

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

This year we have many reasons to celebrate women beyond the official International Women's Day which was on Sunday 8th March. Gathered in New York from 9-20 March 2015 are representatives of governments who are participating in the 59th session of the Commission on the Status of Women. Their main objective is to review progress and remaining challenges in implementing the landmark Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action which was adopted 20 years ago. Present as well are more than 1,100 Non-Governmental Organizations who will deliberate on critical areas of concerns for women and how actions for gender equality can be stepped up.



Laetitia Mukurasi gained recognition as the first woman to fight and win the first labour case against discrimination in Tanzania in 1986. 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 and 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.

As a person who witnessed the adoption of the gender mainstreaming strategy whose goal is gender equality and then went on to pioneer its implementation, some developments in gender equality across the world in the last 20 years are cause for some celebration. I recall the heady years when many people in Tanzania, women as well as men, viewed those who has been able to attend the Beijing Conference with admiration and wanted to know what had actually transpired. As master of ceremony at a "Bringing Beijing Back Home" event which was held to welcome Mama Gertrude Mongella, the Secretary General of the Beijing Conference, I heard her proclaim with conviction and pride that the gender revolution was on and that there was no going back. That motivated many activists to work with greater vigour. I am proud that I had the opportunity advocate for gender equality and give voice and visibility to women empowerment issues in two large multilateral organizations, the UNDP country Office and the African Development Bank. Indeed I consider it a privilege to be among the pioneers who worked at the coalface of the gender policy implementation in the early years after the adoption of the Beijing Platform for Action.

In the last 20 years, I have seen awareness to gender equality issues evolve at various levels. Locally, the widely spoken language in Tanzania - Kiswahili, did not have the equivalent of the word "gender". Concepts such as gender analysis, gender awareness, gender blind, gender responsive planning were not known. Today, not only is the term "gender" well recognised but also a new word "jinsia" for gender and "jinsi" for sex have been added to the Kiswahili lexicon. The use and analysis of the two terms in everyday reporting in the radio, newspapers in seminars and workshops have contributed to some awareness and shifts in societal attitudes and perceptions towards the girl child. It has also brought about greater appreciation and acceptance of women abilities and capability as leaders. At the regional level, the strategy has

catalysed many initiatives including the clamour for 30/70 and now 50/50 presentation at all levels of decision making in several countries. While gender equality is far from being achieved, the empowerment of women is slowly but resolutely moving forward.

Across the world, women have rejected the stereotypical view of what is possible for them as human beings. Globally, there are now 22 female presidents, prime ministers and other heads of state in power and 22 per cent of parliamentary seats are held by women. In Tanzania, women constitute 36 per cent of all parliamentarians. There are now more self-employed women, more female doctors, lawyers, pilots, engineers and accountants than was the case 20 years ago. An unprecedented number of women have been elected, nominated or appointed to positions of high responsibility such as Presidents, Speakers, Ministers, Permanent Secretaries, Judges, and Commissioners of Police among others. In several countries, legislation has been adopted to deal with development challenges confronting women such as discriminatory customs and traditions particularly with regard to property and land ownership, sexual harassment and violence against women, particularly against practices such as female genital mutilation.

Notwithstanding the excellent laws and policies, the results 20 years after the Beijing Conference are far from what was expected. Studies show, for example, that 800 women still die every from preventable pregnancy related causes and 99 per cent of these deaths occur in developing countries; 30 per cent are likely to experience physical violence by an intimate partner; over 60 per cent of all illiterates are women; in Sub-Saharan Africa women spend 16 million hours per day collecting water and women constitute only 5 per cent of all Chief Executive Officers. Indeed an authoritative global review reveals that that advancement in the status of women has been unacceptably slow with areas of stagnation and even regression. This has been attributed to world leaders who are said not to have done as expected in operationalizing the commitments made in the visionary BPfA.

The achievement of gender equality has encountered several challenges at different levels. As a gender mainstreaming practitioner, I wish to highlight four critical challenges at the organizational level:

First, the perception and attitudes of men who are the main implementers of the gender mainstreaming strategy are changing only very slowly. It is a fact that men still command considerable societal power and enjoy a numerical advantage in high level decision making positions in governments, private sector, bi-lateral and multilateral organizations. However, with only a very few exceptions, most are struggling with the baggage of deeply entrenched male supremacist ideologies on one hand and the negative perceptions, myths and stereotypes about women that are deeply rooted in culture, religion, folklore, traditions, institutions and value systems. They find it difficult therefore to champion these issues. Somehow, most do not think that they have a stake in empowering women as this is a challenge to the status quo which hitherto which privileges them as a gender category. The prospect of empowering women presents most men with anxiety as they see it in terms of a zero-sum game – if women gain power they will lose it. They may see its logic and acknowledge it intellectually but at the emotional level it contradicts all that they have been taught and led to believe. The tactics used by men in leadership to prevent, or obstruct the institutionalization of gender equality policy include, inactivity/passivity, evaporation of gender inputs at all stages of the project development and implementation process; “loss” or blocking or disappearance of important reports; preventing gender equality operations from acquiring resources and undermining gender equality initiatives by questioning their relevance and legitimacy Many of them especially those in positions of power may be forced by virtue of their positions to stand on

platforms and pay lip-service to gender equality and talk about how they support their mothers, but most do not understand or support it. In a very illuminating paper, titled “*Gender Mainstreaming in Development Programmes: What Works, What Does Not Work and What Needs to Be Done*”, George Zimbizi, a Zimbabwean Social Development Consultant narrates the private opinion on gender equality of a Chief in Swaziland which echoes attitudes elsewhere:

“Sometimes we have to sing along this tune on gender equality, at least in public, because this is what the donor wants and expects us to do. To be honest with you I don’t think this gender equality thing works here because it is against our culture and beliefs. Elevating women to the same level with men will create instability in families and I as a chief, a custodian of culture, would not want to see this happening. We however sometimes need to be seen to be swimming with the tide because we want these donor funds. Talk to these men in private, nobody believes in this at all”.

