst’), *Unde-s șapte fete-n casă, nici călți în casă, nici mălaiu pe masă* (RO-4.4.5-2) ‘Where there are seven daughters in the house, there’s neither tow,<sup>1</sup> nor polenta on the table.’) and *Unde sunt trei femei, gata și tribunalul* (RO-4.4.5-3) (‘Where there are three women, there is already a court case’).

English parallels include *Too many cooks spoil the broth* (EN-4.4.5-2) and *The fewer the women, the less the trouble* (EN-4.4.5-1), which similarly link female plurality with disorder.

#### 4.6 A GOOD / WISE WIFE IS A BLESSING

A major evaluative polarity in the dataset idealises the wife who sustains household stability and enhances male status. Romanian examples include *Femeia bună e plug de aur în casa omului* (RO-4.4.6-1) (‘A good woman is a man’s golden plough’) and *Muirea înțeleaptă, coroana bărbatului* (RO-4.4.6-3) (‘A wise woman is a man’s crown’), where women are metaphorised as productive assets or status-enhancing ornaments.

Moral purity is foregrounded through *Femeia cinstită e soarele casei* (RO-4.4.6-2; OSF dataset) (‘An honest woman is the sun of the house’) and *Femeia cinstită – piatră neprețuită* (RO-4.4.6-2) (‘...a precious stone’).

Wisdom is framed as domestic management: *Femeia înțeleaptă își zidește casa* (RO-4.4.6-5) (‘A wise woman builds her house’), and female advice is acknowledged but bounded: *Bine este să ascuți și sfatul unei neveste* (RO-4.4.6-6) (‘It is good to listen to a wife’s advice’).

English proverbs mirror this evaluative structure: *A worthy woman is the crown of her husband* (EN-4.4.6-3) and *A virtuous woman is a source of honour to her husband* (EN-4.4.6-1), maintaining the asymmetry that female virtue is measured through its effects on male reputation.

#### 4.7 A BAD WIFE IS A CURSE

The negative counterpart constructs the “bad wife” as a source of male suffering, domestic disorder, and misfortune. Romanian proverbs encode her presence as intolerable: *Trei lucruri te scot din casă afară: ploaia, fumul și femeia rea* (RO-4.4.7-1) (‘Three things drive you out of the house: rain, smoke, and a bad woman’).

Speech is framed as dangerous: *Limba muierii, cuțit cu două ascuțituri* (RO-4.4.7-4) (‘A woman’s tongue is a double-edged knife’) and *Dacă limba femeii ar fi mai scurtă, zilele bărbatului ar fi mai lungi* (RO-4.4.7-5) (‘If a woman’s tongue were shorter, a man’s days would be longer’).

Other proverbs attribute stubborn or entrapping power: *Ceea ce femeia leagă, nici dracu’ nu dezleagă* (RO-4.4.7-3) (‘What a woman binds, not even the devil can unbind’) and *Să te ferească Dumnezeu de judecata femeiască și de bătaia*

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<sup>1</sup> The coarse and broken part of flax or hemp prepared for spinning.

*prostului* (RO-4.4.7-2) (‘May God protect you from a woman’s judgement and a fool’s beating’).

English examples similarly construct women as causes of trouble: *A woman is at the bottom of every lawsuit* (EN-4.4.7-2; OSF dataset), *Woman is woe to man* (EN-4.4.7-6), and *A whistling woman and a crowing hen are neither fit for God nor men* (EN-4.4.7-7).

#### 4.8 SPOILED DAUGHTERS MAKE BAD WIVES

This category links women’s future marital adequacy to childhood socialisation, presenting femininity as something cultivated through domestic training. Romanian examples encode skill acquisition as supervised and imposed: *Când eram la mama, și eu știam să cos...* (RO-4.4.8-1) (‘When I was with my mother, I knew how to sew too...’).

English proverbs express a comparable logic: *The daughter of a spry old woman makes a poor housekeeper* (EN-4.4.8-1), linking upbringing to later domestic competence.

