



Perpetuation of sexism through proverbs: The case of Martínez Kleiser's *Refranero General Ideológico Español*

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ABSTRACT

In the present paper, the most prestigious and thorough paremiographic source published in Spanish, Luis Martínez Kleiser's *Refranero General Ideológico Español* (1989), is analyzed to assess how misogynistic beliefs have manifested in Spanish paremiology and whether, having circulated for centuries, they were still considered relevant at the time of composition of the work. As stated in the paper, misogynist proverbs are believed to have been used by an exclusively male dominating class to shape society's point of view towards women. As shall be seen, this work was also conditioned by the socio-political context in which it was published, as well as the compiler's own political stance.

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1. Introduction

The issue of linguistic inclusiveness has gained some notoriety in the Spanish public debate over the last decades. Although this affects languages differently depending on their grammatical features, it is readily apparent in Spanish, in which the masculine gender has traditionally been used as the neutral, a convention that contributes to the invisibility of the feminine (Calero Fernández, 1999, p. 93). Apart from grammatical limitations (see Ljubičić, 2020) there is another way in which the language projects a sense of sexism and misogyny: how the dictionary presents certain words related to gender. Words and phrases are dealt with differently depending on whether they relate to men or women and carry different connotations in the masculine or the feminine, with the latter often being assigned a pejorative sense (Lledó Cunill et al., 2004). Nevertheless, more and more speakers are gaining awareness of this issue and starting to use the feminine form of words more often to draw attention to this matter.

In relation to the androcentric use of the language and how it serves to perpetuate sexist attitudes, in this paper, Luis Martínez Kleiser's *Refranero General Ideológico Español*, (1989, *RGIE* henceforward), will be surveyed in order to determine how sexist attitudes have traditionally manifested in proverbs throughout Spanish history over the last few centuries and how paremias have been used to maintain gender roles and stereotype women. The reason for this choice has to do with the fact it is the most exhaustive, most authoritative paremiographic work in the Spanish language and proverb scholars, as well as the general public, have naturally referred to it for decades due to the unparalleled amount of paremias contained in it.

As is generally accepted, proverbs are elements of folklore and, as such, tend to represent with a certain degree of accuracy the norms and customs of a society (see Arewa and Dundes, 1964; Mieder, 2008). Consequently, in a patriarchal society, like the Spanish, it is to be expected that proverbs exist which express ideas that illustrate a negative or inferior perception of

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women within the society, or of the role they are expected to play in it (see Calero Fernández, 1999; Crida Álvarez, 2001; Martínez Garrido, 2001; Fernández Poncela, 2000, 2002, 2010, 2012a, 2012b; Guzmán Díaz, 2002; Molina Plaza, 2008; Schipper, 2010, 2018; Lomotey, 2019a, b; Lomotey and Chachu, 2020). The scornful portrayal of women noted in the *RGIE* is yet another example of the negative representation of women in paremiology, which has been shown to be a widespread occurrence, as documented by studies in many languages around the world.¹ However, in this paper the focus will be on proverbs within the Spanish language and how Luis Martínez Kleiser's *Refranero General Ideológico Español* (1989) may have contributed to the maintenance of misogynistic attitudes in society, often through the employment of recurring strategies.

2. Objectives and methodology

The reason for the choice of book under analysis lies in its status as the most influential reference work in its category in the Spanish language since its publication in 1953. So much so that for decades, and still today,² it has been the main reference work for paremiological studies carried out in Spanish even though it shows some notable deficiencies. Among these, two stand out: on the one hand, its “ideological” sorting of proverbs is chaotic and counterintuitive, often causing an item to be listed under a category different from which one would expect to find it. This is due to the redundancy in certain ideas and the reader's understanding of the proverb in question. The other major flaw noted is the dated character of the vast majority of the 65,083 proverbs listed on its pages, which come from previous collections going as far back as the 14th century (Martínez Kleiser, 1989, p. XXIX-XXX). This endows the work with an unquestionable diachronic value to analyze the evolution of Spanish paremiology, but hardly makes it a reliable contemporary reference work as it lacks one of the most relevant defining features of proverbs: currency among a community of speakers (Gallacher, 1959, p. 47; Mieder, 1996, p. 597; Speake, 2008, p. V), after all, as W. Mieder (1997, p. 406) points out, “Paremiography cannot remain a science that looks primarily backwards and works only with texts of times gone by.” Nevertheless, it has been chosen for analysis here for its status as the most notorious paremiographic resource in Spanish over the last century, the period during which Paremiology experienced its greatest development in the language. Coincidentally, it was composed in the heyday of the Franco regime, a time during which a specific worldview was imposed on society and works like this one might have helped legitimate the government's stance with regards to certain issues, in this case, the position that women were expected to occupy in society.

For this study, all the subcategories and proverbs contained in the category of “Women”, i.e. “Mujeres”, in the *RGIE* have been analyzed in order to assess how women are represented and to determine how the sexist bias against women existing in the Spanish language manifests in its paremiology. Accordingly, an attempt will be made at establishing what the most common motifs are in proverbs about women. To achieve this, a first look at the subcategories included under “Women” will be dissected in order to determine whether they focus on positive, negative, or neutral ideas. The purpose of this is to get a first impression of how women are represented by analyzing the features that the author used for the organization of proverbs. This sorting of subcategories was first done without looking at the proverbs listed under them so as to keep the classification as objective as possible. Only then are some of the proverbs from each subcategory analyzed to get a more detailed understanding of how women are characterized and what types of features and attitudes are highlighted. Through this analysis of the feminine characteristics used to organize paremias and how they manifest in them, an attempt will be made at exposing the sexism found in Spanish paremiology and how the *RGIE* deals with this issue. This is something that does not seem to be a general concern for most paremiographers, i.e. scholars devoted to the composition of collections and

¹ Studies analyzing the paremiology of a number of languages from a gender perspective have proliferated over the last few years. These seem to have appeared at larger rates in African scholarship, among which we can cite papers on the proverbs in the Baganda language of Uganda (Kiyimba, 2005), the Kasena language of Ghana (Yitah, 2009, 2012), the Oromo language of Ethiopia (Dedo, 2010), the Akan language of Ghana and Ivory Coast (Diabah and Appiah Amfo, 2015), the Tigrigna language of Ethiopia (Beharme-Hagos, 2015), the Shona and Ndebele languages in Zimbabwe (Mapara and Thebe, 2015), the Ewe language of Ghana (Aku-Sika, 2016), the Bakossi language of Cameroon (Sone, 2016), Moroccan Arabic (Kamwendo and Kaya, 2016; Ennaji, 2019), the Dongolawi and Kenzi languages of Sudan and Egypt (Jaeger, 2018), the Xhosa language of South Africa (Mafela, 2018), the Oshiwambo language of Namibia (Mbenzi, 2018), the Gurage language of Ethiopia (Nisrane and Tizazu, 2019), the Yoruba language of the Niger-Congo area (Aragbuwa, 2020), the Sesotho sa Leboa language of South Africa (Baker and Maluleke, 2020), the Zulu language (Ciliz and Masuku, 2020; Masuku, 2020), as well as others with a more generalized character about various African languages and areas (Hussein, 2009; Dipio, 2019).

Likewise, although at lower rates, similar studies have appeared about various European languages such as Greek (Crida Álvarez, 2001; Cascajero, 2002), Spanish (Guzmán Díaz, 2002; Lachiri, 2002; Mitkova, 2007; Gálvez Vidal, 2019; Lomotey, 2019a, 2019b), English (Petrova, 2002; Kirsanova, 2018), Italian (Pellegrinelli, 2010), Estonian (Baran, 2015), Russian (Shaimardanova et al., 2016; Saiwuleshi et al., 2017), Turkish (Akgül, 2017), and French (Bestman, 2017).

Among the publications dealing with this issue in Asian languages, we can cite the examples of Storm (1992) and Pellegrinelli (2010) about Japanese; Zhang (2002), Lee (2015) and Schones (2021) about Chinese; Qanbar (2012) about Yemeni; Badshah & Sarfraz about Pakistani (2017); Khan et al. (2017) about Punjabi; and Bishwakarma (2020) about Nepalese.

In the Americas, the studies quoted in the body of the text by Kerschen (1998, 2000) about American proverbs and Fernández Poncela (2002, 2010; 2012b) about Spanish remain the most relevant approaches.

Finally, some postgraduate students have dealt with the topic of sexism in proverbs in their dissertations, such as Dedo (2010), Sura (2015), Hartwell (2017), and Khaleefa (2018).

² Note that *Paremia*, the most relevant journal for paremiological studies in Spanish has over 140 articles published that quote the *RGIE* as of the composition of this paper. García Page (1997), Hernando Cuadrado (1999), Álvarez Curriel (2000), Mitkova (2007), and Fontana i Tous (2019) are some examples of works that use it as their main reference. Recently, J. Qin (2020) also used it as a reference for her doctoral dissertation.

dictionaries of proverbs, who have traditionally been primarily men, an exception to this being J. Speake (2008),³ who includes significantly fewer negative representations of women. Unfortunately, this is not the norm and this instance may have to do with the fact that she is a woman and has therefore noted a phenomenon that goes unnoticed by many men. In relation to this, L. Kerschen (1998, p. 1), another woman paremiographer, explains how,

Until recent times, the study of folklore has largely excluded women. Whether this neglect resulted from the preponderance of male folklorists and anthropologists who failed to be sensitive to the possibility of another viewpoint or from the less personal but more pervasive bias of a male-dominated world, the consequence has been an invisibility of women in the picture of civilization's progress.

