Community Education Program

Website: www.maasaigirlseducation.org

Mission: Maasi Girls Educational Fund’s mission is to improve the literacy, health, and economic well-being of Maasai women and their families in Kenya through education of girls and their communities. With economic empowerment, this new generation of Maasai women will end early marriages and circumcision of girls and bring greater literacy, health, and economic well being to future generations.

About the Organization

In August 1999, the founder, Barbara Lee Shaw, began a photography project to document the Maasai culture. Spending a week camping near a Maasai village in Kilonito, she visited several villages enjoying the Maasai hospitality, dances and humor. It was there she discovered the irresistible charm of two Maasai girls, Ntanin Tarayia and Sempyeo Sarinke, the girls who inspired the creation of MGEF.

MGEF’s primary goal is to provide scholarships from primary school through university to girls who have never enrolled in school, or who would be forced to drop out of school for cultural or economic reasons. They are committed to each student until they have the knowledge and skills needed to enter the workforce in Kenya. As of December 2011, MGEF has provided scholarships to 103 Maasai girls.

MGEF’s Community Education Program organizes workshops throughout Maasai communities to address the social customs and cultural beliefs that prevent Maasai girls in Kenya from getting an education.

Where They Work

MGEF works in the Kajiado, Loitokitok, and Ngong Districts of Kenya, where two-thirds of Kenya’s Maasai population lives.

MGEF is in partnership with an independent community-based organization in Kajiado, Kenya. The Kajiado organization provides the grass roots connection to the Maasai community, executes the fieldwork, and ensures that MGEF’s work is accepted in the culture.

Maasai Traditions and Life Challenges for Girls

The Maasai are a semi-nomadic pastoral tribes native to southern Kenya and north-central Tanzania, along the Great Rift Valley plains. They are great herders of cattle who live in the open wild, sharing

In the MGEF program area:
- 48 of 100 girls enroll in school. Five of them will graduate from primary school (8th grade).
- Fewer than one in 100 will graduate from secondary school.
- Nine out of 10 will be circumcised and married off by the age of 15.
- In the previous generation less than 20% of girls enrolled in school, and they and their families live in extreme poverty.
their habitat with wildlife. The Tanzanian and Kenyan governments have encouraged the Maasai to abandon their traditional lifestyle through governmental programs, but the people continue their age-old customs. Because of their ability to farm in deserts and scrublands in response to climate changes, Oxfam has claimed that the lifestyle of the Maasai should be embraced.

Many traditions of the Maasai culture and life challenges for young Maasai girls create barriers to continue their education and have contributed to the low level of literacy of Maasai girls and women. They include:

Cultural Beliefs
- **Girls are an asset**: In the Maasai Culture, a girl is viewed as an asset, to be traded for economic gain as soon as she "crosses the childhood bridge," usually in exchange for five cows.
- **Economic disincentive**: A daughter becomes a member of her husband’s family once married, and belief is her education will benefit her husband’s family.

Social Customs. When a Maasai girl reaches puberty, she is no longer allowed in her father’s house when he is at home, so she is left without a place of her own to sleep and without supervision. Since sex is a taboo subject, girls are ignorant of the facts of life and vulnerable to the advances of men and boys.

**Poverty.** The Maasai are among the most impoverished ethnic groups in Kenya, and most cannot afford to send their children to school. For those few families that can, the preference is to educate sons first. Poverty is also the driving force behind early marriage to obtain a dowry.

Pressure for Early Marriage. When a Maasai girl reaches puberty, she is subjected to intense pressure from family and peers to marry, as has always been the custom among the Maasai. Girls need strong external support to resist these pressures.

Teen Pregnancy. Because girls are ignorant about the facts of life, they are at high risk of becoming pregnant. Girls are not told about menstruation and do not understand the consequences of sex.

**Female Genital Mutilation (FGM).** Traditionally, when a girl reaches puberty, and often long before, she is circumcised in preparation for marriage. An estimated 90% of Maasai girls are circumcised and are considered ready for marriage and childbearing. They believe that school is for children, and circumcised girls who continue are often ridiculed by peers from their villages.

**Female Genital Mutilation**

*Female Genital Mutilation* (FGM) is a widespread practice in Africa and other developing areas, which involves the cutting away of genital tissue with the aim of reducing or eliminating sexual arousal, and thereby limiting the probability of sexual activity prior to marriage. **Immediate complications** can include severe pain, shock, hemorrhage, tetanus or sepsis (bacterial infection), urine retention, open sores in the genital region and injury to nearby genital tissue. **Later problems** can include problems urinating, cysts, infections, infertility, as well as complications in childbirth and increased risk of newborn deaths.