#### 4.9 MARRIAGE FOR LOVE IS A BLESSING

A smaller but significant subset values affective compatibility over material calculation. Romanian examples contrast personal preference with external judgement: *Cată nevastă să-ți placă ție, nu altora* (RO-4.4.9-1) (‘Look for a wife who pleases you, not others’), and devalue wealth when paired with incompatibility: *Bogăția șede-n ladă și toanta șede pe vatră* (RO-4.4.9-2) (‘Wealth sits in the chest and the foolish woman sits on the hearth’).

#### 4.10 CONCEPTUALISATIONS OF GOOD LOOKS / AGE

A further cluster encodes asymmetrical standards of appearance and age. Romanian proverbs explicitly position women as objects of visual evaluation: *Muirea cu ochi frumoși pe toți îi face voioși* (RO-4.4.10-2) (‘A woman with beautiful eyes makes everybody cheerful’) and *Bărbatul are ochi să vadă, femeia are ochi să fie văzută* (RO-4.4.10-3) (‘A man has eyes to see, a woman has eyes to be seen’), which assigns perceptual agency to men and visual objecthood to women.

English examples catalogue physical traits alongside moral judgement (e.g. *Fair and sluttish, black and proud / long and lazy, little and loud; Fat and fulsome, pretty and proud* - EN-4.4.10-6), collapsing appearance and character into a single evaluative frame.

#### 4.11 BATTERING IS BENEFICIAL

A final category—less frequent but analytically severe—legitimises physical violence as corrective. Romanian examples include *Bătaia e ruptă din rai* (RO-

4.4.11-1) ('Battering is a slice of heaven'), which frames punishment as divinely sanctioned.

English proverb data provide explicit gendered violence: *A woman, a dog, and a walnut tree, the more you beat 'em, the better they be* (EN-4.4.11-1), which aligns women with animals and objects and constructs beating as productive correction.

#### 4.12 Interim synthesis

Across categories, the proverb data encode stabilised evaluative patterns that (i) naturalise domestic-role confinement for women, (ii) stigmatise female authority and male subordination, (iii) moralise women's speech and conduct, (iv) frame marriage through obligation, compromise, and role-based evaluation, and (v) in extreme cases, legitimise coercion as corrective. These observations remain at the level of proverbial meaning and evaluative framing; the question of contemporary discursive activation and pragmatic management is addressed in the media analysis section.

These findings consolidate the response to RQ1 and RQ2, showing that gendered evaluative patterns are both recurrent within each inventory and unevenly distributed across shared conceptual domains.

### 5 Metadiscursive activation of proverbial gender models (illustrative cases)

This section provides a limited set of illustrative examples showing how proverb-based gender evaluative patterns may be contextualised, reformulated, or explicitly problematised in contemporary Romanian media texts. The purpose of these examples is not to document proverb usage, frequency, or uptake in media discourse, nor to make claims about the prevalence or social impact of particular gendered evaluative formulations. Rather, they serve to demonstrate contextual intelligibility: the fact that certain evaluative formulations associated with traditional proverbs remain recognisable enough to be invoked, paraphrased, rejected, or temporally marked in public texts.

Media examples were identified through manual exploratory searches of a major Romanian online news outlets and opinion platforms (*Adevărul*), using proverb-related keywords and paraphrastic formulations. The search was exploratory rather than exhaustive, and examples were selected solely to illustrate recognisability and contextual intelligibility, not frequency or representativeness.

The examples presented below are therefore treated as metadiscursive activations of culturally sedimented evaluative patterns, not as instances of canonical proverb use. Their analytical relevance lies in the presupposition of shared cultural knowledge that makes such formulations interpretable, whether they are employed ironically, critically, or as background assumptions in narrative framing. No claims are made regarding frequency, representativeness, or causal influence, and the examples are not intended to function as an empirical corpus.

Analytically, each example is examined in terms of (i) the proverb-based evaluative pattern activated, (ii) the mode of activation (e.g. metaphor, quotation, temporal marking, narrative framing), and (iii) the evaluative and pragmatic orientation suggested by the formulation, drawing on discourse-oriented accounts of evaluation and facework (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Fairclough, 2003; van Dijk, 1998).

### 5.1 Covert metaphorical activation and authority enactment

(1) *Marcel Ciolacu, însă, a pus piciorul în prag și a trimis-o pe Firea direct la cratiță.* (Adevărul, 2022, September 13)  
'Marcel Ciolacu, however, put his foot down and sent Firea straight back to the kitchen.'

