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Young People Reflect on Current Peace and Security Situation in The Gambia

The importance of young people as change agents in the maintenance and promotion of peace in The Gambia, is critical. This is why, on Tuesday 2 October 2019, the Gambia National Youth Council, with support from UNFPA The Gambia, through the UN Peacebuilding Fund's Women and Youth Project, held a Youth Reflection Meeting on Peace and Security in The Gambia.

The gathering bringing together about 70 young people, drawn from all the regions of The Gambia, was an opportunity to create a space for young men and young women of the country, to reflect on the current peace and security situation of the country, and identify how collectively, they can work to ensure sustainable peace for national development.

On her part, the chairperson of the opening ceremony, Kaddijatou Jabbie from the National Youth Council, stressed that, “there will be no development without peace, so young people, should be the champions of peace in our communities.

Mr. Bakary Juwara, delivering the keynote address on behalf of the UNFPA Representative, stressed that, building young people's capacities as peace and security building actors, is key to strengthening the country's democratic governance and support in proffering solutions to problems both at local and national levels, because, young people are key stakeholders in the peace agenda. He added that, for a nation to thrive, it's women and young people, must live in a peaceful environment, where their rights and choices to fulfil their maximum potential, are ensured.

According to the Executive Director of the National Youth Council, Mr. Lamin Darboe,

“now is the time when Gambian youth will not only claim to be the majority of the population, but will sit to discuss ways they can work towards the future, together.”
He called on the participants, to actively engage in honest conversations, to reach resolutions that will guide government and other duty-bearers, on how to build this place we call home.

In delivering the official opening statement, Dembo Kambi, Chairperson of the National Youth Council, reiterated that,

“peace is vital to our living as Gambians and as citizens of the world, because it has no substitute – peace is the only way.”

He went on to emphasise that, the National Youth Council as an institution, recognises that, their responsibility during this transitional period the country is going through, is to create the space for dialogue, in order to pave the way for peace.

Open discussions, which led to the finalisation of concrete recommendations, where the highlight of the event, and as an outcome of reflection meeting, a Youth Position Paper on Peace and Security in The Gambia will be developed, to be used as a policy brief to inform policy and decision-makers about the concerns of Gambian youth and the need for action, to address potential conflict and promote tolerance and peaceful coexistence in country.
Building a GirlForce: 
4 Girls, 4 Stories Unscripted, 
4 Forces Unstoppable

As the world commemorates the International Day of the Girl Child today, on the theme “Girl Force: Unscripted and unstoppable” UNFPA The Gambia celebrates the achievements by, with and for girls in The Gambia. We explore the stories of four vibrant adolescent girls, who have benefitted from UNFPA supported interventions in the country and have dedicated their efforts and time to impacting change in their communities, inspiring their peers and being the voice of the thousands of girls who continue to suffer in silence from issues like Female Genital Mutilation, pad poverty and period shaming, among many others.

Fatima Gomez, 17, is on a Mission to Empower Adolescent Girls in her Community

Meet Fatima Gomez, 17, one of the young rising voices ready to take the world by storm. Fatima is an energetic young girl who benefitted from a UNFPA supported mentorship programme for adolescent girls, organised by Think Young Women.

Currently a Grade 12 student and the Deputy Head girl of her school, The Gambia Methodist Academy, Fatima shares with us her experience going through the mentorship programme and how it has impacted her life and journey. The vibrant young lady began her discussion with us by mentioning that the mentorship programme opened doors for her and helped her realise that, even though still young, she can contribute to the country’s development in different areas.

“I realised that people need help in this country especially young girls as the most vulnerable group in society. Learning this during the three-month programme and understanding the role I can play, changed my perspective about myself and my responsibility to make the world a better place for everyone.”

Fatima confessed that, before her participation in the mentorship programme, she was a little negligent about issues around her, her friends and the relationships she kept with people. Going through the module on sisterhood, dawned on her the reality to be more vigilant about issues affecting people in her community and the need to strengthen her relationship with her friends and family. This new perspective and her constant readiness to voice out her concerns about the issues she and other young people are faced with, has earned her series of titles like “Lawyer of the class”, "madam advocate” etc. in school.

“When I see people being tortured, bullied and abused, I have to do something about it. Otherwise, I feel bad for not changing a situation when I had the chance to. This was strengthened by the Think Young Women mentorship program”.
Ms. Gomez expressed her gratitude to the Think Young Women team, the mentors she has grown to cherish and UNFPA The Gambia for supporting her growth and the advancement of young girls in The Gambia to realise their full potentials and go beyond just dreaming for a better world for them to excel in, but to achieving it.

“We might face countless challenges in life, but we should hold our heads up high and fight for what we deserve, never let any form of stigma degrade our capabilities nor destroy our dreams and aspirations. We should be the authors of our own stories because if everything fails, this is what we can offer the world to keep on for us and the next generation”.

