



# VOICES FROM TANZANIA

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## **Women's empowerment and gender equality: focusing on Samia Suluhu Hassan as Tanzania's first female president.**

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*By Ronja Koch*

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## 1. Introduction and Background

In recent years, the global conversation around gender equality and women's empowerment has gained unprecedented momentum. One powerful emblem of this process in Tanzania is the remarkable journey of Samia Suluhu Hassan. After President Magufuli's sudden death, she became Tanzania's first female president, taking office on March 19, 2021. (Africa Renewal, 2021)

This milestone not only signifies a monumental shift in the traditionally male-dominated sector of politics but also highlights the ongoing struggle for gender parity and women's rights. Samia Suluhu Hassan's ascent to the presidency serves as an inspirational example of breaking gender barriers and setting a precedent for women's leadership in the country's highest office. (Africa Renewal, 2021)

This paper seeks to examine the specific initiatives and reforms implemented by President Samia to promote women's empowerment and gender equality in Tanzania, with a special focus on the achievements and challenges embodied by her tenure as Tanzania's first female president. Additionally, it analyzes the obstacles encountered in the implementation of these initiatives, while also considering the transformative impact of her presidency on traditional gender roles and expectations within Tanzanian society.

## 2. Changes for Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality

### 2.1. Definitions

To comprehend the roles of women, it is essential to examine the concept of women's empowerment and gender equality.

#### 2.1.1. Gender equality

The aim of gender equality is a society with equal opportunities, rights, and responsibilities in all aspects of life for both women and men (e.g. freely exercise their human rights, make choices, access resources and services, and engage in public life without being constrained by laws, policies, gender norms, or stereotypes). (United Nations Development Programme, 2023, p.6)

#### 2.1.2. Women empowerment

In situations where gender inequality exists, it is typically women who are marginalized, particularly in decision-making and access to economic and social resources. Therefore, a key aspect of advancing gender equality is empowering women. Broadly speaking, it denotes the process through which women acquire influence and equivalent opportunities to pursue personal, societal, and economic aspirations. This involves their active engagement in all areas of society under the same conditions as men. (FINCA International, 2023)

### 2.1.3. Challenging Gender Disparities

Tanzania's population in 2022 is around 61.7 million, with a slight majority of women, according to the National Bureau of Statistics. Despite their numerical superiority, women in Tanzania experience marginalization when compared to men. (Msafiri, 2023, p.1) In 2022, Tanzania's Gender Inequality Index stood at 0.72, indicating that women were 28 percent less likely to have equal opportunities as men in the country. Furthermore, Tanzania ranked 13th out of 36 countries in the sub-Saharan Africa region. Nevertheless, it still scored low in the category of political empowerment. (Statista, 2023) In addition, gender inequalities are still evident in the experience of violence and unequal distribution of salaries or land (BAMF - Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge, 2021, p. 18). According to the report from FINCA International (2023) one billion women worldwide have no access to formal banking services, two-thirds of the world's illiterate population are women, and approximately 2.7 billion women worldwide face legal restrictions that limit their job choices to a greater extent than men.

## 2.2. Legal Framework

### 2.2.1. Legal Framework Within Tanzania

Despite persistent gender inequalities affecting women, Tanzania has established multiple legal frameworks mandating the integration of gender equality and the empowerment of women. Both the 1977 Constitution of the United Republic of Tanzania and the 1984 Zanzibar Constitution explicitly demand a focus on gender equality and women's empowerment. Moreover, the Tanzania Development Vision 2025 and Zanzibar Development Vision 2050 emphasize the importance of incorporating gender equality and women's empowerment into their objectives. The government's key priorities, as outlined in the Third National Five-Year Development Plan (FYDP III) 2021/22 to 2025/26 and the Zanzibar Development Plan (ZADEP) 2021-2026, include the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of women (United Nations Development Programme, 2023, p.7)

