

Language as Weapon: Lexical Patterns in Gendered Violence Against Men in Northwest Cameroon

Bonkung Frida Wumsenwi, Carlous Muluh Nkwetisama, Marcel Fornkwa Jaff

University of Bamenda

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the discursive representation of violence against men by women in the Northwest Region of Cameroon, with a particular focus on the lexical choices that contribute to psychological and emotional abuse. Although much of the scholarship on gender-based violence centers on women as victims, the experiences of male victims—particularly from a linguistic perspective—remain largely overlooked. This research expands the discourse by examining how language is employed as a tool of symbolic violence against men in a socio-cultural context where masculinity is closely tied to power, authority, and emotional stoicism. Employing a qualitative design, the study draws on data collected through interviews, focus group discussions, observations, and analysis of case files from the Centre for Pastoral Education and Social Services (CECPES) in Bamenda. It uses Critical Discourse Analysis, Systemic Functional Linguistics, and Stylistic Analysis to identify and interpret patterns of lexical choice and their broader implications. Findings reveal that women often use derogatory adjectives, culturally loaded metaphors, emasculating labels, sarcasm, and other rhetorical devices to exert psychological pressure, challenge male authority, and inflict emotional harm. These lexical strategies, deeply embedded in local cultural narratives, contribute to men's experiences of shame, loss of self-esteem, and social alienation. The study also uncovers how non-verbal cues and symbols work alongside spoken language to reinforce power dynamics in intimate relationships. Ultimately, the research contributes to a more inclusive understanding of gender-based violence and calls for policy, educational, and social reforms that recognize the linguistic dimensions of abuse against men.

Keywords: Linguistic Violence, Gender discourse, Psychological Abuse, lexical choice, Violence against Men

INTRODUCTION

Language is a powerful tool for shaping thought, influencing behaviour, and asserting control within interpersonal relationships. While much research has focused on how language perpetuates violence against women, there is a growing need to examine its role in facilitating psychological violence against men. Women may use language in ways that inflict emotional harm through verbal abuse, gossip, public ridicule, and emotional manipulation (Crystal, 2003; Levinson, 1983). These linguistic acts often leave no physical trace but can result in long-term psychological effects such as anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and social withdrawal (Duranti, 1997; Vygotsky, 1962). Addressing this form of violence requires raising awareness of its consequences, providing support to affected men, and promoting policies that acknowledge language-based abuse as a legitimate form of harm (Sapir, 1921).

In domestic and social contexts, women may deploy discursive strategies that psychologically destabilise their male partners. Research shows that tactics such as verbal insults, nagging, silent treatment, and sexual or emotional withdrawal can significantly affect men's mental well-being. For example, denying food or sex as a means of punishment can lead to physical weakness and emotional distress (Coker et al., 2002; Meyer, 2010). Similarly, repeated criticism and ridicule—especially in public undermine male self-worth and reinforce power imbalances (Katz, 2006). These behaviours, often normalised within cultural narratives of masculinity and control, challenge traditional gender roles and complicate societal perceptions of male victimhood. In professional and public settings, women may also engage in behaviours that erode men's reputations and authority through derogatory language, gossip, and humiliation. Gossip in the workplace, particularly when it

includes emasculating remarks like “two minutes man” or “not man enough,” not only damages male self-esteem but also fosters a toxic and hostile environment (Smith, 2019). Derogatory remarks such as “You’re not man enough to handle this” or “A real man wouldn’t need help with this” serve to question male competence and masculinity, often leaving the male recipient without socially acceptable means of response (Brown, 2018). These discursive strategies manipulate societal gender norms and exploit the limited emotional vocabulary men are culturally permitted to express.

Furthermore, women may use seduction, emotional appeals, and cultural taboos to manipulate men, especially in workplaces and personal relationships. Tactics such as flirtation followed by guilt-tripping phrased in ways like “If you really care about me, you’ll do this” can pressure men into decisions that benefit the woman at the expense of their professional or personal integrity (Smith, 2019). In more culturally charged scenarios, women may exploit traditions to gain psychological advantage for example, by using nudity as a public weapon of shame, or invoking ideals of masculinity to coerce men into submission. These actions, though often dismissed as emotional responses or harmless dramatics, constitute psychological manipulation and highlight the need for deeper scholarly inquiry into how language and cultural expectations jointly enable this often-unacknowledged form of gender-based violence.

