

BOOK REVIEW

Heather D. Switzer. *When the Light is Fire: Maasai Schoolgirls in Contemporary Kenya*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2018. 168 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$28.00. Paper. ISBN: 9780252050770.

When the Light is Fire is certainly not the first book about the Maasai people, neither is it the first study on Maasai girls or children in contemporary Kenya. What makes Heather Switzer's ethnographic account unique is the forceful way it disarms reductive assumptions that continue to present Maasai girls as "objects of expert knowledge rather than the subjects of their own stories" (3–4). Refreshingly, Switzer approaches girls in the Global South, particularly in Africa, through their own subjective perceptions of daily lives in general, and education in particular. On this last account, Switzer argues against the theory purporting that education is "the silver bullet solution" (12) to eradicating global poverty and ensuring global economic growth. According to Switzer, the last two decades have engendered increased public discourse about adolescent girls living in poverty, focusing on their newly determined capacity to embody development imperatives. Switzer calls this discourse *girl-effect logic*, which she rejects for representing girls' education as an essential condition of economic development and girls themselves as the ideal subjects of investment and intervention (12).

Structurally, the book is organized around four chapters that examine historical and sociocultural forces—in colonial and postcolonial eras—that have informed Maasai identity and contributed to the community's marginality (Chapter One). Along the way, Switzer interrogates transnational discourses about who exactly "the schoolgirl must be for development" (61), an interrogation that holds together the book's second chapter. She then exposes the ambivalent and bewildering character of Maasai schoolgirls that she correctly links to the social contour informing the community (Chapter Three). Switzer concludes the book by teasing out "the paradoxes and the possibilities of schoolgirl subjectivity by considering schoolgirlhood as an embodied experience" (116).

The book's strength resides in the rich oral data that Switzer collected from more than one hundred girls who participated in her semi-structured oral interviews. To the benefit of the scholarship on this subject, Switzer

allows the girls to speak for themselves, a sure approach that reveals the complex interplay among education, girls (children), and societal expectations. Given that local and global discourses on girls in Africa tend to ignore their voices, Switzer's study is a valuable contribution to scholarship. In addition, Switzer's book cuts across multiple disciplines that include children's studies, women & gender studies, anthropology, African studies, history, and education. It is ideal for graduate and upper-level undergraduate students in these disciplines, including those considering oral interviews as a research methodology. Although the book is fairly short, its chapters convey deep meanings about girls and education in contemporary Africa. College students should find the chapters easy to read and comprehend.

However, the book is not without fault—it lacks visual literacy in maps, charts, and photographs that would aid the reader in understanding the country's geography. The physical features of the region contribute to the harsh reality that often impedes education in Kajiado District, where Switzer conducted her research. Kajiado lies at the center of arid and semi-arid dryland in the southern Rift Valley. The dryness affects livestock, which is Maasai's source of wealth and pride. Consequently, Maasai men and their sons are forced to "migrate out of the valley to higher ground to find grass," leaving behind women to consolidate households and to "keep school-going children in school" (2). Undoubtedly, the shift often disrupts family cohesion which, in turn, affects the girls' academic performance and attendance at school, as they often must attend to household needs associated with the challenges of pastoral livelihoods. In Switzer's own words, "fathers ... tend to have a say, if not a stake, in girls' futures" (7), and their prolonged absence from their daughters' lives adversely affects this say, knowledge about their daughters' social and education standing, and father-daughter interaction. The use of visual literacy is essential to studying the recent past, for which photographs and maps are important sources of information. For this reason, it is inconceivable that Switzer lived in Kenya—and among the Maasai people— "for a few months and would remain a few more" (33), but overlooked the country's landscape and the experiences of its people in pictorial form.

Viewed narrowly, *When the Light is Fire* captures children and education in Africa, highlights social and academic challenges that African schoolgirls encounter, and pushes back against the assumption that education will empower Kenya's Maasai girls. Viewed broadly, however, the book exhorts us to critically reexamine our perception of education in the twenty-first century, especially in transnational development discourse.

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For additional reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:

- Fratkin, Elliot. 2001. "East African Pastoralism in Transition: Maasai, Boran, and Rendille Cases." *African Studies Review* 44 (3): 1–25. doi:[10.2307/525591](https://doi.org/10.2307/525591).
- Winterbottom, Anna, Jonneke Koomen, and Gemma Burford. 2009. "Female Genital Cutting: Cultural Rights and Rites of Defiance in Northern Tanzania." *African Studies Review* 52 (1): 47–71. doi:[10.1353/arw.0.0142](https://doi.org/10.1353/arw.0.0142).