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## **Education as a Path to Gender Justice for Maasai Youth**

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### **Abstract**

This study explored the differences between adolescent boys and girls and their tendency to accept the influence of others. This is important when considering not only one's path in life but also the implications for independence and having an equal voice in a civil society. The study measured authenticity in 306 adolescent Maasai boys and girls and found that boys are significantly more likely to accept external influence than girls. Accepting external influence is inversely correlated with authenticity, a character strength linked with mental health and well-being, and arguably needed for democratic societies to flourish. Furthermore, unquestioned adherence to external social inductions serves to maintain the status quo and prevents responsiveness to needed change. The embodiment of authenticity is crucial for its actualization and takes place in

the context of relationships. Schools represent a microcosm of the larger society and provide a window into different cultural practices and, as such, represent opportunities for transformation. The study discussed the social implications of these ideas, and the role Kenyan teachers play in the advancement of gender justice.

**Keywords:** *Education, Gender justice, Maasai youth, Adolescent boys and girls, Authenticity.*

## **Introduction**

This paper considers authenticity through the lens of social construction theory. Social construction theory suggests that while our actions and beliefs might feel like they are ours alone, they originate from a web of social relations and meaning, and sometimes we are not even aware of the external influence these factors have on our lives (Gergen, 2000). Voparil and Bernstein (2010) assert that there is no such thing as an authentic self, outside of a social context. Further, external factors have an invisible influence which, unless questioned, continue unabated. Insofar as gender norms are a product of cultural context, teachers could play a major role in Kenyan classrooms by questioning these external, socially constructed influences.

## **Maasai Cultural Context and Gender**

In recent years, the Kenyan government has created more gender equitable policies (Prohibition of Female Genital Mutilation Act, No. 32 of 2011. Nairobi: Government of Kenya), but they are slow to transfer to action, and there remains a perilous gap between policy and the lived experiences of girls and women. M'mboga Akala (2019: 2) submits: "Kenyan women have been on the margins of power for decades. This can be ascribed to inferior education, lack of opportunities, sexism, ignorance, and demeaning cultural practices that relegated them to private spaces." Cultural expectations and strict gender roles create a context where girls and young women are solely responsible for household chores and family responsibilities, resulting in fewer girls enrolled in secondary schools and higher education. This then negatively impacts women's economic empowerment and livelihoods.

The Maasai culture is pastoral, rural, isolated, and heavily patriarchal. Therefore, it presents unique challenges and opportunities for gender equality. Parsitau (2017: 3) states, “The custodians of tradition and culture and not lawmakers, are the main decision makers in these communities, and the implementation of national laws and policies related to education have [has] little effect.” The Kenyan Primary Education Development Project (2017) found that factors such as female genital mutilation (FGM) and early marriage are persistent barriers to girl’s education. While the Children Act (2011) officially criminalized FGM and early marriage, few Maasai communities were consulted during the policy process, and there was little understanding about what the laws were intended to accomplish (Parsitau, 2017). Parsitau suggests that key gatekeepers of culture must be engaged for change to happen. Gatekeepers include spiritual leaders, youths, mothers, female teachers and girls themselves, by raising their voices and agency for education. Girls must be informed of their rights, build leadership capacity and life skills, learn about menstrual health and hygiene (MHH), and sexual and reproductive health. We need to better understand the optimal ways to teach for change and gender justice.

Within the Maasai tradition, the transition from boyhood to manhood is marked by ritual circumcision that seeks to transform boys into warriors (Mukasa & Kinang, 2018). This ritual encourages autonomy and serves to heighten and reinforce gender role separation. As women’s economic independence grows, it at times threatens the male ego and their sense of self-worth, leading to tension and conflict. These rites of passage serve as instructions on how to maintain traditional Maasai lifestyle and cultural identity. In the process of preserving culture, some of these rituals perpetuate a system that denies women basic human rights: the right to an education; the right to control her body, the right to choose whom and when to marry, and the right to express an opinion (Maasai Girls Education Fund, n.d.). If young boys are to grow into young men who can truly be allies to the cause of female empowerment, they need to be a part of a community that values and practices collaboration and interdependence. The promotion of gender equity as a basic right presents an opportunity for boys and men to act in ways that empower young girls and women and to dismantle patriarchal gender norms and challenge harmful models of masculinity (USAID, 2020).