Example (1) illustrates covert activation of the domestic-role template (cf. the proverb category THE WOMAN IS A HOUSEWIFE) through metaphor rather than quotation. The expression *a trimis-o la cratiță* ('sent her to the kitchen') draws on the culturally sedimented association between women and domestic space, using it to frame the target's political participation as illegitimate or dismissible.

Pragmatically, the move can be read as a face-threatening evaluation: it is interpretable as an exclusionary positioning of the female actor by construing domestic confinement as the relevant alternative to public agency. Its impolite force is indirect, relying on presupposed common-sense intelligibility rather than explicit insult, which also helps diffuse speaker accountability (Brown & Levinson 1987).

### 5.2 Explicit quotation and metadiscursive rejection

(2) „Locul femeii e la cratiță”. Nu am o problemă cu cratița... Am o problemă însă cu sintagma „locul femeii”. (Adevărul, 2022, May 28)  
' "A woman's place is in the kitchen". I don't have a problem with the kitchen... I have a problem, though, with the phrase a woman's place.'

Example (2) illustrates a different discursive status of the same template: explicit quotation followed by metadiscursive rejection. Quotation marks and commentary signal distancing, positioning the expression as unacceptable as an affirmative claim. At the same time, the critique depends on recognisability: the proverb-based formulation is treated as sufficiently known to function as a shared point of reference.

This example therefore shows how proverb-based gender evaluations may persist publicly as objects of critique rather than as unmarked common sense, while remaining discursively available.

### 5.3 Temporal marking and stigmatisation of the stereotype

(3) *În timp ce Becali încă trimit femeile la cratiță...* (Adevărul, 2019, March 8)  
'While Becali still sends women to the kitchen ...'

In Example (3), the adverb *încă* ('still') performs temporal marking that frames the activation of the domesticity template as anachronistic. The evaluative force targets the social actor associated with the expression, construing him as backward relative to broader developments (here linked to women's sport). Crucially, the proverb-based template remains operative as a benchmark: it is presupposed as recognisable and therefore usable for contrastive evaluation.

This illustrates a mode of engagement in which the stereotype is criticised while simultaneously being reactivated as a discursive reference point.

#### 5.4 Biographical framing and resistance to a normative script

(4) *După ce... a înfruntat ideea că soarta femeilor române este de a sta la cratiță...*  
(Adevărul, 2022, February 13)

After she faced the idea that Roma women's fate is to be in the kitchen...'

Example (4) embeds the domestic-role template in a biographical narrative, framing it as a socially circulating expectation to be resisted. Unlike Examples (1)–(3), the formulation is not used to enact exclusion in the immediate interaction; rather, it functions as a background "script" against which achievement is narrated. The example is also salient because it links gendered domestic confinement to ethnic stereotyping, showing how the same evaluative template can be recruited to index multiple forms of marginalisation.

The pragmatic effect here is not impoliteness directed at a present target, but narrative positioning: the stereotype is invoked as an obstacle that can be overcome.

#### 5.5 Performance-based rebuttal and legitimation

(5) ...un mesaj pentru cei care spun că locul femeilor este la cratiță și nu pe terenul de fotbal. '

(Adevărul, 2018, June 21)

'... a message for all those who are saying the women's place is in the kitchen and not on the football ground. '

Example (5) illustrates a rebuttal strategy in which the stereotype is invoked as a claim requiring refutation. The proverb-based template (*women belong in the kitchen*) is positioned as a recognisable evaluative frame that must be countered through evidence of competence and results. This confirms discursive availability: even when rejected, the template structures argumentative space by defining what must be disproven.

#### 5.6 Role inversion and symbolic authority

(6) ... ziua în care fetele poartă pantalonii și băieții stau în fuste...

(Adevărul, 2014, November 16)

'...the day when girls are wearing trousers and boys are dressed in skirts...'

Example (6) activates a different proverb-based template: authority and role inversion through clothing symbolism (cf. “to wear the trousers”). The journalistic framing literalises the metaphor, presenting inversion as a marked event and thereby reaffirming the underlying association between masculine-coded clothing and authority. The evaluative template remains recognisable even when enacted playfully or pedagogically, which again supports the claim of discursive availability.

