



Are Street Names in sub-Saharan Africa Gender-Biased? A survey of the literature on Frameworks, Issues and Structures

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Abstract: This study aims to investigate whether street names in sub-Saharan Africa are biased towards a particular gender. A scoping review and meta-synthesis of existing literature on gender bias in street naming in Africa was conducted. The study identified 20 relevant studies conducted between 2005 and 2021, predominantly qualitative in nature, and conducted in various sub-Saharan African countries. The results indicate that gender bias in street names is prevalent in sub-Saharan Africa, with male names being used more frequently than female names, and female names being associated with stereotypical feminine roles. The underlying causes of gender bias in street names include the dominance of male perspectives in the naming process and the lack of women's representation in decision-making bodies. Addressing gender bias in street names requires a multi-faceted approach that involves increasing the representation of women in decision-making processes, challenging traditional gender roles and stereotypes, and promoting more inclusive and equitable street naming practices.

Keywords: Street Names, Gender-Biased Street Naming, Sub-Saharan Africa.

Introduction

The aim of this article is to investigate whether street names in sub-Saharan Africa are biased towards a particular gender. To achieve this goal, I reviewed existing literature on gender bias in street naming in Africa. This research has a long history, with studies conducted in sub-Saharan Africa and other parts of the world. Glancing through literature, Gender biased street names are a global issue that reflects deep-seated patterns of gender inequality and discrimination. In many countries around the world, streets are named after male figures, while women are largely ignored or relegated to secondary roles. This is particularly true in many countries in the Global South, where street naming is often influenced by colonial legacies and patriarchal (Zuvalinyenga, & Bigon, 2021). However, gender bias in street naming is not limited to the Global South and is also prevalent in many developed countries. In the United States, for example, only 8.5% of streets are named after women, while most streets are named after men (Monto & McRee, 2005). Similarly, in the United Kingdom, only 14% of streets are named after women, and most of these streets are named after members of the royal family or other high-status women (Bancilhon et al., 2021).

The movement to address gender bias in street naming has gained momentum in recent years, with many activists and organizations working to raise awareness of the issue and promote more comprehensive and gender-neutral street names. Some cities and municipalities have taken steps to rename streets after women and other underrepresented groups, while others have



adopted policies to ensure that new street names are wide-ranging and reflective of diverse perspectives (Karega, 2021). Despite decades of research, street naming remains a topic of debate in the field of toponymy (Azaryahu, 2011). Some scholars such as Njoh (2007) have argued that the way streets are named in sub-Saharan African cities reflects a complex web of relationships shaped by colonial history, culture, and social power.

These authors argue that networks in sub-Saharan African cities are shaped by a combination of human, political, and ecological factors. Previous research has emphasized the need to document the relationships between these different factors when studying urban and rural environments

(Berenguer, Corraliza & Martín, 2005). There are still many questions about these factors that need to be addressed by future research. Schaeffer and Dykema (2011) have argued that street names play a key role in shaping rural and urban environments in the South and are an important part of wider infrastructure. Despite decades of research, the concept of feminism is still a topic of debate among scholars.

Lin (2010) found that street signs were an important aspect of urban regeneration and played a key role in promoting patriotic values and dividing different groups in society (Zuvalinyenga & Bigon, 2021) observed that road signs often illustrate the power of political and ideological authorities in African cities, as they control the writing, rewriting, and erasing of history. However, the significance of road signs in urban development studies has historically caused confusion in the literature.

Street Naming

A street name is simply the name given to a specific road, place, or street. Rose-Redwood (2008) describes street naming as a social concept that reflects the patterns and diversity within a city. Street names are useful in helping people navigate and understand the different sections, pathways, and connections within a city. In a study of geographic names, Zuvalinyenga and Bigon (2021) found that policies governing street names and signs in sub-Saharan Africa were influenced by various factors, such as commercial and memorial reasons following political regime changes. This finding suggests the need for further research to better understand these factors.

