



International Women's Day: Working Class Women Organising in Dar es Salaam

By ROAPE



International Women's Day “brings together all working women to discuss our struggle against exploitation,” [declared](#) Stella Mwasa as she invited working women and men to gather for a meeting on the 8 March in Manzese, a working-class area of Dar es Salaam.

Stella is a leading organiser with the Manzese Working Women's Cooperative, or [UWAWAMA](#) as per the Swahili acronym. UWAWAMA unites the savings and loan groups of petty traders and cargo porters, seeking a [cooperative alternative](#) to the “slavery” of financial institutions.

UWAWAMA hosted the meeting in a rented space, dubbed Amy Garvey Hall, which the cooperative uses for both its economic and political activities. But the meeting was for all *wanawake wawujasho*, meaning all working women, or more evocatively, all “women who sweat”. It brought together not only the urban-based petty traders of UWAWAMA but a group of rural small-scale farmers, women members of the Tanzania Network of Small-scale Farmer Organisations ([MVIWATA](#)). Other groups with representatives at the meeting included [HakiArdhi](#), [JULAWATA](#), Kilosa Land Movement, and underground hip hop groups like [Watunza Misingi](#), among others.

As with [previous](#) UWAWAMA gatherings marking International Women's Day, this year's meeting was a chance for women to unite, organise, and articulate their demands. The women who

participated in the day's discussions summed up these demands in a declaration, part of a "struggle to remind society that women's demands differ depending on class" and to explicitly define these demands "for working women."

In the spirit of International Women's Day, and to "remind society" beyond Tanzania, here is an English translation of the declaration. The original Swahili version is available [here](#).

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Six abiding demands from working women for Women's Day

We working women, urban and rural, including small business operators and smallholder farmers, have come together in solidarity to celebrate International Working Women's Day today, 8 March 2022, in Amy Garvey Hall, Manzese. As women who face a variety of challenges under all oppressive systems, we realize that our interests are different from the interests of upper class women. Therefore, we decided to establish our alternative forum to celebrate Women's Day. After a lengthy debate through this forum, we declare the following six abiding demands for working women.

1. Full economic freedom

Despite there being many campaigns for women's economic empowerment, like microfinance initiatives, a large group of working women have ended up the slaves of financial institutions. Instead of being empowered, we are chained by debt that exacerbates our poverty. This is because the solutions offered to tackle women's poor economic conditions do more to entrench an oppressive economic system than to liberate women.

Many initiatives for women's economic empowerment benefit financial institutions more than they liberate us. Through these campaigns, we are encouraged to take out [exploitative loans](#), and then to become selfish to the extent that we will do anything to pay them back, including exploiting and oppressing other women.

We working women are tired of being slaves. We no longer want [deceptive empowerment initiatives](#) that are useless to us. We have unanimously decided that we will continue to fight for full economic independence, and we want it to be known that such freedom will not be achieved if a large group of women continue to be enslaved by financial institutions. So we will continue to fight against oppressive financial institutions and against all systems of class exploitation until all women and all working people are free.

2. Freedom to own land and protection from land-grabbing

We working women are the major producers given that a large percentage of rural smallholder farmers and urban small business operators are women. Land is our main source of livelihood. Yet the patriarchy deprives us of our right to own land because of our gender, and the capitalist system robs us of that right along with working men because of our economic class. Because of capitalism, neo-colonialists have been given the name of investors and are protected by the state when they plunder our land.

Every time the government announces the arrival of investors in our areas, we are filled with grief and anxiety because, in our experience, we can expect nothing aside the loss of our homes and our productive areas. We are always told that investors are coming to bring us prosperity, wellbeing and development, but reality and experience have shown that they come to destroy us by depriving us of our land, which is the main means of production, and by turning us into labourers in their fields or factories.

Others come as investors then plunder our land. Yet later they end up fencing off that land without even using it for any productive activity. Whether in rural areas where our fields are stolen or in cities where our businesses are evicted, the cry of all working people is the same.

We unanimously say that we are tired of being turned into serfs on our own land, and of becoming producers without food or other basic necessities because our land is stolen. For us, land is our identity, our heritage, and our life. There is nothing more important than fighting for our lives. There is no greater right to defend than the right to life, and to separate us from our land is to rob us of our lives. Therefore, we will continue to claim that right and to fight land-grabbing in all its various forms.

3. Free social services

In this unjust system, everything is turned into a commodity for sale, including important social services like health, education, clean and safe drinking water, and more. Since the system itself has created classes of the haves and have-nots, the vast majority of the have-nots cannot afford such services due to lack of money.