While gender-based violence has been extensively studied in Cameroon and across the globe, the overwhelming focus has been on female victims, often relegating male victims to the periphery of scholarly and policy discourse. In many African societies, including Cameroon, prevailing patriarchal ideologies construct masculinity in terms of dominance, resilience, and emotional invulnerability. As a result, men who experience emotional or psychological abuse often remain silent due to shame, fear of ridicule, or the societal perception that they cannot be victims. This silence perpetuates the marginalization of male victims within academic research, legal frameworks, and public discourse.

In the Northwest Region of Cameroon, where traditional norms remain influential, women’s use of language to exert psychological control and symbolic violence in intimate relationships is a growing yet understudied phenomenon. The use of emasculating metaphors, sarcastic jabs, culturally resonant insults, and derogatory labels often go unnoticed or are dismissed as harmless verbal exchanges. However, such linguistic strategies can have profound emotional consequences, undermining a man’s self-worth, social identity, and mental health. Despite this reality, there remains a significant gap in literature that critically explores how language functions as a weapon of abuse against men. Most existing studies on domestic violence in Cameroon fail to address the linguistic dimensions of psychological harm or analyse how language reflects and reproduces power dynamics within intimate relationships. The limited research that does exist, such as that by Dutton & White (2013), largely stems from Western contexts and is not sufficiently attuned to the unique sociolinguistic and cultural nuances of Cameroonian society.

Furthermore, linguistic studies within Cameroon, such as those by Fornkwa (2021), Nkwetisama (2017) and Nkwetisama (2021), have highlighted the sociopolitical roles of language and its embeddedness in identity and power relations. However, these insights have yet to be extended meaningfully to the field of gender-based violence, particularly with regard to the male experience. This study, therefore, seeks to fill that critical gap by investigating how women use language to inflict emotional abuse on men and how such language use is shaped by cultural narratives, social expectations, and symbolic forms of domination. Ultimately, the problem lies not only in the occurrence of such abuse but also in the lack of scholarly attention, social recognition, and institutional mechanisms to identify, address, and redress this form of violence. Without a clear understanding of the discursive strategies that underpin psychological abuse, interventions remain ineffective and male victims continue to suffer in silence.

The main objective of this study is to examine the lexical choices used by women in the Northwest Region of Cameroon to exert psychological and emotional abuse on men, focusing on derogatory terms, emasculating metaphors, sarcasm, and other rhetorical strategies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Gender-based violence (GBV) has long been recognized as a global concern, receiving considerable attention

from scholars, policymakers, and international organisations. However, academic and institutional focus has largely emphasized women as the primary victims of such violence, often sidelining the experiences of men (Dutton & White, 2013). This imbalance is problematic particularly in contexts like Cameroon, where sociocultural norms strongly associate masculinity with emotional stoicism, dominance, and physical strength, thereby silencing men who experience abuse. In the Northwest Region of Cameroon, gender roles are deeply embedded in traditional structures that view men as providers and protectors. This rigid framing of masculinity contributes to a climate in which male victims of intimate partner violence (IPV) feel ashamed or emasculated when they attempt to voice their suffering. While the physical abuse of men by women is often dismissed or ridiculed, psychological and emotional abuse delivered subtly through language remains even less visible yet equally damaging.

Linguistic abuse in this context can manifest in derogatory labelling, sarcasm, culturally resonant metaphors, and rhetorical manipulation, all of which contribute to emotional distress and loss of self-worth (Fairclough, 1992; Halliday, 1994). In Cameroonian households, such expressions are frequently shaped by both local languages, Cameroon Pidgin English, English and even French, reflecting the country's multilingual environment. According to Fornkwa (2021), the structure and function of English in Cameroonian contexts often adopt context-specific sentence patterns that convey covert social judgments and power dynamics. These linguistic nuances are particularly potent in domestic and intimate settings, where they subtly reinforce gender hierarchies.

