Table of Contents

2
Introduction
Mitra Shavarini

5
Confronting Community: The Complexities of Slum Life in Mumbai
Kayla Dinces, '12

13
A Lot Can Happen Over Coffee
Kelsey Grab ’12

20
Girl Power: Gender Roles and Women’s Empowerment in Kyrgyzstan
Matthew Kupfer ’12

29
La Loma: Community and Education in a Rural Andean Village
Christopher Lau ’12

38
Her Story: The Struggles and Characteristics of the Kilimanjaro Woman
Tess Raser ’12

46
Treasure Amidst Trash: Preserving Community in the World’s Largest Garbage City
Madeleine Stix ’12

Photos: David J. Weinstein
You are about to journey into the 2010 summer experiences of six Brandeis students. It is a journey of words, narratives that explore the notion of community, that examine the self, and that infuse personal insights with literature.

The pieces that you will read speak as much about these six individuals as they do about the fellowship that sponsors them and the University that educates them. Each piece, you will note, has an undercurrent of social change; a tone of activism. And each piece, you will come to realize, has been a labor of both emotion and intellect.

Let me introduce to you these dynamic Brandeis students. Five are Sorensen Fellows, sponsored by the International Center for Ethics, Justice, and Public Life at Brandeis University:

**Kayla Dinces ’12.** Originally from Camden, Maine, Kayla majors in Theater Arts and minors in Peace, Conflict and Coexistence Studies and Religious Studies. This past summer she worked with school children in India, in one of Mumbai’s slum neighborhoods. Her essay brings to us nuances of this community: its economy, its ability to maintain a positive outlook despite seemingly insurmountable obstacles, and its role with NGOs such as Parivartan, the group which sponsored her internship.

**Christopher Lau ’12** grew up in Farmington, Connecticut. He is double majoring in Economics and Politics, with a minor in East Asian Studies. His internship experience took him to an Andean village in Ecuador through the WorldTeach program. Through his vignettes, Chris proffers insight into how primary and secondary education is not only impacting the children but also the adults of this tightly linked agrarian community.

**Tess Raser ’12.** From the Chicago area, Tess is majoring in International and Global Studies and minoring in Women’s and Gender Studies. During her internship with the Women’s Education and Economic Centre (WEECE) in Moshi, Tanzania, Tess was able to interview 25 women who receive assistance from that organization. Using her interview data, she portrays the lives of five of these women in Tanzania’s Kilimanjaro region.

**Madeleine Stix ’12** is from Washington Heights, in New York City. She is majoring in International & Global Studies and minoring in Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies (IMES) and Hispanic Studies. Last summer she interned at the Spirit of Youth Association for Environmental Service in Cairo, Egypt. In particular, she worked with the Zabaleen, a Coptic Christian recycling community on the outskirts of Cairo. Her essay seeks to understand the factors that bind this marginalized, and often oppressed, community together.

**Matthew Kupfer ’12.** From Phoenix, Arizona, Matt is a double major in International & Global Studies and Anthropology. This past summer, he sponsored his own internship in Kyrgyzstan. Finding himself amidst ethnic
violence in Osh during his first week, he re-assembled his plans and evacuated to Bishkek. His new internship was with the Kyrgyzstani branch of the International Research & Exchanges Board (IREX). Matt's essay parallels the history of Kyrgyz politics with his own internship experience.

This compilation, I should note, is the culmination of a multi-pronged academic and experiential process. Preparation for these pieces began in the fall of 2009 with the selection of the Sorensen Fellows through a competitive application process.

Then, in the spring of 2010, in addition to taking a course that intellectually prepared them for their summer field project, they participated in a workshop that introduced them to the social science research method of “portraiture.” During this training, they learned about gathering data, about research’s ethical issues, and about the role researchers play vis-à-vis their subjects. They came to understand the nuances of portraiture and how it differs from other research methodologies. For instance, portraiture stresses self-reflexivity – or, as I kept repeating to the group, the importance of including yourself, your biases, and your perspective – in collecting, analysis and write-up of data. Needless to say, it is a rigorous and demanding process but one that ultimately has given them a valuable skill set.

In our fall class, the students faced the difficult and challenging task of turning what they had captured as data into something that not only made sense, but also told their stories and described their journeys. Each week, they grappled with shaping their own thoughts as well as those of their peers. Inside and outside of the classroom, they have offered each other abiding criticism and support.

These pages would not have been possible without the efforts of the following colleagues: Barbara Strauss, the International Center for Ethics, Justice, and Public Life’s senior department coordinator, who each year plays a valuable role for the students throughout the year as she shepherds them through the internship process; David Weinstein, communications specialist for the International Center for Ethics, Justice, and Public Life, who oversaw the Sorensen Fellowship last year during Marci McPhee’s leave of absence and supported the students throughout their experience – and swept through the pieces in this publication with a deft editorial eye; and Marci McPhee, associate director of the International Center for Ethics, Justice, and Public Life. Last year, Marci took a year-long leave of absence from her position at Brandeis to volunteer as an English teacher in the Marshall Islands in the Pacific through WorldTeach. This fall she joined our class to analyze and write about her own experiences. A voice of reason and wisdom, the group benefitted greatly from Marci’s experiences. Her essay will be found on the Center’s website. And finally, Dan Terris, director of the International Center for Ethics, Justice, and Public Life. Dan’s guidance inspires me to improve this course each year.

Thank you all!

Mitra Shavarini teaches in Peace, Conflict, and Coexistence Studies and Women’s and Gender Studies at Brandeis.

Sorensen Fellowship Program

The Ethics Center’s Sorensen Fellowship program honors Theodore C. “Ted” Sorensen (1928-2010) for his lifelong commitment to public service and for his 10 years as founding chair of the Center’s International Advisory Board. Ted Sorensen was policy advisor, legal counsel, and speechwriter to President John F. Kennedy. He practiced international law for four decades, and was a widely published author on the presidency and foreign affairs. The Sorensen Fellowship seeks to engage Brandeis undergraduates with constructive social change on the international stage, an appropriate tribute to Ted Sorensen.

Read a remembrance of the life and work of Ted Sorensen: brandeis.edu/ethics/about/Remembering_Ted_Sorensen.html

Ted Sorensen meeting with the 2010 Sorensen Fellows during a visit to the Brandeis campus in March 2010.
walk down the narrow pathway. My knees wobble. I use a hand to steady myself against a brick wall and I find my footing on long, exposed pipes. The children walk ahead, their feet steady on the uneven ground. They move quickly and assuredly, leading me down the walkway single file towards the school. Turning and twisting around corners, they deftly avoid various animals and barefoot toddlers wandering along the road. I follow their bright backsides, the girls’ *kurtas* a mixture of patterns – flowers and stripes and other shapes in orange and pink and blue and brown. Polyester fabric blends with the other sights and sounds of the slum, melding into a cacophonous symphony.

We are traversing the Sangam Nagar slum on Antop Hill, Wadala, Mumbai. This huge community is practically invisible in the urban structure that is Mumbai/Bombay, a metropolis with an estimated population of 20 million people as of 2010. As much as half of the total population of this city live in slum communities. I am in Mumbai working with a non-profit organization called Parivartan Shikshan Sanstha, a school that works to serve the needs of this community of over 200,000 people. I am more than 8,000 miles away from the quiet tree-lined streets of my home on the coast of Maine. It feels like an entirely different world. I am used to blending in with the friendly faces on my small college campus and to hearing the sounds of whispering leaves on the walkway. Here, my eyes are met with stares of all sorts, from the fascinated to the friendly to the leering glare. I can only speculate as to their true meaning; my English language-speaking self is not of much use in the land of Hindi. The sound is a steady foreign buzz of men and women and children and cows flicking flies with their tails. Everything mixes on the street, where even the trash gloms together, moving from separate pieces of plastic to a solid mass. The monsoon rains in the summer season act as a sort of glue, cementing the refuse in piles throughout the neighborhood.

Yet there is impermanence to this slum neighborhood, and others like it throughout Mumbai. Slums are at constant risk of displacement in this giant metropolis. One of the largest megacities in the world, Mumbai is also beginning to compete on a global scale as one of the financial capitals of the world. The city is constantly making plans to redevelop and improve its infrastructure. Yet India, the world’s largest democracy, must contend with its poor before it can move onto the world stage in full force.

I spent this past summer working with school children in Wadala, Mumbai. I learned much about the nature of slum communities and was left with many questions. I wish to explore the geography of this community, and the economy it functions within. I will investigate its ability to foster positive community action through partnerships with NGOs like Parivartan. I will also examine the social problems that occur in communities like this one, and how the low status of slums in the larger culture perpetuates these problems by keeping them largely invisible.

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1. Indian loose fitting long shirt, worn by men and women, traditional dress
3. Slums are defined by the Slum Area (Improvement and Clearance) Act of 1956 as “areas where buildings are unfit for human habitation; or are by reason of dilapidation, overcrowding, design of buildings, narrowness of streets, lack of ventilation...or any combination of these factors, are detrimental to health, safety, morals”
5. *Megacity* is defined as an urban agglomeration of more than 10 million people. Today there are 22 megacities – the majority in the developing countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America – and by 2025 there will probably be 30 or more. Bruinius, Harry. “Megacities of the world: a glimpse of how we’ll live tomorrow.” *Christian Science Monitor*. May 05, 2010. 1.
Structuring Community: The Slum as Home

The little girls in front of me are an integral part of the slum landscape. The oldest is 12, leading the youngest by the hand as the third skips along. Their slight bodies are at ease as they walk hand-in-hand through their neighborhood. They pass doorways with fabric serving as doors. The fabric provides privacy, however flimsy, but its permeability allows me to peek into one-room homes. TV sets blare. Women scrub clothes, babies stand in doorways, eyes large as saucers.

Homes in the slums are made of any variety of materials, and are generally formed by two different kinds of structures. A _kuccha_ structure is a house made of various materials including gunny bags, plastic, tin sheets, bricks. A _pucca_ structure is one that utilizes permanent construction materials for floor, wall, and roof. The community I am walking through has both, though many structures seem more permanent, suggesting that this community was established quite some time ago.

Slums first appeared in this city in the 1930s, when the number of people migrating to the city from the village exceeded the available housing. The population of the city expanded exponentially over the course of the 20th century, as did the slums. Currently Mumbai has the highest percentage of the population living in slums in all of India. According to government statistics, the slum population of Mumbai in 1991 was 4.32 million, or 34 percent of the total population. Today there are an estimated 6.5 million people living in slums, which is over 50 percent of the population of Mumbai. In less than 20 years, the slums have grown exponentially.

Dirty, crowded, and ignored by the elite busy building high rises, the “invisibility of slums and slum-dwellers to the ‘official’ eye perpetuates the vulnerability of slum-dwellers to multiple forms of displacement,” according to Amita Bhide. The fact that they are largely ignored means that they are inconsequential in plans to develop the city. Simon Robinson writes that government of the state of Maharashtra, of which Mumbai is the capital, would like to decimate slums to redevelop them as part of a “multibillion-dollar plan to turn the city into a world-class financial center by 2015.” But this goal of redevelopment could possibly displace up to half of the close to 20 million people living in Mumbai. Displacing slum dwellers challenges the idea that the poor and rich can live side-by-side in this democracy.

People who live in slums constitute the lowest classes of Indian society and experience their lives in constant motion. Many slum inhabitants are migrants who have moved from the village to the city in order to find work that is not available in their rural hometowns. Once they reach Mumbai they continue a transient existence, their homes often not legitimized by the government and thus subject to instantaneous removal.

Journeying through the streets, my pale white skin appears in stark contrast to the ocean of brown surrounding me. I feel my middle class, white American privilege weighing down the North Face backpack that is snug over my shoulders. It is as though I am on an obstacle course, partaking in some sort of contest where not falling in a crevice or slipping in a puddle is an achievement, and avoiding the open sewer a major accomplishment.

Bhide states that slum dwellers are “perpetuated as second rate, unwanted people who live off the city’s resources and can therefore be removed or wished away at will.” Shubhani Parkar writes that by characterizing a community as a slum, it may become identified with words such as “chaos” and “squalor.” People who reside there are then marked as dirty and chaotic, confusing their status, and making their identity become one with their home, a “mark of stigma and a source of shame.”

I try to imagine what it would be like to live in a place considered shameful. My home is a source of comfort to me, and I have always taken pride in the communities I have grown up in. For those whose community is the slum, the sentiment is similar. Even when offered “better” places to live, many slum dwellers will refuse to leave. Suketu Mehta states that while people think of slum life as miserable, they forget that “...out of inhospitable surroundings, they form a community, and they are...attached to its spatial geography, the social networks they have built for themselves, the village

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they have recreated in the midst of the city...”10 While the urban developers want to move people into high rises with better amenities, many in the slums have purposefully chosen to stay home and live in a place that is close knit.

When I walk through the slum I understand this feeling. Far from being overwhelmed by the dirtiness or sensing some sort of wretched atmosphere, I am fascinated by the animated inhabitants of the community as they go about their daily routines. Like anywhere, there are people going to and from work, running errands, cooking, and cleaning. Women whiz by carrying bundles, a man pulling a banana stand saunters along. A barefoot child zigzags across the street, chasing after the older children. Jandhyala writes that when examining children in slum areas many were joyful and seemed to be communicating and playing in a healthy and free fashion.11 This is attributed to community interaction: “It is heartening that children are in constant interaction with older siblings and other neighboring children and families. These experiences provide the children with a rich repertoire of communicative and social stimulation.” The children I see wandering the streets do not have mothers trailing after them, but they are not completely without supervision. Here, everyone is interconnected and close by, unlike my isolated life growing up in the U.S., where the closest relatives entrusted to look after me lived two states away.

Interconnected: Economics of the Slum

As the girls and I walk through the slum, I am at first overwhelmed and then desensitized. Over time it becomes easier to let the stench of garbage and of human and animal waste fade into the background. These smells combine in the air with the intense aroma of spices spewing from oiled pans frying food on the street, the pungent scent coating the neighborhood. The girls are still walking. They giggle and look back at me every once in a while to ensure that I am indeed following them. The littlest one runs ahead, eager to reach school. The older one catches up to her, resting her hand on the top of her head, a cautionary and caring gesture.

A seemingly endless path, the slum twists and turns in a non-linear manner that has its own order. We walk by Vodaphone stores, their red signs ubiquitous for excellent Indian cell phone service. The stores are a constant presence in the city, and ensure a way to make connections in this hectic land, even in the slum neighborhoods. Other stores sell candy and soft drinks, another buttons and fabrics, next to that, rubber tubes and brand name toiletries on haphazard shelving. A group of men stand on the corner idling by a chai stand.

While considered almost inconsequential in relation to the larger economic structure of the city, the slums are full of booming businesses. Mumbai’s largest slum, Dharavai, (with a population close to 600,000) maintains a thriving recycling business. People “shred plastic, mend clothes, strip computers, sort and bundle paper, fix machinery, flatten cardboard and clean and crush glass.”12 In this manner, the old goods can be reworked and sold for profit. These enterprises are a perfect fit for the cramped surface area of the slums, which does not allow for large factories.

I continue walking. On a sign, a picture of a woman in a fashionable sari advertises a tailor shop. As I pass, my eye catches bright colors of various scraps of fabric on the ground. They are scattered on the walkway in front of the shop in oblong triangles and distorted squares. Perhaps these are the discarded corners of hastily sewn garments, the forgotten bits of clothing production. They are the leftovers of new enterprise. I watch the fabrics turn brown in the muck of the street as they are quickly trampled and blend into the larger landscape.

Of the migrants who come to the slums, more than 75 percent primarily come to Mumbai for employment.13 The vast number of people in the slums ensures cheap labor. The city relies on the residents of these communities to work in factories, drive rickshaws and taxis, and work as servants for more well off families.14 A family does not have to be wealthy to have help. In the middle class apartment complex where I stay in Mumbai, my neighbors are a young married couple, working for technology companies. They have both a female cook and a woman to do their cleaning. This is in contrast to the United States, where there are exorbitant fees for delivery and a middle class sense of self-sufficiency in doing one’s own household work. For many in this city, someone

There is a lightness to the room that I find comforting, an inner sense of community within the larger interconnectedness of the slum. Yet the room is small, the floor cracked, and there are only two small windows high up on the walls.

According to the survey on the gendered experience of mental health in a Mumbai slum, women constitute 60 percent of the workforce in the slum of Malavani, an area in the north of Mumbai. Women tend to comprise a larger percentage of the work force in slum areas. Parkar states that this is often because jobs available to women are typically menial, and can include positions as “domestic servants...or as laborers at construction sites. Some sell fruits, vegetables, or cooked snacks, either circulating on foot or sitting in a market.”

In the Sangam Nagar slum where I am working, children also engage in the work of the community. The children here perform household chores, as well as work on export garments. They labor in hotels and tea stalls or assist in tailor shops. Some are garage workers; others are involved in car washing as well as sewage cleaning. The three girls in front of me do not hold regular jobs, yet their daily duties are undoubtedly more strenuous than the tasks of making the bed and clearing the table that constituted my childhood chore list.

These statistics about the proportion of female and child employment in the slum could help explain why on my many walks throughout this neighborhood and others in the city, I see many more men than women. As I continue following the girls to the school, this journey is no different. I pass men who are short and tall and skinny and squat. They wear mostly western clothes, though some seem to be entirely from another era. Hair gel and bell bottoms are a popular choice amongst the men in the Sangam Nagar slum. Everyone’s skin glistens in this heat. The light, the dark, and the in-between – every shade of brown imaginable shines and bobs up and down as the men make their way in this bustling neighborhood. The children in front of me blend into this crowded landscape, but I keep my eyes trained on them as they lead me to the door of the Parivartan classroom.

Parivartan: Transforming Community

The closeness of community is evident in the Parivartan classroom, an oasis from the slum’s chaos. The walls are covered with drawings. A blackboard has many words in Hindi on it, as well as depictions of butterflies. Children’s names and smiley faces line one wall (a way to keep track of attendance, I am told) and there are cupboards filled with old school supplies. The ceiling is decorated with colorful cutouts, and another bulletin board area showcases student artwork, depictions of people at various tasks made using marker and collaged torn paper. There is a lightness to the room that I find comforting, an inner sense of community within the larger interconnectedness of the slum. Yet the room is small, the floor cracked, and there are only two small windows high up on the walls. A single fan whirs overhead, collecting the dirt particles and spinning them in circles in front of my nostrils, causing my nose to wrinkle, as I wipe the beads of sweat from my forehead.

Parivartan works to provide non-formal education to children living here in Sangam Nagar. These children have little opportunity to become educated through formal government schools. What efforts they make to obtain education are often thwarted by difficult circumstances: sociopolitical, economic, or issues relating to gender, all stemming from their place in this slum community. Parivartan seeks to bridge the gap for children who live in the slum as laborers by helping them receive an education that enables them to transcend their circumstances.

Parivartan was founded in 1997 by Shakhil Ahmed, a human rights activist and lawyer who himself grew up in the slums. Ahmed started the school because of his feeling of responsibility towards providing others with basic rights. Ahmed told me, “Not anything inspired me. I myself am from this locality and I am also a resident of this locality. I found that I am the most literate person in the slum, so I have some responsibility towards other children. So I started teaching them in my house and like that we started slowly this organization.” The fact that Parivartan is a grassroots organization has allowed it to be embraced by members of the community. Parivartan has since expanded and operates two classrooms in different locations within the slum, with plans to build a computer center. Two teachers run the centers. Non-formal education is provided in the mornings to younger children; the afternoon classes are filled with older students.

15. Parivartan literature.
In the classroom I tug at my kurta, gazing upward at the fan and urging the air to circulate around my body and allow me to be comfortable in this small space. Nothing in this classroom is new or even particularly clean, yet there is a sense of constant re-creation here. This is not the first incarnation of this classroom, nor will it be the last. Children enter the classroom in uneven numbers. Some little girls carry even smaller children on their hip. They take their shoes off in the corner and begin to whisper and stare. My presence in this room is unusual, yet so is the learning that goes on here.

Parivartan has undergone many changes in the 13 years it has been operating in Wadala. Until 2006, there was no formal government school in the area, with the closest municipal school a 45-minute commute. Ahmed and others worked tirelessly to change this, and after a seven year struggle, a BMC (Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation) school was opened in Sangam Nagar. Now, Parivartan continues to provide non-formal education to help bridge the gap for children who have not been attending school and who instead have been laboring at home. It also helps enroll them in government schools.

Enrolling them in the government-run schools is not a simple process. Many children from the area have difficulty enrolling in BMC schools because they lack proper birth certificates. Though a law enacted in 2009 declares all children in India have the right to a free education, it is a slow process to ensure that actually happens, especially in the slums.17

It is a shock to learn just how many obstacles stand in the way for these children. When I was young, the sky seemed to be the limit for my future. In my economically privileged world of small town America, I was practically guaranteed a formal education, not to mention numerous extracurricular activities.

