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Gender Stereotypes and Cultural Legitimation in *Bodaboda* Discourse: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Informal Transport Talk in Kenya

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to examine how sexist discourse constrains women's participation in Kenya's informal transport sector, specifically the *bodaboda* industry in Biashara Ward, Nakuru City. Everyday talk and interaction among riders frequently reinforce gender stereotypes and cultural norms that sideline female riders. A qualitative case study was chosen as the most suitable design because it enables in-depth exploration of discourse practices within a bounded social setting. Guided by Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis and Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity, the study employed semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and video recordings across nine *bodaboda* stages, involving 15 riders (12 men and 3 women). Interviews captured riders' perspectives, observation documented communicative practices in context, and video recordings facilitated multimodal analysis of embodied discourse. The findings reveal recurring discursive patterns: domesticity scripts casting women as caregivers, stereotypes of physical inadequacy, moral policing discourses, occupational ownership positioning riding as "men's work," and cultural legitimation through appeals to tradition and religion. Counter-discourses from women and some men challenge these exclusions, though resistance remains fragile. This study is significant because it advances understanding of gendered discourse within Kenya's informal transport sector, showing how everyday communicative practices regulate occupational identity and sustain exclusion. By foregrounding cultural legitimation as a discursive mechanism, it contributes to feminist transport scholarship and informs policy interventions such as gender-sensitive training, equitable access to credit, and awareness campaigns that challenge exclusionary discourse at its roots.

Key words: Cultural legitimation; discourse analysis; gender stereotypes; hegemonic masculinity; informal transport economies.



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INTRODUCTION

Sexist discourse in Kenya's *bodaboda* sector is not reducible to isolated acts of misconduct but functions as a patterned communicative practice regulating belonging and occupational identity. Existing scholarship has documented harassment and insecurity, yet it rarely interrogates the linguistic realisation of stereotypes, leaving the discursive machinery of exclusion underexamined. This study addresses that gap by analysing how sexist discourse is linguistically constructed and culturally legitimated in Biashara Ward, Nakuru. The purpose is to examine how gendered talk sustains occupational hierarchies while also revealing points of contestation against male dominance. Specifically, the study seeks to analyse how sexist discourses are linguistically constructed in everyday *bodaboda* interactions, investigate the cultural scripts that legitimise and reinforce gender stereotypes, and explore the counter-discourses that challenge exclusionary norms and re-frame occupational identity for female riders.

Sexist discourse in Kenya's public transport sector functions not as incidental harassment but as a patterned communicative practice that reproduces patriarchal power. Everyday interactions, including unsolicited appellations such as "sweetheart" or "madam," spatial exclusion through seating practices, and institutional silences, regulate women's mobility and inscribe asymmetrical hierarchies of gender. These communicative practices are embedded in broader cultural scripts that normalise exclusion, making mobility a microcosm of wider patriarchal structures.

Transport is fundamental to economic activity and access to services, yet Kenya's informal transport sector, particularly the *bodaboda* industry, illustrates how gendered discourse constrains participation. *Bodabodas* have become central to short-distance mobility, but their design and cultural norms favour men. Male passengers sit astride behind riders, while women are socialised to adopt side-saddle positions that symbolically mark them as peripheral (Nyachio & Mang'era, 2022; Okello, 2020). These seating practices are discursive, signalling who belongs and who remains excluded. The industry's strenuous working conditions, characterised by long hours, exposure to risk, and lack of institutional protection, compound these barriers (Nzira et al., 2025). Language practices further entrench hierarchy, as women riders encounter ridicule, harassment, and exclusion from leadership, while men's talk naturalises occupational ownership and renders female participation illegitimate

(Akinwale, 2025). Consequently, women are discursively positioned as passengers rather than service providers, and their representation in the sector remains minimal.

Biashara Ward in Nakuru City exemplifies these dynamics. As a busy commercial hub with diverse ethnic and linguistic groups, it stages discourses of masculinity, exclusion, and resistance in everyday rider interactions. Here, gender stereotypes are not merely expressed but culturally legitimated through appeals to tradition, religion, and humour, making Biashara Ward an ideal case for close interrogation. Silberschmidt (2001) similarly shows how cultural scripts in rural Tanzania police masculinity and sexuality, reinforcing exclusionary practices through everyday discourse.