## Authenticity

To be authentic is to be clear about one's own most basic feelings, desires and convictions, and to openly express one's stance in the public arena. Guigon (2004) describes authenticity as both a personal and a fundamentally social virtue. Therefore, it involves reflectively determining what is worth pursuing in the social context. The belief that authenticity is central to human functioning and well-being has a long tradition in philosophy and psychology. Gergen (2012) argues that authenticity is needed for a democratic society to flourish. The consequence of a lack of voice has been linked to social apathy and powerlessness (Moghaddam, 2013). On the level of the individual, a lack of authentic connection has been linked to depression, low self-efficacy, and hopelessness.

**Measurement of authenticity:** In his development of a psychosocial measure of the construct of authenticity, Wood et al. (2008: 386) suggests that “authenticity is not simply an aspect or precursor to well-being but rather the very essence of well-being and healthy functioning”. The *Authenticity Scale* (see appendix) was designed to measure three different aspects of authenticity: *self-alienation* or the subjective experience of not knowing oneself or being out of touch with your true self, *authentic living* or behaving in a way that is in sync with your beliefs, and *acceptance of external influence* or “the extent to which one accepts the influence of other people and the belief that one has to conform to the expectations of others” (Wood et al., 2008: 368). While the empirical data for the scale development suggested gender invariance, it was a largely Western sample. It is of interest to see the scale results with Kenyan participants of all genders.

**Authenticity, adolescent development and education:** The development of authenticity and “voice” in adolescent girls has long been an important topic in the scholarship of gender differences and social development (Gilligan, 1993; Harter, Waters, & Whitesell, 1997). The impact of social context is strong during adolescence, and Gilligan (1993) has observed there is a tremendous desire to bring one's own inner world of thoughts and feelings into sync with the thoughts and feelings of others. Empirical findings (Harter et al., 1997) demonstrate that, while not all girls lose their voice in adolescence, the effect is

strongest for girls who report lower levels of voice in public contexts. This would apply to most Maasai females who are often told to quiet themselves in the presence of males. The need for teachers to view the development of voice as a relational and evolving process is especially useful during adolescence, when most MHH programming occurs. Harter et al. (1997: 170-71) draws attention to the lack of voice within school settings. Teachers that use what Shor & Freire (1987) have called the “banking model” of education, where knowledge is seen as something that can be deposited in pupil’s heads, do little to support the development of student voice. The embodiment of authenticity is crucial for its actualization and takes place in the context of relationships. Schools represent a microcosm of the larger society and provide a window into different cultural practices and consequently provide opportunities for transformation.

***The current study:*** In a previous study (Fialkov et al., 2021), we assessed the impact of the Always Keeping Girls in School (AKGIS) program on the psychosocial measure of authenticity in adolescent girls in urban and semi-urban regions of Kenya. The research pointed to the need for an exploration of some previously uncharted territories. One, we wanted to better understand the baseline gender differences between boys and girls on the measure of *authenticity*, since our original work did not study boy’s development, only girls. Second, we wanted to investigate the semi-rural regions of Kenya and the Maasai communities, since they were under-represented in the research. Third, we wanted to take a deeper dive into the construct of *authenticity* because of the need for clarification in the literature and the potential for gaining a better understanding of Maasai culture. Our current paper outlines the results of this exploration. The current study addresses whether there are differences in the development of authenticity between adolescent boys and girls, and if so, which aspect of authenticity? In the current research, the participants are from a single school located in a rural setting and come from Maasai, pastoralist communities.

## **Methodology**

This study compared boys and girls (N= 306) from a single school located in the Maasai Mara, in Narok, Kenya from grades 6, 7 and 8, participating in the Always Keeping Girls in School (AKGIS) Program.

