

THE GAMBIA

**RESPONSE TO THE QUESTIONNAIRE ON
IMPLEMENTATION OF THE BEIJING PLATFORM FOR
ACTION (1995)**

AND

**THE OUTCOME OF THE TWENTY-THIRD SPECIAL SESSION
OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY (2000)**

BACKGROUND

Gambian women presently constitute half the population of the country. The majority of Gambian women are rural, and are engaged in agricultural production. In agriculture, women are generally involved with Food Production, horticultural production; and women farmers raise and manage most of the small ruminants and rural poultry.

Women are also engaged in fisheries as fish off-loaders and fish processors. In forestry, women are engaged in planting seedlings and woodlots.

In health, maternal mortality rates remain unacceptably high, fertility levels high, although declining. Antenatal care and immunization levels are very high (details in report). Other health related issues confronting women, include infertility, early marriage, boy-child preference, harmful traditional practices and inadequate representation of women in decision-making.

As far as education goes, significant progress has been registered in the key areas of enrolment and retention. However, much room remains for improvement in terms of quality.

In the non formal sub-sector, factors such as heavy work load of women, lack of labour saving devices, and poor attitude of men towards women's literacy continue to be major constraints.

Due to the foregoing, women's access to employment is limited in terms of getting employed in the first place, staying there and making it to the top. Thus making it difficult for women to get out of the vicious circle of poverty.

Women are generally involved in the informal sector, a domain erroneously not generally considered worthy of legislation or monetization.

Increasingly, Gambian women are taking up their rightful positions in all spheres of Media Development. Women are no longer perceive receivers of messages, but active participants in the whole process of information delivery.

THE PURPOSE OF THIS REPORT

The purpose of this report is to provide a brief analytical overview of The Gambia's experiences in the implementation of the platform for action and the outcome of the twenty-third Special Session of the General Assembly.

COUNTRY PROFILE

Physical Features

The Gambia is a small State in West Africa with a land area of 10,698 square kilometers, varying in width between 42 kilometers near the mouth of the river to 24 kilometers further upstream and stretching about 480 kilometers in length. The country is divided into half by the River Gambia, which runs the entire length of the country from the Futa Jallon Highlands in the Republic of Guinea. It is bounded on the North, South and East by Senegal and to the West by the Atlantic Ocean.

Population

According to the 2003 Population Census preliminary results, the population of the Gambia is estimated to be 1.4 million. The annual growth rate is 2.8% and the density per square kilometer is 128, one of the highest in Africa. Three quarters of the population is rural. Women constitute 51 per cent of the population. Currently, the crude birth rate is 46.2 per thousand though dropping is still high. Life expectancy at birth is low at 55 years overall, and 54 years and 57 years for males and females respectively.

Economy

With a per capital Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of US\$ 360 (2003), The Gambia is amongst the poorest countries in the World, ranked 155th out of 177, in UNDP's Human Development Index for 2004.

Agriculture is the mainstay of the economy, accounting for 27 percent GDP in real terms (2001), followed by Tourism, 12 percent and services.

Political System

The Gambia became independent in 1965 and practices multi-party democracy. It has a parliamentary system of Government. The second Republic came into being in 1997 following a two-year transition from military rule in 1994-1996.

PART ONE: Overview of Achievements on Equality

The mission statement for gender and development in The Gambia is to:

- Foster the effective and efficient integration of women in the Gambia's socio-economic development process as equal partners and beneficiaries with men, and;
- Ensure that meaningful socio-economic transformation for all is attained by reducing, to an acceptable level, the ills of poverty, inequality, injustice and dependency for all Gambians.

Following the fourth World Women's Conference held in Beijing, China, Gambian women are poised to take control of their destiny and in the process, create a new and developed Gambia in partnership with the men of the country.

In order to highlight the strides made by the women, it is important to compare the provisions in 1970 the Republican Constitution to those of 1997. For the first time in the constitutional history of the Gambia the term discrimination was extended to include discrimination based on "Gender". Also for the first time a child born outside the Gambia to a Gambian mother is entitled to Gambian citizenship whether or not the father is Gambian - The 1997 Constitution also provided for rights that did exist in the 1970 Constitution. These include:-

- That marriage shall be based on the consent of both parties;
- That women shall be accorded full and equal dignity with men;
- Women shall have the right to equal treatment with men; including equal opportunities in political, economic, and social activities.

However, the major draw back is the fact that the 1997 Constitution recognizes and preserves the application of customary law and practice which, to some extent, is discriminatory against women. Regardless of the foregoing, the rights provided for under the 1997 Constitution are indeed an achievement.

Apart from the 1997 Constitution, in the area of policy, a National policy for the advancement of Gambian women has been prepared and adopted by the National Assembly. The justification for the policy is to strengthen the way that women issues are dealt with at National level, and how the coordination of the different strategies geared towards promoting the advancement of women are managed at all levels. The initiative thus offered an attempt to bridge the gaps in addressing the concerns of women and offers a framework within which Gambian women can move out of inequality and deprivation, towards greater participation in the national development process. Following the development of the policy, an action plan has been developed in the form of programmes and technical cooperation programmes. Also, the Government, in collaboration with DFID has implemented a £1 million grant project to mainstream poverty and gender. At the sector level much work is in progress.

However, overall implementation of the policy is constrained by lack of a level playing ground, limited human resources, a weak institutional framework and scarcity of programme resources.