From a Pro-FGM Advocate to an Anti-FGM Activist, Haddy Badjan will Protect Her Younger Sister and Other Girls from the Harmful Practice

“I want to live in a world without FGM, where young girls like me can live and help each other.”

With the strong zeal to serve and impact her society after the mentorship program, Fatima Gomez encouraged 2 of her friends from school to sign up for the mentorship program and came back as a mentor to share her knowledge and experience with the girls that came after her.

With a strong belief in herself and the power young girls possess, Fatima is still giving back to the mentorship program with her friends, where they support the smooth running of the programme.

Fatima aspires to be a lot of things, all of which connect to salvaging girls from the issues hindering their progress and growth. As a strong believer of the power of art, Fatima uses her talent as a young poet, to advocate for the rights of the girl and shed light on issues affecting them, so the world can take swift action towards their wellbeing. When asked to share a message to young girls everywhere, she stressed

“Spending every Saturday morning with a group of twenty-nine (29) other girls, mentors who challenged us to aim for big things, for three months, and learning lessons that will help us in our daily lives and in our relations with the people around us, I count myself lucky to have been through the programme and I see myself as an agent through whom other girls who did not have the opportunity I had, can also receive the information and learn the lessons I learnt from the program.”

This is the reality Haddy Badjan envisions for herself and every young girl around the globe, especially the 3 million young girls still at risk of undergoing Female Genital Mutilation (FGM).

Coming from a practicing community, Haddy was subjected to FGM at a very early age. On a school break back in primary school, she was greeted by pleasing news that she was going to spend the holiday with her father, a man she missed so much. She was excited but least did she know that she was about to be subjected to a grave violation of her rights, without her knowledge.
Following this initiation, Haddy grew up promoting the practice of Female Genital Mutilation because like she was taught, she believed that the practice was a religious obligation and every girl should be subjected to it.

Earlier in 2019, Haddy shared that she was concerned that her little sister was yet to be circumcised and thus she encouraged her mother to do so before she grows older. This persisted up until three months ago, when she participated in the “FGM Open Conversations for Children” organised by The Girls’ Agenda. The initiative supported by UNFPA The Gambia, was initiated to create an FGM learning space for children, to teach them about the harmful practice and help carve a path for them to advocate against the practice in their homes, communities and little spaces.

According to her

“before this training, I was a pro FGM advocate because I believed it is a tradition we must uphold as a people. Like a lot of people before me, I was adamant to attend the training because I thought it was here to rip me off my roots as an African.”

She described the training as an eye opener, it gave her a detailed insight on FGM and the harmful effects of the practice. This made her rethink her beliefs, her purpose and what she can do to protect her little sister and other girls in her community. As such, she went further to share this gained knowledge with her mother.

Today and every other day, Haddy pledges to protect her little sister and other young girls in her community from FGM and other harmful practices. She urges young girls like her to learn and grow in order to protect themselves and future generations because

Stories like these, are the reasons we continue to work with our partners in Gambian communities, to ensure that every girl and every woman, is protected from all forms of Gender-Based Violence and harmful practices such as FGM and Child Marriage.

Fatoumatta Jaye, 16, Believes Every Girl Should Have Access to Menstrual Hygiene Products and Information and She is Doing Something About It

“I am not a property or a toy people can play with. I am a human being; I have rights and people need to respect that.”

These were the words of Fatoumatta Jaye, a 16-year-old girl, also a beneficiary of the Think Young Women Girls’ Mentorship Programme, dubbed #TYW4Girls.

The young aspiring Software Engineer, described the three-month journey as one of the most impactful experiences yet.

“The mentorship programme has developed me beyond measure, harnessed my skills and showed me everything I can do for myself and other girls around the globe.”
Like a lot of teenagers, Fatoumatta described herself as a shy person, who went through the daily struggle of not voicing out her concerns both in school and at home, because she felt that her opinions were not good enough for the world to consume. Going through the mentorship program, she learnt that “no one is perfect and everyone’s opinion matters”. This quote, out of the dozens of inspirational quotes shared at the mentorship programme after every session, pushed her beyond her limits, to accept herself, flaws and all.

The Girls’ Mentorship Programme supported by UNFPA The Gambia, is a curriculum-based initiative, designed to strengthen the lives and communities of girls and young women. The programme’s mission is to empower girls through mentorship, life-skills training, building their capacities on women’s rights and challenging them to discover and fulfil their potential.

Reflecting on the various modules of the programme, Fatoumatta shared that the sessions on Menstrual Health and Hygiene and the Life Skills Training, impacted her life the most. Before the mentorship program, she shares,

“I knew very little about my period and the products I needed for my hygiene. Going through the programme, I learnt to take care of myself. I shared this knowledge with my mum and since then, she buys me sanitary pads every month, and I now feel comfortable to talk to her about any concerns I have.”

She went on to highlight that, the module on life skills honed her inter-personal skills and gave her a greater insight, on how to relate with and most especially smoothen her relationship with her father.

