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The politics of respect: Gendered address terms in the Vhavenḓa community

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Gender-based violence remains prevalent in many communities, including the Vhavenḓa community, where language plays an important role in shaping social interaction and gender relations. This study explored how gendered Tshivenḓa address terms are interpreted and enacted, focusing on their role in negotiating respect, authority, social roles and relational responsibilities. The study was conducted in the Vhavenḓa community within Collins Chabane local municipality, Vhembe District, Limpopo, South Africa. Guided by African feminist theory, the study adopted a qualitative case study design. Twenty participants were approached directly by the researcher and, where appropriate, referred by other participants and their recruitment criteria. Data were collected through face-to-face semi-structured interviews and analysed thematically. Findings showed that titles such as '*vhamusanda*' and assertive male postures function as culturally recognised markers of status and authority. Conversely, gestures of deference, including kneeling, bowing, avoiding eye contact and lying on one's side, communicate respect and acknowledge social hierarchies. Participants indicated that failure to observe these forms of address may be perceived as disrespectful. The use of teknonyms and honorifics such as '*vho*' further reflects local understandings of gender, authority and relational responsibility. The article concludes that Tshivenḓa address terms are culturally significant practices through which social roles, hierarchies and gendered power dynamics are expressed and negotiated.

Contribution: The study contributes to scholarship on language and gender by demonstrating how indigenous address practices shape everyday negotiations of respect, authority and gendered power within the Vhavenḓa community.

Keywords: gender-based violence; Vhavenḓa community; feminism; address terms; Tshivenḓa.

Introduction

Gender-based violence remains a pervasive social challenge worldwide, rooted not only in physical acts of aggression but also in everyday social practices that shape perceptions of power, respect and social relations. Among these practices, language plays a critical yet often overlooked role. Address terms, such as how individuals refer to one another in both private and public interactions, are powerful linguistic resources through which respect, authority and social position are expressed and negotiated (Mudau, Mandende & Mushaathoni 2022). Within many cultural contexts, including the Vhavenḓa community, systems of address reflect broader social norms related to age, gender and hierarchy. In some cases, different forms of address are used for males and females, reflecting socially recognised roles and expectations. Scholars have noted that patterns of address may also reflect broader gendered meanings embedded within social interaction (Fontanella, Chulvi & Ignazzi 2024; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO] 2023). Rather than assuming these practices are inherently problematic, this study seeks to understand how gendered Tshivenḓa address terms operate within systems of respect and social organisation, and how they may intersect with contemporary discussions on gender relations and gender-based violence in the Vhavenḓa community.

Background of the study

Language plays a central role in structuring social relations, transmitting cultural values and reproducing systems of social meaning. Sociolinguistic scholarship has long established that address terms are not neutral forms of reference but socially regulated mechanisms through which authority, respect, hierarchy and identity are negotiated (Fang & Heng 1983; Fasold 1990). Because address practices encode social expectations, they often reflect broader social norms associated with gender, age and status within particular cultural contexts. Within the Vhavenḓa