Significant progress has been registered in the development of an institutional framework to address women's issues. A Department of State for Women's Affairs has been created, with the Vice President of the Republic being the Secretary of State for this portfolio. The number of "elected" Women Councillors in the country has been increased from 30 to 45, with each constituency having a Councillor.

At the sectoral levels significant achievements have been made in Agriculture, Education and Health.

In Agriculture, women produce 40 percent of food consumed in the household. In groundnuts they produce 24 percent of crop, up from 23 percent in 1995. They own 36 percent of cattle, 52 percent sheep and 70 percent goats.

As far as education is concerned, the ratio of girls to boys in primary education has increased from 47.9 percent in 1993 to 65% in (1998) and the ratio of girls to boys in Lower Secondary education from 26 percent in 1993 to 37 percent in 1996.

In health, The Gambia has one of the best health care systems in the sub-region. For instance, our immunization coverage is praised as one of the best and evidence exists to show that over 90 percent of pregnant women are seen and checked by a trained health worker at least 3 times during pregnancy. HIV 2 is on the decline from 1.1 – 0.9 and HIV/AIDS 1 has increased from 0.6 – 1.2 and Doctor to population ratio has improved significantly with the introduction of nearly 150 Cuban Doctors.

However, a review of key development indicators reveals a mixed picture. Population size has increased from 1.1 million in 1993 to 1.4 million in 2003, but population growth rate has declined from 4.2% to 2.8% in 2003. On the economic front, real GDP per capita has increased from USD309 in 1993 to USD350 in 2003. The single most influential factor behind the high level of overall poverty is low productivity and income. On poverty, the poverty head count ratio (% of population) was 69 percent in 1998, overall poverty (% population) with 60 percent in 1998 while food poor (% population) was 37 percent in 1998. In the light of the foregoing, poverty in The Gambia has persisted despite concerted Government efforts to fight it. The persistence of and inequalities in poverty is linked to low productivity in Agriculture, high unemployment or – underemployment, weak redistribute policies, especially in public social services, and weak support mechanisms for the poorest households.

However, it is critical to take due cognizance of the fact that at the heart of the empowerment process is the need for an effective and well funded and coordinated Information Education and Communication programme. An initiative that will ultimately grow from IEC to behaviour change communication. Because in the final analysis, it is when there is this progression from Awareness creation to Attitude and behaviour change that we will see the impact of these efforts on the lives of the people.

Among the most important challenges currently impeding the issue of equality and women's empowerment remain those of improving economic and human development, reducing poverty,

increasing the literacy rate for particularly adult women, and improving the weak resource redistribution mechanisms.

PART TWO: Progress Review of the Implementation of the Critical Areas of Concern

WOMEN AND POVERTY

Government's commitment to poverty alleviation is demonstrated by its launching of a Strategy for Poverty Reduction (SPA I) in 1994. After five years of implementation, Government conceived SPA II which was developed through a highly consultative process culminating in a PRSP document submitted at a donors roundtable conference in Geneva and received remarkable pledges of support from international donors. The long-term goal of SPA II is to eradicate poverty by significantly increasing National income through stable economic growth and reducing income and non-income inequalities through specific poverty reduction priority interventions. SPA II sets out five broad program areas to address poverty in the medium term:

- (i) Creating an enabling environment for promoting economic growth and poverty reduction;
- (ii) Enhancing the productive capacity and social protection of the poor and vulnerable;
- (iii) Improving coverage of the basic social services as reflected in the millennium development goals;
- (iv) Build capacity of local communities and civil society organization to play an active role in the process of poverty reduction; and,
- (v) Mainstreaming cross – cutting development issues, gender, population, nutrition, environment and HIV/AIDS in policies and programmes.

The Gambia Government's commitment to the fight against poverty draws strength from the fact that it is one of the poorest countries in the World with a per capita of about US\$ 350 (National Household Survey report) and a rating of 155 out of 175 countries (UNDP Human Development Index). It is estimated that 55 percent of households and 69 percent of population are poor (NHSR 1998) as compared to 37 percent and 51 percent respectively (1993 Household Economic Survey). Thus poverty is on the increase rather than declining.

The condition of women in the Gambia is worse than their male counterpart, as they lag behind in all spheres of development. For instance, against the human development index of 0.350 for the whole country, the gender related development index is 0.277 (UNDP Human Development Report 1998).

However, following Beijing, the Government and its partners initiated several credit programmes to boost the productive capacity of women. Some notable ones among these are the Social Development Fund (SDF), Women In Development, NGO Fund, Gambia Women Finance Association (GAWFA) Rural Finance and Community Initiative Project (RFCIP), Peri-Urban Project, NGOs such as Action Aid The Gambia (AATG), Association of Gambian Entrepreneurs (AGE) amongst others. These institutions together are only able to meet 55 percent of the credit needs of women in the Gambia.

According to a study commissioned by the Fight Against Social and Economic Exclusion Project (FASE) on women's access to savings and credit, the impact of credit on quality of life and entrepreneurial development, showed that 81.5 percent of Kafos and 87.6 percent individuals

who received credit did make profit. Of the profit made the study found that 75.2 percent was ploughed back to expand the business venture, 8.2 percent spent on acquiring more credit and 4.6 percent on personal business.

The proliferation of informal neighbourhood short-term savings by way of pooling cash together and paying to members by ballot is an indication of women aspiration to improve their lot on their own initiation. This system is locally known as “Osusu”.

