

Notes on Transformative Feminism in Tanzania

Our analysis of feminism is guided by asking: ‘what are we against?’, and ‘what are we for?’. We also ask, ‘who are we?’, and ‘who are we with?’.

Many different kinds of feminism have emerged in Tanzania and worldwide in the context of women’s struggles against oppression and exploitation as women/girls and for emancipation and freedom. Although each of these has its own history and positionality, they have many things in common. The most important commonality is that all feminisms challenge male domination, supremacy and discrimination against girls/women in some way, and they seek to improve the situation of girls/women.

At any one moment, one individual or organisation may embody elements of several different feminisms. However, these may be in opposition to each other, and lead to confusion. It is important therefore to clarify exactly where we stand with respect to feminism, because of the different and, in some cases, opposing trajectories which emanate from the different positions which each one takes on key issues. This is especially important in Africa today, given the growing power of major donor agencies to determine policy directions of both governments and civil society organisations, including women’s and feminist organisations.

At the same time, we proudly assert our position as transformative feminists in the face of those who reject feminism as diversionary, secondary or of no consequence, and others who fear the backlash from men and women who uphold male supremacy and patriarchy.

In the next section we examine the feminism approaches which are most prominent in Tanzania and the region today, from the point of view of the position taken by the Tanzania Gender Networking Programme (TGNP), which is transformative feminism. This analysis is situated within the context of corporate-led globalisation and the growing power of ‘western’ governments and the ideology of neo-liberalism in Africa today.

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Different feminisms

The position we take in this paper is that transformative feminism is at the cutting edge of all revolutionary conceptions and social movements, because it links struggles against all major forms of oppression, discrimination and exploitation. *Transformative feminism* struggles against all forms of male domination/supremacy (often referred to as ‘patriarchy’); class exploitation on the basis of capitalism, the dominant economic structure today; imperial domination and growing supremacy of the G7 countries (often referred to as corporate globalization); oppression on the basis of race/ethnic differences; and fundamentalism and traditionalism.

Transformative feminism has not developed in a vacuum, and has its roots in other forms of feminism. At the same time, clarity regarding what it is and what it stands for has partly been derived from a recognition of differences in outlook and ideology, as well as position. Transformative feminism is very different from *radical feminism*, which identifies men as the main enemy, and concentrates on struggles against patriarchy. Radical feminists envision a world without men, where women are in control of all aspects of society and life. It tends to essentialise women as all sharing certain attributes which are different from those of men. For radical feminists, women are, by nature, nurturing, artistic, cooperative, non-competitive, non-hierarchical and peaceful.

Radical feminism rightly challenges us to deconstruct ‘femininity’ and ‘masculinity’ and to explore how these gender identities – and others – have been constructed. We need to do more analysis of the impact of the macho identity, for example, on state militarism, competitive sports, the destructive discourse of academia, and do-

mestic violence against women and children. Relevant strategies of action are needed to combat the macho identity in all its manifestations, along with the ‘dependent feminine’ identity which many women/girls employ.

A major problem with radical feminism, however, is its assumption that all women are the same, thus ignoring the way in which different classes or groups of women oppress and exploit others. By emphasising ‘natural’ differences between women and men, essentialism adopts the mirror image of patriarchal beliefs in biological differences between women and men, and overlooks the role of society (including patriarchy) in constructing gender differences. It does not ask why and how, for example, (some) women have been socialised to be nurturing, cooperative and peaceful. And it ignores the many women who are, in fact, competitive, individualistic, bossy and violent (and vice versa, what about gentle, nurturing men?).

Another problem is the failure to recognise the way in which other social relations and structures support and strengthen male supremacy – all of these social structures need to be abolished in order to do away with male domination.

Liberal feminism identifies gender inequality as the main problem, and seeks to promote women’s equality with men in all spheres of life. This is the dominant form of feminism in Tanzania today, and informs most programmes of gender equity and gender mainstreaming in government and among donors, and among many NGOs as well. The main focus is on promoting equality by advancing women to be on a par with men within existing structures, for example, in education, in employment, in politics, and so on. Policies and ideologies such as ‘Women in Development’ (WID) are typical of this approach.

The problem with this approach is that it takes the status quo as given, which would mean that other forms of oppression and exploitation would persist, thereby dividing and exploiting some women by other women, and men. For example, liberal feminism demands

that women entrepreneurs have access to bank loans on the same terms as men, as one form of women's economic empowerment. This means in practice that a few women will benefit from credit programmes, along with a few men, while excluding the majority of both women and men. Transformative feminism might call for alternative strategies of financing which benefit all classes and genders equally - only possible with alternative forms of finance institutions, not the present private commercial banks.