community, greeting practices and address terms form an important part of the cultural system through which respect and social harmony are maintained. These practices are embedded within long-standing traditions that guide interpersonal interaction and demonstrate recognition of age, status and relational roles. For instance, when females greet or respond to being called, they say '*Aa*!' and '*u khotha*' [lie down on their side with both hands clasped] as a gesture of respect and good manners, whereas Vhavenḓa boys and males do not lie down but say '*Nndaa*!' [Hello!] and clasp their palms together during the exchange of greetings. These non-verbal gestures are accompanied by the verbal address terms '*Nndaa*!' for males and '*Aa*!' for females and in some instances, the gesture alone suffices as a greeting to seniors. Such greeting practices illustrate how respect is culturally expressed through both linguistic and embodied forms within the community. In some interactions, greeting a male may include the response '*ndau ya nduna*', a phrase that literally refers to a male lion and pragmatically aligns masculinity with strength and leadership. These expressions reflect culturally meaningful ways in which social roles and identities are symbolically communicated through language. At the same time, the forms of address associated with females often emphasise humility and respect through embodied gestures. Rather than viewing these practices solely as fixed structures, they can also be understood as part of a broader cultural system in which respect, gender roles and social expectations are negotiated and expressed in everyday interaction. Importantly, linguistic practices within communities are not static; they evolve as social values, generational perspectives and cultural interpretations shift over time. While greeting rituals and address terms remain important markers of respect in Vhavenḓa society, speakers may interpret and use them differently across contexts and generations. This dynamic nature of language highlights how cultural practices are continually reproduced, adapted and reinterpreted within communities. Scholars have observed that in some contexts, expectations surrounding respectful forms of address may influence how behaviour is interpreted within interpersonal relationships (Hlongwane 2023; Ladzani 2014; Mudau 2025). For example, deviations from expected greeting or address norms may sometimes be interpreted as expressions of disrespect or social tension within particular relationships. In such cases, language functions not only as a communicative tool, but also as a social mechanism through which expectations of respect and relational harmony are negotiated. Globally, research on gender and language has shown that linguistic practices often reflect broader social structures and cultural values (Lakoff 1975; Piller 2016). United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2023) notes that address systems across societies frequently index different forms of authority, status and relational positioning. Cross-cultural studies in African contexts similarly illustrate how systems of address can encode expectations of respect and hierarchy within culturally specific frameworks. For instance, research in Yoruba society indicates that females are often encouraged to use honorifics when addressing husbands as a sign of respect within marital relationships (Salami 2004). Comparable observations across African sociolinguistic contexts suggest that address systems frequently reflect culturally embedded norms regarding age, authority and gender roles (Mensah 2021). Beyond private interactions, forms of address also shape how individuals are positioned within public and institutional spaces. Studies have shown that language used in political, literary and professional contexts can frame individuals differently depending on gender, status or social role (Donkor 2016; Odoom et al. 2022). These patterns illustrate how linguistic choices may influence how authority, credibility and social identity are perceived across different domains of society. At the same time, scholars have increasingly highlighted the importance of examining how everyday language practices intersect with broader social challenges. Some studies suggest that discourses that symbolically associate masculinity with strength, control and authority may influence social perceptions of gender roles (Sharma 2025). Understanding these associations does not imply that cultural practices are inherently problematic; rather, it allows researchers to explore how language participates in shaping social expectations and interpersonal dynamics. Despite growing scholarship on gendered language, limited research has examined how address terms function within community-level interactions and how they shape perceptions of respect, authority and relational expectations. In communities such as Vuwani, where systems of respect, linguistic traditions and interpersonal relationships intersect, examining address terms offers an opportunity to better understand how language participates in the negotiation of social relations. By foregrounding community perspectives, the article approaches address terms as culturally meaningful linguistic practices through which respect, identity and social relationships are expressed and negotiated within everyday interaction (Makoni & Pennycook 2007; Nnaemeka 2004). In doing so, the study contributes to sociolinguistic and African feminist scholarship by examining how everyday language practices participate in shaping social expectations and gender relations within the community (Oyěwùmí 1997; Piller 2016). This study, therefore, explores how gendered Tshivenḓa address terms operate within the cultural system of respect in the Vhavenḓa community and how community members interpret these practices in relation to gender relations and experiences of gender-based violence.

Theoretical framework

African feminist theory underpins this article as the primary theoretical lens through which gender relations and linguistic practices within the Vhavenḓa community are examined. African feminism refers to a body of scholarship that seeks to understand gender inequalities within African societies by situating gender within African historical experiences, cultural traditions and indigenous knowledge systems rather than relying solely on Western feminist assumptions (Nnaemeka 2004; Oyěwùmí 1997). African feminist scholars argue that gender relations in many African societies are intertwined with other social organising principles such as age, kinship, seniority and communal responsibility, which

collectively shape social identities and power relations (Oyěwùmí 1997). Consequently, cultural practices, including linguistic forms of respect and address, must be understood within these broader socio-cultural systems. African feminism, therefore, emphasises the importance of analysing gender inequalities in ways that acknowledge both the cultural significance of indigenous practices and their potential implications for social justice. For instance, Obioma Nnaemeka conceptualises nego-feminism, which foregrounds negotiation, dialogue and compromise as culturally grounded strategies through which African females engage with patriarchal structures and seek transformation within their communities (Nnaemeka 2004). Similarly, Amina Mama argues that gender relations in African societies must be examined within broader socio-political and historical contexts, including the impact of colonialism and postcolonial governance on African gender systems (Mama 1997). Within this framework, address terms in Tshivenḓa are approached as culturally embedded linguistic practices that reflect systems of respect, hierarchy and social organisation in the Vhavenḓa community. At the same time, African feminist perspectives provide a critical lens through which these practices can be examined to understand how they may contribute to the reinforcement of gendered power relations and potentially intersect with broader patterns of gender-based violence.