WOMEN AND HEALTH

The Government of The Gambia has been vigorously pursuing policies that seek to address the health, nutrition and demographic needs of the population. There has always been a conscious effort to strike a balance between population growth and socio-economic development.

A National Population Programme was formulated for implementation during the period 1997-2000. A health policy “Improving Quality and Access” 1994-2000 was developed and used to guide health care delivery.

A Health Action Plan for the Gambia was developed in March 1996, with a focus on adolescent health as one of five sub-programmes. The health sector policies currently being implemented include National Family Planning, National HIV/AIDS, Nutrition and Drug (Pharmaceutical). A new National Health Policy “Changing for Good” was completed in September 2001. The policy aims at providing quality health care services within an enabling environment, delivered by appropriately and adequately trained, skilled and motivated workers at all levels of care. A key component of this policy is the essential care package, which aims at addressing the common causes of morbidity and mortality, especially for women, children and the under served.

The public sector health service is delivered at three levels – primary, secondary and tertiary. The number of Government hospitals increased from two to four over the decade with a fifth one nearing completion. There are forty Health centers at the secondary level, and a network of 492 primary health posts spread across the country making the Gambia as one of the countries with the most accessible health care support system. Public Health services is complemented by 34 private and NGO clinics. The health policy focuses on 20 programme areas, including child health, reproductive health and nutrition.

The Department of State for Health and Social Welfare commissioned a National Maternal Mortality Survey in 1990. This study revealed a maternal mortality level of 1,050 per 100,000 live births nationally as compared to 730 per 100,000 in 2001 (MMS 2001).

A maternal mortality and contraceptive prevalence study was conducted in 2001. The results showed that contraceptive prevalence rate has increased from 12% in 1990 to 17.5%.

Contraceptive prevalence for modern methods has increased sharply from 6.7% in 1990 to 13.4% in 2001, a 50% increase.

This study also looked into “assistance during delivery”. The results show that 52% of births in the country take place in medical facilities, the majority of which in rural areas are health centers (34%) and only 18% in hospital. 14% of births in the community are attended by a trained birth attendant. The survey examined data on antenatal care and tetanus toxoid immunization. It indicates that over 97% of women who have ever been pregnant visited a clinic at least once for a pregnancy – related check-up during their first pregnancy. Almost all of them were seen by a doctor (8%) and nurse or midwife (92%). For over 70% of the last pregnancies, a mother made four or more antenatal care visits While 23% made between one and three visits.

In 1997, a Safe Motherhood Needs Assessment was conducted by the Department of State for Health. The purpose of the study was to provide policy-makers, health care managers and providers with baseline information necessary for the formulation and implementation of a safe motherhood programme. This study revealed that access to reproductive health services was satisfactory, with 76.35 of clients traveling for less than one hour to the clinic, walking. About 75% of the health facilities were found to be providing integrated services. The result also indicates 89.8% of health facilities provided some form of family planning services. Timely referral and access to next higher level of care is critical. The study showed 90% of health facilities are located within 40km-60km from the referral point.

STIs and HIV/AIDS

HIV/AIDS is one of the most serious threats to the lives of people in The Gambia. The first confirmed case of HIV/AIDS in The Gambia was seen in May 1986. In 1980s -1990s, HIV 2 was the predominant strain, but HIV 1 has overtaken it in the country. The current estimated prevalence of HIV 1 is 1.2% and HIV 2 is 0.9% of the population. It is estimated that 15,000 people are currently (2004) living with the virus. The most common route of transmission of HIV in The Gambia is unprotected heterosexual intercourse (85%). By contrast, the segment of the populace hardest hit by HIV/AIDS is 15-49 year age bracket. The national response to HIV/AIDS is gaining momentum on all fronts, but the knowledge – behaviour gap remains a cause of concern.

In 1998, a study on the prevalence of three sexually transmissible infections – herpes simplex type 2, chlamydia and syphilis, was conducted among young adults in a rural district (Western Division). According to the study, only 20% women and 53% men attended a clinic with a potential STI symptom, and 58% of women and 27% men had not spoken to anyone, including friends or relatives about their problem. Twenty-three percent of the subjects were identified as needing treatment either because of laboratory evidence or active/untreated syphilis or herpes. The results showed that 23% of women and 5% of men had herpes simplex; 10% women and 2% men had an indication of syphilis infection; and 7% women and 1% men had clinical evidence of a combination of infections. Herpes and syphilis are both ulcerative STIs, which are known to be important cofactors in the transmission of HIV. Treatment for STIs is an integral part of general medical care provided at all secondary and tertiary levels of care in the country. Men and women have equal access to care across the country, but men’s health care seeking behavior seems to be better, compared to that of women.

Child malnutrition and micro-nutrient deficiency among women of child-bearing age are highly prevalent in The Gambia. A nationwide survey showed that 73% of the pregnant women were moderately anemic with 5% severely anemic. The national health policy places emphasis on women and child nutrition. Increasing access to food and improving the nutritional status of women has continued to attract the attention of the Government, NGOs and their partners. The formulation of a Nutrition Policy and the creation of a National Nutrition Agency (NaNA) to facilitate coordination of nutrition programmes in the country are developments that took place in the past five (5) years. Iron supplementation for women is provided through the national maternal and child health services throughout the country. Vitamin A supplementation for postpartum mothers (birth to 8 weeks) is also provided countrywide. The Baby Friendly Community Initiative, a community-based model for nutrition education, promotes positive infant feeding practices. Government departments involved in nutrition promotion and feeding programmes include Agricultural Services, Health Services, Education and Community development. The Gambia Food and Nutrition Association (GAFNA) and a host of other NGOs are engaged in nutrition promotion, including food processing.

