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Author(s): Marjorie J. Mbilinyi
Published by: Canadian Association of African Studies
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/484210
Accessed: 26/04/2013 16:01

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The State of Women in Tanzania

"Work by Everyone and Exploitation by None"?

MARJORIE J. MBILINYI *

"Men talk a lot about the equality of women, but in their hearts they are not prepared to give women any real position." 1

"If a man has to get his wife's consent to a second marriage, the African tradition where man has always been superior to a woman will be endangered. Unless the Law of Marriage Bill intends to change men into women this clause should be removed." 2

"We have said that we want to create a socialist society which is based on three principles: equality and respect for human dignity; sharing of the resources which are produced by our efforts; work by everyone and exploitation by none." 3

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To understand the contradictions in the life of a Tanzanian woman today, it is necessary to analyze the traditional role of women in Tanzanian society as well as contemporary changes. There are now 3.3 million adult women living in rural areas and only sixty thousand women in urban areas, out of a total population of 12 million.

The dual role of wife and mother is traditionally the most important for a woman. It is nearly impossible in practice to separate the two. The most essential aim of marriage is to beget children in order to maintain the lineage. Whether the society is patrilineal or matrilineal, the woman's function of reproduction is essential in this respect.

Children are valued as economic assets. In the subsistence rural economy,

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* Department of Education, University of Dar Es Salaam.


children provide important labor resources, especially as assistance to the mother for farm and household work. Parents expect their children, particularly the boys, to provide for them in their old age. Girls are expected to marry into another household, and bring wealth through their brideprice. In that way, they are also assets: when a daughter is born the mother is often congratulated for bringing wealth into the home.

Because of high child mortality up to the very recent past, it was necessary to have as many children as possible. Even now, the idea of birth control is anathema to many people. Children are normally spaced through the traditional custom of abstinence while the mother is nursing an infant. The average birth rate is fairly high: 6.6 or a rate of 47 per thousand.

A sterile wife is liable to be divorced and returned to her father's homestead in disgrace, especially in the case of patrilineal societies. A brideprice is usually paid to the wife's family which ensures the legitimacy of the offspring as members of the husband's lineage. This is why the brideprice is sometimes not paid in full until after the birth of one, even two children. In the case of a sterile wife, her father would have to pay back all of the brideprice upon her return.

In addition to what is basically the biological responsibility of reproduction, a wife has definite economic and social responsibilities. She must provide nearly all the necessary household needs for herself and her children. A woman is normally given some land by her husband to use for the production of food. In a polygamous homestead, each wife may have her own land in which case she and her children operate as a separate economic unit. There are varying degrees of cooperation among polygamous wives. In some households, the women share housekeeping and sometimes even farming duties. In other cases, joint wives live in a state of semi-conflict and competition over the household's scarce resources: land, husband's 'favours', and even children.

A common misconception is that all African marriages are polygamous. In fact, there are various rates of polygamy. In East Africa its occurrence is generally lower than in West Africa, as is the average number of wives per husband. Preliminary estimates from the 1967 Census in Tanzania indicate the average number of wives per married man to be 1.5. This figure is meaningless, however, unless the developmental cycle of a family is considered. Usually a man remains with one wife during the early years of marriage. Only when he is economically able to provide for additional wives will he do so. Polygamy means more children and greater prestige. Additional wives also mean additional workers on the farm and increased acreage under a man's domain. Moreover, where joint wives cooperate together and where the first wife has a superior status, she may desire a second or third wife to lighten her household responsibilities and provide company. Nevertheless, a substantial proportion of marriages are monogamous. Some will remain so and others will become polygamous only in the later years of marriage.
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A wife is an extremely important part of the production unit in a subsistence household. She produces most of the essential crops needed for survival. Where a husband helps in food production, a definite division of labour operates. Men's duties usually consist of the heavy work which is not continually needed; whereas women perform the more continuous, routine chores of weeding, planting and harvesting. The division of labour is beginning to change in many areas due to the expansion of cash crops and to the migration of men to urban areas. Women are apt to assume many jobs once considered to be men's but few men will undertake chores considered women's work. J. Wills documents this shift in the division of labour for Kenya, but a similar trend is also occurring in Tanzania.

Although the husband normally controls the cash crop and its financial returns, the wife may be expected to help in its production. The man's attention to the cash crop means he has less time available to work on the food crop. This results in increasing labour demands on the wife. In addition, when a husband migrates in search of work, his wife is left to tend the crops alone. He may leave instructions as to the cultivation of the crop and he always controls the returns, even though absent. The wife's relationship to the production of cash crops closely resembles that of any worker.

