

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



The verdict contained in the reports to the Commission on the Status of Women in March this year indicate 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.

While discussing some of the factors that hold gender equality back, Laetitia noted attitudinal barriers on the part of men - the main implementers of the gender mainstreaming strategy; the tendency to conflate “gender” with “women” and to ignore the “men” part of the gender equation; misconception and limited understanding of feminism and feminists; the way many organizations structure gender for organizational inequality and position staff members whose job is to implement pro-equality policy implementation for ineffectiveness and the visualization of “gender” and “women” in development projects. Laetitia believes that gender inequality has a trans-historical character. This week she continues to share her notes taken in the early 1990s to discuss the extent to which the state in Tanzania was a positive force for or posed some challenges to gender equality.

When Tanzania proclaimed itself a socialist state, it took a number of practical measures which were designed to achieve a socialist society. Two of these measures are significant from a gender perspective. The first was the nationalization of the commanding height of the economy. This was significant because the state became the major employer and was therefore in a position to determine the trends with regard to equality principles in the workplace. The second was the introduction of Ujamaa Villages, which meant that the state held great potential to promote gender parity with regard to relations of production as well as transformation in the sex division of labour which exploited and oppressed women.

My focus of analysis will be the prospects of nationalization for women workers. I shall therefore examine their situation at length. Viewed from the gender advocates’ perspective, the mere act of nationalizing the economy need not necessarily lead to gender equality. Rather what was required was the reconceptualization and redefinition of certain aspects of socialist policy and practice such as the transformation of norms and values in the sense described by Sen G. and Grown C. in their book: *Development Crisis and alternative visions: Third World Women’s Perspectives* that:

“.....each person will have opportunity to develop her of his full potential and creativity. And women’s values of nurturance...will characterize human relationships. In such a world, women’s reproductive roles will be redefined: child care will be shared by men, women and society as a whole”.

Studies done by some Tanzanian gender equality advocates at that time such as Mbilinyi, M. and Mascrenhas, O.; Nkebukwa, A.; and Koda, B. indicate that such a vision of society was not part of socialist rhetoric or policy. On the contrary, the sexual division of labour as well as the norms and values which underpinned the exploitation and subordination of women were left intact. This situation obtains to-date.

Nationalization moreover resulted in the expansion of bureaucratic structure which according to Mukandala, R. in his article, ***Bureaucracy and Socialism in Tanzania: The Case of the Civil Service*** occupied a significant place in the implementation of the socialist policies in Tanzania. This expansion had some positive aspects from women’s point of view in that it resulted in the increase in the number of women in formal employment so that by 1980, 15 percent of all public sector employees were women most of whom occupied junior positions. However, the State bureaucracy was predominantly male in terms of its gender composition and its work culture. While issues of equality in many areas of public life featured very prominently in Tanzania’s political rhetoric, the gender composition of the bureaucracy was never made an issue at the time.

Furthermore, the adoption of socialism did not lead to immediate changes in the old colonial structures, administrative procedures, rules and regulations. Neither did it entail changes in the values, norms and practices that would have made the environment more gender equal or responsive to women workers’ needs and interests. Thus the new pro-equality provisions of law and policy were grafted on to old and discriminatory provisions and this combination at times, as we shall see, resulted in contradictory impacts in practice.

Thus though gender equality was right from the beginning on the agenda of socialist transformation, the conditions that would ensure its full realization were not properly conceptualized or defined. Nevertheless, several pro-women legislation was put in place as we shall see later on.

The next question is to what extent was the Tanzania State informed by feminism and to what extent did the State allow the free articulation and expression of women’s issues? Answers to this section can be arrived at by looking at the nature of the state, its mode of policy making and also the degree of the leeway or room for manouvre it provided for the infusion of a woman-centered perspective.

Scholars who examined the nature of the state at the time such as Shivji, I and Hyden, G. were of the view that the state embraced the ideology of developmentalism. This ideology was defined by professor Shivji as a belief that:

“.....we are economically backward and we need to develop and develop very fast. In this task of development, we cannot afford the luxury of politics”

This view was supported by Goran Hyden who posited that the style of policy making was characterized by the notion that “we must run while others walk”

This mode of policy making was also linked to the modality in which socialism was conceived in Tanzania. According to Resnick, I. in his book, *The Long Transition: Building socialism in Tanzania*,

“.....in fact the ideology at first was largely president Nyerere’s personal construct...the ideology was Nyerere’s perception of reality and his prescription for change. It was never a voicing of people’s (or even of the leaders closest to him) understanding of their own oppression and agenda for liberation”.

Accordingly, the combination of a developmentalist ideology, a pressing sense of urgency and a belief in state leadership, especially of Mwalimu Nyerere provided an ideological rationalization for claiming that all the energies had to be harnessed in the interest of development. In such a situation, politics and political factionalism were viewed as divisive and as having no place while the most important task – development - was at hand. As Shivji observed

“.....politics are relegated to the background while economics came to occupy the central place in the ideological terrain”.

Thus to ensure that all energies were channeled in the right direction - in the interests of development, all mass organizations such as the trade union, the cooperative movement and the women’s organization – Umoja wa Wanawake Tanzania (UWT) were coopted and affiliated to the party. One of the stated objectives of UWT was:

... to unite UWT with other national organizations under the Party to foster national development.

It is significant that until 1990 appointment to the position of Secretary General as well as her deputy was the prerogative of the chairman of the party who was also the president of the State. This mode of appointment rendered questionable where the Secretary General owed her loyalty - the female constituency that she was purported to represent or the appointing authority.

While these features of the State were not unique to Tanzania, it is their implications for gender equality that is at issue for gender advocates. While it is significant that the cooptation of political pressure groups was indiscriminately exercised, the failure to recognize women’s interests as separate from men’s deprived the state of an opportune moment for bringing about genuine gender transformation. Further, it can be suggested that given the predominantly male composition of the party and the state, it is possible that demands that can be termed as strategic and which aimed at women getting the same right as men and abolishing women’s subordination to men would have proved to be too radical or too feminist to be part of the socialist agenda and were suppressed for being divisive. As one commentator pointed out at the time:

“.....In Tanzania, the term feminism is not widely known or used. The reasons are... the image of feminism portrayed in developing countries was that feminism is a struggle of women against men and feminists were looked upon as misfits in their societies”

According to one observer, the relationship between UWT and the Party was such that whatever decision was made by UWT, the Party had to give the mandate for implementation. The cooptation of the women wing of the party was to facilitate women's participation in line with Party directives.

Although the perception of what UWT was able to achieve for women differed, the majority view was that UWT was instrumental in canvassing the State to enact some significant women-centered (as opposed to gender centered) laws and policies. We shall examine this at length next week.

To summarize, the Tanzanian theory of socialism did not go far enough to encompass the dual exploitation of women in the prevailing traditional and capitalist relations of production as well as within the family or the household. Consequently women were conceptualized as workers or peasants without due regard that even as members of these broader categories, they have separate gender interests from men. Secondly, socialization was viewed narrowly in terms of economic resources. There was no corresponding move to socialize the norms and values that would ensure equitable division of the total human experience. Women's political interests were depoliticized and neutralized in order to avoid divisions in the "interest of development" (or was it in the interest of patriarchy). Inadequate attention was paid to the negative effects of retaining old structures, ideologies and processes side by side with the new socialist principles and ideologies.

The impact of all these factors was bound to be reflected in the content of laws and policies and also during implementation as we shall see next week.