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Violence against women take various forms, such as physical abuse, rape, sexual harassment, female genital mutilation, early child marriage, domestic violence, girl child abuse, violence against street children. Violence of all sorts leaves a long-term psychological effect on the victim and hence the need to curb it to enhance women's empowerment.

In The Gambia, Government, through the Department of Social Welfare and the law enforcement authorities, have continued efforts to support victims, enforce the existing laws and actively involve traditional institutions in the fight against all forms of violence.

At the NGO level, the foundation for Research on Women's Reproductive Health Productivity and Environment (BAFROW) and Gambia Committee on Traditional Practices (GAMCOTRAP) have developed programmes to address the vices of FGM and harmful traditional practices.

However, in spite of all the sensitization activities, FGM prevalence is still reported to be at 80 percent. What the intensive IEC efforts have achieved is an openness to discuss this hitherto sensitive issue at all levels of society.

The effects of these sensitization programmes can also be seen in the greater awareness of women in their equality as women as demonstrated in a most recent conference of Gambian Women where several women said they will not allow any man to batter them for whatever reason.

Addressing the plight of street children in The Gambia is on top of the agenda of the Department of Social Welfare.

To alleviate problems of street children, the Islamic Relief Agency – ISRA has a programme to take these children off the streets and put them back to school.

WOMEN AND THE ECONOMY

Despite the relative peace and stability in The Gambia, the country is one of the poorest in the World. An analysis of the women's socio-economic position must be viewed against the backdrop of the countries overall development and economic status.

The country's economy is mainly agrarian with over 70% of the population engaged in some form of agricultural activity. Although women are active participants of the agricultural sector, the products of their agricultural activities mostly go towards feeding the family and sales in the local markets for cash. They however play vital roles in diversifying the economy by being involved in petty trading, fisheries, crop and animal production.

The implications of poor export performance, inflation, structural adjustments and financial austerity measures, an male dominated sectors are evident in The Gambia. It is the women who subsidize main crop failure in many households in the rural economy and high unemployment in urban areas by supporting families with the limited income they receive from casual farm labour, gardening, petty trading and other activities.

The Government of The Gambia has recognised the role women play in the economy particularly at the micro level.

About 75% of the agricultural labour force is provided by women since Agriculture contributes about 27% of GDP, the role of women at the macro-economic level is of great importance. The present policies focus on empowering women in terms of resource opportunities such as land, credit and technology.

Income generating activities are being promoted through various skills and enterprise development schemes/projects or micro-finance institutions such as the National Association of Cooperative Credit Unions of the Gambia (NACCUG), Social Development Fund (SDF), Village Savings and Credit Associations (VISACA), Gambia Women Finance Association (GAWFA) the Community Skills Improvement Project (CSIP), Rural Finance and Community Initiatives Project (RECIP), the Fight Against Social Exclusion Project (FASE) and many others.

In The Gambia, Agriculture forms the basis for the livelihood of over 75 percent of the population. Women have played and continue to play vital roles in the process of agricultural development.

In the early 1980s, the involvement of women was primarily at subsistence level. They cultivated mainly upland and swamp, rice and vegetable crops mainly grown in the North Bank, Lower River, Upper River and Western Divisions. In the last two decades, significant progress has been made to increase the area under cultivation and productivity.

The introduction of irrigated rice production in the Central and Upper River Divisions enhanced double cropping and significantly increased the productivity of the crop. However, the success of the system attracted the participation of more men thus reducing women's access to production resources including land and production inputs. The women in this ecology especially those in

areas where there are no other rice ecologies moved to the periphery producing in fragmented smallholdings.

A tractor ploughing service was introduced in the 1980s particularly for women farmers in the Central and Upper River Divisions. The services reduced the drudgery involved in ploughing but gradually access to such services were limited and inefficient due to numerous factors including poor management of the scheme, defaults in loan repayment etc. In pursuance of new government policies on mechanization, the scheme was revitalized in 2001 with the provision of additional tractors and a new management system, which transferred supervisory mandate to divisional management committees chaired by the commissioners. The scheme was also expanded to cover the whole country. In 2003, over 100 tractors were injected into the system to improve access of the services by women. These efforts have been consolidated by the introduction of high yielding rice varieties. However, more work is expected in order to attain the desirable goals.

VEGETABLE CROPS

Women have continued to be the principal producers of vegetables for the home and local markets. Women in this industry can be categorized into individual and communal producers. The group or communal approach was introduced by the Department of Agriculture to easily reach many women with extension advice, using common gardens in which each woman has a number of beds to grow preferred vegetables. According to the 2002/2003, National Agricultural Sample Survey, 87,000 women operate in communal gardens. Both producer categories experienced water shortages thus reducing yields. Although many NGOs have intervened in this area, it is still considered a major constraint for the industry. The communal gardens have mostly good fences and production is generally conducted in line with recommended technologies. The production systems vary between individual and communal gardens. Through extension advises, women have increased their knowledge on various production techniques.

Generally, individual gardens are characterized by poor fencing and locally dug shallow wells and mixed cropping. Since such holdings have less access to extension advice, production is normally based on traditional practices.

