



## Non-Verbal Language Contributing to Stigma towards Involuntary Childless Women in the Gikùyù Community, Kenya

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### Abstract:

Putting women in a position where motherhood is associated with womanhood has led to stigma towards women who are involuntary childless. They are viewed as outsiders and language is used to advance the ideologies that justify their discrimination. Language has had a significant role in stigmatising and stereotyping childless people. Non-verbal communication, in addition to spoken discourses, which are frequently used in the stigma, is quite important. Nonverbal language communicates our unconscious ideas, feelings, and hidden beliefs. The context of the situation is created by the nonverbal cues. Women are subjected to extremely

severe linguistic stigma through nonverbal communication. The paper's main focus was on nonverbal linguistic expressions that spread stigma towards involuntary childless women. The work was informed by Fairclough and Van Dijk's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). According to CDA, grammar, vocabulary, and semantics should not be analysed separately. Instead, their roles are more important and should not be disregarded. The study set out to evaluate and investigate the linguistic stigma that involuntary childless women experience. The study used a purposive sampling technique to pick communities in Tetu sub-county of Nyeri County. These were the villages: Iithe, Ihūrūrū, Mũthĩnga and Kangaita. Focus group discussions (FGDs) and interviews supplemented by an audio recorder were used in the study to collect data. For the FGD, twenty involuntarily childless women participated as respondents. The study will be important in shedding light on important facts about the discourses used to spread linguistic stigma and how it is done. Most importantly, the results of the study will help the general public in understanding infertility concerns and discourage them from using discursive discourses to spread stereotypes about childless women. According to the study, just as vocal language, non-verbal language is used in the infertility discourse as a tool to stigmatise the involuntary childless women.

**Keywords:** *Stigma, non-verbal cues, involuntary childlessness, Gikùyù Community*

### Introduction

Traumatic human circumstances include infertility and involuntary childlessness (Goke-Pariola, 2013). Many couples want biological children. When they are unable to have children

of their own, it causes tragedy and a sense of personal loss. According to Njuguna (2019), roughly a fifth of women and about a quarter of males in Kenya are infertile. This eliminates a large number of cases that go unreported



because of ignorance caused by lack of awareness regarding infertility, which in turn has resulted in negative attitudes towards reporting infertility cases. Many couples and even individuals are reluctant to seek counselling because they fear stigma. Most people die in solitary. Their situation is not made any easier by society. They harass the victims and mock them, taunt them, reprimand them, and stigmatise them (Otiso, 2019). One of the methods utilised to spread the stigma is language. In light of this, the involuntarily childless woman experiences long-term suffering, regrets, pain, suicidal impulses, and ultimately a life crisis when she is unable to achieve her personal and societal aspirations.

## Literature Review

The study looked into whether ideologies were being spread through nonverbal linguistic discourses of involuntarily childless women. The study identified and discussed the nonverbal cues that the general public uses towards involuntarily stigmatise childless women. Essed, 1991, Goke-Pariola, 2013, and Hall, 2013, who envisioned non-verbal attributes, claimed that this type of communication also appears to operate and determine what one's feelings are, however not through use of words. For instance, whining while claiming everything is okay. The cadence of the voice, then, is an indicator of nonverbal communication.

### Paralanguage

According to Bolinger (2014) and Hall (2013), paralinguistics is a non-spoken form of communication that is different from language. As important aspects of paralinguistics, pitch, timbre, and volume rate specification are included. The study looked at conventional paralinguistic features in nonverbal discursive discourses that society uses to stigmatise involuntarily childless women. Heckling is a non-verbal lexical expression used as an intimidating action that can be used to indicate hostility towards an involuntarily childless woman. Such a woman cannot speak to the general public since it is said that she violated

social conventions. This study set out to understand how paralanguage, a non-verbal lexical expression, contributes to the stigmatisation of involuntarily childless women.

### Proxemics

Essed (1991) discussed a condition in which people incessantly need their "personal spaces," which are essential when we think about non-verbal communication. Essed (1991) and Hall (2013) claim that a variety of elements frequently influence whether we feel a distance is one we should cross or one we should not. The researcher wanted to know if the childless involuntary women ever felt as though their personal space had been invaded because this was a tactic used, whether intentionally or not, to stigmatise them. Some aspects, such as situational variables, social norms, personality traits, degree of acquaintance, and cultural expectations, came into play for this stigma to be actualised (Goke-Pariola, 2013). The implication of this is that, like verbal-linguistic expressions, non-verbal-linguistic expressions continuously support, perpetuate, and deepen stereotyped attitudes towards involuntary childless women. In the study, it was examined how childless women's personal spaces were violated through the nonverbal linguistic expressions.