**FGM is sometimes called female circumcision, but it is far more brutal and damaging for girls than for boys.** It is an important rite of passage and many girls look forward to that day. Some girls even beg to be circumcised when their parents are ready to end the custom in their own families. But girls don’t know what it is until the procedure is being performed on them, and are misinformed about its adverse impact on a woman’s health, as are many of their mothers.

Although **FGM was banned in Kenya in 2011**, it continues to be practiced. Two types practiced by the Maasai:
- **Strict traditional Maasai practice** is removal of the clitoris and the labia minora and majora without any pain relievers. Should a girl scream due to the pain inflicted, the girl and her mother are taken to be cowards and perceived of as bringing shame to the family.
- **More modernized Maasai practice** is a partial removal of the clitoris, usually done surgically at night at a private hospital or government medical facility.
HIV. The Maasai culture is highly promiscuous, and rape is not uncommon, increasing the spread of HIV. There is also a strong resistance to using condoms, and misinformation about them as well. Many Maasai, especially in the rural areas, remain ignorant about the disease, some believing it is simply a curse about which they can do nothing. Many girls must drop out of school to take care of ailing parents and younger siblings, and girls between the ages of 15 to 24 are four to six times more likely to become infected with HIV than their male peers. The incidence of HIV infection in this area is more than twice the national average - 13% versus 6% nationally.

Prejudice and Self-Esteem. There exists in Kenya a great deal of prejudice among the various tribal groups, including against the Maasai. Most of the teachers and head teachers (principals) at schools in the program area are not Maasai, since so few Maasai women (and men) have been educated. These prejudices are often expressed by non-Maasai teachers toward Maasai female students, and sometimes towards boys. Students have reported that teachers have scolded them when they ask a question, or incorrectly answer a question, by saying, “You Maasais will never be anything. Why don’t you just go back home and have babies.”

The Program

The primary objectives of the Community Education Program are to end forced and early marriage, female genital mutilation (FGM) and other forms of violence against women, as well as teen pregnancy, and the spread of HIV, all significant factors preventing Maasai girls from receiving an education. The ultimate goal is to increase the enrollment and completion rates of Maasai girls in school by addressing these barriers. Through community workshops and business training for women, girls are empowered to continue their education and contribute to the economic status of their families and communities.

All Life Skills Workshops are facilitated by Maasai women, who are trained medical professionals and counselors. The workshops are held in rural primary schools for girls, and for rural women at a central location near their villages. Business Training Workshops are held for groups of fifty women, also at a central location near their villages.

About the Community Education Program Workshops

- **Life Skills for Girls** – girls age 10 and older learn they have a right to an education; that it is illegal in Kenya for a child to marry under the age of 16 and to circumcise girls, and that a progressive local area chiefs and law enforcement officials can protect them from both. They learn about FGM and why it is harmful to their health. They learn how a girl becomes pregnant and how to combat the advances of men and boys. They are also taught how HIV is spread and how to protect themselves. Emphasis is placed on the danger of having sex with older men, since they are more likely to be infected and are skilled seducers. The workshop is designed to instill pride in being educated and build self-esteem among a population where marriage and a dowry are valued above education.

- **Life Skills for Women** (new program in 2011) - introduces a new role for mothers to explain the facts of life to their daughters, which is taboo in the Maasai culture, and to provide supervision once
they reach puberty. The workshops address misconceptions about condoms, HIV and FGM. Discussing these subjects with daughters is an essential component of the effort to reduce teen pregnancy, FGM and the spread of HIV. Though the key to success is approval from the fathers, which MGEF has arranged through its Chiefs & Elders Workshops (part of Community Education Program but not funded by DFW at this time).

- **Mentoring for MGEF Scholarship Students** – is specifically designed to mentor secondary MGEF scholarship students 8th-12th grade who are also victims of peer ridicule and family disdain for not following the traditional Maasai life of marriage and motherhood. The girls receive the same information as the Life Skills Workshop girls and create through this a community of MGEF students and alumni who can provide emotional support and encouragement to each other.

- **Business Training for Rural Maasai Women** – aims to empower rural Maasai women with little or no formal education by teaching them basic business skills and providing a seed grant of $150 to start a business (5 women / business). One day of training is followed by 4 visits from a business mentor during the startup-phase. This workshop project is done in partnership with Village Enterprise Fund (funded by DFW in March 2011).

  These women become self-sufficient, and therefore able to provide better health care and nutrition for their families, afford school fees for their children, as well as have ability to escape abusive relationships with their husbands.