Through donor assistance, communal market gardens have been established with high capital investments and operational costs. As result, the women have found it difficult to sustain the production system. As alluded earlier, although vegetable production has increased significantly over the last decade, the income gain by women does not commiserate with yield gains. Marketing has been regarded as a major problem of the industry. This problem is compounded by the increasing participation of large-scale growers who make it difficult for the women to access the hotel and export market.

Over production has had substantial impact on the economic gains of women in the sector. Consequently, the women earn low prices from their products and experience wastage due to poor storage facilities. Although the department of agriculture had introduced simple processing techniques, the adoption of most of these have not been sustained due to socio-economic factors.

A survey conducted in 1994 revealed that 35% of vegetable farmers cultivate in borrowed land most of whom live in the area.

FIELD CROPS

In the Gambia, women continue to dominate in rice cultivation in the upland and swamp ecologies. According to 2002/2003 NASS report, women produce 96.6% of the rice grown in the country in these two ecologies. The increasing participation of women in the production of cash crops is remarkable. The NASS report also revealed that in the 2002/2003 season, women cultivated 24% of the total land area grown to groundnuts. In the Upper River Division, women cultivated 80.8% of the total groundnut area.

Sesame production has also become an important crop for women in The Gambia. Sesame was introduced in the 1980s by Catholic Relief Service (CRS) but by 2003 the total hectareage put to this crop was 3,436 hectares with a total yield of 1,230 tons. CRS/The Gambia in partnership with NAWFA – National Association of Women Farmers are currently implementing a Development Activity. Proposal financed by the USAID which among other things assists in the United States Agency for International Development promotion of Sesame.

Women's role in crop production also includes the unenviable task of processing. The drudgery associated with the backbreaking tasks of cereal processing has continued to haunt women. In spite of the many milling machines provided by government and NGO agencies women in agriculture still face problems with cereal processing. The formation of the recent National Association of food processors initiated by CILLS through the Procelos programme aims at addressing the associated constraints in the area of processing. The women form the majority of the membership of the Association.

LIVESTOCK PRODUCTION

Women in the Gambia have always been active in the production of small ruminants, poultry and the processing of milk. They are mainly responsible of the management, feeding and health care of these species.

In the 1990s, there was a deliberate shift of emphasis from cattle to the production of short cycle livestock species where women are more prominent. In line with this change, Government and NGOs initiated several programmes and projects specifically targeting women farmers. The Sheep fattening programme was prominent among these.

The women livestock farmers have taken the enterprise as an economic activity. Women participate in national and regional livestock shows making millions of Dalasis of sales from small ruminants. However, women are still faced with production constraints in both poultry and small ruminants such as: Frequent diseases, Inadequate access to drugs and other production inputs, marketing and theft. In spite of all these problems, there is an increase in the livestock production over the last two decades. This is confirmed by the 2002/2003 NASS report which puts women ownership of sheep and goats as 52 and 70 percent respectively.

WOMEN, EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Literacy levels in The Gambia are indeed low and vary by geographical location and gender. In fact there is a correlation between illiteracy and distance from the capital and its environment.

Indeed, the endeavour is to encourage the education of the girl child; therefore efforts are geared towards training more female teachers at all levels where they would serve as role models.

More females are being trained at the Brikama College to become qualified teachers in order to offset the imbalance between male/female teacher ratio.

The school of nursing vis a vis, the Royal Victoria Teaching Hospital and many other health institutions across the country are being capacitated with females studying various health disciplines.

The Management Development Institute (MDI) is the main Government institute which cater management training, research and consultancy in the Gambia.

The Gender and Management Unit of the Institute is responsible for the creation of gender awareness and sensitization and mainstreaming gender into its economic management and capacity building programmes.

Various training need/types on gender sensitization have been conducted for female Secretaries of State and Permanent Secretaries.

The President's Award Scheme continues to train young women in various skills in order to empower them. This is in addition to the numerous other skills related institutions across the country where women are being empowered intellectually, socially and economically.

The Department of State for Education has also undertaken several initiatives to further the empowerment process of girls:

- Take our daughters to work under this initiative, a role model is identified in a particular institution and a concern girl student attached to them to understudy for a week
- Career days – Here a re-known woman is asked to talk to a group of girls on her life experience in a particular field so that these girls can use her as role model
- All girl conferences encourages girls to speak out on issues and propose recommendations to address such issues.
- Sensitization programmes
- Presidents Empowerment of Girls Education Project PEGEP – This initiative operates in region 1 & 2 and contributes D375 to payment of school fees for girls. The purpose being to ease the burden of paying school fees on parents and thus keep girls in school.
- Dinasaid initiative is an initiative to assist needy boys with payment of school fees.
- CCF and NGO also provide support for payment of fees.

Local and International NGOs has been working with Government in the area of Gender and Development. For example, the Peace Corps has been working closely with the Department of State for Education in this area. Peace Corps/the Gambia is also involved in Gender and Development activities in The Gambia working closely with the Department of State for Education.

WOMEN AND DECISION MAKING

Since Beijing, significant improvements have been made by the Gambia in women's participation in decision-making. In the political arena the Vice President, and the Secretary of State for Women's Affairs, and the Secretary of State for Education, Tourism and Culture are all females. During the period under review women have also served in the Departments of State for Health and Social Welfare (3), Justice (4), Youth and Sports (1) as Secretaries of State. The Deputy Speaker of the National Assembly is also female. Also, 3 of the 45 elected members of the National Assembly and 4 of the 5 nominated members are female.