Thus, the fact that collections of proverbs have traditionally been composed by men, and for a masculine readership, leads to the perception “that women have seldom originated proverbs” (Kerschen, 1998, p. 6) and if they have, not many seem to have found their way into mainstream proverb collections.

Finally, despite the old-fashioned character that most of the proverbs analyzed may have to any present-day reader, these proverbs might have been used to promote the world-view that the ruling regime at the time intended to impose, using them as legitimization for certain beliefs.

3. Luis Martínez Kleiser's *Refranero General Ideológico Español* in context

To understand the nature, purpose, and process for the compilation of the *RGIE*, some background information is necessary. As Martínez Kleiser (1989, p. XIII-XXVIII) explains in the foreword to his work, he took up the offer presented to him by Agustín González de Amezúa in 1947 to ideologically arrange the more than 50,000 proverbs that Francisco Rodríguez Marín had gathered,⁴ a project that the latter had been meaning to do for years but which he left unfinished due to his death in 1943. The project was sponsored by José Ibañez Martín as Minister of National Education and the Real Academia Española de la Lengua, of which Martínez Kleiser had become a member years earlier. Accordingly, the goal was to arrange the proverbs that had been collected over the years under headers, “ideas” in their terminology, with the intended purpose of facilitating the task of locating a certain proverb. Although the intention was to come up with a system to make the search for a paremia more dynamic and intuitive, it is arguable that they succeeded. An example of how hectic this process can be is illustrated by the well-known proverbial sentence “a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush”, i.e. “*más vale pájaro en mano que ciento volando*”, which is included under the grandiloquent subheading “Vacuity of Hope”, i.e. “*Vacuidad de la Esperanza*”, even though someone might expect to find it under a more straightforward category such as “Greed”, for instance. This apparent shortcoming has its basis in the fact that many proverbs are open to interpretation, which, as figurative uses of language, can be applied to different situations (Mieder, 2004, p. 74). This, together with the multiplicity of similar categories and the massive amount of proverbs included in the volume, leads to confusion and misunderstanding, making it a challenge to locate even the most popular of proverbs.

Before we look into the character of the majority of proverbs depicting women, a glance at the sociological context in which the work was developed and published might be useful to clarify some matters. Spanish society at the time was extremely conservative and the social model imposed by Franco's dictatorship, known as National-Catholicism (Ascunce Arrieta, 2015), left women little room for freedom and independence. They were limited to housework and a few traditionally feminized professions, such as nurses or teachers. Other than this, women were expected to stay home and look after their families. The indoctrination of women regarding acceptable occupations within the newly founded Spanish state was carried out by a specific section of the political arm of the regime: Falange's Sección Femenina and it was established by Pilar Primo de Rivera, the sister of the founder of Falange, a political party modeled after the Italian National Fascist Party and which provided Franco's regime with a political framework. According to this ideology with a firm religious foundation,

Throughout her entire life, a woman's mission is to serve. When God made the first man, he thought, “It is not good for a man to be alone.” And he made a woman, for his help and company, and to serve as a mother. God's first idea was “Man”. He thought about women later, as a necessary complement, that is, as something useful. (Otero, 1999, p.17, my translation)⁵

Even though these ideas were imposed by men, who occupied all the important positions in the state, they were accepted by women, who did not question the *status quo*, and as in the case of Primo de Rivera, even contributed to their propagation. Women's subordination to men was expected to be total, as can be inferred from the following fragment,

³ The British author states that “[p]roverb usage once again shows itself an index of linguistic and social change. Whereas many older proverbs use ‘man’ for the human subject, modern users often attempt to avoid such non-inclusive language, preferring ‘someone’ or ‘a person’” (Speake, 2008, p. V).

⁴ Rodríguez Marín explains how he accumulated that vast amount from direct communication with individuals, with the help of contributors, and through the reading of previously published works by other paremiographers, namely the Marqués de Santillana, José M^a Sbarbi, Gabriel M^a Vergara y Martín, Sebastián de Horozco, and Luis Galindo (Rodríguez Marín, 1926, p. VIII).

⁵ The original reads, “A través de toda la vida, la misión de la mujer es servir. Cuando Dios hizo el primero hombre, pensó: «No es bueno que el hombre esté solo». Y formó a la mujer, para su ayuda y compañía, y para que sirviera de madre. La primera idea de Dios fue «el hombre». Pensó en la mujer después, como un complemento necesario, esto es, como algo útil.” (Otero, 1999, p. 17, p. 17).

When you get married, you will write your first name on the card, your first last name, and then, followed by the particle “of”, your husband’s name. Thus, Carmen García de Marín. In Spain we say Mrs. of Durán or of Peláez. This is a pleasant formula, given that we do not lose our personality, but, rather, we are Carmen García, who belongs to Mr. Marín, that is, Carmen García of Marín. (Otero, 1999, p. 183, my translation)⁶

This illustrates what role was expected of Spanish women at the time and how they were little more than an accessory to men.

Martínez Kleiser shows his exacerbated patriotism, one of the defining features of the newly-established regime, applying it to his field of study when he states that the amount of proverbs might be larger in Spain than in any other country (1989, p. XXVII). But this is not his only ideological contribution to the regime as through his selection of proverbs, he helped to spread, record, and fossilize beliefs that were not to be challenged. In relation to the usefulness of proverbs to the spread of an established ideology, Lomotey and Chachu (2020, p. 71) explain that “[p]roverbs are powerful instruments in the creation of ideologies and stereotypes especially because they are considered as true reflections of a society’s values and are accepted as authoritative creeds that cannot be challenged.” Moreover, the fact that such a dictionary was composed under the patronage of the Real Academia contributed to giving the work an institutional character, supporting the idea that, since the beliefs were contained in a dictionary published by the most prestigious linguistic authority, they were incontestable. As Forgas Berdet (2004, p. 423, my translation) states,

Every dictionary, and particularly the academic *Dictionary*, being a model and guide for others, at the time of deciding the destiny of a word both in the macrostructure and the microstructure, sanctions and prescribes. It sanctions a word’s very existence by the mere fact of having it among its entries, and, by defining it, dictates its content and the perception of the word’s social meaning that speakers have or *must have*.⁷

In short, what is included in the RAE is considered to be of the utmost authority and correctness.

With respect to Martínez Kleiser’s political standpoint, he was a supporter of the regime and in favor of the military uprising that would lead to the Civil War and Franco’s dictatorship, as shown by a poem that he (Martínez Kleiser, 1936) published during the first months of the military upheaval in a conservative newspaper of the time. Furthermore, he held several posts of responsibility and earned different honors granted by the Government, something impossible for anyone who dared to oppose it given the intellectual purge that followed the military victory. Hence, he was appointed as a member of the Real Academia Española in 1946, 7 years prior to the publication of the *RGIE*, and would eventually become its treasurer, a position he held for 13 years. We can obtain an approximation to Martínez Kleiser’s way of thinking from the preface to his dictionary, where he states that

Indeed, linguistic license in language sometimes enters unembarrassed into the fields of coarseness, and other times, freely crosses the borders of *clergyphobia*, profanity, and obscenity. A great problem for the cautious collector. His selective spirit finds itself between two equally dangerous chasms: To consider his work an open port to all paremiological goods that intend to disembark in it, and to cut off at the root those sayings that offend decency, faith, or good taste. (Martínez Kleiser, 1989, p. XX, my translation)⁸

This hints at his conservatism, which may have determined which proverbs were worthy of keeping and which were not. Consequently, the solution to the puzzle proposed by the author was the following,

To escape from both terrible abysses, [...] one must search for the guardrail of safety on which to rest one’s conscience. And my hesitations and concerns had to embrace this support in the form of superior and wise advice. This authorized *filter* excluded the notoriously lewd ones and let in, not without intimate opposition, those presenting unassailable states of opinion or culture. (Martínez Kleiser, 1989, p. XX, my translation)⁹

As stated in the quote, it is the compiler’s task to determine which materials were worthy of keeping and which were to be discarded, choices through which his or her point of view may filter. Yet, when considering which items were included as “unassailable states of opinion and culture” of the time, a picture emerges of what the paremiographer’s own beliefs may be,

⁶ The original reads, “Cuando estéis casadas, pondréis en la tarjeta vuestro nombre propio, vuestro primer apellido y después la partícula «de», seguida del apellido de vuestro marido. Así, Carmen García de Marín. En España se dice señora de Durán o de Peláez. Esta fórmula es agradable, puesto que no perdemos la personalidad, sino que somos Carmen García, que pertenece al señor Marín, o sea, Carmen García de Marín.” (Otero, 1999, p. 183, p. 183).