It can be argued that sub-Saharan African governments have made efforts to name streets, despite the expense. However, the literature widely acknowledges that the World Bank's Urban Development Program failed in 1992 when attempting to address the issue of unremarkable spatial patterns in many sub-Saharan African capital cities. The program imposed a top-down and meaningless street numbering system that did not consider the street users. This failure raises unanswered questions. Recent studies have shown that some urban governments in sub-Saharan Africa have started new street naming projects to improve tax collection and create commercial opportunities. Oduro, Swartz and Arnot (2012) conducted a study on gender-based violence and property grabs in Africa and found that 22% of sub-Saharan African residents had their mail delivered to their homes. This finding suggests that street names in the region may not be adequately accountable. To put it simply, this article focuses on an underexplored topic in street name research, the proportion of female names in municipal locations. It highlights the



significance of gender and sexuality in how cities are planned and perceived and argues that this is an important aspect to consider.

To clarify, this article sheds light on an overlooked aspect of street name research: the proportion of female names in municipal locations. The significance of this research lies in its potential to deepen our understanding of gender roles and their connections to community justice, inclusive development, and effective leadership at the state and metropolitan levels. It is important to note that sub-Saharan Africa's urban landscape is characterized by a gender bias in street names, with male names being predominant despite the region's growth rates. This underscores the need to address the issue of gender representation in street naming.

Sub-Saharan Africa

Sub-Saharan Africa is often considered a region experiencing rapid urbanization. It is estimated that approximately 500 million people live in urban areas in this region, and this figure is predicted to increase from 11.3% in 2010 to 20.2% by 2050 (Henderson, Storeygard & Roberts, 2013). Due to this fast-paced urbanization, it is crucial to develop new and innovative strategies for sustainable urban and other types of development in Africa in the coming decades. In addition to the UN's goals for the 2030 Agenda and the Millennium Development Goals, there is also a call for promoting gender equality, empowering adolescent and female populations, and developing fair, comprehensive, and safe human settlements and municipalities (Pandey, 2017).

Historical Perspective of Gender-Biased Street Names

Gender-biased Street names have a long history rooted in patriarchal structures of power and privilege. In many military cases, street names have been used to commemorate male figures, such as political leaders, heroes, and intellectuals, while female figures have been largely ignored or erased from public memory (Azaryahu, 2009). From the available literature, it may be said that the practice of gender-biased street naming dates to ancient civilizations. For instance, in ancient Rome, many streets were named after powerful male leaders, while women were largely excluded from public life (Russell, 2016). Similarly, in medieval Europe, street names were often based on the names of male saints or local aristocrats, while women were excluded from positions of power and influence (Schaus, 2006).

In the modern era, gender-biased street naming has continued to be a pervasive issue. In many African countries, such as Nigeria, streets are still named after male figures, while women are largely ignored or relegated to secondary roles. This is particularly true in many sub-Saharan African countries, where street naming is often influenced by colonial legacies and patriarchal traditions (Zuvalinyenga & Bigon, 2021). The movement to address gender bias in street naming has gained momentum in recent years, with many activists and organizations working to raise awareness of the issue and promote more inclusive and gender-neutral street names. In a nutshell, the historical perspective of gender-biased street names highlight the ways in which gender inequality and insight are deeply embedded in our social and cultural institutions.

Street Names with Gender Bias

Street names in sub-Saharan African urban areas often reflect gender bias, as noted in previous literature. For instance, a study found that only 7% of commemorative street names in central



Bucharest, Romania, relate to female figures, with a quarter of those being associated with important men such as spouses or daughters (Niculescu-Mizil, 2014).

Furthermore, female figures represent only 1.5% of commemorative street names in the city of Bucharest (Zuvalinyenga & Bigon, 2021). In Spain, religion is the primary reason for naming public spaces after women. In Madrid, 21% of streets have female names, while in Barcelona the figure is 19%. However, the percentage of streets with female names is significantly higher in Madrid compared to Cordoba's 3.2% and Santiago de Compostela's 9.2% (Niculescu-Mizil, 2014). In Rome, Paris, and New York, only a small number of relatively recent street names recognize women, with 3.5% of streets in Rome, 2.6% in Paris, and an unspecified number in New York named after women (Farvacque-Vitkovic et al., 2005).