The perspective of forms of address

Forms of address are central to the construction of social hierarchy, gender identity and relational roles. Across cultures, linguistic practices often reflect locally recognised systems of authority and respect, in which males and females occupy socially recognised positions within families and communities. Rather than functioning as neutral labels, address terms serve as culturally meaningful tools through which respect, status and social recognition are communicated and negotiated. In the Vhavenḓa community, for example, it is culturally accepted to address a female by her first name, whereas addressing a man may involve the honorary prefix '*vho*' or reference to his children. Omitting such honorific markers when addressing a man can be interpreted as diminishing respect. These patterns illustrate how address practices are embedded within Vhavenḓa social systems, while also being actively interpreted, negotiated and adapted by community members over time. Such practices are particularly significant in shaping the socialisation of young boys, who learn through everyday linguistic interactions how relational roles, respect and socially recognised authority are enacted within their community. Scholars have shown that metaphorical language plays a crucial role in reinforcing gender hierarchies. Montashery (2013) argues that metaphors shape perception and sustain stereotypes. Terms such as *honey*, *sweetie*, *sugarplum*, *flower* or *kitten*, commonly used to refer to females, frame them as consumable objects, aesthetic possessions or domesticated beings. Chen and Chen (2011) demonstrate that animal metaphors can carry gendered and evaluative meanings, with some expressions reflecting negative perceptions of females. Such gendered linguistic practices illustrate how language can encode social attitudes and unequal evaluations of females and males. Gendered asymmetries are also evident in occupational and titular language. Lei (2006) notes that terms such as *chairman*, *newsman* and *foreman* historically centre males as default occupants of positions of authority. Redl and Frank (2021) further demonstrate that the generic use of masculine pronouns can produce a male bias, suggesting that supposedly gender-inclusive uses of he may not represent females and males equally. Mills and Mullany (2011) similarly observe that male terms frequently function as universals (e.g. man to refer to humanity), while female terms remain marked and derivative (e.g. *manageress*, *goddess*). These patterns reinforce male normativity and female deviation within linguistic systems. Animal metaphors and derogatory imagery further entrench patriarchal attitudes. Rodriguez (2009) found that in both English and Spanish, females are frequently depicted through animalistic metaphors such as *chickens*, *bitches* or *vixens*, framing them as inferior or morally suspect. Pratama (2018) also highlights how humour reproduces sexist assumptions, portraying females as weak and males as invulnerable, thereby trivialising gendered harm and reinforcing rigid gender binaries. Within African contexts, address practices are deeply embedded in cultural systems of respect and lineage. Mbaya's (2002) study of Oromo society shows that wives avoid addressing husbands by first name, instead using teknonyms such as 'father of *X*', symbolically elevating male authority. Similarly, Salami (2004) found that Yoruba females are prohibited from using their husbands' first names and are expected to employ honorifics or teknonyms that reinforce deference. De Kadt (2003) further argues that the practice of females adopting their husbands' surnames reflects linguistic sexism, as such expectations are not reciprocally imposed on males. Studies in Swazi and Nguni contexts demonstrate that naming practices often prioritise male lineage, with boys' names emphasising heritage continuity while girls' names frequently reference paternal identity (Moyo 2012; Ngubane & Thabethe 2013). These patterns reveal how language institutionalises patriarchal family structures. In northern Ghana, Salifu (2010) notes that the linguistic choices available for a speaker of Dagbani to address other speakers are influenced by three variables, namely kinship, age and sex. Salifu (2010) further states that kinship systems give some people in certain kin positions exclusive rights or privileges over others in other kin positions. Salifu (2010) avers that older persons have a higher status than younger persons do, and wives are subordinate to their husbands. These hierarchical relations are expressed and reinforced through different socio-cultural institutions and practices, including linguistic forms and behaviours. Salifu (2010) further adds that titles are also an obligatory element in Dagomba address practices. Therefore, besides traditional titles, titles from the Islamic religion, like Afa, Mallam, *Alhaji* or *hajai* and the English title, Mr., are used. A professional and occupational description like 'teacher' or 'lawyer', as well as a position like 'chairman' or 'assemblyman', are all used as titles in Dagbanli (Salifu 2010). Gendered address terms are more than linguistic expressions; they are cultural practices through which respect, authority and gendered power relations are negotiated. Talbot (2020)

argues that language plays a central role in constructing gender identities and power relations, while Chaarani (2021) contends that everyday language can reinforce gender hierarchies. Similarly, Zinyemba and Hlongwana (2022) maintain that gender-based violence is rooted in social norms that privilege male authority and unequal gender relations. Research on occupational language similarly demonstrates the persistence of male-centred terminology. Formanowicz, Hodel and Sczesny (2024) found that occupational titles and wording can communicate gender stereotypes and influence perceptions of who is suitable for particular jobs. The study found differences across countries in the use of gender-specific and gender-neutral occupational terms. Dada (2022) further illustrates how honorific systems in Xhosa and Zulu are shaped by age and gender, reinforcing traditional hierarchies through linguistic deference. Within the Tshivenḓa context, Muavha (2025) demonstrates that derogatory expressions and proverbs contribute to gender disparity by normalising male dominance and diminishing women's social standing. The study reveals that when males and females occupy similar social positions, they are often described using unequal terminology, with females disproportionately subjected to disparaging labels. Participants linked such linguistic practices to experiences of marginalisation and gender-based violence, suggesting that language not only reflects inequality, but may also sustain it. Collectively, this body of scholarship demonstrates that forms of address function as mechanisms through which patriarchal authority is constructed and reproduced across diverse linguistic and cultural contexts. However, while studies have examined sexist metaphors, naming systems and honorific structures, limited research has explicitly connected gendered address practices to the escalation or normalisation of gender-based violence at the community level. This gap underscores the need to examine how differential address systems operate within specific cultural contexts, such as the Vhavenḓa community, where language, respect norms and intimate partner relations intersect.