Related to liberal feminism is what is often referred to as *western feminism* by critics who are usually based in the Third World, postcolonial and transformative feminism. 'Western feminism', whether situated in Africa, another region in the South or in the North, is the term used for a certain kind of liberal feminism whose gaze is focussed on 'other' women in Africa and the South - or in the village or rural areas - from the vantage point of a woman observer who assumes herself to be liberated. As with radical feminism, there is a tendency to homogenise all African women as being the same, thus robbing women of their individualism, dynamism and uniqueness. Africanist feminists have promoted colonising and totalising generalisations about 'rural African women' as being powerless, helpless, propertyless, voiceless - the essential victim.

Because western feminists assume that African women are passive objects who are acted upon by men or patriarchy, they do not look for examples of contestation, resistance and struggle and they usually fail to recognise resistance when it happens. Instead, the observer adopts a highly patronising/matronising position, assuming that she knows what is best for the African woman, the rural woman, the woman living with HIV/AIDS and the African girl. Western feminism has been adopted by many African women scholars, government officials, parliamentarians and NGO-based actors working in Africa, as well as Africanist feminists based in the North.

Black feminism identifies white supremacy and racism as being the major cause of the oppression and exploitation of black women, thereby subsuming the struggle against male domination as part of the overall struggle against racism and global apartheid. Many black feminists adopt essentialist views, similar to radi-

cal feminists, and argue that black women are, by nature, unique, the same and different from all other women. For example, black women are essentially, by their nature, sexy, musical, artistic, courageous, etc. Whether essentialist or not, the approach homogenises all black women as being the same, thus obscuring the way in which some black women exploit and oppress other black women and men. It also fails to address the ways in which imperialism and capitalism further the oppression and exploitation of working black women, in particular, and all working women, in general.

Like black feminists, transformative feminists recognise the reality of white supremacy within different branches of the women's movement worldwide, and in Africa. White supremacy permeates many donor programmes emanating from 'the North', and is increasingly incorporated within postcolonial structures of power and ownership of property. Liberalisation and privatisation programmes have led to the growing economic power of white South Africans and 'Europeans' from the North in Eastern and Southern Africa, thus reversing the decolonising achievements of early independence. Moreover, Northern-based feminists have increasing power to define what 'African-based' feminism ought to be about, by virtue of their position in global governance structures.

At the same time, this power is not defined solely or ultimately by race (witness the number of third world women who now work for governments, international NGOs and academia in the North), but by position in imperial structures of power. Hence, postcolonial feminists based in the North who are of third world origin have an undue amount of power to determine the direction which global feminisms should take, by virtue of their greater access to and control over resources than feminists based in the South (research, publications, media attention, and academic and management positions).

The essentialising ideas of both black and radical feminism are rejected in this analysis as mirror images of sexism, white racism and imperial ideology about 'exotic' African women - and men. They share basic elements of biological determinism which has been rejected over time by all those movements which have struggled against white supremacy and male supremacy. One of the major ideological

weapons of white supremacists and colonial ideologues has been the argument that whites are by nature superior to all other 'races'. Similarly, male supremacists argue that men are biologically superior to women. Efforts to adopt biological or essentialist arguments for the supremacy or uniqueness of black women/people adopt a similar kind of biological determinism, and have therefore to be rejected.

Marxist feminism struggles against both male domination and class domination, and identifies the main cause of women's oppression/exploitation as class. Hence, feminist struggles are to be subsumed under class struggles which are led by the workers against capitalists. Women workers have often been at the forefront of this movement, trying to win gains for all workers, while at the same time struggling against sexual abuse at work, discriminatory wages, and male oppression in the workers' movement. Many of our male activist partners embrace some version of Marxist feminism - hence the unease if not outright hostility about prioritising feminist struggles against male supremacy as a diversion of the masses, or not being 'serious'.

While recognising the significance of class struggle and identifying capitalism as a major cause of women's oppression and exploitation, transformative feminists reject the prioritisation of any one 'structure' or set of relationships over the other. Instead, they examine the dynamic way in which class and gender relations interact with each other, and with race and imperial relations. At any one 'moment' in time and space, one of these social relations may appear to be the most dominant and have top priority - however, transformative feminist struggles link all forms of oppression/exploitation together in order for real transformation to take place, and real women's emancipation to be achieved.

State feminism is a term which has been developed to conceptualise a strategy, more than a conceptual framework, the strategy of mainstreaming gender in and through the state, and using the state to promote gender equity, women's advancement and, in some cases, social transformation. In Latin America, for example, progressive leftist parties have won political power in some countries with the support of the feminist movement, and later have invited leaders of the feminist movement to join the new government in power.

One result has been the fragmentation of the feminist movement and the domestication of its political programme.