She added that, after the 3-month programme, she gathered a wealth of knowledge and experience, which she has made a point of duty to share with her friends in school during their free periods and is currently grooming her younger sister to have access to information and skills she did not have at her age. Fatoumatta strongly believes that, her strength lies in speaking up for herself and for others because “we are stronger together”.

We asked Fatoumatta to share a message with the world on International Day of the Girl Child and this is what she had to say

“Girls should support each other; we should help each other in times of difficulties. There is no shame in going through menstruation. We should speak out for the world to hear our voices. I know I will continue sharing with girls around me, how to take care of themselves during their periods.”

Not a Survivor of FGM but a Strong Voice Against the Practice - Haddy Jallow Believes She is Her Sister’s Keeper

Haddy Jallow a student of Mingdaw Senior Secondary school, also participated in the FGM Open Conversations for Children organised by The Girls’ Agenda with support from UNFPA The Gambia, which she described as one of the most educative trainings she has ever attended.
“My knowledge on FGM was limited but everyone around me told me that it was a religious act. I believed them, until I attended the FGM Open Conversations for Children, where I was exposed to the harmful effects of FGM, the religious misconceptions around the practice and the Anti-FGM law in the Gambia.”

Following the activity, as a member of the Microscope Club in school, Haddy went on to share this gained knowledge with her colleagues in school through their drama and poetry sessions. Haddy urges all girls today and every other day, to educate themselves on social issues like FGM, report cases of FGM, protect themselves and others as this goes a long way to help them realise their full potentials and excel beyond measure.

Haddy is not an FGM survivor, her family does not believe in the practice and she is not one of the 200 million girls alive today, still suffering the consequences of this menace. However, she is a strong advocate for an end to the practice and continues to engage her peers in school, about the harmful effects of FGM, because according to her, both survivors and girls who have not undergone the practice, experience abuse.

“I was stigmatised for not having undergone the practice. I got called names. The training helped me understand FGM and overcome the shame that has been eating me up for ages.”

When asked why she is now involved in the end FGM campaign in the country, Haddy emphasised that,

“All though I was not subjected to this grave human rights violation, I believe it has affected and continues to affect the lives of millions of girls. If one woman or girl is suffering in my community, I am indirectly affected, if one girl is not safe, I too am not safe. This is why, I pledge to be my sister’s keeper.”

For us at UNFPA The Gambia, we are hopeful for a brighter future for young girls like Fatima Gomez, Fatoumatta Jaye, Haddy Badjan and Haddy Jallow. As we celebrate international Day of the Girl Child, we renew our commitment to contribute to a better and fairer world for every girl, everywhere in The Gambia.
Improving Menstrual Health Management for Adolescent Girls

“We are pleased to have the UNFPA team here at our school, especially on an occasion that will help us understand our bodies and enable us manage our menstrual health and hygiene.”

These were the words of Abibatou Camara, Head Girl of the School, speaking on behalf of the girls.

These words of UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres on UN Day 2019, inspired the approach of the UN Day celebration in The Gambia.

Answering to the Secretary General’s call, the UN family in The Gambia, led series of community engagements, geared towards bringing the UN to the people. This included a Menstrual Health Management Outreach, led by UNFPA The Gambia on 24 October 2019, in partnership with The Girls’ Agenda, targeting 300 adolescent girls at Soma Upper Basic school, in the Lower River Region of The Gambia.

In a world where girls and women are period shamed, where pad poverty is a daily lived experience, most school-going girls are left with the choice to stay out of school, during their periods. As a result of this reality, UNFPA The Gambia supported the provision of sanitary kits containing 5 reusable pads, 2 bars of soap, underpants a school bag, to ensure that girls do not miss school as a result of their periods. To ensure sustainability and a widespread of knowledge especially on taboo topics in The Gambia like mensuration and other sexual and reproductive health issues, the girls were introduced to menstrual health and hygiene discussions, to enable them take care of themselves and stay healthy.

“%e is absolutely essential that everyone joins the conversation. We need your opinions, your strategies, your ideas, to be able to deliver better for the people of the world we must serve.”

Speaking to UNFPA, like most girls in The Gambia, the girls shared the challenges they encounter during their first periods and how limited information on the topic of mensuration from their parents or communities, have affected how they respond to these issues.
On the path to building and ensuring a progressive society, the highlight of the Menstrual Hygiene Management Outreach, came from the adolescent boys in the school, who helped package the sanitary kits for distribution amongst their sisters. Surely, boys are taking up partnership and supporting their sisters to access vital reproductive health information and services.

This activity gave UNFPA the opportunity to meet with adolescent girls, as they are key to the work we do, listen to their concerns and discuss better ways to build a better and sustainable world where everyone can thrive.
UNFPA Lobbies Support of National Assembly Members to Promote Women’s Health and Well-being Among Others

“The things we say might not be popular but someone has to do the work with support from all relevant stakeholders.”

