

State Construction of Gender

*Marjorie J Mbilinyi**

Introduction

A common thread running through most of the articles included in this edition of *UTAFITI (New Series)* is the role of the state in constructing gender. Four of the seven articles focus on formal schooling—Meena's "Situational Analysis of Education of Girls/Women in Tanzania", Mushi's "Tanzanian Secondary School Science Teachers Perception and Reaction to Gender Differences in Performance in Science", Malekela's "Tanzanian School Women Talking: Are the Traditional Patterns of Thinking Changing?" and Possi's "Gender and Education of People with Disabilities in Tanzania". Manji's "The Case for Women's Rights to Land in Tanzania: Some Observations in the Context of AIDS" is a strong critique of dualistic state policy concerning customary and common laws pertaining to land and other property. Mbonile and Lihawa's analysis in "Rural-Urban Female Migration in Tanzania, A Case of Dar es Salaam City" can be read as an indictment of the government for its failure to provide mechanisms to protect workers' rights for people employed in marginal jobs such as waitressing in bars (bar girls) or domestic service.

The texts, taken as a whole, provide a wealth of information, especially about formal education. Readers are challenged to read beyond the facts; to consider what kind of social forces have propelled the education and legal system in a certain direction, whose outcome is to systematically deprive girls and women of their rights as human beings and to reinforce male domination in society as a whole?

In the next major section, I will explore some of the common themes that emerge among the articles, as well as some differences. A brief summary of each article is provided in the third and final section.

* Professor of Education, Institute of Development Studies, University of Dar es Salaam; founder member of Tanzania Gender Networking Program (TGNP) and Women's Research and Documentation Project (WRDP).

2 *Marjorie J. Mbilinyi*

Gender Construction

Gender, as distinct from sex, concerns the social construction of gender relations between women and men, old and young, parent and child. Gender relations have a history, they are a site of struggle, they change (TGNP, 1993). Feminists, and here I am referring to *critical third world feminists* in particular, have endeavoured to analyse how gender relations are constructed over time and place, with specific attention to differences according to class, race, ethnicity and nationality (Mbilinyi, 1992; Meena, 1992b). The 'construction' process not only connotes the behaviour of ruling classes/groups in society, in establishing and defending male dominant power relations and patterns of behaviour, but it also refers to efforts by youth, women, the poor and others to context, resist, struggle against and transform the status quo (TGNP 1993).

The state, understood as the complex of institutions and functions associated with government, has contributed to the shaping of gender relations in Tanzania, and indeed, the African continent as a whole (Parpart and Staudt 1989, Stichter and Parpart 1988, Imam, Mama and Sow 1997; Tsikata in particular, TGNP 1993). More studies are needed which consciously analyse the development of state policy in different sectors, and its impact on the construction of gender relations; as well as state policy which specifically focuses on women or gender relations. Manji's article discussed below is a welcome contribution in this direction.

Land Rights

Manji provides a nuanced analysis of how *women's rights to land* have been eroded by market relations, increasing patriarchy, and specific state policies. A bargaining model is used, which perceives that women are active subjects, not passive victims of power structures. The analysis documents the success with which some women have been able to increase their bargaining power vis-à-vis family members and in-laws, by securing independent rights to land. This has strengthened their ability to demand and secure family support and funds for medicine and improved nutrition, which has been especially important for widows and women with HIV/AIDS.

HIV/AIDS has heightened the level of economic violence against women, in the context of economic crisis and growing land scarcity in Mubba District, Kagera Region. The laws are successfully manipulated, largely by men, to dispossess women of their rights to land, and indeed, to a livelihood. The judiciary system is ambivalent, but basically reinforces patriarchal customary laws which deprive women systematically of their rights to land, children and to the proceeds of lifelong work. While calling for legal reform which is absolutely clear in abolishing all laws which discriminate against women with

respect to access to and control over land, the author also emphasises the need to move beyond legal reform. A movement is necessary which builds social legitimacy for women's rights to land, in rural and urban areas. This is especially urgent now, in the context of growing pressure for liberalisation of land laws and tenure systems. As land becomes increasingly scarce and costly, women are most likely to be dispossessed *and* disenfranchised (see papers produced by TAWLA and other members of the Gender Task Force, which is part of the National Land Forum led by Hakiardhi).

