

Girls and Women

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One of the advantages of having emeritus rank is the privilege of continuing to serve on doctoral committees. Recently at Virginia Tech one of my doctoral students, Heather Switzer, defended her dissertation, “Making the Maasai Schoolgirl: Developing Modernities on the Margins.” She had spent eight months in Kenya collecting data, and during that time I visited her just prior to the turmoil and bloodshed caused by the disputed presidential election in December 2007. Her base of operation was her tin hut and a small vegetable garden near Kajiado in the Rift Valley, home of the Maasai. From there, she and her research assistant, who also acted as a translator, visited primary schools and did more than a hundred interviews with girls ages 12 – 17, focusing on two questions, among others: When does a female become a woman? Are you a woman?

And so it was that in early October 2007 I sat with Heather in Nairobi because my project work had kept me in the city and I was soon slated to leave. She had boarded what she laughingly referred to as a “goat truck” in the early dawn the day before. The goat truck is a pickup that went each morning to the nearest town center, picking up people, animals, and merchandise on the way, and returning in the darkening evening with perhaps the same people but different animals and merchandise. In Africa, a pickup truck can never be too full. From the nearest town center, she would take two or more mini-bus rides into Nairobi, depending on the many vagaries of the buses and drivers.

And so we sat in Nairobi in a setting only a day away in distance but years away in culture. Heather is a courageous woman, a dedicated scholar, and a vivid storyteller. Although she spun out stories of her arduous daily routines with humor and pathos, there

had to be much loneliness and even fear that she dealt with every day. On the other hand, Heather was no stranger to Kenya or to Africa, having been a Peace Corps teacher in Ethiopia, who was evacuated during a dangerous conflict there.

Having financed her year in Kenya on her own, Heather received an AAU American Dissertation Fellowship to help support her year of data analysis and writing upon her return to the United States. During her dissertation defense she talked about these Maasai primary school girls’ conception of themselves as “schoolgirls,” even those who had been circumcised, which automatically made them women under local social norms, or those with a child at home. They were not women; they were schoolgirls, they said.

When I think of these schoolgirls, clinging to girlhood, I see them in stark contrast to a meeting of middle school girls in our university town, who were discussing sexuality, sexual harassment, and empowerment with a group of university faculty women that had worked with them during the year. The university female faculty studiously referred to these 6th, 7th, and 8th grade girls as “women.” Young women perhaps, but using the term women did not ring true for me. It sounded awkward and somehow inappropriate.

But what made these middle school girls want to embrace being called women with all the inherent implications and responsibilities? Is it that they knew they could usurp the term without having to accept being a woman? They could remain girls, protected by societal norms, while playing with the idea of being women. The Maasai schoolgirls know all too well what awaits their acceptance of being called women. Their mothers, sisters, and friends are living

examples of the effects of poverty, early marriage, and multiple children. A two-minute video at

<http://www.girleffect.org/#/video/>

called “The Girl Effect” powerfully demonstrates the plight of the girl child in developing countries and the potential positive outcomes of assisting this half of the world’s population. It’s mostly in black and white with written words only, but the dramatic effect is stunningly memorable. One scene shows the GIRL overcome by flies, husband, babies, hunger, and HIV, then stripped of all those to stand alone ready to make her way toward changing the world.

The schoolgirls in Heather’s study wanted to postpone marriage and children; they wanted an education, good jobs to help their families, and independence to make decisions about their lives. Though the images they might evoke for these dreams would differ from the university town middle school girls’ dreams of their futures, they are no doubt basically grounded in the same goals.

Worlds apart. Girls. Women. Different realities of girlhood and womanhood. Trapped by gender. Defined by gender