There were (N=157) girls and (N=149) boys. The Authenticity Scale (see Appendix) was administered, and the data that measured the differences between boys and girls were analyzed. This study utilized the *Qualtrics Experience Management Platform* to facilitate the shift from paper and pencil collection to a digital methodology. Having this improved technical capacity to gather data helps provide the information leaders need for the justification of decisions in a more timely and accessible manner. The team asked the pupils the questions and then entered the data into the cell phone survey format. No names or individual identifying information were recorded. The Institutional Review Board approval and parental permission was obtained.

## Results

In the study's sample, it was discovered that there was a significant difference between the scores of Kenyan Maasai youths (N=306) on the *Accepting External Influence* subscale, with boys scoring significantly higher than girls, indicating that they are more likely to accept external influence. Resisting the opinions of others and not doing what other people tell or expect you to do takes practice. This attitude demands a resistance to the status quo, and young Kenyan women must develop that if they are to be successful, especially in gaining access to education. *Acceptance of External Influence* does not impede educational achievement for boys, since acceptance of the status quo does not hurt the powerful.

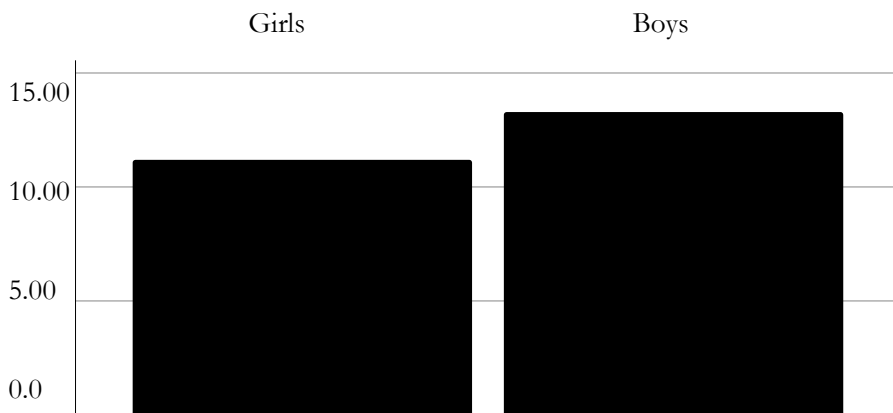
Table 1 shows the group statistics for the three authenticity subtests: Authentic Living, Self-Alienation and Accepting External Influence. Table 2 reveals that there was a statistically significant difference between the Accepting External Influence scores of girls and boys, with boys more likely to be influenced by the opinions and expectations of others and feel more of a need to do what others tell them to do. The graph (Figure 1) depicts this in visual form.

**Table 1:** Group statistics scores on the authenticity scale

	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
<b>Authentic Living</b>			
	Girls 157	22.80	4.87
	Boys 149	21.85	5.77
<b>Accepting External Influence</b>			
	Girls 157	11.07	5.29
	Boys 149	13.17	5.61
<b>Self-Alienation</b>			
	Girls 157	13.91	5.63
	Boys 149	13.77	5.15

**Table 2:** Independent samples t-test for equality of means

	<i>df</i>	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
Authentic Living	304	.117	.96
Accepting External Influence	304	.001*	-2.10
Self-Alienation	304	.831	.13



**Figure 1:** Bar graph mean of accepting external influence by gender

## **Discussion**

The finding that adolescent Maasai boys are significantly more likely to accept external influence than girls led us to wonder about the ways in which this acceptance perpetuates gender inequality. When considered through the lens of social construction theory, gender inequality is a byproduct of the relational patterns and rituals that shape gender identities. These gender roles are determined by the social dynamics of the Maasai culture. Mwangi Wainku (2018) posits that, within the Maasai culture, the intersection of social and economic pressures has challenged the male position as provider contributing to an increase in “husband battling”, attributable to challenged masculinity. In a school context, these gender roles and interactions are played out each day (Archambault, 2017), with teachers being able to provide a path to gender equity.

The acceptance of external influence and adherence to cultural norms allows for the transmission of values and beliefs that give strength to community and tradition. At the same time though, adherence to these social inductions serves to maintain the status quo and prevents responsiveness to needed change. One place that this is most disturbing is in the perpetuation of gender-based violence. For example, the prevalence of child marriage and FGM in Maasai culture is at once a wish to keep cultural values and traditions alive as it simultaneously contributes to a cycle of violence against girls and women and the perpetuation of gender inequity. If boys have a disproportionate need to accept external influence, change will be hard to achieve.