Formal Education: Reinforcement or Challenge to Male Biased Systems?

Meena's article provides a strong analysis of education *policy*, including specific strategies adopted to reform or transform the system, and the gaps which have persisted in implementation, *and* policy. She makes clear the need to engage more effectively with the state (national government and donor agencies), so as to challenge the way certain government policies systematically discriminate against girls and women. This requires the building of a democratic movement to abolish all forms of discrimination, including within education. Activists and educators have increasingly recognised the futility of focusing solely on lobbying activities: i.e. carrying out research, disseminating the resulting information to officials in government and MPs and recommending education reforms. Civil society organisations need to be strengthened, which challenge the state and successfully build up popular pressure for change which forces the government to act on behalf of the majority of its citizens. Otherwise, it will continue to act on behalf of the rich minority, who reside in and out of the country, and profit from the cheap labour and unpaid labour provided by women *as a result of the male bias in our economy, polity, and society*.

The negative impact of macro economic reforms associated with liberalisation and Structural Adjustment (SAP hereafter) is also documented by Meena. School expenditures have risen because of cost sharing, and education has become a marketed commodity, due partly to privatisation and liberalisation in education reform. The former policy of equity and redistribution in education is under attack. Education policies of the 1970s insured that the majority of children, whether rich or poor, got access to primary education, and provided affirmative action to open up education opportunity for women and children from disadvantaged districts and regions. Detailed research is urgently needed, along the lines of Malekela's (1983) work, to analyse the question of access to education at primary, secondary and post-secondary level in the present context of SAP.

Although most activists call for increased access for girls/women in formal education, there is an urgent need to transform the education system at the same time—otherwise, girls and women find themselves oppressed and socialised by the conservative patriarchal structures found in schools, colleges and universities. Mushi documents the extent to which science teachers have differential expectations for girls and boys, in terms of performance in school *and* examinations, which can easily reinforce a self-fulfilling prophecy. There are very few female models of successful science teachers, or other scientists, for young women to emulate. Teaching materials and text books construct a particular imagery of men and women: what kind of work they do, how they behave, what they wear. Women are consistently inferior and subordinate to men (see Meena's article).

Particularly alarming was the finding that nearly 80% of the female teachers were blind about the male biased nature of the school environment, and its probable contribution to gender differences in school performance. Women, *more than men*, denied the negative role of teachers. Or the equally disturbing finding that 60% of the male teachers believed in biological differences as the cause for poor female performance. Where women and men teachers agreed with each other is to blame the parents—for boy preference, the gender division of labour, and being more restrictive of girls than boys. As if these qualities were not widespread in formal education!

Meena's article summarises a tremendous amount of information concerning the male bias in formal education, in terms of curriculum, teaching materials, teacher-student interactions, *macho pedagogy*, and mechanisms to recruit teachers and students. More attention is needed to disseminate this information to teachers at all levels, and to raise their awareness of the *negative impact which formal schooling itself has on girls/women* (see UNICEF 1996 study of the girl child).

The most hopeful essay in the collection may be that of Malekela, who invited young women in secondary school to share their views about education, employment, gender, and 'life'. Their positive views about themselves and parental support for their efforts to succeed in school belied the findings of other studies which emphasise student passivity and low self-image. However, the women were also conservative about many issues, and repeated gender stereotypes that have been contradicted by changes in behaviour. A good example is their belief that most parents have a male preference with respect to investment in education, and are more likely to invest in boys' education than girls. This negates the major investment which a large number of parents have made in private schooling of their daughters at all levels. What needs further analysis, however, are class differences in parental investments in education, controlled by gender and urban/rural location.

Especially tragic were female students' low expectations for the performance of women teachers, and their resulting preference to be taught by men:

"Women teachers are very hot-tempered"

"Sometimes women teachers share boyfriends with their students and this annoys them very much"

"Women teachers are usually lazier than men teachers"

Women teachers were also blamed because of reproductive responsibilities associated with the gender division of labour—maternity leave, caring for children and sick relatives—which were labelled "a waste of time"! These are expressions of patriarchal ideology, and reveal a very low level of gender consciousness among the students, and a complete lack of solidarity between women students and teachers.