Research methods and design

This study adopted an interpretivist paradigm, which views social reality as socially constructed and shaped by individuals' lived experiences and cultural contexts (Hammersley 2013). This paradigm was appropriate to explore how gendered Tshivenḓa address terms might reinforce power imbalances, which might contribute to gender-based violence in the Vhavenḓa community. A qualitative case study design was employed to enable an in-depth examination of gendered address practices within their natural social setting. The study focused on Tshivenḓa native speakers residing within the Collins Chabane local municipality, which falls under the Vhembe district in the Limpopo province, South Africa. Participants were initially identified and approached by the researcher through community networks and personal contacts. Those who met the inclusion criteria were invited to participate, while additional participants were recruited through referrals from initial participants.

Sample and sampling procedures

A total of 20 participants (N = 20) were selected using purposive, snowball and convenience sampling. Wilkinson and Birmingham (2003) and Williman (2011) share a similar view regarding the understanding of a sample as a selection of a group from the population. Participants of different genders and ages were included to find a balanced view of the phenomenon under study. The sample comprised Vhavenḓa male and female youth (18 years – 36 years) and adults (37 years and above), allowing for comparative insights across gender and generational lines. Participants were selected based on the following criteria: (1) native Tshivenḓa speakers, (2) residents occupied by Tshivenḓa L1 speakers, (3) aged 18 years or older and (4) sufficiently familiar with local linguistic practices to provide informed perspectives.

Data collection

The data collected must be interpreted and converted into research findings (Kumar 2005). Polit and Beck (2017) define data collection as the systematic process of gathering information relevant to answering research questions and addressing the objectives of a study. Gaffane (2005) further elaborates that data collection is the process of collecting information for a specific purpose, which may include both individual and group data. Participants were approached directly by the researcher and, where appropriate, were referred to the researcher by other participants who were aware of the study and its recruitment criteria. Data were collected by the researcher through face-to-face semi-structured interviews conducted primarily in Tshivenḓa at locations convenient to the participants, including their homes and other mutually agreed-upon venues. No research assistant was involved in the data collection process. The researcher personally conducted all interviews, which allowed for direct engagement with participants and a deeper understanding of the cultural and linguistic context under investigation. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and later transcribed verbatim. This method allowed participants to articulate their experiences and perceptions of gendered address practices in their own words.

Data analysis methods

In qualitative research, data analysis begins with defining and structuring the study's aim, followed by developing themes to organise the data. This is accomplished by compressing the scripts and then displaying the data in a conversation (Creswell 2007). Data were analysed thematically. Transcripts were coded iteratively to identify recurring patterns and themes related to gender, power and language use. The analysis focused on how address terms function in constructing and reinforcing gendered hierarchies. To ensure trustworthiness, credibility was enhanced through audio-recording and careful transcription of interviews. An audit trail of coding and thematic development was maintained to ensure dependability.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the College of Human Sciences Research Ethics Review Committee from 23 January 2024 to 23 January 2025. The NHREC registration number is Rec-240816-052. The CREC reference number is 66477301_CREC_CHS_2024. Written informed consent in the local language, Tshivenḓa, was obtained from all the participants. All collected data were kept under strict security and password-protected to ensure the protection of research participants' information. Participation was voluntary. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study. To ensure the participants' anonymity, the participants were coded.

Results

This study sought to explore how gendered Tshivenḓa address terms operate within social relations and how they may shape perceptions of respect, authority and gender roles in the Vhavenḓa community. Particular attention is given to how expectations surrounding respect and authority may influence gendered power dynamics and, in some instances, intersect with attitudes and behaviours associated with gender-based violence. In responding to this research objective, participants repeatedly emphasised the importance of being addressed in ways that convey respect and dignity, particularly in public spaces. The findings reveal that address terms are not merely linguistic choices but are deeply embedded in cultural norms that guide social interaction and expectations of respectful conduct within the community. Participants further indicated that these linguistic practices could influence how authority, dignity and relational harmony are interpreted within intimate relationships.

