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Power and Recognition Among the Maasai

As an indigenous people, the Maasai of Kenya face challenges to their rights and culture. They are a patriarchal society, leaving women with limited opportunities for development — though this is slowly starting to change. Maasai activist Mary Simat shares her story.

By Mary Simat for ISN

I was born in 1959 in the village of Kanunka in Narok, Kenya, with my mother the youngest of my father's four wives. I was married off while still in my mother's womb, a common practice among my people, the Maasai. A child can be married off while still unborn, in the hope that it will be a girl. If it turns out to be a boy, it is believed that it will be a good friend to the person who would have married the girl.

At the time I was born, Maasai women could not go to school but my mother wanted more for me. So she divorced my father and moved to Olpopongi, a more progressive Maasai village than Kanunka.

After I finished school I attended a Teachers' Training College, something very unusual for a Maasai woman. In fact, because few Maasai women become teachers, we are usually then appointed by the Kenyan government to teach in our native villages because we are familiar with the customs and language of the communities. I was posted to Kanunka -- returning to the village I had left as a little girl. As a teacher, I was invited to workshops in Narok town sponsored by NGOs from Nairobi to raise awareness of female genital mutilation and women's rights.

Balance of power

I began telling people about the things I was learning at the meetings. I felt very strongly that this was a message the Maasai people needed to hear and that they needed to change their customs that were [oppressive to women](#). In the Maasai culture, women are treated like animals: They are regularly beaten because Maasai men believe that women need a beating to learn proper discipline. I myself was beaten by my husband from time to time, sometimes so badly that I had to take refuge at a neighbor's home. Women are beaten for any small thing - for example, I once received a severe beating from my husband because the cows came home late. Women are also traded like cattle: married off to older men - often with many wives already - at a very young age.

I am the woman who dared go against Maasai elders and apply for a job as the Chief of Naroosura. But it did not occur to me to become a chief until I witnessed a scene that disturbed me greatly: A woman accused of adultery was being mercilessly beaten and stripped naked by her brothers-in-law while the chief looked on; the man she was supposedly having an affair with was standing nearby,

untouched. Apparently, the woman's husband worked far from home and her brothers-in-law had brought the couple to the chief: In my culture a woman belongs to the clan, and they had decided it was their duty to 'discipline her'. It was a heart-wrenching experience.

It occurred to me that if I was chief I would be able to protect these women, they who had no one looking out for them. The position of chief soon fell vacant; I promptly applied and was invited for an interview.

The men in the location were shocked that a woman would even *think* of becoming chief, let alone apply for the job. Several meetings were held after which the men convinced the elders that the only way to stop my unimaginable ambition was to curse me. Shortly after, a cursing ceremony was convened, but I sabotaged it by appearing at the meeting and shocking the elders to silence. Then the interview panel decided that part of the interview was to be written. None of the men had a pen and none of them could write. I was the only one who could.

Determination

News started seeping into my village that I had been selected for the job. It was even discovered that my appointment letter had indeed been sent out - but I never got to see it. Elders had declared that there was never going to be a woman chief in our location.

After the heartbreak of not being able to secure the position of chief, I went to Narok town and founded Maasai Women for Education and Economic Development (MAWEED), fighting for the rights of indigenous Maasai women and girls to enjoy fundamental freedoms and rights. In 1997, I was sponsored by Narok County Council to attend my first international conference (the UN Working Group for Indigenous Populations ([UNWGIP](#))) in Geneva. I was so naïve and 'fresh from the village' that I thought that toilets don't fly up with the airplane, so I kept visiting the bathrooms in the airport because I was afraid that once we were up there in the sky I may want to visit the toilet - and not be able to find one.

During the WGIP I was elected as the first Africa Gender Representative for the Indigenous Peoples of Africa Coordinating Committee. I became vice-chair in 2001, and then in 2003 chairperson, becoming the first woman to ever hold that office. [IPACC](#) is a network of 150 indigenous peoples' organizations from 20 African countries, uniting diverse community-based organizations into an alliance to enable effective advocacy. During my time as chairperson I fought very hard to preserve indigenous peoples' rights and representation and participated in the adoption of the UN Declaration on Indigenous Peoples.

In October 2010, I embarked on a campaign to familiarize Maasai villagers with the [new Kenyan constitution](#). The National Heritage and Culture ministry named me one of four Maasai Heroes in Narok County. It was like a dream to be seated with high government officials, talking on their level -- and on national television.

Indigenous rights and culture

Other important issues that I have been working on include the preservation of traditional language and cultures, and raising awareness of climate change and drought's effects on indigenous peoples. I have also been very influential in the UN system. In May 2007, I spoke at the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues alongside the other representatives of indigenous peoples' organizations and proclaimed that the indigenous peoples in Africa should be "recognized *and* respected. It's not fair that, when we simply ask for our rights, we are always seen as being rebellious. We want to maintain our culture and our connection to our indigenous cultures." Despite the

challenges I and other indigenous people face, I am optimistic and see a bright future for the indigenous peoples of Africa: Africa is the only continent where indigenous people have organized themselves into groups. United together, we can make great strides towards a better future for our people. And the indigenous peoples of Kenya may have the most to celebrate: Never before have we been so politically visible.

The realization of [indigenous peoples' rights](#) will be borne out of persistent lobbying and advocacy and a shift in government policy. I strongly believe that bureaucracy within organs responsible for articulating the interest of indigenous peoples - national and international - should be re-evaluated, to pave the way for dialogue and sustainable engagement with indigenous peoples in policy formulation and implementation processes.

Nonetheless, in view of our heritage and culture it is difficult to reconcile indigenous peoples' issues. And, despite a progressive intensification of calls for indigenous rights there is still much work to be done -- especially due to civil society organizations' unwillingness to educate indigenous peoples about gender equality. But I feel confident that the fighting indigenous peoples are undertaking to claim their rights will one day end - and we will emerge even stronger.

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