The study is guided by key concepts that explain how language shapes gendered power in the *bodaboda* sector. Gender stereotypes are understood as the everyday assumptions and expectations about what women can or should do, which often limit their occupational roles. Hegemonic masculinity refers to the dominant forms of male identity that establish the standard for authority and legitimacy, positioning men as the natural owners of transport work (Connell, 1995). Cultural legitimation describes the use of appeals to tradition, religion, and morality to justify exclusion and reinforce male dominance. Together, these concepts provide the lens through which the study examines how occupational identity and gendered power are reproduced and contested in informal transport discourse.

The study applies Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis to everyday communicative practices in the *bodaboda* sector to examine how occupational identity and gendered power are reproduced and contested. It presents findings on discursive patterns of exclusion and resistance, situates them within Kenya's informal transport economy, and discusses their implications for sociolinguistics, feminist transport scholarship, and policy interventions.

The study is guided by the following research questions: (1) How are sexist discourses linguistically constructed in everyday *bodaboda* interactions in Biashara Ward, Nakuru? (2) In what ways do cultural scripts legitimise and sustain gender stereotypes within the *bodaboda* sector? and (3) What counter-discourses emerge to challenge exclusionary norms, and how do they re-frame occupational identity for female riders?

This study advances sociolinguistics by extending Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis into the informal transport sector, demonstrating how sexism is enacted through everyday rider talk. It shows that inequality is not simply attitudinal but is embedded in communicative practices such as nicknames, jokes, and silences. By foregrounding cultural legitimization through appeals to tradition, religion, and humour, the study enriches feminist transport scholarship and illustrates how hegemonic masculinity is sustained discursively. Beyond its theoretical contribution, it offers policy insights by exposing the linguistic foundations of exclusion and pointing to interventions that challenge cultural scripts alongside structural barriers.

The study focuses on Biashara Ward in Nakuru City, a busy commercial hub where gendered discourses among bodaboda riders are vividly enacted. The study collected data from December 2023 to March 2024, involving 15 bodaboda riders (12 male, 3 female) and 5 key informants as participants. Limiting the scope to bodaboda riders ensures depth within a single occupational context while excluding other modes of transport, such as matatus and private vehicles. The study period provides a snapshot rather than a longitudinal account, and the small number of female riders reflects the realities of a male-dominated industry. These boundaries allow close interrogation of how gendered discourses and cultural legitimization are locally constructed while acknowledging that the findings cannot be generalised to all transport contexts in Kenya.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sexist Discourse in Public Transport

Sexist discourse in occupational and transport settings is not random harassment but a patterned communicative practice that reproduces unequal gender relations. It positions women as inferior or inappropriate in spaces coded as male. Drawing on Bourdieu's idea of symbolic violence and Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA), language is understood here as the medium through which belonging and legitimacy are negotiated (Lazar, 2007; Fairclough, 2013).

Global studies show that women in public transport are routinely subjected to unsolicited nicknames, spatial exclusion, and institutional silences that normalise inequality (Kaplan, 2021). While protective measures such as women-only buses reduce immediate risk, they rarely dismantle the discursive foundations of exclusion (UN Women, 2025).

Gender Stereotypes in Bodaboda Talk

Within Kenya's bodaboda sector, sexist discourse takes on distinctive forms. Riders deploy sexualised nicknames such as *nyash* (buttocks) and *maziwa* (breasts), while humour, metaphors, and embodied silencing trivialise women riders and reinforce male dominance (Connell, 2005). These practices transform cultural stereotypes into occupational regulation, making ideology visible and culturally legitimated (van Dijk, 2018). Empirical work in Kenya has documented harassment and insecurity (Nyachieo & Mang'era, 2022; Nzira et al., 2025), but few studies have examined how these stereotypes are linguistically realised. More recent scholarship points to seating practices and occupational jokes as discursive mechanisms of exclusion (Lee, 2022; Sumbal, 2022), yet systematic sociolinguistic analysis remains limited.