In the Civil Service, 17% of managerial and administrative positions are held by women. These include three Permanent Secretaries, the Director General of the Management Development Institute, the Director of Gambia Technical Training Institute (GTTI), the Directors of Women's Bureau, Social Welfare, National Nutrition Agency, Accountant General, Auditor General and Project Managers of Economic Management and Capacity Building and Population and Family Life Education Project are all female. In the Civil Service, 21 percent of all employees are women. At the international representation level there are three female counsellors but no ambassadors. A former female Secretary General and Head of the Civil Service now heads the African Union Political Commission.

However, at the local decentralized level, no gains have been made as there are yet to be female Divisional Commissioners or District Chiefs although at a recent Women's Conference, the Secretary of State for Local Government and Lands had made an undertaking to look into this phenomenon.

WOMEN AND DISABILITY

Physical handicap, deformity and impairment of hearing, sight and speech is widely prevalent in The Gambia, with significant difference between the sexes. Depending on the degree of handicap or impairment, mobility, movement, and overall ability to interact with others in the demands of everyday life can be seriously curtailed. Physical disability can result in low self-esteem and psychological trauma, especially for female members of society. Research has shown that physically disabled persons often carry a complexity syndrome in society.

The interpretation of certain disabilities in Gambian society is rather discriminatory, and as a result those who experience them become self-conscious of their condition. Women with disability are most likely to be abused in society than those without any form of disability. The incidence of sexual abuse and harassment is higher among women with an impairment of hearing, sight or mental disorder. In a culture where marriage is a strong norm, staying single or

not being able to find a partner can have serious social and psychological consequences. Physical disability can be an impediment to marriage, especially for the female.

Steps have been taken by Government and NGOs to address the special needs of this group and to mainstream them in society through the establishment of vocational training institutions such as a school for the visually impaired and a school for the deaf and dumb. A girl's secondary school has also introduced a unit for the skills training of the visually impaired. The successful implementation of programmed aiming to mainstream the disabled however, would require a revolutionary transformation in the attitudes of Gambians. Some Gambians still view disability as a curse and would rather keep their disabled at home rather than expose them education, skill training and therefore, gainful employment. It appears to be more acceptable for a disabled to be a beggar than to encourage them to work.

WOMEN AND CONFLICT

In every conflict situation whether armed or otherwise, women are most vulnerable, perhaps, more than the children whose care are entrusted to them.

Often women are caught in cross fires during armed conflicts which are rampant in most parts of Africa.

The Gambia, though, unlike many of her neighbours in the sub-region, has not experienced the direct consequences of armed conflict, the country has taken the strides in brokering peace between warring factions. Without peace in the sub-region sustainable development cannot be achieved.

Gambia's military spending is relatively, the lowest in West Africa according to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

If the CIA's rank order of military expenditure for countries is anything to go by, the Gambia makes the bottom list of countries with the lowest military expenditure, ranking 167 out 170 countries listed by the CIA.

However, in spite of the unlikeness of armed conflicts occurrence in The Gambia, there is the need to come up with proactive initiatives that would mitigate any eventuality.

In this connection, a West African Peace Building Network – Gambia Chapter is currently being set up. An Office has been established and a National Network Coordinator as well as a Programme Officer have been appointed.

The overall objective of WANE-B-GAMBIA is conflict prevention, and changing crisis situations into more productive interventions.

Already training for civil society organizations and teachers on peace building has taken place. A board is currently being set up to provide Policy Directives for the Chapter.

Many human rights organizations both internationally and nationally have dilated on the issue of armed conflicts with the following guidelines: Among them is to increase the participation of women in conflict resolutions at the decision making levels and to protect women living in situation of armed and other conflicts or under foreign occupation.

The Gambia has for many years hosted refugees from conflict stricken nations. Women and children have been disproportionately affected given their inherent vulnerability.

As of June 1999, the country has a refugee population of 19,481 of which 11,748 were female representing 60%. The number of refugee children estimated at 9,927, represent 19% of the total. These statistics were provided by the UNHCR, Gambia office.

However, some of these refugees have now returned home following the restoration of stability in Sierra Leone and Liberia.

WOMEN AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Since Beijing in 1995, The Gambia has taken positive strides towards the promotion and the protection of human rights of women.

In the 1997 Constitution of The Gambia, significant provision was made to incorporate issues addressed in CEDAW and CRC.

Secondly, two complementary institutions were established for the protection of women's right: Among them is the office of the Ombudsman. The body is involved among other things in creating awareness among Gambia women on the basis of the fundamental the rights, duties and responsibilities and also to provide redress for injustices in their places of work.

Even though concerted efforts are being made to eradicate FGM, especially by NGOs who have mandate to discourage harmful traditional practices, mutilation of girls is still spread in Gambian community.

Beijing Conference advocates that circumcised women should make informed choices about the continuation of such practices on their daughters.

Studies conducted at the Women's Bureau have indicated that domestic violence against women is common in The Gambia and steps are being taken to minimize it. Certain pressure groups have been commissioned for the complete eradication of this age-old practice on women.

The land ownership by women as an issue of human rights has been legislated and sent to the Attorney General's Chambers for consideration.

Land ownership is still a controversial issue and is gender sensitive, despite numerous attempts to reform since 1995. The women who are the main rice growers only enjoy user rights and women divorced by their husbands would automatically lose the right to use the land, despite decades of tilling on it.

