

Chapter 6

Social Norms or Child Labour?

The Case of the Maasai Community in Kenya

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses social norms which purportedly condone “unpaid child labour” as a way of bringing up children, especially girls, in preparation for early marriage in the Maasai community in Kenya. International organisations such as the International Labour Office (ILO) and United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) view “unpaid child labour” as detrimental to children’s education and welfare. Yet, in the Maasai culture, it is viewed as a way mothers prepare girls to be responsible married women from an early age. Findings revealed that the young educated Maasai girls and boys who are “agents of change” are actively engaged in sensitising their communities and advocating for the rights of girls, and women. The Chapter recommends that the Government of Kenya, international NGOs and stakeholders work together with agents of change in their communities to create awareness concerning children’s rights.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on the issue of unpaid child labour (traditional work) in which young children, especially girls, engage from a very young age. UNICEF (2016) suggests that children across the world are becoming agents of change and participating in rights campaigns. For instance, child labourers in Bangladesh have joined the Global March against child labour. Among the *Maasai*, the agents of change are committed and willing to do what is best for the *Maasai* children. Their life stories narrate their experiences of growing up in *Maasai* communities. Yet they overcame hardships and some actually fled their homes to rescue centres so as to pursue their education. Agents of change are therefore perceived as best suited to creating awareness on children’s rights, which could change communities’ attitudes towards young girls. UNESCO rightly asserts that children and young people need a political mechanism through which they can debate important issues such as child labour (UNESCO, 2016). Moreover, UNICEF supports communities in developing countries such as those in Africa in changing their cultural

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acceptance of child labour, while supporting strategies and programmes to provide alternative income to families, access to nurseries, quality education, and protective services.

This chapter discusses social norms which traditionally require mothers to prepare girls for early marriages and to be responsible women from an early age. Children are not aware of their rights as they are meant to believe that the upbringing is culturally accepted and is a way of life for the *Maasai*. Most of these children engage in activities which are globally viewed as “unpaid child labour” as discussed broadly in this Chapter. Discourse shows that unpaid child labour activities which are mainly done at household level affect children’s education, especially that of the girl child.

Social norms and activities which are culturally accepted continue to be in constant competition with Government policies. For instance, whilst the *Maasai* communities concentrate on “culture education”, the Government of Kenya has enacted the Basic Education Act, 2013, which requires all school going children to be in school. Furthermore, the policy has put in place tough measures to deal with parents who engage children in activities which keep them out of school. This Chapter shows that agents of change view “unpaid child labour” as a factor affecting children’s education and leads to early marriages. The question is: how can communities such as the *Maasai* change their predominant beliefs and practices and embrace children’s rights as proposed internationally and adopted by the Government? It is noted that it is often difficult to change people’s beliefs and their way of life. In fact, historically even the colonists and missionaries failed in changing communities’ beliefs and practices (Munthali, 2001).

The objective of the Chapter is to impart knowledge and encourage debate on competing ideologies of predominant social norms versus global and national policies such as child labour; and the importance of engaging communities in participatory approaches to creating a platform for dialogue and consensus. The Chapter will contribute to deeper understanding of childhood conceptions and children’s rights in the *Maasai* community. This should benefit students, professionals, and researchers working especially in education and child welfare.

BACKGROUND

As Edmonds (2007) states, any researcher who discuss child labour issues should start by defining the term “child labour”. The definition needs to be unpacked as UNICEF and the International Labour Office (ILO) rightly point out that there is work that children do to help their families in ways that are neither harmful nor exploitative. This work usually entails helping parents around the home. It involves activities such as preparing tea, washing up dishes, house cleaning, washing clothes and shopping just to mention a few. However, defining whether an activity is harmful to a child’s health and development is a challenge, because whether an activity is harmful depends on what the child would be doing in the absence of work (Edmonds, 2007). It is noted that these activities differ in western countries and vary in African countries. For instance, in addition to activities already mentioned, young children in Africa, especially in sub-Sahara countries and those living in rural areas, walk long distances to fetch water and firewood, wake up early in the morning to clean their homesteads, cook meals for families, look after siblings and engage in agricultural related activities. These activities are normally done by girls before and after the school day. Whilst in western countries the activities children engage in homes are just helping parents, in some communities in Africa it is part and parcel of “culture education” which prepares girls and boys for their future roles. Such activities are traditional demands and are acceptable by most communities in Africa. According to the ILO/IPU Handbook for Parliamentarians (2008), as quoted by

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