The path is not so clear for children in Sangam Nagar. Enrolling them in school is strenuous work that requires long hours of physically going to the schools with the parents and children as well as conducting ongoing community surveys to assess which children are currently enrolled. Each day I see the two teachers of the centers enter the office breathlessly, often with a folder of papers under their arms. One dressed in a sari18 and the other wearing a hijab,19 they have long conversations with the school administrator in rapid-fire Hindi, before walking around collecting the children for the next session. Although I do not even know the half of their conversations, I understand that they are facing difficulties in enrolling students in the BMC school. Despite being overworked and often tired, they always greet me with a small smile. They return each day, creating change for these children by making education a reality for them.

**Tangible Connections**

As I stand in the Parivartan classroom, the reality of education in this community is evident in the dozen faces staring at me across the circle. Their gazes are overwhelming and seductive; they suck me into this land of Hindi and innumerable mother tongues. I don’t think I could have imagined I could come to a place so different from rural New England, so bold, so foreign and so full.

The intensity of this community is reflected in Divya,20 one of the youngest children who comes to the sessions at Parivartan. Day after day she careens into the room, her body arriving directly in front of mine. She jumps at me and demands that I swing her in circles, her legs tightening around my waist as she squeals and my head starts to spin. Her small body holds so much force, much more than I would have imagined in a person so little. Her being pulses with liveliness, with the entitlement that comes from being the youngest of a group. It reminds me of entering a room at a family gathering when I was younger. My little sibling status was cemented by the way people responded to me as I crawled into my big sister’s lap, assuming my position of privilege in the warmth of the familial crowd. In my colored tights and party dress I would demand attention, and tug and pull until it was mine.

Divya does the same. Her charming demeanor wins her the attention of all in the class. Her nickname is “choti bandera” or “little monkey” for her ruthless approach of entwining herself around her fellow classmates and her teachers, refusing to let

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18. traditional dress for a Hindi woman
19. traditional head covering worn by Muslim women
20. name has been changed
She gravitates towards the old toys in the back of the classroom, their grime and dull color indicating they are not the latest trinkets being produced in this technologically advanced nation. These are the leftovers, someone else’s children’s forgotten treasures, donated to the school and now considered precious once again. Little boys push plastic trucks. Divya grabs at a troll-like doll, its white body turned a shade of grey. Her frenetic energy extends out to this stuffed toy, its limbs shaking as she runs around the room.

Children like Divya remind me that this school is doing something real, that “change” is not something outside. It comes from within, from providing opportunities for little girls like Divya to nurture their creative and rambunctious natures. Education can become a reality for her through programs like this, and with it, the ability to learn how to transcend her circumstances.

Yet Divya lives in a community that lacks more than education. Parivartan literature states that the community where she resides is without a postal service, and has no access to health care. When I am working in the slum it is also not easy to forget that there is a severe lack of hygienic toilet facilities. I recall that Divya is one of 80,000 - 120,000 children living in this slum. Last year, Parivartan enrolled approximately 160 children in government schools. Divya was not one of them, and there were close to 80,000 others who were also not allowed this privilege.

These numbers are difficult to wrap my head around. I do not know Divya’s particular circumstances; in spite of all of her boundless energy and the sparkle in her eyes, we have never once held a true conversation. My inability to speak Hindi serves as a substantial handicap in my efforts to understand the true nature of the circumstances of girls in this community like Divya. I want nothing more than to sit down and have a conversation with her, to know if there is another life she dreams of, if my hopes for her education are anything more than the guilty wishes of a privileged westerner when there are many other things in her life that could be improved upon. She is just a little girl; maybe these thoughts do not enter her mind at all. What do I really know about her circumstances?

Hidden Atrocities

Despite the vibrant community in the slum, there are many issues that go unnoticed. The circumstances of many in the slums are largely ignored or forgotten. Beyond the lack of basic amenities, human rights are blatantly violated with little done to stop it.

An example can be seen in a slum near Reay Road in Mumbai. Shakhil Ahmed worked on the case of a Dalit woman who was severely beaten and abused by neighborhood women. The woman was “verbally abused, beaten with sticks, stripped of her clothes and dragged through the basti to the taunts, jeers and catcalls of whoever gathered to watch,” all in response to the victim’s brother having been arrested in a rape case.

This woman’s story is not even told to the greater public of Mumbai. Outlook, whose audience is upper middle class, English-speaking Indians, is the first publication to take it up. Typically, those outside the slum do not even hear mention of these stories. The mother of the beaten young woman asks, “Someday the policemen will stop coming here, and then what happens to us?” The article states that “the answers are not easy” to problems like this – but it makes no further comment on the abominable nature of such a crime.

I rationalize that in America such a crime would receive considerable attention. But part of me questions how many stories go unreported, even in the land of the free. There are abominations in my country too; maybe we all close our eyes a little too often. My head spins with questions. What sort of community fosters this kind of behavior?

In “Policing from Within” Kalpana Sharma discusses the implications of policing in the slums of Mumbai. The article states that the police “were generally unresponsive to issues that concerned slum dwellers. They were particularly indifferent to women’s concerns and often refused to entertain complaints brought to the police station by women.” This information reportedly comes from Jockin Arputham, the president of the National Slum Dwellers Federation. For all they are lacking, slum residents are members of a democracy and historically have been very politically active. In 2004, Arputham and others developed slum panchayats in Mumbai, giving community members

21. Dalit is a term used to define “untouchables.” The term means “those who have been broken and ground down deliberately by those above them in the social hierarchy.” Dalits live at risk of discrimination, dehumanization, violence, and enslavement through human trafficking every day. “Who are the Dalits?” Dalit Freedom Network, 2010.
opportunities to police themselves, with committees that resolve disputes that include women. He writes, "When resolving a dispute, the members summon both sides involved, listen to their points of view, and work out a compromise. The panchayats have the authority of law as well as moral authority in the community."

This optimistic view on a civil judiciary system does not always seem to work. Dilip Waghmare states in the article that this case was a clear atrocity under the Scheduled Caste and Schedule Tribe (Prevention and Atrocities) Act. Yet in this case, the women were only provided security after the atrocity was committed. The gendered excuse that men cause these issues is also broken here, as the victimizers here were a group of 30 women. The interconnectedness of community obviously did not extend to this family of “untouchables.” Very few, in fact, would stand up for this woman and others like her. Between 2004 and 2008 the number of registered cases of crimes committed against scheduled castes has risen from 689 to 1,173. Where does it end?

Looking Forward

I stand in front of the group of children at Parivartan; all are giggling ferociously. I run towards them, my hands beside my face like claws. I can feel the sweat dripping off my body, and my limbs ache, but I creep towards them in my tiger mode, roaring, and urging by example for them to do the same. The children laugh as I come into their space, and then tentatively put their hands up next to their faces making sounds back at me. Soon we are all crawling on the ground, exploring the space around us. We are all kinds of animals: I make the wings of a bird, an elephant’s trunk; I hop on the ground like a rabbit. We end up sprawled on the floor, the children piled on top of one another and myself. I watch them mimic my lead in expression: angry, happy, surprised, sad. They are giggled right out of their comfort zones.

Days like this give me a deep down feeling of hope. I can sense the potential for connections, for sharing and crossing boundaries. Yet the scene is not always so light and full of laughter. There are days when the children do not show up, when the numbers of children are fewer, my energy lower, their attention span minimal, and I find myself speaking to no one in particular as little bodies careen around the room, banging into walls and each other, shouting and tugging and baffling me.

I step outside the classroom and begin the long trek across the slum, back to my apartment. Small droplets of water land on my head as I walk down the narrow streets and then the wider roads. People are taking cover, knowing that the rains bring a havoc to the slum that is unparalleled by anything man-made.

Nature has its way, and I have never been to a place that is so unprepared for something that occurs so often. Monsoon season causes many health issues in the slums. The open sewers collect more water than ever and help spread the number of unmentionable items floating along the street. I put up my umbrella hurriedly as I turn and look at the children who are standing in the doorway of the classroom, shouting “barish!” (rain!) and twirling in circles, their faces surprised and delighted about the water pouring from the sky.

Slums do not descend or rise up. They spread. Ironically, their true enormity can only be seen from a high rise. The sheer amount of space they take up in a land full of contested earth is enough to think they should be the center point of every conversation involving urban India. Still, they continue to be pushed aside by those who deem the problems of the people living there as petty in comparison to the larger goals of becoming a global metropolis.

The slum, made up of so many people living in unhealthy conditions, is also an interconnected community of people seeking a successful life. Enterprise and jobs contribute to the overall economy, and the community fosters NGOs like Parivartan, which prove there is a way out of the circumstances into which many young people are born. Even within this intricate and involved community there are deep troubles. Too much goes unnoticed by those who refuse to give attention to the reason that Mumbai is considered the fourth largest megacity in the world: the slums that are an integral part of the city. While the financial sector of the city may be booming, so is its population, pushing the city past its limits.
It has been several months since I returned from my trip to Mumbai. It has been difficult to describe what exactly the slum was like, a place about which people have such preconceived notions. Its complexities continue to elude me. Merely describing them doesn't seem to do them justice. I wonder what I really learned there, and whether it is possible to make sweeping changes in a community with so much adversity. At a university 8,000 miles away, where I am writing about this like it is some far-off world, I feel disconnected from my experience.

I remember Divya's sparkling eyes and the feeling of her warm body as it latched to mine, spinning in circles. It seems so far away. Just last week I received an email from Parivartan, telling me that several of the homes of the children who attend the school have been demolished. It all comes rushing back to me, and the knowledge of the children's uncertain futures tumbles and crushes my insides, forcing me to remember.

But what do I do now?
An Important Partnership of the 21st Century

Bengaluru. The South Indian city’s name originally translates to “town of boiled beans.” It was named after a dish a local woman served to the tired and hungry King Veera Ballala.1 “Town of Boiled Beans” does not conjure images of an information technology capital. Indeed, my ticket for Lufthansa flight LH754 reads, “Destination: Bangalore.” Yet, when I descend from the plane, a sign reads, “Welcome to Bengaluru.” India, it seems to me, is having an identity crisis.

In 2005, the city changed its name from the anglicized “Bangalore” to its original Bengaluru. This has been seen as an effort to reclaim India’s traditional identity.2 Inside this brightly lit airport the smell of disinfectant and sanitizer mask the smell of the sweat dripping off the wilting bodies of travelers arriving here at 1 AM. The buildings outside this modern airport look like an abandoned ghost town.

Today, Bengaluru stands as the center for information technology (IT) growth in India and the world. This influx of modernity allows for a strange dichotomy to erupt on the streets. Thin women dressed in traditional Indian saris3 walk alongside women dressed in tight jeans and tee shirts with Tommy Hilfiger logos. As an American college student who has not traveled much outside her own country, these contradictions make me curious.

The importance of understanding the path of Indian society has never been so crucial for Americans. During President Obama’s whirlwind tour of India in November 2010, he discussed at length the ways the relationship between the United States and India will be an essential component of the 21st century. President Obama went as far as explicitly stating that his intention in coming to India was to build a bilateral partnership.4

Throughout my summer in India I spent a lot of time in a particular coffee shop within the city. An internship that I had hoped would teach me about life in India left me thirsty to learn more about the dichotomy between India’s old and the new, between its forces of tradition and modernity. In Café Coffee Day, I was able to experience and observe the contrasts of Indian society. Here, I could see how this city is being reshaped by new media, music, food, and clothing, a modernism that brings with it materialism. Along with a new consumer culture, there has been a dramatic change in the way young people relate to one another. The increased visibility of consumerism is in stark contrast with the degree of poverty.

2. An article discusses how they are going to their original name that the British changed, but how young people are not happy with the change, because it makes the city sound less modern. Nanjappa, Vicky. 2005. “Bangalore is Officially Bengaluru.”
3. Saris are traditional women’s wear which consist of a long piece of unstitched cloth worn on the body in a variety of styles, most commonly wrapped around the waist. For more information on saris and traditional Indian clothing see: Garcia, Carol Henderson. Carol E. Henderson. “Culture and Customs of India” Greenwood Publishing Group, Westport, CT, 2001. P116-119.
**Coffee House Tradition and The Beginning of Western Influence**

One of the first “traditional” Indian coffee shops was created to reject a new culture’s arrival into India. During the reign of the British Raj, coffee became a symbolic way of keeping Indian identity alive. In the 1940’s the creation of India Coffee House by the Indian Coffee Board offered a place for Indian coffee to be sold and jobs to become available to Indian citizens. The government helped to create co-operative spaces for Indian coffee to be served the way that Indians still make it today, filtered with milk and sugar.  

These shops, owned and maintained by the Indian co-operative societies, served as meeting places for political activism. Inside their walls revolts were planned over traditional Indian food and drink. They are still in existence, with waiters in time-honored military dress and feathered caps, distinctly traditional in their presentation and coffee production. Coffee shops were once a place where people revolted against foreign influence. Today, I sit in Café Coffee Day surrounded by a world that celebrates foreign goods.  

The mainstream Indian market was not always this way. It was not until 1991 that the Indian government opened its marketplace to global trade. The influx of foreign goods has created an ethos of consumption. Via printed advertisements, television, Internet, and other media, Indian society has become a consumer nation, much like that of my American home. I think back to one of my own college courses taken at Brandeis University that discussed our desire for “stuff.” The concept of a consumer culture is not new to me – I live in such a culture. To see this play out here in India is unsettling. I respect and admire India for its historical tradition and cultural pride. The media influences and their consumerist agenda affirm some of the negative repercussions of bringing “modernism” into India.

**Facebook Events and Cosmo Models**

The metal handle and glass door of Café Coffee Day reflect my pale Irish-American complexion. The shock of the cold air inside, compared to the Indian heat, sends a chill down my spine. The room is filled with sounds of coffee machines and chatter.  

My eyes scan the room. Men and women consuming modern products surround me. A young man and young woman sit at a polished steel table where a Macbook Pro is the center of attention.  

“Did you see that event that Shanti made on Facebook for Anjali’s birthday?” the woman asks the man. “No, I haven’t been on yet today, the net is a mess at home.”

“I’ll show you, here.” The young woman points to the screen and immediately the two are discussing how they will get to the party.

“Let’s email Lankesh and see if we can get a ride with him,” the young man says to the woman. The two sip their coffee between clicking through pages online.

One of the lures of Café Coffee Day is its high-speed wireless Internet access, offering a consistent connection that may not otherwise be available. Electricity, never mind Internet access, is something that cannot be taken for granted in this city. Bengaluru relies on monsoon rains to power its nearby hydroelectric generators. The soil outside the coffee shop resembles red dinosaur scales, evidence of the summer monsoon that is unusually late. This puts a strain on a power grid that is already over-capacity. This is related to the demands of the many IT companies and a growing population in the city. Entire offices can be closed because of power outages, straining businesses.

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6. This is discussed in an article on how Coffee House has changed over time and become less like its traditional place for meeting. “As steaming Cuppa Lost Flavour,” The Times of India October 21, 2010. http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/lucknow/As-steaming-cuppa-lost-flavour/articleshow/6783406.cms.  
9. All names are pseudonyms.  
10. “This monsoon, the state has not received enough rain that could roll the turbines at the various hydel power generations units” as quoted in the article, “Grim Power Situation in State” Deccan Herald, July 11, 2010, http://www.deccanherald.com/content/80882/grim-power-situation-state.html.  
11. Bengaluru is having such extreme issues with the power supply that they have recently begun a pilot project in controlling and alerting citizens of the city of their usage. This can be found in “Smart Grid will Monitor your Power Consumption” The Times of India, November 17, 2010.  
“Hold on, this computer is taking forever,” the young woman replies as she impatiently taps at her keypad. I look at her Macbook Pro, admiring it for the modern marvel that it is. Her computer is a luxury even in my home. I think about when I bought my first laptop for college. I passed over the expensive Apple brand Macbooks for the Hewlett Packard that was on sale. Laptops are not exactly new technology, but their cost can be high. A Macbook Pro bought in India can easily cost double the US price. As she stares at the screen with irritated eyes, I feel frustrated. Back home the cost of consumer electronics bothers me, here the price is much higher. I know that there are many people both in India and in the US who would love to have a computer like hers. Her anger seems unfair with my knowledge of how few Indians have the luxury of owning a computer.

India has only 3.7 million personal computers.13 With over a billion people, that number represents only three percent of the population. In 2003, 61 percent of all U.S. households had a computer.14 This despite the fact that India has the largest number of software professionals outside of California.15 The young woman’s frustration with her laptop’s inability to load her email reminds me of how my friends react back home. But here this woman is part of a small population that can afford such luxuries. She is a modern consumer.

Both her computer purchase and clothing style are atypical of the majority of Indians. Along the city streets which lead to the shop I see women dressed in dark blue and bright magenta saris, covered in gold jewelry with bindis46 on their foreheads and supple black hair. The young woman I see inside the coffee shop with dark black eyeliner and thick mascara looks like she came straight out of a Cosmopolitan magazine ad. Her hair is curled into perfect swooping ringlets. In her fitted leather jacket over her tight red tank top she looks like she is headed to a nightclub. She wears tight jeans and a black belt with a large sparkling clasp. In her ears are simple silver studs. Her shiny patent leather black heels catapult her small figure to height. From head to toe her Indian figure is plastered with “modern” style. She wears an outfit similar to something I would wear on a Friday night out in Boston. But this was just after lunch on a Wednesday, the middle of the typical workweek. She was poised to put on a fashion show while sipping her café mocha. I wonder what she was thinking as she got dressed. Is she trying to impress someone? Does she want to look “cool?” The impressive details in her outfit are of a style that had to be bought in an expensive retail store in one of the new gargantuan glass malls being built down the street. Her style was not purchased in a “common store.”

Uncomfortable with her steady stare, I look down at myself. It is no wonder she is curious about me, I look absolutely ridiculous here. In my modest pink tunic shirt and white cotton pants I try to emulate “India.” In this more traditional wear, my outsider status is even more apparent. Not only am I a white American, I am also obviously clueless about the socially acceptable style of dress in a store like Café Coffee Day.

Café Coffee Day sells a variety of products: from the usual coffee mugs and coffee beans to tee shirts with witty sayings and comics reminiscent of those I see back home in the United States. The displays are well lit and the packages are brightly colored screaming for attention, all reinforcing a consumer culture. Those privileged enough to enter this modern shop are encouraged to buy trinkets and other unnecessary goods. These goods reinforce their status and material desires.

I am also struck by the way the coffee is made inside this shop. The tall, thin Indian men who work behind the black marble counter are slaves to modern espresso machines. They run back and forth from the milk frother to the espresso maker, pouring the concoctions into large white porcelain mugs. The loud hums of the machines fill the air as customers wait impatiently for their coffee to be served. These machines are imported. Just as the jeans on the girls’ legs do not belong to India, neither do these machines, more typical of European coffee shops. Is all this fancy, expensive equipment necessary to make a cup of coffee? The very technique to make coffee here seems to be a form of unnecessary material consumption.

I look at the way the young woman is dressed and think about how consumption is changing the face of the people inside this store. This concept is not unique to India. Peter Jackson’s “Local Consumption Cultures in a Globalizing World” discusses the ways in which cultures around the world react to the influx of the modern consumption. He hypothesizes that “globalization is held accountable for the erosion of local
difference.” As older women walk by the store window, dressed completely in saris and gold jewelry, people inside look increasingly dissimilar from their parent’s generation. Their attachment to modern goods such as computers and contemporary fashion point to a partial dismissal of traditional Indian culture.

The White in the Room
A couple of white men walk into the store. They are dressed in pressed shirts and ties with leather briefcases in hand. Everyone pauses to stare at them. I hear their voices and immediately feel my toes wiggle – their accents are American! I watch them shuffle a few tables around to make space for their laptops, bags, and numerous papers. They continue to hold the gaze of everyone in the room. The pair proceed to rearrange the store while discussing the “new merger” they are hoping to “seal” this afternoon. I assume they’re part of Bengaluru’s growing expat population.

Multinational companies are opening offices in India, especially here in Bengaluru, where more than 250 U.S. companies have set up offices. Along with these international business professionals, foreign students are flocking to Bengaluru. The city has become a hotbed of intelligence, catching the attention of the world, even earning the title “India’s Silicon Valley.”

With this growing population of westerners comes the influence of their ideas and lifestyle. Between conversations about their business mergers the two men discuss American baseball teams and the best places to get “American Chinese food.” Westerners bring with them their own cultural identities: their pastimes, their food, their language, their material goods.

Western influence has had a multifaceted and many times controversial influence on India. In Globalization and the Crossroads of Tradition and Modernity in Rural India, Kirk Johnson cites an encounter in 1995 with a wall outside the

19. In a recent Seattle Times article, the author discusses how the next phase of globalization is outsourcing IT jobs and resources to India. The article mentions that iconic companies such as IBM and Accenture have already done so. See: Wax, Emily “High Tech Jobs Next Phase of Outsourcing?” Seattle Times November 7, 2010, http://seattletimes.nwsource.com/html/nationworld/201373970_outsourcing08.html.