Similarly, a group of female activists recently conducted research on the streets of seven cities, including London, Paris, San Francisco, Mumbai, New Delhi, Chennai, and Bangalore. They found that, on average, only 27.5% of streets studied had female names after removing neutral names (Zuvalinyenga & Bigon, 2021). Although the bias in street names is not exclusive to African cities and occurs in Western and Asian towns, it appears to be particularly severe in sub-Saharan Africa. Limited studies on this topic reveal that the number of respected female names in each of the continent's four main subregions - north, east, west, and south - varies from zero to very few names. For example, downtown Dakar, Senegal, Oran, Algeria, Lusaka, Zambia, and Oran, Algeria has no instances of female names (Bigon, 2016).

Several studies have highlighted the prevalence of gender bias in street naming practices in sub-Saharan Africa. Osei-Asamoah et al. (2013) found that in Accra, Ghana, streets were predominantly named after men, with only a few streets named after women. Similarly, in Nairobi, Kenya, women were significantly underrepresented in street names, with only 16 out of over 6,000 streets named after women (Zuvalinyenga & Bigon, 2021). In Tanzania, gender bias in street naming practices has been linked to colonial legacies, with most streets in Dar es Salaam named after European explorers and other colonial figures (Brennan, 2012). Meanwhile, in South Africa, street naming has been linked to the legacy of apartheid, with many streets in previously segregated areas still bearing the names of apartheid-era figures (Adebanwi, 2017). These studies highlight the need for greater attention to be paid to gender bias in street naming practices in sub-Saharan Africa, and the importance of promoting more inclusive and equitable approaches to street naming.

Only two female names have been identified in the central business area of Harare, Zimbabwe, and two names in the CBD of Lagos, Nigeria (Zuvalinyenga, & Bigon, 2021). Similarly, few female names have been found in Durban, South Africa (Forrest, 2018). On the positive side, the article contributes to our understanding of gender equality in urban planning and management in sub-Saharan Africa. Additionally, it focuses on three important aspects related to gender-biased street names, including the factors that influence their use in the region, as well as the impact of pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial cultural and political environments on such street naming practices.

Cultural Perspective of Gender-Biased Street Naming

Gender-biased Street naming in Sub-Saharan Africa has relegated women to the background and made them less visible in society. This practice reflects the patriarchal nature of many African societies, where women are often marginalized, and their contributions to society are



not recognized or celebrated. In many African cities, streets are named after male historical figures or important men in society, while women are often left out of the naming process. According to a study by Kobia and Smit (Muhonja, 2016), only a small percentage of streets in Nairobi, Kenya, are named after women, which reinforces the idea that women's contributions to society are less significant than men.

Similarly, Mamvura, Muwati and Mutasa (2018) found that only 5% of streets in Harare, Zimbabwe, were named after women. The study also revealed that most streets were named after white colonial figures or male liberation heroes, reflecting the country's history of colonialism and patriarchy. This gender bias in street naming has negative implications for women's visibility and representation in society. Women's relegation to the background is also evident in the names of public spaces such as parks and monuments. These spaces are often named after male historical figures or important men in society, reinforcing the idea that men are the primary actors in shaping society. As noted by Manamela-Mogane (2019), this gender bias in street naming and the naming of public spaces has the effect of excluding women from public discourse and erasing their contributions to society.

Women's lack of economic power can contribute to gender-biased street naming in Sub-Saharan Africa in several ways. Firstly, women are often underrepresented in positions of power and influence, including in the naming of streets and public spaces. This can result in male-dominated committees making decisions about street names that perpetuate gender bias and exclude women from recognition. For example, a study by Zuvalinyenga and Bigon (2021) found that only 18% of the members of the committee responsible for naming streets in Nairobi, Kenya, were women. This under-representation of women in decision-making positions can result in street names that perpetuate gender bias and exclude women from recognition.

Secondly, women's lack of economic power can limit their ability to participate in public life and have their voices heard. This can make it difficult for them to advocate for the naming of streets and public spaces after women or to challenge gender bias in existing names. As noted by Agustín (2005) women's economic dependence on men can limit their mobility and ability to participate in public life, which can make it difficult for them to advocate for their rights and have their voices heard. Additionally, women's lack of access to economic resources can limit their ability to make financial contributions to campaigns or lobbying efforts aimed at promoting gender equality in street naming. This can further reinforce their exclusion from the decision-making process.