Discussion

Theme 1: The use of address terms that show dignity

Vhavenḓa male youth expressed strong views regarding how they should be addressed by their partners, indicating that respectful address terms, such as the use of surnames or the names of their children, are widely understood within the community as important markers of dignity and respect. Participants further indicated that being addressed in a manner they perceived as lacking respect could lead to interpersonal tension or conflict within relationships. These perspectives illustrate how address terms carry significant social meaning and may influence how respect, authority and relational harmony are interpreted within intimate relationships. This suggests that linguistic practices can play an important role in shaping perceptions of respect and power within everyday interactions, which may intersect with broader discussions on gender relations and gender-based violence. Unemployed Male (UM) 2 elaborated on the significance of respectful address, stating:

> 'How my partner addresses me is very important. If she disrespectfully addresses me, it takes away my dignity as a man. I have experienced a situation where my partner addressed me in a way that did not show respect, and the way I handled it was not good at all.'(UM 2, male youth, aged 26 years – 36 years)

Similarly, UM 1 emphasised the contextual nature of address terms, particularly in public spaces:

> 'If we are among other people, she should address me in a way that shows respect, such as using my surname. Being addressed by my first name in public would shock me.' (UM 1, male youth, aged 26 years – 36 years)

Vhavenḓa female youth also underscored the importance of respectful address terms. Unemployed Female (UMP) 2 noted that appropriate forms of address affirm intimacy and respect:

> 'The words my partner uses should show that we are lovers, especially in public. Using the honorific "*vhone*" shows respect, as it is usually reserved for elders or respected individuals.' (UMP 2, female youth, aged 26 years – 36 years)

On the other hand, Traditional Healer (TH) 2 highlighted culturally entrenched gender asymmetries in address practices:

> 'A [*female*] can use "*Vho*" when calling the father of her children, but a man can call a [*female*] by her first name. This is an old practice that still exists today. Furthermore, a [*female*] can also lie on the side of the body as a form of greeting, while a man can only kneel with their knee.' (TH 2, female adult, aged 56 years – 65 years)

The findings align with scholarship highlighting that forms of address are central to expressing authority, respect and social identity in interpersonal communication. The emphasis by Vhavenḓa male youth on surnames and child-based teknonyms as markers of dignity reflects the role of language in structuring social relations and expectations of respect (Lei 2006). The perception of first-name usage in public as diminishing dignity indicates that address terms function as social signals through which status, identity and masculinity are constructed. These observations are consistent with Redl and Frank (2021) and Mills and Mullany (2011), who show that linguistic systems often reflect broader socio-cultural expectations regarding gender roles and authority. The participant's account suggests that perceived disrespect through forms of address may generate tension within intimate relationships. Although he did not specify what he meant by 'the way I handled it was not good at all', the statement indicates that deviations from expected forms of respectful address can lead to interpersonal conflict. This supports research showing that language is closely linked to social identity, power and interpersonal relations (Braun 1988; Brown & Gilman 1960). In patriarchal societies, respectful communication is often associated with male authority and social status (Holmes & Stubbe 2015), and challenges to these expectations may create frustration and relational tension. This observation further aligns with African feminist perspectives that view language as a means through which gendered power relations are negotiated and maintained (Oyěwùmí 1997). Within the Vhavenḓa context, participants noted that females are often expected to use honorific markers such as '*vho*', and in some situations, to accompany greetings with gestures of respect, whereas males may use first names more freely. These practices reflect culturally embedded systems through which respect and

social hierarchy are expressed and recognised within the community. Rather than viewing these practices as static, they can also be understood as part of evolving cultural traditions through which community members negotiate dignity, respect and relational expectations in everyday interaction. In this way, the findings contribute to existing scholarship demonstrating that language participates in shaping how authority and status are interpreted within social relationships. Some participants noted that perceived disrespect in forms of address could lead to tension or conflict within relationships. References to handling situations 'not in a good way' suggest that such interactions may shape interpersonal dynamics and conflict management. Participants also indicated that females are often expected to use more respectful forms of address, particularly in public spaces, whereas men's use of informal address was considered socially acceptable, reflecting and reinforcing unequal gender roles and power relations.

Theme 2: Modern address terms and the gendered politics of respect

This theme explores Vhavenḓa participants' perceptions of modern address terms within intimate relationships and how these linguistic practices are interpreted in relation to respect, dignity and social roles. The findings indicate that address terms are not merely forms of reference but culturally meaningful linguistic resources through which individuals express and interpret respect, identity and relational expectations within the community. Participants' accounts further suggest that these forms of address are closely connected to socially recognised understandings of masculinity, authority and appropriate conduct within relationships. At the same time, the findings illustrate how speakers continue to interpret and negotiate these linguistic practices within contemporary social contexts. This observation aligns with studies showing that language plays a central role in constructing gender identities and power relations (Holmes & Stubbe 2015; Talbot 2020). In many African societies, respectful linguistic practices are associated with age, status and gendered expectations, reinforcing notions of authority and social responsibility (Oyěwùmí 1997). The findings further demonstrate that while traditional forms of respect remain influential, speakers continue to negotiate and adapt these practices within changing social contexts (Bucholtz & Hall 2016). One participant, Employed Male (EM) 3 (male youth, aged 26 years – 36 years), strongly emphasised the cultural importance of honorifics, particularly the prefix '*Vho*', as a marker of respect within the Vhavenḓa culture. He rejected the use of '*inwi*' [you], when used by his female partner, arguing that its contextual flexibility allows it to be interpreted as disrespectful. He further expressed concern that permitting such an address could gradually erode his authority within the relationship, stating that 'things start small' and may reach a point where he can no longer 'control it'. This response reflects an underlying anxiety about the perceived loss of masculine authority and cultural legitimacy, which may often result in violence against the female. Employed Female (WRK) 1 posits that:

> 'My husband addresses me as "*mme a vhana*" [mother of my children or '*mme a "X"', mother* of '*X*'] or '*Mufunwa wanga*' [love of my life].' (WRK 1, female adult, aged 46 years – 55 years)

Self Employed Male (SEM) 1 affirms that:

> 'Sometimes my wife, when she is happy, she normally calls me "*khosi yanga*" [*my king*]. And in return, I will call her "*muṱanuni*" wanga [*my wife*], which is used to address a king's wife or "*ḓinga ḽa mbilu yanga*" [*rubble of my heart*].' (SME 1, male adult, aged 36 years – 45 years)

In contrast, Diploma Student Male (STM) adopted a more flexible stance, suggesting that:

> '[*A*]ddress terms are shaped by context, social environment, and emotional intent. He indicated acceptance of affectionate terms or even being addressed by his first name, provided the interaction is respectful. This perspective highlights a shifting understanding of masculinity that is less rigidly tied to hierarchical address practices. For example, he mentioned that you can sometimes address your partner as "*iwe*," "*eṋe*," [*you*], *and* "*kwanga*" [*mine*]. These address terms depend on the surroundings or the mood.' (STM 1, male youth, aged 26 years – 36 years)

Similarly, STM 3 expressed indifference towards being addressed by his first name, while noting that:

> '[*H*]onorific forms such as the use of a surname, a child's name, or the prefix "*mavu*" [*Owner of the land*] evoke feelings of honour. His own address practices toward his partner, referring to her as "*mamasi*" [*the mother of my child*] or by her first name, still reflect gendered conventions that prioritise relational identity and motherhood.' (STM 3, male youth, aged 18 years – 25 years)

The findings under Theme 2 resonate with existing scholarship demonstrating how language can function as a vehicle for shaping social relationships and perceptions of gendered authority. As Montashery (2013) argues, metaphorical and affective language shapes perception and contributes to the reproduction of gendered norms, while Salami (2004) shows that seemingly respectful address practices may reflect gendered relations of deference and subordination. Within the Vhavenḓa context, terms such as '*khosi yanga*' [my king] carry culturally recognised connotations of respect and leadership, reflecting socially acknowledged positions within intimate relationships. Although affectionate expressions such as '*mufunwa wanga*' [love of my life] or '*ḓinga ḽa mbilu yanga*' [rubble of my heart] appear reciprocal, some male participants expressed concern that using less deferential terms (e.g. *inwi*) could be interpreted as diminishing social standing or relational respect. This aligns with Rodriguez's (2009) observation that language frequently positions females as subordinate through evaluative imagery, and with Pratama's (2018) argument that everyday linguistic practices may subtly reinforce social hierarchies. In this article, participants' resistance to more egalitarian address forms and the perception of linguistic flexibility as a potential challenge illustrate how language functions within the cultural negotiation of respect, authority and relational expectations.

Consequently, these findings extend existing literature by demonstrating that not only metaphorical language, but also culturally valorised honorifics and affectionate titles participate in shaping socially recognised expectations of authority and relational conduct. This finding supports the view that language plays a central role in shaping gender identities, social expectations and power relations (Holmes & Stubbe 2015; Talbot 2020). It further suggests that linguistic practices may intersect with broader concerns regarding gendered interactions and gender-based violence.

Theme 3: Gendered honorifics and embodied practices as markers of hierarchical power

