

Education of Maasai Girls in Kenya

*Written by Ezekiel Ole Katato
Chairman of Across Maasai Land Initiative & Olakira Le Maa Trust*



StandUp4Talent supports the education of Maasai Girls in Kenya in cooperation with Across Maasai Land Initiative (AMLI) / Olakira Le Maa Trust, a Community Based Organization {CBO} working to promote and support maximum utilization of locally available resources and assets for sustainable livelihoods of the Maasai people in Kenya. To achieve this goal, the organization supports education, promotes the Maasai culture and conservation.

The organization is working to increase the number of girls who are enrolled in school by providing access to education for those who would otherwise never go to school, and to ensure that girls already enrolled in school will be able to continue with their education as long as their ability and desire allow. The organization pays all educational costs, including room, board, uniforms, school supplies and transportation. Through this effort, the next generation of Maasai women will have an opportunity for economic independence, which will give them the power to determine their own destinies and to lead the way to a better life for future generations.

Across Maasai Land Initiative is structured to build long-lasting, institutional and cultural independence. By committing to the complete education of its students, support to one child per family, AMLI is providing an opportunity for economic independence to one generation, which will in turn be in a position to educate the next generation themselves.



By involving the community in every aspect of the organization's development and management, AMLI is building community values that include education for all. Through this community effort, the Maasai will be able to take responsibility for their future, rather than depend on the actions of their national government or the charity of foreign governments and international institutions.



The investment for supporting a girl in primary school is 700 Euros per year, 1,200 Euros per year in high school and 2,400 Euros per year in university. The cost include school tuition, boarding facilities {water, electricity, caretaker, school watchman, school cooks} school uniforms, school supplies {soap, writing materials, pens, pencils, rubbers, toiletries, sanitary towels, tooth paste, brush, box, mattress, cup, spoon, plate, blankets, bed cover, etc. }

Background

Like most poor women in African nations, Maasai Women are destined to live a life with limited choices. More than eighty percent of Maasai women will never have a single day of formal education. They will never learn to read or write or speak a language other than their native Maa. Not one in ten will reach the eighth grade. All but the most defiant will be “circumcised” at the age of twelve or thirteen and soon afterwards married to a man her father chooses. She will never be allowed to divorce, except in the most egregious cases of physical abuse, and will never be allowed to marry again, even if the husband her father chooses in an old man who dies when she is still in her teens. She will be one of her husband’s multiple wives, and will have many children, regardless of her health or ability to provide for them. She will rise early every day to milk cows, and spend her days walking miles to water holes to launder clothes and get water, and to gather wood to carry back home. If she is lucky, she will have a donkey to share her burden. She will live a life with few physical comforts, dependent on a husband and a family she did not choose.

One of the poorest tribes in East Africa, the Maasai is noble and dignified people who despite the pressures of the modern world have proudly maintained their traditional lifestyle and cultural identity. They live a nomadic lifestyle raising cattle, sheep and goats, wearing traditional clothes, and living in small villages called Manyattas, which are circular arrangement of mud huts. In the process of preserving their culture, however, the Maasai have embraced a system where the cultural pressures against woman’s education are nothing short of overwhelming.

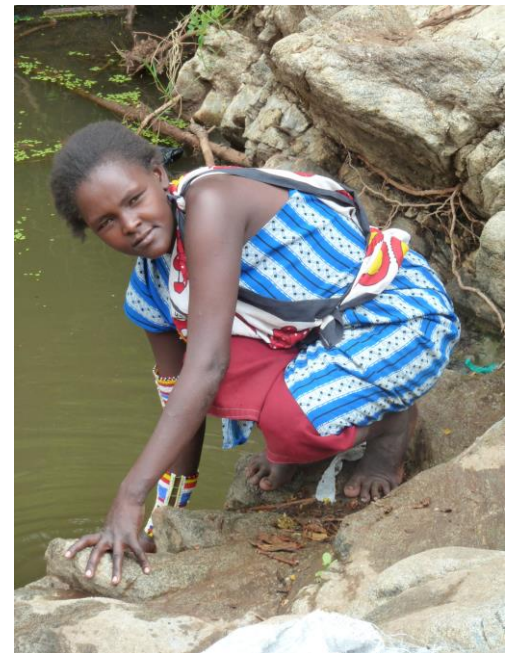
Maasai girls are far less likely than their urban counterparts to go to school and even fewer will reach the secondary level. When economically feasible, boys are allowed to remain in school, while many bright girls are forced to drop out and marry against their wishes.

Tragically current trends lead Kenya education officials to project that less than one half of one percent of Maasai girls will make it to secondary school, and too few to calculate will pass the national tests and go on to attend college.