Mainland Tanzania and Zanzibar have established dedicated ministries, such as the Ministry of Community Development, Gender, Women, and Special Groups and the Ministry of Health, Social Welfare, Gender, and Children, respectively, to address gender-related issues. These ministries are responsible for formulating policies, strategies, and action plans for gender equality and women's empowerment, which are to be implemented in collaboration with various sectors. Furthermore, these ministries are tasked with overseeing the execution of national policies aimed at promoting gender equality and empowering women. They receive assistance from gender focal points or committees that are established in all Ministries, Departments, Agencies (MDAs), regional secretariats, councils, and institutions. These commitments reflect Tanzania's dedication to gender equality and enshrines the principles of gender parity at the highest legal level. (United Nations Development Programme, 2023, p.7)

Additionally, the Tanzania Women Parliamentarians Group (TWPG) is an organization devoted to enhancing the active involvement of female Members of Parliament (MP) in parliamentary proceedings (e.g. to advocate for and oversee the integration of gender equality into parliamentary affairs). TWPG has identified inheritance laws, marriage laws, sexual and reproductive health rights, and the issue of human trafficking involving women and children as the primary areas requiring legislative reforms and policy attention. (Parline: the IPU's Open Data Platform, 2023b)

### **2.2.2. International Legal Commitments**

On global stage, Tanzania has ratified numerous international agreements, among others the "United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women", the "Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa", and the "Southern African Development Community Protocol on Gender and Development". (Afrobarometer, 2023 September)

## **2.3 Transformation in Political and Social Dimensions**

Tanzania has made significant progress in advancing gender equality, as evidenced by its notable improvement in the Global Gender Gap Index. In 2023, the nation ascended to the 48th position out of 146 countries, marking a substantial leap from its 82nd place ranking in 2021. This advancement underscores President Samia Suluhu Hassan's dedication to addressing gender disparities and fostering a more equitable society. (Afrobarometer, 2023 September, p.1)

### **2.3.1. Political Dimension**

As per the Elections Regulation of 2010, as stipulated in Article 86A and further enshrined in Articles 66 and 78 of the Constitution, it is a statutory requirement that the National Assembly includes a minimum of 30% women members. To ensure this representation, special seats for women are allocated based on the proportional number of seats awarded to each political party in parliament. Each political party participating in parliamentary elections is permitted to nominate and submit a list of eligible women candidates to the Commission for consideration in the allocation of MP for Women Special Seats. (Parline: the IPU's Open Data Platform, 2023a)

In the realm of political representation, Tanzanian women have made substantial strides. A historic moment in Tanzanian politics unfolded with the appointment of President Samia Suluhu Hassan in March 2021 as first female President and Head of State, following the passing of President John Pombe Magufuli. President Hassan also held the position of the first female Vice President in the country since 2015. Additionally, the Tanzanian Parliament is fortunate to have Hon. Tulia Ackson as the female Speaker since her election in February 2022. Notably, two out of the three branches of the United Republic of Tanzania, namely the Executive and Parliament, are currently led by women, offering significant potential for women's influence in

state decision-making. (Msafiri, 2023, p. 3) Moreover, on May 15, 2021, Nanelwa J. Mwihambi became the first woman to assume the role of National Assembly Clerk in Tanzania. She was appointed by President Samia to replace Mr. Stephen Kagaigai. (Parline: the IPU's Open Data Platform, 2023a)

In terms of female representation, the Tanzanian cabinet currently includes women in 34.6% of ministerial positions. This places Tanzania in comparison to its neighbours: Rwanda, with 50%; Uganda, with 38.7%; and Kenya, with 33.3%. Furthermore, within the Tanzanian Parliament, women currently hold 36.9% of the seats, providing a basis for comparison with the figures in Rwanda (61%), Uganda (34%), and Kenya (22%). Important to note that while Tanzania has made significant progress, there is still work to be done to achieve gender equality in leadership, especially when compared. (Msafiri, 2023, to Rwanda p. 3) It's also worth highlighting the significant improvements made in recent years. When compared to 2020, the proportion of women in ministerial level positions has experienced a substantial increase, rising from 18.2%. (World Bank, n.d.) Furthermore, a shift in gender representation can be observed when comparing the number of female candidates in the 2015 General Elections in Tanzania to the present day under the leadership of Mama Samia. In 2015, only 19.2% of nominated parliamentary candidates were women. (Tanzania FES, 2020, p.6)