Both Meena and Malekela emphasise the negative self-image and lack of self-confidence which characterise female students, but the data on which such conclusions are drawn is based on studies carried out *in school*—a site of patriarchal socialisation. What about girls and women who are not in school, and have probably become active in the informal sector as micro-small enterprisers, earning independent cash incomes? Comparative studies of behaviour and attitudes of female and male persons in different age cohorts are needed, which contrast self-image and self-confidence of those who remain dependent on parents (in/out of school), those who have married, and those who are unmarried; with attention, as well, to their economic activities.

Another issue which Meena refers to are the countless number of girls and women who have risen above negative gender stereotypes, and succeeded in school and in employment later. Where did they draw their strength from? Studies are urgently needed of the different forms of contestation, resistance and struggle against male bias which girls and women carry out at different levels of the education system, such as the well-known educator in Moshi, Mary Kamm (MP), who has consistently acted to protect the rights of pregnant school girls for further education. What are the characteristics of transformative educators *and students*, and how can these be fostered by the education system itself, but even more so, by activist NGOs and CBOs (see Mbilinyi and Mbughuni 1991)?

The double oppression which disabled girls/women experience is highlighted by Possi, discriminated against on grounds of gender and disability. A clear state policy to support the rights of disabled persons to education—and employment, freedom of movement and other basic rights—is glaringly absent. One indicator is the absence of official statistics to monitor the situation—the

6 *Marjorie J. Mbillinyi*

last census of people with disabilities was in 1981! Some 10% of the population is reportedly disabled, and the majority are systematically denied access to formal schooling. Of the few privileged students who make it to primary and secondary school, a variety of barriers block women's access to post-secondary education.

Inequalities in education are highly associated with gender inequities in employment. Mbonile and Lihawa's article explores the conditions of bar maids in Dar es Salaam, an occupation which 'attracts' a growing number of young women who migrate to towns and rural trade centres. They are subject to high levels of exploitation and sexual harassment, and lack any systematic form of worker benefits or protection, as a matter of government policy.

Proverbs are part of the realm of oral literature and culture which lies outside the state, but in this case, tend to reinforce state construction of patriarchal gender roles. Madumulla's review highlights the dual imagery of women in proverbs: the hardworking mother figure, and the evil sorceress, more unfaithful than virtuous. He is in agreement with the text under review that the main producer of proverbs has been men, who use them to their own advantage to reduce women to become mere objects for their use. "Under the very circumstances, the woman was kept at a distance from the man and, hence, *silenced*".

However, feminists have unearthed alternative forms of oral literature, including proverbs, which were and are controlled by women, and project a more transformative view of gender relations (see the work of Patricia Mbughuni). One of the negative impacts of colonial and post-colonial rule is the silencing of women's contribution to oral literature, and fostering their marginalisation in the arts. Mlama (1991) provides concrete examples of efforts to challenge this marginalisation process, and to facilitate women's empowerment by means of popular theatre.

In this section, I have explored key issues which have emerged in the articles contained in this collection. Brief summaries of each of them are provided in the final section below.

The Articles

In "The Case for Women's Rights to Land in Tanzania", Ambreena Manji argues that there are strong links between women's rights to land and their treatment as widows and/or as persons infected with HIV/AIDS. She explores the male bias found in land tenure and land use systems, focusing on one area

of Kagera Region, and using court cases as well as interviews to provide empirical data. The implications of her findings for land policy reform are presented, with a call for 'hard line' action to abolish the existing discriminatory elements in the law, pegged to customary law and practice.

Ruth Meena's "Situational Analysis of Education of Girls/Women in Tanzania" provides an excellent overview of gender bias in formal education, and of some of the efforts to reform—or transform—the system. Causal factors are explored within and outside of the school environment, and statistical data provided to document male bias at different levels. Government policies are indicted for discriminating against girls/women, but government strategies to redress gender imbalance are also noted and critiqued. A variety of recommended actions are provided, addressed to government and to civil society organisations.