## **6 Discussion**

The analysis presented in Sections 4 and 5 supports a refined, discourse-oriented understanding of gendered proverbs not as residual cultural artefacts, but as discursively available evaluative resources whose relevance extends beyond their canonical proverbial forms. Taken together, the proverb data and the contemporary media excerpts show that gendered evaluations encoded in traditional figurative language continue to provide recognisable evaluative reference points in public meaning-making, even in contexts where explicit proverb use has become pragmatically constrained or socially marked.

### **6.1 Proverbs as normative reference points**

One of the central findings of this study is that the decline of proverb usage in contemporary journalistic discourse does not correspond to a decline in the evaluative norms proverbs encode. Instead, the conceptualisations identified in Section 4—such as *THE WOMAN IS A HOUSEWIFE*, *A COMMANDING WOMAN IS SHAMEFUL TO A MAN*, or *A GOOD / WISE WIFE IS A BLESSING*—reappear in Section 5 as discursive patterns activated through metaphor, paraphrase, quotation, and allusion.

This observation challenges approaches that treat proverbs primarily as static textual units whose relevance depends on frequency of use. The empirical evidence suggests that their discursive significance lies less in overt citation than in their role as repositories of sedimented evaluation. Proverbs function as normative baselines: culturally available points of reference against which actions, roles, and social positions are discursively evaluated, justified, contested, or narrativised.

### **6.2 Discursive fossilisation and normative persistence**

The concept of discursive fossilisation outlined in Section 2.3 proves analytically productive in accounting for both stability and change. The proverb-based patterns documented in Section 4 display a high degree of internal coherence and cross-linguistic convergence, indicating long-term stabilisation. At the same time, Section 5 shows that these stabilised meanings are not inert. They are repeatedly reactivated in contemporary discourse, albeit under different pragmatic conditions.

Discursive fossilisation thus captures a dual process:

- (1) the historical sedimentation of evaluative meanings through repetition, anonymity, and cultural transmission, and
- (2) their context-sensitive reactivation in new discursive environments.

Importantly, fossilisation does not imply semantic rigidity. Rather, it helps explain how certain meanings become default, recognisable, and remain readily recognisable as conventional evaluative reference points, even when openly challenged. The persistence of expressions such as *locul femeii*, *la cratiță*, or *a purta pantalonii* in media discourse illustrates how fossilised norms retain interpretive salience despite shifting ideological climates.

### **6.3 Gendered normativity and evaluative asymmetry**

Addressing RQ3, this section examines how ostensibly positive representations of women are configured in proverb meaning and how these differ from the evaluative patterns applied to men.

The results also reveal a systematic evaluative asymmetry in the construction of gender across proverbial discourse. Women are overwhelmingly subjected to moral evaluation, behavioural prescription, and life-course regulation, while men are more often associated with agency, authority, or relative exemption from scrutiny. This asymmetry is not confined to overtly negative categories such as A BAD WIFE IS A CURSE or BATTERING IS BENEFICIAL, but is equally present in ostensibly positive conceptualisations like A GOOD / WISE WIFE IS A BLESSING.

Section 5 demonstrates that these asymmetries persist in contemporary discourse, even where they are explicitly contested. Crucially, contestation itself presupposes the recognisability of the norm. Media texts opposing the idea that a woman's place is in the kitchen must first invoke that idea in order to reject it. This confirms that fossilised gender norms operate as discursively salient preconditions for evaluation, rather than as optional or marginal beliefs.

### **6.4 Politeness, facework, and normative orientations with respect to gender roles**

An important contribution of the contemporary discourse analysis lies in showing how fossilised norms are discursively framed through mitigation, quotation, and distancing strategies. In contrast to proverbial discourse—where norms are presented as impersonal and largely incontestable—modern media texts frequently rely on mitigation, quotation, temporal distancing, and depersonalisation to handle the face-threatening nature of gendered prescriptions.

This shift does not necessarily signal a weakening of normativity, but rather a transformation in its mode of circulation. Norms that were once asserted unproblematically are now negotiated discursively, often through indirectness, irony, or strategic distancing. Discursive fossilisation thus interacts with politeness

as a mechanism that allows evaluative norms to persist under conditions of increased moral and ideological scrutiny.