An estimated 1200 Maasai girls (20%) will enroll in school in the Kajiado County of Kenya in January 2016. Over the next years approximately 1,000 of those who start school this year (90%) will drop out of school against their wishes. A vast majority of these girls will be circumcised and married between the ages of 13 and 15.

Barriers to girls’ education

The economic, cultural and physical factors that combine to deny education to Maasai girls in Kenya are numerous and, taken together, almost impossible for all but the most determined girls to overcome. Even when possible Maasai girls have the added impediment of cultural beliefs that prevent many from enrolling or completing school. They include: (1) economic incentives for early marriage, such as cattle and cash dowries, (2) the belief that biological family does not benefit from educating a daughter, since the girl becomes a member of her husband’s family when she marries, (3) family and peer pressure for early marriage, as women are valued by the number of children they have, (4) fear of early pregnancy, which is a disgrace prior to marriage.





Even when girls are enrolled in school, the vast majority is enrolled in local public day schools because public boarding schools, which are not free, are prohibitively expensive for most Maasai families. The quality of education in this rural school is rarely adequate to prepare students for the national tests, which are required to go on to secondary school. And for the exceptional child, who does pass the national test to graduate from primary school, the minimum 1,200 Euros per year cost of secondary schools prohibitive for most Maasai and, if economically feasible, sons are always given priority. In addition, the walking distance to the closest school can be as much as seven to twenty kilometres one way. This is further complicated by the nomadic culture, which causes seasonal disruption in education for all Maasai children.

Economic barriers unrelated to the cost of education

Economic incentives for early marriage:

The Maasai culture is polygamous, and a man's wealth is determined by the number of cattle and the number of children he has. A daughter's marriage increase the wealth of Maasai girl's family through combine cattle and cash dowries and, since a girl joins her husband/s family upon marriage, her father is relieved from having to support her. The problem of early marriage is also worsened by increasing poverty of Maasai people, which lead Maasai fathers to marry their daughters off at increasingly young ages.

Return on investment:

For those few families that are able to pay education costs, there is a widespread cultural preference for educating sons first. This stems from the tradition that Maasai girls leave their parents' village and become a member of the husband's family upon marriage. Maasai fathers tend, therefore, to believe that their family will not benefit from investing in their daughter's education.

Cultural Barriers

Family and peer pressure for early marriage:

Early marriage is the most often cited reason that Maasai girls drop out of school. Maasai girls are taught that circumcision is a rite of passage into womanhood that accompanies puberty and an immediate precursor to marriage. As a result, many bright young Maasai girls are forced to drop out school to get married after circumcision. Further escalating the pressure for early marriage is the reality that in the Maasai culture women are often valued on the basis of how many children they can produce for their husbands.

Fear of early pregnancy:

In the Maasai culture, a girl is not allowed to live in the same house with her father once she is a "woman". Therefore, when a girl reaches puberty, she is effectively on her own. Without supervision or even a roof over her head, she is at great risk of becoming pregnant. Except where a daughter is required to remain unmarried to take care of elderly parents who have no sons, a woman who has children but no husband brings disgrace to her family. Fear of premarital pregnancy is a common reason for parents to insist that their daughters leave school and marry early.



Walking distance to school:

Since the pastoral Maasai require significant land resources to graze their cattle, their villages are constructed far apart from each other. As a result, one school must serve several villages typically within a 15- to 20-kilometer radius. There are no cars, buses, horses, or even bicycles available to Maasai children, so they must walk this great distance. A 15 to 20 kilometre walk each way is a deterrent to all but the most determined students. But some do it, every day. The long walks undermine education even for those who make it to school. Not surprisingly, teachers report that children who have spent two to five hours walking to school in the morning, often without having had anything to eat, are tired, and their ability to concentrate is impaired. Also, it is often late when children arrive home after such long walks, and they are still required to do chores. Even if they still have the desire and energy to study after they are finished with their responsibilities at home, it is often too dark and there is no electricity or artificial light.

The nomadic Maasai lifestyle:

The Maasai are a pastoral, nomadic society, and circumstances sometimes require that families move in order to find water and grass for their cattle. In drought conditions, a child's education is often interrupted or halted until the rains come, causing them to fall behind in their school work, or to stop attending school altogether.

Overcoming the Barriers

Across Maasai Land Initiative is mitigating the barriers to girls' education by assuming all education costs for its students in boarding schools. These include room, board, tuition, supplies, transportation, uniforms, tutoring, and test fees. In addition specific strategies have been developed to address the disparity between the enrollment of girls and boys.