## **2.3.2. Social Dimension**

### **2.3.2.1. Income**

Tanzania's economy heavily relies on farming and the informal job sector, with agriculture employing 60.9% of individuals aged 15 and above, while the informal sector accounts for 29.0%, and the formal sector for 10.1%. Particularly, women are more inclined to work in the informal sector compared to men. Additionally, about 14.3% hold paid employment, with a higher percentage of men than women in this category. This gender gap underscores the need for specific policies to encourage women's involvement in productive work and ensure fair wages. (JAMII, 2023 p.1)

Under the leadership of Samia Suluhu Hassan, there is a commitment to champion the implementation of the Economic Justice and Rights action coalition, serving as a catalyst for women's empowerment. (JAMII, 2023 p.1) The government has introduced a range of initiatives in recent years to advance economic justice and rights, with a strong focus on empowering women and providing decent work opportunities. A notable effort is the "Building a Better Tomorrow" program launched in 2022, which imparts innovative agricultural knowledge to over 800 individuals, mainly in crop, fisheries, and livestock production. Furthermore, more than 4,400 women in Zanzibar have been empowered in horticulture and the blue economy. The government has also introduced the iSOKO Digital Trading Portal, benefiting over 4,320 women traders in regional commerce and business tools. Entrepreneurship training has

reached over 2.2 million women, and financial support, totalling Tsh. 748 billion, has been extended to 1.3 million women entrepreneurs. The government's commitment extends to promoting women-owned small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), encouraging girls' participation in STEM, and establishing Women's Economic Empowerment Forums at various levels. (JAMII, 2023., p.4)

### **2.3.2.2. Education**

Tanzania has made significant progress towards achieving gender parity in secondary school enrolment. From 2014 to 2020, the Gender Parity Index increased from 0.96 to 1.10, marking a substantial rise in girls' participation in secondary education. Notably, gender parity has already been achieved in primary schools, with girls slightly outnumbering boys in both primary and secondary education. This remarkable advancement can be attributed to the successful implementation of pivotal policies, such as Universal Primary Education and the provision of free education, as well as the establishment of public secondary schools across the nation. (Msafiri, 2023, p.2) These measures have significantly broadened educational access and empowerment opportunities for girls. A notable stride under the leadership of President Samia Suluhu has been the decision to allow pregnant girls and teenage mothers to return to school. This decision underscores the government's unwavering dedication to providing support for girls and young women. (Katare Mbashiru, 2023) She also advocates for contraception and family planning, in contrast to her predecessor. (Cosmo WDR, 2023)

Despite these accomplishments, it's essential to acknowledge that challenges still exist. Approximately one-fifth of girls are unable to complete lower-secondary education, and four out of ten girls do not finish upper-secondary education. Furthermore, nearly one-quarter of adolescent girls who marry between the ages of 15 and 19 have experienced sexual or physical abuse from their partners at least once in their lives. Recognizing that investing in girls' education is an investment in prosperity, it serves as a potent tool for breaking the cycle of poverty and inequality. (Katare Mbashiru, 2023)

In line with these accomplishments, President Samia Suluhu Hassan stated at the beginning of 2023, "The government is following up, and we will make our contribution by setting policies and putting strategies in place, including increasing the education budget. We want to ensure that we do not leave anyone behind." (Mosenda, 2023) On the International Day of the Girl in October 2023, Minister Prof Mkenda emphasized that the government plans to conduct a study to identify the main challenges leading to girls dropping out of school, with the aim of formulating recommendations for permanent solutions, in alignment with the President's earlier statement this year (Katare Mbashiru, 2023)

### **2.3.2.3. Public Sentiment on Gender Equality**

According to the Afrobarometer questionnaire for Tanzania Round 9 (2022), Tanzanian citizens have generally shown approval for the government's initiatives aimed at fostering equal rights and opportunities for women, with an impressive 83% expressing their satisfaction. However, a significant majority (75%) also believes that the government should further intensify its efforts to advance gender equality (Afrobarometer, 2023 September)

