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Towards Ending Obstetric Fistula in The Gambia: A Story of Restored Dignity, Hope and Survival

Surviving a 90-day journey of healing, excitement for a possible transformation of their lives, hope for restored dignity and on the other hand, fear of a failed surgery, was the story of the women who underwent fistula repair surgeries organised by the BAFROW Medical Centre, with support from UNFPA The Gambia.

Secluded from community life, living through constant loneliness and the pain of being unable to afford treatment for their condition for many years, these women have fought the hard fight of living with a condition often regarded as ‘embarrassing’ and ‘unmanageable’. They lived through the struggle of an injury they never saw coming and one they were often blamed for, but they have made it to the other side where they once were – happy, full of life, active and recognised as valuable members of their communities.



“I really thought I would never be cured. So I was always indoors.” “I have seen many women like myself die as a result of this condition in my village. I always thought I was going to end up like them – dead.” These were the words of two of the women we spoke to after final confirmation of their successful surgeries.

For us at UNFPA, these very difficult traumatic experiences of women living with Obstetric Fistula in The Gambia, are the reason we continue to invest in strengthening The Gambia’s health system and working towards ending all preventable maternal deaths in the country. Reaffirming this commitment, the Country Office as part of its 2017 – 2021 Country Programme, intends to support at least 150 fistula repair surgeries in The Gambia.

Working with BAFROW and the Edward Francis Small Teaching Hospital, 19 repair surgeries have already taken place. However, it must be emphasized that, we are accompanying these women through their journey of healing and this for us means restoring their hopes in life, equipping them with skills to help them earn a living to be economically independent, and reintegrating them back into their communities. Each of the women will go back home stronger, with skills in dye-dye, soap making, sewing, bread baking, among others following a successful battle against Fistula.



Underdiagnosed in The Gambia and subjecting women to life-long silence, exclusion and ill-health, Obstetric Fistula is a childbirth injury caused by prolonged, obstructed labour without timely intervention, typically, a Caesarean section. During unassisted prolonged labour, the sustained pressure of the baby’s head on the mother’s pelvic bone, damages her soft tissues, creating a hole—or fistula—between the vagina and the bladder and/or rectum. The result of the condition, is a constant leaking of urine and/or faeces through the vagina. Fistula is most common in poor communities in sub-Saharan Africa and Asia where access to obstetric care is limited. About two million women remain untreated in developing countries and between 50,000 and 100,000 new cases occur each year. Without treatment, fistula often leads to social, physical, emotional and economic decline and thus requires partnership among stakeholders to eradicate in the Gambia.



On our first visit to the Bafrow Fistula Rehabilitation Centre in Mandinaba, approximately 19 kilometers from The Gambia’s capital city, Banjul, we had an opportunity to interact with the patients who were being prepared for theater. In our conversations, they were positive that the surgeries will be successful because of the quality of care and the level of their interaction with the staff. Although aware that not all fistula surgeries come out successful and that they would have to wait for 3 months (90 days) to find out their fate, the women expressed delight in the opportunity to have a second chance at getting back their health and dignity. This alone for them, was enough reason to be happy and positive.

There worries were numerous before they got registered to undergo surgery. Their fears were evident and their hope to survive was very minimal.

UNFPA is committed to working towards ensuring that, all women in The Gambia live happy, dignified and Fistula-free lives. This is the journey we are on and we will leave nobody behind!

UNFPA, UNICEF and UN Women Joint Statement on the International Day of Zero Tolerance for FGM 2019

Joint Statement on International Day of Zero Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation

Mary Oloiparuni was 13 when she was mutilated. Restrained in a doorway early one morning in her home, she was cut, bled profusely and experienced agonizing pain. The scarring she endured then continues to cause her pain today, 19 years later. It has made giving birth to each of her five children an excruciating and harrowing experience.

Mary is not alone. At least 200 million girls and women alive today have had their genitals mutilated – suffering one of the most inhuman acts of gender-based violence in the world.

