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April 2003

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SPECIAL

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beads of hope

Maasai mothers sell beadwork to send their daughters to school. TEXT: HEATHER BUCHAN

Four years ago, Florence Nasoore had just completed eighth grade, which meant that in Maasai culture she was old enough to be married. Her father had already started looking for a husband for his then 12-year-old daughter. Like most other young women in her Kenyan village, she had been circumcised in preparation for this important rite of passage. But Florence had other plans. She wanted to be a nurse.

Today she is about to graduate from one of the best schools in the district, with dreams of now becoming a doctor. Florence was able to continue her schooling after she received a scholarship through BEADS for Education, a non-profit project of the International Women's Democracy Centre and the Dupoto Women's Group that her mother belongs to. Formed in 1993, the beadwork co-operative is comprised of women from Isinya, a rural town on the outskirts of Nairobi. The women have been selling traditional beaded bracelets, baskets and necklaces to

earn money to support their families and to send their daughters to school. Their handicrafts are sold in local markets as well as on the Internet (www.beadsforeducation.org).

In 1998, Debby Rooney, an American woman who helped form the group and manages the BEADS for Education Web site, offered to organize scholarships so that the girls could attend secondary schools and private primary schools, which provided a better education than the poorly funded public system. Sponsors would pay US\$360, and the mothers would be required to contribute a minimum of US\$20 to annual school fees. (As a family's monthly income is around US\$25, this represents a significant sacrifice.)

"When I mentioned the sponsorships, Florence's mom's eyes got huge and she insisted that I meet her daughter," recalls Rooney. "At their home, her father just sat there with an extremely skeptical look on his face. He didn't see the point in educating his daughter if she was of >



Opposite page: An elderly Maasai woman wearing traditional beaded necklaces and clothing. This page, from top left: Bracelets the members of the Dupoto Women's Group make to raise money to send their girls to school (US\$15; at www.beadsforeducation.org); a lone Acacia tree in the middle of a vast plain; the women gather for their weekly beading session; and Mama Nasoore, Debby Rooney and Shanka.



marriageable age. Besides, like most families, he couldn't afford the school fees. Even if a family does have the money, it would be used to educate a son because boys earn money to support the family whereas daughters eventually marry and leave home."

When Florence entered the room, Rooney says, she recalls her big, beautiful smile. She told Rooney that she didn't want to be married and that she wanted to go to school. "When I left that day, I promised her I'd find her a sponsor, and I did," explains Rooney. "When I saw her again earlier this year, the sponsor came with me. We broke it to her father that we thought Florence would be continuing on to university. Turns

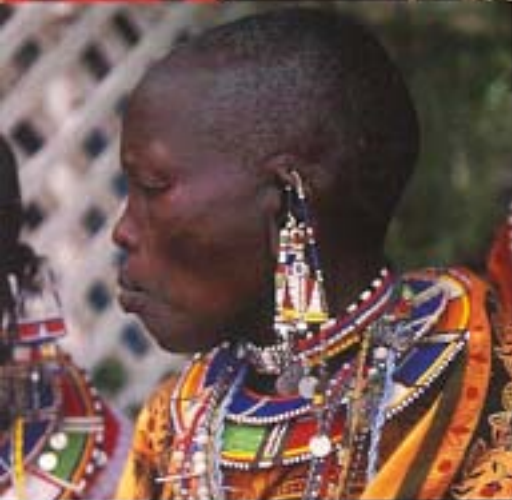
out, he isn't skeptical anymore. In fact, he is really proud that his daughter is the first in the family to be educated. He even presented her sponsor with a goat in appreciation for what she is doing for his daughter."

Today, 56 girls have sponsorships; 39 are daughters of the Dupoto Group women, while the others are orphans or daughters from a newly formed Maasai beading group from the Amboseli National Park district. The 25 members of the Dupoto co-op, most of whom are illiterate, meet each week at a small workshop in the village. It's 8 a.m. and already the sunlit room is filled with women, many of whom walked for hours to participate in today's beading session. With their heads bowed, they methodically string needles through piles of colourful beads.

"There's an expression in Kenya that 'you go forward,'" explains Jane Maina, the mother of seven daughters, one of whom graduated from school and is now attending college in Nairobi. "If young women can read, they can push forward and have a better life." Fellow member Esther Kelele Kotoine, who has three daughters, adds that she wants her daughters to receive an education so that they have the freedom to make >



From top left: Florence Nasooore graduates from high school this year and hopes to continue her studies so that she can one day become a doctor; a group of Maasai girls are dressed and ready for school; a mother working on her beading project; Florence Keroye says she is living out her mother's dream by continuing to study; and stacking baskets from the Dupoto Women's Group (US\$25; at www.beadsforeducation.org).



From top: The Maasai women of Isinya perform a traditional chant and dance to welcome their guests; 16-year-old student Florence Nasooore with her BEADS sponsor, Pat Judy; women get their ears pierced when they are young girls and sticks are used to stretch the skin to ensure a large opening, as this is considered a mark of a great beauty.

"OUR DAUGHTERS WILL BE FREE BECAUSE IF THEY'RE EDUCATED, THEY CAN DO WHATEVER THEY WANT."

choices. Pointing to the women around her, she says: "We have no rights. We take care of the home, the family, cook, feed people and bear children. But our daughters will be free because if they're educated, they can do whatever they want."

A Maasai woman typically isn't allowed to work outside her home, nor is she given any of her husband's money to spend, explains Zippy Wanakuta, from the African Conservation Centre, a non-governmental organization that works closely with the Dupoto group, helping them package, price and market their beaded work. "Without financial empowerment, these women cannot enjoy any rights."

The group's treasurer, Veronica Saturai, adds that financial independence will empower both them and their daughters. "We're no longer totally dependent on men. We have gained their respect. They're humbled by the money we're making." (Each beader earns approximately US\$10 to \$15 a month from the sale of her work.)

Besides offering them the freedom to earn a living, Rooney says that another added benefit to keeping the girls in school is that it delays them being circumcised. "If they're in school, they're not getting married, so there's no need for it to be done," she explains.

"Some of the women in the beading group have said they will do everything not to have their daughters circumcised. We've had a few girls refuse already, with the support of their mothers. The husbands worry that they won't be able to find anyone to marry their daughters, but it's

quite possible that these girls won't marry traditionally. They're probably going to marry an educated man, so it won't be an issue. It's definitely a cultural practice in transition."

While Florence accepts what happened to her, Rooney says that during a recent visit to Kenya, the now 16-year-old student talked openly about what a painful experience it was. "Florence knows that it's their custom, but I would say she's questioning it. She has a younger cousin, who is also sponsored, and I'm sure that she won't want her to be circumcised. Everyone looks up to Florence. She's definitely a leader, so I'm sure she'll influence other girls."

Standing outside the Isinya Primary School, where 200 of the 500 students are female—something unheard of a decade ago—Florence Kereyia says that she and the other girls she goes to school with know that they're living out their mothers' dream. Like Florence Nasooore, she also wants to be a doctor one day.

"I don't want an arranged marriage and I'm not going to be circumcised," she says. "We are free. There are some things you don't want for your life, and we now have the choice to say no." □

How to help:

To make a donation to BEADS for Education, to sponsor a girl to attend school, or to purchase beaded products from the Dupoto Women's Group, go to www.beadsforeducation.org. Or you can take a trip to Kenya and see firsthand the work these Maasai women are doing. For information on organized tours, visit www.eco-resorts.com.