Now that foreign companies have brought jobs with the influx of call centers and IT companies, it seems as though many Indians have come to appreciate foreign goods. In this coffee shop young people are seated in aircon and drinking coffee from European coffee machines. Their large pocketbooks, laptops, and high heels point to a lifestyle that embraces materialism.

The windows are thick here. From inside this oasis one cannot hear the sounds of the traffic outside, the people begging for change and the young boy hawking newspapers. Each person seems completely content in his or her imported modern world of American and European brands.

Making Spaces, Changing Relationships
My head sways to the hip-hop music overhead and my eyes stop at a couple in the corner. The two seem to be enacting a Bollywood romance scene as they gaze longingly at one another. They giggle and laugh, lightly brushing their bodies against one another, moving to music. The instances in which their bodies touch are only “accidental” in their occurrence and they immediately push away in their aftermath. Their physical contact is limited to these encounters. They sway in unison over their plate of chocolate cake.

There are plenty of reasons this young couple might be happy. They can afford to go out for coffee. They are well dressed. They are young. I imagine sitting in this shop with my boyfriend, as happy as they are – yet the life I come from is so different it would be impossible to compare.

My family has let me take my childhood “boyfriends” along to family events since I was 12. They do not find boys for me to date nor do they interfere with my relationships. We are a very physically affectionate family, often greeting one another with a hug. I go to a progressive college where there are no restrictions on male and female interactions in public or private areas.

Traditionally, Indian families are responsible for the creation of romantic relationships. Many young Indians do not date, as the concept is understood in the west. Theirs is not

23. Indian slang term for air conditioning.
24. The practice of arranged marriage is widely accepted and practiced in India.
an individual choice, but one that involves the entire family. As such, there is no pressure to find romance.\textsuperscript{25} Arranged marriages serve multiple purposes beyond the love felt between two people. These bonds are deeply connected to social status and systems of inheritance.\textsuperscript{26}

In contemporary Indian society traditional marriages are changing. The influence of westernization has produced the concept of “love” or “choice” marriages. Although familial and economic issues once characterized western marriages,\textsuperscript{27} today they are often based on individual choice. In Importance of Marital Characteristics and Marital Satisfaction: A Comparison of Asian Indians in Arranged Marriages and Americans in Marriages of Choice Jayamala Madathil states that “choice” marriages are characteristic of more individualistic societies. With the decision to marry outside of the traditional arrangement, Indians are producing more modern relationships.

I wonder how the two at the counter met. They do not hold hands. His arm is not around her waist. They have a distance between them that reminds me of the requirement to “leave room for the Holy Spirit!” imposed at my Catholic high school dances. If I were home I would equate these two with some of my more old-fashioned friends.

I overhear another young couple nearby. “Since our wedding we have had no time to be with one another alone,” the young woman says to her husband with a gentle firmness. The two are seated across from one another, each grasping a white porcelain coffee cup. “I wish to hold you all the time, but I cannot. It saddens me,” the young man replies, lowering his eyes. The woman, dressed in jeans and a modest tee shirt, looks to her husband and covers her head with thin fingers painted with intricate henna that I assume is from her wedding party. Her gaze locks on the plate of ice cream below her. Their hands fiddle with their coffee cups as they lean forward to whisper. Their soft words open smiles on their faces and brighten their eyes. As they clutch the coffee cups more tightly, their smiling eyes reach forward and their bodies move closer to each other, barely clinging to their seats.

They entrance me. The pair nearly falls out of their seats as they discuss the funny moments of their wedding party: when she nearly tripped walking on stage, when he couldn’t hold in a laugh during a prayer. Their laughter fills the cold coffee shop, transforming it into a place of warmth and love.

At the door the wife says with a smile, “I’m happy we were able to talk here.”\textsuperscript{28} I watch the two open the glass door and leave with a skip in their step, to go home on their motorcycle.

Their interaction makes me wonder if there is no place other than a coffee shop where a young couple can meet and discuss their lives. What is it like to have to head to the coffee shop to discuss private matters of the heart? The thought of being married yet not being able to hold my spouse upsets me. As the two depart my heart aches for them. These coffee shops create new spaces for many facets of Indian society. These stores are not just places for young “dating” to happen but also havens of privacy otherwise not available in India.

I take privacy for granted. In my experience living in Indian households the doors are often left open, locks are left unlatched and members of the household wander in and out as they please. The privacy “violations” I experience when I want to “journal” alone seem silly when I see this couple unable to embrace one another in their own home. It is strange to me that these people come to a coffee shop where a young couple can meet and discuss their lives. What is it like to have to head to the coffee shop to discuss private matters of the heart? The thought of being married yet not being able to hold my spouse upsets me. As the two depart my heart aches for them. These coffee shops create new spaces for many facets of Indian society. These stores are not just places for young “dating” to happen but also havens of privacy otherwise not available in India.

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Many travel guides discuss this issue, claiming that the lack of privacy is related to the volume of people in India.\textsuperscript{29} While this seems valid, there are many layers to this issue beyond the size of India’s population. It is difficult for me, as an American, coming from an individualistic society, to

\textsuperscript{25} This is often considered a “pro” of arranged marriages. In an article in which an Indian girl who has traveled to the US for college discusses her arranged marriage, she states “more attention should be given to studies than boys.” Herschel, Eric. “Indian Students Discuss Pros, Cons of Arranged Marriages” The Daily Princetonian, October 20, 2004, www.dailyprincetonian.com/2004/10/20/11161.
\textsuperscript{26} Information on weddings, inheritance and the tradition of dowry, another economic aspect of Indian marriages, can be found in Dalmia, Sonia, “The Institution of Dowry in India: Why it Continues to Prevail,” The Journal of Developing Areas Vol. 38, No. 2 (2003) 71-93.
\textsuperscript{27} This is found in many historical accounts of marriage in Western culture. For a brief outline of this see: Psychology Today. 2008. “Marriage, a History.” Last modified July 21. www.psychologytoday.com/articles/200505/marriage-history.
\textsuperscript{28} I took record of conversations I overheard in a journal. This quote comes from July 8, 2010.
\textsuperscript{29} One such guide that discusses this is Max Moxon’s travel writing, www.moxon.net/india/surviving_india.html.
understand the collective nature of Indian people.\textsuperscript{30} Their collective nature often leads Indians to conform to societal expectations rather than seek their own individualistic desires. Respect for the community keeps these couples from their desired privacy.\textsuperscript{31}

Café Coffee Day and places like it give young Indians a place to “hang out” – an entirely new concept. With these new places come new opportunities for social interaction. An Indian friend told me, “I never did anything more than go home after school to have dinner with my family. Now we go to Coffee Day.”\textsuperscript{32} These meeting places fit a new niche in Indian culture. They offer a place for Indians to meet and work together that otherwise is unavailable. Where time traditionally was spent in the home, young people are finding places and spaces where they can be on their own. In many blogger communities Indians refer to Café Coffee Day as a place to hang out during their college years, where they can relax and enjoy themselves.\textsuperscript{33} These places have become spaces for friendships and relationships to flourish in a natural and fun way.

Café Coffee Day offers its consumers pseudo-privacy in part because the majority of the population is between the ages of 20 and 29. A young man who meets his girlfriend in Café Coffee Day explains this idea: “You can get comfortably cozy because no one’s looking at you. These places are a boon for people in love.”\textsuperscript{34} This concept of public spaces becoming private puzzles me, yet in this modern coffee shop it seems as though many non-traditional interactions can happen. Seated here with laptops open to Facebook, it is hard to imagine a world of tradition and privacy issues.

The couples that enter this modern coffee shop demonstrate difficulties associated with modernization. Similar to how an increased emphasis on material possessions alters Indian lifestyles, the longing for modern relationships expresses a movement towards new ways of thinking. The paradox of privacy found in public space exposes a conflict between tradition and this new way of life.

Outside the Glass: The Mango Sale

Outside the glass door I am immediately reminded that I am not in Boston. The smell of tobacco, stale milk, and the inside of trashcans overpowers me. This stench is muffled by the taste of rickshaw exhaust in the air. Black smog burns my eyes and stings my nose. I cough from the haze and realize that the air quality is not the only aspect that has changed since leaving Café Coffee Day; the people are different as well.

A young man stands across the street. His face reminds me of images I see on TV of people in war zones, sub-Saharan Africa, the victims of tsunamis and earthquakes. But this young man is living in Bengaluru, the IT capital of the modern world. Instead of name brand jeans, he wears only a torn loincloth and a turban-like towel to shield him from the heat. I look at him in dismay. Although here in Bengaluru there are fewer beggars than I had expected in India, his presence is no less impactful. His small hands are so unclean it seems as though dirt has seeped directly into his dry brown skin. He is probably one of the 456 million Indian people trying to survive on under $1.25 a day.\textsuperscript{35} Nearly half of the Indian population lives in poverty, as defined by the World Bank.\textsuperscript{36}

I begin to question the experience I just had in Café Coffee Day. How is it that I could step outside that modern paradise into this? As I walk along the broken sidewalks I nearly trip over another man covered in dirt from the street, also wearing only a loincloth and with only a towel over his head to shield him from the heat. In one filthy hand he offers me a piece of freshly cut mango, while with the other hand he holds up four fingers, asking if I will buy it for four rupees.

The man speaks no English. He only motions to me with his hands, offering me something for a very small cost. One U.S. dollar is equivalent to about 45 rupees. His request is minimal, amounting to about 10 cents. The latte I just drank cost over 80 rupees – more than four times what most Indians have to live on for one day.\textsuperscript{37} Other drinks involve elaborate ice coffees and ice cream mixtures that can cost over 100 rupees. This coffee is a luxury by Indian standards, especially considering that at the local coffee shop down the

\textsuperscript{32} I took notes of conversations in a journal immediately after they occurred. This conversation was with Deepak on July 5, 2010.
\textsuperscript{33} One such blogger discusses how terrible the coffee is in Café Coffee Day.
\textsuperscript{34} This information is part of a new report written by the World Bank detailing how many people in poverty is probably higher than estimated.
\textsuperscript{35} Nearly half of the Indian population lives in poverty, as defined by the World Bank.
\textsuperscript{37} Seventy percent of Indians are living on less than twenty rupees a day. This article discusses the deplorable conditions of the Indian population “Nearly 80 percent of India Lives on Half Dollar a Day” Aug 10 2007. www.reuters.com/article/idUSDEL218894.
street, a cup retails at about five rupees. Even in its cheapest form a cup of coffee can be a luxury for many Indians. I decline his mango offer. I have been told it is unsafe for my foreign stomach to eat food sold on the street.

Despite the squalor, modernization has trickled down to the poorest people. The man who was just begging me to purchase his fruit pulls a cell phone from his pocket and begins speaking quickly in Kannada. Studies indicate that nearly 45 percent of the Indian population owns a cell phone. Even in rural India citizens have cell phones. Yet most do not have sanitary toilets.

I found it paradoxical that people in the village have cell phones, yet do not have hygienic bathrooms. This lack of hygiene makes this world far from modern.

This paradox begins to explain itself when the cost of a cell phone is taken into account. For an individual in India, the cost of a cell phone is low, but the cost of building a toilet is beyond what most can afford. The cost of labor, materials and maintenance of a toilet is roughly 300 U.S. dollars, as cited in a UN report. The cost of my Indian cell phone and SIM card were the equivalent of 20 U.S. dollars, and minutes on my phone to call within India cost only pennies. Cell phones can be bought even cheaper secondhand or through friends and family members. The price of the phone is minimal in relation to the cost of improving Indian infrastructure.

The Next Step

Down the street I pass another Café Coffee Day. Seated outside is a poor woman looking similar to the two men I passed earlier. She is dressed in a stained sari, holding out a withered hand for change. I wonder why she is sitting outside, wilting in the heat of the city when there is air conditioning in the shop. I look inside and see young people crowded around small tables, laughing over coffee. I realize that Coffee Day is a world that this woman cannot enter.

The pain in her eyes seems greater than ever as I look at the people laughing inside the shop. It is probable that this woman does not own a Macbook Pro or designer heels. The push for modernization and technological advances has left some outside. This coffee shop accentuates the sharp divide between the rich and the poor. The clear windows look into a world that can be entered only by those with the money to afford the luxuries inside. Those outside wait for the spare change of the wealthy elites. The boundaries have been defined.

I watch these interactions and think about how little I understand, but how familiar this seems. I cannot distance myself from the people inside the shop. Their desire to shut the door behind them to the issues their society faces is not unfamiliar to me. How often do I enter that modern world and shut the door to those in need outside? I am thousands of miles away from my home, but I can see in the faces of these beggars the reality of modernization everywhere.

This phenomenon of globalization can be seen on street corners throughout the world. Cultures and traditions may vary, but the reality of poverty is often the same. The beggar who sits outside a Starbucks in Boston is not very different from the one outside a Café Coffee Day in Bengaluru. We always have the option to keep walking, coffee cup in hand. Within our modern worlds of convenience we make attempts to shield ourselves from the reality of the dichotomy between the rich and poor. This dichotomy is created by the economic and social systems that modern citizens are a part of.

I look into the woman’s dark eyes and feel a sense of guilt; her gaze paralyzes me. My L.L. Bean backpack suddenly feels unnecessarily heavy. A laptop, a few granola bars, and books on globalization weigh my body down. In one hand I hold a cup of coffee and in the other I hold a granola bar and a few rupees. I step forward to place the food and coins in the palm of her hand. I stand at the intersection of both of these worlds wondering, what is the next step? As consumers continue to look for the best technology to improve their lives, will there always be someone waiting outside the door for spare change?

Perhaps our next modern advancement should be less about the refinement of our cup of coffee and more to do with the five rupees this impoverished woman rattles in her hand.

38. This is the native language of Karnataka, of which Bengaluru is the capital.
39. During drives through local villages I often saw signs for the Indian phone companies Vodaphone and Reliance.
could hear the *rat-tat-tat* of machine gun fire in the distance. Plumes of smoke billowed over the walls of my host family’s house. Before the cable television went off the air, I saw downtown Osh, Kyrgyzstan, ablaze on the Russian-language news: buildings that I had seen standing days before were now reduced to charred piles of rubble. Microbuses and taxicabs had all but disappeared. Osh’s citizens cowered in their homes, hoping that the remaining food in their refrigerators would last through this chaos. This small, bustling city suddenly had found itself in the grip of ethnic violence. It was a scene of dusty alleyways and streets that had, in the course of a short time, become a battlefield. And it was this scene that I stepped into this past summer. A Brandeis junior, majoring in International and Global Studies and Anthropology, I came to Osh for an internship which I expected would teach me how non-governmental organizations can use education to combat urgent problems like HIV/AIDS.

Then, after a week on the job, age-old ethnic tensions in Osh reignited, and rumors flew about town in text messages and phone calls that ethnic violence had broken out. There were reports of fighting in the streets. One widespread story claimed that a gang of ethnic Uzbek men had invaded a women’s dormitory and raped and lynched three ethnic Kyrgyz girls. This proved false, but, provoked by this and other rumors, mobs of Kyrgyz men soon began marauding through Uzbek neighborhoods, killing residents and burning down their houses. Living with an Uzbek family in one of these neighborhoods, I felt the same fear as Osh’s Uzbek citizens. As a young man growing up in a quiet suburb of Phoenix, Arizona, I had no experience to prepare me for a situation like this. I wondered if I would ever see my family again.

However, after a few anxious days, I was evacuated to Kyrgyzstan’s capital, Bishkek, where I eventually found the Kyrgyzstan branch of the International Research & Exchanges Board (IREX) and a new internship. I began working on “Tech Age Girls,” a conference aimed at empowering young women to take leadership roles in their communities. Among my many tasks, I made a short film about the conference participants, asking these teenage women: “Why is women’s leadership important in 21st century Kyrgyzstan?”

It is a critical question. I can see its importance in the country’s current political climate. Just two months before the Osh unrest, mass protests resulted in the deaths of nearly 100 Kyrgyzstanis and the ouster of the country’s president, Kurmanbek Bakiyev. In a landmark change, he was replaced by a woman, Roza Otunbaeva.¹ Among the Commonwealth of Independent States, Kyrgyzstan’s achievement of a female president was a first.²

In this paper, I make that question my own. I consider what might be the implications of female leadership for this country. I present portraits of the young women I met and interviewed during the course of my summer experience.

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  1=r-is&scp=14&sq=Revolution%20Kyrgyzstan&st=cse.

². The Commonwealth of Independent States is a loose association of countries that were formed during the breakup of the Soviet Union. It is defined here as all the official member states—Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, as well as one unofficial associate member, Turkmenistan, and one non-member that participates, Ukraine.
These Kyrgyzstani women believe that women’s leadership can promote stability, peace, and development. Their contrasting experiences and opinions reveal how traditional gender roles continue to hold women back socially. Still, it is important to examine what efforts exist to empower them, and what the current female president of Kyrgyzstan means for their future and for that of their country.

The Osh Unrest

The violence in Osh started without warning on the evening of June 10, a day that had seemed completely normal. That evening a large crowd of Uzbekis gathered downtown in response to a few scuffles that had occurred during the day between Kyrgyz and Uzbek men in a casino. Soon, clashes broke out between these Uzbeks and groups of Kyrgyz. The violence continued throughout the night. According to Human Rights Watch, Uzbeks were reportedly responsible for many of the initial attacks.4

Then, large groups of ethnic Kyrgyz from villages near Osh, fearing for their relatives in the city and angered by the violence, started pouring into the city.5 For the next four days, the villagers joined locals in acts of arson, looting, and violence directed against ethnic Uzbeks. While the number of dead still remains uncertain due to the Muslim tradition of burying the dead immediately, it seems to stand around 400. In addition, an estimated 80,000 ethnic Uzbeks fled to Uzbekistan as refugees, and thousands more were internally displaced.

The Osh unrest was just the most recent incident in the history of instability, corruption, and violence that has haunted Kyrgyzstan since its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991.

Empowering Women to Change Their World

When I first see them, I feel like I’m back in my high school in Phoenix. They behave just like my sister and her friends when they were 16, nudging each other, whispering, and giggling. Some wear tee shirts with pictures of cartoon characters, others have ribbons in their hair, and a few fashionistas sport large Jackie O sunglasses perched on top of their heads. They may seem like typical teenage girls, but they’re not. They are “Tech Age Girls,” a collection of young female community leaders who have already demonstrated their potential by organizing community service projects, interviewing female leaders, and blogging about women’s leadership.

“Tech Age Girls” (TAG) is a program of the International Research & Exchanges Board, an American international nonprofit organization that got its start in 1968 administering scholastic exchanges between the United States and the Soviet Union. TAG aims to identify the most promising young female leaders in the seven regions of Kyrgyzstan and train them in information and communication technology. The ultimate goal of the program is to prepare these young leaders to give back to their communities. The program also provides them with an opportunity to practice their English and network with prominent female leaders in business, civil society, and government. But as I get to know and interview these young women, I see that TAG cannot equalize their opportunities, nor can it prepare them all equally to make a difference in their communities. Their opportunities are heavily tied up in geography and ethnicity, factors that TAG cannot change.

When I ask Aigul, a 16-year-old girl from Bishkek, why women’s leadership is important in 21st century Kyrgyzstan, she responds instantly.

“In the last year in many companies, in the government elite, there are only men. And men think all women should sit at home and they should [take] care of their children,” she says. “But it’s not true because all men and women are equal.”

It is relatively easy for Aigul to make this statement about gender equality because she is from Bishkek, a city that is definitely more liberal than other parts of the country. If men in Bishkek feel that women ought to remain at home, their feelings are probably not as strong as those of men from the villages. In addition, Aigul is advantaged by her status as a city-dweller; she grew up being exposed to many things that are new to girls from smaller, less developed areas.

As a result, Aigul seems more sophisticated and assertive than the TAG girls from rural areas. For example, earlier in the year Aigul had to write a blog about a female leader. She was interested in a leading fashion designer and TV producer, who is a celebrity in Kyrgyzstan. Aigul had the courage and assertiveness to locate this celebrity and talk her into an interview. Upon hearing this at the conference, some of the

3. I have purposely chosen to use the word “Kyrgyzstani” in this paper to refer to a citizen of Kyrgyzstan regardless of his or her ethnicity or when referring to a feature of the country of Kyrgyzstan. Sadly, the distinction between “Kyrgyz” and “Kyrgyzstani” is not made frequently enough. “Kyrgyz” is an ethnic group. Thus, referring to an ethnically Uzbek citizen of Kyrgyzstan as a “Kyrgyz citizen” seems strange at best. At worst, it seems to imply that Uzbeks as minorities ought to be subordinate to ethnic Kyrgyz. In light of the unrest in Osh, in which innocent Uzbeks were frequent targets of violence, making this distinction is even more important. The word “Kyrgyzstani” emphasizes the equality of citizenship that all people in Kyrgyzstan legally have and ought to have.


5. Ole Solvang and Anna Neistat, “‘Where is the Justice?’,” 28.
TAG girls from smaller towns and villages admitted they wouldn’t have even entertained the idea of interviewing the celebrity.