⁷ The original reads, “todo diccionario, y en especial el *Diccionario académico*, modelo y guía de los demás, en el momento de decidir el destino de una palabra tanto en la macroestructura como en la microestructura, sanciona y prescribe. Sanciona incluso su existencia misma por el mero hecho de tenerla entre sus entradas, y, al definirla, dicta su contenido y la concepción que del significado social de esta palabra tienen o han de tener los hablantes.” (Forgas Berdet, 2004, p. 423, p. 423).

⁸ The original reads, “En efecto, se deslizan en ellos licencias de lenguaje que se adentran unas veces, sin embarazo, por los ranchos de la grosería, y traspasan otras, libremente, las fronteras de la clerofobia, de la profanación y de la obscenidad. Gran problema para el prudente coleccionador. Su espíritu selectivo se halla colocado entre dos simas igualmente peligrosas: La de considerar su obra puerto franco para toda clase de mercancías paremiológicas que pretendan desembarcar en él, y la de talar por la raíz cuantos dichos ofendan al pudor, a la fe o al buen gusto.” (Martínez Kleiser, 1989, p. XX).

⁹ The original reads, “Para huir de ambos terribles abismos, [...] se ha de buscar el quitamiedo de un apoyo seguro en quien descansar la conciencia. Y a este apoyo, en forma de superior y sapiente consejo, hubieron de acogerse mis titubeos y mis inquietudes. El autorizado filtro excluyó los notoriamente impúdicos y concedió libre paso, no sin íntima contrariedad, a cuantos reflejan estados inocultables de opinión o de cultura.” (Martínez Kleiser, 1989, p. XX).

as well as what he considers to be socially and politically acceptable. In this regard, as [Lomotey and Chachu \(2020, p. 70\)](#) explain,

By adopting, instead of challenging the misogynous ideologies ingrained, sometimes unwittingly, in proverbs, speakers contribute to sustaining the status quo without the need of coercion. That is, they contribute to the gender hierarchization by complying with the common sense tenet that the polarization of women and men is natural.

As can be observed from the introduction to the *RGIE*, there is no intention on the part of Martínez Kleiser to challenge the *status quo*. In fact, he considered it controversial to preserve items that went against what he saw as acceptable, however he shows no reservation in presenting multiple strings of almost identical proverbs that reiterate the negative portrayal of women. As shall be seen, this is one of the characteristics that brings out the misogyny of the work, despite the broadly accepted fact that with proverbs, as with any other element of folklore, “variation may be minimal, but if an item is authentic folklore, there is bound to be variation of some kind” ([Dundes, 1999, p. 4](#)). This is due to their nature, as elements that are principally orally-transmitted, often caused by interferences in transmission when an individual reproduces an item of folklore with slight variations. In the case of proverbs, [Crêpeau \(1994, p. 89\)](#) explains that “a variant is a change in form at the pure linguistic level.” It is common practice in Folkloristic Studies, as well as in Paremiography, i.e. the collection of paremias, and Phraseography, i.e. the collection of phraseologisms, that each individual variant is not usually included in a dictionary, as shown by [Kamenetskaia Kotseruba’s study \(2010\)](#).

Taking this into consideration, one of the key issues with the *RGIE* comes to light. Although Martínez Kleiser distinguishes between “variations” and “repeated proverbs” ([1989, p. XXVII](#)), assuring that thousands of the latter have been deleted, we still find multiple examples of almost identical proverbs under the category of “Women”, contributing to an inflated number of paremias in this category. It is often assumed that when one approaches a work of these characteristics, not every single variant of an item is included and the reader’s discretion becomes of capital importance.

As explained above, the *RGIE* appeared at a time during which women were expected to play a limited role in society and this was promoted by a vigilant state. Therefore, Martínez Kleiser, as a prominent member of the establishment, may not have considered it necessary or appropriate to question the traditional merciless linguistic abuse of women. Even though he acknowledges that some controversial topics might have been avoided, he did not feel the necessity to alleviate the weight of the excessively large number of proverbs that criticize women and, in many cases, call for or justify the use of violence against them. As a result, the reader is presented with a surprisingly large amount of proverbs listed under the header of “Women” and which, as shall be seen, highlights the subjugation of women in society at the time and for centuries.

4. Distribution of proverbs about women in the *RGIE*

After presenting the socio-cultural and historical context in which the *RGIE* was composed, and mentioning some of its peculiarities in relation to what is considered to be the general practice in Paremiography, we can focus on the subject matter: the representation of women in the *RGIE*. To begin with, it is important to remember that in the *RGIE*, proverbs have been arranged according to the concept they refer to. There are hundreds of such headers, some of which overlap or come across as redundant, often making it hard to find a paremia. Under the category “Women” we find an astounding 1610 proverbs, making it the second largest category overall, with 2.47% of the total number of proverbs included in the volume, only exceeded by geographical proverbs with 2222 items, which make up 3.41% of the total. Conversely, under the heading of “Men”, we find only 30 proverbs, which is rather surprising as in Spanish the term ‘man’, i.e. ‘*hombre*’, has traditionally been used as the neuter to refer to both men and women, something that is not clearly represented in the classification devised by Martínez Kleiser.

The imbalance between proverbs related to the “weak sex” and “strong sex”, in words of [Martínez Kleiser \(1989, p. XXXVII\)](#), may suggest that men must have been behind the creation and popularization of many of these, an idea also defended by [L. Kerschen \(1998, p. 6\)](#). The importance that is given in the paremiological lore of the language to the relationships between the two sexes is further highlighted by the fact that the third most numerous heading is “Marriage” which is also illustrative of the view that this androcentric society had of women, given the ideological context at the time and the role that was reserved for them. Nonetheless, in order to maintain our focus, the proverbs analyzed here will be those exclusively under the heading of “Women”.

The amount of proverbs under the heading “women” in the *RGIE* is so excessively large that Martínez Kleiser found no other way to organize his work than to arrange them under subcategories, of which we can find fifty-one. For the current analysis, the fifty-one subcategories listed by Martínez Kleiser have been sorted according to whether they seem likely to be interpreted as positive, negative, or neutral, before considering the individual proverbs included under each one, as this might influence how they are perceived. At first glance, it does not appear too difficult to distinguish whether a subcategory presents a positive or negative trait. However, there are cases in which they do not come across as clearly positive or negative, and have thus been labeled “neutral” given that they may be interpreted both ways or simply have no clear positive or negative connotation. Accordingly, the fifty-one subcategories have been arranged as follows (see [Table 1](#)):

Table 1

Distribution of subcategories under the header “Women”.

Positive subcategories	Neutral subcategories	Negative subcategories
Appraisal of women	Abundance of women	Underestimation of women
Women's power	Treatment that must be given to women	Festive proverbs against women
Women's goodness	Age in women	Women's wickedness
Behavior of the virtuous	Women's lightness	Keep from women
Women's devotion	Silence in women	Women's fragility
Talent in women	Curiosity in women	A woman is dangerous
Women's wisdom	Petitions in women	Imperfections in women
Women's astuteness	Cleanliness and untidiness in women	Women's gossiping
Women's grace	Leisure in women	Women's murmuring
Women's industriousness	Women and games	Women's falseness
Beauty	Love in women	Weeping in women
	Adornments and cosmetics in women	Anger in women
	Physical qualities	Dullness in women
	Whiteness	Manly women
	Height	Volatility in women
	Slimness and obesity	Whims and stubbornness in women
	Fame	Affectedness in women
	Richness and poorness	Temerity in women
		Ingratitude in women
		Vanity in women
		Ugliness
		Bearded women

What stands out after an initial appraisal of the table is that the most numerous group is that of negative subcategories, followed by the neutral ones, and only half the amount of positive subcategories as negative ones. In the following paragraphs, examples will be presented from each section, and their meanings and connotations analyzed. As shall be seen, the negative portrayal of women in Spanish throughout history is not coincidental, but the result of men holding the positions of power and, presumably, being the creators of most of the proverbs that have been passed down over time.

4.1. Proverbs under positive subcategories

While it is true that there are some subcategories that include mostly positive proverbs about women, for instance those about “Appraisal of women” and “Women's goodness”, it is astonishingly frequent to encounter lists of proverbs included under what appears to be a positive subcategory but which, in reality, depict negative ideas about women or twist the meaning so as to insult women.

To begin with, if we examine the role of women in the type of society that has been described in this paper, it can be concluded that possibly the most respected female figure in such a patriarchal and androcentric society is that of a woman as a mother, inasmuch as they give life to men. As Guzmán Díaz (2002, p. 9, my translation) affirms,

Much has been written about how the mother stereotype supports the ideological work of the disqualification of women, who may only, as a procreator of man, be redeemed from her character of whore and such adjectives attributed to her by proverbs and sexist ideology in general.¹⁰

This is also the case with Martínez Kleiser's work, which includes “Mothers” as a standalone category, with a majority of positive proverbs relating to the concept of motherly love. However, there are also proverbs about motherhood listed under the category of “Women”, nine to be precise, which do not present a particularly positive idea of women as mothers.¹¹ This

¹⁰ The original reads, “Mucho se ha escrito acerca de cómo el estereotipo de la madre soporta el funcionamiento ideológico de la descalificación de la mujer, que sólo como procreadora del macho es susceptible de redimirse de su carácter de puta y demás adjetivos que le asigna el refrán y la ideología machista en general.” (Guzmán Díaz, 2002, p. 9, p. 9).