On the International Day of Zero Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation, we reaffirm our commitment to end this violation of human rights, so that the tens of millions of girls who are still at risk of being mutilated by 2030 do not experience the same suffering as Mary.

This effort is especially critical because female genital mutilation leads to long-term physical, psychological and social consequences. It violates women's rights to sexual and reproductive health, physical integrity, non-discrimination and freedom from cruel or degrading treatment. It is also a violation of medical ethics: Female genital mutilation is never safe, no matter who carries it out or how clean the venue is.

Because female genital mutilation is a form of gender-based violence, we cannot address it in isolation from other forms of violence against women and girls, or other harmful practices such as early and forced marriages. To end female genital mutilation, we have to tackle the root causes of gender inequality and work for women's social and economic empowerment.

In 2015, world leaders overwhelmingly backed the elimination of female genital mutilation as one of the targets in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This is an achievable goal, and we must act now to translate that political commitment into action.

At the national level, we need new policies and legislation protecting the rights of girls and women to live free from violence and discrimination. Governments in countries where female genital mutilation is prevalent should also develop national action plans to end the practice. To be effective, their plans must include budget lines dedicated to comprehensive sexual and reproductive health, education, social welfare and legal services.

At the regional level, we need institutions and economic communities to work together, preventing the movement of girls and women across borders when the purpose is to get them into countries with less restrictive female genital mutilation laws.

“to end female genital mutilation, we have to tackle the root causes of gender inequality and work for women's social and economic empowerment.”

Locally, we need religious leaders to strike down myths that female genital mutilation has a basis in religion. Because societal pressures often drive the practice, individuals and families need more information about the benefits of abandoning it.

Public pledges to abandon female genital mutilation – particularly pledges by entire communities – are an effective model of collective commitment. But public pledges must be paired with comprehensive strategies for challenging the social norms, practices and behaviours that condone female genital mutilation. Testimonials by survivors like Mary also help to build understanding of the practice's grim reality and long-lasting impact on women's lives. Advocacy campaigns and social media can amplify the message that ending female genital mutilation saves and improves lives.

Thanks to the collective action of governments, civil society, communities and individuals, female genital mutilation is in decline. But we are not aiming for fewer cases of this practice. We are insisting on zero.

Ewurama Dontoh, UNFPA The Gambia Intern, Shares her Internship Journey as She Says Goodbye to the Country Office

“My decision to intern with UNFPA The Gambia was almost an instinctive one. Due to an interest in public health and the social determinants of health and their implications, my aim was to gain insight into the public health sector in The Gambia through keen observation and active participation. Thankfully, UNFPA The Gambia provided me with that opportunity, and the amount of knowledge I acquired during the short course of my internship, exceeded my expectations.”



I interned with the Country Office for 3 months, from November 2018 to February 2019, and working with them showed me just how involved and committed the organisation is in ensuring that all its goals and objectives are met, both within the Gambian community and the world at large. Particularly in the areas of sexual and gender-based violence, sexual and reproductive health rights and family planning, I saw first-hand the amount of work put in on a daily basis to ensure that the Gambian people and their needs were always put first. I was also fortunate enough to have a comfortable and enabling work environment that endeavoured to make my internship as educational and worthwhile as possible.

Right from my first week, I was introduced headfirst into the thick of things; I visited the Fistula Rehabilitation Centre run by BAFROW Medical Centre in Mandinaba multiple times, learning that the centre, a first of its kind, focuses on the prevention, treatment, rehabilitation and re-integration of fistula patients back into their communities. I also had the privilege of attending the annual review meeting of the United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF) to review the progress of Pillar 2 (Human Capital Development) and identify some hindrances to progress, lessons learned & emerging issues of priority. Although this was very new territory for me, it did not take me long to grasp the basics of the framework and its importance in human, social and economic development in The Gambia.

