

# Chapter 10

## Maasai Girls' Subjectivities and the Nexus of Gender Justice and Education Rights Discourse

Serena Koissaba

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA

### ABSTRACT

*Global development discourse around the interplay between social justice and childhood issues are complicated when interpreting these ideas contextually through translocational gender and cultural lenses. This chapter attempted to address some of the following questions: How do international gender and education interventions problematize the transition for Maasai girls as they transition from childhood to adulthood? Can Amartya Sen's 'capability framework, work effectively for African children in Kenya who by their cultural norms become adults before the age of 18? In what ways are the social justice schemes producing disaggregated cultural structures for Maasai Girls? This chapter, therefore examined how Maasai girls' subjectivities are affected by gender and education rights mediation through Amartya Sen's 'capabilities approach' and a human rights framework. The experiences and perspectives of female subjects have seemingly been distorted within feminist and geopolitical rhetoric. Transnational feminism in this work is positioned as a postcolonial project that employs theories of human rights, capabilities, and multiculturalism as lenses in which to interrogate practices of erasures of voice and representation of active participants within the movement, but reconsider what feminist theory can do to move the conversation away from male-centric ideologies.*

### INTRODUCTION

Current analyses of the condition of African girls are in direct contestation to their cultural norms. The "intervention factor" (Nsamenang, 2013) by international actors with the goal of defining and promoting Western sensibilities in non-Western contexts are at work to restructure the lives of girls living outside of those spaces by using social justice and emancipatory-based instruments to position non-western girls to contribute to the global economy. Funding sources for these initiatives are based almost entirely on

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foreign aid (Nsamenang, 2013) with development ideologies regarding 'children' and their wellbeing, which in some ways reflects a poor attitude towards African social systems. The critique of these African social systems are framed around human rights and multiculturalism binaries that do not consider global hegemonic forces and these forces tend to produce structural inequalities that disrupt the lives of the people they claim to desire to help (Tamale, 2013). There is a movement of neoliberal "market-oriented politics" (Kjørholt, 2013), connected to gender and education rights discourses that shape how African girlhood is imagined. Education is seen globally as the mechanism for economic growth worldwide. Youth from aboriginal settings are situated between concepts of human-child rights and human capital strategies. Maasai females live in a communitarian social ontology which means that members of the community participate as a political collective to design their shared knowledge of social goods and standards (Kang, 2008). There are disadvantages to the distribution of power both in and outside of the political community for women and girls.

This interpretation of Maasai girls' rights to gender justice and education is framed using a 'capabilities approach' and a sociological analysis to conceptualise their childhood. Traditionally, Maasai girls transition into adulthood at puberty. This is problematic due to theoretical and practical implications regarding children's rights and considerations of the complexities of the sociological norms in which they live. Standards for the transition to adulthood should be reconsidered in light of international human rights and children's rights precepts as enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and congruent to various processes and definitions of childhoods globally. Sen's (1999)'s capability approach does not limit what 'freedom' means in terms of a child's development, access to jurisprudence, or enacting their own agency when desired (Peleg, 2013). Global development discourse around the interplay between social justice and childhood issues are complicated when interpreting these ideas contextually through global and local gender and cultural lenses. For example, how do international gender and education interventions problematize the transition for Maasai girls as they transition from childhood to adulthood? Can the Sen's capability approach be effective for African females who by their cultural norms become adults before the age of 18? In what ways are social justice schemes producing disaggregated cultural structures for Maasai Girls? This chapter sought to establish an understanding of how the Maasai girls' subjectivities are constructed by gender and education rights mediation by looking at childhood through Sen's capabilities approach, multiculturalism, and the human rights framework.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **Fieldwork**

My fieldwork with Maasai schoolgirls began in the Maasai Mara Game Reserve in Kenya. The field site for my initial research took place in Narok County from 2000-2006 with follow-up interviews from 2007 to the present. I conducted interviews with both women and men on their views concerning female circumcision as well as laws passed by the Kenyan government to restrict customary rituals. My primary research site was the Maasai Mara Game Reserve. The Maasai Mara is a challenging site to conduct research regarding FGM because of the amount of tourism and external influences from outsiders. I attended numerous circumcision ceremonies for both boys and girls while having the opportunity to talk

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