The findings demonstrate that gendered honorifics and embodied greeting practices serve as culturally meaningful markers of social roles and hierarchical relationships within the Vhavenḓa community. In this context, participants indicated that the absence of culturally expected honorifics may be interpreted as a sign of diminished respect, highlighting how linguistic and non-verbal practices are deeply embedded in local norms of interaction. As EM 3 (male adult, aged 56 years – 65 years) emphasised, adhering to customary forms of address is important for maintaining social harmony and relational expectations. Similarly, TH 1 (female adult, aged 56 years – 65 years) noted that females are often expected to curtsey while greeting, whereas males may kneel with one leg and clasp their hands together. These observations illustrate how greeting practices are interpreted and enacted differently across genders, reflecting culturally recognised understandings of respect and social conduct. These findings resonate with recent scholarship that views language and embodied communicative practices as important resources through which social identities, power relations and cultural values are negotiated and maintained (Schnurr & Zayts 2021; Talbot 2020). Furthermore, contemporary studies on language and gender suggest that gendered communicative norms continue to shape expectations regarding appropriate behaviour, respect and authority within social relationships, particularly in communities where cultural traditions remain influential (Litosseliti 2022; Talbot 2020). The asymmetry becomes more pronounced in intimate and familial contexts. Employed Male 2 (aged 56 years – 65 years) observed that males are sometimes addressed as '*vhamusanda*' [king] even when they do not hold royal status, symbolically elevating ordinary males to positions of authority. Females, by contrast, must clasp their hands, kneel with both legs when greeting their husbands in the presence of elders, and in some instances lie on their side when serving in-laws. Employed Female 2 (aged 26 years – 36 years) further explained that females are expected to bow until their heads nearly touch the floor and avoid eye contact when addressing their husbands, as direct eye contact is considered disrespectful. Conversely, males are permitted to stand upright and maintain eye contact when addressing their wives. Diploma Student Male 1 (aged 26 years – 36 years) reinforced this perception by stating that females are regarded as junior to their male relatives or husbands, and that similar restrictions apply when interacting with in-laws. From an African feminist perspective, these practices can be understood as culturally embedded mechanisms through which social roles, respect and authority are expressed and negotiated within the Vhavenḓa community (Nnaemeka 2004; Oyěwùmí 1997). The use of titles such as '*vhamusanda*' and the socially recognised assertive male postures function as markers of status and authority, reflecting culturally sanctioned understandings of masculinity and leadership. Simultaneously, the ritualised gestures of deference, such as kneeling, bowing, avoiding eye contact or lying on one's side, constitute culturally meaningful ways of expressing respect and acknowledging social hierarchy. Within the African feminist lens, these linguistic and embodied practices are interpreted not merely as instruments of subordination but as part of broader socio-cultural systems in which gender, age, kinship and communal responsibility intersect to shape social interactions (Mama 1997; Nnaemeka 2004). These practices reveal how authority, relational expectations and social recognition are continuously negotiated and enacted. At the same time, African feminist perspectives highlight that while these practices carry cultural significance, they may also intersect with patterns of gendered power that influence women's agency and relational dynamics, including in contexts where gender-based violence is a concern (Ahikire 2014; Tamale 2020).

Theme 4: Perspective towards forms of address

Participants expressed divergent views regarding the use of first names as forms of address within intimate relationships. While some participants interpreted being addressed by a partner using a first name in public as potentially diminishing respect, others indicated that they were largely comfortable with such usage. These differing perspectives illustrate that address terms are socially and culturally mediated, with meanings negotiated and adapted within the community over time. Rather than viewing any form of address as inherently right or wrong, participants' accounts highlight how linguistic practices are intertwined with culturally recognised norms of respect, authority and relational roles, and how these norms continue to evolve in response to contemporary social contexts. Among Vhavenḓa male youth, several participants emphasised that the acceptability of first-name address is context-dependent. Employed Male 3 explained that public settings, especially in the presence of children or colleagues, require a respectful mode of address:

> 'If my partner calls me by my first name, it depends on where we are. She cannot address me by my first name in front of my child or among other people. It sends the wrong message. When we are alone, she can call me by my first name.' (EM 3, male youth, aged 26 years – 36 years)

As noted by TH 1:

> 'Growing up, we found it like that when a [*female*] greets his husband, [*females*] are required to curtsey while greeting, whereas [*males*] may kneel with one leg and clasp their hands together.' (TH 1, female adult, aged 56 years – 65 years)

Similarly, EM 2 (male youth, aged 26 years – 36 years) stated that being addressed by a first name in the presence of elders

or children is unacceptable. Unemployed Male 2 further highlighted the importance of tone, noting that respectful intonation can mitigate perceived disrespect:

> 'The tone matters a lot. My partner can say my name respectfully, but there is also a tone that sounds condescending, and that is unacceptable.' (UM 2, male youth, aged 26 years – 36 years)

Some participants expressed indifference, viewing their first names as neutral identifiers. For instance, WRK 1, supported by UMP 1 (female youth, aged 26 years – 36 years), stated:

> 'Being called by my first name does not make me feel undermined. What makes me feel disrespected is the use of "*iṅwi*" when it is said in a belittling manner.' (WRK 1, female youth, aged 26 years – 36 years)

