

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

During the recent meeting of the Commission on the Status of Women which was held in March this year, it was reported that the implementation progress of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in the past 20 years was unacceptably slow with areas of stagnation and even regression. In discussing some of the factors that hold gender equality back, Laetitia identified attitudinal barriers and the tendency to conflate “gender” with “women” as challenges. In this third instalment, she looks at misconceptions over the term “Feminism” and how this erodes the dynamism of gender officers in many organizations.



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.

The third challenge operating invisibly at the organizational level is the lack of clarity or rather limited understanding of the inextricable link between gender equality and feminism. This has resulted in a backlash not only against issues of equality but also against people whose work is to advocate for it. It is not uncommon for gender officers or advocacy groups to be branded feminists in ways that are pejorative. The term “feminist” tends to be, in the words of one African writer, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, heavy with baggage. It is perceived as emanating from the 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 the implementation of gender equality policies because such a perception makes it unacceptable to many African male policy implementers, who see it as an aberration, and who, as we saw last week, mount an overt and covert resistance against it. Even some female bureaucrats are not immune from this kind of reaction. Indeed they have been known to distance themselves from gender officers or advocates for fear of being “tainted” and incurring male displeasure thus placing their careers in jeopardy.

But what is feminism and who is a feminist?

While definitions of Feminism emanate from different schools of thought, a common thread that characterize them all is the belief that women and men are and have been treated differently by society, and in ways that that women have systematically been discriminated against in participating fully in all economic, political and social means advocacy for women's rights on the ground of the equality of the sexes in all arenas be they political, economic,

social, cultural or personal. As a corollary a feminist is man or woman who believes that men and women should have equal rights and opportunities and advocates for change.

Contrary to those who view feminism in negative terms, it may come as a surprise to realize that the writings and actions of presidents such as the late Nyerere of Tanzania, the late Bourguiba of Tunisia as well as the current president of Rwanda, Kagame, represent feminist ideals. They recognized the marginalization of women and as leaders and statesmen acknowledged, advocated and took concrete measures to promote gender equality.

President Nyerere's (Mwalimu) feminist stance is captured in the following quote that was made in his book *Freedom and Development in 1973*:

"... 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"

Many educated women of my generation owe a lot to the position of Mwalimu on gender equality policies which promoted girls' education.

Similarly in Tunisia, owing to policies with strong feminist overtones championed under the leadership of President Habib Bourguiba, the first post-independence leader, women have, since 1956 enjoyed legal rights and advances in education unparalleled in any other Arab nation. Seeking to promote equality in marriage, the family code was amended banning polygamy and repudiation, promoting consensual marriage and introducing equal divorce proceedings. Further amendments to the personal status code, labour code, and criminal code also strengthened women's rights. By the 1980s Tunisia had invested heavily in girls' education whose numbers equalled that of boys.

Equally, due to the support and conscientious feminist policies of President Kagame of Rwanda, 64% of its parliamentarians and half the country's 14 Supreme Court justices are women. Boys and girls now attend compulsory primary and secondary school in equal numbers, and new laws have been enacted to enable women to own and inherit property.

The charge that feminism is not African is therefore unfounded given that some male African heads of state have provided strong leadership on this issue. They may not have labelled their actions as such but through their writings, statements and actions, they did something to change it. It should be borne in mind that beyond the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action which was adopted in 1995, several sub-regional, regional and international agreements and declarations on gender equality have been adopted by many African governments. These include the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against women (CEDAW); the United Nations Security Council resolution 1325 of 2000 on Women, Peace and Security; the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Declaration on Gender.

It is also farfetched to say that African women have been instigated by outsiders to fight for their rights. Such statement denigrates the intelligence, agency and potential of African women. The pursuit for equality and the desire to be treated with dignity and respect is as

innate as it is universal. It knows no sex, race, tribe or ethnicity. African women like women elsewhere in the world need education, incomes, seek for the right to be safe from all forms of violence, to own and control land, to be equally represented in politics in order to determine the direction of development in the communities and states and want the right not to be discriminated against based on the fact that they are born women.

Thus as suggested by Tawanda Sachikonye in her paper titled “*The African Feminism Debate*” Feminism entails “a firm commitment to gender equality, a painful awareness that such equality is far from achieved, and a continuing desire to work toward such equality.”

Due to lack of understanding of the “F-word” or Feminism as is commonly known, the fight for women’s rights has too often been stigmatised in some places of work. Unfortunately, due to the nature of their work, gender officers cannot escape being branded as feminists. They therefore bear the brunt of the backlash to feminism and gender equality. Indeed there is vast literature that demonstrates that some gender officers have often been subjected to personalized abuse, bullying, and discrimination. They are often perceived not as change agents but as dangerous and disruptive influences given that their job involves questioning the traditional relations between the sexes.

In her paper: “*Can an Aid Bureaucracy Empower Women?*” Karin Himmerlstrand discusses how culture and other social barriers have posed complex challenges to equality officers. She observes that not only have they failed to get promoted very far but they have been met with slander, accusations, suspicions and gossip for being part of the “women’s lib” movement and considered untrustworthy. The backlash against feminism often takes the form of sexist jokes disingenuously camouflaged as office humour or negative comments labeled as constructive feedback. In her paper titled “*Acceptable sexism? Unconscious bias in the workplace*” Sneha Khilay observes that “sexist humour, which is really the denigration of women through humour, trivialises the unpleasant reality of sex discrimination behind a smokescreen of harmless banter and implies that when sexist language is presented as humour or in jest, it is to be viewed as acceptable and considered a bonding ritual between colleagues”. Well, it is not. Over time, the stress of working in such a minefield area is a factor that may affect their energy and drive. It is a disincentive to advocate effectively for equality in a fraught environment. Doing gender work in some organizations can sometimes prove to be an occupational hazard. Gender advocates need to do more to educate the public and to change the perception of feminism and of gender specialists.

Next week, I will examine the positioning of gender officers in some organizations as a challenge to promoting gender equality.