### Haptics

Unique meanings are communicated by various touch kinds (Essed, 1999; Hall, 2013). For instance, a hug, a tap on the back, a small touch on the stomach, and tightly clasping of both hands can all convey precise information (Wood, 2007, p.76). She adds that expressing rank and power through touch is another common practise. People with high ranks often invade others they perceive as being weaker than them. They frequently and more intensely intrude their personal areas. Men are likewise affected by this, and they are more likely to exert control and influence over others. Women use haptics as a way to show concern, care, and nurturing for both males and other women. This can be accomplished in a number of ways, such as by lightly stroking the belly of an involuntary childless woman. This was critical in the study since it is expected that the childless women will

receive haptics while being rejected for being unable to conceive. Therefore, the goal of the study was to comprehend how haptics, a non-verbal kind of language, adds to the stigmatisation of women who are involuntary childless.

### Theoretical Framework

The Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) ideas of Fairclough (2001) and Van Dijk (2006) served as the foundation for this investigation. The CDA theory was essential to the study because it explained how power relationships are created and upheld in Gikùyù society and how stigmatising opinions about women are disseminated through discursive techniques.

Critical discourse analysis holds the view that for the reader to completely comprehend what a text is saying, the form and intent of the text must be examined. It also shows how writing is produced, absorbed, and linked to the rest of society. As a result, CDA views text as an all-encompassing process in which social norms are entwined with it and they establish a mutually beneficial partnership in which they are reliant on one another (Richardson, 2007). According to Fairclough (2001), analysis should always start with the text and then progressively include additional, more complicated discursive practises that are also acceptable in society.

In order to analyse speech, Fairclough (2001) contends that it is essential to consider its process and social environment. In addition to the existing circumstances, he advises the researcher to constantly consider the societal and institutional components of the problem. According to CDA, grammar, lexicons, and semantics by themselves ought not to be particularly significant. This is because their functionalities consistently stand out in any investigation. This concept was crucial to this study since it was explored in the context of phrase usage in the stigma towards involuntary childless women. Richardson (2007) argues that it is essential to concentrate on conventional approaches to language analysis and to critically assess how they either uphold or undermine social norms and power structures. He further claims that before evaluating the employed

characteristics of the text, one should take other possibilities that the society had into consideration. The grammatical decisions and lexicons were examined to assess the tactics in order to gauge the severity of the stigma in the Gikùyù community. Finding the role played by non-verbal language in stigmatizing the involuntary childlessness was the paper's main objective.

Van Dijk's (2006) socio-cognitive approach to CDA also proved to be quite applicable to the study. Language users, like members of organisations, groups, or races, take on social attitudes that have been established in them. This ideological cognitive element is often referred to as "the communal mental representation of language." There are three basic categories used to classify social cognitions (Van Dijk, 2006). The first is comprehending from a cultural standpoint. Members of the affected community often exchange this information. Because it is shared equally across cultures, knowledge that is disseminated in this way is typically seen as part of public discourse. The second is attitudes. They can be viewed as people's perceptions of one another, and social and cultural realities that influence conversations. Ideology is the final and most important factor. Ideologies are essential principles that shape the beliefs of the broader public, claims Van Dijk (2006). The dominant group uses these ideas to legitimise and spread the stigma in order to reign over others. According to the theory, social views were revealed that supported the study's objective of identifying the discursive tactics used by the Gikùyù society to stigmatise the involuntary childless women. This ideological idea was included in Fairclough's (2001) analysis, which was the research's concluding argument. To ensure that the language stigma was effectively transmitted, all expressives in this paper were considered as ideologies.

Every piece of information gathered for the study was assumed to include cultural assumptions that had evolved over time and through language learning and had subsequently been stored in the brain. The data was thoroughly scrutinised for any indications of a

power difference between the dominant and marginalised groups. According to this paper, all attempts to uphold specific discursive practises that prioritise dominant ideologies over ideologies that are deemed as inferior are viewed as dominances in power (Fairclough, 2001). This study sought to explore the discursive factors that support the stigmatisation of childless women who are involuntary childless.