Galiè et al. (2022) and Ekeke and John (2025) provide a broader interpretive frame for these dynamics, showing that gendered spaces in informal economies are actively negotiated through discursive practices that normalise exclusion and regulate women's occupational presence in informal work. Their findings show that occupational belonging is shaped by cultural scripts and communicative acts that render women's participation precarious.

Applying this insight to bodaboda talk reveals how sexualised nicknames, jokes, and embodied silencing are not isolated acts of harassment but part of a patterned discourse that sustains patriarchal boundaries in transport economies. In other words, the bodaboda sector exemplifies how informal economies reproduce gendered hierarchies through language, while simultaneously offering sites where women contest and renegotiate their occupational identities.

Cultural Legitimation and Hegemonic Masculinity

The lens of hegemonic masculinity explains how male dominance is discursively legitimised, framing bodaboda riding as "men's work" and delegitimising female participation (Connell, 1995; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Mchunu et al., 2025). This framework highlights that masculinity operates as a cultural ideal that subordinates women and marginalises alternative masculinities, sustaining occupational hierarchies through everyday discourse. Building on this, Messerschmidt (2020) demonstrates that hegemonic masculinity is relational and contested, continually negotiated through everyday practices rather than fixed traits. More recent critiques, such as Lucy (2024), further

stress that its authority is never absolute but always subject to challenge. Cultural legitimization shows how appeals to tradition, religion, and humour embed stereotypes into rider talk (van Dijk, 2018; Akinwale, 2025).

Empirical Studies on the Bodaboda Sector

Kenyan scholarship has largely examined the bodaboda industry in relation to safety, regulation, and economic contribution, with limited attention to language. Existing studies highlight harassment and insecurity (Nyachio & Mang'era, 2022; Nzira et al., 2025), but they often treat sexism as an external attitude rather than a communicative practice embedded in occupational life.

This limitation explains why previous research has failed to capture language as a mechanism of exclusion: the focus has been on structural or behavioural aspects of transport rather than on discourse itself.

Identified Gap and Contribution

The reviewed literature demonstrates that while sexist discourse in transport is widely acknowledged, most

Kenyan studies have not systematically analysed how language itself sustains exclusion. This absence leaves a gap in sociolinguistic research, where sexism is often reduced to behaviour or attitude rather than understood as communicative practice. The current study addresses this limitation by applying Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis to bodaboda talk, analysing nicknames, jokes, metaphors, and silences as discursive mechanisms of exclusion. By combining the lenses of hegemonic masculinity and cultural legitimization, the study explains how male dominance is sustained while also identifying counter-voices that challenge exclusion.

Conceptual Framework

The reviewed literature points to a dynamic relationship between sexist discourse, gender stereotypes, hegemonic masculinity, and cultural legitimization, all of which converge to produce occupational exclusion in Kenya's bodaboda sector. This study conceptualises these elements as interconnected rather than isolated.