With over four decades of support to the Government of The Gambia, UNFPA The Gambia Representative, Mr. Kunle Adeniyi and the Country Office team, on Wednesday 6 November 2019, met with the National Assembly Select-Committee on Women, Children, Disaster, Humanitarian Relief and Refugees. The meeting, geared towards strengthening the partnership between the National Assembly and the UNFPA Country Office, was led by the Chairperson of the Select-Committee.

Presiding over the meeting, the Chairperson extended profound gratitude to UNFPA for supporting the committee members benefit from various capacity building opportunities, aimed at preparing them to contribute more meaningfully to the development of the country and in carrying out their functions as lawmakers. He went on to reaffirmed the Committee's commitment to promoting the rights of women and girls in the country and their unflinching support to the agency in executing its mandate in the country.

These were the opening remarks of the UNFPA Representative as he shared the work of his agency, especially the strides made in the areas of women's health, protecting the wellbeing of adolescent girls and the empowerment of young people in The Gambia.

Emphasising the interests of the Country Office to the select committee, Mr. Adeniyi reminded the committee members about the need to push for women's active participation in the National Assembly. According to him,

“The Gambia will not grow out of its circle of poverty if it does not invest in its women, girls and young people.”

He called on the committee to support the achievement of the three zeros and assured them of UNFPA’s continued support and partnership in delivering a Gambia
As a strong voice for women, I advocate for Family Planning uptake openly in my village because this is a sector of society that needs to be protected and empowered with the right information.

- Honorable Nyassi

Honourable Nyassi, one of the committee members shared his delight with the gathering and called on everyone present to do something about maternal mortality, because the recent recorded rates are alarming.

“women are vulnerable but women with disability are helpless, which leaves them more vulnerable.”

Honourable Ndey Yassin Secka Sallah, a strong voice for persons with disabilities and a National Assembly, recognised UNFPA’s work in the country and called for more targeted interventions to support women and girls living with disabilities.

She highlighted that,

where every pregnancy is wanted, every childbirth is safe and every young person's potential is fulfilled.
In order to ensure the eradication of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) in various communities and The Gambia as a whole, there is a need to employ a multi-stakeholder approach. This is why, the involvement of ex-circumcisers is key in the campaign to eradicate the practice.

Hinged on this importance, with support from UNFPA The Gambia, GAMCOTRAP on 14 December 2019 conducted a one-day FGM refresher training for 30 ex-circumcisers in Nyakoi Talabatu, in the Upper River Region on The Gambia. It should be noted that, when circumcisers who are the custodians of this harmful practice, drop their knives and join the movement to end FGM, the results will be enormous, thus, there is a need to keep them adequately informed about the importance of campaigning against the practice and the power of their voices in their communities, to influence positive change.

This is why, UNFPA continues to support grassroots movements and structures such as these ex-circumciser, to leverage the power of their condemning the practice of FGM and to amplify their positive stories of change, for greater impact in accelerating the abandonment of FGM and other harmful traditional practices against women and girls.
“Female Genital Mutilation is detrimental to the health of women and girls.” - Lamin Jallow, GAMCOTRAP

After over three decades of the campaign to end Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) in The Gambia, the practice was criminalised in The Gambia in 2015. However, it is evident that the practice still continues to be carried out in various communities in the country and the URR is no exception. Recent studies have also shown that the region records some of the highest numbers of maternal death cases in the country. As such, supporting efforts to end FGM, is a key part of UNFPA’s work.

Ensuring that all stakeholders are actively involved in the campaign to end all forms of violence against women and girls, is key to its successful realisation. Recognising this fact, with support from UNFPA The Gambia, the Gambia Committee on Traditional Practices (GAMCOTRAP), on Friday 15 November 2019, trained one hundred (100) teachers from the Diabugu Batapa and Nyakoi Talibatu communities if the Upper River Region (URR), on FGM. The training is part of continuous efforts aimed at accelerating the abandonment of FGM and other harmful traditional practices affecting women and girls, in the URR and The Gambia at large.

Speaking at the event, the GAMCOTRAP Regional Coordinator for URR, Ms. Fatou Bojang, shared the numerous health complications caused by FGM, which include severe pain during birth, urinary retention and even death in some cases. She stressed that, “many women are walking around with severe complications caused by the practice, which they cannot share with anyone due to our taboos and the culture of silence.”

Following the activity, Foday Camara a participant, recommended that perpetrators of harmful traditional practices be held accountable and punished. According to him, this will serve as an example to everyone to abide by the laws. He stressed that,

“the culture of negotiating with perpetrators of harmful practices at family and community levels, is the main factor undermining the fight against FGM.”
According to recent studies, Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) is still heavily practiced in three districts of the Upper River Region (URR) namely: Sandu, Wuli East and Wuli West Districts. As a result, the Gambia Committee on Harmful Traditional Practices affecting the health of women and children (GAMCOTRAP) held sensitisation activities for one hundred youth and women and girls of reproductive age from various districts, on the health complications of FGM, on the 14 and 15 November 2019, respectively.