Another of Aigul’s advantages is that, living in Bishkek, she has always had much greater access to information technology. Today, she has the Internet installed in her home, which is generally unheard of outside of the capital. Aigul is quite aware that, when it comes time to organize her major post-conference community service project, she will have little trouble doing research and partnering with nongovernmental organizations, which are plentiful in the city.

Aigul’s opportunities stand in stark contrast to those of Sitora, a 16-year-old Uzbek girl who wears a colorful Islamic hijab. She is from a village outside Osh, and she lost a relative during the unrest. That she made it to the conference in Bishkek so soon after that family tragedy is a testament to her desire to improve her future.

On the final evening of the conference, I am reviewing the footage of my interviews with the girls when a Peace Corps volunteer, who is helping with the program, calls me over to a table where Sitora is working to come up with a plan for her post-conference community service project.

“She’s having some trouble coming up with an idea,” he says with some concern. “Do you think you can help?”

I have my doubts; I am a stranger in this country. Before I can say anything, Sitora tells me that solving the issue of interethnic conflict is too big for her to tackle. I want to help, but don’t know what other problems her village has. Since meeting Sitora on the first day of the conference, I have felt a sense of solidarity with her. Having lived through the Osh unrest, I have had at least a taste of the bigotry that she and other Uzbeks face in southern Kyrgyzstan. But unable to generate any ideas for her, I decide to pose a simple question:

“Haven’t you ever seen something in your village and thought, ‘I don’t like that?’” After a long pause, Sitora’s eyes light up.

“I know! I know!” she cries. Then, in staccato bursts of English and Russian, she urgently explains. She says she has never liked how girls from her village often don’t get to go to the university because their parents would rather save the money and use it for the marriage dowry. Sitora decides that she wants to organize presentations in villages near Osh to explain the benefits of higher education for women. Specifically, she wants to reach teenage girls and their mothers, and she hopes to get female professionals to speak at these presentations about what they gained from higher education. After we discuss it for a while, we all agree that the plan isn’t totally complete, but it’s a good start. In the excitement of the moment, I want to reach out and hug Sitora, but then I remember the boundaries. I am a young, American man and she is a conservative Muslim girl. That wouldn’t look right in her village, and would seem inappropriate here.

Instead, I just let my smile speak for me.

Though Sitora definitely has a good idea, I can’t help feeling that she will have trouble implementing it. First, the area she is from is still in chaos after the riots. Many houses are in shambles, families are still homeless, and businesses that were looted or destroyed during the violence have not reopened. Even if these people can afford to send their daughters to college, at the moment, it’s probably not their top priority.

And there are other obstacles. For example, Sitora lives in a conservative, rural community where she may find that people are less receptive to her ideas than she hopes. If she wants to find female professionals to speak at the presentations, she may have to look beyond her village. This will require traveling to Osh by microbus or taxi, which may be too expensive. In addition, if she wants to do research for the presentations, she may have difficulty finding a place to access the Internet. This may be one of the greatest obstacles. A quick perusal of the social networking site that IREX maintains for students and teachers in Kyrgyzstan reveals that Sitora barely posted on it. In contrast, many of the other Tech Age Girls from larger communities posted quite

8. The word “hijab” refers to the headscarf and long, modest clothing traditionally worn by Muslim women.

9. Field notes, July 30, 2010
frequently, stating their opinions on everything from women's leadership to personal hobbies.

Finally, there is no way to rule out the possibility of future trouble in Osh. This could also have an adverse effect on her plans.

Given the obstacles that Sitora and many of the Tech Age Girls may face in the future, I suspect that there is only one thing that the TAG conference can surely do for the girls: motivate them. This it does remarkably well. For the two weeks of the conference, IREX staff, women leaders, and other presenters tell the girls that they can be the next leaders of their communities, bring change to Kyrgyzstan, and achieve their dreams – messages they may not hear elsewhere.

The Tech Age Girls’ greatest strength is most certainly their passion. They are very young, but also very determined, and they are not afraid to declare that they will be future leaders of Kyrgyzstan. Most importantly, they have not yet been overcome by the apathy and cynicism that affect many young people here.

The First Revolution

Though it has been plagued by instability for most of its post-independence history, there was a lot of hope for Kyrgyzstan immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union. During the early 1990s, under the leadership of President Askar Akaev, Kyrgyzstan was viewed in the west as an “island of democracy.” Akaev pushed hard for political and economic liberalization. Kyrgyzstan’s constitution was based on that of the United States, and it was the first former Soviet republic to join the World Trade Organization. In those early years, Kyrgyzstan even had basic freedoms of speech, press, and assembly.

By the mid-1990s, however, Akaev became less committed to democracy, and increased his political power as president through a series of constitutional referendums. During this period, corruption and repression increased significantly. Modest estimates suggest that Akaev and his family were making hundreds of millions of dollars illegally each year.

In April of 2005, Akaev was ousted by mass protests after rumors spread that he was planning to have his children succeed him as president and that he had rigged the parliamentary elections. The so-called “Tulip Revolution” swept a new president, Kurmanbek Bakiyev, into power on promises to clean up the corruption of the Akaev regime.

What Does It Mean to Be a Woman in Kyrgyzstan?

The dinner party is over. Friends and relatives have piled into their cars and sped into the inky darkness down the potholed road to Bishkek. The table has been cleared of all the greasy plates that once held meaty plov, chopped tomato and onion salad, and thick, cream-filled pieces of cake. Even the flies that tormented us throughout the meal are gone. My friend Jyldez’s grandmother has gone to bed and left Jyldez and me sitting out in the courtyard of the house, looking out at the mountains beyond this village on the outskirts of Bishkek.

“You know, it’s good to get married young. It’s healthy for women to give birth before they are thirty. The earlier the better,” she says. “And we Kyrgyz women are very concerned with our health.”

I smile to myself, thinking about the meat and fat-heavy Kyrgyz cuisine we have just consumed, which seems like the antithesis of “healthy” by my American standards. Jyldez and I are continuing a conversation we started over the video chat program Skype a few months before I came to Kyrgyzstan.

Jyldez, who grew up in Bishkek but now lives in Moscow as a university student, had just been visited by a childhood friend from Kyrgyzstan, Nurjan. Nurjan had lived in Italy for the last decade, and came to Moscow with her boyfriend. Jyldez gave the couple a tour of the city, but was increasingly put off by Nurjan’s constant, aggressive criticism of her boyfriend. That behavior seemed inappropriate to Jyldez. However she was stunned by what she found out next: Nurjan and her boyfriend were sexually active.

“She can never live in Kyrgyzstan again,” Jyldez told me emphatically. “Men here want to marry a girl, not a woman.”

This reminds me of something my grandmother, who is almost 90, would have applauded, but not my mother, who is a modern American woman.


15. The revolution that toppled President Akaev was named the “Tulip Revolution” due to its association with the series of non-violent, pro-democracy “color revolutions” that occurred in former Soviet states during the early 2000s. The other color revolutions were the Rose Revolution in Georgia and the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, which both took place in 2004.
16. Plov is a Central Asian variant of pilaf that consists of rice, onions, carrots, and meat cooked in oil.
17. Field notes, July 7, 2010
In traditional Kyrgyz society both men and women rode horses, herded livestock, and prepared food. ... This active nomadic lifestyle gave women independence.

However, Jyldyz’s reaction to Nurjan’s behavior is not surprising. This is Kyrgyzstan. Although men and women are legally equal in Kyrgyzstan, it remains a socially conservative country where, according to researcher Yvonne Corcoran-Nantes, a “strong patriarchal system has exerted considerable pressure on women to prioritize their role in the family, the socialization of children, and the strengthening of cultural values.” Traditionally, Kyrgyz marriages were arranged by the parents of the bride and groom, and the groom was expected to pay a kalyym (bride price) to the bride’s family. Chastity was, and remains, “highly valued and expected from young brides in most Central Asian communities, and traditionally the kalyym is given only after the wedding night when this is ‘confirmed’ by the husband.” While this expectation probably came about to ensure the continuation and purity of the husband’s bloodline, it has now become another example of male dominance in Kyrgyzstan.

Interestingly, the nature of nomadic pastoralism, the traditional Kyrgyz lifestyle, is often at odds with male dominance, making the position of Kyrgyz women very complex. In traditional Kyrgyz society both men and women rode horses, herded livestock, and prepared food. Women, in addition, had critical roles in setting up the traditional Kyrgyz yurt and caring for domestic animals that produced milk and wool. Although the Kyrgyz are Sunni Muslims, and men’s lives are relegated to the private sphere of the home, this active nomadic lifestyle gave women independence. This prevented women from being as completely confined to the home as they were in other Central Asian cultures.

During the Soviet period, the government dedicated significant efforts to improving the position of women in Central Asia. To them, this meant eliminating Islamic and “traditional practices of veiling, polygamy, bridal payments, and prearranged child marriages.” Although this process of reforming Central Asia was destructive to traditional cultural practices, it also yielded many positive results for women.

Jyldyz is one of the beneficiaries of these changes. While a high school student, she was allowed to spend a year studying in the United States as an exchange student. When I met her in Phoenix and we became friends, she taught me about her country and sparked my interest in Central Asia. One day she explained to me that in the past she would not have been allowed to leave her family and country to pursue her education. In fact, in traditional Kyrgyzstan, she would probably have been getting married at 18. Now, by studying computer science in Moscow, she is the embodiment of a modern Kyrgyzstani woman. Yet she also has a deep respect for the traditional culture of her country.

“Once I finish the university, I’ll get married,” she says, leaning back in her chair and staring up at the stars. She pauses for moment, and then adds, “But I’ll also have a career.”

Like Jyldyz, nearly all women in Central Asia were literate by the time the Soviet Union dissolved, and approximately half of the students in higher and secondary professional education were women. Significantly, 45 percent of government and party officials were women, though men still achieved the highest ranks of their careers much more frequently than women. This high level of female representation was maintained by quotas guaranteeing that women would hold a minimum of 30 percent of elected positions at virtually all levels of the government.

However in recent years women’s opportunities have declined. For example, since independence there has been a significant decrease in the number of women in government. A case in point is the Kyrgyzstani justice system, where, between 1985 and 1995, the number of women dropped from 30.5 percent to just eight percent. In addition, with the growth of ethnic nationalism and Islam, practices that were illegal in the Soviet Union, like polygamy and particularly bride kidnapping, have reemerged.

Bride kidnapping, frequently perceived by ethnic Kyrgyz as a traditional practice, is one of the most common ways in which men exert dominance over women in Kyrgyzstan, especially in rural areas. A man and his friends will kidnap...
A girl and take her to the man’s house, where she is held until the man’s female relatives can convince her to put on a marriage scarf. Sometimes the girl will be raped, forcing her “by the shame of no longer being a pure woman” to agree to marriage.28 While many Kyrgyz will claim that today bride kidnapping is more of a ritual enacted with the consent of the girl, one study of the practice in a rural Kyrgyz village suggests that between 35 and 45 percent of ethnic Kyrgyz women are forced into marriage this way.29

The outcome for those women who do not agree to such a marriage, or whose marriages soon fail, is rather bleak. I found this out for myself shortly after arriving in Kyrgyzstan. Before the unrest in Osh, I visited the sacred mountain Sulayman-Too (Solomon Mountain), with some friends. As we walked the crowded downtown streets to the foot of the mountain, which sits in the center of the city, I noticed that one of the girls in our group, Maral, was gauging longingly at every small child or seemingly happy family she passed. Her behavior seemed strange to me until, later, another friend told me about Maral’s life.

A few years ago, Maral was kidnapped by a total stranger. Like many kidnapped women, Maral eventually agreed to marry the man, because rejecting him would bring shame on her working-class, traditional family. But the marriage didn’t last. Maral’s husband started noticing her “paying attention” to one of his friends, and soon threw her out of the house, forcing her to return home to her family in shame.30

As I think about Maral’s story, I try to imagine how I would feel if my own sister was kidnapped for marriage. I have no doubt that my parents and I would do anything and everything to stop it. From my American perspective, it is incomprehensible that a kidnapped woman, who doesn’t want to marry her kidnapper, would bring shame upon herself, let alone her family. Yet, this is the reality for so many Kyrgyz women.

The most tragic aspect of Maral’s story is that she is not a “modern” woman like Jyldyz. In a country where women frequently feel pressured by family to marry in their early 20s and start having children quickly, Maral would like nothing better than to do so. She has no college degree and no desire to advance herself through education; she only wants to be a wife and a mother. Yet, as a divorced woman who is no longer a virgin, she has found herself potentially unmarriageable. In conservative Kyrgyzstani society, she sees her ideal future as being a wife and a mother. Yet, as a divorced woman who is no longer working-class, traditional family. But the marriage didn’t last. Maral’s husband started noticing her “paying attention” to one of his friends, and soon threw her out of the house, forcing her to return home to her family in shame.30

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30. Field notes, June 5, 2010

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The Second “Revolution”

The Tulip Revolution of 2005 failed to bring about the change its supporters had envisioned, and the Bakiyev regime proved to be no more democratic or honest than its predecessor. In less than a year, the regional news website EurasiaNet was already reporting that corruption had increased. Some entrepreneurs even claimed that bribe rates had risen by between 200 and 500 percent.31 Over the next three years corruption would continue to thrive. In a country where women are forced into marriage this way.

In early April 2010, Bakiyev was finally ousted like his predecessor, after significant hikes in utility rates enraged the nation’s poor population.32 This “revolution” went less smoothly than the last one. As protesters in Bishkek gathered in the main square and around the White House, the headquarters of Kyrgyzstan’s president, Bakiyev ordered his guards to fire on the protesters. The result was at least 85 deaths, hundreds more wounded, and chaos in the streets.33

After the toppling of the Bakiyev government, opposition leaders quickly chose Roza Otunbaeva to serve as interim president of Kyrgyzstan. According to Bruce Panner, a journalist who covers Central Asia, Otunbaeva is one of the most important and experienced female politicians in the post-independence history of Kyrgyzstan.34 During the regime of Askar Akaev she served as foreign minister, ambassador to the United States and Canada, and ambassador to the United Kingdom and Ireland. But over time she became a supporter of the opposition to Akaev. After the

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33. The causes of the 2010 ouster of President Bakiyev are significantly more complex than this. Shortly before the protests began, the Russian print, radio, and television news media accused him of corruption and nepotism. In addition, Russia increased the tariffs on gas imports to Kyrgyzstan. Thus, some suspect that the Kremlin may have instigated this ouster for its own gain, although this has not been proven.
Tulip Revolution, Kurmanbek Bakiyev nominated Otunbaeva for the position of foreign minister, but she did not receive the necessary parliamentary approval. Within a year she joined the opposition and accused Bakiyev of failing to follow through with the reforms he promised to the people of Kyrgyzstan.\textsuperscript{36}

Otunbaeva’s term as interim president will officially end on December 31\textsuperscript{st}, 2011, and she will not have the right to run again in the 2011 presidential election.\textsuperscript{17}

What Does a Female President Mean For Kyrgyzstan?

“Why is women’s leadership important in 21\textsuperscript{st} century Kyrgyzstan?” Aizada restates my question. “Just look at Roza Otunbaeva!”

Aizada is a young Kyrgyz filmmaker whose new documentary about the life of a boy from a poor family in rural Kyrgyzstan has just been shown in a film festival in the Netherlands. She has come to the TAG conference to give a presentation on the artistic side of filmmaking. The girls have already been taught to use Windows MovieMaker. Now it is time for them to learn to use it well. Aizada spends an hour-and-a-half presenting video examples of close-ups, medium close-ups, and wide shots. She explains the types of storylines and subject matter that interest her. They tend to be about societal ills and development issues.

When I finally sit down in private with her for an on-camera interview, she seems like an entirely different person. Gone are the frenetic gestures and enunciated explanations of someone used to presenting her ideas in front of a large audience. Now, she looks away from the camera, chuckles nervously, and speaks quietly but precisely in the English she mastered during a year in Oregon as an undergraduate exchange student.

“You know what really makes me appreciate Roza Otunbaeva at the moment?” she asks. “I see several minuses to her current politics as well as her previous political affiliations, but when I see her giving a live interview to Al Jazeera via Skype, wearing headphones, that makes me think of Kyrgyzstan as a very modern place, a place with a future, a country that has elections, but lacks civil liberties. It is followed respectively by Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, which are all classified as “authoritarian regimes.”

I think about Aizada’s perspective. She is a worldly, educated woman from a tiny, underdeveloped country that most Americans can barely pronounce, let alone locate on a map. Growing up in Arizona, I long felt isolated from the thriving international and intellectual community I sought out when I chose to attend college in Boston, Massachusetts. I suspect that Aizada feels a more extreme version of this. As a young, creative, and liberal woman, she longs for a day when Kyrgyzstan will be able to enjoy the fruits of a western-style democracy: stability, peaceful transfer of political power, and a greater focus on development and education. I try to imagine what it would be like if each time the United States elected a new president, the people had to expel the old one by force. It’s an interesting thought exercise. I come up blank. I have no precedent on which to base this scenario.

Until I went to Osh, I had no experience at all with civil disorder. Aizada has had multiple experiences with situations like this growing up in turbulent, post-independence Kyrgyzstan.

Now Kyrgyzstan has a female president, something even the United States has yet to achieve. Furthermore, President Otunbaeva and her interim government seem focused on steering the country towards democracy.\textsuperscript{39} In almost any country in the world, this would be considered progressive. But this combination is especially remarkable in Central Asia, a region dominated by authoritarian male leaders.\textsuperscript{40} I can understand why Aizada sees Otunbaeva’s presidency as the harbinger of progress. It is the culmination of what women like her have been striving for over many years.

Interestingly, it is not only the women of Kyrgyzstan who feel this way. During a walk through downtown Bishkek with Azimbek, my friend Jyldyz’s father, I hear similar sentiments. However Azimbek views the new female-led government through the lens of nationalism. As we pass the gates of the Kyrgyzstani White House, still pockmarked with bullet holes from the turmoil that brought Otunbaeva to power, he explains to me that other Central Asian countries lack the level of gender equality necessary for a woman to be president, suggesting that Kyrgyzstan is the most democratic country in the region.

\begin{itemize}
  \item 36. Antoine Blua, “Who is Roza Otunbaeva?”
  \item 38. Short on-camera interview in English, July 2010
  \item 40. The five former Soviet Central Asian states all rank relatively low in the Economist Intelligence Unit’s Democracy Index (http://graphics.eiu.com/PDF/Democracy%20Index%202008.pdf). Of these countries, Kyrgyzstan ranks the highest, and is the only one categorized as a “hybrid regime”—a country that has elections, but lacks civil liberties. It is followed respectively by Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, which are all classified as “authoritarian regimes.”
\end{itemize}
“This would not work in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, or Tajikistan,” he says in a mixture of Russian and English supported by emphatic hand gestures. “Here it works.”

When a pair of women in Islamic hijab passes us on the street, he gestures in their direction and says, “This is not our culture.”

Hearing Azimbek’s perspective, I realize that the meaning of Otunbaeva’s presidency may be interpreted to support many different viewpoints, even among her supporters. His comment about the women in hijab makes me worry that the idea of “progress” for women and for Kyrgyzstan may not be interpreted as increased equality between the sexes in a democratic state, but as the requirement that women adopt the relatively secular belief system prevalent in northern Kyrgyzstan. I strongly believe in cultural pluralism and do not think that this would be progress. Worse, I worry that it would lead to more discrimination against ethnic Uzbeks, who tend to be stricter Muslims than ethnic Kyrgyz.

At the moment, it is extremely difficult to say with any certainty what Roza Otunbaeva’s presidency means for Kyrgyzstan. Certainly, she seems dedicated to democratization. But that’s what people said about Askar Akaev in the early 1990s, when Kyrgyzstan experienced a false start on the road to democracy. Furthermore, the unrest in Osh and the interim government’s inability to quell the violence suggest that Kyrgyzstan is still unstable, and there is no guarantee that another round of protests will not force Otunbaeva and her administration out of power. All I know for certain is that many of the Tech Age Girls have told me that Roza Otunbaeva is an example of what they can achieve. It is an interesting time to be a woman in Kyrgyzstan.

Facing the Future

President Roza Otunbaeva has opened a door for women in Kyrgyzstan. A philosophical precedent is set: theoretically, women can aspire to the same careers as men. However, in reality it isn’t quite that simple. Since independence from the Soviet Union, women have lost much of the ground they gained under the forced gender equality of communism. The number of women in positions of political power has fallen. Roza Otunbaeva is simply the exception to the rule.

But she doesn’t have to be.

On the final day of the conference, I film the last scene of my short film about the Tech Age Girls. After a long evening of planning their community service projects, the girls are visibly dragging, yawning, and looking around the room with drooping eyes. When I ask them to give me a few minutes to film one last scene, quite a few pretend not to hear me or understand my Russian.

“I want to record you all standing together and shouting that you are the future of Kyrgyzstan,” I tell them. Suddenly, everything changes. The girls’ eyes open wide. They look at each other, exchange a few words in Kyrgyz, and then excitedly begin lining up. Soon I have them waving their arms in the air, shouting, “We are the future of Kyrgyzstan!” At that moment, all the obstacles that stand in the way of women as they try to chart a path for themselves seem to disappear. The Tech Age Girls are pure enthusiasm, pure unbridled passion.