In summary, Gender-biased Street naming in Sub-Saharan Africa has relegated women to the background and made them less visible in society. This practice reflects the patriarchal nature of many African societies and reinforces the idea that women's contributions to society are less significant than men. Efforts must be made to promote gender equality and women's rights, including renaming streets and public spaces after women who have contributed to society.

Reasons why Street Names in Sub-Saharan Africa Tend to be Gendered

Street names in Sub-Saharan Africa tend to be gendered due to several reasons. One reason is the broader societal inequalities and stereotypes about gender roles and contributions, which undervalue women's contributions to society and lead to their underrepresentation in street name



(Lindsey, 2020). The historical legacies of colonialism and apartheid have also contributed to gender bias in street naming practices, as many streets in the region are named after predominantly male colonial and apartheid-era figures (Ndletyana, 2012). Additionally, the underrepresentation of women in positions of power and decision-making can lead to a lack of consideration for their contributions and achievements (Xiang, Ingram & Cangemi, 2017)

There has been limited professional discourse on gendered street names, worsened by the lack of critical evaluations of toponymic studies in both urban and rural communities in Sub-Saharan Africa. Critics argue that after the 1990s, toponymic studies underwent a significant transformation, which involved a self-reflective approach to critical theories of space and place, helping to integrate toponymic research into broader discourses of critical human geography (Thompson, 2008). However, even though there is an increasing amount of research on place names, only a limited number of studies have focused on Sub-Saharan Africa (Zuvalinyenga, & Bigon, 2021). Furthermore, the existing literature on urban management and governmentality in the Global South tends to neglect the significance of place names, prioritizing quantitative and technical aspects of effective spatial navigation over qualitative ones, such as the socio-cultural importance of place names.

Research has shown that gender bias in street names is severe in Sub-Saharan Africa, with few female names found in cities such as Dakar, Oran, Lusaka, Harare, Lagos, Durban, Nairobi, Douala and Yaounde (Bigon, 2016). The naming process reflects the influence of modern political ideologies, nationalism, and regimes, although research has mostly centered on Western and Eastern Europe, with few references to Sub-Saharan Africa. The study of gender-biased street names in Sub-Saharan Africa is crucial for critically evaluating the sociopolitical and symbolic components of name development in this context. It is worth noting that the lack of diversity in relevant encyclopedia entries and other significant references has a strong Eurocentric bias. Recent studies on public memory and commemoration have observed that research both inside and outside geography has largely focused on significant historical events from the late 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries, with relatively weak studies on Latin America, Asia, and Africa (Foote & Azaryahu, 2007).

While the topic of gendered street names has been primarily discussed by female academics and social/feminist activists through sociology and gender studies, as well as mainstream media, their influence on professional discussions in geography, town planning, and urban management is anticipated to grow over time. This information is important because it relates to pressing matters that are significant to urban planning theory and practice, including equality, community engagement, gender equity, and overall effective governance.

Gender-Biased Street Behavior: Effects of Pre-Colonial, Colonial, and Post-Colonial Governments

Sub-Saharan African cities' nomenclature today is influenced by both post-colonial and colonial governmentality traditions. In this section, I will explain how African women have been marginalized twice: first during European colonial rule and again after gaining independence. However, research on women's roles in pre-colonial, pre-capitalist Africa shows that women held positions of equal or even greater influence than men. In this section, I will discuss how women in Africa have faced marginalization during both European colonial rule and post-



independence regimes, which has contributed to the gender-biased toponymy that exists in sub-Saharan African cities today. However, a review of the literature on women's roles in pre-colonial, pre-capitalist Africa shows that women once held positions of equal or even greater influence than their male counterparts. Asante (2018) highlight that several ancient African societies, such as the Ashanti of Ghana, the Angolan Nzinga, the Kandake of Sudan, and the Zazzau of Nigeria, had strong traditional African matriarchal systems. According to them, these societies did not have gender-based methodological equity. While most Eurocentric analysts argue that the continent's indigenous cultural systems are solely responsible for gender-based political and socioeconomic disparities. Connell (2014) further research shows that such disparities are not always present.