Furthermore, I had the opportunity to meet with and pose all relevant questions to the heads of key programme areas within the agency, including Programme Analysts for the areas of sexual & reproductive health, reproductive health commodity security & family planning, gender-based violence & female genital mutilation, monitoring & evaluation, partnership &



advocacy and communications.

These meetings were essential for me in providing basic knowledge on how UNFPA The Gambia operates, its key objectives and standard operating procedures, and served as a guide for navigation through my internship.

Every opportunity was afforded to me to gain as much knowledge and experience; I was allowed to sit in and participate in the historic review and finalisation of the new National Family Planning Policy and had the chance to meet and engage with key personalities involved in the policy's formulation and finalisation. I also participated in the UN's 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence, which was chock-full of activities all aimed at bringing awareness and sensitisation on the human and sexual rights violations women and girls often face in The Gambia. Participating in this period of activism was one of the many highlights of my internship, and it shed a new light for me on the SGBV situation in The Gambia.

As part of the activism, I attended a symposium on SGBV which featured a panel discussion focused on sexual harassment and other forms of GBV in the Gambia. It was graced by the UN Resident Coordinator Ms. Seraphine Wakana, the UNFPA National Coordinator on FGM and GBV Ms. Fatou Kinteh, and other dignitaries including the Minister of Health and representatives from other key organisations and implementing partners.

I was also allowed to be a part of a workshop organised for all UN staff focused on sexual harassment, exploitation and abuse of authority in the workplace, and gained insight on the ways in which we as individuals can perpetuate certain cultures and practices that encourage sexual and gender-based violence, but can also help put a stop to sexual harassment through observation and vigilance. The last day of the 16 Days of Activism also coincided with the commemoration 70th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and was characterised by an awareness march and congregation at the Youth Monument in Serrekunda. The commemoration ceremony was graced by Gambians from all walks of life and included speeches from many distinguished members of society mainly focused on the promotion and protection of the human rights of all

Gambians regardless of age, gender, ability or socio-economic status. Tasked with documenting all proceedings of the ceremony, I was able to fully grasp the meaning and magnitude of the significance of the ceremony, and the strides that have been made in securing and upholding the human rights of all in The Gambia, as well as the amount of work still left to be accomplished to ensure the human rights of all Gambians are respected.

Aside participating in the aforementioned activities, I was also tasked with writing up articles concerning them to be posted on the country office website, which greatly improved my creative and report writing skills and honed my ability to siphon key facts, data and information from large banks of information.

Though my experiences outside the office were numerous and memorable, I also gained a lot of knowledge within the country office. I was allowed to actively participate in meetings concerning country office work plans, progressions towards the achievement of yearly objectives and the development of newer and more focused goals and outcomes. I was also privileged to be present for the creation, drafting and completion of the Peacebuilding Fund (PBF) Project work plans, a comprehensive, multi-UN agency initiative primarily aimed at promoting peacebuilding and fostering positive behavioural changes within The Gambia in light of recent political developments.



My time with UNFPA The Gambia has been very eye-opening and educational and has provided me with essential experiences I never thought I needed. Furthermore, even though I will not be present for the implementation of the PBF Project, from what I was able to observe and learn from in the country office, I strongly believe that the project will be implemented very well and will go a long way towards ensuring, enhancing and maintaining peace within the country, especially with the active participation of women and youth. “

UNFPA The Gambia's Fatou Kinteh Appointed as Minister for Women's Affairs, Children and Social Welfare of The Gambia



March, the UNFPA The Gambia team put together a congratulatory ceremony to express their pride in Fatou's Appointment and to shower her with best wishes for her new journey.

The ceremony was graced by the UN Resident Coordinator in The Gambia, heads of UN agencies, members of the UN Gender Theme Group and other staff. It was a beautiful display of memories of Fatou's hard work and dedication to everything related to gender and girls issues in the UN's work and its partners.

