

Gender Myths and Feminist Fables: Repositioning Gender in Development Policy and Practice

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'Globalisation Hurts Women more than Men'¹

Summary Report

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It has become a truism to say that women have been more harmed than men by the globalisation process, ie the massive restructuring of capital and labour during the last two decades. Critics of the process in Tanzania and elsewhere in Africa, including myself at one time, built their case as follows:

- Retrenchment and downsizing led to the firing of more women than men
- Women's real incomes declined more than that of men
- Women outnumber men in the informal sector, thus exposed to sweatshop work conditions
- Female labour was intensified in paid and unpaid work.

Two related myths are usually attached: (1) men control women's cash incomes at household level; and (2) whereas men are selfish, women are both weak and generous.

These myths have had real policy implications, with conflicting and sometimes damaging consequences for families and communities. Both governments and donors have invested large resources in more of the same – i.e. women's income-generating activities. The main approach has been micro-finance, combined in some cases, not all, with training, and rarely, with market support. This has occurred in the context of the abolition of soft loan policies in commercial public and private banks, public subsidies for crop production and livestock-keeping, and other support systems which formerly reached a relatively large number of peasant producers and smallholder farmers. These support systems mainly benefited male producers and traders. The policy makers argue that the female bias is legitimate because women devote more of their cash earnings to their children's needs, along with other family requirements, compared to men.

The liberal feminists argue, in a contradictory vein, that in spite of the increased 'opportunity' for women in the market place, their earnings are controlled by men because of culture and tradition. Gender training/ sensitisation policy programmes have been fostered in order to raise women's awareness about their oppression and exploitation by their male partners and/or fathers and/or brothers.

More in-depth research and more careful listening have led me to either reject or problematise each of the above conclusions. Firstly, in Tanzania at least, more men than women lost their jobs in the formal sector in both absolute and proportionate terms in the 1980s and 1990s as a result of retrenchment and downsizing. True, job losses were particularly devastating for women in the public sector, because the majority of wage employed women in the formal sector depended on this sector. Nevertheless, men far outnumbered women in formal sector employment in both public and private sectors, and they suffered tremendous set-backs in job security, employment regularity and real incomes at all levels of the occupational hierarchy.

In Tanzania, however, the majority of both women and men never depended on formal sector employment. Tanzania's economy is underdeveloped with hardly any modern manufacturing and service sector. The Structural Adjustment programme led to deindustrialisation, with massive closures of the few factories and processing mills which existed. Hence, most men and women work in some form of agricultural activity combined with non-farm informal sector activity. Moreover, large numbers have migrated from rural areas to town in search of a better life and livable incomes. Men far outnumber women in the informal sector, so-called, in both urban and rural areas. Moreover, many young men have moved into occupational niches formerly controlled by women, especially food processing, preparation and sale.

What about incomes derived from agriculture, the main base for Tanzanians? The architects of SAP promised higher crop incomes in return for devaluation, liberalisation and privatisation policies in agriculture and trade. The opposite occurred for most farmers – crop prices fell in real terms, and rates of return plummeted. Crop prices could not match the rising costs of farm inputs and farm equipment; and domestic markets for some basic food stuffs vanished as a result of increased importation of subsidised food resulting from trade liberalisation. Export crop producers were especially hard hit, and many turned to horticultural and other crops, or devoted more labour and other resource to non-farm activities.

Who are these farmers we are talking about, hurt by the fall in rates of return in 'traditional' export and cash crops such as tea, coffee, cotton, cashew nuts, rice and maize? Men, of course, the controllers of these crops. Denied a fair share in proceeds

from 'male' controlled crops, women had depended all along on other kinds of food crops for household consumption as well as for small cash earnings. Yes, they provided much of the labour in the production of the traditional cash crops, but they did not directly control most of its income.

What about incomes earned in non-farm employment, including casual labour as well as petty trade, artisanry, food and beverage preparation and sale, and the clothing sector? Both women and men in urban and rural areas agree that their incomes have declined in real terms, and that they must work much harder to earn as much as before, if at all. They also agree that many more members of the family or homestead must work in order to provide for family consumption needs. Their perceptions are matched by 'hard' quantitative data.