I can’t help feeling that if programs like TAG can continue to motivate and empower young women to actively pursue leadership roles in their country, there may be a way to buck the trend of decreasing gender equality in the post-independence period. Yet, the reemergence of traditional attitudes and practices such as bride kidnapping has made it harder to achieve this in Kyrgyzstan. Pressure to marry and have children in one’s early-to-mid 20s means that many young women will have to juggle the responsibilities of marriage and childrearing before they are established in their careers. Despite these challenges, there is no legal obstacle to women taking leadership roles in Kyrgyzstani society. Motivated women, unrelenting in the pursuit of their dreams, may be just what Kyrgyzstan needs.

41. That Azimbek fails to mention Turkmenistan as a country where a woman could not be president may be telling. The Economist Intelligence Group’s Democracy Index ranks Turkmenistan as the third least democratic country in the world, and laws in Turkmenistan are often repressive in arbitrary and bizarre ways. In Azimbek’s mind, putting Turkmenistan and female leadership in the same thought may seem ridiculous.

42. Field notes, June 17, 2010
It is more difficult to say definitively what Roza Otunbaeva will mean for Kyrgyzstan. She has only been in power for eight turbulent months, so it is too soon to make a judgment. We will have to ask this question again in five or 10 years. I want to believe in Otunbaeva’s presidency and the prospect of democracy for Kyrgyzstan. But then I remember my experience in Osh, and I realize that democracy may not be able to soothe the ethnic tensions tearing this country apart.

However, there is one thing I do have faith in: the Tech Age Girls. I maintain hope that they can be a force for change in Kyrgyzstan and that they can pass on their knowledge and passion to others like them. There is already some evidence that this is indeed possible: a few weeks after the conclusion of the conference, five of the girls collaborated with the United Nations Development Program and trained female representatives of Kyrgyzstani political parties to use Skype and video editing software as tools for communication.35

This may seem minor, but improving the ability of women to disseminate ideas can do a great deal to promote political debate in a country where politics has been dominated by men, and is frequently polarized between the regime in power and the opposition. It is an excellent first step for the Tech Age Girls. With luck, it is the first of many.

This reminds me of something my father has often told me: “If you can dream it, you can do it.” These girls are definitely dreamers, and that is hopeful.

Today is the day. Throngs of curious onlookers have already gathered around the blacktop where my choreographed dance of the World Cup 2010 song, “Waving Flag,” is about to be performed. I stand eagerly next to a group of 15 of my students representing the village of La Loma. Dressed neatly in white shirts and black jeans, the kids’ green, yellow, and blue pom-poms bounce playfully around their wrists and ankles. Señora Catalina and Señora Mariella (their primary school teachers), the children’s parents, and other members of La Loma beam with pride, waving to us from the crowd. The entire community is present at this annual summer celebration commemorating the establishment of the parish back in 1964. It serves as a festive respite from the toils of everyday agrarian life.

The loudspeaker booms: “The parish of Cuellaje welcomes the Ignacio Burbano Primary School of La Loma.” The knot in my stomach tightens. All eyes fix on me. I take a deep breath, casually put on my sunglasses, and step out confidently onto the blacktop. Whispers of “Who’s that chinito?” reverberate through the crowd. An Asian-American college student whose yellow skin and jet black hair stands out, I’ve already become accustomed to discreet side glances and finger-pointing. As I walk humbly towards the other side of the blacktop, I tell myself: Wow, I can’t believe I’m going to dance in front of all these people...in Ecuador.

Teaching in Ecuador

I have been teaching English to primary and secondary students this summer in the small Andean community of La Loma. At the local primary school, I teach four different levels of English to children ages 6-17. Although I can speak Spanish, I only speak English in my classes, in order to create an immersive language learning experience.

Over the past seven weeks I have become acutely aware of the deficiencies of schooling here, and of the general condemnations leveled against the Ecuadorian public education system. Nationwide, there exists a marked disparity in education attainment between rural and urban areas: in 2001, the average level of schooling in rural areas was 4.9 years, compared to 8.7 years in urban areas. There are also serious systemic flaws. As the Ecuadorian academic Quiroz Palacios puts it, “Ecuador’s public school system provides an education that is so repetitive and routinized as to destroy its reason for being.”

Using my experience in La Loma to explore the role of the community in shaping primary and secondary education in Andean villages, I seek to understand this rural-urban divide.

1. Translation from the Spanish: “Who’s that Chinese [or anyone who physically appears to be of East Asian descent] person?” This phrase can have derogatory, neutral, or endearing connotations, depending on the situation.
2. La Loma is located in Intag Valley, a rural region in the Imbabura Province of Ecuador.

Ecuador first piqued my interest in 5th grade. I remember sitting at a small desk in my Connecticut elementary school classroom, enthralled by my Spanish teacher’s descriptions of a country that was only about the size of Colorado but nonetheless has four geographically distinct regions: the Amazon, the Coast, the Andes, and the Galápagos Islands. My small hands promptly added Ecuador to a list of countries I wished to visit one day. This past summer, I resolved to finally explore Ecuador through WorldTeach, an NGO that describes itself as an organization that “partners with governments and other organizations in developing countries to provide volunteer teachers to meet local needs and promote global partnership.”6 After undergoing a weeklong orientation in the capital, Quito, volunteers are sent off to their individual sites, working in communities that have specifically requested an English teacher for the summer.

* * *

I am at the other side of the blacktop. I turn around, facing the children who are still waiting patiently. Clapping, I signal the first row of five students, adorned with blue pom-poms, to come forward. They run towards me, abandoning the synchronized entrance we had rehearsed for weeks. I smile. After all, these are the youngest of the bunch: they are only six years old. I signal the second row, with yellow pom-poms, to follow. Lastly the tallest children, adorned with green pom-poms, complete the formation. Together, the sea of green, yellow, and blue represent the colors of the newly designed flag of Cuellaje, the parish of which La Loma is a part. The green symbolizes “a love for nature,” the yellow “warmth, optimism, and kindness,” and the blue “the pure air and crystalline waters of [the regional] rivers.”

Before the music starts, I look around. I see Enrique and Paola, my host brother and sister, sitting on the pavement enjoying pink cotton candy together. Their parents cannot attend because Rafael, their father, is recovering from a recent accident. I am at the other side of the blacktop. I turn around, facing the children who are still waiting patiently. Clapping, I signal the first row of five students, adorned with blue pom-poms, to come forward. They run towards me, abandoning the synchronized entrance we had rehearsed for weeks. I smile. After all, these are the youngest of the bunch: they are only six years old. I signal the second row, with yellow pom-poms, to follow. Lastly the tallest children, adorned with green pom-poms, complete the formation. Together, the sea of green, yellow, and blue represent the colors of the newly designed flag of Cuellaje, the parish of which La Loma is a part. The green symbolizes “a love for nature,” the yellow “warmth, optimism, and kindness,” and the blue “the pure air and crystalline waters of [the regional] rivers.”

Rafael: The Visionary

“If it weren’t for the men in La Loma who came and rescued me, I would have died on the cold forest floor,” Rafael says, lying in a semi-reclined state on his bed, his upper body scarred with bruises and his injured legs nestled under a blanket.


7. Translation from a pamphlet distributed during the August 5, 2010 Cuellaje Festivals, entitled “Parroquia Seis de Julio de Cuellaje: Nuestros simbolos parroquiales.”

At his bedside, I sit on a wooden stool. I had just finished teaching my morning classes at the primary school and wanted to check up on my host dad. Rafael is alone at the house: his wife, Señora Marina, is out working on the farm in place of her husband, and the children are still at school. Two weeks prior, Rafael had been cutting trees with a friend high up in the mountains, clearing land to establish another farm. All of a sudden, a giant tree fell on his back, striking him down. His friend, who fortunately carried a cell phone, left Rafael alone for an hour as he tried frantically to find satellite reception and call for help.

“**You know what I was thinking when I was lying there, all alone?”**

“No.” I don’t know what else to say.

“All I could think of was not being able to see Enrique and Paola all grown up.” His voice is soft and solemn.

I have come to truly admire Rafael. A third generation family in La Loma, Rafael is very much an integral part of this community. As a young boy, he spent most of his time outdoors learning from his father how to pack horses, slaughter pigs, clear fields, and other farm-related tasks. When he is not working in the fields, he enjoys hiking, fishing, and playing fútbol with other men in the village.

However, Rafael is not like the others. He owns the largest house in La Loma, which he built by himself right after marrying Marina. The house has four rooms, a kitchen with tiled floors, a fully functional outdoor bathroom with an electric shower, and a spacious attic. In comparison, most other houses in this village consist of one dirt-floored room and one bed for the entire family to share. The relative prosperity Rafael has built up is not a matter of divine providence or good fortune. Rather, it is a result of hard work. Prior to his accident, Rafael would wake at 3 AM every morning, ride on horseback high up into the mountain fields, and work there until dusk. When he came back, he always spent time with his wife and children, playing games or watching an episode of Escalera al Cielo, a surprisingly popular Korean drama dubbed in Spanish.

“What are your hopes for your children?”

“I want them to be happy, and not have to work as hard as Marina and I have.” A smile lights up his face. “Well, at least I don’t have to worry about one of them.”

I chuckle. He is referring to Paola, his 14-year-old daughter who happens to be the most academically gifted pupil in her age group in La Loma. Every year since primary school, Paola
has been designated the abandadera, an honor accorded to the best student in each grade level. Her report cards are consistently full of 19s and 20s, in subjects ranging from mathematics to language arts. In many ways, she reminds me of myself: an introspective, academically-inclined person. On the weekends, I often see her curled up in a chair, reading stories from a bilingual Spanish-English book a previous WorldTeach volunteer gave her. In contrast, her 12-year-old brother, Enrique, would much rather harvest yucca with a machete out in the fields than lift a pencil. From my experience in the classrooms, girls appear to be more academically inclined than boys, reflecting the fact that the gender gap in terms of years of schooling in Ecuador has nearly closed: in 2001, the figure for males was 7.5 years of school, and that of females was 7.1 years.

Although Rafael only completed 7th grade before he dropped out, he believes in the importance of education. In fact, his children have a private study room. He single-handedly built an entire computer shelf, study desk, bookshelf, and several wooden chairs to furnish the study room. Last year, using funds he diligently accumulated over the years, he bought his children a brand-new computer, a sleek copier/scanner/fax printer, and a computer video camera. He also enlisted a friend to set up a wireless Internet connection. The computer is now fully furnished, with high-speed internet and Skype capabilities. I was stunned the first time I saw my host siblings watching Shakira’s “Waka Waka” dance on YouTube. After all, who would have thought that in the middle of the Andean mountains Shakira’s hips would be gyrating on a flat-screen computer monitor? At Rafael’s request, I have helped Enrique and Paola utilize the Internet effectively, teaching them, for example, how to use a Google search and a Yahoo! e-mail account.

Rafael’s efforts to secure an education for his children might indeed make him a visionary. In the latest data collected by the World Bank in 2008, only 29 percent of all Ecuadorians have Internet access. In rural areas where most families do not even have phone service this figure is likely to be considerably lower. Unlike other men in La Loma who squander extra savings on liquor, Rafael instead invests in the future of his children. He routinely hosts WorldTeach volunteers such as me without any monetary compensation. Señora Catalina informs me that Rafael offers to host volunteers because he wants his children to improve their English skills and be exposed to, in her words, “the world beyond Ecuador.” His own knowledge about the world may be limited (e.g. he did not know that China and Japan were different countries prior to my arrival), but he nonetheless wants his children to grow up with a more expansive worldview.

Rafael seems to realize that even La Loma, perched high up in the mountains, is susceptible to external forces. Within Ecuador, market prices for limes, avocados, and coffee beans directly affect the livelihood of farmers in La Loma. On an international scale, the Ecuadorian economy is inextricably tied to that of the United States, since Ecuador uses the U.S. dollar as its currency. Multinational mining companies such as Ascendant Copper threaten to usurp vast tracts of land in Intag Valley, only to be temporarily subdued by massive village protests and court injunctions. Ascendant Copper is currently prohibited from mining in Intag, but this does not necessarily preclude other ambitious companies from moving into the area in the future. For better or worse, globalization has reached La Loma, and Rafael wants his children to be ready.

“But doesn’t Enrique want to just be like you, a farmer?”

14. For years, the Canadian mining company Ascendant Copper aggressively pushed for the development of a mine in Junín, a town in Intag Valley. A vigorous anti-mining campaign, spearheaded by the grassroots organization Defensa y Conservación Ecológica de Intag (www.decon.org) ensued. In September 2007, the government ordered Ascendant Copper to cease all operations in Intag, citing that “Ecuador’s mining concessions are in violation of Article 88 of the nation’s Constitution, which protects the affected communities’ right to be consulted prior to development activities being undertaken.” See “Ecuador: Government Shuts Down Ascendant Copper’s Junín Project, MiningWatch.” Changing public policy and mining practices to ensure the health of individuals, communities and ecosystems. http://www.miningwatch.ca/en/ecuador-government-shuts-down-ascendant-copper-s-junin-project (accessed October 24, 2010).
“He has an interest in animals. I want him to be a veterinarian, so he can still combine his interests in farm life with a professional occupation.”

Rafael wants Enrique to stay in the village when he grows up, and it seems he has succeeded in imparting to his son a love for the picturesque river valleys, scenic cloud forests, and the idyllic pastoral landscape. However, if Enrique is to become a professional end up breaking the family apart? Which is more important: one’s family or one’s career? At what cost should education be pursued? Certainly, I do not have the answers, but these are some of the questions one must ask when considering the role of the community in shaping education in Ecuador’s rural areas.

* * *

The music starts. I feel a rush of adrenaline...this is it. Almost reflexively, my body moves in sync with the lively music. The crowd erupts in cheers. I turn around, facing my students. Sitting in the second row I see Miguel, one of my 6th grade students.

I think about his brother, Alejandro, and wonder if he, too, is cheering in the audience. Two weeks ago, after my afternoon class, I had a chat with Alejandro.

Alejandro: A Student’s Dilemma

Alejandro and I are sitting in the front yard of his house. A 16-year-old, Alejandro is enrolled in my afternoon English class. He is wearing a blue faux Abercrombie & Fitch tee shirt, frayed blue jeans, and muddied work boots. His eyes are cast into the distance, fixed on the outlines of the distant hills. I suppose he didn’t expect me to trek all the way down to his house, located at the very bottom of a steep dirt path overrun by prickly bushes and gnarled roots.

With a tattered yellow washcloth in her hand, Ximena, Alejandro’s mom, gives me an encouraging look through the kitchen window. There is a gleam of hope in her tired eyes that I will be able to get through to her son. She is busy scrubbing grease stains off a frying pan; her husband is sitting on a bench at the kitchen table with a bottle of beer in his hand. Two of Alejandro’s younger brothers, Miguel and José, wave hello to me from atop a coffee tree in the valley below. Perhaps they wonder what brings me to their house, but are too engrossed at the moment with their imaginative game.

With the front door closed and the children off in the distance, Alejandro eventually breaks our silence.

“Why are you here?” he asks. The tone of his voice is neither angry nor accusatory, but rather flat. He glances at me quickly in the eye with a nervous smile, only to look off in the distance again.

“I’m just wondering why you aren’t going to class,” I respond, as nonchalantly as possible. “And not just my class...why aren’t you attending your regular classes?” Alejandro is enrolled in 10th grade, attending the secondary school in Cuellaje, a 40-minute trek down the hill from La Loma.

He looks at me expressionless, realizing that’s the reason I have come to talk to him. Two days ago, Señora Catalina, one of the teachers at the primary school in La Loma, decided to talk to me about the home lives of the children in the community. She expressed her concern about Alejandro, who apparently had stopped attending secondary school. Having been his primary school teacher, Catalina was worried by Alejandro’s errant behavior. She had told me that Alejandro had always been a quiet, amiable student who was “not like the other boys.” He kept to himself. She suspected that perhaps Alejandro’s father, a man of “forceful character,” may be coercing Alejandro to work with him in the fields instead of allowing him to attend school.

Such a parental demand would not be uncommon; many men in the village often embark on weeklong trips deep into the mountains to prepare new tracts of land for cattle grazing. In order to earn some money, many adolescent boys accompany their fathers and other men in the village on such excursions. Although Alejandro had been absent for several of my afternoon classes, I was not aware that he had also stopped attending his regular classes. Previously invited to his home for lunch by Ximena, I knew where Alejandro lived, and offered to pay him a visit to determine what was actually going on.

“I don’t know,” Alejandro replies mechanically to my question.

“What do you mean you don’t know?” I give him a few seconds to respond, but he is still looking away. “Is it that school is too hard? Or,” I add teasingly, “perhaps you’re distracted by a certain girl in class?”

He laughs at my joke, his face lighting up. “No, no Chris, don’t be crazy.” I know that he knows that I am aware of his crush on another student in my afternoon English class. He pauses slightly, his expression suddenly serious. “I quit school because I’ve gotten zeros in several subjects.” There’s

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15. The grading system is on a 0-20 scale; 0 denoting failure, 20 denoting a perfect grade.
no point going back; I don’t learn anything in school anyway.” Although I have yet to bear witness to an actual class taught by an Ecuadorian, I believe Alejandro’s frustration with school may not be entirely unwarranted. In the words of education expert Carlos Quiroz Palacios, the Ecuadorian school is “a repressive, repetitive, empiricist pedagogical exercise, without creative, without constructive experimentation.”  

While his critique may be too harsh, there is perhaps some truth to it. My host siblings, for example, are regularly assigned “homework” which basically entails mindless regurgitation of class material. Students are often assigned projects where they simply copy diagrams and notes from the pages of their textbooks onto a larger sheet of paper, decorating the sheet with colorful pictures. The substandard quality of instruction possibly contributes to poor school attendance rates. Nationwide in Ecuador, only 67 percent of boys and 68 percent of girls attend secondary school, with figures for rural areas such as Intag Valley most likely even lower.

“What have you been doing instead then?”

“Working in the fields with my father.”

I am not surprised; Catalina was right. Perhaps, like many other adolescent males his age, he has already resigned himself to the life of an itinerant farmer, toiling from dawn to dusk harvesting yucca and coffee beans for a meager U.S. $7 a day.  

Perhaps he doesn’t dare to dream anymore. He knows that more likely than not he will end up struggling to raise a family of his own on the same soil tilled by his father, grandfather, and great-grandfather. Alejandro looks in my direction and continues. “I don’t care about school. All I want to do is to play fútbol.”

Having played on his team after classes myself, I can attest to Alejandro’s formidable soccer skills. Quite frankly, though, I am sick of the ubiquitous “I’m too cool for school” mentality among adolescent boys here. Every afternoon, my meticulously planned lessons are often disastrously interrupted by boys who not only refuse to go to my class, but who bang on the door of the classroom in order to entice the few remaining boys in my class to join them outside for a pick-up game of fútbol.

“But even soccer players need to be educated,” I respond. If nothing else, I want to impart a lasting impression on the importance of education to my students during my short stint as a teacher this summer. “You’re so close to finishing high school. It would be a shame if you didn’t get your diploma.”

“I don’t care about school,” he reiterates.

“Well, do you want to be a farmer in the future?”

“I don’t know.” Judging from the tone of his voice though, I can tell that his heart is not set on being a farmer. “If you could do anything in the world, what would you be then?” My question seems to catch Alejandro off guard.

After a long pause he admits, “I want to be a writer.”

“That’s awesome!” I say enthusiastically, imagining Alejandro as a writer one day. Whenever I see him around La Loma he is carrying a small notepad, jotting down notes in Spanish. Alejandro is an introvert, preferring to listen to others instead of being at the center of attention. I advise him: “If you want to be a writer, you need to go back to school.”

Just then his father, a large, sturdy man, appears at the doorway, slightly tipsy. Alejandro becomes visibly tense and clams up. From what Catalina has told me, his dad, unlike Rafael, places no importance on education for his 10 children, at least not beyond mastering basic computation, reading, and writing skills. I extend a hand towards his father. We shake hands while I introduce myself as this year’s WorldTeach volunteer. He says nothing, glances coldly at his son, and swaggers back into the house. Ximena quickly closes the door behind him and nods in our direction.

I am taken aback by his father’s demeanor but then try to put myself in his shoes. He is trying to support his wife and eight children on a meager salary working on other people’s fields. Unlike Rafael, he has no time to ponder his children’s futures. Instead, his day-to-day priority is scraping together enough money to put food on the table. I can only conclude that his
The Teachers: A Dynamic Duo

I am about to head back to my host family’s house for lunch when Señora Mariella pulls me aside. “Chris, come have a snack with Señora Catalina and me before you leave?” Pleasantly surprised, I agree, and follow her into the casita (little house) located directly across from the main building of the school. Sitting on a wooden stool behind the kitchen counter, I watch Señora Mariella meticulously prepare three portions of bread and Coca-Cola, a meal fondly referred to as almuerzo de trabajadores (worker’s lunch). Her black curly hair bounces up and down to the reggaetón playing on the radio; her eyes are cheerful and radiant.