In contrast, other female youth rejected the first-name address, interpreting it as disrespectful. Unemployed Female 1 stated that she does not accept being addressed by her first name by her partner, while WRK 3 described such usage in public as shocking and potentially damaging to the relationship. Among Vhavenḓa male adults, rejection of first-name address by a partner was more pronounced. Employed Male 1 indicated that being addressed by his first name undermines the respect he expects as a man. Employed Male 5 further noted that such an act in public would be interpreted as disrespect and could result in serious conflict at home. Similarly, WK 4 preferred to be addressed by his surname or his children's names rather than his first name. Female adult participants also highlighted the symbolic importance of address terms in publicly affirming marital and social status. TH 1 associated the first-name address in public with a lack of recognition of her position as a wife. SE 3 emphasised the use of the honorific '*Vho*' as a key marker of respect, while EM 3 rejected first-name address, stating that it downgrades her status and fails to acknowledge her role as a partner publicly. The findings on perspectives towards first-name address align with broader African scholarship, demonstrating that forms of address are deeply embedded within culturally recognised systems of respect, lineage and relational roles. Similar to the Yoruba context described by Salami (2004), where wives are expected to employ teknonyms or endearment terms rather than addressing their husbands by first name, many Vhavenḓa participants interpreted public first-name usage as inconsistent with locally recognised norms of respectful interaction. The preference among male adults for surnames, child-based teknonyms or honorifics such as '*vho*' mirrors Mbaya's (2002) findings among the Oromo, where relational forms of address (e.g. 'father of X') are used to publicly signal seniority and responsibility within households. These patterns suggest that first-name avoidance functions as a culturally meaningful mechanism through which respect, social roles and relational expectations are communicated and affirmed. The statement, 'When we arrive home, we will have a big problem', suggests that perceived violations of expected forms of respect may generate conflict within intimate relationships. Although violence was not explicitly mentioned, the statement may be interpreted as an implicit threat reflecting underlying power dynamics. This finding resonates with literature showing that patriarchal norms often associate masculinity with authority and respect, and challenges to these expectations may prompt attempts to reassert control (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005; Morrell, Jewkes & Lindegger 2012). Furthermore, coercion, intimidation and threats are recognised as forms of psychological violence that may precede physical violence (Heise 2011). The statement, therefore, highlights how language and expectations of deference may contribute to the normalisation of gendered power imbalances. De Kadt (2003) observes that naming practices often reflect gendered expectations of deference and relational responsibility. Similarly, the emphasis on lineage-based and relational identities mirrors patterns reported in Swazi and Nguni communities, where naming systems reinforce family hierarchies and male heritage (Moyo 2012; Ngubane & Thabethe 2013). While some youth expressed more flexible views, address practices continue to serve as important means through which respect, authority and social roles are negotiated.

Conclusion

This study accomplished its objective of exploring how gendered Tshivenḓa address terms are interpreted and enacted within the Vhavenḓa community, and how these practices relate to social roles, power relations and gender dynamics. The findings showed that titles such as '*vhamusanda*' and assertive male postures serve as culturally recognised markers of status and authority, reflecting locally understood expressions of masculine leadership. Simultaneously, the ritualised gestures of deference, such as kneeling, bowing, avoiding eye contact or lying on one's side, represent culturally meaningful ways of expressing respect and acknowledging social hierarchy, as participants interpret and enact them. The article further illustrated that Vhavenḓa wives often use relational forms of address, including teknonyms or endearment terms, rather than first names, a practice participants described as aligning with culturally recognised norms of respect and relational roles. Many participants indicated that first-name usage in public could be interpreted as inconsistent with these norms. At the same time, most male adults preferred to be addressed by surnames, child-based teknonyms or honorifics such as '*vho*'. These patterns highlight how linguistic and embodied practices are embedded within culturally mediated systems of respect, authority and social organisation. Address terms were also shown to function as markers of relational positioning and social recognition within the community. Participants interpreted the absence of culturally expected honorifics as potentially diminishing respect, demonstrating how linguistic practices are socially negotiated and carry symbolic meaning. From an African feminist perspective, these practices are part of broader socio-cultural systems in which gender, age, kinship and communal responsibility intersect to shape social interactions and relational expectations. While these practices are culturally grounded, African feminist theory encourages critical reflection on how

expectations of deference and authority may intersect with patterns of gendered power and influence relational dynamics, including in contexts where gender-based violence may arise. The findings suggest that Vhavenḓa address practices are both culturally significant and dynamically negotiated, reflecting continuity and adaptation in response to social change. This underscores the importance of community dialogue and reflection on evolving forms of address that maintain respect while supporting equitable relational interactions, allowing males and females to enact culturally meaningful expressions of respect that are mutually recognised and socially meaningful.

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CRediT authorship contribution

Muthuhadini L. Muavha: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft and Writing – review & editing. The author confirms that this work is entirely their own, has reviewed the article, approved the final version for submission and publication and takes full responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are not openly available and are available from the corresponding author, Muthuhadini L. Muavha, upon reasonable request.

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