¹¹ These are:

42.730. *La mujer y la sangría, a veces matan y a veces dan la vida.*—R. M.

42.731. *La mujer, o es Eva, o es María.*—R. M.

42.738. *Cuando de las mujeres hables, acuérdate de tu madre.*—R. M.

43.162. *Olla cabe tizonas ha menester cobertera, y la moza do hay garzones, la madre sobre ella.*—N.—M.—C.

43.163. *La doncella, la madre sobre ella.*

43.166. *Dame madre acautelada, y darte he hija guardada.*—R. M.

43.172. *Piénsase mi madre que me tiene muy guardada, y otro dame cantonada.*—N.—M.—C.

43.291. *Mi madre andadora, si no es en su casa, en todas las otras mora.*—N.—M.—C.

contrast between apparently positive traits and actual negative meanings is not an isolated incidence related to the concept of motherhood.

More specifically, within the group of positive subcategories, there are four that come across as particularly apt to be considered positive traits, at least at first glance. These are: “Behavior of the virtuous”, “Women’s wisdom”, “Women’s astuteness”, and “Women’s industriousness.”¹² These four have been selected as illustrative of one of the major realizations that occurred while carrying out this research: even those categories that might be considered positive still contribute to the establishment of gender roles and a representation of women in a way that only responds to a patriarchal conception of society in which they are expected to play a certain role and be submissive to men (Falcón, 2000).

The first subcategory of proverbs about women with a seemingly positive header, as arranged by Martínez Kleiser, is that of “Behavior of the virtuous”. Virtuosity is a word with unquestionably positive connotations and aspiring to it is in the realm of both men and women. The problem comes when we take into consideration what was thought to be virtuous within historical and socio-political contexts, especially with regard to women. In addition, as can be seen in the examples below, virtuosity is approached here from a prescriptive point of view, telling women how they *should* behave, and not describing how they *do* behave. This also brings up the possibility that these proverbs were created by men with the intention of indoctrinating women, taking advantage of the sententiousness of proverbs and the irrefutable character they are often given. Some examples are the following:

- 43.043. Not only must a woman be chaste, she must also look so.—C.
 43.044. Not only must a woman be good, it is also necessary for her to look so.—R. M.
 43.045. In a woman’s life, three exits must she take: when she gets married; to mass; to the grave.—Z.
 43.046. In life, a woman must choose from three options: baptism, marriage, the grave or a monument.—C.
 43.047. In life a women, from three options must choose. —N.—M.—C.
 43.048. The woman at home, and with a broken leg.—N.—M.—C.
 43.049. The honest maid, her leg broken, and at home.—R. M.
 43.050. A good woman’s business, at home and not out.—R. M.

Here we can see what type of traits are considered to be “virtuous” in a woman, at least from the point of view of a society in which chastity is seen as a relevant quality to judge women, something that seldom applies to men. Thus, example 43.043 is a clear case of how certain sexual attitudes are seen differently by society depending on whether they are practiced by women or men. The next proverb, 43.044, which follows the same structure, highlights the importance of women’s appearance, not necessarily because women consider it a relevant feature but because it is imposed by men. Examples 43.045 and 43.046 highlight the fact that one of the few opportunities for a woman is to get married, reinforcing the idea that women be reliant on, and submissive to, men.

Items 43.048 and 43.049 are almost identical, highlighting the expectation that women devote themselves to domestic occupations, the same as 43.050, but also presenting a gruesome picture that might encourage the use of violence against women. In relation to this, Tolton (2013, p. 331) explains that these sayings rely on pre-established relations of power that have existed for centuries, in which men always take the dominating position, often justifying the use of violence within the family. As stated by Tolton, and supported by the examples presented, men have always had the grasp of power and therefore, it is not coincidental that they are the ones that have traditionally compiled most of these works,¹³ contributing to the popularization of a proverbial knowledge that perpetuated and justified such abusive behavior. This can be inferred from the degrading terms in which women are presented and which, despite the fact that women may have contributed to their preservation and popularization, due to the submissive role they have been forced to play, are not likely to have been coined by women to talk about themselves.

The second subcategory included in the positive group is that of “Women’s wisdom”, under which we can find the following sayings:

- 43.519. No sad jenny (she-donkey), nor wise woman.—R. M.
 43.520. No lent jewel, nor literate woman.—R. M.
 43.521. Learned woman, broken silver; well-learned woman, stay right away.—R. M.
 43.522. A woman of letters, twice as foolish.—R. M.
 43.523. The most forewarned woman knows a little or nothing at all.—R. M.
 43.524. The woman who knows the most is only good to govern twelve hens and a rooster.—R. M.
 43.525. Women and books, never get along.—R. M.

¹² Note that what is provided in the body of the text is my English translation of the original proverbs presented by Martínez Kleiser. The original versions for each group are presented in an annex at the end of the document.

¹³ Some notable exceptions are Kerschen (1998), Panizo (1999), Canellada and Pallarés (2001), Ferguson (2001), Speake (2008), or Sevilla Muñoz & Zurdo Ruiz-Ayúcar (2009).

Here, we find multiple strategies used to delineate and maintain the power structure. The first strategy is one that has often been used to carry out the dehumanization of a collective: equating them to animals (López Rodríguez, 2009). This can be seen in example 43.519, where a woman is identified with a female donkey, an animal with clear cultural implications and which is better suited for physical activities than intellectual ones and often subjected to physical abuse. Another strategy found here is the objectification of women, which can be observed in examples 43.520 and 43.521. Additionally, in the final four examples, the intellectual ability of women is questioned, which contributes to the establishment of the idea that women are unable to carry out certain tasks or become knowledgeable in certain fields, sustaining the misconception that some jobs should be reserved for men. All of these stereotypes are, once again, indicative of a masculine mind being behind many of these ideas that eventually led to the formulation of these proverbs.

The third set of proverbs arranged under a seemingly positive header is that of “Women’s astuteness”, where we find items such as the following:

- 43.708. Devils are pins, and women are demons.—R. M.
- 43.709. The woman who must be taken by the devil shows early.—R. M.
- 43.710. Women were given knowledge by the devil.—R. M.
- 43.711. The biggest part of her knowledge, was acquired by the devil from women.—R. M.
- 43.712. A woman usually knows a little more than the devil.—R. M.
- 43.713. A woman knows a little more than the devil. —R. M.
- 43.714. A woman knows a little more than Satan.—R. M.

As can be seen, one of the most remarkable features of this set of examples is the constant reference to the “devil” and even to “Satan”, elements that get their significance from the Judeo-Christian tradition, to which Spanish culture unquestionably adheres. According to Martínez Garrido (2001, p. 93), this tradition is responsible, to a large extent, for the misogyny in our society, which started in Genesis 3:16, the passage where Eve is created out of Adam’s rib and which will eventually lead to a “divine curse that will condemn her to submission to men”. However, it also needs to be borne in mind that some of these ideas correspond to an interpretation of the sacred texts from an opportunist, male perspective that could use these precepts to impose and perpetuate the subjugation of women to men in society, particularly at the time of composition of the work under scrutiny. Paradoxically, despite the title given to this sub header, few references are actually made to women’s astuteness or intelligence and their possibility to possess and exhibit these traits, highlighting their evil character instead and giving it a religious justification.

Just as with the animalization of women, their characterization as evil creatures, or having a relationship with the devil, is a constant that appears in multiple nearly identical proverbs in the *RGIE*. What is more, they come from the same source, Rodríguez Marín, which calls into question the filtering task that Martínez Kleiser carried out as it contributes little to the paremiological value of the work but stresses the already marked negative character of women. Here, he presents numerous redundant proverbs that add to the negative portrayal of women solely on the basis of old-fashioned religious beliefs, which were widespread between the 12th and 15th centuries (Martínez Garrido, 2001, p. 94), without providing new concepts to the collection. Coincidentally, this was also the time when some of the sources were created, that Martínez Kleiser (1989, p. XXIX) referenced when composing his own collection. Again, this hinders the synchronic value of the work as it does not indicate whether certain proverbs were current at the time of composition of the work, leading the reader to believe that they were so.

The last set of proverbs under the seemingly positive sub header that will be presented in this section is “Women’s industriousness”, where we may find such paremiological items as the following,

- 43.904. An industrious woman does thirty things in a day. —R. M.
- 43.905. More than the beautiful woman is worth the industrious one.—R. M.
- 43.906. Between the industrious and land-owning women, the former is more appealing to me.—R. M.
- 43.907. An industrious woman is worth more than a land-owning one.—R. M.
- 43.908. Mary Cross is never short of a bad day.—N.—C.
- 43.909. Mary Cross always Works and leads a good life; Mary Filth is always lying down and starving. —R. M.
- 43.910. A cross woman does not rest while sleeping.—C.*
- 43.911. Look not for a good lass at a feast, but in her everyday clothes.—R. —M.

