

WITNESS: WE HAVE MADE PROGRESS BUT SERIOUS CHALLENGES TO GENDER EQUALITY REMAIN



The reports presented during the last meeting of the Commission on the Status of Women in March this year show that overall progress in gender equality in the last 20 years has been unacceptably slow, with stagnation and even regression in some contexts. Change towards gender equality has not been deep enough, nor has it been irreversible.

In discussing why gender inequality persists, Laetitia identified several contributing factors including attitudinal barriers on the part of men - the main implementers of the gender mainstreaming strategy; misconception and limited understanding of feminism and feminists; the way many organizations structure gender for organizational inequality and the invisibility of “women” in development projects. This week she revisits her notes taken in the early 1990s to discuss the extent to which the State laws and policies in Tanzania were a positive force for or posed some challenges to gender equality.

Is the State a positive force for gender equality or is it a patriarchy and cannot adequately redress gender injustice? Is the State implicated in or can it escape from the charges that its institutions function in ways that entrench patriarchal domination and male privilege on one hand and subordination, exploitation and oppression of women on the other?

Gender advocates agree that the State plays an important role in structuring gender relations. However, there is no consensus regarding the nature of the link between the State and gender. Briefly summarized and simply put, the liberal pluralist school sees the State as a neutral arbiter between competing social and economic interests with one exception: the State is not neutral in its treatment of women. They point out that the State bureaucracy is predominantly staffed by men who use its power to further men’s interests. In order to redress this anomaly, women need to gain access to powerful positions of the State and use its power to further the interests of women through creation of policies favourable to women, changing employment practices and conducting attacks on prejudice.

Those who adhere to the Marxist school of thought take a view that gender inequality and the oppression of women, is not a direct consequence of State action but stem from the logic of capitalism. Gender inequality is seen as derived from capitalism and the actions of the State as emanating from the needs of capital. Accordingly the State should be conceptualized as capitalist since its actions vis-à-vis women are geared towards maintaining the capitalist mode of production. The capitalist state defines the household, the division of labour at work, the regulation of the educational system and formulation of laws in ways that up-hold the subordination of women for the benefit of capitalism.

The Socialist school or dual systems theorists center their focus on the relationship between capitalism and patriarchy. They posit that the subordination of women cannot be simply reduced to the logic of capital. They maintain that capitalist and patriarchal relations are so intertwined and interdependent that they form a mutually interdependent system of capitalist patriarchy. They further argue that both capitalism and patriarchy are engaged in symbiotic relationship and that this link is fused at the level of the State where patriarchal interests are represented via capitalists who are predominantly male.

This differs from the radical school of thought, who at first visualized the State not as central or even relevant to women's subordination or oppression, rather the nature of the relations between the sexes which they saw as political since one gender category controlled the other. Patriarchy was seen as the basis of women's subordination especially in so far as the area of sexuality and women's reproductive capacities are controlled by men. However, newer thinking in the radical school of thought examined the State in relation to male violence against women and focused on the state's lackluster efforts to prevent it. Men's violence is seen as an important basis of men's control over women. The State then, according to this view, is an instrument of male domination and its inactivity part of the logic of the patriarchal system.

Perhaps the best way to comprehend the nature of the link between the State and gender is to look at a particular state, its history, type, mode of policy making and implementation and its gender character, particularly the spaces it offers for women to articulate and interpret their own needs and interests.

The State in Tanzania has, for a long time, been praised for its positive stance on gender equality and women empowerment. Its progressive outlook pre-dates the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BDPfA). As early as 1967 when Tanzania adopted the Arusha Declaration, women-centred law and policy was rationalised by ideologically linking them with socialism. The period after the Arusha Declaration was followed by a spate of laws, policy statements and policy directives aimed at enhancing the position of women. Yet to-date, gender equality for the majority of women, especially those in rural Tanzania remains elusive. What went wrong?

The inequality that we see today in Tanzania has a trans-historical character. It is partly rooted in its past. It is important therefore to analyse some features of the State in Tanzania, particularly the years immediately after the adoption of *Ujamaa* (African socialism).

An important characteristic of the State in Tanzania was its adherence to *Ujamaa* policies. Tanzania's socialism was first defined as an attitude of mind whose objective was to capture the African principles of socio economic organization which obtained before colonialism. In 1968, for example, the purpose of *Ujamaa* was spelt out as:

..... To regain our former attitude of mind, our traditional African socialism and apply it to the new societies we are building today....so the government can be relied upon to introduce only legislation which is harmony with socialist principles.

These principles were that everyone was a worker and contributed a fair share of effort towards the production of wealth, there was no private ownership of land and rights to land were limited to the right to use it.