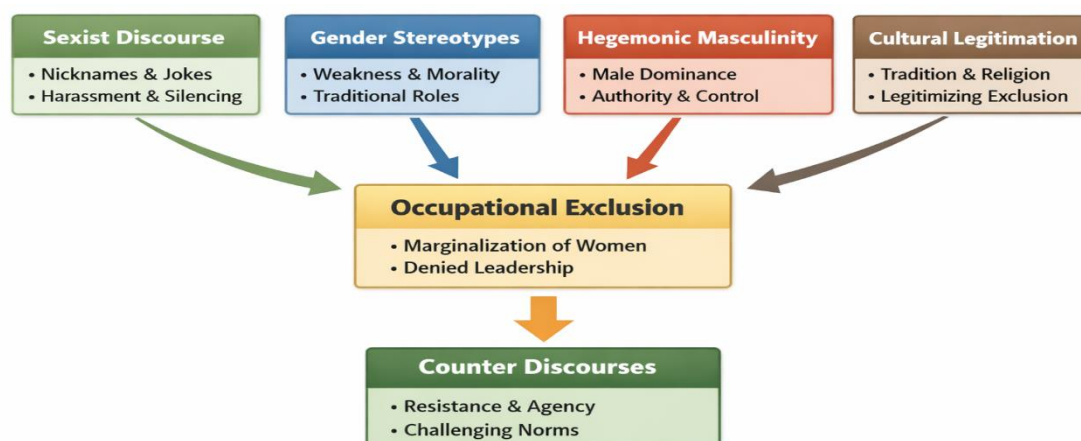


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

The framework shows how everyday talk keeps women on the margins of the bodaboda trade. Nicknames, jokes, and silences draw on old stereotypes that portray women as weak or out of place, while masculine authority and cultural beliefs make this exclusion seem normal. Yet women and some men still find ways to push back—using conversation to challenge sexist humour and claim space in the trade. Their resistance may be small, but it proves that change is possible.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative case study design guided by Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) to examine how sexist discourse and cultural legitimization are enacted in everyday bodaboda interactions. The research was conducted in Biashara Ward, Nakuru City, a linguistically and culturally diverse commercial hub whose multilingual environment (English, Kiswahili, Kikuyu, and Sheng) provided a rich context for analysing discourse and identity (Mugambi, 2024). Purposive sampling was used to select 15 registered bodaboda riders (12 men and 3 women) aged 18–45 years with at

least six months of riding experience, alongside five key informants comprising a bodaboda association manager, a gender officer, a regular female client, a religious leader, and a community development officer.

Data were gathered using semi-structured interviews, participant observation at nine bodaboda stages, and video recordings obtained with participants' consent, allowing for the triangulation of verbal and non-verbal communication practices (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). The interviews were transcribed word for word, translated into English with careful preservation of cultural nuances, and analysed using NVivo software through open and axial coding to uncover recurrent patterns of exclusion, objectification, and cultural legitimisation associated with tradition, religion, and humour. Multimodal analysis examined the interaction of gestures, laughter, and silences with spoken discourse, while FCDA informed interpretation of how these practices reproduced or challenged gendered power relations and occupational identities (Fairclough, 2013).

Researcher reflexivity was maintained by recognising the influence of gender on access and interpretation, employing male and female research assistants to facilitate participant engagement, and using reflexive field notes alongside methodological triangulation to enhance transparency and analytical rigour. Ethical approval was obtained from National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI) and Laikipia University's Institutional Scientific and Ethical Review Committee (ISERC). Informed consent, pseudonymisation, secure data storage, and confidentiality procedures ensured compliance with ethical research standards (Bond et al., 2023).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Sexist discourse among bodaboda riders was enacted through stereotypes, cultural appeals, and everyday talk, but also contested by female riders and occasional male allies. The themes below illustrate how language and embodied practices reproduce or resist exclusion in Biashara Ward.

Gender Stereotypes in Bodaboda Talk

Gender stereotypes were a recurring feature of rider talk, trivialising women's occupational identity and positioning them as outsiders in the bodaboda sector. Humour, ridicule, and presuppositions about "appropriate" female roles were used to naturalise exclusion. These discourses framed women as fragile,

domestic, or morally compromised, thereby delegitimising their professional presence, as in these examples:

"Unaona hiyo bike yako? Very soon utagongewa hadi ufungue salon." (Male BR1) *"See that bike, you will be hit and soon you will start a salon."* This joke reduces riding to a temporary diversion before women return to stereotypically feminine service work, reinforcing the idea that transport is not their rightful domain.

Mama akishika handlebar, lazima ateleze - hii kazi ni ya wanaume." (Male BR3) *"When a woman holds the handlebar, she will surely slip- this job is for men."*

Here, physical weakness is naturalised as a gendered truth, casting women as inherently incapable of mastering the machine.

Wanawake wakipanda bodaboda, wanaharibu heshima yao." (Male BR5) *"Women who ride bodaboda ruin their respectability."*

Respectability is policed through moral discourse, equating female mobility with loss of dignity and social value.

"Ukiona mama rider, ujue ni drama - kesho atalia." (Male BR7) *"If you see a woman rider, know it's drama- tomorrow she will cry."*

Emotional fragility is invoked to trivialise women's persistence, portraying them as unstable and unsuited to sustained participation.

Wanawake huambiwa eti bike ni nzito sana kwao." (Male BR9) *"Women are told the bike is too heavy for them."*

This stereotype positions women as physically inadequate, reinforcing exclusion through claims of bodily incapacity.