There is a growing recognition worldwide about the way in which *gender mainstreaming* has contributed to the domestication of the feminist agenda in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Once feminist discourse is appropriated by donor agencies including the World Bank and IMF, the original often transformative goals are in danger of being subverted and domesticated. It takes constant vigilance to maintain clarity of positionality, especially in a context when many feminist organisations, researchers and teachers depend upon external funding and external support for publication.

Another expression of the same tendency is the rise of *gender technocrats*, i.e., state officials who are experts in gender, or gender consultants who work with donor agencies and the government to carry out gender analysis and training. A whole industry of gender analysis and gender planning has developed, which has adopted many elements of feminist discourse but without the passion, the commitment and the grounding in the feminist movement. This has informed the development project, whereby the 'nation' is continually groomed to accommodate itself to postcolonial capitalism. Elements of gender equality may be incorporated into the development project so as to win support from local women's groups as well as external taxpayers, but without challenging the dominant structures which oppress and exploit the majority of girls/women and boys/men.

This section of the paper has compared and contrasted transformative feminism and other kinds of feminism in Tanzania and Africa today. In the next section, we analyse transformative feminism in more detail.

Transformative feminism

One of the most controversial elements in transformative feminism (and in radical feminism as well) is the belief that change must come about in both the public and the private spheres of life. Efforts to change dominant structures of decision-making over policies and budgets in the public sphere will go on side by side with efforts to abolish male supremacy in decision-making within the family, nuclear and extended, and the community. These

struggles are linked, in that male supremacy is created, reproduced and struggled for in both the public and the private spheres of life. Hence, the need to struggle on all fronts for change. There are no boundaries for patriarchy – and hence, no boundaries for transformative feminist struggle.

Another dimension of transformative feminism, which is held in common with other forms of feminism, is its attention to the emotional, psychological and sexual aspects of the self and of relationships, as well as the economic, the political, the cultural. Transformative feminists link struggles for ownership and control of bodies with those for ownership and control of land, for example, or of labour. Struggles over sexuality and over reproduction are part of these struggles.

Male supremacy is partly based on the way in which both femininity and masculinity have been constructed within the most personal, private areas of our lives. The link between male supremacy and macho identity and the perpetuation of physical violence and war as a solution for social conflict illustrates how powerful psychology, self-identity, and emotion are.

Connecting the personal and the public is highly controversial, however, and can be very painful. It means talking about oppression and struggle within our own families and homes, among people we love and care for. Moreover, the finger needs to be pointed in all directions – who is innocent? The mother who oppresses her daughter by trying to define for her how she should behave and who she should love? The older sister who exploits her younger sister's labour?

Feminists of different kinds have also challenged the way in which knowledge is generated, packaged and disseminated. Research and knowledge cannot be 'objective' in the sense of a researcher not having a position, or her work not reflecting her positionality in society. The challenge, instead, is to make the positionality and identity of the researcher clear, visible.

Transformative feminists call for a holistic approach to research, which takes into account all aspects of reality. The subjective, emotional side of our lives is as significant and open to scientific inquiry as the so-called logical and analytical side. Linking the creative and artistic sides of our brain with the logical and analytical has proven to be crucial in

making transformation happen. Both quantitative and qualitative methods become potentially useful in our efforts to 'know' the world as fully as possible. These struggles include the popularisation of who does research and how the information generated will be shared, thus challenging the dominance not only of men, but also academic professionals and corporations.

As with historical materialism, transformative feminism links theory and practice, and is rooted in concrete struggles for change. In other words, the analysis is derived from what is learned in the process of struggle, and vice versa. Transformative feminists do not sit back and critique reality, including policy, they struggle to change it. This means taking risks, 'getting our hands dirty', in the process.

Finally, transformative feminists have promoted emancipatory ways of organising ourselves, so as to challenge male dominant top-down structures in civil society as well as in government. Group-centred leadership – not leader-centred groups – is one example. Collective participatory decision-making is another. Engagement within participatory democratic structures is liberating, and becomes a school for the revolution.

Silences, confusion, positionality

In preparing these notes, we have recognised silences within transformative feminism in Tanzania which may ultimately undermine the struggle for change. Such silences include those on sexual orientation and identity, and sexuality. Confusion has also been noted – which may be a creative development – over the following issues: the role of men in the feminist movement; gender versus women; the role of the state in the feminist struggle for women's emancipation and transformation of society; the relationship between the transformative feminist movement and organised religion; the relationship between the transformative feminist movement and the state; strategies to handle the growing challenge of fundamentalist struggles, including market fundamentalism on the one hand, and religious fundamentalism on the other, and traditionalism.

In terms of positionality, we reconfirm the importance of: naming yourself; taking a position; and being in solidarity with other transformative movements.