The wife's role in the economy is not to be measured only in terms of her work on the farm. She has complete charge of preparing and processing food and usually of storing it, as well. Women are usually entitled to whatever surplus occurs from the small garden under her sole care. This surplus is sold in local markets and the proceeds exchanged for commodities such as salt and sugar. This is low-scale marketing compared to the widespread, extensive marketing traditionally controlled by women on a regional, even national level in areas of West Africa. Nevertheless, it provides the woman with some degree of economic autonomy. In addition to surplus food crops and occasionally cash crops, women plait baskets and make pottery and beadwork to sell.

Social responsibilities of the wife-mother include caring for children as well as providing for elderly kinfolk and maintaining cordial relations with relatives and neighbors through the exchange of gifts and visits. Younger children are completely in the care of women, though not necessarily their own mother. After weaning, children may be taken by the husband's relatives to be cared for. Even in early infancy, the mother shares her maternal duties with other women relatives in the homestead. The term "mama" therefore may refer to different women. One's own mother is distinguished from the others by the words "mama mzazi" in Kiswahili, or "mother who gave birth."

The heterogeneity of many tribal societies in Tanzania makes it impossible to generalize about women's traditional roles, let alone the new social and economic roles that are presently developing. Even in one society, women have several different and sometimes conflicting roles at any one time; a woman may
simultaneously be a mother, a daughter, a first wife, an elder sister, a cultivator and a skilled craftswoman. In some identities she is 'the authority', and in others she is subservient.

Although women are essential to a subsistence economy, land is either owned or its use controlled by men. The husband will represent his wife's interests outside of the household. Even the children a woman bears remain the property of her husband and his lineage in a patrilineal society, or her maternal uncle and his lineage in a matrilineal society. Up to the present time, if a husband died or if they were divorced, the wife had no basic rights to the house, land or household properties other than her cooking pots, not even to her children. She was a perpetual 'minor', legally dependent on husband, father or other male kinfolk. Whether her marriage was monogamous or polygamous was essentially irrelevant. In either case, her subordinate position remained; it differed only in degree depending on the position she had in the family structure.

In the past, there were many compensations for the contradictions in a woman's life. Ritual, family and community factors protected her interests in and out of marriage and provided her with security. She had economic autonomy within certain spheres, and social autonomy as well. Husbands and wives were not expected to 'do things together' in the western sense. Instead, the wife was free to participate in her own women's activities. In many respects, women were self-sufficient.

Modernization has had mixed effects on the woman's "world". Many of the ritual and community factors that once protected her interests are disappearing. The modern economy had meant the production of cash crops and the migration of men to urban areas, both of which have increased women's work. Information about modern housekeeping and farming methods usually result in more work for the woman as she cannot afford any of the labor-saving devices that alleviate work.

Education has also had mixed results. Under the British administration, the school system was expanded in order to provide lower level clerks and administrators to staff the colonial bureaucracy. This meant increased educational opportunities for boys, not girls, as can be seen in the disparities in education between men and women. There have always been more boys schools, at all levels, than girls. Parents observed the job opportunities for educated men and invested education with an economic value. Whereas this value was in keeping with traditional expectations for boys, the future patriarchs of their households, it was contradictory to the expectations for girls. Since the future role of a girl was that of wife and mother, the best training for her was at home under the tutelage of her mother and women relatives. Reading and writing were considered skills irrelevant to a woman's life.

Unequal educational opportunity still exists today. It is increased by the need for primary school fees which range from ten shillings in the first standard
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to as much as one-hundred and fifty shillings and even more in the seventh standard. Boarding schools, often the only alternative for girls, are much more expensive.

For a peasant, schooling represents an economic investment, from which he expects a return. He relies on his sons to provide for his future and he expects his daughters to marry into another family. Hence, to educate a girl tends to be considered a loss.

Other disadvantages are believed to be involved in the education of girls. Parents fear that they will get spoiled, lose their ‘manners’ or become pregnant. Girls more than boys are expected to assist their mothers with household duties, and therefore their presence in school represents a loss in labor. In other African countries an educated girl being a higher brideprice for her family, but in most areas of Tanzania their ‘value’ remains the same or may even decrease.