Speaking on behalf of the UN Country Team, the UN Resident Coordinator expressed delight in the news of her appointment and implored on her to continue the good fight for women and children of The Gambia, since she understands the issues hindering their growth and wellbeing.

To conclude, the UNFPA Representative, Mr. Kunle Adeniyi, spoke at length on Fatou's willingness to look at all programmatic issues through a gender lens and contribute towards the realisation of the agency's mission through various interventions.

A mother to all, a great friend, an ardent advocate for the advancement of Gambian women and girls and an astute programmer, Fatou has always been a voice for Gambian women and girls. She will be assuming greater responsibilities for her country and we will miss her presence at the Country Office. We however look forward to working with her good office as we continue to advance the cause of the people of The Gambia.

It goes without saying that the entire UNFPA The Gambia team is excited to welcome the creation of the first Women's Affairs, Children and Social Welfare Ministry of The Republic of The Gambia and even more so that UNFPA The Gambia's National Coordinator for Gender Based Violence (GBV) and Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), Mrs. Fatou Kinteh, has been appointed the first Minister.

Fatou who has been with the Country Office for the past nine (9) years, has a wealth of experience working with the United Nations System in The Gambia, Government and Civil Society Organisations, where she has always promoted the gender and children's agenda. She has previously served as the Deputy Executive Director and Executive Director of the Women's Bureau as well as the health of Information, Education and Communication at the Gambia Family Planning Association, among many other notable capacities. During her time as Executive Director of the Women's Bureau, Fatou led the development and implementation of the first gender component of the UNFPA Country Programme in The Gambia.

The receipt of her appointment came as a further manifestation of her vested interest in ensuring that issues of women are prioritised at the highest level possible.

To bid her farewell and formally send her off to her new office, on Friday 1st



Statement by UNFPA Executive Director Dr. Natalia Kanem on International Women's Day 2019

Everywhere, new technologies and innovations are transforming the way we work, the way we communicate, the way we interact with each other and with our environment, and the way we live, in ways previous generations could not have imagined. Innovation also offers opportunities to leapfrog the obstacles that have kept far too many women and girls from claiming their rights and realizing their full potential.

For UNFPA, innovation is about expanding the possible. It's about opening up women's opportunities for education, sexual and reproductive health, employment and participation in the affairs of their communities.

Innovations like our new Population Data Platform can help decision-makers map needs and target interventions to reach those furthest behind. By combining different sources of data, it can help highlight, for example, which districts in a country have the highest rates of child marriage, or where demand for contraceptives outstrips supply.

Mobile technology is helping us strengthen health providers' skills, improve data collection, and reach women and girls with the sexual and reproductive health services and information they need. This is a matter of life and death, especially for adolescent girls.

For girls trying to escape female genital mutilation in rural Tanzania, crowdsourced maps developed by networks of volunteers in more than 60 countries are showing the way to safety. The data generated will also help FGM-related outreach programmes and services reach the girls, families and communities that need them most.

Innovative partnerships, including with the private sector, are helping us break bottlenecks and strengthen health systems to improve maternal and newborn health and expand access to contraception.

Many of the best solutions come from women themselves.

For example, in Kenya, social enterprises led by women,

are developing new sexual and reproductive health solutions, like prototypes for sanitary pad dispensers that use chip-reader cards provided for free to girls in poor areas of Nairobi. In Uganda, a women-led enterprise supported by UNFPA is developing an affordable, discreet menstrual health kit, designed by local women for use by local women.

Women know best what they need to participate in, and benefit from, the economic and social development of their communities. It is our job to listen and to foster creative, fresh approaches that promote the highest level of sexual and reproductive health.

As we celebrate International Women's Day under the theme "Think Equal, Build Smart, Innovate for Change", let's celebrate the women innovators around the world who are breaking down barriers to rights and choices and building a more gender-equal world.