Equally, men in the professional categories who had to oversee the implementation of programmes and projects in many multi-lateral organizations find it difficult to broach issues of gender equality in their dialogue government counterparts. In her seminal book, *Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead* Sheryl Sandberg, the Chief Operations Officer of Facebook cites a male CEO who confided in her that “it is easier to talk about your sex life than to talk about gender”. The net result of men’s inner struggle is that “these gender equality issues tend to be ignored, treated with ambivalence or outright indifference and with impunity particularly in organizations where the mechanisms for accountability are weak. Much more needs to be done to deconstruct men’s thinking, transform of mindset and build their capacities to support gender equality.

Secondly, though gender refers to both women and men, gender had been used as a proxy for women or women issues and less as a concept that calls for transformation of the unequal economic, social and political relations between women and men. This creates an impression that gender equality issues are solely a female province. While the focus on women is justified because it is women and women’s perspectives and ideas that should permeate mainstream thinking and practice, this lop-sided attention directed to women is counter-productive for two reasons. It is bound to result in strategies that target women alone thus placing the onus of any transformation in gender relations on their shoulders. This is counter-productive because it is contrary to and in conflict with the hierarchical cultural values which men are seen as the heads and as leaders. In addition, if we focus solely on women, the opportunity to problematize men is lost and men are not seen as part of the problem that needs a solution. Thus interventions that would fundamentally change the construction of gender relations are not appropriately directed. In her book, *Everyday Sexism*, Laura Bates observes: “the very notion that there is such a thing as a women’s issue is deeply damaging not just to the women fighting for such causes but also to society at large.To call gendered violence or abuse a women’s issue is to absolve the perpetrators of responsibility while equally alienating and discounting the male victims. This inevitably means that we lack the focus on perpetrator’s motivations and actions which is so desperately needed for meaningful progress to be made”. Thus the gender revolution has to be visualized in its proper sense and should target both women and men simultaneously.

Thirdly, the lack of clarity of the inextricable link between gender and feminism has resulted in a backlash against those who promote gender equality. While a feminist is man or woman who believes that men and women should have equal rights and opportunities and advocates for change, the term “feminism” tends to be, in the words of one African writer, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, heavy with baggage. Indeed it is perceived as emanating from the reactionary

women's movement in the west and contrary to African culture. Regretfully, the imagery associated with feminism is one of an unruly, man-hater, anti-establishment, strident, humourless, bra-burning virago. This perception of feminism is a problem for gender mainstreaming because it makes it unacceptable to many African male policy implementers, who see it as an aberration. Even some women bureaucrats disassociate themselves from it for fear of incurring male displeasure and placing their careers in jeopardy. The lack of understanding of the "F-word" has led to the subjection of people whose mandate is to promote gender equality to abuse, bullying, sexism and discrimination. Most times, this manifests as sexist jokes disingenuously camouflaged as office humour or negative comments labeled as constructive feedback. In several organizations, Gender Specialists and Gender Focal Points have to work in an environment fraught with suspicion, controversy and frustration and are perceived not as change agents but as disruptive influences who want to turn culture on its head. Over time, the stress dissipates their energies and is a disincentive to work efficiently. Concerted efforts are required to change the perception of feminism and of gender specialists.

Fourthly, heads of organizations make public pronouncements of their commitments to gender equality which is negated by their dismal failure to put in place adequate structures and resources necessary for its effective operationalization. This is amply demonstrated by the low positioning of staff who work on gender issues such as Gender Specialists and Gender Focal Points. To be given a position whose remit spans the whole institution without corresponding power, authority and political clout to execute their mandate can be disempowering. It also often signals the relatively low importance accorded to women/gender issues. The positioning of many gender officers and focal points mimics gender relations in the wider society in which women are subordinated to men. Their work is rendered even more difficult when they are not allocated funds from the mainstream budget to execute their work thus reduced to having to "beg" from other donors. In some organizations improvements have been made with gender officers attaining the level of directors and managers. However the majority still face marginalization. Although the situation of gender officers has merited considerable historical attention over the years the situation is only changing very slowly.

Notwithstanding these shortcomings, the gender mainstreaming strategy whose goal is equality between the sexes remains a transformatory concept, first because it places the human dimension at the centre of global development policies. The United Nations defines the basic objective of development as: *"enlarging the choices of women and men, by expanding their capabilities such as improved health, knowledge and skills and opportunity to use these capabilities for productive purposes, or for being active in cultural, social and political affairs"*. Two decades after the Beijing Conference, the realization is slowly but steadily beginning to permeate that the achievement of development is unsustainable from policies developed from the perspective of men or women alone. Both genders must be integral to all fields. Secondly, it is a radical strategy because it provides the legitimacy to debate and question the economic, social and political relations that accord more power to one gender within the public and private domains and the unequal division of labour, income, rights, power, dignity and respect. Sustainable development can only result from true and equal partnership between women and men. Although gender mainstreaming is still not a well understood or supported concept, it is an accepted as a global strategy, process and principle of development and will remain relevant so long as relative to men most women remain subject to less social, political, economic and legal rights.