Both activities supported by UNFPA, aim to accelerate the abandonment of FGM and other harmful traditional practices like Child Marriages and other forms of Gender-Based Violence (GBV). The GAMCOTRAP team led by Musa Jallow, emphasised that both sensitizations are meant to empower the youth, women and girls respectively with requisite information on harmful traditional practices and how they can collectively take a stance against it. He added that, there is a need to raise the awareness of the youth, noting that they are instrumental in changing harmful practices in society. The facilitators encouraged the participants to utilise the knowledge gained and share their experiences so as to contribute to the elimination of harmful traditional practices in their various communities and to work towards achieving an FGM-free society. According to the lead facilitator,

“these harmful traditional practices are changeable depending on the advancement of knowledge as well as generational changes”.

Fatou Bojang, GAMCOTRAP field coordinator during her deliberations added that, FGM is one of the main issues affecting the health of women and girls in The Gambia. She took the participants through the effects of FGM, citing excessive bleeding, urinary retention, among other health and physical consequences. She pointed out the importance of education and encouraged parents to enroll their children in school. This she stressed, will help improve their understanding on social issues as well as help curb poverty in this generation and by extension the whole country.

Talking to the women of Sare Guba, Fatou Bojang encouraged them to be conscious of family planning, noting that understanding family planning would enable them to practice birth-spacing, which is likely to strengthen their health and well-being.

The different yet very similar activities, left the different target population groups with the needed information to make informed choices to protect themselves and the next generation from harmful traditional practices.
On 8 December 2019, the National Youth Parliament ended a nationwide Training of Trainers on Peaceful Political and Constitutional Debate Processes in Banjul. The trainings commenced in July and have since been conducted in Jarra Soma, Basse, Janjanbureh, Kerewan, Brikama, Kanifing Municipality and Banjul, targeting 60 participants each in every location, emerging from all the registered parties in The Gambia and the regional youth leadership structures. This activity, inspired by the reality that young people have a crucial role to play in maintaining peace in The Gambia, brought together 34 and 26 women and men respectively, in the closing lap of the training held in Banjul, to dialogue and strategise on ways to hold healthy conversations on issues they have different views on, especially Politics.

In light of the new dispensation in the country, the rise of conflict amongst young people has been evident and as such, there is a need to promote healthy engagements for sustainable peace. The participants at the activity were led through presentations and critical thinking sessions which availed participants from different political parties to think deeply as to how they can make The Gambia more peaceful with specific focus on their roles as young people.

Following the discussions, the participations came up with key recommendations for The National Youth Parliament to engage leaders of various political parties in The Gambia, to inculcate the culture of spreading peaceful messages to their supporters and sympathisers. This, according to them, will strengthen peace and peacebuilding in the country.

The contributions from the participants include key ones from Isatou Jallow, a participant from The Gambia Democratic Congress (GDC) who believes that we can all disagree politically but that should not affect whatever relationship we have as people living in the same country. According to Fatou Dibba, a representative from United Democratic Party (UDP) “accountability is eminent in peace building. As such, we must make sure that we hold our party leaders to account first before anything else”. On the other hand, Aminata Lamin from the People’s Democratic Organisation for Independence and Socialism (PDOIS) emphasised that, “we cannot continue to support life presidents in our country. People must serve and give others a chance too. That is what democracy is all about”. Through its UN Peacebuilding funded project on Increasing Women and Youth Participation in Decision Making and as Agents of Community Conflict Prevention, UNFPA The Gambia continues to support such platforms that will enhance inclusivity and ensure active participation of young people in peacebuilding and decision making.
processes, in order to empower them to realise their fullest potentials, thus leading us to harnessing The Gambia’s Demographic Dividend.
Without peace, we cannot be here in the market to sell our products and commodities. We all have a responsibility to maintain peace and this responsibility is one that we need to be reminded about on a daily basis.”
- a vendor at the Serrekunda market

Peace Caravan Promotes Women and Youth Participation in Decision-Making and Peacebuilding Processes in 10 Communities

Promoting peacebuilding and encouraging women and youth active participation in decision making is a message that needs to reach all corners of grassroots communities. This is why, from the 4 to 8 December 2019, ACTIVISTA The Gambia with support from UNFPA through the UN Peacebuilding funded Women and Youth project, organised a Peace Caravan, to create awareness on the need for collective action to build and promote peace, while encouraging women and youth actively participate in leadership and decision making process. The caravan, which went round the Greater Banjul Area, West Coast and Upper River Regions, reached a total of 10 communities, including markets and other public places using a public address system for information disseminating, and engaging people in discussion on peace, youth and women political participation, among others. Through this social mobilisation activity, an estimated 550 people were reached, most of whom were women, to dilate on the following questions/discussion points:

- Why should young people and women participate in peace building and politics?
- How can one participate and what are the current decision-making processes that young people and women can participate in at community level?