Women's empowerment and gender equality are critical, not only to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, but also to finally realizing the vision of the 1994 International Conference in Population and Development, ICPD, which linked reproductive health and rights to sustainable development. Twenty-five years since this path-breaking event, hundreds of millions of women still lack the power to make their own decisions about whether, when, with whom or how often to become pregnant. It doesn't have to be this way. That's why UNFPA is innovating with our partners for contraceptive choice, safe birth, and to end violence and harmful practices against women and girls.

In November, UNFPA and the Government of Kenya are hosting a summit aimed at renewing commitments to achieving the ICPD goal of sexual and reproductive health for all. On this International Women's Day, I encourage all governments to join us on our journey to Nairobi.

Together, let's expand the possible for every woman and girl everywhere.

Statement on International Women's Day by UNFPA Executive Director Dr. Natalia Kanem

**“together, let's
expand the possible
for every woman
everywhere.”**

#WOMENSDAY

International Women's Day 2019 Commemoration at the UN House and Beyond

International Women's Day commemorated globally every 8th March, was celebrated at the UN House, with the leadership of UNFPA The Gambia, being the Chair of the United Nations Communication Group, as well as the Youth and Gender Thematic Working Group.

This year, the group saw to a change in the norm of celebrating this day by leveraging high visibility activities that shed light on and celebrates the life and strides of Gambian women, with series of activities, including the production of eight (8) short interviews with young Gambian women in venturing into innovative and often male-dominated trades.



These interviews were ran on The Gambia's national broadcaster Gambia Radio and Television Service from the 1st to 8th March, as a way of showcasing the importance of this year's theme: Think Equal, Build Smart, Innovate for Change: #BalanceForBetter. The stories of these identified women were also shared on the Country Office's website serve as inspiration to other women and girls and to emphasize the valuable



UNFPA CELEBRATES THE GAMBIAN WOMAN ON *International Women's Day* 2019

#UN4Women
#BalanceForBetter



In addition to the videos highly amplified on Television and social media, UNFPA joined the Women's Bureau and other partners at the National Women's Parade featuring female personnel of the security and law enforcements officers as well as women's groups, in Banjul.



Simultaneously, at the UN House, staff participated in a colourful photo campaign using their personal platforms to send the message of the UN's women for and with women of The Gambia.



A beautiful commemoration, a reminder that investing in women and girls of The Gambia will yield immeasurable returns for the country, will always be UNFPA The Gambia's motivation.

Gambia Family Planning Association Trains 50 New Community-Based Distributors and Conducts Outreach HIV Voluntary Counselling and Testing



The Gambia Family Planning Association (GFPA), from the 16 to 16 March, 2019, held a National Training of Community-Based Distributors on Sexual and Reproductive Health.

The training, aimed at increasing access to sexual and reproductive health information and services in communities furthest behind in The Gambia, brought together 50 participants from the various regions of the country.

Speaking at the opening ceremony on behalf of the GFPA, Mr. Momodou Njie, emphasised that, with the support of UNFPA, GFPA is working towards ensuring that Gambian families are becoming more open to discuss and start uptake of Family Planning products and this will



Pay great dividends towards our socio-economic development and promote happier and healthier communities.

The organisation (GFPA) also in March, carried out an Outreach Voluntary Counselling and Testing for HIV in schools within the Greater Banjul Area. This activity is geared towards providing HIV/AIDS information and an opportunity for young people to know their statuses, while encouraging preventive measures.

From this activity, 158 people received free HIV counselling and testing services.

The Country Office Leads ICPD+25 Engagements at the 3rd Pan-African Youth Conference on African Unity and Development in Banjul

The 25th anniversary of the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, Egypt, coupled with the 50th anniversary of UNFPA, call for galvanized efforts to take stock of the progress we have made so far and the gaps that remain in our drive to accelerate the ICPD Programme of Action. As such, UNFPA The Gambia, leveraged the 3rd Pan-African Youth Conference on African Unity and Development, co-hosted by the African Youth Commission (AYC) and the National Youth Council (NYC) under the auspices of the Ministry of Youth and Sports The Gambia, organised three high-level panels, capturing the voices and contributions of African youth, towards the achievement of the ICPD agenda.