Observation, Naivas Lower: Women left the stage when rain began, while men "braved" it. The embodied contrast between male endurance and female retreat was read as proof of resilience versus fragility, further entrenching gendered expectations.

Construction of Masculinity and Cultural Norms

Masculinity was consistently framed as ownership of the bodaboda trade, with women depicted as intruders. Riders invoked tradition, marriage, and taboo to justify

exclusion, while elders and leaders reinforced these views through appeals to religion and custom. The discourses that illustrate this construction are shown in the table below.

Table 1: Construction of Masculinity and Cultural Norms

Excerpt	Translation	Discursive Function
<i>"Hii kazi ilianzishwa na sisi... wanawake wameingia juzi tu."</i> (Male BR1)	"This job was started by us... women only joined recently."	Male ownership of trade
<i>"Hii ni kazi ya wanaume, siyo fashion show."</i> (Male BR2)	"This is men's work, not a fashion show."	Ridicules female presence
<i>"Kwa culture yetu, wanawake wanatakiwa kuwa nyumbani."</i> (Male BR10)	"In our culture, women belong at home."	Cultural legitimization
<i>"Huyu akiolewa, hii kazi ataacha tu."</i> (Posta)	"Once she marries, she will inevitably abandon this bike work."	Marriage as barrier
<i>"Culture yetu huona mwanamke kwa boda kama taboo."</i> (Male BR7)	"Our culture sees a woman on a boda as taboo."	Participation framed as violation
<i>"Wazee wa stage huona wanawake kama wageni. Wanatumia dini na mila kusema hawawezi kudumu."</i> (KI1)	"Stage elders see women as outsiders. They use religion and tradition to say women cannot last."	Elders reinforce exclusion

These narratives condense masculinity into occupational entitlement, delegitimising women through culture, marriage, and taboo. Observations and key informant testimony confirm that exclusion is actively sustained by elders, embedding hegemonic masculinity into everyday practice.

Normalisation of Sexist Discourses

Sexist talk was embedded in everyday jokes, insults, and routine interactions at bodaboda stages. Humour and ridicule were used to trivialise women's competence, while dismissive remarks reinforced exclusion as part of ordinary conversation, as shown in these examples:

"Wanawake huambiwa eti bike ni nzito sana kwao." (Male BR9) *"Women are told the bike is too heavy for them."* This remark naturalises weakness, presenting physical incapacity as a gendered truth.

"Wanawake huambiwa eti hawawezi jua route vizuri kama sisi." (Male BR9) *"Women are told they cannot*

know routes as well as us." Here, spatial competence is framed as male, reinforcing occupational superiority.

"Ukijaribu kuongea, wanaanza kusema 'sasa unajiona kama mwanaume. Nyamaza wanaume wakiongea.'" (Female BR1) "If you speak up, they say 'now you think you're a man? Shut up when men are talking.'" Assertiveness is silenced by equating speech with transgression.

"Wanaanza ku-mock, ati 'hii kazi si ya kupelekwa na emotions za wamama.'" (Female BR2) "They mock us, saying this job isn't for emotional women." Emotional stereotypes trivialise female participation, casting women as unfit for the trade.

"Wamama tukisema hatutaki ujinga, wanasema tuna kiburi." (Female BR3) *"When we speak out, they say we are arrogant."* Resistance is reframed as arrogance, discouraging women from asserting themselves.

These excerpts show how sexist discourse is normalised through humour, ridicule, and silencing. By embedding

exclusion in everyday talk, riders reproduce gender hierarchies and discourage women's confidence, making marginalisation appear routine and unremarkable.

Cultural and Religious Legitimation

Cultural and religious discourses were frequently mobilised to legitimise gender hierarchies in the bodaboda sector. Riders and community leaders invoked tradition and scripture to naturalise exclusion, presenting women's participation as morally inappropriate or spiritually forbidden. These appeals gave sexist talk a veneer of authority, embedding it within broader cultural narratives. The discourses are illustrated in the excerpts below:

"Bibilia inasema mwanaume ni kichwa." (Male BR10) *"The Bible says the man is the head."* Religious text used to justify male dominance.

"Religious leaders support culture, wanasema ni dhambi kuendesha bodaboda." (Male BR4) *"Religious leaders support culture, saying it is a sin for women to ride bodaboda."*: Moral framing of female riding as sinful.