Interesting contributions emerged from individuals in the various target communities, buttressing the importance of such an initiative and why it is important that decision-making and peacebuilding processes are participatory and inclusive.

According to Foday, a driver at Westfield,

“youth and women should avoid political divides and conflict and instead should serve as agents of peace and opt for leadership positions.”
Creating Spaces for Faith-Based Organisations to Contribute to Peace Building Processes in The Gambia

On 21 December 2019, the Assembly of Gambian Muslim Youths (AGAMY) held a seminar on the theme “Peace Building for Sustainable Development” at the Doha Hal in Kanifing. This activity supported by UNFPA The Gambia was inspired by the current political reality of The Gambia which brings forth the need to identify key conflict drivers and peace engines in The Gambia and how all stakeholders especially young people, can play vital roles in peacebuilding processes. The seminar brought together 50 participants from different political parties, Civil Society Organizations, the media, religious and youth organisations, among others.

Speaking at the opening ceremony, Mr. Ousman Gaku, President of AGAMY highlighted the need for such occasion under the prevailing circumstances in the country, citing the importance of creating spaces for dialogue and mutual understanding, for the common good.

Representing UNFPA The Gambia Mr. Alieu Jammeh, Program Analyst Reproductive Health Community Security (RHCS) presided over the opening ceremony and shared the delight of the country office to support such a timely activity. He emphasised the importance of youth in the development of the country and more so the attainment of sustainable peace across The Gambia.

According to Mr. Gibril Ngorr Secka, Director of Security at the Ministry of Interior

“Religion is a formidable tool in peacebuilding.”

The seminar featured discussion on various topics including Early Warning, Conflict Prevention, the Role of Religious Groups in Peacebuilding, among others. It ended with brainstorming on the way forward as far as attaining sustainable peace in The Gambia is concerned.

“Young people should not be neglected but included in problem solving drives as they constitute 65% of The Gambia’s population. For us at UNFPA, we attach great importance to investing in youth as a pre-requisite to realising their individual potentials.”
Community Shared Learning: A Strategy for Ending Discrimination against Returnee Migrants and Promoting Reintegration and Youth Participation

“Returnee migrants should be respected and have equal access to opportunities in The Gambia to help in their reintegration, thus reducing discrimination and ensuring peace and stability.” – a vendor at the Serrekunda Market

The issue of irregular migration in West Africa in general and The Gambia to be particular, is characterised by series of contributing factors, including poverty, unemployment, among many others. It is estimated that, West Africa records the highest number of intra-regional migrants and, to a lesser extent, migrants moving towards Northern Africa and Europe, according to the International Organisation for Migration (IOM). As a result, between 2014 and 2018 alone, a recorded number of over 35,000 Gambians arrived in Europe by irregular means (IOM The Gambia). A great number of these emigrants, unfortunately happen to be young people.

Due to this influx and the poor conditions in which some of these migrants live in during transit and upon arrival at their destinations, actors have taken steps to facilitate voluntary return opportunities. Thus, between January 2017 and October 2019, over 4,800 Gambians were provided with return assistance by IOM.

Due to a lack of awareness however, communities may not be very accepting of these returnees and as a result of their (the migrants’) traumatic experiences, there is a critical need to employ reintegration programmes that will facilitate their smooth transitioning back to their communities of origin.

In this light, as part of activities supported by UNFPA The Gambia under the UN Peacebuilding funded project on Reintegration of Returnee Migrants, ACTIVISTA The Gambia, from the 24 to 25 December 2019, organised community shared learning sessions between returnee migrants and resident youth in sixteen (16) communities across the country, namely: Sintet, Tallinding, Banjul South, Banjul North, Faji Kunda, Basse Mansajang, Diabugu, Bantanto, Njaba Kunda, Barra, Jimbala, Kaiaf, Jarra Japineh, Jamali Ganyado, and Samba tacko.

The sessions, which initially targeted 30 youth in each community, making up a total of 480 youth all together, ended up reaching 608 youth people instead, thus exceeding the target. Among the reached number of youth through this activity, 308 were male while 300 were female, including returnees, survivors of human trafficking and resident youth in the various communities.

Conducted in collaboration with the Gambia Returnees from The Backway and the Network of Girls Against Human Trafficking, the shared learning sessions were aimed at helping facilitate the re-integration of returnees in their communities;
discourage stigmatisation, and stereotyping of returnees, and build solidarity; inform and provide information to young men and young women on issues of human trafficking.

As part of the sessions, young people were also informed about ways in which they can participate in community decision-making, peacebuilding and conflict prevention processes.

The shared learning sessions provided information to youth on the stigmatisation and stereotyping of returnee migrants, and why such is inhibiting the reintegration processes of returnees.

“We wish our young people had the opportunity to participate in such a forum before they departed for the backway journey”

said Abdul Aziz Kah of Medina Sering Mass, citing the recent incident of a sunken boat along the shores of Mauritania, which claimed the lives of over fifty Gambians, stressing that, this was the worst incident that happened in their community since it was established more than 150 years ago. He mentioned that in fact, about 13 people on the said boat are claimed to have come from the same extended family.