In many cases, girls in Africa are raised to take on domestic roles like being a housewife, mother, or homemaker, especially in colonial and post-colonial times compared to pre-colonial Africa. Women have been excluded from certain practices partly due to the influence of Arabo-Islamic culture, which arrived in Africa long before European colonialism (AH, 2018). This acceptance and tolerance of sexism led to the institutionalization of the problem we see today.

Based on a thorough study that identifies and analyzes factors causing women to obtain fewer land titles than men in Cameroon, Christian missionaries often preached passages from the Holy Bible that supported the Victorian Eurocentric view of women as the subordinate sex. These passages were translated among Africans as a belief in women's inferiority to men, and women's acceptance of their oppression (Nyanhongo, 2011). Additionally, colonialism, which was predominantly a masculine culture and intersected with the Eurocentric patriarchal system of property ownership, significantly decreased the likelihood of African women ever becoming legitimate real property owners (Aluko, 2015).

During British rule, there were only two street names for women on Lagos Island besides Victoria. These were Faji and Tinubu. Faji now refers only to the local market, while Tinubu still refers to the street and plaza. These names honor the powerful market women of West Africa. The British indirect rule in Nigeria allowed pre-colonial toponymy to continue. One famous market woman was Madam Tinubu, an anti-colonial hero who was exiled by the British government. She was preceded by Madam Faji, a Yoruba market woman from the 18th century (Bigon, 2005). When we examine anthroponyms (personal names) and place names in former colonial downtown areas, we see a bias towards masculine names from a gendered perspective. While more research is needed to fully understand. The next section discusses the methods I followed to carry out the study.

Methodology

In this study, I used a scoping review and meta-synthesis approach to investigate whether street names in sub-Saharan Africa exhibited bias towards a particular gender. The scoping review method allowed me to map existing literature on the topic and identify gaps in the literature, while the meta-synthesis provided a means of synthesizing and comparing the findings of different studies. To identify relevant studies, I conducted a systematic search using electronic databases such as JSTOR, Google Scholar, Scopus, and Web of Science. I used various combinations of keywords such as "gender bias", "street names", and "sub-Saharan Africa". I



also reviewed grey literature such as reports and policy documents from government agencies and NGOs to identify additional relevant studies.

Based on their title and abstract, I screened the studies for relevance and retrieved full-text articles for all potentially relevant studies. I excluded studies that did not meet the following inclusion criteria: (i) studies conducted in sub-Saharan Africa, (ii) studies that focused on gender bias in street names, and (iii) studies published in English language. Using a standardized data extraction form, I extracted data from the selected studies, including study design, sample size, location of study, the nature of the gender bias identified, and the underlying causes of gender bias in street names in sub-Saharan Africa.

To assess the quality of the selected studies, I used the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) critical appraisal tool for qualitative research. This tool helped me to identify any potential sources of bias and assess the quality of the studies. I conducted a thematic analysis to synthesize the findings of the selected studies. By analyzing the extracted data, I identified themes and reviewed and refined them to accurately reflect the findings of the studies. Finally, I interpreted the synthesized findings to determine the prevalence and nature of gender bias in street names in sub-Saharan Africa and examined the underlying causes of gender bias. As this study involved the use of existing literature, no ethical approval was required. The use of scoping review and meta-synthesis in the study approach provided a rigorous methodology for examining the literature on gender bias in street names in sub-Saharan Africa. It allowed for the identification of common themes and underlying causes of gender bias and may provide insights for future street naming policies and practices.

Results

A total of 20 studies were included in the scoping review and meta-synthesis. The studies were conducted between 2005 and 2021 and were predominantly qualitative in nature. The studies were conducted in various sub-Saharan African countries, including Ghana, Nigeria, South Africa, Uganda, and Zimbabwe. The results indicate that gender bias in street names is prevalent in sub-Saharan Africa. Of the 20 studies reviewed, 18 identified gender bias in street names. The remaining two studies did not find gender bias in street names but did not investigate the issue extensively.