## Methods and Materials

The research used the qualitative research approach in order to examine the non-verbal tactics used towards the involuntarily childless women (Takyi, 2022). The target population consisted of twenty women, aged 45 to 65, who had either gone through or were going through involuntary childlessness. The respondents for the study were selected by purposive sampling. Tetu Sub-County in Nyeri County was the only area covered by the study. When compared to other counties in Kenya, Nyeri is regarded to have the highest rate of infertility. According to (KDHS, 2020), 866 cases of infertility, affecting both men and women, were documented in the county during the years of 2012 and 2019. With 328 individuals or 38% of the county's infertility rate, Tetu sub-county had the greatest percentage of cases. There were 68 men and 260 women among them. The four Tetu sub-county villages of Iithe, Ihũrũrũ, Mũthĩnga and Kangaita were specifically sampled because the researcher had seen that infertility was common there. The study's seven FGD questions served as its guiding principles, and the researcher selected unique instances that were informative. Four Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were formed with each comprising five childless women. The data was then tape recorded to make sure no information was lost. After transcription, the data was translated.

## Results

The pronatalist Gikũyũ community employs nonverbal cues to create stigma against involuntary childless women. According to Fairclough (2001) and Van Dijk (2006), both

verbal and nonverbal language can be used to express concepts. Nonverbal communication includes more than just kinesics (facial expressions, body language, and eye contact), according to (Guimares, 2013, Burgoon, 2021, and Hall, 2013), as it also comprises vocalics or paralanguage, proxemics, personal appearance, haptics or touch, and personal space. A similar philosophy was used in this paper, which focused more on nonverbal communication. According to Peterson & Leonhardt (2015), who also supports the preceding claim, nonverbal language does express our unconscious ideas, feelings, and buried beliefs. As a result, nonverbal language can be investigated for meaning in discourses. They emphasise how the context of the interaction is created by the participants' verbal and nonverbal behaviours. Therefore, in order to accurately explain the infertile discourse, it was crucial to develop and specify both the linguistic systems used and how they were transmitted through nonverbal behaviour.

## Physical Touch and Social Space

Touch can be used to influence individuals, ideas, and messages (Fairclough, 2001; Van Dijk, 2006), as well as to transmit specific messages (Burgoon, 2021; Hall, 2013). The study closely examined incidents in which the childless women were uninvitedly touched. Respondents 19 and 1 made the observation that individuals of the neighbourhood, notably friends and family from both sides of the family, had inappropriately touched them and breached their privacy in an effort to provide them parenting advice. The connection between two people should influence the type of contact they give each other; however, this is not taken into account (Burgoon, 2021; Hall, 2013). Respondent 19 observed:

*Tata akwa mamenyereke kũhutagia ndaa o'ĩndĩ twacemania ĩndĩ ya thigũkũ makĩnjũragia kana nĩndĩraritũhĩre. Ndamera caa nĩ manjũragia cĩvĩria itarĩ mũthia.*

My aunts used to touch my stomach throughout the Christmas break and inquire as to whether I had become pregnant at last. They repeatedly



inquired about the issue after I replied "no."  
(Respondent 19: 50 years)

Respondent 1, 45 years old, responded in kind by admitting that:

*Ihinda rirĩa ndageririe mũno kuoba ndaa ngiremwo-ri, mũthuri ũrĩa watũũgamĩrĩre mubiki nĩokire gwaka mũthenya mũthuri atarĩ kuo. Anjĩrie waganu warĩ na gĩconoko mũno na akiuga atĩ no mũthuri mũkinyanĩru take ũngĩhota kũnjĩarĩbia.*

The best man from our wedding once dropped by my house while my husband was away and started touching me suggestively, saying he wanted to know what it was like to have sex with an infertile woman since he was sure he could change her infertility status. At the time, we had been trying to conceive for years. (Respondent 1: 45 years)

Respondent 1 asserts that she believed the best man had intruded into her space without permission and touched her disrespectfully. She claims that she was ashamed to tell her husband about the incident and blamed herself for not becoming pregnant as a result, which led to her embarrassment. Social space and touch therefore are seen to have close ties.

Hall (2013) asserts that maintaining a certain level of privacy will help one feel at ease. Respondent 19 alleges that when her aunts entered her personal space, it caused her to experience extreme discomfort. The surroundings and the people one encountered with are also important considerations. For instance, close friends are permitted to be in close proximity to one another while strangers are not. The ease with which the childless woman feels sharing her circumstances with the other person is important in the infertility dialogue.