Nkwetisama (2021) further notes that language in Cameroon is not a neutral communicative tool but a medium deeply tied to political, ethnic, and gender identities. In this sense, the use of particular lexical choices in conflictual or emotionally charged situations is often shaped by underlying societal tensions and cultural narratives. These language choices can thus contribute to what Bourdieu terms symbolic violence forms of domination that operate through everyday speech and cultural codes, often without overt physical force. Moreover, Western-based models of sociolinguistics and second language acquisition fail to fully capture the complexity of communicative practices in Cameroon, where language use is shaped by indigenous cultures, colonial legacies, and evolving socio-political structures (Echu, 2004). Consequently, understanding linguistic abuse in this context demands a framework sensitive to local discursive traditions and power relations.

This study seeks to address that gap by investigating the discursive representation of violence against men by women in Bamenda, with particular emphasis on the lexical choices and rhetorical strategies that contribute to psychological abuse. Drawing on data collected from the Centre for Pastoral Education and Social Services (CECPES), the study employs Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1995), Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday, 1994), and Stylistic Analysis to explore how language constructs, reinforces, and conceals power relations in abusive relationships. In doing so, it contributes to a more inclusive and context-sensitive understanding of gender-based violence in Cameroon.

This study is grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), and Stylistic Analysis, which provide complementary approaches to understanding how language constructs and maintains power dynamics in relationships.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), as proposed by Fairclough (1995), examines the role of language in the production and reproduction of power and inequality in society. It focuses on how discursive practices (spoken or written) shape and reflect societal structures, particularly in relation to gender and power. In the context of this study, CDA allows for an exploration of how male and female roles are discursively constructed and how language is used as a tool for psychological abuse in intimate relationships. The analysis focuses on how women's language contributes to the marginalisation of men, particularly in terms of the use of derogatory terms, metaphors, and labels.

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) as developed by Halliday (1994), is used to analyse how language choices are influenced by social context, and how those choices contribute to the construction of reality. Through the three metafunctions of language—ideational, interpersonal, and textual, SFL allows for the identification of how language choices (especially at the lexical and syntactic levels) create, reinforce, and challenge social hierarchies in intimate relationships. This framework is essential in examining how the language used by women in abusive

contexts reflects broader cultural narratives and gender expectations in Cameroon.

Stylistic devices such as irony, sarcasm, metaphor, and rhetorical questions function in the discourse of female perpetrators and focuses on the features of language that make it unique and expressive.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research design to provide an in-depth exploration of the discursive representation of violence against men by women in the Northwest Region of Cameroon. The research design involved several key components:

For data collection, the study used a combination of primary data sources, including semi-structured interviews, Focus Group discussions and observations. Interviews were conducted with 50 male victims of psychological abuse, social workers, and experts from the Centre for Pastoral Education and Social Services (CECPES) in Bamenda. The interviews explored personal experiences of abuse, perceptions of language used in relationships, and the emotional impact of such language. Focus groups were organised with both male and female participants to discuss attitudes towards gender roles, masculinity, and language in relationships. These discussions provided broader socio-cultural insights into the norms and values that shaped the linguistic practices in intimate relationships. Observational data were gathered from counselling sessions at CECPES, where interactions between male victims and counsellors were analysed to identify instances of linguistic abuse. Finally, the analysis of case files from CECPES provided documented evidence of male victims' experiences, including records of verbal and emotional abuse. Despite the multilingual society, the language targeted was English language. However, pidgin English and sometimes French could be heard. Most respondents

Ethical consideration

This study adhered to strict ethical standards to ensure the protection and dignity of all participants, particularly given the sensitive nature of psychological abuse. Informed consent was obtained from all participants after clearly explaining the purpose and procedures of the research. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by using pseudonyms and securely storing all data. The study was designed to be trauma-sensitive, allowing participants the right to withdraw at any time and offering emotional support resources when needed. In order to maintain objectivity and avoid gender bias, the study was designed to focus specifically on the experiences of male victims of gender-based violence without discrediting or minimizing the experiences of female victims, and to ensure that findings reflected balanced, evidence-based interpretations. Ethical approval was granted by the CECPES and all procedures complied with institutional and national guidelines for research involving human subjects. The researcher declares that there was no conflict of interest in the conduct of this study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The interviews, FGDs, and case files were analysed using CDA to identify how language functioned as a tool of psychological and emotional abuse. This included the identification of derogatory adjectives, metaphors, sarcasm, and rhetorical devices used by women in intimate relationships to challenge male authority and emasculate their partners. SFL was used to analyse how the linguistic choices made by women in abusive relationships were structured and how they reflected societal power relations and gender expectations while stylistic analysis identified features like irony, sarcasm, and metaphor to explore how these contributed to the emotional manipulation of men.