The total primary school enrolment for 1968 indicates a ratio of 1.77 boys to 1 girl in the rural areas. The enrolment of girls is 38% of the total (the urban ratio is 1.22:1; proportion of total enrolment is 46%). Given that there are equal numbers of boys and girls in the population, and if anything more girls within certain age-groups, there is evidence of a great disparity in educational levels. Localities differ however; in rural Moshi, the ratio is nearly equal but in other areas such as rural Mwanza, the ratio may be 3 or 4 to 1.

The proportion of girls in the educational system drops with each successive level of education. At the University of Dar es Salaam, women represent only fifteen percent of the entire student body. They are predominantly found in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and rarely in the physical sciences, law, medicine, and agriculture, areas of major importance in the society. Preliminary census figures for rural Tanzania show that 65% of women in the 15–19 age group have had no schooling whatsoever as compared to 38% men. In the 20–24 and 30–34 age groups, the corresponding figures are 79% to 46% and 90% to 58%, respectively.

The significance of these figures is seen in the occupational structure. To get a wage-earning job it is almost essential to have some kind of post-primary school education. Therefore, the majority of women have no chance of acquiring a wage-earning job. Those who have the essential educational prerequisites often find that certain jobs are defined as men’s territory and they are relegated to the usual teaching, clerical and nursing positions considered appropriate to their sex. Promotion prospects are correspondingly low.

Preliminary census figures substantiate these facts. Women represent 24% of the professionals (53,700 total): this includes 24% of the teachers (22,500: mainly primary school level); 40% of medical personnel (14,400: mainly nurses); and only 8% of university academic staff (344). Women compose 47% of the typists (2,350 total) but only 10% of ‘other clerical’ (28,000) which includes messengers and clerks and once provided the greatest possibility of a

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job for primary school leavers. Women hold 23% of domestic help positions (50,000 total) but only 4% of the jobs in industrial labour (109,000) and only 2% of managerial posts (9,300).

Given that Tanzania is moving towards a socialistic state, the basic contradictions between men and women need to be analyzed and removed. The government has recently passed a new Marriage Contract Law (effective on the mainland) in an attempt to offset some of the inequities faced by women and to unify the several marriage laws now in existence. Some of the most positive sections of the law are the following: 1) the wife’s right to ownership over all properties she has acquired before or during the marriage; 2) the provision of inheritance for a widow; 3) the regularization of divorce procedure through the institutionalization of Conciliatory Boards; 4) the provision for the maintenance of divorced wives; 5) the wife’s permission, to be registered in court, before a husband is allowed to marry an additional wife; 6) the establishment of minimum ages for marriage: 18 years for men and 15 for women; 7) the free consent of both parties to the marriage.

The Law is a great step forward. It is the first legislative attempt to protect a woman’s rights as a citizen, as a worker, as well as a wife. Before the Law is fully effective, however, certain shortcomings in its structure need to be corrected. First, a wife’s ownership extends only to the material goods or “products” she has acquired, but because of the semi-subsistence nature of most women’s work, household and otherwise, she is left with very little tangible product. Second, the Law does not state to what extent a widow or divorced wife is to be provided for. Third, the wife’s consent for the acquisition of an additional wife disregards the fact that economically she is the weaker party and has no alternative but to consent. Fourth, when a husband and wife come from the same locality and were married either in a church or in a traditional ceremony, customary law will be used in cases of divorce and inheritance. It protects the interests of the husband and his extended family in regards to the children and the inheritance of property.

Perhaps the most exciting development is the widespread expansion of ujamaa villages which involve collective production in agriculture and in certain areas, collective residence, as well. Members of work brigades are paid according to individual work efforts. In many places, women have become the most active proponents of these villages. The significance of receiving a tangible product for one’s labor would appear to be a key factor in explaining their support.

Male resistance against all efforts in the direction of ‘women’s emancipation’ is outspoken, influential and represents the attitudes of the majority of Tanzanian men. The most blatant expressions of male chauvinism occurred in the debates over the Marriage Law in Parliament and in the press. Underlying the mini-skirt debate is a similar negativism towards educated and economically independent women who represent a threat to the status quo.
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Women have been taught to be passive in the face of opposition. They also tend to be isolated from one another by class, tribal, and marital divisions. They need to develop a consciousness of their own historical position and a will for unified action as well as organizational skills. Fundamental changes are needed in the structure of the economy and in the social network before real progress for women is possible. These are the very changes necessary for a socialistic society for all Tanzanians. Unified action would appear to be essential now in order to ensure a fully productive role for women in Tanzania's future.