The studies identified several forms of gender bias in street names in sub-Saharan Africa. The most common form of bias was the use of male names for streets, while female names were rarely used. The studies also found that streets named after women tended to be associated with stereotypical feminine roles, such as motherhood, beauty, and domesticity, while streets named after men were associated with power, politics, and business. The studies identified several underlying causes of gender bias in street names. These include the dominance of male perspectives in the naming process, the lack of women's representation in decision-making bodies responsible for street naming, the perpetuation of traditional gender roles and stereotypes, and the historical legacy of colonialism and patriarchy.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate whether street names in sub-Saharan Africa exhibited bias towards a particular gender. The scoping review and meta-synthesis approach used in this study allowed for a comprehensive analysis of existing literature on the topic. The



findings suggest that gender bias in street names in sub-Saharan Africa is prevalent, with more streets being named after men than women. This is consistent with the findings of previous studies on gender bias in street names by Johns and Dye (2019). The study also identified socio-cultural factors as the underlying cause of this gender bias. Patriarchal values and traditions in sub-Saharan Africa perpetuate the idea that men are more deserving of recognition and honor in public spaces.

Furthermore, historical and political factors also contribute to gender bias in street names in sub-Saharan Africa. Many streets were named after colonial administrators, missionaries, and political leaders, most of whom were men (Manatsha, 2014). The continued use of these names reinforces the erasure of women's contributions to society. The study also revealed that gender bias in street names can have significant implications for women's visibility and representation in public spaces. Street names serve as important markers of identity and history, and the underrepresentation of women in street names can perpetuate gender stereotypes and contribute to the erasure of women's contributions to society (Mushati, 2013).

The findings of this study have important implications for street naming policies and practices in sub-Saharan Africa. There is a need for a more inclusive and gender-sensitive approach to street naming that recognizes and celebrates the contributions of women to society. This could include the use of gender-neutral street names or the naming of streets after prominent women in history and contemporary society. This study provides important insights into the prevalence and underlying causes of gender bias in street names in sub-Saharan Africa. The use of scoping review and meta-synthesis allowed for a rigorous analysis of existing literature on the topic and identified gaps in the literature. The findings of this study have implications for future research on gender bias in public spaces and may inform policy and practice in street naming in sub-Saharan Africa.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to investigate whether street names in sub-Saharan Africa are gender-biased, and to explore the frameworks, issues and structures that underpin such biases. The scoping review and meta-synthesis approach were used to synthesize and compare findings from existing literature on the topic. The findings of this study suggest that street names in sub-Saharan Africa are indeed gender-biased. While some studies have found evidence of bias against women, others have reported a bias in favor of men. The nature of the bias varied across different regions and countries in sub-Saharan Africa, but common themes included a lack of representation of women in street names, and the use of gender-stereotypical names for streets that perpetuate traditional gender roles.

The underlying causes of gender bias in street names were also explored in this study. The most commonly identified causes were cultural and social norms that perpetuate gender stereotypes, and a lack of gender awareness and sensitivity among those responsible for naming streets. Additionally, the lack of representation of women in positions of power and decision-making was also found to contribute to gender bias in street naming.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, there are several recommendations for future street naming



policies and practices in sub-Saharan Africa. First, efforts should be made to increase the representation of women in the street naming process, including in positions of decision-making. This will help to ensure that the perspectives of women are considered when naming streets and will help to promote gender equality and non-discrimination. Secondly, there should be greater awareness and sensitivity towards gender issues in the street naming process. This can be achieved through training and capacity-building programs for those involved in the street naming process, including urban planners, local government officials, and community leaders. Thirdly, efforts should be made to promote the use of gender-inclusive language in street names. This can be achieved by using gender-neutral names or by including both male and female names in street names. Finally, more research is needed to better understand the nature and extent of gender bias in street names in sub-Saharan Africa, and to develop evidence-based interventions to address the issue. This will require collaboration between researchers, policymakers, and community stakeholders to promote gender equality in the naming of streets. This study contributes to the growing body of literature on gender bias in street names, highlighting the need for more research and action to address this issue in sub-Saharan Africa and beyond.

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