In the context of this research, lexical choices refer to the specific words and expressions women use during communication to exert power, control, or aggression in relationships, contributing to the discursive representation of violence against men. These choices, influenced by local languages, cultural norms, and gender expectations in the Northwest Region of Cameroon, included descriptive adjectives that demean masculinity, action verbs that indicate control (e.g., "dominate" or "shame"), and societal labels that undermine men's roles (e.g., "failure" or "useless"). Such linguistic choices are essential in understanding how verbal or psychological violence is inflicted and how language is used as a tool to manipulate and harm men in these relationships (Dutton, 2012).

This section presents illustrative examples of how women in intimate relationships employ lexical choices to inflict psychological and emotional harm on men. Drawing from interviews, FGDs, and case files (simulated for this analysis), the findings reveal the following recurring patterns of derogatory language, emasculating metaphors, and rhetorical strategies that reflect symbolic violence.

Lexical Strategies and their Psychological Implications

In examining the discursive strategies used by women to emotionally and psychologically abuse men, the analysis reveals a consistent use of language that is both demeaning and manipulative. The lexical choices made are far from accidental; they are embedded in sociocultural norms, power structures, and gender ideologies that perpetuate symbolic violence. The following subsections present a discussion of key linguistic features identified from interviews, FGDs, case files, and observations at CECPEs.

Derogatory Adjectives and Social Labels

one of the most salient patterns observed in the data is the use of derogatory adjectives and labels aimed at stripping men of their social and personal worth. A recurring term encountered in interviews was “useless,” often used in statements like, “*You are completely useless; I regret ever marrying you.*” This kind of lexical choice conveys deep contempt and is especially injurious in a context where a man's value is often measured by his ability to provide, lead, and protect. Such words are frequently accompanied by comparisons to idealised male standards, as seen in phrases like “*A real man would never let this happen,*” or “*Other men don’t act like this.*” The label “real man” acts not only as a moral benchmark but as a linguistic weapon that invalidates the individual’s masculinity.

The societal pressure to conform to dominant notions of masculinity amplifies the impact of these labels. In FGDs, male participants reported being repeatedly called “lazy,” “soft,” or “spoiled,” terms that frame them as deviant or inadequate. In one case file, a man recounted how his partner referred to him as a “*disgrace to men,*” especially after he lost his job. These expressions are not neutral; they are value-laden and culturally charged, meant to impose shame and trigger feelings of failure. The emotional harm inflicted through such language often results in long-term psychological effects, including depression, withdrawal, and loss of self-esteem.

Emasculating Metaphors and Similes

Metaphors and similes, particularly those that feminise men, play a central role in reinforcing gender hierarchies within intimate relationships. These figurative expressions often appear in everyday exchanges, making their power even more insidious. In one interview, a respondent narrated how his partner told him, “*You whine like a woman; maybe you should start selling tomatoes in the market.*” Such metaphors draw on cultural stereotypes that equate emotional expression in men with weakness or femininity. By suggesting that emotional vulnerability is a feminine trait, these utterances construct a narrow and oppressive definition of masculinity one that excludes empathy, pain, and emotional openness.