Whereas in the past the male household head could provide for the main cash needs of the whole family from his earnings as a wage worker or a peasant, this is no longer true. Wives, children of all ages, young women and men and other dependents are employed in some form of paid labour [ie as self-employed or wage-employed in the market] or as unpaid family labour. The primary forms of unpaid family labour in the past were found in domestic work [cooking, water and fuel collection, child care] and in farming and livestock-keeping, where the main exploiter/oppressor was identified as the male household head ie patriarch. These days unpaid family labour of children, youth, dependent sisters and the like is increasingly relied upon by women to support informal sector activities which they control: engaged directly in the production or trade process, eg in batik clothing manufacture, food preparation and sale, and homebrew beer manufacture and sale; or as substitute female labour in domestic work, thus freeing wives/mothers to concentrate on market activities.

I would agree that there has been a major intensification of female labour in market-oriented activities, as compared to that of male labour. In some locations, unpaid family labour primarily consists of the work of wives and their children in reproductive activities, as in the past. But wherever the commoditisation process has extended itself, with openings for female controlled enterprises, there has been an intensification of child and youth labour in unpaid work, often substituting for the paid work of women.

Therefore, the main ‘victims’ of the economic crisis in many areas of Tanzania and much of the rest of Africa are children and youth. However, many children and youth make active choices eg to drop out of school in order to work, or to seek more independent incomes on the streets as hawkers or sex workers rather than working as unpaid family workers. Schools are uninteresting, oppressive places, where girls are especially subject to sexual abuse. Unpaid family labour cannot provide for basic needs, let alone the new consumption items which young people desire.

In general, women and men have very different perceptions about relative changes in income over the last five or ten years. Men have consistently argued that their real incomes are falling. Women argue that they earn more income than ever before, meaning independent income controlled by themselves. Hence, women have conflicting perceptions of both ‘harder times’ than ever before, and better times: more work, devalued money, but more independent control over cash.

Of real significance are the changes that have occurred in gender relations within families and homestead. Many women of all ages, including young married women, have more voice and status as a result of their increased access to and control over cash incomes.

How have men responded? In multiple often conflicting ways, the same as women. The same man, a husband say, feels his manhood threatened by his wife’s autonomy, and may lash out by beating or neglecting her one day. He also devotes part of his working day to providing her with needed inputs and/or labour support for her ‘enterprise’. He relinquishes the labour of some of their children from working on ‘his’ crop so as to assist mama in ‘her’ market activity eg marketing of her produce. In quantitative surveys, it has been documented that the most common source of initial ‘capital’ for women micro-small enterprisers are men, usually their husbands/partners. True, the capital is often in the form of a loan which is repaid, but it is interest-free and far less exploitative than the 30% interest rates charged by most micro-finance programmes.

What about male irresponsibility and female responsibility? More than half of all the households included in research conducted by myself and other colleagues during the 1980s and 1990s depended on the earnings and ‘labour’ of both men and women

household members. Similar results were found by other researchers who asked ‘open’ questions about who provided what, from what resources, as a result of what activities? Complementarity was found in the different activities, be it rural or urban areas. Many women in other cases had set up their own households, in the sense of not being married in a formal sense and not dependent on a male household head. Many placed a premium on being ‘free’ of male oppression or female slavery. Nevertheless, they extracted child support payments of an informal kind from the fathers of their children, and relied on a variety of support systems consisting of male and female kin and non-kin.

Yes, many women denounced male irresponsibility, saying that their husbands had withdrawn financial support as a result of their newfound economic activity. Where did the men spend their money? On themselves [alcohol consumption] and on other women, often second or third wives and/or mistresses.

However, I believe that some women exaggerated the extent of this behaviour, partly to meet the expectations of feminist and other researchers, partly because they have accepted [often non-African and/or state] gender stereotypes about lazy irresponsible African men [ref Ann Whitehead]. Analysis of reports from the same women about household expenditures documents the extent to which the same man often provides a substantial portion of household/family cash needs.

If we reexamine these gender myths from a class/race/gender/imperial angle, they appear extremely harmful and have led to damaging results in terms of policy and practice. Projects target women or ‘poor women’, rather than poor producers, be they male or female. Isolated miniscule projects are supported which operate on an individual basis, rather than collectively owned enterprises. My own work suggests that women, and men, are in desperate need of entirely different kinds of economic development, which encompass whole communities and networks of communities, in order to achieve the sustainable livelihoods they desire. The main barriers to such development are not ‘intimate’ men in one’s family, but largescale investors and the developing agencies who fund and promote them.