When it comes to discrimination in these services, we working women are the main victims. We are the ones who lose our lives by failing to access quality health care during childbirth because we cannot afford the high cost in hospitals that provide good care, many of which are private. Even when we go to government hospitals, we still need to purchase medical equipment for maternity care, which are also sold at a high price. Maternity services start at a cost of TSh75,000 (US\$30) rising to TSh200,000 (US\$90) and up to Tsh3,000,000 (US\$1300) depending on the type of hospital and the type of delivery, natural or caesarean section. These costs are in addition to the cost of purchasing medical equipment. In short, in this system where we are forced to purchase essential health care, working women are at greater risk of losing our lives or those of our children during childbirth.

The health sector is just one facet that shows how we live in a society that degrades human dignity by selling services. Since without these services we cannot live nor safely bring a new life into the world, for us women, our rights cannot be realized if the right to access these essential services discriminates against us and the whole class of working people. We are tired of living in fear of losing our lives and the lives of our children. Thus, we want a system in which our human dignity is given priority over money.

4. The right to the city for all, without discrimination

In urban areas, we working women earn our living by running small businesses in the middle of the city. Our dependence on such businesses stems from being the victims of an economy that fails to protect our livelihoods while concentrating the means of production in the hands of the few.

The economy fails to focus on production and thus ends up creating a nation of informal traders. Among us, there are victims of land grabbing that deprived us of our farms as well as a large group that could work productively in factories but that remains unemployed because there are no factories. Thus, our only option is the business of petty trading, and we cannot operate in areas where there are no customers as all our needs depend on this business.

In addition to relying on our businesses, we are also major service providers for people of all classes in the city. We are the cleaners and cooks in offices and other urban areas. In short, all the activities of upper-class people in the city depend in every way on our services. Yet, whether we can live and earn a livelihood in the city is at the mercy of the state and not a recognized or respected right. We

working women - as well as men of the working class - have been called derogatory names to justify the abuse, humiliation and theft inflicted on us, including the brutal evictions from urban areas.

Since cities are built with our sweat and through our taxes, we want our right to remain and do our business in the heart of the city. We are tired of being harassed and robbed of our property under the pretext of sanitation and urban planning. We do not accept to be second class citizens in cities that thrive on our sweat and our labour. Thus, we want the relevant authorities to plan cities based on the needs of all citizens without discrimination. As the main victims of urban planning that discriminates against the majority of urban residents, we will continue to fight for a "right to the city" for all without exception until a revolution to establish a fully equal system is achieved.

5. Decent jobs for all

We working women recognize that the employment problem is systemic, and that it is not due to individual laziness or lack of ingenuity as we are told. We recognize that relations of production have been engineered such that a large group of able-bodied people are unemployed and turned into the slaves of a small group that monopolises the means of production. And that slavery thrives even more where the numbers of unemployed grow larger.

As working women, we are also affected by this problem, as we are educating our children with difficulty through our small businesses and farming. Sometimes we must sell everything we own to afford their schooling, which is also commodified in this system. Yet even after all that, our youth come back home and continue to be our dependents because there are no jobs.

As victims, we oppose all misleading ideologies that try to cover up these systemic weaknesses. We reject all ideologies that blame the victims for failing to find employment when it is the unjust system itself that has failed to create jobs. In solidarity with our children, we will continue to fight for decent jobs and to wish that all workers enjoy the fruits of their labour.

6. An end to gender-based violence in all its forms

We working women are the biggest [victims of gender-based violence](#). Due to the patriarchal system, we have grown up experiencing beatings and harassment, among other forms of abuse. We recognize that all women go through this ordeal, but it is indisputable that we are the biggest victims. Due to the hardships caused by capitalism, working women are vulnerable to violence as they are victims of men's stress and anger resulting from the cruelty of life. And since everything costs money, our economic situation deprives us of access to justice when we experience violence.

Given this reality, we will continue to fight to end gender-based violence, and beyond that, for full gender equality, which we believe will only be achieved when all oppressive systems are broken and a fully equal society is established, one that respects the dignity of each person.

Thus, we have decided:

(a) All of us present today will continue to create alternative organisations uniting working women wherever we are, raising our voices together to fight for these demands.

(b) We will continue to use these organisations to reach out to other working women and to encourage them to join forces and fight for our demands.

(c) We will continue to educate ourselves and to build class consciousness between us and working men to create strong solidarity that will enable us to bring about a revolution in the system and build a society with dignity, justice and prosperity for all.

This is a struggle to remind society that women's demands differ depending on class. These six abiding demands are for working women and all working people, and we, working women, will continue to fulfil our revolutionary duty by leading the struggle for these demands.

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Introduction and translation from Swahili by Michaela Collord. Collord teaches politics at the University of Nottingham and is active in labour organising both in the UK and in East Africa.

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