



# Support to Child Mothers - Tanzania

Within the pastoralist communities of East Africa, there is a large variation in attitude toward sexual relations among unwed youth and toward pregnancy in young girls. The Maasai are not as sexually conservative as many other pastoralist communities. As a result, the girls who become pregnant do not typically face abandonment, abuse and stigma, though, many still face immense hardship. This is especially the case for girls who discover their pregnancy while in school. In these cases, they often face abuse from school authorities, discriminative school policies, police harassment, and upon returning to their homes, they are commonly forced into early marriage. The incredible disappointment that they face is from not only being chased from school, but also, expulsion from the public school system, which eliminates most girls' hopes and dreams for the future. No agencies in Longido District have been providing support for these child mothers, so Sauti Moja works with LOOCIP, a local agency, to provide counseling, care, family mediation, and education advocacy services. This project is being sponsored for a three-year term by a Canadian donor and her friends.

**Sauti Moja provides shelter, counseling and support, and family mediation for pregnant school girls to ensure healthy pregnancy, maintain school opportunities, and avoid early marriages.**



Early pregnancies are common among Maasai girls. The Maasai have very diverse sexual values and practices, as compared to those in the West. For the most part, girls have very little power to negotiate sexual relationships, and more significantly, they face strong cultural conventions and social pressures that foster very early sexual experiences. Although sexual norms are changing among the Maasai due to a host of factors, including HIV/AIDS, it still remains common and expected that girls, as young as 12, will begin sexual relationships with older male youth. Consequently, early pregnancies are common, and while this has not posed a major social problem in the past, these early, unplanned pregnancies are a threat to many girls' well-being and the progress that women may achieve through education.

Elizabeth Lesitei's experience is a good example of the impact of early, unplanned pregnancies. As a secondary student, Elizabeth had high hopes pertaining to her education and professional achievements. She wanted to go to university and work as a development worker to help alleviate poverty and hardship in her community. When she became pregnant, all her hopes were lost, as she was forced to leave school. In one discussion, she stated, "if someone was there to help me when I became pregnant, my life would be very different now. If someone could have helped me talk with my family, especially my father, and helped me find another school opportunity, I could have still fulfilled my dreams. Sauti Moja's project will surely help many, many Maasai girls".