"Viongozi wa dini wanaamini wanawake hawapaswi kufanya hii kazi." (Male BR12) *"Religious leaders believe women should not do this job."*: Religious authority invoked to restrict participation.

"Wachungaji hujaribu kutufundisha, lakini vijana hawawezi kubadilika." (Female BR3) *"Pastors try to teach us, but the youth will not change."*: Highlights persistence of exclusion despite attempts at reform.

Cultural and religious appeals are used to legitimise exclusion, casting women's participation as taboo or sinful. By embedding gender hierarchies in moral and spiritual discourse, riders and leaders reinforce hegemonic masculinity and present discrimination as culturally inevitable.

Female Riders' Counter-Discourses

Female riders articulated counter-discourses that challenged stereotypes and asserted agency. Their voices reframed participation as legitimate, resisted trivialisation, and exposed the contradictions in how men judged them. These narratives are illustrated in the table below.

These counter-discourses destabilise hegemonic masculinity by reframing women's participation as legitimate and professional. By asserting competence, rejecting pity, and challenging stereotypes, female riders resist discursive attempts to marginalise them and carve out space for agency within the trade.

Table 2: Female Riders' Counter-Discourses

Rider Code	Quote	Counter-Discursive Strategy
Female BR1	<i>"Ukijaribu kuongea, wanaanza kusema 'sasa unajiona kama mwanaume.'" (If you speak up, they say you think you're a man.)</i>	Exposing silencing practices
Female BR2	<i>"Wamama tukisema hatutaki ujinga, wanasema tuna kiburi." (When we speak out, they say we're arrogant.)</i>	Rejecting stereotype of arrogance
Female BR3	<i>"Ukiwa firm, wanasema 'huo ni ukali ya single mother.'" (Being firm is not disrespect.)</i>	Reframing assertiveness as legitimate
Female BR3	<i>"Mimi hupigania wateja. Sitafuti huruma." (I fight for clients. I don't seek for pity.)</i>	Rejecting sympathy, affirming legitimacy

Findings from Video Analysis

Video recordings provided a complementary layer of evidence, capturing non-verbal cues, group dynamics, and spontaneous interactions.

Humour and collective performance (City Clock):

Male riders joked about a female colleague's appearance,

accompanied by whistles and exaggerated gestures. This amplified ridicule and reinforced verbal objectification.

Silencing through embodied dismissal (Safaricom):

A female rider attempted to contribute to a discussion on traffic safety. As she spoke, one male rider turned his back, another waved dismissively, and others avoided eye contact. The conversation continued without

acknowledging her input. These embodied cues - posture, gesture, gaze avoidance - enacted symbolic invisibility, demonstrating that silencing operates not only through speech but through interactional alignment that excludes her.

Resistance to sexist talk (Menengai): A male rider interrupted a sexualised joke, saying “*heshima kwa wadada*” (respect for women). His intervention shifted the group dynamic, silencing laughter and redirecting the conversation.

Table 3: Video Evidence of Discursive Practices

Stage	Discursive Device	Example	Interpretation
City Clock	Humour & collective performance	“ <i>Anafanya kazi ya wanaume, lakini anaonekana kama model.</i> ” (She is doing men’s work, but looks like a model) with whistles, gestures, and laughter	Amplified ridicule; reinforced verbal objectification through embodied actions
Safaricom	Silencing & symbolic invisibility	Female rider attempted to contribute; one rider turned his back, others avoided eye contact, conversation continued without her	Embodied dismissal; enacted symbolic invisibility; silencing through posture and gaze
Menengai	Resistance to sexist discourse	“ <i>Heshima kwa wadada.</i> ” (Respect for women) - male rider interrupted a sexualised joke, halting group laughter	Shifted group dynamic; silenced sexist talk; demonstrated counter-hegemonic voices

Discussion

The analysis demonstrates that sexist discourse in the bodaboda sector is not incidental but systematically reproduced through language, humour, and embodied practices. Rather than treating these as isolated remarks, the findings reveal how gender stereotypes, cultural norms, and religious appeals converge to regulate occupational identity.