The first item from the list is one of the few that actually speaks positively, or at least neutrally, of women. However, this should be taken with a grain of salt as, if we keep reading, we soon realize that “industriousness” in women is only acceptable inasmuch as men can benefit from it, particularly when it comes to domestic chores, as shown by multiple examples, i.e. 43.905, 43.906, or 43.907. Furthermore, The Spanish word used to describe ‘industrious’ women, i.e. *‘hacendosa’*, comes from the root *‘hacienda’*, a country house, and means “diligent in household chores”. This relates to the last example, which shows suspicion against women who enjoy their free time.

What becomes clear after a close examination of the proverbs included under “positive” headers is that the representation of women in folklore, particularly in proverbs, is viewed from the optic of a patriarchal society that decides which traits and occupations are to be valued positively in them. It also becomes obvious that certain characteristics that would be considered

desirable when applied to men are seen as dangerous in women. Even more distressing than this double standard is the tendency noted towards the objectification and dehumanization of women in proverbs, likening them to animals, objects, or religious imagery, such as devils. There is no question that the diffusion of this proverbial knowledge over the centuries leading up to the compilation of Martínez Kleiser's work contributed to the stigmatization of women in Spanish society. In contrast to many other comparable countries, Spain saw little development in the role that women played in society. Martínez Kleiser's collection of proverbs is a clear depiction of how men thought about women at the time, as well as who the expected users of the work would be. Bearing in mind that we have only looked at the supposedly positive ideas so far, it quickly becomes apparent that even within positive categories, women are portrayed negatively and without agency.

4.2. Proverbs under neutral sub headers

If the proverbs included under categories that appeared to be positive illustrate the mentality of a patriarchal society in which men decide what is expected of women and how they have to behave, look, and think, a neutral set of categories that cannot be discerned as “absolutely good” or “absolutely bad” should not be expected to redirect the phenomenon under scrutiny. As mentioned previously, the sub headers included in the “neutral” category are those which can be interpreted as either positive or negative, or in some cases neither. The following labels have been chosen for their apparent suitability to show this, as from all the options available, they seemed the most illustrative of the indefiniteness perceived in them, not being able to determine from just the idea expressed in the header whether they are considered to be desirable or undesirable traits:

Abundance of women
Treatment that must be given to women
Age in women
Silence in women¹⁴

A good example of something which could be positive or negative is the first group from the list above: “Abundance of women”, where we find proverbs such as the following:

- 42.851. Tape, woman, and bed are easy to find.—R. M.
42.852. Woman, fire, and pot are found everywhere.—R. M.
42.853. Women and bad years never lacked.—R. M.
42.854. Women are like frogs: for every one that dives, four come out of the water.—R. M.
42.855. Seven women in each corner are there for each man.—R. M.
42.856. Despicable is he who fights over a woman, the world being full of them.—R. M.

At first glance, it is not easy to determine whether an abundance of something is good or bad. There are contradicting interpretations about this matter depending on the individual's mindset. One's first impulse might lean towards believing that much of something is indeed good. The reason for this can be found in [G. Lakoff and M. Johnson's \(1980\)](#) “Conceptual Metaphor Theory”. The authors propose that there are certain mental structures that help us interpret and categorize the reality around us in terms of a completely different domain from what is being referred to. These are known as “conceptual metaphors” and are the foundation for many figurative expressions. One of these metaphors presented by the authors is “more is better” ([Lakoff and Johnson, 1980](#), p. 22–23), which would lead many to see an “abundance of women” as something positive. However, after a close inspection of the proverbs included in the category, it is clear that this sub header includes proverbs with the opposite meaning, and which are articulated around the opposite metaphor: “less is good” ([Lakoff and Johnson, 1980](#), p. 25).

The apparent desire for a scarcity of women may have to do not only with the metaphor proposed by Lakoff and Johnson, but also with the objectification of women, according to which they are seen as market goods to be bought and sold, and whose only value is to satisfy men's appetites, often sexual. Furthermore, in the free-trade society in which we live and according to the basic principle of supply and demand, an abundance of women might be seen as undesirable as it would be less profitable for the traders, i.e. men. These proverbs reduce women to objects of men's desire with no agency, again making it clear that the proverbs were written by men, as no woman would utter such statements about herself. As derogatory as this objectification is, it is not the only way that women are denigrated in the examples presented in this sub header. As in the previous section, women are again compared to animals. In example 42.854, women are identified with frogs, a slimy animal that lives in ponds and, following Christian symbolism and its cultural influence, may be associated with plagues. In addition, the reference to “corner” in example 42.856 should not go unnoticed as this is often associated with the places where prostitutes meet their clients, presenting women as objects of sexual desires, supporting the idea that women are only valuable inasmuch as they are willing to satisfy men's appetites.

¹⁴ i.e. *Trato que se le ha de dar a la mujer; La edad en las mujeres; El silencio en la mujer.*

The second group that will be analyzed as an apparently neutral set of proverbs is that of “Treatment that must be given to women”. This group has been included under the neutral category given the impossibility to determine what this treatment should be without looking into the proverbs contained in it. Unsurprisingly, the paremias listed show the same tendencies as previous sub headers, as can be observed in the following,

- 42.912. A mule and a woman for the flattery run their errands.—C.
- 42.913. Ladies want to be begged, not taught.—C.
- 42.914. To a donkey, a stick; to a woman, a gift.—R. M.
- 42.915. Do not contradict a woman or a she-cat.—R. M.
- 42.916. Against a woman, a Jew, or an abbot you should make no effort.—R. M.
- 42.917. To a woman and the wind, few times and carefully.—R. M.
- 42.918. To a woman and a dog, a stick in a hand and bread in the other.—R. M.
- 42.919. A woman and an orange cannot be squeezed too much as they embitter.—C.—R. M.¹⁵

In this section, out of the 59 proverbs included by Martínez Kleiser, not a single one advises benevolent treatment towards women. On the contrary, many of them, cf. items 42.912, 42.914, 42.915, 42.917, and 42.918 include the recurrent objectification of women, comparison with animals, and encourage the use of violence against women or highlight women’s presumed bad character. Interestingly, we also encounter something new: item 42.913 tells us what women want, which is significant granted that most of the proverbs analyzed so far presumably originate from the perspective of men. In this context, it does make one doubt whether women were actually consulted at all. Another remarkable example is item 42.916, which contains both the clergyphobia often found in proverbs, as acknowledged by Martínez Kleiser in his preface, and xenophobia, all brought together with a dose of misogyny. Additionally, item 42.917 refers to another recurring cliché when describing women: their mutability (Fernández Poncela, 2002), which is represented by their association with the wind, the stereotypically changing element.

Finally, the last example listed, 42.919, is the first of a series of proverbs objectifying women and identifying them with fruits and the necessity to squeeze them to obtain their goodness, again promoting the use of violence against them as well as their sexual objectification. Martínez Kleiser includes five proverbs that are almost identical, see footnote 15, once again showing that he did not consider it necessary to eliminate some redundancies, at least in relation to the portrayal of women in proverbs. It is with cases like this that we are led to consider the possibility of this phenomenon not being coincidental but, rather, intentional. This contributes to the instillation of misogyny in society, by insisting unnecessarily on the negative features of women, therefore causing men to come across as a paragon of virtue by comparison.

A third group initially considered to be neutral is that of “Age in women”. This was included under “neutral proverbs” as age is a general characteristic that often carries both positive and negative connotations. In the same way that young age is a symbol of innocence and health, it is seen as inexperienced; conversely, old age is a symbol of wisdom and respectability, but also of decay. In theory, both extremes can be employed positively or negatively and neither is inherently bad or good. In practice, however, this is not the case, as shown in the following examples:

- 42.968. No woman is ugly at fifteen.—R. M.
- 42.969. There is no such a thing as an ugly fifteen.
- 42.970. Young woman, soft bread, and green firewood are, at home, wolves that bite.—R. M.
- 42.971. Aprils until twenty; summers, until the thirty; autumns until fifty, and winters from the sixty on.—R. M.
- 42.972. At fifteen, a quail; at twenty, a partridge; at thirty, a cow; and at forty, a poop.—R. M.
- 42.973. Little lady who reached three and zero, you may as well start closing your closet.—R. M.
- 42.974. That one beyond forty-five is more suited to give little knives than to take them.—R. M.
- 42.975. At fifty there is no tally.—R. M.

Age may be seen quite differently depending on whether it applies to men or women and, as usual, it may also be employed to denigrate the latter. Older men being attracted to and courting younger women is a fairly accepted cliché in our society, and often seen as acceptable, desirable, and even a status symbol. This is probably the motivation for examples 42.968 and 42.969, which from a present-day point of view can be seen as promoting or justifying pedophilia. But even more telling is the fact that number 42.969 does not specify a gender but has nonetheless been included under the category of women.

¹⁵ The list continues with the following practically identical proverbs:

- 42.920. A woman and an orange, it is better not to squeeze them.—R. M.
- 42.921. An orange and a woman must not be squeezed: they will yield what they want.—R. M.
- 42.922. Oranges and women, whatever they choose to give.—R. M.
- 42.923. An orange and a lemon, whatever they give without squeezing.