## **2.4 Challenge in Implementing Gender Equality Measures**

Despite the commendable progress, Tanzania still grapples with persistent gender disparities and obstacles. As highlighted by the findings of a national assessment of the country's statistical system's capacity to generate reliable gender statistics, several significant challenges have come to the forefront:

- Constraints in policy and financial support.
- The absence of a comprehensive data gap analysis and a standardized set of national gender indicators.
- Insufficiency of detailed data categorized by essential variables such as gender, location, age group, wealth status, ethnicity, and more.
- A lack of in-depth thematic analysis and capacity-building needs for data producers.
- Limited accessibility of data for users, as well as restricted interaction between data users and producers.

Addressing these challenges is crucial for further advancing gender equality and ensuring that the nation's policies and initiatives effectively serve all of its citizens. (UN Women – Africa, 2019)

## **3. Cultural Change and Challenges in Tanzanian Society**

### **3.1 Gender roles and expectations in Tanzanian societies**

In Tanzania, despite constitutional provisions for gender equality, there are persistent gender-specific disparities. These disparities are rooted in social norms that exacerbate risk factors such as high rates of early marriage and childbirth, coupled with low levels of economic independence and education for women. Furthermore, women in Tanzania often have lower levels of agency and decision-making power due to their limited participation in employment, lower earnings, significant age gaps between husbands and wives, and the practice of polygamy. (World Bank, 2022) These structural challenges contribute to a range of issues, including violence, political underrepresentation, unequal land access, and wage gaps faced by women. Gender-based violence, encompassing domestic violence and rape, remains prevalent but often goes unreported due to the social stigma associated with such cases and the complexities involved in reporting. While legal provisions for life imprisonment exist, reporting



issues often lead to delays and dismissals tainted by corruption. Domestic violence is inadequately defined, which perpetuates its ongoing prevalence. (BAMF - Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge, 2021, p.18/19)

### **3.2 Samia Suluhu Hassan's Impact on Traditional Gender Roles**

Samia's presidency in Tanzania signifies a notable departure from traditional gender roles and expectations. Her elevation to the highest office in the country challenges the deeply ingrained stereotypes that have long marginalized women from high-level political positions. Her leadership serves as a source of inspiration, demonstrating that women are just as capable as men in assuming leadership roles, thereby shifting societal expectations. (The Citizen, 2023)

The presence of a female president also presents an opportunity to create an environment conducive to fostering women's leadership in decision-making spaces. This may encourage more women to participate in politics, further challenging the conventional male-dominated landscape. (The Citizen, 2023)

Female parliamentarians, known for advocating issues such as equal pay, reproductive rights, and gender-based violence, play a crucial role in advancing gender equality and women's rights. Samia's presidency can pave the way for more women to enter politics, champion these pivotal issues, and prioritize social concerns such as childcare and education, which can contribute to human capital development and inclusive economic growth. (The Citizen, 2023)

President Samia has shown trust to women, which for a long time was lost. (Cosmo WDR, 2023)

### **3.3 Challenges for female candidates**

Aminata Toure (CCM) pointed out, "There is a lot of bullying, cyber bullying, bullying in all ways. They even go an extra mile to send people to threaten you. People just don't have a limit to that" (Cosmo WDR, 2023)

Yet, challenges persist. Female candidates, like Samia, often grapple with underrepresentation in media coverage and contend with gender stereotyping when they are featured. Verbal attacks, emanating from both opposition parties and sometimes even within their own parties, are aimed at discouraging women from pursuing political office, thus creating a hostile political environment. Moreover, women in politics frequently face financial constraints, as they receive less support from their political parties and often have to finance their campaigns independently. (National Democratic Institute, n.d., p 18.)