## **6.5 Methodological implications**

The findings also have methodological implications for discourse-oriented research on figurative language. By treating proverb collections as archives of normativity rather than as corpora of usage, the study avoids a false opposition between historical data and contemporary relevance. The integration of proverb analysis with contemporary media discourse demonstrates how long-term sedimentation and short-term interactional dynamics can be examined within a single analytical framework.

This approach aligns with calls within critical discourse analysis to attend to subtle, indirect, and culturally embedded forms of power. Gendered proverbs exemplify one way in which ideological evaluations may be embedded in familiar, conventionalised forms of language, becoming most effective when they operate as background assumptions rather than explicit claims.

## **7 Conclusion**

This study has examined gender-related proverbs in Romanian and English as culturally stabilised evaluative formulations, drawing on established proverb collections as the primary empirical archive for analysing proverbial meaning. In line with foundational paremiological scholarship, proverbs have been treated not as records of actual language use, nor as indicators of speakers’ beliefs or social behaviour, but as conventionalised expressions that encapsulate recurrent evaluative models and normative expectations that have achieved cultural salience through long-term circulation.

Together, the findings presented in Sections 4 and 6 provide convergent answers to RQ1–RQ3, demonstrating recurrent gendered evaluative patterning in Romanian and English proverb inventories, systematic cross-linguistic convergence and divergence across conceptual domains, and a marked asymmetry between positive female and male evaluation.

The comparative analysis of the Romanian and English proverb inventories has shown that gendered evaluation is structured asymmetrically across a coherent set of conceptual domains, including domesticity, authority, marriage, moral conduct, appearance, and, in a limited number of cases, physical coercion. Across these domains, women are subjected to intensified moral scrutiny, behavioural prescription, and life-course regulation, while men are more frequently positioned as agents, evaluators, or beneficiaries of female conduct. Importantly, this asymmetry is not confined to overtly negative representations. Even proverbs that idealise women—such as those praising the “good” or “wise” wife—operate within an

evaluative framework that defines female worth relationally, conditionally, and in terms of service to male or household stability.

A small set of contemporary Romanian media examples was included to illustrate how such proverb-based evaluative patterns may be contextualised beyond their canonical proverbial form. These examples were not analysed as instances of proverb usage, nor as evidence of frequency, uptake, or social impact. Rather, they were used to demonstrate contextual intelligibility: the fact that certain evaluative formulations associated with traditional proverbs remain recognisable enough to be invoked, paraphrased, ironised, or explicitly rejected in public texts. Their analytical relevance lies in the presupposition of shared cultural knowledge required for such reformulations to be interpretable at all, rather than in any claim about contemporary prevalence or discursive dominance.

The notion of discursive fossilisation, as employed in this study, is intended as a descriptive heuristic for capturing the long-term stabilisation of evaluative meanings in conventional figurative language. It does not imply semantic rigidity, universal acceptance, or direct social influence. Instead, it designates a condition of cultural availability whereby certain evaluative models remain accessible as shared reference points, even when their overt endorsement becomes contested, mitigated, or socially marked. In this sense, fossilisation refers to recognisability rather than to frequency or authority.

Methodologically, the study highlights the continued relevance of proverb collections for linguistic and cultural analysis. As curated repositories of conventionalised expressions, such collections provide access to evaluative patterns that are not readily recoverable through corpus-based approaches, particularly given the marked, infrequent, and often metadiscursive nature of proverb use in contemporary communication. When treated as archives of proverbial meaning rather than as corpora of usage, proverb collections constitute a valid and necessary empirical foundation for examining long-term cultural models encoded in figurative language.

The findings presented here are necessarily limited to the analysis of proverbial meaning and cultural availability. They do not permit generalisations about actual language use, speaker attitudes, or behavioural outcomes. Future research may build on this work by examining how proverb-based evaluative patterns interact with other forms of conventionalised language, or by exploring their reinterpretation and negotiation in specific genres or communities, without presupposing frequency or causal influence. Within these bounds, the present study contributes to a more precise understanding of how gendered evaluation is encoded, preserved, and rendered intelligible through traditional figurative language.

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