Speaking during the session in Barra, the Chairperson of the Village Development Committee (VDC) stressed that, young people in their community continue to take the backway because they are struggling for survival as there are limited job opportunities available. As a result, these youth he said, depend highly on commercial boat transportation from Barra to Banjul to earn a living, which he stressed is no longer good business due to the efficiency of the ferry service. He called on government and other partners to create employment opportunities for the youth in order for them to be able to sustain their families.

Regarding the reintegration of survivors of human trafficking, members of the target communities pledged to sensitisise their colleagues and peers to disengage on stereotyping, and stigmatisation of survivors of human trafficking.

The highlight of the shared learning sessions, was in one of the communities, where Binta Sey, a woman attested that her daughter is currently being helped by an agent to obtain a passport and get a job in Kuwait but as a result of her participation in the session, she was able to understand the dangers involved in this journey and immediately called her daughter to discontinue the process. In her words

“What if I had not come here? My daughter could have ended up being enslaved or even killed if she went on this journey.”

Modou Jagne, a returnee migrant confessed that the backway journey is a perilous one, citing his personal experiences on the journey:
“I went through hell fire during my journey, I have seen dead people, I have seen people being killed in cold blood, I have been starved for more than 4 days without food, I have been beaten, I suffered and suffered but I thank God for bringing me back and reuniting me with my family. Now I am in business and I sell second-hand clothing and I am ok with that.”
National Youth Organisations Capacitated to Strengthen Operational Effectiveness

Through the UN Peacebuilding funded women and youth project, The Gambia National Youth Council with support from UNFPA The Gambia, on Saturday 28 December 2019, completed a two-day capacity building activity for National Youth Organisations in the country, bringing together 70 participants from all regions.

The training was aimed at strengthening the capacity of youth and youth-led organisations, on effective programme delivery, to strengthen operational effectiveness, sustainability and data-based programming, through peer-to-peer research. This is believed to drive better impact-driven programmes and projects for the benefit of Gambian young people in general. Some of the modules the participants were taken through include, Result-Based or Performance-Based budgeting, among many others.

It is imperative that, for young people to realise their maximum potential, the structures working to address the issues affecting them must be adequately strengthened to ensure that the investments made into this section of the population, yield results and translate into better life outcomes for them. This is why, such capacity building exercised are key.

At the end of the activity, participants representing the various youth-led organisations, made key recommendations on how to improve coordination of youth programmes/activities in the country, while emphasising the importance of the coordination role of the National Youth Council, as it is critical in achieving the shared vision for a productive youth folk and contributing towards building a better Gambia.
Radio Talk Shows Paving the Way for Community Awareness on Women and Youth Participation in Decision-Making and Peacebuilding

Mass media is an effective avenue for information dissemination and awareness creation. Its use, creates an opportunity for wider reach of target populations and sparking community conversations for positive social change.

Based on this realisation, ACTIVISTA The Gambia, with support from UNFPA The Gambia through its UN Peacebuilding funded project on Increasing Women and Youth Participation in Decision Making and as Agents of Community Conflict Prevention, runs a weekly radio talk show, providing a platform for youth and women to learn and express their opinion and concerns around women and youth participation in decision-making processes and the roles each population group has to play in attaining sustainable peace in The Gambia.

Recent studies have shown that, a majority of Gambians depend more on the radio, as opposed to other mediums of communication and information sharing. Thus, during the last quarter of 2019 (October – December), 36 radio Talk Shows were conducted, with twelve shows hosted at Home Digital FM, Qradio and Paradise FM Basse respectively. This decentralisation of the shows, created a unique opportunity for nationwide coverage and reach.

The shows, which have live phone-in options, recorded a total of 160 phone calls during the quarter, giving an average of 5 callers per show, therefore making them participatory and open to the public. This is also a way of ensuring that, shared learning was fostered, by giving callers an opportunity to share their perspectives with the wider listening audience and creating room for interaction and perception change.

Additionally, live tweeting of the shows is done to ensure that the virtual community who may not have an opportunity to listen in on the programme, could participate in the discussions and share their thoughts as well.

Some other topics such as Human Rights, Migration, Gender Equality, Gender-Based Violence and harmful practices, among many others are also usually discussed on the shows, to shed light on issues affecting women, girls and young people in The Gambia and to identify ways in which they can be curbed.
Introducing #MÉBÉT the Movie: Inspiring a Generation to Take Action against Child Marriage

Every child dreams of a bright life, one that brings them joy and laughter, days of fulfilled hope and realised dreams spent with a family they love and cherish. Every child longs for happy endings and happy ever-afters. This however, is not the case for the 650 million girls and women alive today who were married off before their 18th birthday. This and the 12 million girls that are married off every year, watch the world clip their dreams and cage them in a lifelong misery.

