A “She” Story in Tanzania

Linlin Liang
ICTD Global Corps Study Abroad Program

As an international student at Michigan State University, traveling to Tanzania with a study abroad program designed for cultural and hands-on service learning gave me an unprecedented opportunity to break down serotypes about Africa, improve my understandings of gender inequality, and reinforce my cultural awareness. This story is about me, a young Chinese woman, and the local female community in Tanzania.

It was entirely dark when we landed at the Kilimanjaro International Airport, Tanzania. Spoiled by my past experiences with advanced infrastructures, I was surprised that there were no lights on the airport runways and the only lighting came from an old and faded grey building far away. When I stepped out the airplane, the air was humid, chilling, and mixed with some floral aroma. “Am I really in Africa? Shouldn’t Africa always be dry and warm?” I kept asking myself.

Through our training classes, I resolved my first puzzle about Tanzania. Tanzania is located in the South Hemisphere. It means May and June are wintertime and the end of rainy season, suggesting the coolness and humidity were reasonable by that time we arrived. Yet, I encountered more questions in regard to social and cultural norms as the program went on.

We spent most of our time in a rural village, Mto wa Mbu, from where we gained valuable insights about local social and cultural norms. In Mto wa Mbu,
most local women used various cotton clothes to cover themselves from neck to knee or from breast to toe with t-shirts, sweaters, and jeans underneath. It is worth mentioning that very few women dressed tight tops and bottoms that could accentuate the body curves. Seeing local women dressed in layers of fabrics made me wonder if these sorts of garments were a regular part of women’s daily dress code in Tanzanian culture. I was told this kind of one-piece cotton cloth is called “Kanga” and it was initially designed to deliver information from person to person by printing messages on fabrics. It initiates the bonding within the community. Tanzanian women wear Kanga all year around, even in summer, when temperature reaches over 85°F. Astonished by the fact, I kept investigating the reasons behind this dress code and became aware of the gender inequality in Tanzania.

From my observations in local schools and conversations with the community, I learnt that women shared a lower social status in Tanzania society, like India and most developing countries. Consequently, gender inequality gives rise to other social problems, like high dropout rates for girls and the prevalence of sexual harassments. In Tanzania, girls are not encouraged to continue education after elementary school not only because of limited education resources and preference for boys but also due to potential sexual harassments and assaults in schools. One female teacher, who is also a mother of a high school aged girl, anxiously conveyed her concerns about her daughter’s going to a boarding school in town. She said, “It is not safe for girls, like my daughter, to stay
in their dorms because bad things happen, “although these boarding schools usually assign security guards to girl dorms. It was frustrating that, in the end, she made her daughter commute from home to school every day on walk instead of living in the dorms. In Tanzania, parents also shave girls’ hair when they are ready to schools since long hair has been viewed as sexually attractive to males. These actions are to protect girls’ bodily integrity at the cost of beauty, time, and even secondary education. I never felt so fortunate that I had choices to go to a boarding school, have my long hair, and pursue higher education as I wished.

After knowing that, it is bittersweet to make the connection that Tanzanian women cover themselves up with Kanga in order to protect themselves from sexual harassments. Over-exposure of skin will attract males’ attention more or less. Local women find it easy to cover their skin by using Kanga. Local elder ladies usually wear multiple layers of Kanga; if they see a woman who does not cover her skin appropriately, they can easily take one layer of Kanga off and wrap her up. It is empowering when women watch each other’s back in a disfavored environment. Situating myself in a broader cultural context refreshed my knowledge of cultural norms and cultures. Furthermore, I greatly value this female daily dress code as a social norm in Tanzania and resonate with the virtues behind it.

In terms of the cultural context within this four-student group, we had three cultures: Thai, Chinese, and American. It was a great chance for all of us to get to know more about each other’s cultures. Engaging with students in the
study abroad program, I developed an open-minded patience with how people perceive my culture, the Chinese culture. Although I had already spent two academic years in Michigan State University, I did not quite fit in the American culture. I felt embarrassed and uncomfortable at first when one student in the group asked me if all Chinese people knew Kung Fu. I answered right away, “no, not a single guy that I know” and explained the exaggeration of Western media on the image of China. The student felt so relieved, explaining he never messed with Chinese people on the streets since he did not want to be punched. Then, we all burst out laughing. Being a Chinese, I was happy to alleviate someone’s harmless confusion about China, which also allowed me to reexamine my cultural awareness.

My journey from America to Tanzania has valuable implications on me as a researcher and a woman immersed in a multi-cultural environment. Being open-minded, I became aware of differences between cultures and others’ perspectives towards my own culture. From those cultural differences, I learnt virtues and morals behind certain social and cultural norms by valuing them and probing. This cultural learning process will assist me with my future cross-cultural research and studies. More importantly, this journey inspires me to voice for the female community, improving the public awareness of gender inequality in developing countries.