The second was that Tanzania's State socialism was not a product of domestic class struggle. As Mwalimu Nyerere wrote in 1968:

.....Ujamaa ...is opposed to capitalism which seeks to build a happy society on the basis of exploitation of man by man; and it is equally opposed to doctrinaire socialism which seeks to build its happy society on the philosophy of inevitable conflict between man and man

The third feature of State socialism was its formal commitment to equality. The only political party in power at the time, Tanganyika African National Union (TANU) specified a creed that professed equality of all human beings; upheld the right for every individual to receive from society protection of his property held according to law; espoused the right to receive a just return for one's labour; and recognised State responsibility to intervene effectively in economic life of the nation in order to prevent exploitation of one person by the other. In addition TANU stated that one of its aims was to see that the government gives opportunity to all men and women irrespective of race, religion or status.

The fourth attribute was its acknowledgement of the unequal position of women and men in society. For as the architect of the policy Mwalimu Nyerere wrote in *Ujamaa: Essays on Socialism*,

“Although every individual was joined to his fellows by human respect, there was, in most parts of Tanzania, an acceptance of one human inequality... it is true that women in traditional society were regarded as having a place in the community which was not only different but was also to some extent inferior . . . by virtue of their sex they suffered from inequalities which had nothing to do with their contribution to the family welfare. Although it is wrong to suggest that they have always been an oppressed group, it is true that within the traditional society, ill-treatment and enforced subservience could be their lot. This is certainly inconsistent with our socialist conception of the equality of all human beings and the rights of all to live in such security and freedom; for all progress now, it is essential that our women live in terms of full equality with their fellow citizens who are men).

Undoubtedly this manner of theorizing socialism by the Tanzanian State was positive both from a human development standpoint on one hand and from a gender perspective as well. It is significant that the State recognised the unequal position of women in traditional society and underlined the need for measures to redress it. Educationally, the government stance on equality spurred an unprecedented increase in the number of girls in all institutions of learning. By 1980 women constituted 15 per cent of the labour force and by 1987, the State had set aside 15 seats for women representatives in Parliament.

Nevertheless the State's socialist policy had a number of troubling implications for gender equality. First, if socialism was an attitude of mind meaning that it was lodged in the realm of ideas, how could adherence to its principles, including gender equality be determined or evaluated on the part of those who had to implement it? But even more crucial from the equality point of view, how was the basis of women's unequal position to men to be eradicated since it was both ideologically and materially based? As one commentator pointedly observed:

“.... as it is attitudinally defined, socialism becomes purely a supernatural phenomenon, with all its attendant problems of subjectivism and conceptual discrepancies”

Second, the socialist theory was blind to some fundamental contradictions. In so far as absence of exploitation constituted one theme of its socialist policy, and as long as Tanzania was already integrated into the world capitalist system, it failed to theorise the exploitative link between the masses in Tanzania and international capitalism. Although this anomaly was later redressed by stating that the priority aim of the African revolution was to liberate the African by combating exploitation, colonialism and imperialism, this mere acknowledgement of the exploitative link between Tanzania and international capitalism did not result in any effective measures to disengage

from it in practice. In fact many observers at the time argued that Tanzania became even more entrenched into the world capitalist system thus perpetuating the exploitation of the Tanzanian masses.

In addition, Tanzania's socialist theory was also blind to the twin-fold exploitation and subordination of women by male patriarchs as a separate question in what some observers termed the 'reconstituted patriarchal relations' of production and reproduction. Women's exploitation, as seen from Mwalimu's writings above, was posed in the context of traditional or pre-capitalist African society. To be sure, the integration of Tanzania into the world capitalist system meant that not only did women continue to be exploited through the remnants of pre-capitalist and feudal relations of production, but also that some of these same relations of production were subjected to capitalist relations and transformed in ways that not only benefitted male patriarchy, but capitalism as well. President Machel elucidated this dual exploitation and oppression of women when he said that:

...Generally speaking, women are the most oppressed, humiliated and exploited beings in society; a woman is even exploited, beaten by a man who is lacerated by Palmatoria, humiliated by a man who is crushed under the boot of the boss and settler.

This failure to acknowledge the double exploitation and oppression of women at the level of theory was also to be reflected in practice. Regrettably, it endures to this day. In those early days, there was no state policy or strategy in place to provide guidance on how the gender equality principle was to be translated into action. Thus the implications of such concepts as "equality of all human beings", "a just return for one's labour", "abolition of exploitation of one person by another" and "equal opportunity for men and women" largely remained and still constitute mere slogans or political mantras at the level of rhetoric and written directives. Equality between women and men has not been significantly achieved.

Next week, I shall examine some of the practical examples of implementation of Tanzania's socialist policies and their implications for gender equality.

Laetitia Mukurasi is a Gender Specialist who gained recognition as the first woman to fight and win the first labour case against discrimination in Tanzania. From 1993 to 1998 she worked as the Assistant Resident Representative in charge of Gender/Women issues in UNDP Tanzania Country Office. She attended the Beijing Conference and later joined the African Development Bank from 1998-2010 where she attained the position of Chief Gender Specialist. She is now retired but actively working with the women's movement in Tanzania and recently sponsored two meetings to discuss the future of gender mainstreaming.