Coincidentally, it does not specify the source from which it was obtained either, indicating that it might have come from Martínez Kleiser's own paremiological pool. Thus, not only did he choose not to omit a proverb despite its close similarity to another one, but put it under a label to which there is no explicit reference, coming across as an unashamed justification of pedophilia.

Continuing with the previously mentioned strategies of denigration, item number 42.972 literally calls forty-year-old women “poop”, after the no less insulting comparison between women of different ages and species of poultry considered to be delicacies. This is another example of the animalization of women, taking the comparison even further as the birds referred to are only valuable as they are good for eating, that is, to satisfy a man's appetite, which may also be seen as a sexual allegory.

Similar to proverb 42.969, item number 42.975 might be considered a criticism of older age, as no reference is made to gender, despite being included under the category of women proverbs. These examples also contribute to the perception of a gender bias against women, in this case in relation to their age, which affects their desirability by men, solely for physical or sexual reasons. As has been shown in previous instances, the same idea is often manipulated depending on whether it applies to men or women so as to vex the latter and use proverbs to implant certain ideas in society that contribute to maintaining gender roles and keeping women submissive to men.

The last sub header that will be presented under the neutral section is the one titled “Silence in women”. Often, silence is considered a sign of intelligence and a positive quality, at least in elements of folklore and proverbs.¹⁶ However, it may also be perceived as a sign of ignorance that prevents someone from participating in conversation. It is because of this duality that the sub header was included under the group of “neutral” proverbs although, taking into consideration everything that has been analyzed so far and all the examples presented, it is probably no longer surprising that a feature that might be seen as positive is used here to ridicule women and to perpetuate certain stereotypes. Here we find the following examples:

- 43.592. A quiet woman, a rare bird.—R. M.
 43.593. A smart and quiet woman is praised by everyone.—R. M.
 43.594. The good ones are quiet.—Z.—C.
 43.595. The good ones, stay quiet; and the bad ones, talk.—R. M.
 43.596. The good ones are quiet, and the bad ones chat.—R. M.
 43.597. A woman and a pear are good as long as quiet.—N.—C.
 43.598. A woman and a puppy, the quieter, the better.—R. M.
 43.599. A woman and a pear, the quiet one is the juicy one.—C.*

The misogyny transpiring from Martínez Kleiser's selection soon becomes apparent and is highlighted by the fact that 13 proverbs have been included in this group under “Women”, whereas in the standalone category, labeled “Silence”, there is only one proverb,

- 58.315. Silence and solitude, antidote against the city.—R. M.¹⁷

Again, the same devices are employed in the proverbs under this category. Women are once again animalized and objectified, with the criticism falling this time on another widespread feminine stereotype: their chattiness. As seen in all of the examples, silence is appreciated in women partially because they were considered unable to make relevant contributions to a serious debate. In relation to this, A. Mitkova (2007, p. 94, my translation) points out the hypocrisy behind this consideration as

It might be true that for centuries female conversations could not go beyond trivial topics such as the house, the husband, the children, etc. But it is not less true that women have not received any kind of instruction that allowed them to broaden their knowledge and interests. In paremiology, one finds a serious contradiction regarding the role of women's education. The content of conversation among women is subjected to criticism for being dull, trivial, shallow, and at the same time, women are denied access to proper education. Women say foolishness and talk about empty and shallow things because they are not very bright and are not educated.¹⁸

In short: the same men that criticized women for their shallowness and irrelevant chit-chat were those preventing them from cultivating themselves and achieving a level of education analogous to what men could achieve. An additional

¹⁶ Cf. The well-known proverbs “fools are wise as long as silent” (Wilson, 1970, p. 278), “speech is silver, but silence is golden” (Wilson, 1970, p. 763), or “wise men silent, fools talk” (Wilson, 1970, p. 901).

¹⁷ 58.315. *Silencio y soledad, contraveneno de la ciudad.*—R. M.

¹⁸ The original reads, “Puede que sea cierto que durante siglos las conversaciones femeninas no hayan podido ir más allá de los temas triviales como la casa, el marido, los hijos, etc., pero no es menos cierto que las mujeres no han recibido ningún tipo de instrucción que les permitiera ampliar sus conocimientos y preocupaciones. En el refranero se detecta una grave contradicción respecto al papel de la educación de la mujer. Se somete a crítica el contenido de la conversación femenina por ser insulso, banal, superficial, y al mismo tiempo a la mujer se le niega el acceso a la educación adecuada. La mujer dice tonterías y habla de cosas vacías y superficiales porque tiene pocas luces y porque no está instruida.” (Mitkova, 2007, p. 94, p. 94).

interpretation may be that men prefer women to remain submissive and not contradict them, which is why “silent” women are valued.

In contrast, if one reads the list of proverbs under the header “Men”, which, as a reminder, comprises just thirty proverbs in total, not a single reference is made to whether or not men should cultivate silence. Hence, it becomes apparent how Martínez Kleiser does not consider it necessary to alleviate the charge of negativity against women by leaving out some variants that are nearly identical, as are the cases of 43.595 and 43.596 or 43.597, and 43.599. This is not the usual way in which par-emiographers proceed, the common practice being to include different variants in the same entry in order to keep the work more manageable and accessible. An example of this can be found in the entry below from the *Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs*

At a good bargain (pennyworth), make a pause (think twice) (Wilson, 1970, p. 317, p. 317)

He that marries a widow and two children (daughters) marries three thieves (has three back doors to his house) (Wilson, 1970, p. 514, p. 514)

As can be seen in these examples, the phrase in brackets may be found to substitute the one immediately preceding it. This is a more generalized practice in similar works and has the advantage of avoiding unnecessary repetition, as most people are aware that the same item might manifest in slightly different terms. What’s more, in a work of the characteristics of Martínez Kleiser’s, where proverbs have been sorted semantically and not alphabetically, such redundancy comes across as awkward and unnecessary, burdening it with unnecessary repetition and inflating the amount of paremias listed artificially.

After taking a look at the proverbs included under seemingly innocuous labels, it becomes apparent that even headers that are harmless in appearance are used to portray women negatively. This is done through the usual techniques of comparing them to objects or animals and characterizing them spuriously, often twisting features that would be considered desirable when applied to a male. Martínez Kleiser also includes redundancies that contribute to the further magnification of the already negative portrayal of women. Far from being happenstance, it appears that this exaggerated negative representation of women was an intentional choice, carried out to perpetuate the idea of women as submissive to men through the amplification of the number of proverbs presenting women negatively.

4.3. Proverbs under negative sub headers

Since the intention of this paper is to analyze the sexist bias against women in Martínez Kleiser’s work, which was the accepted premise for this piece of research, and the devices employed by proverbs to do so, there does not seem to be a necessity to prove that the paremias listed under harmful ideas do indeed denigrate women. However, in order to determine what some of these commonly used images are and show how they are consistent across the whole spectrum of women proverbs, some examples shall be commented on so as to round out our analysis. Consequently, the subcategories that have been chosen for analysis have been picked for their illustrative value of the psychology behind the sexism in the RGIE and the common devices used to defame women through proverbial knowledge.

The first category chosen for this section is that of “Underestimation of women”, which does not leave much room for doubt, and where we find examples such as the following,

42.785. No woman, sword, or horse without a flaw.—C.

42.786. A woman is a necessary evil.—R. M.

42.787. A woman, like old age, is a desired evil.—R. M.

These three instances are a great example of the relentless mistreatment of women and how it is often carried out. In the first example, women are compared to objects, a sword in this case, and beasts of burden, a pattern that has been exposed throughout the present work. As usual, the choice of elements for the comparison is not accidental and seems to have been carefully made, as a sword is a weapon that can also be seen as a phallic representation, supporting the biblical idea that if men are imperfect, so are women. Moreover, horses and mules are working animals employed for menial, fatiguing tasks and hardly associated with intellectual occupations, which would be expected to be carried out by men, according to the standpoint that would justify and promote the use of such proverbial ideas.

In the second example, we find another recurrent motif in proverbs about women: their identification with evil. This idea is also expressed in the last example, number 42.787, which compares women and old age, which in the previous section was shown to also have been of frequent reference to belittle women in proverbs. Both are presented as “desired evils” because despite the inconveniences both may cause, they compensate them with the advantages they provide: on the one hand, old age is preferable to death; on the other hand, women are expected to take care of housework and satisfy men’s appetites. This assimilation of women to evil is often justified on religious grounds and, in the case of the Spanish language, shows the influence that Catholicism has on Spanish society and how proverbs may be used for the fossilization and dissemination of these beliefs.

A second insulting header found is that of “Festive proverbs against women”, i.e. “*Refranes festivos contra la mujer*”, under which we find 37 items, such as,

- 42.817. To a woman and a candle, twist their neck if you want them to be good.—N. C.
 42.818. The woman and the pavement, always want to be trod on.—N.—R. M.
 42.819. The ass and the woman, with sticks must be beaten.—N.—M.—C.