This is where Señora Mariella resides during the week. Furnished simply with bare essentials, the three-room casita (kitchenette, a bedroom, and an indoor bathroom) is her home away from home. On the orange walls of the living room hang the scribbled drawings of her first grade students: a butterfly, a horse grazing on grass, a boy climbing up an avocado tree.

Every week, Señora Mariella leaves behind her husband and teenage son in Ibarra (a bustling city four hours away by bus) to work primarily with the youngest pupils (grades 1-3) in the rural areas of the Imbabura province of Ecuador. The majority of teachers here are from Ibarra,20 where there is a prominent national teaching school. Given the dearth of qualified teachers in rural communities, the Ecuadorian government compels aspiring teachers to work for two years in rural communities before being officially granted their teaching licenses.21 Señora Mariella has already satisfied this requirement, yet nevertheless chooses to stay. She tells me she is fond of this community, that she is on a first-name basis with nearly all the parents of her students.

Señora Catalina arrives, a bunch of freshly picked mandarinas and limas in her arms. A sturdy, robust woman, she is the full-time teacher of the school, responsible for teaching grades 4-7. As such, she teaches everything from the natural sciences to fine arts. She is unique in that she is 45 years old and unmarried; almost all women in the village are married by the age of 20, oftentimes even younger. She once quipped, “Who needs children? The kids at the school are my children.”

She wanted to teach children from a young age, inspired by the dynamic way a teacher had taught her in 2nd grade. Born and raised in Cuellaje, Catalina decided to return to Intag after receiving her teaching license from an education institute in the city. Upon graduation, her peers at the teaching institute in Otavalo applied for jobs in the cities, but she wanted none of that and instead wanted to return home and see her family. On a typical day, Catalina spends her mornings teaching, and her afternoons running a butcher shop in order to supplement her meager teacher’s salary. In her free time, she bounces in and out of families’ homes, talking with parents and checking on students’ home lives.

Although they come from radically different backgrounds, the two teachers are more than colleagues. They are very good friends, their friendship reinforced on a daily basis. After all, they are the only ones responsible for educating more than 60 children in a remote area. In a sense, they are thrown together to ensure that primary education is implemented high up in the mountains.

There are structural forces at play that make teaching in the two teachers are more than colleagues. They are very good friends, their friendship reinforced on a daily basis. After all, they are the only ones responsible for educating more than 60 children in a remote area. In a sense, they are thrown together to ensure that primary education is implemented high up in the mountains.

There are structural forces at play that make teaching in
rural communities particularly challenging. In rural areas, there exists a “core-periphery pattern of schooling” in which the government first establishes schools in larger towns (e.g. Cuellaje) and then in “isolated parish hamlets” (e.g. La Loma). Because of this, schools in small villages tend to lag behind those in larger towns in terms of funding, implementation of new policies, and provision of materials. There are also logistical difficulties: it is difficult and time-consuming to transfer bulks of books, pencils, and other school supplies from the cities to La Loma. Señora Catalina and Señora Mariella often pick up supplies whenever they visit the cities on the weekends, spending their own money if necessary.

The two teachers are behind the kitchenette counter, slicing the mandarinas to serve along with the food Señora Mariella already prepared. There is a stack of textbooks on the counter. Curious, I pick up the first one in the stack, perusing its pages.

The textbooks used in class are designed and distributed by the government, written only with urban audiences in mind (e.g. students who live in the capital city of Quito). For example, there are references to “supermercados” (supermarkets), even though they are non-existent in La Loma. My host sister’s English book, Our World Through English, is a joint collaboration between Ecuador’s Education Ministry and the British Council, an organization that indirectly serves the interests of the British government. Instead of depictions of agrarian life (farmers, horses, pigs), images of things not found in La Loma such as cars, grocery stores, and indoor bathrooms appear on page after page. As the Ecuadorian academic Rivera Pizarro puts it, “the hegemony of the metropolis is reflected in the education system.” There is a misguided assumption that children all across Ecuador, regardless of their background, will process and understand the textbooks the same way.

The teachers are still preparing lunch. I put the textbook back on the counter, and look through the window of the casita at a group of my students busy climbing a tree. I wonder: Do the children actually learn in school? If so, what are they learning?

Given enough willpower and funding, the education system in La Loma could be better structured in a way that still presents the basic tenets of arithmetic, reading, and writing, but taught in a manner that makes it immediately relevant to students. As Kevin Lucas, an academic who has explored rural education in Ecuador, states, “the practical mathematical skills that are required to make wise economic decisions regarding the operation of a successful agricultural household are not taught at the escuela [school].” He suggests that students learn how to “make informed decisions about what crops to plant by calculating expected crop yields, input prices, an anticipated market prices” instead of learning how to “format a business letter.”

But since the curriculum has not been revamped, the two teachers restructure and add to lessons provided in the books. For example, as a means of teaching history to students, the teachers have brought students to local Incan excavation sites where they have engaged in hands-on archaeological digs.

Finally, the two teachers arrive at the kitchen counter, placing plates of bread and cups of refreshingly sweet Coca-Cola on the countertop. Señora Mariella initiates the conversation.

“Chris, how have the visits to the students’ homes been going?” Throughout the summer, I have been graciously invited over by my students’ parents as a means of becoming more personally acquainted with each family in La Loma.

“Excellent,” I reply, half-munching on an empanada.

“That’s good.” Señora Mariella smiles, pleased that her plan to introduce me to each family has been succeeding.

Señora Catalina introduces a different topic. “Chris, are you aware of the future prospects of the girls in your class?”
“No...I guess not.” I hesitate, wondering if there was something I should have known.

Señora Catalina informs me that if recent trends were any indication, many of the secondary school girls I teach in my afternoon class will not be able to stay in La Loma because there is not enough land to raise new families. The few who do stay will inevitably conform to the culture of _machismo_, the counterpart of _machismo_ that embodies the concepts of “virginity, chastity, honor and shame, the ability to suffer, and willingness to serve.” In many families, the woman never sits at the meal with her husband or children, instead eating her meal silently in the kitchen, hidden from view. Women are expected to faithfully carry out the traditional roles of childrearing, cooking, and doing laundry, as well as to help out in the fields if called upon by the men.

However, the majority of young women will likely end up in one of three scenarios: working as a domestic servant to a wealthy household in Quito or Guayaquil, working as a prostitute in the cities, or working in a flower-harvesting plant. Ecuador’s flower industry has been “one of the first types of paid off-farm employment offered to women and the only employment offered to women in [large] numbers.” There is the perception among overseers that women “work more efficiently in the detail-oriented, careful work required of flower tasks,” and others speculate that women are willing to work for less money than men. Whatever the reason, women are gravitating away from education and instead finding themselves in less-than-desirable predicaments.

Just last year one of my students, Rafaela, was almost sent by her parents to work in Quito as a domestic servant. A scout had visited La Loma, targeted the homes of teenage girls, and promised their parents that their daughters would earn U.S. $300 per month in the city, even though domestic workers in Latin America only earn up to 40.7 percent of the average income found in urban areas. Tipped off by one of her students of what was about to happen to Rafaela, Señora Catalina immediately accosted Rafaela’s parents, pleading with them to reconsider their decision. Her parents, albeit reluctantly, gave in.

Señora Mariella passes the dishes of fruit around. I peel the skin of the _mandarina_ mechanically, shocked by what happened to Rafaela. I had held her parents in high regard, and could not believe that they subjected their daughter to all of this. In their eyes, was Rafaela just an economic asset waiting to be exploited?

Throughout lunch, as the two teachers continue to share with me the individual stories of my students, I sit silently, processing the information. I am disturbed by the anecdotes. At the same time, I think to myself: How many teachers meet with their students after class? How many teachers go to their homes, and talk with their parents? The answer: only teachers who care.

In a way, Señora Catalina and Señora Mariella embody the heart and soul of the community – a pair of activist teachers who go above and beyond their prescribed teaching duties. At school, they are not only teachers, but also the students’ mentors and friends. As educators, they undoubtedly share the same mindset harbored by parents like Rafael: that education is not only an end in and of itself, but a means to offer future generations a better life in the future. They are also acutely cognizant of the _laissez-faire _attitudes of many parents towards education. By patiently listening to contending voices and continuously assessing ever-changing realities, the two teachers bond the community together. They realize that Enrique’s home life, for example, is much more stable than that of Alejandro. They do their best to foster a non-judgmental, safe learning environment each day in their classrooms.

* * *

_The triumphant chorus of the song repeats itself one last time. I listen to the lyrics, contentedly humming along:_

**Unidos!**  
(United!)

**Seremos grandes**  
(We will be big)

**Seremos fuertes**  
(We will be strong)

**Somos un pueblo**  
(We are a people)

**Bandera de la libertad**  
(Freedom flag)

My heart beats faster. Never in my life have I been overcome with such an intense feeling of camaraderie and community. Perhaps it is the booming music with its proud, defiant lyrics, or the clapping, whistling, and cheering of the crowd as the children and I complete the last of our dance moves. With the end of the last beat of the song, the children and I all jump up together as one entity, ending our choreography with a bang.

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31. Ibid.
A People, United

Here in La Loma, primary-age children study together with Señora Catalina and Señora Mariella in the same school, the adults work side by side in the same fields, and families all attend the same mass at the Cuellaje church every Sunday. Each day at the primary school, the two teachers artfully balance the realities of their students’ home lives, the expectations of the Ecuadorian government, and their own desire to see the children learn. Some parents in the community view school as a place to keep children busy and out of the trouble during the day, but others, such as Rafael, view education as playing an indispensable role in preparing children for the future. When parents in the community once told Señora Catalina that all they wanted was that their children learn basic reading, writing, and arithmetic and nothing else, she responded, “No, that is not education. That’s only a basic part of life. But to teach is to [convey] values, to [convey] respect.” Education, as she sees it, serves to develop not only a student’s intellectual faculties, but also to foster moral and ethical development.

34. Field notes, June 28, 2010.
Note: Names have been changed in this piece.

It may be easy to dwell on the shortcomings of the La Loma school and of the public education system in Andean villages. However, there are positive developments to consider as well. Currently in Intag Valley, the government is refurbishing all the primary and secondary schools, paving the concrete floors with tile, installing air conditioners in the classrooms, and furnishing each classroom with new whiteboards and chalkboards. Señora Catalina tells me that it will soon be La Loma’s turn: the run-down government-issued desks will be replaced, and the dirt floors of the two classrooms will be tiled. The day before I left La Loma, I saw a horse with a bulky, strange-looking package strapped on its back. Coming closer, I smiled: the horse was carrying two computers to be installed in Señora Mariella’s casita, donated by the regional government.
Her Story:
The Struggles and Characteristics of the Kilimanjaro Woman

Tess Raser ’12

An Inability to Know

“He went to live with another woman but then would come back here to take money and spend it on alcohol. Sometimes he would threaten to kill me,” Mama Grace says to me in Swahili as her wrinkled, worn hands gently dip a shirt in and out of a soapy bucket. Mama Grace, 52, spent her life selling the vegetables she grew on a small plot of land for a bit of money, taking care of her children, and letting her now-deceased husband take everything from her at his convenience.

Her story is not unique for Tanzanian women. In the Kilimanjaro region women bear the brunt of work: They have to take care of their animals and crops, clean the home, cook for the family, and pay school fees for their children, all the while subservient to their husbands and every other man in their lives. Tanzanian women in this region think of themselves not just as wife and mother, but also as producer, cultivator and laborer.1

During my 10-week stay at the Women’s Education and Economic Centre (WEECE) in Moshi, 2 I interviewed 25 women who were, in one way or another, receiving WEECE assistance. These interviews were different from the numerous interviews I had done for my work on the Justice newspaper, a Brandeis University student publication. Instead of interviewing people in a setting such as Einstein’s Coffee Shop, I interviewed them in their own homes. During these interviews I was accompanied by a translator.3 Even though none of the women had enough time to sit down for a proper interview, I learned about the complexity of their lives.

Speaking to me while taking care of their children and/or tending to the chores of their households, I noticed the many similarities these women shared. None of the women, for example, legally owned their own property. Most did not have an education past the American equivalent of 4th grade. This while their brothers had been afforded the luxury of finishing school. And perhaps more importantly, many of the women I interviewed had experienced domestic violence, acts they attributed to faults of their own.

It was in the spirit of diversity and openness to other cultures that I arrived in Tanzania. Raised in a very liberal home in Chicago, my childhood included exposure to every ethnicity one could imagine. I have celebrated Christmas a week after December 25th with my Serbian Orthodox friend; I have performed traditional Indian dances with my Indian friend; and I have learned tai chi from my elderly Chinese neighbor. When I came to Tanzania I assumed I would be able to get to know these women. What I found instead was that getting to know Tanzanian women was not as easy as getting to know my Chinese neighbor or my Serbian friend.

After the first interviews and giving my first few lessons on women’s rights to the students in the vocational school, I felt confused and even angry about the status of women in this region. I knew that the Tanzanian constitution “prohibits discrimination on the grounds of sex...and consolidating laws

3. For my methodology I interviewed women with a translator, recorded their stories on a voice recorder and also took notes. I also took photographs of their homes and families.
and jurisprudence regarding property rights.” Yet I learned that Tanzanian laws are not being followed in creating gender equity. In the Kilimanjaro region of Tanzania where there is a traditional division of labor by sex and in marriage relationships, traditional values almost always will trump the existing laws. Upholding traditions was a form of Tanzanian resistance to colonization.

Life for a woman living in the Kilimanjaro region is one of challenges and struggles that I have not experienced in my own life. In this paper I present four portraits: Mama Grace reveals how the residue of Chagga tradition preserves gender roles; Jenny demonstrates the role of education in maintaining gender norms; Mama Tiffania shows a woman’s role in the family; and the final portrait of a Maasai village illustrates the role of men in the struggles women face. Each portrait reveals how traditionalism, education and domestic violence help shape the nature of the Kilimanjaro woman.

Mama Grace: The Residue of Chagga Tradition

Mama Grace picks up a piece of cloth, dips it in her soapy bucket, wrings it, scrubs it, and sets it in another bucket of water. She repeats this again and again. Her behavior as she washes her clothes reminds me of when I do laundry in my dorm. When I do a mundane task such as this, I listen to my IPod, read the New York Times or zone out. Unlike Mama Grace I do not, while washing socks, tell a life story full of abuse and inequality. I watch her toil, pounding and scrubbing the fabrics of her daily life, washing and rinsing. This is Mama Grace’s story.

Mama Grace was born in the Chagga village of Marangu, just outside of Moshi, and she completed only primary education. She didn’t have much money, so she did what most women in that position do: she got married. “Economically, politically and symbolically,” marriage has always been a part of initiation into womanhood for Chagga women. Women could not obtain property without a husband because of the patrilineal society; marriage made this possible.

Mama Grace and her husband Alex had two boys and five girls; one of those girls died. The family spent some time in Arusha, a large city, before returning to Moshi.

“We stayed in peace, until one day Alex and his parents started bringing conflict,” Grace tells me.

Alex left Grace and went to live with another woman, and Grace had to take care of the children and the land. Divorce is frowned upon, thus Grace began to build a new home on the land while still married to Alex. One day, he returned and said he was back to live with Grace. Chagga households were traditionally polygamous before Christian missionaries came and taught people to live monogamously. Each wife in a polygamous union was given her own homestead with her own field that she was to tend. She normally brought her own cattle and goats, as women still do as part of a dowry, that she could control. The land was ultimately in a man’s control, but because he had many wives, his focus was not always on one specific wife and he felt power. I find irony in this and have trouble believing that polygamy could be more liberating for women. Grace had no control in this situation.

“His family told him to take the house from me and the children and to leave me again,” Grace explains.

Alex began to beat Grace and take the food she prepared for the children for himself. He constantly referred to Grace as a witch and continued to beat her.

Based on the World Health Organization Study of Women’s Health and Domestic Violence Against Women, 32.9 percent of Tanzanian women living in an urban setting were physically abused and 46.7 percent of women living in a rural community in Tanzania, very similar to the Kilimanjaro region, were physically abused. Women have an increased likelihood of being abused if they are unable to bear children, have more than five children, have less than a primary level of education, if they have a partner who does not contribute financially, or if their partner has other partners. Also, according to the study, these percentages are high because of the “strict patriarchal family structure.”

5. “Economic and Property Rights of Women,” Annual Review of Population Law, 110 (1990): accessed October 20, 2010. 6. Mama is how a Tanzanian woman is addressed if she is older or in a position of authority. Mama can be attached to a last name, but it is typically attached to a first name.
After enduring abuse, Grace went to the head of Alex’s home village. She expected to be helped, but instead the leader sided with Alex’s story and believed his refusal. This was because Grace, as a woman, was only a part of the household and Alex was seen as the head of that household. Also, Alex’s actions were probably seen as typical for how a man should run his household.

Soon after, Alex became an alcoholic. The alcoholism heightened his abusive tendencies. I knew alcoholism was a problem in Tanzania. I felt the pervasiveness of it with every step I took to work in the morning, my sandals stepping on small, empty plastic packets of Konyagi alcohol.

When Alex was at the peak of his alcohol problem, one year after Grace tried to report him, he surrounded the home with firewood and threatened to burn down the house. Grace was inside with the children. She talked him out of burning down the modest home she had built but was ultimately powerless as a woman. The chief of the village would not listen to her.

Alex even tried to sell the house and told Grace he would leave her and the children with nothing. At this point I ask Grace when she went to WEECE for help. I had seen several WEECE counseling sessions, and my supervisor had explained that Grace had received counseling. WEECE provides legal support to women in situations such as Grace’s that typically would not be disputed in a court. Grace went to WEECE during the time Alex tried to sell their home. Grace explained that the situation turned into an ongoing battle between the legal advisors and WEECE, who argued that the land was a family plot. In the midst of these battles, Grace’s husband became sick with liver disease caused by alcohol. He died soon after.

Grace’s sigh of relief as she says this makes me think that nothing would have changed had Alex lived. I think that Grace also feels that way. Perhaps Grace’s skepticism is because the law is not exactly on her side. The Marriage Act of 1971 is a declaration against spousal battery, but it does not prohibit it nor does it state any punishment. This is based on traditional customs, which aid in subordinating women. When husbands abuse their wives, it is seen as punishment the women deserve. Since traditional customs stand directly in the way of the legal system and political progression, for Grace, the death of her husband was beneficial for her future.

Grace is now part of a village community bank at WEECE where she saves money to keep the small bit of land she has, and to take care of her children and grandchildren.

Many of the women in Grace’s village community bank (or “VICOBAs”) have dealt with abuse similar to hers. In a study conducted in Moshi, 21 percent of the women reported being physically abused in the past 12 months. The majority of those women (48 percent) were Chagga. This number is similar to the percentage of abuse reported in the women’s lifetimes, which suggests that women stay with their partners after being abused. The study also suggested that women who were taking non-traditional roles (working for a bit of money), received more abuse. “Men’s increased contributions to the household are associated with decreased violence against their wives.” Grace had no choice but to try to provide an income for her family in Alex’s absence, but this could have been threatening to his masculinity.

In the past few years, Chagga women like Grace have been garnering more domestic power in their agricultural and household economic ventures. Traditionally, Chagga women are expected to care for the crops and provide sustenance in the family while the men provide substantial monetary support. These roles are becoming more intertwined in Tanzania’s current economy. Much of the crops Grace grows are for her family, but she also is selling them to make an income for her family. As more and more women develop their own economic unions like VICOBAs, men feel increasingly emasculated. These men escalate their “expressions of power” through the use of violence.

“Chagga men always do like that,” Grace says.

Negative aspects of Chagga tradition are residual in Grace’s life and in the lives of many women like her.

“Chagga men never care about the family. Only the women care for the fees, food, everything,” she tells me as she drapes the last of her laundry over the swinging clothing line.

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11. Village community banks are groups of women from similar areas. They share a metal box that they use as their bank. The small scale banking system is a way the women can achieve some financial independence without men. WEECE.org, accessed November 6, 2010, http://wecce.org/microloans_microfinance.html

12. A study approved by the Harvard School of Public Health; by the Kilimanjaro Christian Medical Centre Research and Ethical Clearance Committee, by the National Institute for Medical Research and the United Republic of Tanzania conducted in Moshi, “Gender Inequality and Intimate Partner Violence among Women in Moshi, Tanzania” International Family Planning Perspectives, 31(2005): accessed November 6, 2010.

Jenny: The Role of Education in Maintaining Gender Roles

My supervisor had mentioned once in passing that Jenny would be a great person to interview. Since Jenny and I had become friends, I thought I would interview her on the spur of the moment at a time when both of us were free. Our interview happened on a normal day after class. This was the only interview for which I did not need a translator.

“Sawa (OK) class. Now open Word and type a short story about a simba (lion),” I say to my class of girls. Before the students’ fingers even touch their keyboards, Jenny strolls in humming an unfamiliar tune and yells, “Put the computers away. We will go to sewing now.”