Domesticity scripts in rider talk illustrate how inequality is naturalised through discourse. Statements such as women being “supposed to be at home” exemplify what Bourdieu (1991) conceptualises as symbolic violence, where everyday language makes exclusion appear natural. Muindi (2021) argues that occupational humour trivialises women’s labour by tethering it to domestic roles, while Mutinda et al. (2025) show that licensing practices in Nairobi’s informal trade sector reproduce exclusion but also allow women to reframe domestic tropes as resilience. From a sociolinguistic perspective, Lazar (2005) opines that these scripts function as discursive gatekeeping devices, regulating occupational identity. Taken together, these positions highlight domesticity talk as a contested discursive resource, simultaneously reproducing fragility stereotypes and opening spaces for negotiation.

Masculinity and occupational ownership are enacted through ridicule and embodied dismissal, illustrating how boundaries are actively policed. Connell’s (2005) theory of hegemonic masculinity provides a framework for understanding this policing, while Moradi and Huang (2008) emphasise that objectification delegitimises women’s professional identity. Porter et al. (2023) challenge the inevitability of exclusion, showing that counter-discourses emerge in the everyday cracks of talk, where women’s occupational presence disrupts traditional claims of male ownership and transforms discourse into a terrain of contestation. Bayley et al. (2013) further underscore that occupational identity is always discursively negotiated rather than fixed. Taken together, these perspectives converge on the point that masculinity is discursively owned yet diverge on whether resistance has the capacity to destabilise its authority.

Normalisation of sexist humour, evident in jokes that trivialise women’s competence, is insidious because it renders resistance invisible. Recent work shows that feminist humour can disrupt these dynamics and motivate collective action for gender equality (Vizcaino Cuenca et al., 2023). Female riders reframing assertiveness as legitimate, and male allies disrupting sexist jokes, exemplify this tension. Critical discourse analysts such as Fairclough (2013) and sociolinguists like

Holmes and Wilson (2022) argue that discourse must be read multimodally; embodied cues such as posture and gaze confirm that resistance and silencing are enacted through interactional alignment as well as speech.

Cultural and religious legitimisation sustains exclusion by mobilising appeals to scripture — “man is the head” — that reinforce wider ideological structures and symbolic violence. Silberschmidt (2001) shows how masculinity is actively policed through ridicule and cultural scripts, while Ekeke and John (2025) explain that cultural legitimisation endures precisely because it carries moral authority. Against this backdrop, Akinwale (2025) demonstrates that women’s discursive labour re-articulates cultural and occupational scripts to contest exclusion, and Bayley et al. (2013) underscore that occupational identity is always discursively negotiated rather than fixed. Porter et al. (2023) add ethnographic evidence, revealing how counter-discourses emerge in everyday cracks of talk, disrupting traditional claims of male ownership and rendering discourse a terrain of contestation. These perspectives highlight that cultural and religious discourse operates simultaneously as a mechanism for legitimising exclusion and as a site where resistance destabilises its authority.

Counter-discourses and fragile resistance emerge in moments where female riders insisted on respect or where male allies disrupted sexist humour. Hooks (2015)

argues that resistance begins with speech acts that reframe identity. Muindi (2021) concurs, noting that women’s insistence on respect destabilises patriarchal authority. Muchabveyo et al. (2025), however, caution that women’s counter-voices in informal economies are often silenced by systemic inequalities, even as they signal pathways to transformation. VicHealth (2022) opines that resistance to gender equality initiatives remains fragile but nonetheless signals potential for change. Bucholtz and Hall (2005) remind us that identity is always interactionally constructed, and these counter-voices exemplify how even marginal interventions can destabilise hegemonic masculinity.

Seen holistically, the findings extend feminist critical discourse analysis by showing that sexist discourse is enacted not only through language but also through embodied practices - posture, gaze, laughter - which sociolinguists increasingly recognise as integral to discourse analysis (Lazar, 2007). They demonstrate how Connell’s concept of hegemonic masculinity is locally realised in bodaboda talk, legitimising exclusion through cultural and religious appeals. At the same time, counter-discourses confirm that resistance is always present, however marginal, and that occupational identity is negotiated at the intersection of exclusion and fragile contestation.