To begin with, the fact that such proverbs are explicitly “against” women is not surprising. However, the fact that they might be considered “festive” is truly exasperating, much more so after reading the explicit, unreserved violence that is promoted against women. Although they may be considered humorous by some, as [Martínez Garrido \(2001, p. 95, my translation\)](#) explains,

Many of them, men and women, when using, even in a jokingly manner, this type of expressions, connoted with the most disdainful vituperation, without consciously knowing, continue to defend domestic terrorism. Thus, they continue to defend the use of force and violence as the way to female subjection.¹⁹

Furthermore, “[b]y adopting, instead of challenging the misogynous ideologies ingrained, sometimes unwittingly, in proverbs, speakers contribute to sustaining the *status quo* without the need of coercion” ([Lomotey and Chachu, 2020, p. 70](#)). Consequently, the examples shown not only describe but promote this unapologetic use of violence against women. Additionally, the comparison of women with animals, particularly beasts of burden, and objects is not coincidental and is a constant throughout the paremiology relating to them. Here, only three proverbs of the 36 in this sub header have been presented, all of which promote the use of violence against women, many of them comparing women to different beasts in an attempt to justify this use of violence.

Another negative header is that of “Women’s fragility”, where we may find paremias such as,

- 43.188. Not even the ugly ones are safe; there’s always someone after them.—R. M.
 43.189. To the devil with the lock that is not safe under any key.—R. M.
 43.190. With pinches, lasses and figs are ripened.—R. M.

Even though it is to be expected at this point that women are presented as fragile, as they are typically characterized, it is yet another hypocritical statement by the coiner of the proverb if we take into account the tremendous amount of proverbs that promote the use of violence against this presumably “fragile” sex, which can be seen in the last of the proverbs listed, 43.190. The previous two, though, show some of the other strategies observed in proverbs about women: the importance of women’s looks in the first, and objectification of women in the second. In this case, the identification of women with a lock and the reference to a key may also have sexual connotations. Again, the recurring beliefs that motivate the creation of sexist proverbs become apparent and show the preconceived ideas that the coiners of these proverbs, most likely men, had about women.

The last negative idea that will be presented here is that which states that “A woman is dangerous”, under which, 57 items are listed, the following being rather illustrative examples of the origin of the aversion to women perceived in proverbs,

- 43.434. From a woman, much goodness is to be expected and much evil is to be feared.—R. M.
 43.435. Through a woman, evil entered the world.—R. M.
 43.436. A woman and wine take judgment away from man.—C.

The first half of the first proverb is a rare occurrence: a proverb that seems to highlight a positive aspect in women. However, this is soon contradicted by the second half, which refers to their proverbial wickedness, which is referenced in the second one, item 43.435. This one is particularly relevant as it demonstrates, yet again, how religion may have been used to justify the subjugation of women to men and the employment of violence against them. As [Martínez Garrido \(2001, p. 93, my translation\)](#) explains, “in our culture, with Judeo-Christian roots, the first and final reason for this terror, this hatred, and its corresponding necessity for defense and attack against women is already found in the *Genesis*,”²⁰ as has been shown in multiple instances throughout the present paper. Thus, the “story of Genesis and numerous other passages from the Bible have often been interpreted by Christian theology, as a confirmation of the superiority of men over women” ([Schipper, 2010, p. 16](#)), which has been carried out almost exclusively by men. Finally, the last example brings together women and an inebriating substance with the intention of exempting men from responsibility in their potential misdemeanor, consequently blaming the former.

¹⁹ The original reads, “*Muchos y muchas de ellos, cada vez que utilizan, incluso de forma jocosa, este tipo de expresiones, connotadas por el vituperio más despreciativo, sin saberlo conscientemente, siguen haciendo apología del terrorismo doméstico. Siguen defendiendo, pues, el uso de la fuerza y de la violencia como vía de logro del sometimiento femenino.*” ([Martínez Garrido, 2001, p. 95, p. 95](#)).

²⁰ The original reads, “*En nuestra cultura de raíz judeocristiana, la razón primera y última de este terror, de este odio, y de su correspondiente necesidad de defensa y ataque contra las mujeres, se encuentra ya en el Génesis.*”

As has been shown, the amount of negative features attributed to women throughout the 17 pages devoted to them in the *RGIE* is appalling. The majority of these rely on the traditionally established characteristics and imagery used to describe women but, contrary to other paremiographic works that may show different sensibilities or follow a different kind of indexing and methods to avoid excessive and unnecessary repetition, the *RGIE* presents an unparalleled number of proverbs, most of which are blatantly insulting. This is carried out by the usual strategies noted by scholars who have carried out analyses on the portrayal of women in proverbs before and who noted the ideas associated with women and how they are often dehumanized and abused verbally in paremias, some of which find a foundation for their abusive ideas in biblical stories. Furthermore, in Martínez Kleiser's work, the importance of religious beliefs soon becomes apparent. These must not be overlooked as they were the foundation of the Spanish regime at the time and the *RGIE* can be taken as an element that used tradition to legitimize the gender roles that were seen as acceptable at the time.

5. Conclusions

Discourse analysis from a feminist perspective has shown in previous works that the paremiology of different languages presents a derogatory portrayal of women. Multiple authors (Martínez Garrido, 2001; Mitkova, 2007; Schipper, 2010; Lomotey, 2019a, b; Lomotey and Chachu, 2020) find the legitimization for this in the popularization of Judeo-Christian narratives, at least in the Western tradition. However, this does not mean that societies with other languages and religions (see footnote 1) do not manifest similar beliefs in their paremiology, showing that this might be seen as an almost-universal occurrence and with a marginal amount of studies presenting a positive portrayal of women in proverbs (Yitah, 2009, 2012; Dipio, 2019; Masuku, 2020). In the present work, following the premise that Spanish paremiology is indeed sexist, we have shown how this prejudice manifests in the most prestigious, most relevant, and most quoted paremiographic work in the Spanish language over the last century: Luis Martínez Kleiser's *Refranero General Ideológico Español*. Through an examination of the representation of women in this work, it can be seen how Christian tradition has often been used to justify the treatment that was given to women in paremiology, even though, as mentioned above, this seems to be a constant across different languages, societies, and creeds. In relation to this, it becomes quite apparent that the majority of the proverbs describing women were likely coined by a man. Proof of which is the appalling portrayal that is made of women in the proverbs included, something unlikely to have been produced by a woman to describe another woman, as in the cases where an objectively positive quality is manipulated so as to denigrate women, something that happens frequently.

Furthermore, given the dated character of the vast majority of proverbs analyzed, which were taken from centuries-old works presenting the beliefs and customs of the society at those times in history, the scope of the collection seems to be from the point of view of a man who composed a work for an audience of men. Proof of this is the fact that all the sources employed by Martínez Kleiser, apart from him and his collaborators, were all men, and their presumed male target readership would have strongly determined which proverbs they saw as worth keeping and which were to be dismissed.

When looking at the purpose of proverbs written about women, it can be seen how proverbs are not generally written to celebrate them, but are intended to indoctrinate them, by telling them what to do, how to behave, and how to look. Most appear to be written from a male gaze, evaluating women's behavior, complaining about their attitudes, or simply ridiculing them. Another fact that supports the idea that this is a work written by men for men, is the scarcity of proverbs with the topic of "men", which must have been taken for granted by the male paremiographers, as men are the rule makers, not the rule followers. It would not be necessary to include proverbs to indoctrinate men, the compilers' peers, as they were the people already enforcing societal norms and expectations.

Given the social context in which the composition of this work took place and the presumed political inclinations of the author, as shown by his professional trajectory and literary compositions, it can be understood how opinions that are seen as archaic from our present-day point-of-view must have seemed acceptable and desirable to certain sectors of Spanish society a mere 70 years ago. What is more, the principles of the state institution devoted to the education of women in the doctrine of the ruling regime at the time, the aforementioned Sección Femenina, is not far from what proverbs from the 16th century tell us.

Thus, although the *RGIE* is of scarce value when determining the current use of certain paremias, and particularly those under analysis here, it seems a fairly accurate testimony of what gender roles the regime hoped to preserve during the Franco era. In relation to this, paremiographers may exempt themselves from the responsibility for the coinage and popularization of certain beliefs that fossilized into proverbs and, by placing the blame on their ethereal anonymous character, they capitalize on the condition of proverbs as irrefutable truths to maintain the state of affairs. This is the case with Martínez Kleiser's *RGIE*, which may have proved of great value for the justification of misogyny on the basis of tradition.