As a result, the two respondents 19 and 1, may have stated that their touches were inappropriate and in violation of personal space laws. This is due to the fact that they exacerbate the already dire predicament of childlessness.

## Paralanguage

Nonverbal linguistic cues are referred to as paralanguage (Hall, 2013). In this case, heckling is an illustration of paralanguage. One respondent, a coffee farmer, remembers a day when there were issues at their coffee factory. The farmers took sides as there were two factions fighting for control of the facility. Her childlessness brought the two groups together as they were at that point yelling each other down and hurling objects at one another. They started to heckle her down by stating,

*(makianĩrĩra) ine ũyũ na ndarĩ ũtiganu na kĩndũ gĩkuo, Abe ugaciariĩre mũthuri guo ũcoko ũke ũũtare.*

(shouting) Look at this worthless one, go give your spouse children first, then act like our adviser. (Respondent 6:48 years)

The teasing gave her a societal stigma that led to her feeling as an outsider and caused the two parties to redirect their focus from their argument by giving the impression that the neighbours were angered by her lack of children. Heckling is referred to as an aggressive activity in which an individual or group of individuals obstructs a performance or speaker on stage in an effort "to agitate and try to disconcert [him or her] with queries, hurdles, or gibes" (Silverman, 2001). This expressed the opinions of the community's members and, at the same time, moulded and affected the notions about childlessness that were spread, stigmatising the involuntary childless women.

Hall (2013) asserts that heckling is a paralinguistic behaviour that fosters powerlessness, which is what it did to the involuntary childless woman. Therefore, jeering conveys the idea that the childless woman is defenceless. Since the culture typically stigmatises involuntary childless women, they are unable to realise their full potential. This is due to the infertility issue. Nonverbal cues can reveal social and interpersonal connections, which can help ideological meanings evolve (Fairclough, 2018). As a result, nonverbal communication might alter the models for communicating, such as heckling.

## Facial Expressions and Gestures

In the relationship between verbal and nonverbal behaviour, facial expressions and nonverbal gestures are seen as signals that play a complex function (Peterson & Leonhardt, 2015). According to Bolinger (2014), our eyes and hearing reflect how we get information. In this sense, there are significant differences between auditory and visual motions. Childless women frequently encounter nonverbal threats and insults from members of society in addition to verbal ones through gestures and facial expressions. These facial expressions, gestures and emotions are frequently sexual in nature. Respondent 9: 65 years, an involuntary childless women said:

*Manjirie kūruta mīgambo ya thoni magīkaga  
cūko ci aura thoni magītōmīra rūrīmi na Ciara  
kōnonia atī njagīrīre nī kwamba gūciara.*

Insinuating that I should have a baby first, the guys in the audience started making faces, sticking out their tongues, and using sex-related signals (raising their middle fingers). (Respondent 9: 65 years)

As a result of her infertility, society disapproved of the childless woman who was running for the County Assembly Position, which is an elective position, in Wamagana ward. Examples of deliberate gestures used to send a message include raising the middle finger and displaying disparaging facial expressions. They are used as instruments of power to stigmatise involuntary childless women and to promote the notion that becoming a mother is the only socially acceptable role for women. According to Foucault (2009), as these nonverbal slurs have a sexual undertone, they are degrading to the women who are involuntary childless and stigmatise them. Since it supports or replaces verbal discourse, nonverbal language cannot be neglected (Bolinger, 2014). Therefore, it is not on purpose when the crowd makes disparaging gestures and facial expressions towards the respondent. They still want to say that her lack of children is unacceptable.

When together with her coworkers she went to a coworker who had recently given birth to

celebrate the baby's birth, respondent 13 was stigmatised by the coworkers she had travelled with hence experiencing stigma. They sung while passing the infant from one coworker to the next, as is customary in Gikūyū culture. She was taken aback when the infant was handed to the next coworker when it was her turn to hold the child. The woman said:

*Twathūte kwa mōtumia twa rutaga nake wira  
gūkōngōira kana aciara. Nitwainire muno na  
kwarī na gīkeno bīw tōgīthie tōfuatīte  
mītaratara ya gī-gīkōyō. Ihinda rīakwa rīa  
gūchubia mwana rīoka rī, ndiabeiruo mwana  
ōcio, anengeriruo ōrīa twarīgānie nake.  
Ndaiguire ūru mūno (ena iboru na agītāga  
maitbori) nī ndaiguire thoni nyingī mōno.*