Strategies

Increasing enrollment:

AMLI, through a volunteer network of community advocates for girls' education identifies young Maasai children who will never have an opportunity to go to school and, after obtaining permission from parents, enrolls them in a boarding school with proven high standards of performance. Equally important is sustaining the number of children who are already enrolled in school that would be forced to drop out against their wishes because of cultural reasons, such as circumcision, early marriage. Community advocates and educators are vigilant in their effort to identify these girls in time to keep them in school.



Enrolling in boarding schools:

Physical barriers are removed and cultural barriers weakened by placing children only in boarding schools. Physical barriers include the long, walks to local schools, which may be as far as 15 kilometers from a girl's village, and disruptions of education caused by droughts and related tribal migrations of this pastoral culture. Boarding schools also mitigate the cultural barriers by giving girls a place to escape the relentless pressure for, early marriage and motherhood in an environment supportive of girls' education. In addition, boarding schools provide regular, nutritious meals, health care, structured time for study, and a housing option for girls who have reached puberty and, by Maasai tradition, can no longer live in the homes of their fathers.



Ensuring quality education:

AMLI enrolls its primary school students only in boarding schools that perform in the top one-third on national tests. Secondary school students are enrolled in the best public school possible within the limitations of the school's national test score requirements. In that way, our students will receive the quality education necessary to score high on national tests at graduation from eighth grade and from twelfth grade. This will allow them to compete with students coming from the more sophisticated and well funded urban public schools and private schools in Kenya, thereby giving them access to the best secondary schools and colleges. To give them a further boost, AMLI provides tutoring during the school break before the national.

Paving the way for economic independence:

AMLI is committed to increasing opportunities for the economic independence of Maasai people in Kenya. Our strategy' is to ensure that AMLI-sponsored students remain in school as long as their desire and ability allow, including a college education in their chosen fields, provided there is a viable job market in the field in Kenya.

Empowering rural women:

AMLI is developing a series of seminars for rural Maasai women who have no formal education, which focus on practical skills in areas such as health care, nutrition, and business. Through this effort, the mothers, grandmothers, aunts, and sisters of our students will be gaining knowledge that will improve their lives and the lives of their families and communities. At the same time, the benefits of educating girls will be demonstrated directly and immediately, thus accelerating an increase in community support for education of girls.

Building capacity:

AMLI is providing training to its staff and board members to enable them to become better business managers. This training includes formal computer and book keeping classes, as well as direct involvement in managing their office. The on-the-job training includes administration, governance, and fund-raising, and will ultimately teach skills that will improve their ability to manage independently the day-to-day affairs of the office. It will also expand their opportunities for participation in other business areas in Kenya.





Value of Educating Maasai Women

The benefits to society of educating women are well documented and include lower birth rates, better health practices, lower infant mortality, fewer teenage marriages and pregnancies, and greater economic well being not only for women, but for the entire community in which they live. This is true in every culture, worldwide. This is true in Kenya.

As recently documented in a report by the Ministry of Finance and Planning in Kenya: *Illiteracy has emerged as the number one root cause of poverty in the district.. Education is a means of overcoming poverty, increasing income, improving nutrition and health, reducing family size as well as raising people's self confidence and enriching the quality of their lives... The gender gap in education however comes at a high cost to growth and development. For example, the mother's education is the single most important determinant of a family's health and nutrition. Female discrimination must be overcome through increased awareness on the importance of education for all, and in particular, increased female participation in education and formal sector employment. Republic of Kenya, Ministry of Finance and planning, Kajiado District Development Plan 2010-2015.*

Building Independence - A Replicable Model

Much of the developing world is dependent on the charity of foreign governments and international institutions for its economic development. While the efforts of these institutions, are sometimes successful in the short-term, they often fail to diminish the need for ongoing charity. Across Maasai Land Initiative is structured to build long-lasting, institutional and cultural independence. By committing to the complete education of its students, and restricting support to one child per family, the organization will provide the opportunity for economic independence to one generation, which will in turn educate the next generation themselves. By providing management training to the staff and board, the organization can be managed independently by the Maasai community.

The great strength of the organization is its level of community involvement. AMLI has included the community in every aspect of its development. From the beginning, women's advocacy groups, educators, and parents were consulted to ensure that all perspectives and opinions were considered. The Division committees and board members all participated in deciding the organization's goals and how to achieve them, and they are essential to carrying out its mission.

This model can be applied to other ethnic groups in Kenya as well as other countries in Africa and elsewhere. The model works because it is focused and because it is a community-based initiative that has long-term, direct benefits to the community it serves.