

Home and Overseas Paper – September 2021

At MWA Central Committee in April, a decision was taken to financially support an appeal made by the Unity Women's Desk (UWD) called "Keep Them in School Appeal." This was an appeal to help keep 12 Maasai girls in education in order that they avoided being married at a young age and of course gain an education. Central Committee agreed to immediately send £500 and as this was an ongoing project – the girls have a number of school years to complete – we agreed to raise funds throughout the next "MWA year" in order that we could donate at least another £500 to the appeal next Spring. This project has caught the imagination of many MWA members – The Seedlings Circle raised a magnificent £1,115.42, we received a £200 donation from the Carol Holdsworth Trust and other donations are still coming in.

The Maasai are a semi-nomadic people who occupy land in southern Kenya and Northern Tanzania and have done so for hundreds of years. Unfortunately for Maasai girls and women, circumcision or female genital mutilation (FGM) is often performed between the ages of 11-13 followed very quickly by marriage to a man chosen by her father in exchange for cattle and cash. Maasai girls are rarely allowed to divorce and even if her husband dies, she is not allowed to re-marry; instead, she becomes the property of one of her husband's brothers. Life expectancy is 45 years. Women are valued by the number of children they have and because after marriage they will belong to their husband's family, the Maasai see no benefit to their own family in keeping a girl in education. Poverty plays a large part in the decision to marry girls off at an early age – the lure of increased cattle numbers is too much for Maasai men to resist. For more information on the Maasai culture see youtu.be/3jAZWAc8YpQ.

Sr Rehema Taikoo is a Moravian minister in the Mborali District of Mbeya, Tanzania – she herself is a Maasai woman. It was she who appealed for help from the UWD to keep the girls in education. She reports that in 2020 in the six villages she is familiar with, 30 girls aged between 10-12 were circumcised and approximately 20 girls were married at a young age – from 12 years old. Rehema reports that as circumcision is illegal in Tanzania, parents are choosing to circumcise their daughters at an even earlier age to conceal it from the government. Rehema is also hoping to run education sessions for parents in the six Maasai villages she works to reduce the circumcision and early marriage of girls.

The UWD has an educational fund but normally only provides \$500 dollars per person. However, it was felt by UWD that this particular issue was of gender justice and as the usual amount would not cover the expenses for these girls, the UWD utilised their "End Violence against Women" fund. It is this fund MWA are contributing to.

It is not difficult to see why keeping Maasai girls in school is so important. "Educating women is the single, most effective way to reduce poverty, improve health and economic wellbeing and bring development to communities throughout the world." An educated woman will choose her own husband and marry later, she will have fewer children who will be healthier and better educated than previous generations. She will have economic security and will not circumcise her daughters. It is likely that she will spend 90% of her income on her family in comparison to the 35% an educated man would spend (quote and facts from: maasaigirlseducation.org). As increasing world population is a factor in the world's ecological problems – educating women will result in a decrease in population growth thereby helping our world to survive.

The Maasai Girls Education Fund which operates in Kenya, supporting girls in education has a video on youtube which interviews Maasai girls about their desire to be educated. If you want to watch it in full it can be found by typing the following into your internet search bar: youtu.be/oQiBQaA5NSo. In this video there is a statement: "A girl is worth more than 5 cows" – a

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reference to the fact that once educated, a woman will bring more wealth to her family than her wedding dowry of 5 cows would bring.

But surely a girl is worth much more than her ability to bring wealth to her family – it seems appropriate that this first Home and Overseas paper ties in so well with our new Devotional theme of “Dreams and Visions.” Maasai girls like all girls and indeed children the world over surely have an inherent worth unrelated to their ability to bring wealth to a family. Maasai girls like all girls and children surely have dreams and visions – dreams and visions of how their life might be, dreams of a wonderful future.

Sr Janet Cooper