Finally, as an answer to the question of what can be done to prevent the overt sexism found in paremiology, Schipper (2010, p. 303) notes that "it would be a regrettably shortsighted reaction to reject, suppress, or censor these cross-cultural ideas from the past without further reflection". This calls for a social awakening and the carrying out of a pedagogical labor that raises awareness among the younger generations, as Pellegrinelly (2010, p. 142) suggests. As Kerschen (2000, p. 68) explains, "[i]f we don't examine carefully what we've been taught by proverbs to determine what we really believe and discard the rest in our personal use, we risk perpetuating resentment, misunderstanding, and prejudice." Moreover, "[e]fforts should be made to educate society about the damaging expressions while maintaining and supplementing the positive practice" (Nisrane and Tizazu, 2019, p. 342), a key aspect of which is the abandonment of allusions to harmful ideas even when used jokingly (Martínez Garrido, 2001, p. 95). Furthermore, the prejudices manifested in sexist proverbs must be recognized as "blatant lies" (Presbey, 1999, p. 178) and we must "adopt strategies of subverting negative gender ideologies

through creative appropriation or production of new positive discourses” (Lomotey, 2019b, p. 336). These gender ideologies appear in proverbs as recognizable patterns that support the preexisting power relations that slander women and need to be lessened, as explained by Lomotey and Chachu (2020, p. 78). Lastly, the appearance of female paremiographers, such as M. J. Canellada & B. Pallarés, R. Ferguson, L. Kerschen, J. Panizo, J. Sevilla Muñoz, or J. Speake, to mention some of the most representative names in Paremiography, is of major importance in order to apply a very much needed gender perspective that balances out the practice by male collectors, as is the case with Martínez Kleiser, of inflating the already negative portrayal of women in proverbs by including an unnecessary amount of repeated proverbial ideas, many of which “are starting to undergo obsolescence by reason of social change” (Speake, 2008, p. V).

Declarations of competing interest

None.

Annex 1. List of sub headers under the idea of “Women” as included in the RGIE

Positive headers

La bondad en la mujer
Conducta de las virtuosas
La devoción en la mujer
La sabiduría en la mujer
La astucia en la mujer
La gracia en la mujer
La laboriosidad en la mujer
Hermosura

Neutral sub headers

Trato que se le ha de dar a la mujer
La edad en las mujeres
El silencio en la mujer
La curiosidad en la mujer
El enojo en la mujer
Las peticiones en la mujer
La limpieza y el desaseo en la mujer
El ocio en la mujer
La mujer y el juego
El amor en la mujer
Adornos y afeites en la mujer
Cualidades físicas
Estatura
Delgadez y obesidad
Fama
Riqueza y pobreza

Negative sub headers

Menosprecio de la mujer
Refranes festivos contra la mujer
La maldad en la mujer
Guarda de la mujer
La fragilidad en la mujer
La mujer es peligrosa
La imperfección en la mujer
La charlatanería en la mujer
La murmuración en la mujer
La falsedad en la mujer
La sosería en la mujer

Mujeres hombrunas
 La volubilidad en la mujer
 Los caprichos y la terquedad en la mujer
 La melindrería en la mujer
 La osadía en la mujer
 La ingratitud en la mujer
 La vanidad en la mujer
 Fealdad
 La mujer barbuda

Annex 2. Proverbs listed

Behavior of the virtuous

- 43.043. *No solo ha de ser casta la mujer, mas débelo parecer.*—C.
 43.044. *No basta a la mujer ser buena: es menester que lo parezca.*—R. M.
 43.045. *En la vida la mujer, tres salidas ha de hacer: cuando se casa; a misa; a la sepultura.*—Z.
 43.046. *En la vida, la mujer tres salidas ha de hacer: al bautismo, al casamiento, a la sepultura o al monumento.*—C.
 43.047. *En la vida la mujer, tres salidas ha de hacer.*—N.—M.—C.
 43.048. *La mujer en casa, y la pierna quebrada.*—N.—M.—C.
 43.049. *La doncella honrada, la pierna quebrada, y en casa.*—R. M.
 43.050. *Los negocios de la mujer buena, dentro de casa y no fuera.*—R. M.

Women's wisdom

- 43.519. *Ni burra mohína, ni mujer supina.*—R. M.
 43.520. *Ni joya prestada, ni mujer letrada.*—R. M.
 43.521. *Mujer sabida, plata partida; mujer resabida, apártate en seguida [sic].*—R. M.
 43.522. *Mujer con letras, dos veces necia.*—R. M.
 43.523. *La mujer más avisada, o sabe poco o nonada.*—R. M.
 43.524. *La mujer que más sabe, sólo sirve para gobernar doce gallinas y un gallo.*—R. M.
 43.525. *Mujeres y libros, siempre mal avenidos.*—R. M.

Women's astuteness

- 43.708. *Diablos son bolos, y las mujeres demonios.*—R. M.
 43.709. *La mujer que el diablo se ha de llevar, desde temprano da la señal.*—R. M.
 43.710. *A la mujer, el diablo le dió el saber.*—R. M.
 43.711. *La mayor parte de su saber, lo aprendió el diablo de la mujer.*—R. M.
 43.712. *La mujer, un punto más que el diablo suele saber.*—R. M.
 43.713. *La mujer sabe un punto más que el diablo.*—R. M.
 43.714. *La mujer sabe un punto más que Satanás.*—R. M.

Women's industriousness

- 43.904. *La mujer hacendosa hace en un día treinta cosas.*—R. M.
 43.905. *Más que la mujer hermosa vale la hacendosa.*—R. M.
 43.906. *Entre mujer hacendosa o hacendada, la primera más me agrada.*—R. M.
 43.907. *Mujer hacendosa, vale más que mujer hacendada.*—R. M.
 43.908. *A Mariardida, nunca le falta un mal día.*—N.—C.
 43.909. *Mariardida, siempre trabaja y se da buena vida; Maricochambre, siempre tendida y muerta de hambre.*—R. M.
 43.910. *La mujer ardida no es buen echada cuando es dormida.*—C.*
 43.911. *A la buena moza no la busques en la romería, sino en su traje de cada día.*—R. M.

Abundance of women

- 42.851. *Cinta, mujer y cama fácilmente se hallan.*—R. M.
 42.852. *Mujer, lumbre y cazuela en todas partes se encuentran.*—R. M.
 42.853. *Mujeres y malos años nunca faltaron.*—R. M.
 42.854. *Las mujeres son como la rana: que por una que zambulle, salen cuatro a flor de agua.*—R. M.
 42.855. *Siete mujeres en cada rincón hay para cada varón.*—R. M.
 42.856. *Ruin sea quien por una mujer pelea, estando el mundo lleno de ellas.*—R. M.

Treatment that must be given to a woman

- 42.912. *La mula y la mujer por halago hacen el menester.*—C.
 42.913. *Las damas quieren ser rogadas, no enseñadas.*—C.
 42.914. *Al asno, el palo; a la mujer, el regalo.*—R. M.
 42.915. *A la mujer y a la gata no les lleves la contraria.*—R. M.
 42.916. *Contra mujer, judío ni abad, esfuerzo no has de mostrar.*—R. M.
 42.917. *A la mujer y al viento, pocas veces y con tiento.*—R. M.
 42.918. *A la mujer y al can, el palo en una mano y en la otra el pan.*—R. M.
 42.919. *La mujer y la naranja no se ha de apretar mucho, porque amarga.*—C.—R. M.

Age in women

- 42.968. *De quince no hay mujer fea.*—R. M.
 42.969. *No hay quince años feos.*
 42.970. *Mujer joven, pan tierno y leña verde son en la casa lobos que muerden.*—R. M.
 42.971. *Abriles, hasta los veinte; veranos, hasta los treinta; otoños a los cincuenta, e inviernos desde los sesenta.*—R. M.
 42.972. *De quince, codorniz; de veinte, perdiz; de treinta, vaca, y de cuarenta, caca.*—R. M.
 42.973. *Doncellita que llegó al tres y cero, ya puede ir cerrando su ropero.*—R. M.
 42.974. *La que pasa de cuarenta y cinco, más está para dar gañivetes que para pedirlos.*—R. M.
 42.975. *A los cincuenta, ya no hay cuenta.*—R. M.

Silence in women

- 43.592. *Mujer callada, avis rara.*—R. M.
 43.593. *La mujer lista y callada, de todos es alabada.*—R. M.
 43.594. *Las buenas, callen.*—Z.—C.
 43.595. *Las buenas, callan; y las malas, parlan.*—R. M.
 43.596. *Las buenas callan, y repicotean las malas.*—R. M.
 43.597. *La mujer y la pera, la que calla es buena.*—N.—C.
 43.598. *La mujer y la cachorra, la que más calla es más buena.*—R. M.
 43.599. *La mujer y la pera. [sic] la que calla es mamadera.*—C.*

Underestimation of women

- 42.785. *No hay mujer, ni espada, ni caballo, ni mula sin tacha.*—C.
 42.786. *La mujer es un mal necesario.*—R. M.
 42.787. *La mujer, como la vejez, un mal deseado es.*—R. M.

Festive proverbs against women

- 42.817. *A la mujer y a la candela, tuércele el cuello si la quieres buena.*—N. C.
 42.818. *La mujer y lo empedrado, siempre quiere ser hollado.*—N.—R. M.
 42.819. *El asno y la mujer, a palos se han de vencer.*—N.—M.—C.

Women's fragility

- 43.188. *Ni las feas están seguras; que nunca falta quien las procura.*—R. M.
 43.189. *Vaya al diablo cerradura que con ninguna llave está segura.* —R. M.
 43.190. *A pulgaradas, mozas y brevas son maduradas.*—R. M.

A woman is dangerous

- 43.434. *De la mujer, mucho bueno has de esperar y mucho malo has de temer.*—R. M.
 43.435. *Through a woman, evil entered the world.*—R. M.
 43.436. *La mujer y el vino sacan al hombre de tino.*—C.

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