Jenny is a fantastic teacher, at times tough but still always laughing with her students. Her relationship to some students is that of friendship. I learned on my first day that she was once a student at WEECE’s vocational school for girls who could not go to “normal” school, due to economic reasons or family apathy toward education. However, I have yet to learn why. Jenny’s interruption piqued my interest. I admired her teaching abilities but did not understand where she received her skills. If she had attended a vocational school, there was no way she could have gone to a teacher’s college. Teacher’s college requires secondary schooling (or high school). I decide that today I would try to hear Jenny’s story.

“How did you end up at WEECE?” I ask her during the girls’ recess.

Jenny laughs the loud, cackling laugh that has become so familiar to me. After joking around and avoiding the question, Jenny looks me in the eye and her lips tighten up.

“My father was not good.” She laughs again, this time nervously. She then tells me her father decided to leave her family when she was just 14.

“He didn’t come one day again,” she says.

At the time, she was living in Marangu with her younger sister and older brother. Jenny’s mother could not afford to pay for her school fees. Jenny had to stop attending school. She struggled to help her mother tend to the animals and crops for several years until she met her husband, nephew to the director of WEECE. Soon after, Jenny became a student there.

She excelled at sewing. Jenny adorns herself in beautifully self-made clothes sewn from scraps from the vocational school. Her outfits are always brightly colored, with traditional Tanzanian flair. To me, someone who habitually wears jeans and muted colors, Jenny’s clothing seems gaudy. They embody her curves just as much as they embody who Jenny really is: sometimes loud and creative but also deeply traditional.

‟Dada, do you want to know how I learned English? From you. People like you who come here,” she says. I am puzzled. People like me are usually students from the west, who come here for a brief time to volunteer or go on safari. At WEECE, visiting teachers are encouraged to speak English all the time and to make sure the students are also speaking English. Jenny listens carefully to the visiting co-teachers and also strikes up conversations with them frequently.

Jenny’s English is not perfect since she is learning it from very temporary relationships. Every time she means to say “me too” or “me also” she says “even me.”

“Even me. I like this song so much.” Her English is impressive for someone who has not completed secondary school. Most Tanzanian women I have met in Moshi do not speak English. Chagga families believe that educated women are harder to control, and if the women are “out of control” they are not desirable for marriage. Older Chagga men and women believe that schooling contributes to a girl’s moral decline.

Schools in this area teach about “foreign things,” for instance, illustrating American ways of life through media such as literature and film. This is threatening to a patriarchal society dependent on maintaining tradition. I have studied feminism and issues with patriarchal systems in my own studies at Brandeis University.


better knowledge of these systems could change the status quo.16

In addition to its threat to tradition, education is simply too expensive for most, making English a privilege. Parents must pay school fees for their children each semester, whether their children go to a government or private school. During my time in Moshi, students had a monthlong break in order for their parents to save up enough money for the next term. Children also help out around the house and farms, which allows parents to focus on pulling together funds for school while their children do more chores.

Jenny tells me that she pays her younger sister’s school fees. Her sister is in secondary school, form six (or junior year of high school). She cares for Jenny’s young children and cooks for the family when she is not in school.

“I like so much to help because I got no opportunity to go to secondary school because the exam, but my father did not help me. He left. I don’t like something like that, so this time I will help my sister because I didn’t get opportunity,” Jenny says to me with her head held high. Aside from financial issues, Jenny tells me that she is doubtful that her father would even let her go to school, even if he paid for her brother. In the Kilimanjaro region, schooling is a way of maintaining the social differences between men and women. Girls traditionally stay home and help their mothers do house chores while their brothers are in school. Elders believe that this is positive, maintaining what they consider a dying culture. There has been more recent discourse from Chagga people that sees education for girls as positive for Chagga culture.17

Those in favor of girls’ education, such as younger college educated girls,18 argue that education furthers development for the Chagga people by giving girls job skills. Most educated girls, though, leave confining Chagga villages for larger cities where tribal tradition is much less apparent. This is why girls’ education is seen less in the more rural Kilimanjaro region than in urban areas. Jenny wants to change that.

“It is so important we have this school. It is giving the girls more voices than before,” Jenny says as she watches the students playing netball in the distance.

Mama Tiffania: A Woman’s Duty to Her Family

Mama Tiffania Kanjo’s skin is so dark I can barely see her eyes. Her smile, although a bit hidden, is clear if you look closely. It reminds me of a smile on a bronze statue. There is no change in color between her lips and her skin. When I first arrive at her gate, she hugs me and then leads me into her muddy plot of land. Her children and the neighbor’s children run around me in circles. We step into her home. Her living room has cement floors, wooden couches with a thin purple covering, and matching accent pillows that have embroidered roses. A holy cross hangs by her door. My living room at home in Chicago has hardwood floors and burgundy couches. Tiffania’s living room has dirt on the walls and floor but still seems clean in its emptiness. My living room, clean from the chemicals and machines used on it, feels more cluttered with bulky wooden furniture and shelves of large books. Her living room is not similar to mine at all, but I feel at home in it.

Before this interview, I had seen Tiffania at village community bank meetings, but my supervisor had told me that I was interviewing her regarding her reasons for legal counseling from WEECE. Tiffania starts by telling me her background.

She was born in the Kilimanjaro region as one of 10 children, seven of whom had died in childhood. In 2009, 61 of 1,000 children under the age of five died in Tanzania.19 A significant cause of these mortality rates is HIV and AIDS. Access to primary healthcare is the greatest factor. According to the World Bank, this includes lack of immunization, sanitation, and access to clean water and nutrition. Tiffania’s family did not have much money, and at best only had access to a medical dispensary (a small clinic that might have nurses).

Still, Tiffania was fortunate enough to attend primary and secondary school and to find a low-paying job at a hospital. She only worked for three years because her ultimate goal was to own property. As a woman, she could not do that on her own. The Village Land Act of 1999 prohibits the application of customary law if it denies women access to property ownership, but there is rarely implementation of the act, especially since it presumes spousal co-ownership.20

17. Stambach
Tiffania had a boyfriend at the time, Mussa, and the two of them decided to settle on a piece of land and build a house there. After construction finished, she decided to marry Mussa. The two lived happily until her elder sister and father came to visit and decided to stay. Tiffania and her husband had three children at this point.

Children are valued as loved ones, but they are also valued as economic assets.\(^{21}\) It is not unusual that Tiffania’s family felt that her home was for them. Mothers are often congratulated when their daughters are born “for bringing wealth into the home.” This is especially true of a family’s view toward the youngest daughter.

“The whole family used to come [to the house] and stay before I got married. But after the marriage they continued coming, but they saw the lifestyle changing,” Tiffania says to me in Swahili. Her elder sister then started fighting with Tiffania and her husband and claimed that the house belonged to her and the rest of the family because Tiffania had started building the home before she was married and belonged to a man and his family. I ask Tiffania if it was legal for her to build the home with her husband before they were married.

She tells me, “You can buy, but now you see the culture. The family thought it was impossible for the girl to buy the land. They thought that means it belongs to them.”

This is due, in part, to the tradition of dowry. This perpetuates the view of women as property who, in turn, cannot own their own property.\(^{22}\) Since daughters are ultimately sold from their homes, families feel as if a daughter – and her possessions – belongs to the family until she is given to her husband.

Tiffania tells me that the family kept trying to chase Mussa, the children and her out of their home.

At this point, our interview is interrupted by a bit of chaos: her husband has just come in quietly and sat down and the roosters are now crowing louder than ever. I cannot imagine the conflict between Tiffania and her family in addition to this much daily chaos. I nervously click my pen because of the surrounding disorder.

WEECE helped Tiffania write a letter to her sister explaining that her plot was a family plot, and that she could not leave it, but her family only responded negatively.

“I respect God in my life, which is to obey my parents, my relatives and other people. I am the witness to my marriage. So I did nothing wrong,” says Tiffania, who believes strongly in Chagga traditions.

Her sister has stopped visiting and so have her parents.

“I wanted to bring harmony. I wish my sister a good health,” Tiffania wrote in the letter. Now, her younger brother, only 23 years old, feels that he is in charge of Tiffania as the man in the family. He has been trying to live in Tiffania’s home and threatens to kill her husband regularly. When Tiffania tells me this, I look around the modest house and am baffled by all the sadness that hangs over it. At the small VICOBVA meetings, Tiffania had never shown signs of her dark cloud that is just down the dirt path from WEECE. At the meetings she smiles, puts her small earnings in the metal box, and briefly talks about her plans to someday buy a car so that it will be easier to carry her vegetables.

A Maasai Village: Gender Roles Among the Maasai

I spent most of my time with the Chagga in Tanzania. However, the Maasai are also an integral part of the Kilimanjaro region. The Maasai live in rural communities outside of the cities. They dress in traditional robes and are self-sufficient. The Chagga do not practice traditionally, live in cities, and usually look down upon the Maasai. Today, the Maasai represent reminders of a “primitive” lifestyle that is embarrassing to non-Maasai Tanzanians. The Maasai maintain traditions they brought down to Tanzania and Kenya from northern Africa in the 17th century.\(^{23}\) To fully understand the characteristics of the majority of women in the Kilimanjaro region, one must look at the Maasai.


\(^{22}\) United Nations Human Settlements Programme

“Welcome to our home. Feel comfortable. Take pictures. Be free,” says a watchman of the boma. His red shuka hangs on him in an almost regal fashion, as he grips his spear at his side. Another man walks over and greets us as well. One of the men pets my loose, curly hair, tied back in a bun, and says, “Your skin is a little like ours, but your hair is strange. Not like a mzungu but not like an mbongo. My father can offer your father 10 cows for marriage.”

“I am taken off guard. My father would most certainly not accept cows for anything. He, like myself, grew up in Chicago and knows little about caring for cows.

This is not the first time that a man in Tanzania has offered me livestock in exchange for my hand in marriage, but this man pet my head in a way an elementary school bully would give another child a noogie. Members of the Chagga with whom I am living would not usually touch me. I typically would be more offended, but I have been trying to keep an open mind throughout my time here.

Like the Chagga, marriages are started with the offering of a dowry. After that initial step, a large part of the marriage is about pleasing the wife’s father. The husband presents him with alcohol at the ceremony and numerous other gifts. Maasai traditionally believe that marriage symbolizes “the transfer of a woman as a possession from her father who reared her, to her husband who rules her.”

Another large part of these weddings is the focus on the wife’s beauty. Her husband and her mother-in-law both take turns shaving her head and adornning her in jewelry and vivid fabrics. I have seen these festooned women on the glossy pages of National Geographic before but never in person.

My two American friends with whom I am traveling and I are led into the center of the circle surrounded by mud huts. The men are chatting away at us in clear English. The women are not chatting. The women emerge from the huts in bright colors and huge, circular beaded collars. They smile at us but do not say much. They just stand in a line smiling at us. This feels like the beauty pageants I loathe for objectifying women.

The men invite me to join in the dance, but I continue to snap photographs in awe at the performance, adjusting my lens frequently to capture every small leap. I can only resist for so long. They finally manage to drag me into the dance circle. Wearing a grey hoodie bearing the name of my high school soccer team, I feel uneasy amidst the beautiful women adorned in bright fabrics and beads.

When the dancing stops, two men tour us around the boma. The women who follow behind them are quiet.

At one point these women did have a stronger voice. During the 19th century, Maasai women had an active voice in trade with neighboring tribes and in local political groups. Early European travelers in the 1880s wrote about the freedom of the Maasai women that they did not see in their own cultures. Maasai women chatted in the travelers’ camps and had open sexual relationships with multiple men — both European and Maasai. Still, Maasai society was patriarchal. Gender roles became more distinct when Tanzania was colonized by Great Britain. Maasai men began to think it was inappropriate for the women to engage in meetings with the British, since they were all men. British colonizers also expressed their “concerns” over women not remaining in domestic domains. Westernization aided in further oppressing the Maasai women. This boma is an exemplar of their oppression.

A tall, slender woman accompanies the Maasai men. Each hut is home to a different wife and her children. The leader of the boma rotates to each hut each night based on which wife he feels like sleeping with. The Maasai are traditionally polygamous. The number of wives ranges from two to 16. This stems from a tradition that yearns for “quantity over quality” as a sign of success. For example, it does not matter how strong or healthy a cow is in Maasai tradition. A Maasai guardsman I met in town once told me that Maasai would rather have 10 cows than one strong healthy cow. In Tanzania, polygamy is legal with the consent of the first wife. Most Maasai women are married off at a young age for the dowry her family will receive. She does not have a choice whether to be involved in a polygamous relationship.

24. A boma is a plot of land with several huts that the Maasai live in. Each hut is home to a different wife. The huts are small and round and made from mud.

25. A shuka is a traditional red robe Maasai men wear.

26. Mbongo is a term for a white person or westerner. It literally translates to a traveler.

27. Mzungu is a term for a native Tanzanian.

28. The Chagga are from the southern slopes of Mount Kilimanjaro. Lack of adequate farm land is forcing Chagga youth to seek work away from the kihamba (family homestead). Public show of affection through bodily contact between the sexes is considered highly inappropriate. Traditionally, men and women were socially segregated. http://www.everyculture.com/wc/Tajikistan-to-Zimbabwe/Chagga.html


As we sit down in a hut a woman grabs my hand to prevent me from bumping into walls in the blackness surrounding me. There is only one small window. They cannot have large windows because of the hyenas and large cats in the area that pose a threat. The huts are dark and hot on the inside but are sturdily built of mud and cow dung by the women who inhabit them. The tour ends as the sun begins to disappear in the vast savannah.

“Please look at what the women made. We need some money,” one of the men tells us. We are then escorted around the *boma* to tables covered in beaded jewelry, belts, bags and other Maasai crafts. The women stand behind the adorned tables and just say, “Karibu” (welcome) over and over again. The women cook, clean, and build the homes, and they also make a product that provides an income for their family. In addition to these tasks, the women care for the cattle. The man will eat the best part of the meat if an animal is slaughtered. In addition to husbands being more valued than wives, wives are also said to be less important to Maasai men than their cattle. For instance, if a family is asked how many children they have, girls are not included in that response. Another typical question would be how many cows a family owns. Cows and sons are accounted for, while women are not.32 Observing the gentle treatment of cows in Maasai land and dehumanizing treatment of women is ironic for me. My college-educated, outspoken mother is always ranting about the mistreatment of cows in our American farming industry. Maasai women are rarely educated, work domestically, are quiet and most certainly do not have cattle mistreatment to rant about.

The Maasai women are there as part of the show but nothing more. The sun finally disappears and we must return to our campsite. I buy a necklace and get back into our car. Staring out the window, I see the men calling after us, thanking us in English, animated and alive. The women, blending into the scenery like a watercolor painting, simply smile and wave goodbye, their hands calloused and worn.

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The Dance Circle: A Hopeful Symbol of Friendship

Women's singing voices floated over the WEECE gates. Upon entering, my eyes widened to see a line of women, most of whom I had interviewed, singing and dancing in circles, all wrapped in *kangas* (brightly patterned fabrics). The song the women sang as they followed each other in a circle was one I had heard many times here, and had become part of the soundtrack to my experience. In English, the lyrics are: “The mother, like a mother animal, carries everything on her back. She carries the work, the children, the house, the heart, me. Everything.” In the Kilimanjaro region of Tanzania women do, in fact, carry everything.

I felt a part of something that had recently seemed so distant and unfamiliar. Singing a song that made my heart pound with emotion put me in a position where I thought I could really connect with the women I was trying to help. The song’s meaning at this point still had to be explained to me, and I was trying to understand the women. There is a sense of camaraderie between these women that is beautiful. At WEECE, in their path to empowerment, they are uniting with women so that they can help each other. Part of me believes that these women know how essential they are to their society and that the hardships they face are unjust. Another part of me believes that the Kilimanjaro women will never live without these struggles.

I am reminded of that feeling as I look around the circle. I see Tiffania’s premature wrinkles set under her dark eyes; I see Jenny’s chipped nails. The work is more than physical.

Women in the Kilimanjaro region live in a society in which their voices are seldom heard as much as they are in my own country, and their rights are not always upheld. In my own society, women face similar issues, such as abuse. Yet, as soon I began conducting my interviews, it struck me how common women's struggles were here in the Kilimanjaro region of Tanzania.

In the dance circle, I did not feel these struggles.

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This city has three social classes, the upper class, the middle class, and then there is the nothing class. That’s us – the Zabaleen.

– Adham, Garbage Dreams

The smell of burning plastic chokes me; I stop breathing and waver side to side for a few moments before continuing to stumble my way forward. Is it rude to cover my nose at someone’s work and livelihood? *Garbage Dreams,* the documentary I had seen countless times before, is now three-dimensional; a full reality. Egypt’s boiling hot sun beats down on my head while the putrid smell of animal feces, rotting garbage, and burning plastic seeps into my taste buds. The sight of bustling people, goats and donkeys, and unfinished towering brick buildings makes me dizzy. I am smack in the center of Garbage City: Manshiet Nasser, in Cairo. Home to the world’s largest community of informal garbage collectors: the Zabaleen.

The Zabaleen, Arabic for “Garbage People,” are a Coptic Christian community, constituting six informal settlements on Cairo’s periphery. The largest of these settlements, Manshiet Nasser, consists of more than 45,000 people.

Garbage collection is a familiar concept in both the first and the third world. Living on the bottom floor of a dorm my sophomore year of college, I daily heard the collection and compression of waste. But the distinction between the licensed garbage collectors who made a ruckus outside my window on the Brandeis campus each morning and informal garbage collectors such as the Zabaleen is how the collectors perceive the waste they collect. According to the scholar Daniel T. Sicul, who studied waste management in West Java, Indonesia, there are two types of garbage collectors: those who “treat waste as waste and are employed to perform the service of removing and disposing it, and those who treat waste essentially as an ore: a source from which valuable materials can be extracted.” The Zabaleen, according to Sicul, are the latter. They are scavengers, who pay for the right to collect waste in order to reuse and redistribute it.

The Zabaleen are the largest group of informal garbage collectors in the world. But such scavenger communities exist in many other megacities, including the Muslim minority in Kolkata, India; the Roma gypsies in Romania; and the Bangladeshis and members of the Muslim minority in Delhi. Besides seeing waste as a resource, these scavenger communities share other distinct commonalities. Most notably, the occupation at once necessitates and bestows low status. The Zabaleen scavengers are a marginalized and low status community in Egypt for two distinct but undeniably interconnected reasons: their livelihood and their religion. I learned about both of these factors firsthand.

1. I spent the summer of 2009 working for the director of Garbage Dreams, a documentary film that follows the lives of three boys from the Manshiet Nasser settlement of the Zabaleen.
2. There are 120,000 Zabaleen dispersed throughout these six settlements. The Manshiet Nasser Settlement has doubled in size over the past 20 years.
5. Sicular 23.
In the summer of 2010, I worked at the Spirit of Youth Association, a small NGO that tries to reconcile this marginalization and empower the Zabaleen community through youth education and social aid. While working for the Spirit of Youth Association, I helped launch a Bill and Melinda Gates grant-funded project, Improving the Livelihoods of Garbage Collectors in Cairo through Organizing, Institutionalizing and Upgrading the Traditional Waste Sector, which sought to preserve the community’s livelihood as it becomes threatened by the implementation of foreign waste management companies in Cairo.

Why is the Zabaleen’s livelihood and community worth saving? What is so important about preserving this community? Walking down Naim Guindy Street in Manshiett Nasser,6 I observe that everyone seems to know each other. There is a sense of deep connection, of mutual responsibility. How can this be? What binds this community together? A host of factors explain the dynamics of the Zabaleen community. Here, I explore two: the role of the Coptic Church and the function of development programs in the Manshiett Nasser settlement. Both the church and the development programs provide a necessary linkage within the community in relation to the tension that exists with the majority Muslim population and the government that is trying to “clean up” and modernize the city. I will show how religious and economic discrimination simultaneously marginalize and reinforce the community dynamic. The social role of the Zabaleen is both a source of prejudice and of strength. It is within this duality that new development projects are paving the way for the Zabaleen’s next generation.

Prejudice and Strength in “Garbage City”

The authorities perceive the Zabaleen as “old fashioned.” But they didn’t come tell us “You need to modernize your ways.” It was all done behind our backs. So what now? This work is all we know.
– Laila, community social worker, Garbage Dreams

The Zabaleen community began its migration from the Assuit Governorate in Upper Egypt7 to Cairo throughout the first half of the 20th century. While in Assuit, the Coptic community worked as farm hands and pig breeders. To find more lucrative work, they migrated to Cairo, bringing their practice of pig breeding with them. Their religion and practice in agriculture in the Assuit Governorate made them the perfect group to adopt the practice of garbage collection in Cairo: their pigs could consume the organic waste collected. The use of pigs to consume organic waste was extremely effective. When feeding the organic waste to their pigs, the Zabaleen were able to recycle up to 80 percent of what they collected.