These events were preceded by an interactive chat on Twitter organised in partnership with AfriYAN The Gambia, featuring UNFPA West and Central Africa Regional Director, Mr. Mabingue Ngom, UNFPA The Gambia Representative, Mr. Kunle Adeniyi, and key young people leading change in their various countries.

This highly amplified chat, brought key issues specific to various countries on the continent, but also, created an avenue for youth to identify opportunities and ways in which they can promote the ICPD agenda and accelerate its successful achievement.

ICPD+25: Accelerating the Promise from Cairo

The first panel on the 25 March, which also served as the official opening of UNFPA The Gambia's ICPD+25 engagements in the country, was graced by Her Excellency the Vice President of the Republic of The Gambia, Dr. Isatou Touray, government Ministers, heads of government and diplomatic missions, youth from across the continent, among others.



Speaking on behalf of the government of The Gambia, the Vice President reiterated the government's commitment to prioritise issues of young people on its development agenda and the need to recognise that youth can make valuable contributions to the country's growth and development agenda.

Following the opening ceremony, the panel on Accelerating the Promise from Cairo, took place, bringing together representatives from government, civil society organisations and UNFPA. This panel, which was aimed at marking the twenty-five years of work since the ICPD in Cairo, focused on discussing progress that has been made since ICPD in 1994 and ICPD+20 as well as a call to action to accelerate actions towards delivering leaving no-one behind in Africa as part of realizing sustainable development, transformation for individual dignity and human rights for all.



ICPD CAFÉ: The Unfinished Business

The second session was styled as a TV show focused on the unfinished business, served as a call to action for young people to take up their roles in delivering on the Pan-African sustainable development and transformation vision which is aligned to ICPD ideals. Since governance and accountability are the primary means of achieving all goals espoused in the ICPD plan of action, the Sustainable Development Goals and Africa's Agenda 2063, panelists discussed the gaps that still exist towards the realisation of the Cairo promise and highlighted where we currently stand as a continent.

The panelist included being young people with lived experiences, in advocacy around the pillars of the ICPD agenda on the continent, shared their experiences and their recommendations going forward on how young people in Africa can better mobilize and organize to effect the change they wish to see.

Through the session, some best examples of where youth leadership has played a pivotal and instrumental role in uplifting the ideals of good/progressive governance and fostering a culture of citizen led accountability and delivering on human rights including sexual reproductive rights, were highlighted.

Con't. The Country Office Leads ICPD+25 Engagements at the 3rd Pan-African Youth Conference on African Unity and Development in Banjul



The panel was concluded with a presentation on Block Chain Technology and the role of technology in delivering on the development agenda., highlighting digital transformation opportunities and challenges in the current 4th Industrial Revolution.

ICPD Talks

Dubbed “Young, Bold and Winning!” the ICPD Talk session was the final engagements on the ICPD+25 at the African Youth Conference. The session featured young people who took it upon their social responsibility to challenge the status quo and embark on advocacy efforts.

These young people are, Ms. Jaha Dukureh from The Gambia, end FGM campaigner, Founder of Safe Hands for Girls and UN Women Goodwill Ambassador for Africa, Mr. Gossy Ukanwoke from Nigeria, a Social Entrepreneur using technology to provide Nigerian Youth with an opportunity to get university education and finally, Ms. Bina Maseno from Kenya, a politician, social justice activist and founder of Badili Africa. These young people’s work is inspirational and epitomizes the kind of African Leadership we aspire to see leading our transformative agenda. They have saved lives, improved livelihoods, influenced changing legislation, compromised their lives in their pursuit of social justice and have gone boldly and fearlessly in the direction of their dreams.



Our Quarter in Pictures!







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