Gender differences in school performance in different subjects are examined, school by school, in P.S. D. Mushi's "Tanzania Secondary School Science Teachers Perception and Reaction to Gender Differences in Performance in Science", along with teachers' perceptions about these differences and their causes. Twenty five schools were visited in six regions of Tanzania; Form 3/4 science teachers were interviewed in each school, and performance compared of 127 male and 127 female students. A common pattern was found, in that girls often outperformed boys in Biology, but boys outperformed girls in Maths, Chemistry and Physics. The majority of teachers recognised that a gender difference existed in performance, but they varied in terms of their perception of possible causes. If anything, female teachers were less gender aware of the negative impact of schooling on girls/women than male teachers, at least according to the views recorded here. Teachers' recommendations for action to improve the situation are also given, along with the author's comments.

Mushi argues against affirmative action procedures such as providing extra time for girls to study science, because this would reinforce the sense of difference. Promoters of affirmative action, including myself, argue, in contrast, that *without affirmative action*, girls/women are not being provided equal opportunity to compete on a level playing field. They enter each level of schooling handicapped by the results of gender discrimination, and need specific remedial programmes to help them overcome the scars of male bias, and catch up with their advantaged male peers (see Meena in this issue, who advocates for affirmative action).

George Malekela analyses the views of Form 4 women students in "Tanzanian School Women Talking...". They are drawn from focus group discussions which were held with 229 female students in Form 4 in Iringa and

Coast regions during 1993. A variety of intriguing questions were used to provoke discussions: for example, “who is valued more in African society, highly educated women with big jobs or low educated women, married with family?” “What are the qualities of a successful woman?” “Is the ability of girls in school the same as boys, according to your teachers” [my paraphrasing]. Contradictory views were discovered, some which validated the women, and others which reinforced their belief in their own lower value in society. Useful recommendations are provided—some of which have actually already been carried out by activist NGOs, but more needs to be done. Much more research is needed of this nature, working with teachers and other educators, as well as students.

In “Gender and Education of People with Disabilities in Tanzania”, M. K. Possi documents the extent of disability in the Tanzanian population, and the level of neglect in providing them with formal schooling. Girls/women are especially deprived of access to education. Relevant recommendations are provided at the end of the article.

The results of interviews with some 400 bar girls in Dar es Salaam are analysed by M. J. Mbonile and Hellen Lihawa in “Rural-Urban Female Migration in Tanzania, A Case of Dar es Salaam City”. Demographic characteristics of the sample are examined, such as levels of education, age and marital status—some 82% had completed primary education. The majority came from the poorer regions of Tanzania, driven by economic poverty and poor social services to seek better employment possibilities in Dar. The migratory and career path of a young migrant is traced, from home to domestic servant to bar maid, and probable sex worker. Bar maids lack any form of regularised wage and work conditions, and are not protected fully by the law so far as worker rights are concerned. One of the most powerful recommendations made is to provide legal protection for people who work in marginal jobs, and are subject to exploitation and sexual abuse.

References

- Imam, A. M., A. Mama, and F. Sow. eds. 1997. *Engendering African Social Sciences*. Dakar: CODESRIA Book Series.
- Malekela, G. A. 1983. *Access to Secondary Education in Sub-Saharan Africa: The Tanzanian Experiment*. PhD theses. University of Chicago.
- Mbilinyi, Marjorie. 1992. Research Methodologies in Gender Issues. In Meena, 1992

- Mbilinyi, M., and P. Mbughuni. eds. 1991. *Education in Tanzania With A Gender Perspective*. Stockholm: SIDA, Education Division Documents No. 53
- Meena, R. 1992a. *Gender in Southern Africa: Conceptual And Theoretical Issues*. Harare: SAPES Books.
- . 1992b. Gender Research/Studies in Southern Africa: An Overview. In Meena 1992a.
- Mlama, Penina M. 1991. *Culture and Development: The Popular Theatre Approach in Africa*. Uppsala: SIDA.
- Parpart, J. L and K. A. Stuaudt (eds). 1989. *Women and the State in Africa* Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Stichter, S. B., and J. L. Parpart (eds). 1988. *Patriarchy and Class*. Boulder: Westview Press
- Tsikata, D. 1997. Gender Equality and the State in Ghana. In Imam *et. al.* 1997.