It is for this reason that efforts have been made to study the land tenure systems in The Gambia and its findings communicated to the Attorney General's Chambers for legal consideration.

Customary laws formulated by culture cum traditions on marriages, divorce and inheritance are biased against women. Currently, calls are being made to the National Assembly to pass the Law Reform Bill when sent to them.

The creation of Women's Bureau and the subsequent establishment of a Department of State for Women Affairs are all geared towards improving the rights of women. This is well demonstrated in the institutionalized women councils which strives to empower women socially, morally, politically and economically.

WOMEN AND THE ENVIRONMENT

In 1991, Government initiated a process to provide a framework for National Environment Policy Planning and Natural Resources, which led to the adoption of The Gambia environment action plan.

The National Environmental Management Act (NEMA) was enacted in 1994 followed by the environment action plan introduced in 1997.

Exposure of women farmers to persistent organic pollutants is hazardous to health. For this reason the plan of action calls for the sensitization of women on the sustainable management of our natural resources in general and hazardous chemicals in particular. The sensitization of women farmers on the issue is in progress in The Gambia.

Since Beijing, an extensive environment education campaign has been undertaken. In this connection, drama groups, women councilors and other influential women have been trained and commissioned as environment motivators. Women have also been empowered to reclaim land lost due to salinity for use as gardens/orchards or rice fields.

Through training in environment management, women preserve land for sustainable use. Organic fertilizers are used rather than inorganic fertilizers on their farms and gardens. Women continue to participate actively in keeping the immediate environment clean and safe for healthy living, as demonstrated in routine clean-up activities.

This has led the National Environment Agency (NEA) to establish district and ward environment committees countrywide, which coordinate environmental activities i.e. preparation and implementation of environmental action plan and sensitization.

A good example of this is the Somita vegetable garden which won the women a prize through the award scheme. Another achievement is the Tumani Tenda Tourist Camp which is managed by UNDP.

Other issues, include; Millennium Development Goals on gender; especially women, girl/child education and adequate provision of clean pipe borne drinking water.

WOMEN AND THE MEDIA

Following the 1995 Beijing Conference significant improvements have been made in the area of women and the media. There have been extensive improvements in both numbers of community Radios and the GRTS Radio extended its reach to the Sub-region. In the light of the fact that Radio has no literacy barriers and women were not left out in this revolution. Apart from the establishment of two community Radio stations to be owned and run by women, women hold both management and programming level of most radio stations.

In the area of Television, The Gambia commissioned its first National station in 1995 December and women are well represented at all levels of the operation of the station with the Deputy Managing Director being a woman. Also, under the Women in Development Project, 30 village video halls were built for women and managed by them. Over 60 video productions on various topics of interest to women were produced and peddled to these video halls.

In the area of traditional media women's theatre groups were formed trained and encouraged to develop theatre performances in their respective areas. Women local communicators, "Kanyelangos" and members. Radio listening clubs were also trained and employed in information dissemination.

With all these strategies, women have been transformed from being passive receivers of messages into active participants in the dissemination of information.

As far as the print media (newspaper industry) is concerned, women are well represented in managerial and editorial positions. In fact currently the Editor-in-Chief of the only daily newspaper in The Gambia is a woman.

Currently, these cores of women communicators are engaged by all sectors in their communication/sensitization campaign.

Women are also now being better portrayed in Gambian media as dignified human beings and not as inferior counterparts of men.

THE GIRL CHILD

Throughout the history of education in the Gambia, boys and girls have had unequal access to education. Both enrollment and retention have persistently and consistently shown inequalities in favour of boys. Over the past decade, a number of milestones have been registered in closing the gender-gaps in enrollment and retention. These interventions were borne out of the realization and recognition of the contribution of the Department of State for Education, to national development and education or a basic human right.

Despite all these, however, gender gaps still persist. However, the gap in enrollment between boys and girls in the Lower basic and Upper basic cycles is closing rapidly.

Past trends have showed that enrollment of girls is low at all levels. Studies have shown that poverty was the main reason for low participation and completion rates. Suffice it to say, then, socio-cultural belief and practices of many Gambian families, especially in the rural areas have placed little or no emphasis on girls' education.

Other factors associated with the reluctance to send girls to school include: the fear of pregnancy and the opportunity cost of schooling. The school environment has not been conducive to the education of the girl child. This trend can be attributed to the insensitivity in curriculum and teaching/learning materials. Toilets facilities were not separated and the apparent stereotyping and biases in teaching methods.

However, The Gambia since Beijing 1995 has embarked on successful Remedial Initiative Programme (RIFT) to entice more girl children enrolled in schools.

A Scholarship Trust Fund has been created to ease the poverty syndrome so that cost, which hinders parents from sending their daughters, can be minimized, if not totally eradicated.

The construction of separate sanitary facilities and the provision of clean water has been sought; coupled up with training of more female teachers to offset the imbalance in male/female teacher ratio.

Mothers' clubs especially in the most deprived regions has been set up with a view to allowing mothers and female guardians to participate more in their daughters' education.

As a result of the above-mentioned efforts and achievements, girls' education in The Gambia has registered an increase at all levels from 1999-2002.

At the level of the lower basic, it has increased from 67% -73% while share of girls enrolment is 48% but has reached 50% in two of the six regions.

At the level of the Upper Basic, it has increased from 34% to 40% and at the Secondary level from 11% in 1996 to 21% in 2002.

At the level of the Upper basic, the share of girl's enrollment is 42% and the share of girls enrollment at the Secondary level constitute 34%.