But in the spring of 2009 the Egyptian government decided to kill all of the country’s 300,000 pigs as a precaution for the impending swine flu epidemic. The New York Times reported that, “International agencies quickly criticized the authorities, saying that pigs were not spreading the illness.” But the Egyptian government proceeded to round up and massacre the pigs, disposing of them in mass garbage dumps outside the city. The government eventually conceded that the massacre of the pigs was not solely a response to a possible swine flu outbreak, but more an effort to “clean up” the Zabaleen, “to finally get them to live in sanitary conditions.”

The actions taken by the government resulted in a loss of livelihood for the Zabaleen community as well as a loss of identity. In a majority Muslim state where eating pork is haram (forbidden) the Zabaleen’s pigs set them apart as non-Muslim, a defining element they take pride in. Although the community fears what the government will do next, that fear keeps the Zabaleen close together in mutual aid when threatened by the government.

The extreme marginalization of the Coptic community is a relatively recent phenomenon. Egypt is more than 90 percent Muslim and less than 10 percent Coptic Christian.8 Coptic Christianity existed in Egypt centuries before the spread of Islam. Only in the 20th century has the Coptic Christian community been severely marginalized, as Islamic law and practice have taken hold.10 Throughout the first half of the 20th century, “Islamist influence was on the increase,” and violence and propaganda against the Copts increased dramatically. Ironically, this was not helped by the Arab Nationalism of Abdul Nasser, who in 1961 further alienated non-Arab Copts by indirectly causing the loss of 75 percent of their work and property.11 In fact, Nasser’s redistribution of the Coptic communities’ agrarian land was one of the factors that forced more Upper Egyptian Copts into cities and into the practice of garbage collection in Cairo.

As more and more Coptic Egyptians migrated from Upper Egypt to Cairo in search of a better livelihood in trash collection, Zabaleen settlements were frequently and forcefully relocated and split into new areas of Cairo as the city expanded and developed throughout the 20th century.

6. Main street in the Manshiett Nasser Zabaleen settlement
7. “Upper Egypt” is actually south because the Nile River flows from south to north – northern Egypt is considered “Lower Egypt” because it is the end of the Nile and vice versa

10. Up until the 20th century, Copts lived with dhimmi status under Islamic law where they lived in coexistence but paid a tax.
11. Imad Boles.
Today, the Zabaleen communities are separated into six different settlements, each focusing on the collection of waste in a certain area of Cairo.

Manshiett Nasser, the largest settlement, is framed by the Mokattam Hills. Carved into these stone hills are the seven chapels of the Saint Samaan Monastery, built in 1986. Unlike the other Zabaleen settlements, this religious site attracts a variety of tourists and Christian groups from Europe and the United States, while also providing the location of daily prayer each evening for the Zabaleen community.

Exposure provided by the Saint Samaan Monastery is one of the main reasons that most development projects and media coverage about the Zabaleen are focused on the Manshiett Nasser settlement. In fact, I first learned of the Zabaleen and the Spirit of Youth Association from Garbage Dreams, a documentary film that features three boys who attend the Recycling School, a project of the Spirit of Youth Association in Manshiett Nasser.

In the summer of 2009, I interned for the filmmaker of Garbage Dreams, Mai Iskander, as she began circulation of the film in film festivals throughout the United States and Europe. The film follows the three boys as they try to reconcile the difficulties the Zabaleen community face as the Egyptian government shifts the waste management system from the Zabaleen to European waste management companies. In the film a group of young Zabaleen men and women discuss how to deal with the loss of their livelihood. They decide to try to implement source separation, which involves convincing the people from whom they collect garbage to start separating their waste at the source to make it easier and more efficient for the Zabaleen to recycle.

Since Garbage Dreams was filmed between 2004 and 2008, source separation has become an even greater necessity – particularly following the pig culling in spring 2009. As a result of this draconian government measure, the Zabaleen lost half their income, and lost the ability to efficiently dispose of organic waste.

The Bill and Melinda Gates grant seeks to solve the major waste collection issue in Cairo, while preserving and developing the Zabaleen community.2 Arriving a month after the project was launched, I observed and aided in its development. I accompanied and worked with 30 young people between the ages of 20 and 30 from the Manshiett Nasser Zabaleen settlement as they made presentations on source separation. We traveled around Cairo to clubs, stores, schools, and cultural centers to make these presentations. In addition to accompanying the source separation team to presentations, I helped coordinate Garbage Dreams screenings in Cairo, using the film as a tool to convey what the Gates grant is trying to accomplish.

I was particularly fortunate to work with the source separation team. Being close in age to those in the team, I was able to relate to them on a social and personal level. I was able to compare my life as a young American woman to theirs as young Egyptians. Through these interactions I got a sense of not just how they interact with me but how they interact with each other and how they perceive their identities within the Zabaleen community and Cairo as a whole.

A “Baladi” Identity

We’re like one big family. Everyone here knows everyone. We watch out for one another. I live here. I belong here. I’m exactly like a fish that can’t live without my sea.

– Laila, Garbage Dreams

“Say Ba’ara Egypt, Ba’ara Egypt,” Ashraf insists as we sit down for our lunch break of foul and ayesh.14 I repeat in accordance with what he asks. The table of young men and women giggle as they dip their bread into the small metal bowls filled with foul. “We are from Ubber [Upper] Egypt,” Ashraf says, gesturing to the people sitting around the table. “You just said Cow Egypt.” The giggles continue. This is a typical joke they play on me while I work at the Spirit of Youth Association with the source separation team: needling me for my pronunciation of Arabic words. But this time I find it curious that they are mocking the name of the place where they are from.

Ashraf and the other young men and women at the table are part of the source separation team. These small jokes and other subtle signifiers are commonplace for the Zabaleen, who take subtle but active roles in defining themselves as different from the rest of the city of Cairo and its majority Muslim population. Many of the defining elements of their Upper Egyptian culture are preserved within this community. Upper Egyptians have deeper accents than Cairenes (people of Cairo). For example, when asking “What

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13. The five objectives of the Gates project are as follows: Integrate the Zabaleen into Cairo’s formal waste collection system. Strengthen the capacity of the Zabaleen communities to represent their own interests. Increase the capacities of the Zabaleen community to engage in successful recycling business activities, particularly through SMEs and NGOs. Achieving a city wide implementation of household waste source separation into two streams (organic and non-organic). Relocate Zabaleen recycling businesses to new industrial zones.
14. Foul is made from Egyptian fava beans and flat bread, similar to pita. Fava beans are filled with protein and sit like a brick in your stomach for most of the day. They fill a hungry Egyptian belly cheaply and for a long time.
“Are you Christian or Muslim?” Moussa asks as we dodge around hordes of people going to evening prayer at Saint Samaan Monastery.

I follow Moussa up the winding and littered road after work. Tired from squeezing around trucks filled with plastic yogurt cups and piles of cardboard paper, the question catches me off guard. “I’m not religious,” I respond uncomfortably. He stares back at me blankly. “You mean you don’t believe in anything?”

His question gives me pause. I stop to think about how I should respond. If there is one thing I have learned in my time in Cairo, it is that religion is of central importance to identity and community.

Growing up in New York City, religion played a binary role in my life. Throughout my childhood I trekked down the street to my mother’s synagogue twice a week for Hebrew School. Meanwhile, I celebrated Christmas and Easter with my father’s family. In social settings in the United States I rarely have to identify myself with either religious tradition, nor do I choose to. In contrast, mixing religious beliefs is unheard of in Egyptian society. In Egypt, identifying with a particular religion shapes how people relate to you. Still, I havent figured out how to explain my own religious background. So I turn to Moussa and simply respond, “No, I don’t believe in anything.”

Moussa looks at me like there is some kind of misunderstanding. Here in Egypt, the lines of religion are clearly marked. There is no room for mixing of religious worlds. But sometimes, religious differences are too difficult to explain. No place for my mixed family background.

Ironically, in Cairo, as in my upbringing, I straddle two religious worlds. I live in downtown Cairo18 where the adan – the call to prayer – reverberates throughout the city five times a day. Lines of men in galabiyyas19 crowd inside the mosques that are scattered in crevices and alleyways of the dilapidated city streets. In my first days in Cairo, the thing that struck me most was how publicly pious people are, that when I would step onto the overcrowded women’s train car I was often the only woman not wearing a hijab.20

17. Saint Samaan Monastery was built in 1986 and consists of seven chapels carved into natural caves in the Mokattam Hills. It is located directly above the Zabaleen neighborhood.
18. Downtown Cairo is one of the oldest areas of the city, and is featured in famous literature and films
19. A loose fitting dress mainly worn by older men
20. Islamic head scarf worn by women
But the religious atmosphere I experience while working with the Zabaleen has a different quality from where I live in downtown Cairo; lanterns inscribed with the imprints of Coptic saints sway precariously off half-built buildings, while men and women chat on the street with small crosses tattooed to their inner wrists. In Manshiett Nasser the adan is muffled by the sound of church bells. Women’s hair, often lightened by henna, is tied back in a loose bun or long braid. Similar to my experience, when one of these Coptic women steps onto a train car in downtown, her identity as non-Muslim stands out like a sore thumb. But within the confines of the Coptic community they have created in Manshiett Nasser, everyone knows and understands each other and everyone practices the same religious teachings.

Moussa and I duck under the archway marking the end of the dirt road of the Zabaleen neighborhood and the beginning of the newly paved road up to Saint Samaan Monastery; the crowd of people thickens. Moussa greets other young men he knows with a handshake and the customary kiss on each cheek. Turning to me he proclaims “All these boys are like my brothers.” Meanwhile, a group of young girls hold hands, weaving around us to run into girl’s church school, where two nuns are welcoming the girls one by one.

Saint Samaan Monastery feels like a haven after a day working in Garbage City. Although the pungent smell of rotting waste lingers, Saint Samaan Monastery is surprisingly well kept compared to the rundown and unfinished buildings that make up the Zabaleen neighborhood. Oddly pristine and intricate carvings of the Virgin Mary holding the baby Jesus decorate the outside dome of the main church.

It would be an ordinary sight were it not for the words inscribed around the holy figures in both Arabic and English. Framing a carving of Saint Samaan the Tanner is a biblical quote: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest....”21 I had visited the monastery a number of times before, but amidst the traffic of evening prayer, the purpose of the monastery took on a new level of importance. The area around the church reminds me of the park across the street from my apartment building in New York City. Men and women chat in groups about the day’s endeavors. Two young boys play pick-up soccer in the open parking lot. Within the Zabaleen neighborhood, men sit in cramped side streets puffing on shisha pipes and women bustle about doing their chores. But the monastery provides a space for people to socialize freely a step outside the chaos of Garbage City, and feel less like outsiders amongst a majority Muslim population.

Moussa and I finally arrive at the main church. Outside, an assemblage of people accumulates into a semicircle. As we make our way toward the expanding group, I catch a glimpse of a man in a black robe and skullcap with a long grey beard. He holds a walking stick, and a long silver chain with a cross rests just above his rounded belly. A man kneels in front of him, kissing his hand. Moussa turns to me with wide eyes and says, “That's Father Samaan.” His excitement catches me off guard. Religious leaders have never played important roles in my life. But Moussa seems to almost idolize this individual. Why is Father Samaan so important? Why do all these people surround him in such a way?

Father Samaan arrived at Mokkatam Hills in 1978, 10 years after the first Zabaleen were relocated to Manshiett Nasser. In a short documentary titled Father Samaan and Garbage City that features his work in the Zabaleen community, Father Samaan describes how “no one cared [about the Zabaleen] because they were doing a filthy task...the people were in need of the grace of Christ.”22 Father Samaan took on the mission of bringing religion to the Zabaleen. In 1986 Saint Samaan Monastery, honoring the Coptic Saint Samaan al-Kharaz, was built as a result of the efforts of Father Samaan. Father Samaan remains in the city as a head priest and administers many of the community’s major decisions.

After greeting the crowd and nodding politely, Father Samaan returns to the inside of the church. The semi-circle breaks down as a number of people follow behind to proceed with the evening prayer; Moussa and I continue to the top of the hill where I can watch the crowds of people surrounding the monastery. At that moment, I am reminded of how strange it must be for Moussa to hear that I am not religious. For his community, it seems that philanthropic efforts through religion have helped solidify and settle the Zabaleen for the first time in over a century.

A Settled Community

When I was young there were no schools here, I had to study from home on my own. We teach them new ways of thinking so they can be empowered unlike their parents.

– Laila (referencing the Recycling School), Garbage Dreams

Ezzat sits reclined and fixed in his chair, cigarette dangling flimsily between his fingers. The round table separating us is covered with a range of Egyptian-style foods – flat bread, baked and fried chicken, tahini, pickled vegetables and molokhia.23 Surrounding us sit members of his family: his wife and mother on the master bed, his daughter animatedly

21. Matthew 11:28

22. Film: Fr. Samaan and Garbage City. A 10-minute YouTube documentary about his endeavors in Garbage City.

23. A slimy soup-like dish prepared with jute leaves and chicken broth
sitting in a chair to the left of me, and the son and daughter of his first cousins sitting snugly on the couch beside me. They smile widely as I attempt to politely stuff my belly with the remainder of boiled chicken that sits dully on the metal plate in front of me. As I nod in recognition at the surrounding relatives, Ezzat takes notice of the staring crowd and nonchalantly comments, “We like to live as relatives around each other; as a close community.”

Smack in the center of the garbage collection settlement of Manshiet Nasser is the home of Mr. Ezzat Naim Guindy, the director and founder of the Spirit of Youth Association, where I sit one Sunday for lunch after work. As Ezzat and I chat about the founding and struggles of the organization, the floor vibrates from the buzz beneath us as boys shift chairs and chat in the Recycling School directly below us.

Ezzat, one of the first Zabaleen to receive a college degree, established the Recycling School in 2000, and the Spirit of Youth Association in March of 2004, mobilizing 35 young men and women of the garbage collectors community who wished to serve their community and families. The Spirit of Youth Association has a mission to empower “the children and youths of the community to learn and earn and to improve their environment, as well as to strengthen their capacities to effectively advocate for their causes.”

As we finish lunch that early evening, his family files in and out of the room, clearing the table of food. Between drags of a newly lit cigarette, Ezzat tells the story of how he began his own education. “My father wanted me to work as a garbage collector since an early age, to help collect and guard the donkey cart when we go to the city to collect garbage. But my mother insisted that I apply to governmental schools. My father was so mad that my mother applied for me to go to school. But by the end of the year I was studying so hard. By the time I was 14 years old I started to do his financial records – I was very clever in mathematics so I kept his financial situation working well. So that’s why he was so happy and let me continue my education.”

Ezzat’s educational experience is very different from mine. My parents never fought over whether or not I could go to school. It was always expected that I would go to university. Despite the vast amount of money and support my parents have put into my education, I have yet to use the skills I have learned from my schooling to aid my parents’ livelihood – education has always been for my individual betterment. As I finish my university education, I notice how increasingly different my parents interests and mine have become. In contrast, Ezzat’s mother’s persistence in a notoriously patriarchal society, and her foresight to facilitate and support the academic success of her son, have proven overwhelmingly beneficial for her family and the Zabaleen community as a whole.

It is safe to say that the Spirit of Youth Association represents a culmination of Ezzat’s academic and personal experiences as a child in the Garbage City. By having the opportunity to get a proper education, he was able to apply his work to help the family and community to which he felt devoted. Similarly, the Recycling School targets boys aged nine to 19 who have dropped out of government schools – or who never enrolled in schools at all – because their parents expect them to help with the collecting and sorting of waste.

The Recycling School is the only one of its kind in Egypt. Its intention is to empower the boys by teaching them skills that would contribute to the Zabaleen community as a whole.

The Recycling School curriculum is designed around empty brand name shampoo bottles recovered by the learners. The boys bring the plastic containers to the school and fill out a form showing how many bottles they have retrieved.

This type of learning is called the Montessori Method of Education. Founded by Mariella Montessori in the early 1900’s, the method is described as an “aid to life” rather than a formal education. Presently, this type of education “prepares students to succeed in a world where technology is changing the way [they] live at a very rapid pace, and general life skills are far more valuable than mastery of an outdated academic curriculum.”

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24. From the English translation of the Spirit of Youth Association website.
26. These conversations and interviews were conducted on both July 11th, when he invited me to dinner with his family before going to watch the World Cup Final at the Saint Samaan Monastery, and during a more formal session at his office on July 29th.
27. From the English translation of the Spirit of Youth Association website.
Before I arrived in Egypt, my plan was to teach English at the Recycling School. While this is not a formal part of the Recycling School curriculum, English class has now become commonplace at the school. In the past few years the Zabaleen have received exposure to the outside world because of their status as a marginalized community that attracts both western Christian groups and environmental activists. It is not unusual to see tourists or church groups wandering around the neighborhood. Much like myself, many volunteers come to the Recycling School to try to “help out.” This often takes the form of teaching English. When I visited the school while working at the Spirit of Youth Association, it was common to see a young man or woman in loose fitting clothing sitting with a couple of young boys teaching art or English.

As a westerner who had also been “inspired” to come to the Recycling School, it was strange to see others doing the same. I often wondered what kind of long-term impact this exposure would have on the boys at the Recycling School. Unlike those of Ezzat’s generation, through volunteers like me these boys have been subject to unprecedented exposure from the outside world. While most of these boys don’t end up learning much from their sporadic English lessons, some catch on quite quickly, and become very attached to their temporary English teachers. These types of experiences will challenge the next generation of Zabaleen.

In January 2010 Ezzat, a representative of an earlier generation, was named one of 22 Synergos Arab World Social Innovators. His education and his initiative to support and develop his community have sent him around the world. He travels to Europe, the United Kingdom and the United States attending conferences and networking. But Ezzat speaks nonchalantly of his successes. I ask him what he thinks of his experiences abroad. The table now cleared of food, he stubs his cigarette in the ashtray. Sighing briefly he responds: “Y’know, I’m going to London this coming Wednesday to make a presentation. They asked me if I wanted to extend my trip for a few days, but yani I told them I wanted to make the round trip in one day. I’m one of those who’s happiest when I’m home.”

**Generational Transitions**

*I can only hope that with time comes change. Something needs to happen. I can’t keep living like this.*

– Adham, *Garbage Dreams*

“I’m moving out of my parents’ home,” Ashraf proclaims one afternoon, in between slides during a practice for the English source separation presentation. “They don’t want me to work for the Association. They just want me to work in collecting the garbage.” This is unheard for a 22-year-old in this community, unless he is getting married. But Ashraf’s decision to leave his parents’ home to work solely for the Spirit of Youth Association represents a beginning of a distinct transition in the Zabaleen settlement.

Although the Zabaleen community has been brought closer together by the church and by marginalization by the Egyptian government, these influences have also precipitated an unprecedented transition in the lifestyles of the next generation of the Zabaleen. Through outside exposure from the building of the Saint Samaan Monastery and development projects like the Spirit of Youth Association, the Zabaleen no longer live their lives as an insular Coptic Christian community of scavengers. Young individuals involved in NGOs are constantly exposed to the outside world, leaving them thirsty for more. Unlike Ezzat’s generation, which continues to find the most comfort within their own community, those of the next generation, such as Ashraf and Adham, will change the face and culture of the Manshieett Nasser settlement.

What I have learned of this community pertains primarily to the life of its young men. The Recycling School is an all-boys school. Although some Spirit of Youth Association projects are directed towards women, my relationships with these women were limited and insubstantial. Due to my own difficulties with the Arabic language I communicated mainly with young people who went to the Recycling School and who had the linguistic knowledge to interact freely with foreigners, and these were mostly men.

Various projects and NGOs support young women in the Manshieett Nasser settlement. Most prominently, the Association for the Protection of the Environment funds a young woman’s income-generating craft school, where

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29. A vocalized pause denoting “like,” very commonly used in colloquial Egyptian speech.
women “learn and earn” through making recycled paper and fabrics. Their voices in relation to the next generation are essential to an understanding of how the Zabaleen community is developing and changing.

Since my return to the United States, the Bill and Melinda Gates grant has faced a number of obstacles from both inside and outside the community. Within the community, Father Samaan has taken a stance against the grant, proclaiming that the Spirit of Youth Association has stolen all the money from the community. On top of this, the government has discouraged and even threatened the Spirit of Youth Association from pursuing the project any further. Without support from the church, the Zabaleen will never support the changes proposed by the grant. Furthermore, without support from the government, the Zabaleen will never be completely integrated into the formal waste management system. The persistent resistance to change from both within and outside the community could lead to the eventual demise of the Zabaleen as a whole.

But perhaps hope lies in the next generation. Through effective development projects such as the Recycling School, young men and women from within the community are learning how to simultaneously maintain cultural identity and develop their community in a way that will, hopefully, withstand opposition.

My experience with the Zabaleen community was always full of adventure. Whether trooping around Cairo making presentations with the source separation team or sitting at countless dinners of boiled chicken, tahini and molokhia, I am forever grateful to the Zabaleen of the Spirit of Youth Association for accepting me, at least temporarily, as a member of their community.

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