Table 4: Discursive Mechanisms, Theoretical Lenses, and Effects

Mechanism	Theoretical Lens	Effect
Domesticity scripts	Bourdieu’s symbolic violence; Lazar’s feminist CDA	Naturalises exclusion; trivialises women’s labour; regulates occupational identity
Occupational ownership	Connell’s hegemonic masculinity; Bayley et al. on discursive negotiation	Frames bodaboda as male domain; polices boundaries through ridicule and embodied dismissal
Humour & collective performance	Fairclough’s CDA; Holmes on multimodality	Amplifies ridicule; enacts boundary policing; silences women
Normalisation of sexist talk	Hooks on invisibility; Porter et al. (2023) on counter-discourses	Lowers confidence; discourages participation; resistance remains fragile
Religious & cultural legitimisation	Bourdieu on ideology; Ekeke and John, (2025) on cultural scripts	Moralises exclusion; legitimises patriarchy; invokes tradition as authority
Counter-discourses	Hooks on resistance; Bucholtz & Hall on identity construction	Challenges stereotypes; asserts agency; destabilises hegemonic masculinity

Theoretical Contributions

This study advances sociolinguistic theory by demonstrating that discourse in informal economies both reproduces and unsettles gendered hierarchies. Rider talk and multimodal practices reveal that precarious labour markets are fertile sites of ideological reproduction,

stretching Critical Discourse Analysis beyond language into symbolic performance.

The findings complicate hegemonic masculinity and symbolic violence: bodaboda riding was legitimised as “men’s work” through cultural and religious appeals,

while exclusion was bodily enforced through ridicule and silencing. This intersection of language, culture, and embodied practice shows how occupational boundaries are sustained through overlapping ideological scripts.

Finally, the study contributes to resistance theory. Female riders' reframing of assertiveness and male allies' interventions illustrate that counter-discourses emerge even in hostile environments, though often fragile and drowned by collective ridicule. Resistance in informal economies is thus contingent and multimodal, exposing cracks in hegemonic masculinity while revealing the precariousness of counter-hegemonic identities.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: This study demonstrates that sexist discourse in the bodaboda sector is systematically reproduced through language, humour, and embodied practices. Domesticity scripts, ridicule, and religious appeals converge to naturalise exclusion and legitimise masculinity as occupational ownership. Yet counter-voices from female riders and male allies, though fragile, reveal cracks in hegemonic masculinity and possibilities for resistance.

By extending feminist critical discourse analysis into informal economies, the findings show that occupational regulation is enacted not only through words but through multimodal policing - posture, gaze, laughter - which sustain gendered hierarchies. This advances sociolinguistic theory by illustrating how language, culture, and embodied practice overlap to reproduce symbolic violence while simultaneously exposing sites of contestation.

Practically, the study underscores that interventions must target everyday talk and embodied practices, not only

formal policy, if occupational spaces are to become genuinely inclusive. Future research should examine how discursive resistance can be amplified, how institutional actors such as schools, unions, and religious leaders might reshape occupational talk, and how multimodal discourse analysis can further illuminate the subtle mechanisms of exclusion and contestation in other informal sectors.

Recommendations: This study contributes to the field of sociolinguistics and feminist discourse analysis by showing that exclusion in the bodaboda sector is reproduced not only through structural barriers but also through everyday discourse. By foregrounding language as a mechanism of inequality, the findings highlight the need for interventions that address both material and discursive environments.

At the policy level, regulators and local authorities should recognise that gender equity frameworks must extend beyond access to resources and explicitly confront the discursive practices that normalise exclusion (Galiè et al., 2022; Ekeke & John, 2025). Practical strategies are equally important: training programmes for riders and unions should challenge sexist humour, domesticity scripts, and religious appeals that legitimise exclusion, targeting everyday talk and embodied practices rather than focusing solely on formal policy.

Institutions such as schools, unions, and religious organisations can play a pivotal role by modelling inclusive discourse and legitimising women's presence in informal economies. Finally, future research should explore how discursive resistance can be amplified, how institutional actors reshape occupational identity, and how multimodal discourse analysis can further illuminate subtle mechanisms of exclusion and contestation across other informal sectors.

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