

Progress for women in the past 20 years after the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action was evaluated as slow with areas of stagnation and even regression. World leaders were castigated for not doing as expected in operationalizing the commitments made in the visionary BDPfA. In discussing some of the factors that hold gender equality back, Laetitia identified attitudinal barriers, the tendency to conflate “gender” with “women” and poor understanding of what feminism is about as challenges. In this fourth instalment, she examines factors related to the positioning and role of gender officers as challenges to effectively promoting gender equality.



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.

Last week we focused on feminism and saw how misconception and limited understanding of the concept elicits a hostile response not only against issues of equality but also against people whose work is to advocate for it. For emphasis feminism is defined as a belief that women and men are and have been treated differently by society, and in ways that women have systematically been discriminated against in participating fully in all arenas be they economic, political, social or personal. This belief includes a desire that this situation should change so that women have the same rights, resources, power and opportunities as men and treated in the same way. As a corollary a feminist is man or woman who believes in the equality of the men and women and advocates for change.

This week I will examine the factors pertaining to the positioning and role of gender officers as a challenge to effectiveness in advancing gender equality.

As is well known, Gender Officers are normally part of the machineries or mechanisms for the advancement of equality and women empowerment. Although their functions tend to be widely diverse, Gender Officers are staff members whose remit requires them to mainstream gender across all organizational activities. As such their day to day function is to translate gender equality policy into action; to advocate and spearhead initiatives for gender equality and give voice and visibility to women issues. To achieve these objectives, gender officers develop, monitor and report on the implementation of the gender policies and action plans; coordinate gender mainstreaming activities; provide technical support; develop and disseminate gender tools; facilitate training workshops and seminars; mobilize resources; and promote inter-agency collaboration among other activities.

Gender officers however are not a homogenous group. I differentiate Gender Specialists (GSs) from a Gender Focal Points (GFPs). For the purpose of this article, I define GSs as staff members who have been technically trained or professionally equipped with analytical,

conceptual and practical skills that enable them to provide expert opinion, analysis or advice and propose sound measures for gender mainstreaming in diverse contexts, sectors, themes, research and in operational work. GSs are normally engaged to work on gender fulltime. GFPs are staff usually female employed to work full-time in other areas of expertise such as economics, law, education, infrastructure or financial analysis but with added responsibility for gender work. Many do not work full time on gender issues and tend to be completely new to this work.

And there is the rub to use a Shakespearian phrase. As Christine Warioba argues in her paper: ***The role of national mechanisms in promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women: SADC experience***, not all people who are appointed GSs and GFPs, are technically qualified to do gender work. The appointments of GFP tend to be arbitrary, to favour females female and there is often a presumption of willingness or a positive psychological disposition to women wanting to work in this minefield area. Experience however shows that the perception of women to gender work cannot be assumed to be always positive. The confession of one GFP who I met in Kenya is a case in point:

“I am an agricultural economist. My training did not prepare me to pay attention to gender/women issues. Not only did I take the existing gender division of labour for granted but also I did not question it. One day I was called by my director and told that in addition to my work, I would also take on the role of the gender focal point for the department. I reflected on how I deeply disliked the Women in Development officers whom I saw as nuisances who were there to create trouble for others. I told my boss that I was not happy to take on this work as I was not trained to handle women/gender issues. The real reason however was that I could not visualize myself linked with those WID officers. I felt I was not trained and that I could not handle the backlash or navigate such a controversial issue that many people associated with “rebellious women,” and within a patriarchal bureaucratic environment. The boss said I would have to learn fast as it was urgent that I take on that role. Although I could not openly reject to do the job, I refused to have anything to do with it until I was ultimately threatened with the sack. I came later to discover that it was a condition stipulated by the donors that before they could sign off on the next round of aid money for our ministry, a gender focal point must be on board and proof thereof provided. I was forced to take on the job.”

The lack of standard or criteria of who can and cannot work as a Gender Officer is a factor, among others that impinges on the implementation effectiveness of gender equality policy.

The implementation of gender policy is further hampered by positioning of most GSs and GFPs in subordinate positions within the organizational hierarchy and in ways that mimic gender relations in the wider society. A useful analogy about how GSs and GFPs are treated in some organizations is provided by Joanna Sandler in her article titled: ***Strategies of Feminist Bureaucrats: United Nations Experiences***. She identifies three strategies by which one UN entity responsible for the advancement of women was structured for organisational inequality vis a vis other entities. The first strategy was silencing or at least reducing the voice and ability of the women’s entity to manage its own business including approving recruitments of its staff. It also had to lobby for the opportunity to represent itself or speak out for gender equality and women’s rights in key policy venues and its leadership was considered not at a high enough level to be included on the podium at meetings. The second was constantly questioning its right to exist. The third tactic was strategic public and private demonstrations of ‘power over’ by putting in place an administrative arrangement in which the women’s entity had to depend on another entity to co-sign its cheques and make payment on its behalf.

This experience in which gender officers are rendered powerless is regrettably not limited to this organization alone. For example, in one African regional organization, gender issues were considered a priority cross-cutting issue along with environment. However, organizationally, gender was placed under male managers who were invariably environmentalists and non-African. Not only were these male managers untrained and therefore not in a position to articulate the issues competently but other male colleagues seized upon their lack of capability to ridicule and ignore their advice on gender. The female Gender Specialist, who was highly qualified and capable of giving voice and visibility to the issues, was placed at a relatively junior position. In keeping with organizational practice, only the male environmentalist managers could attend management meetings. Thus the Gender Specialist could not participate in strategy planning meetings where important policy and budgetary decisions were made. Opportunity was therefore lost to advance gender/women issues. This unfortunate state was exacerbated by the fact that since the managers were non-Africans, it provided the other African male managers with an excuse to evade the issue and at the same time charge them with trying to promote cultural imperialism!

The positioning of gender officers in marginal positions is an impediment to promoting gender equality policies effectively. To occupy a position whose remit spans the whole institution without being endowed with power, authority and political clout to enforce compliance and accountability is disempowering. It signals the relatively low importance accorded to women/gender issues. Although the marginal situation of gender officers has merited considerable historical attention over the years the situation is only changing very slowly.

Tokenism is another method by which efforts to promote gender equality is thwarted at organizational level. In the words of Sara Hlupekile Longwe in her paper *From Welfare to Empowerment: The Situation of Women in Development in Africa*, this involves:

“having a *token* woman in all discussions to address “gender issues” and to acknowledge “the woman’s point of view”. In most cases, such women are a *token* few – preferably one. Every committee can then give *token* respect to the *token* ideas from the *token* woman, for at least five *token* minutes. The *token* woman may very well provide valuable advice on how to adjust the wording of documents to take account of female sensitivities, and to adjust the terminology to conform with the jargon and latest fashionable rhetoric on women’s development. Tokenism is therefore an institutionalized method for achieving improved lip-service and frequently encountered at all management levels”.

Tokenism is harmful to organizations and detrimental to the advancement of gender equality because it leads to recruitment of staff mainly for window dressing purposes. It is also damaging to people who do gender work because it creates inordinate expectations and the pressure to deliver at the risk of being scattered all over the place and failing to generate results.

So far I have discussed some of the obstacles to gender equality policies at the organizational level as attitudinal barriers, lack of clarity of the concepts “gender” and “women”; misconceptions over what is feminism and who is a feminist and the marginal positioning of gender officers as an indication of structural organization inequality. Next week, I shall look at the visualization of women in development as an impediment to gender equality.