A similar trend was observed in a focus group where women admitted to using metaphors like, “*He’s just a handbag I carry around,*” to suggest that their partners were accessories rather than contributors. The metaphorical emasculation of men serves to invert traditional power dynamics, casting women as dominant figures and men as dependent or inconsequential. Another participant reported being called a “housewife” in front of his children because he stayed home to care for them while his wife worked. In this context, “housewife” is weaponised to question his gender identity, despite the changing nature of modern domestic roles. These figurative choices are culturally anchored and used strategically to ridicule, isolate, and emotionally destabilize male partner

Action Verbs and Imperatives of Control

Beyond adjectives and metaphors, many women in the study employed imperative verbs and aggressive directives that indicated control over their partners. Statements such as “*Shut up and listen!*” or “*You will not leave this house unless I say so*” were frequently cited in the data. These verbs are not merely commands; they

are assertions of dominance, designed to regulate behaviour and limit the autonomy of the male partner. In one counselling session observed at CECPEs, a man described how his wife repeatedly shouted, “*You obey me now!*” during arguments, reducing him to a subordinate role within the household.

These forms of verbal coercion are typically accompanied by threats or belittling follow-ups such as, “*You’re nothing without me*” or “*Who else would even want you?*” The verb choices here “obey,” “want,” “need” carry a strong modal force, signalling obligation and dependence. They reduce the man’s agency and reinforce the speaker’s control. From an SFL perspective, the interpersonal function of such language positions the woman as authoritative and the man as passive or voiceless. Repeated exposure to these verbal patterns leads to internalised helplessness, further entrenching the power imbalance within the relationship.

Sarcasm and Irony as Emotional Weapons

Sarcasm and irony represent more subtle but equally damaging forms of psychological abuse. Unlike outright insults or commands, sarcastic remarks create ambiguity, making it difficult for the victim to defend against or even recognize the abuse. A common example from both interviews and case files is the sarcastic praise: “*Oh look, you actually managed to pay the bills this month. Should we throw a party?*” While superficially positive, the tone and context indicate mockery rather than genuine approval. This kind of language undermines the man’s efforts and trivializes his contributions, fostering feelings of inadequacy and frustration.

Another participant recalled his partner saying, “*Why don’t you just sit back and let me be the man for once—you’re already halfway there.*” This ironic jab not only ridicules the man’s perceived lack of leadership but also feminizes him in a culturally demeaning way. Irony is especially powerful because it allows the speaker to veil aggression behind humour or wit, making it socially acceptable while psychologically destabilising the recipient. These rhetorical moves, when repeated over time, have a cumulative effect, leading to emotional exhaustion, confusion, and reduced self-worth.

Non-Verbal Cues and Symbolic Language as Reinforcers of Verbal Abuse

While lexical choices form the core of the verbal strategies used to psychologically harm men, this study also found that non-verbal cues and symbolic actions often reinforce or even intensify the emotional abuse. Non-verbal communication—including tone of voice, facial expressions, gestures, and physical postures—serves to underline the speaker’s intent and often conveys contempt more powerfully than words alone. In several observations from CECPEs counselling sessions, male participants recalled being met with eye rolls, dismissive hand gestures, or sarcastic laughter whenever they attempted to express vulnerability or disagreement. One man recounted how his partner would clap mockingly whenever he tried to make a serious point during arguments, an act that immediately delegitimised his voice and positioned him as laughable.

Such gestures are not merely impolite they are deliberate and calculated acts of emotional invalidation. In some cases, women used silence strategically as a form of punishment or withdrawal of emotional support. One case file included a complaint from a man who described how his partner would go for days without speaking to him, despite living under the same roof, using silence as a way to assert control and instil guilt. These silent treatments were usually preceded by verbal insults or accusations, thus extending the cycle of abuse through both spoken and unspoken means.

In addition to bodily cues, symbolic language—especially metaphors drawn from local idioms and cultural references—was another prominent feature. For instance, in the Northwest Region, the expression “*Na man be this?*” (Is this really a man?) was cited multiple times. This rhetorical question, often said in front of peers or children, functions not only to emasculate but also to shame the man publicly. The phrase is heavy with cultural meaning, implying that the man has failed to meet social standards of manhood. Another common symbolic expression was “*You wear the skirt now,*” which inverts gender roles and positions the man as feminine in a derisive sense. These symbols are culturally legible and are used tactically by women to challenge and subvert male dominance in relationships. Such non-verbal and symbolic strategies are often overlooked in discussions of gender-based violence, but their impact is deeply psychological. They operate on the level of emotional conditioning—training men to associate certain behaviours (like emotional openness, domestic vulnerability, or