Of course, these efforts need to be sustained. Therefore, adequate funding is required in scaling up the GFSI (Girl Friendly School Initiative) and other initiatives. A strong advocacy at both Government level and community level to enhance community ownership needs to be sustained.

The continuous training and retraining of female teachers for improved skill and techniques is an important factor. Improved resource mobilization strategies need to be put in place. Furthermore,

the strengthening of community participation as a way of ensuring sustainability of the girls' education programmes must be pursued.

The provision of continuous training for village development community multidisciplinary, facilitation Teams, MDFTS, PTAS (Parent Teachers Association) and Mother's club for effective collaboration and in line with current decentralization efforts must be pursued.

The consideration of financial assistance be given to meritorious and needy male students in the University of Gambia. Intensification of conference for both boys and girls with role models to guide them must be given thought by all and sundry.

Annual Big Bang Campaign to increase access and to ensure retention should be encouraged.

PART THREE: Institutional Development to Support Implementation of the Beijing Platform For Action

One of the most striking developments in the area of institutional development is the creation of a Department of State for Women Affairs. This portfolio is combined with the office of the Vice President, a strategically placed center of policy and decision-making in the executive. The Vice President and SOS for Women Affairs is a lady of reputable standing in the sub-region. The National Women Council is an instrument that has been created to advance the cause of women in concert with the Department of State and Women's Bureau.

In the past, the portfolio of women affairs was overseen by the office of the SOS health, with limited political clout. Up to the mid 1990s there were only 30 Women Councilors representing 45 constituencies. Now there are 45 "elected" and five nominated Councilors.

The designation of Focal Points for gender equality in line Ministries was not an easy task, but at long last, this came into being some nine years ago. The Departments of State for Health, Agriculture and Education, among others, each have a Focal Point. All the Focal Points have had an intensive orientation, both locally and in other African countries, such as Ghana. The Focal Points have proven to be an invaluable link between the Women's Bureau and their respective line Departments of State.

However, monitoring mechanisms to measure progress in implementation are weak. The Monitoring and Evaluation and Research Units of the Bureau are not able to attract quality personnel, mainly owing to lack of motivation and poor remuneration..

Conscious efforts to mainstream gender have been made in the past decade. For the first time in the constitutional history of The Gambia, the definition of the expression of " discrimination" was extended to include discrimination on the basis of sex – subsection (4) of section 33 of the 1997 second Republican Constitution. The adoption and ratification by the National Assembly in 1999, of the National Policy for the Advancement of Women is one of the greatest advances the country has made in addressing the concerns of women. Another milestone is the implementation of a project specifically for mainstreaming gender in national and sectoral policies and programmes. The three-year project (2000-2003), funded by the British Government, was physically located in the Women's Bureau complex.

The operating environment in The Gambia is quite congenial for establishment of corporate bodies and community organizations for addressing women's affairs within the framework of the platform of action.

A number of NGOs with a mission geared towards women and gender exist in the country, and include foundation for Research on Women's Reproductive Health Productivity and Environment (BAFROW), Gambia Committee on Traditional Practices (GAMCOTRAP), Forum for African Women Educationist the Gambia (FAWEGAM), National Association of Women Farmers (NAWFA) and Gambia Women Finance Association (GAWFA).

The 1970 Constitution of the first Republic granted citizenship to persons born outside The Gambia if they were born after 17 February 1965 and if their father was a citizen of The Gambia at the date of their birth. The 1997 Constitution has addressed this imbalance. It states “ A person born outside The Gambia after the coming into force of this constitution shall be a citizen of The Gambia by descent if at the time of his or her birth either of his/her parents is a citizen of The Gambia”.

PART FOUR: Challenges

Even though remarkable progress has been made towards the realization of the platform of Action, challenges remain in the way. These include the following:-

- Greater involvement of women in the political process;
- Intensification of efforts both at Government, NGO and general public levels to address cultural barriers that have continued to bring women down;
- On the educational front, enhanced the environment for increased retention and improved quality of education of the girl child.

Also intensify efforts to increase enrolment, retention and quality of the adult literacy programme for women.

- In Agriculture address the issues of drudgery, as well as access and ownership of critical production resources such as land and farm inputs;
- Further improve Reproductive Health Programme and address the declining immunization rates of our children;
- Consolidate the gains made in the campaign against HIV/AIDS and STIs;
- Fight Malaria – number one killer especially for children;
- Increase access to safe drinking pipe borne water;
- Enhance participation of women in environmental retention work, as well as, introduce energy saving technologies;
- Worsening poverty situation particularly for women;
- Finally, intensify Information Education and Communication efforts in all issues of concern to women with particular focus/emphasis on Behaviour Changing Communication (BCC).

In conclusion while we may have made significant strides in grappling with women's empowerment, the achievements made in opening up our society and recognizing the fact that we need women to move the human development agenda and in listening to women, needs to be consolidated by interventions that will ensure that women are not only listened to but heard as well; and also that an appropriate enabling environment exists to translate the existing awareness and attitude change into practical realities that would improve women and men's welfare.

In order to achieve the foregoing, The Gambia Government in collaboration with its development partners will engage all stakeholders in consultations that will lead to the development of a multi-sectoral programme so as to address the identified challenges in a holistic and integrated manner.

Such a programme apart from the synergy it will bring to the Gender mainstreaming effort will also enhance coordination and with it, programme effectiveness.