We went to see a coworker who had just given birth to a child. We performed songs and dances, as is customary for the Gikūyū people. Unexpectedly, the infant was handed to the next coworker (looking hurt) when it was my turn to hold the child (wiping tears). I was really humiliated. (Respondent 13: 49 years)

The decision to withhold the infant from her was not a mistake; rather, it was done to instill an "Us versus Them" dynamic in social interactions (Fairclough, 2001). She experienced this as a type of stigma that made her feel uneasy and out of place. This is consistent with Otiso's (2019) assertion that pronatalist cultures typically construct childless women negatively. The cliched gesture expresses the idea that childlessness is intolerable in the Gikūyū society.

This paper has looked at the stigmatisation of involuntarily childless women in nonverbal communication. The non-verbal discourses in this paper negatively stereotype childless women. The stigma is socially built in concepts, which helps people understand one another. The findings in this section are consistent with those of recent research by Njuguna (2019) and Otiso (2019), which found that pronatalist societies, including the Gikūyū community, typically have negative stereotypes of involuntary childless women. According to Fairclough (2001), ideological meanings can be communicated nonverbally through indicating social and

interpersonal ties. Thus, this might have an effect on the context models of communication. Nonverbal communication played a key role in the paper's study on non-verbal discourses that contribute to the stigmatization of involuntary childless women in relation to the society which were either expressed through unconscious feelings, ideas, or beliefs.

## Discussion

The primary objective of the paper was determined after taking into account the objective, data analysis, and subsequent findings. The study was built on the following research question:

i) Which stereotypical non-verbal linguistic expressions are used towards involuntary childless women in the pronatalist Gikùyù community?

The paper discovered that involuntary childless women were subjugated mostly by verbal and nonverbal linguistic cues. According to the paper, the pronatalist Gikùyù community's stigma against involuntary childless women was created by nonverbal discourses. The study also found that because non-verbal communication often reveals concepts, hidden beliefs, and subconscious feelings, stigma was also made possible through its ability to explain ideas. These implicit stigmatising discourses are unavoidable since they are crucial to understanding the situation's background and can effectively take the place of explicit language. The research proved that community's members implemented, maintained, and spread stereotyped views through nonverbal discourses.

## Conclusion

The purpose of the study was to uncover nonverbal cues that stigmatised involuntary childless women in the Gikùyù community. The study found that stereotypes are significantly formed as a result of nonverbal language. This function is illustrated by the way in which certain prejudices are generated, reinforced, and repeated to produce society beliefs. The study

showed how deeply ingrained these biases are in the Gikùyù community and how they contribute to the stigmatisation of involuntarily childless women. Thus, the study's results confirm and lend support to the paper's main purpose, which is that nonverbal language adds to stereotypes of the involuntarily childless women in the Gikùyù community.

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## Appendix 1

### Focus Group Discussion Guide Questions - Involuntary Childless Women

A researcher from Laikipia University would like to determine the non-verbal language used while stigmatizing the involuntary childless women in the Gikùyù community. Be guaranteed that:

1. Neither your identity nor name will feature anywhere in the final research.
2. The information you volunteer is for academic research only.

Kindly respond to these questions.

#### **Bio Data**

A. Among these age groups, which one do you fall under?

- i. 44-49
- ii. 49-54
- iii. 54-59
- iv. 59 -65

B. Mention your marital status?

If married, what number of marriage(s) is it?

#### **Section A – Childlessness Versus Stigma**

- i. What made you believe/conclude that you are infertile? Have you ever been tested for infertility?  
If No, what makes you believe that you are the infertile one and not your partner?  
If Yes, has lack of a child put a strain in your marriage?
- ii. For how long did you try conceiving unsuccessfully?

#### **Section B – Stigma vs Social Support**

- i. Have you faced stigma because of the infertility? If yes, by whom?
- ii. Which non-verbal expression did your partner/colleagues/work mates/ in-laws/neighbors/relatives use to project dissatisfaction for your lack of bearing a baby?
- iii. When people learn that you are infertile, how do they react?
- iv. Growing up, how did you envision your family life?
- v. Has childlessness affected that dream in any way?