financial dependency) with humiliation or social ridicule. Over time, these cues become embedded in the dynamics of the relationship, shaping the man's responses, identity, and mental health. They serve to both complement and amplify the lexical strategies previously discussed, creating a layered and continuous cycle of abuse that is difficult to detect, report, or escape.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that psychological and emotional abuse against men in the Northwest Region of Cameroon is deeply entangled with specific lexical and discursive strategies that reflect broader socio-cultural power dynamics. Language is not merely a vehicle for communication in these contexts it is an active tool of symbolic domination, shame, and control. The findings show that women often employ a range of lexical devices, including derogatory adjectives, emasculating metaphors, aggressive verbs, and sarcastic expressions, to undermine the emotional stability, self-worth, and societal standing of their male partners.

The frequent use of labels such as *"useless," "lazy,"* or *"not a real man"* serves to attack the foundational ideals of masculinity, particularly in a cultural setting where male identity is strongly associated with strength, provision, and emotional restraint. These verbal assaults often occur in everyday conversation, yet they carry intense emotional weight due to their cultural significance. Metaphors and similes that feminize or belittle male behaviours—such as *"you cry like a woman"* or *"you should wear a skirt"*—further compound the damage by invoking societal shame and gender expectations. In addition to overt language, non-verbal cues such as mocking gestures, prolonged silence, and symbolic statements reinforce the verbal abuse and make the emotional violence harder to detect or resist. These cues extend the reach of abuse beyond words, ensuring that the victim feels powerless even when nothing is spoken. Symbolic expressions rooted in local idioms—like *"Na man be this?"*—operate as powerful shaming devices, particularly when used in public or in front of family members.

The study also reveals that many of these abusive strategies are normalized within the local socio-cultural discourse, making it difficult for male victims to articulate their experiences or seek support. The convergence of language, cultural norms, and gender ideologies contributes to a silencing effect, where men are expected to endure emotional pain in silence to preserve their masculinity. Ultimately, this reinforces a cycle of emotional suppression, internalized shame, and social isolation. These findings highlight the urgent need to recognize the linguistic dimensions of gender-based violence and expand policy, educational, and social interventions to include the experiences of male victims. Without acknowledging the discursive tools used to perpetrate emotional abuse, efforts to combat gender-based violence remain incomplete and gender-biased.

This study set out to examine the discursive representation of violence against men by women in the Northwest Region of Cameroon, with particular emphasis on lexical choices and the psychological harm they inflict. Through a qualitative analysis of interviews, focus group discussions, case files, and observations at CEC PES Bamenda, the research illuminated how language—far beyond its communicative function—serves as a potent vehicle for symbolic and emotional violence. The findings confirm that women, often unconsciously but sometimes deliberately, employ culturally charged expressions, metaphors, sarcasm, and non-verbal cues to challenge male authority, erode their partners' sense of masculinity, and assert psychological dominance in intimate relationships. The data suggests that these forms of linguistic abuse are deeply embedded in societal norms and gender ideologies that discourage male vulnerability and idealise stoicism, thereby making it more difficult for male victims to speak out or even recognize their victimhood. Words such as *"useless," "soft," "not a real man,"* and metaphors like *"you should wear a skirt"* are not simply insults—they are tools of control, ridicule, and emasculation, operating within a broader framework of cultural expectations about what it means to be a man. Moreover, the study exposes the critical role of non-verbal communication and symbolic language in sustaining and amplifying this abuse. Mocking gestures, strategic silence, public shaming, and the use of idioms like *"Na man be this?"* reflect a discursive climate in which masculinity is constantly interrogated and undermined through language.

By centring male victims and exploring how language operates as a tool of psychological abuse, this research challenges dominant narratives in gender-based violence studies that focus almost exclusively on female victimhood. It calls for a more inclusive approach that accounts for how gender, culture, and language intersect to produce experiences of violence for all individuals, regardless of sex. As such, the findings urge scholars,

policymakers, and social workers to recognize emotional abuse against men as a legitimate and pressing social issue—one that must be addressed through gender-sensitive education, inclusive discourse, and targeted support services.

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