***Education as a path for gender justice:*** Schools serve as a canvas for both perpetuating gender inequality and offer hope that gender justice might be achieved. What then are some possible ways schools might maintain culture and tradition, while also questioning the influence of old traditions that cause harm to others? Shor and Freire (1987: 36-37) said that education does not shape society, but rather it reflects the society in accordance with the interests of those in power. From the point of view of people in power, “the main task for systematic education is to reproduce the dominant ideology...The authorities mandate a curriculum which they think will sustain the present structure of society”. Transformation and the elevation of girls and women in Kenyan culture, for example, will only be accomplished by those who dream about



gender equality. Teachers with this dream must carry the weight to unveil the reality being hidden by the dominant ideology.

Shor and Freire (1987) call into question the belief that good teachers are neutral, and out of respect for traditional cultural norms do not challenge student viewpoints. Quite the contrary, “Not acknowledging or not challenging inequality ... is to cooperate in hiding reality (p.174)”. The teacher has the right and the obligation to challenge the status quo, especially regarding domination by sex, race or class. This calls for courage on the part of teachers as well as a toolkit for carrying forward the actions required to encourage dialogue and the freedom to question external influences.

Gergen (2001: 4) indicates that educators within the cooperative learning movement have suggested, “students need opportunities, often in smaller groups, to present their ideas in a context where they will be listened to, to be heard, and to be understood ... a humanizing pedagogy in which teachers build upon the life experiences of students, rather than upon rigid adherence to particular techniques and academic content, will lead students to become more engaged in the learning process”. Teachers need to avoid instructional models in which the flow of information is unidirectional. As Delpit (1993) has argued, authoritarian teaching styles in which teachers display their power in the classroom and focus primarily on skill learning rob students of the opportunity to express their own ideas.

Creativity needs to be valued not just as an “add on” but as essential to change and growth. A pilot study in Uganda tested a school-based menstrual health and hygiene intervention, and evaluated its impact on several factors, including school attendance. One component of the puberty education was a drama skit that addressed MHH as well as managing pain and teasing in school. The skit provided an opportunity for boys and girls to “perform” gender in new ways, allowing them to practice the relational skills that support MHH, and challenge gender inequality. Qualitative interviews following the skit presentations reported the performances increased awareness and empowered girls to talk about MHH with their parents and increased self-esteem. We need to appreciate the innovative efforts of the many teachers who create links between the class and cultural context.

The importance of the development of authenticity is in alignment with the Kenyan National curriculum and the ideals of a democratic civil society. Gergen (2001) points out that in a democratic society, in which

the authority of government stems from the consent of the governed, there is good reason to promote virtues like authenticity that sustain such an organization of government. To be authentic is to be clear about one's own most basic feelings, desires and convictions, and to openly express one's stance in the public arena. The capacity for authenticity is precisely the character trait that is needed to be an effective member of a democratic society.

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## Appendix

### Authenticity Scale\*

All items are presented on a 1 (does not describe me at all) to 7 (describes me very well) scale.

Yields 3 subtests

Items 1, 8, 9, and 11 for Authentic Living

**Items 3, 4, 5, and 6 for Accepting External Influence**

Items 2, 7, 10, and 12 for Self-Alienation

1. "I think it is better to be yourself, than to be popular."
2. "I don't know how I really feel inside."
3. **"I am strongly influenced by the opinions of others."**
4. **"I usually do what other people tell me to do."**
5. **"I always feel I need to do what others expect me to do."**
6. **"Other people influence me greatly."**
7. "I feel as if I don't know myself very well."
8. "I always stand by what I believe in."
9. "I am true to myself in most situations."
10. "I feel out of touch with the 'real me.'"
11. "I live in accordance with my values and beliefs."
12. "I feel alienated from myself."

\*Wood, A. M., Linley, P. A., Maltby, J., Baliousis, M., & Joseph, S. (2008). The authentic personality: A theoretical and empirical conceptualization and the development of the authenticity scale. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 55*(3), 385-399.