**How DFW’s Donations Will Be Used**

DFW will provide a grant for $23,504 to Maasai Girls Education Fund to support Life Skills Workshops and Women’s Business Training. The expenses for each program include MGEF staff, facilitators, transportation, accommodations, telephone, lunch and supplies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program Budget Item</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Life Skills Workshop for Girls – 1500 girls</td>
<td>$ 14,131</td>
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<tr>
<td>Life Skills Workshop for Women – 2000 women</td>
<td>$ 6,660</td>
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<tr>
<td>Women’s Business Training - minimum of 4 workshops, 50 women</td>
<td>$1,500</td>
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<td>Life Skills/Mentoring MGEF - 25-30 Students</td>
<td>$ 1,213</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total of Program Budget supported by DFW</strong></td>
<td><strong>$ 23,504</strong></td>
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**Why We Love This Program**

MGEF’s Community Educational Program involves the Maasai community in every aspect. Workshops and business trainings are organized and facilitated by Maasai women – but to be effective, the agenda must be important to the Maasai community, appropriate to the culture and delivered by the Maasai people. A significant break in tradition has occurred as Chiefs and Elders see the need to prevent their
daughters from getting pregnant, and both their sons and daughters from getting HIV. They have agreed to talk with their sons to make changes to cultural traditions that contribute to the spread of HIV. Because fathers would not speak to their daughters about sex, they are the ones that have requested that mothers be given the information through the workshops so they can educate their daughters.

Girls who attend workshops will learn about and discuss subjects that are not addressed in Maasai society, which will prepare them to take control over their bodies and their lives. The role of mothers in protecting their daughters against pregnancy, FGM and HIV will result in a new authority within the family, where women traditionally have no voice, not even in decisions affecting the health and well being of their daughters.

The women who receive business training and seed grants will become empowered economically, giving them a more equal voice in family decisions and the means to educate their children, as well as providing better health care and nutrition for their families.

As more and more girls and women attend these workshops, they will become a force for change that will lead to greater gender equity.

**Measuring Success**

MGEF has been organizing Life Skills Workshops for girls since 2006 and Business Training for women since August 2010. Since that time more than 2,000 girls have attended, and 200 women have received business training in the first year.

This program should bring about a reduction in early marriage, teen pregnancy, FGM, and HIV, and an increase in the number of girls who complete primary school. And for every increase in primary education for girls, there is a corresponding decrease in the age she marries, the number of children she has and a decline in HIV and malnutrition. If MGEF provided business training to 200 women each year, after five years, 1,000 families would be better able to afford secondary school fees for their daughters if businesses succeeded. (Village Enterprise Fund cites a 75% success rate after three years.)

Where workshops are held, MGEF is recording the number of girls who dropped out of school during the three years preceding and will continue collecting the same data for the three years following to see if there is a reduction in the drop-out rate. Questionnaires are also distributed at the end of each workshop to assess the workshop’s effectiveness. The questionnaire was revised in 2011 to have only multiple choice and true/false questions as the prior format was in an essay format and did not draw any meaningful conclusions. So far, this approach has produced a clear understanding of the workshop short-term impact.

You can find a copy of the questionnaire on the DFW June Program webpage for MGEF.
Voices

Changing Attitudes About Educating Girls

Simantoi’s father was adamantly opposed to educating girls and refused to support his daughter’s education, but Simantori persisted attending her classes about one-third of the time as her mother helped support her through selling charcoal and asking friends for help. MGEF support her secondary and college education and in 2006 she was employed as a nurse at a clinic in Nairobi while pursuing a degree in psychology at the University of Nairobi.

In 2011 she was economically independent but did not forget her home. She contributes more to her family every year than her dowry would have ever brought. She helps with medical bills, shoes and schooling for nieces and nephews, purchases food and more. Her family is healthier and economically stronger and revered in the community for having an educated, successful daughter whom her father brags about. Simantoi and her mother have changed the way her father and entire community view girls’ education. Everyone now wants an educated daughter “like Simantoi”!

Additional Resources

On the DFW June Program webpage for MGEF you will also find:

- Maasai Culture information
- MGEF Program Presentation file in both Powerpoint and PDF formats
- MGEF Workshop Questionnaire
- MGEF video files

You may view these files online or download them to your computer.

Additional information on the Maasai people can be found online in the “Maasai People”, Wikipedia article.

Source Materials:

- Maasai Girls Educational Fund website
- Documents provided by Maasai Girls Educational Fund to Dining for Women
- Wikipedia article - "Maasai People"
- Wikipedia article - "Female genital mutilation"