One female party member shared her experience, saying "I had an opportunity to travel to attend an important party event which was attended by top leaders. However, my rivals started spreading rumours that I got the chance to participate in the respective event because I have love affairs with a top leader who has been ensuring that I get such opportunities."(National Democratic Institute, n.d., p.18)

Survey results indicate that a significant majority of Tanzanians support equal rights in employment and political leadership. However, while most respondents believe that a woman aspiring to hold political office can enhance her standing within the community, a substantial number also anticipate that she may face criticism, harassment, and potential familial challenges (Afrobarometer, 2023 May)

### **3.4 Potential for Lasting Changes in Social Attitudes Towards Women in Leadership**

The potential for lasting changes in social attitudes towards women in leadership is both promising and challenging. In many societies, barriers such as property ownership and cultural norms have historically hindered women's pursuit of political positions. The lack of property ownership makes it difficult for women to access the financial resources necessary for a successful political campaign. Additionally, deeply ingrained cultural beliefs often dictate that women's primary role is within the home, taking care of families and children, rather than participating in politics. Consequently, women's rights organizations advocate for increased societal awareness, improved childcare facilities, higher wages, and gender quotas in both politics and the business sector. These efforts represent vital steps towards reshaping public perceptions of women in leadership roles. (Cosmo WDR, 2023)

Mara Warwick, the World Bank Country Director, remarked: "It is encouraging to see the commitment of policymakers to end violence against women and children in Tanzania. However, as our studies show, existing efforts such as the National Plans of Action need to be supported by sustainable funding for their implementation. Also, laws that continue to undermine the rights of women and girls to be free from violence and discrimination need to be urgently reformed, such as the Law of Marriage Act whose repeal is still pending." (World Bank, 2022)

For instance, Tanzania's President, Hassan, is expected to secure a second term in 2025, potentially leading to more reforms that empower women in the nation. As these initiatives gain momentum and women continue to break through these barriers, there is hope that these changes will foster enduring shifts in societal attitudes towards women in leadership. (Cosmo WDR, 2023)

## 4. Conclusion

In recent history, Tanzania has witnessed a significant shift in its political landscape as Samia Suluhu Hassan assumed the presidency, marking the first time a woman has held this position. This historic milestone has brought about notable changes in the traditional gender roles and expectations within Tanzanian society.

The presidency of Samia serves as an inspiring model for women and young girls throughout Tanzania. Her leadership demonstrates that women have the potential to aspire to the highest echelons of political power. This serves as a catalyst for shifting societal expectations regarding women in leadership roles. Samia's presidency is a testament to the potential of women in leadership and may create an environment conducive to increasing women's involvement in decision-making spaces. This, in turn, challenges the conventional, male-dominated landscape of politics. Female parliamentarians, who are statistically more inclined to champion issues such as equal pay, reproductive rights, and gender-based violence, are vital advocates for gender equality and women's rights. The presidency of Samia paves the way for more women to enter politics and advocate for these pivotal issues. The presence of Samia in the presidency could facilitate the development and implementation of policies addressing these critical concerns, benefiting society. Her unique perspective as a woman in a position of power enables her to intimately understand the struggles related to women's empowerment and gender equality, as she is personally affected by these issues, and can provide insights and advocacy that resonate with the experiences of women.

Nevertheless, a valid critique of gender policies in Tanzania is that some, like the special seats for women in the National Assembly, may be seen as superficial measures, offering symbolic rather than substantial change. While these seats aim to increase female representation, they may not guarantee meaningful participation and risk being perceived as tokenism. They should not replace the need for addressing deeper structural issues, including gender bias, unequal resource access, and cultural barriers that limit women's involvement in politics. A comprehensive approach is necessary to promote gender equity in other facets of society, and the true impact of such policies should be assessed in their ability to address these deeper-rooted challenges.

In summary, while Samia Suluhu Hassan's presidency is undoubtedly a significant step forward for gender equality in Tanzania, it should be viewed as a catalyst for change rather than a final destination. Addressing the structural and cultural barriers that hinder women's full participation in society remains an ongoing challenge. Her presidency should be a call to action for continued efforts to promote gender equality, and its long-term impact should be evaluated in the context of comprehensive and sustained progress.

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**Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung.**

Tilmann Feltes, PhD  
Resident Representative  
Country Office Tanzania  
[www.kas.de/tanzania](http://www.kas.de/tanzania)



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