With every day that passes by and every encounter, we are reminded of the 1 in 3 girls that have been married off in The Gambia before they turned 18. This grave human rights violation, has cost the lives of over a million girls around the globe. Some are left with no education, leaving them dependant on the system and others are stuck in realities they never envisioned for themselves.

In an effort to restore the hope of girls in The Gambia, UNFPA The Gambia has spent the past decades with its partners to ensure girls have access to quality education and are empowered to make informed decisions.

In December 2019, as part of activities marking 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence, UNFPA supported RebelVZN to screen their debut film dubbed #MÉBÉT in 5 Upper Basic schools in the Greater Banjul Area, namely Latrikunda Upper Basic School, St. John's School for The Deaf, Charles Jow Memorial Academy, St. Theresa's Upper Basic School and Khaddijatou's Centre of Excellence, targeting 100 students in each school with boys and girls inclusive.

#MÉBÉT is a film that explores child marriage in a typical Gambian community, giving an insight on the journey of a girl who is forced to marry an elderly man as a result of poverty and her parents’ desire to uphold longstanding traditions, which unfortunately brought her life to an abrupt end.
“Child Marriage is bad and our generation has a unique opportunity to end it in a generation. I have taken up the commitment and we can all change the narratives.”

Fatoumatta Bah, also a student of Charles Jow Memorial Academy, in her contribution, reminded her peers and everyone present at the screening that,

“we cannot talk about Child Marriage without talking about Female Genital Mutilation. The fight to end these ordeals and dawn a new day for women and girls in The Gambia and beyond, must run simultaneously because they are both harmful practices.”

Interestingly, the boys also had strong opinions about the practices, with Muhammed Bah, a student of Jarles Jow Memorial Academy stressing that,

“Child marriage does not have any positive benefits and can lead to maternal mortality.”

Fatoumatta Jallow a student of Charles Jow memorial believes that,

“poverty encourages some parents to marry off their children. When parents are poor and find it difficult to make ends meet every day, if a rich man asks for their daughter’s hand in marriage, the chances are high that they will accept this offer, in order deliver themselves from their ordeal.”

When the students were asked about the causes of child marriage, what they think about it and how they pledge to end it in their communities, Anna, a student from St. Theresa’s shared that,
The #MÉBÉT screenings provided a unique platform to engage girls and boys to foster understanding and strike a call for reflection and actions to end child marriage and all other forms of violence affecting women and girls in The Gambia and around the world.

Each screening left us hopeful for what the future holds for women and girls and how their male counterparts are making conscious efforts to support the progress towards realising a world free from all forms of violence. UNFPA The Gambia remains committed to continue supporting initiatives such as #MÉBÉT, which inspire social and behavioural change and call for common action to eradicate Gender-Based Violence and harmful practices in The Gambia and beyond.
It has fast become the norm, December in The Gambia is a festive period and music is used as a tool to unite people, especially young people. However, with numerous planned protests and potential division along religious lines based on the interpretation of the country’s draft constitution, there is the potential for tension and conflict. As a result, it was thought ideal that this year's Open Mic Festival can provide a great platform to leverage on youth interest in music to support social mobilisation for awareness raising and peacebuilding efforts, with thousands of young people in attendance and millions of online viewers across the world.

Thus, in the 10-day leading up to the Festival, UNFPA The Gambia in partnership with Black Lynx, launched the#PeaceCommitments220 campaign, to get young people to make strong commitments to promote peace in their communities, encourage attendance of the festival and implore the population to actively participate in peacebuilding processes in The Gambia. The campaign also resulted in the adoption of “Young People for a Peaceful Gambia” as the theme for this year's festival, by the organisers.

Through either taking a picture with one of the photo frames positioned in various strategic locations, or recording a thirty second video of yourself making your commitment and sharing it on social media using the campaign hashtags, the public was invited to participate in the campaign. As a way of promoting the Open Mic Festival, UNFPA also had 100 tickets to the festival, as give-aways to lucky winners who joined the campaign, if they followed the guidance on how to participate.
When we ask for commitments to promote peace however, it could mean different things to different people.
So what really does peace mean to you?

For some who joined the campaign, peace to them means the eradication of Gender-Based Violence, ensuring inclusivity in sports, using media to preach peace, encouraging dialogue and understanding, encouraging the use of theatre and other performing arts to speak up against violence, among many others. Beautiful yet powerful voices came together and committed to take action through this campaign.

A fresh approach to counting down to the renowned festival, the campaign garnered a lot of attention, with young people from various works of life, heads of diplomatic missions, musicians, poets, media personalities, lawyers, among an array of participants, accepting the challenge to make commitments for sustainable peace in The Gambia.

The question you may be asking yourself right now could be – is the #PeaceCommitments220 campaign ending at the Open Mic Festival?

Well, the good news is, no. We will continue the campaign in other spheres and ensure diverse participation of young people from all parts of the country in the coming months.
Until then, will you commit to promote and maintain peace in your community?
We challenge you today!