When the Light is Fire: Maasai Schoolgirls in Contemporary Kenya, by Heather D. Switzer. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2018.

Monique Kwachou

As per the old English adage, "Do not look a gift horse in the mouth,", we have been made to believe that questioning the value of something "intended for good" is wrong. Yet, a plethora of critiques of development theories and initiatives in the Global South suggest that, if not properly vetted, the most ideal proposal to improve the human condition can fail to meet its intended good – or worse, can foment other ills. Education – specifically girls' education – is one of those "gifts" we rarely question. In recent decades, its value has been established by academic scholarship, confirmed by development reports, and popularised by international campaigns. In response to this widespread ideology of girls' education as a panacea for development in the Global South, Heather Switzer, in her book *When the Light is Fire: Maasai Schoolgirls in Contemporary Kenya*, encourages us to look this gift horse in the mouth. Not so that we should reject it – she makes it clear that she does not dispute the "life-expanding benefits of education" (Switzer, 2018: 25) – but that we can take proper stock of what we are gifted.

Switzer's book draws from her empirical research with over 100 Kenyan Maasai schoolgirls. In it, she presents a robust interrogation of two main assumptions and then proposes the consideration of the embodiment of schooling in the social identity of Maasai girls. The first main assumption Switzer takes on is the pervasive rhetoric that investing in girls' education on the grounds of their potential development output is wholly empowering – as captured by what she terms the "Girls' Effect Logic". Next, she queries the local assumptions that Maasai people have a "hatred" for education and accompanying myopic ideas that this hatred accounts for the Maasai community's contemporary marginalisation. She makes a notable contribution in arguing for Maasai schoolgirlhood as a unique identity in need of recognition in the Maasai social strata and her argument is supported by the Kenyan adage from whence she draws the book's title: "Education is a light". As that "light is really a fire" which is burning a new path, that path must be recognised so that this group

of people who are negotiating who they are now from who they once were and who they aspire to be (based on both individual and communal ideas) can also have a place that connects to the "main road" of their community.

The book consists of six chapters, though the introduction and conclusion are not numbered within. The structure of the book and delineation of chapters encapsulate the aims of widening myopic perceptions of the Maasai regarding education and development, establishing the "Girls Effect Logic" as a very pervasive notion, and interrogating the upshot of schooling on Maasai girls. Despite the aims of each chapter being outlined, there is overlap and thus repetition in some chapters. Switzer writes the book as a first-person narrative, but effectively entwines third-person narrations of her participants' stories as well. In addition, the descriptions of her observations/ experiences with participants, the inclusion of folktales, and the incorporation of Waa (the Maasai language) makes for captivating reading. This approach is not only engaging but also achieves the desired effect of capturing both the voices of the schoolgirls and her interaction with them.

Throughout this book, Switzer does a brilliant job of bringing to light the complexities of the context and the paradox of what education promises these girls therein. Her account of Maasai history shows the evolution of perception regarding education and the issues that arise even as perceptions change. It is never as simple as "#BasicMath: Education + Girls = A world of possibilities" (Switzer, 2018: 12). She makes clear her disapproval of the reductive take readily shared by multilateral organisations which brand Maasai girls as victims and their fathers/ community as oppressive. In addition to this clear disapproval, her work shows that it is possible to respect both groups. It is possible to acknowledge and appreciate the reasons behind the choices of both the Maasai fathers and schoolgirls with provocative hopes for their futures.

With this book, Switzer proffers evidence to support a great many ideological arguments, such as the historical underpinnings of Maasai marginalisation and their negative perceptions of education and development linked to the way this "gift" was historically given. There is evidence which shows how neoliberal and Western ideas seep into African communities through global development campaigns founded on the "Girl Effect Logic". Through schooling and campaigns for schooling, girls and women have internalised neoliberal ideas which make them perceive empowerment in an individual and de-politicised form, view education as a master key, and consider the uneducated as "doers of nothing" who contribute in no way to national GDP.

The book illustrates that, though formal education can change a great deal, what is most likely is that it changes the previously excluded people to fit into whatever format has already been established. It likewise presents rich empirical evidence of the motivations for education, and the negotiations girls must undertake on a daily basis between the normative influence of their communities and the informational influence derived at school.

When the Light is Fire leaves more to be desired in only one respect: Switzer's analysis suggests a great deal which could (and I feel should) have been explicitly stated as recommendations. Through her analysis, she suggests that due to the pervasiveness of the "Girl Effect Logic" and the development rhetoric pushed for "modernisation" of Kenya, Maasai schoolgirls have internalised certain neoliberalist notions such as, among others, the idea that domestic labour does not count as work; that they must work and earn a salary to be of value (Switzer, 2018: 81-83), and that certain languages are "better" than others. Despite recognising this, Switzer does not state explicitly that this implies that the education being offered here needs decolonising. Elsewhere, Switzer's tone suggests her disdain for "Girl Effect Logic" initiators who paint the use of girls and women to fix the world as "smart economics" while asserting that they do not need to "change everything" but rather simply add girls to the mix (Switzer, 2018: 155). Still, she does not state outright that, a dismantling of foundational inequalities is required for true empowerment. Switzer's analysis asserts that Maasai schoolgirls, as targets of empowerment, are told to be stronger, to avoid the boys who "distract" them, and to work harder to achieve that girl power dream, while no one tells the oppressor to cease oppressive behaviour (Switzer, 2018: 133). And yet, at no point does she critique the empowerment potential of the education offered schoolgirls, given such indoctrination. In Chapter 3, Switzer does well to show that a girl "of the home" could be bolder and wield more agency than a schoolgirl, but fails to draw a conclusion on the likelihood that these girls, should they complete their tenure as schoolgirls, could be considered empowered. Do all the educated live more empowered lives, as the Girl Effect Logic implies? Would they be able to acquire the salaried jobs they have been raised to aspire for as the reward for avoiding "distractions" and performing well? Would they, by virtue of their education, be able to avoid the subordination in marriage they cite as a disadvantage of being uneducated? Switzer does not share any conclusive thoughts on these questions that her analysis inspires the reader to consider.

Perhaps the author leaves the analysis as she does to avoid passing judgement on well-intentioned efforts being made. As she acknowledges in her conclusion, no matter how problematic the narrow space schoolgirls inhabit is, it is still transformative. Thus it would seem, with this book, that she focuses on opening the door to questioning presumptions of what the education these girls receive would actually enable them to be and do as they face the realities of their context and as it seemingly sows in them new vulnerabilities and insecurities. And it is for this reason that this book is worth reading, particularly by scholars and practitioners of gender and education in African contexts. As international discourse moves beyond a focus on access and parity, work such as this one begins a very necessary discussion on the contextual issues surrounding the applicability of girls' education initiatives for their empowerment and community development. Switzer's book will undoubtedly inspire others to continue the work she has begun.