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Annual Report



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www.thinkyoungwomengambia.org

Foreword

2023 marked a year of significant transformation and growth for Think Young Women (TYW). We embarked on a journey driven by our unwavering commitment to address Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and harmful practices, while fostering leadership and development among women and youth. Supported by esteemed partners such as UNFPA The Gambia, UNICEF Gambia, and ICTJ, our initiatives have made significant strides in creating a more inclusive and just society.

Our efforts to combat GBV and harmful practices were marked by several impactful activities. We engaged out-of-school girls in crucial conversations to end Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), amplifying their voices and empowering them to advocate for their rights. The “Layboon” initiative, which promotes storytelling to inspire social change, has been instrumental in shifting narratives and fostering a culture of empathy and understanding. Additionally, we actively pushed back against the proposed repeal of the law prohibiting FGM, standing firm in our commitment to protect the rights and well-being of women and girls in The Gambia.

In our pursuit of increasing women and youth inclusion in leadership, development, and transitional justice, we undertook several key activities. We facilitated a message development activity to document the reparations priorities of victims of human rights violations, ensuring their voices are heard and their needs addressed. The Victims’ Open Letter to the Attorney General and Minister of Justice was a powerful testament to the resilience and determination of those affected by past injustices meted by the former Jammeh regime. Furthermore, we sensitised victims about the government’s implementation plan on the recommendations of the Truth, Reconciliation, and Reparations Commission (TRRC), fostering transparency and accountability.

Our focus on advancing feminist leadership development was exemplified by the successful implementation of the girls’ mentorship programme in the Lower River Region. This initiative will nurture the next generation of women leaders, equipping them with the skills and confidence to drive positive change in their communities.



As we reflect on the achievements of 2023, we are filled with pride and gratitude for the unwavering support of our donors, partners, and the communities we serve. Together, we have made significant progress in our mission to create a more equitable and just society. We look forward to building on this momentum in the coming years, continuing to empower women and youth, and championing the cause of justice and equality for all.

Musu Bakoto Sawo
National Coordinator

List of Acronyms

CRR	●	●	Central River Region
CSO	●	●	Civil Society Organisation
DHS	●	●	Demographic and Health Survey
FGM	●	●	Female Genital Mutilation
GBV	●	●	Gender-Based Violence
ICTJ	●	●	International Center for Transitional Justice
LRR	●	●	Lower River Region
NBR	●	●	North Bank Region
SGBV	●	●	Sexual and Gender-Based Violence
SRHR	●	●	Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights
TRRC	●	●	Truth, Reconciliation and Reparations Commission
TYW	●	●	Think Young Women
UNFPA	●	●	United Nations Population Fund
UNICEF	●	●	United Nations Children's Fund
URR	●	●	Upper River Region
WCR	●	●	West Coast Region

Our Funders in 2023



The Board, Executive and entire team at TYW wish to extend our profound appreciation to the following donors for supporting our work in 2023. Your invaluable financial and technical support is crucial in helping us fulfil our mission for young women and girls in The Gambia.



Our Year in Figures

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Open letter by victims of past human rights violations to the Attorney General and Minister of Justice

100

Out-of-school girls trained on FGM

10

Young women trained on storytelling to end FGM

50

Young women engaged on the transitional justice process

125

Victims sensitised on recommendations of the government's white paper

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Position paper on the socio-economic implications of FGM in The Gambia

80

Girls in the Lower River Region graduated from the Girls' Mentorship Programme

Addressing Gender-Based Violence And Harmful Practices

In The Gambia, GBV and harmful practices are rooted in patriarchal socio-cultural norms and unequal power relations that propel women to further subjugation, limit their access to and control of resources and reduce the civic space to speak up against all forms of violence. Despite the enactment of legislation such as the Women's Act (2010) and its Amendment in 2015, the Children's Act (2005) and its Amendment in 2016, the Domestic Violence Act, Sexual Offences Act and the Tourism Offences Act, violations of their provisions remain highly prevalent, with perpetrators often shielded from punishment as a result of weak enforcement of the law, impunity and a common disregard for the rights of women and girls to be protected from violence.

According to the 2019-2020 Demographic and Health Survey (DHS), 9% of women between 15 and 49 years have been subjected to sexual violence. 40% of ever-married women in the country have experienced some form of physical, sexual and emotional abuse by an intimate partner and 51% of women and 35% of men believe that wife battering is acceptable. Similarly, 75% of girls aged between 15 and 49 years have been subjected to FGM while 69,300 girls in the country were married before they turned 15 years old, and 248,900 girls were married off before their 18th birthday.



Project Implementation Summaries

Engaging Out-of-School Girls in the Conversation to End FGM

In 2023, TYW, with generous funding from UNICEF, organised a training for out-of-school girls on FGM. The initiative reached 100 girls from five communities in the Central River Region (CRR) of The Gambia, namely Boss Town, Kerewan Dumbokono, Sarre Soffie, Dobong Kunda, and Batti Njol. Spanning three days, the training aimed to provide the girls with a deep understanding of FGM, including its origins, cultural misconceptions, and its significant impact on individuals and communities. The training also covered essential topics such as GBV, child marriage, sexual reproductive health, and legal frameworks prohibiting FGM and child marriage in The Gambia. It included a critical analysis of flawed cultural justifications, and the legal context relating to Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV).

A key aspect of the program was to challenge the myths surrounding FGM, particularly those misinterpreted as Islamic teachings. This was addressed through sessions with religious leaders who provided perspectives on how FGM is not a religious obligation, thus debunking the long-standing beliefs within the communities. To ensure that training objectives were met, participants' knowledge of the practice was assessed using pre-and post-test questionnaires. The results indicated a significant initial knowledge gap, which was shown to reduce by the end of the intervention, thus demonstrating the effectiveness of the training. The training also highlighted the importance of practical skills and self-care, alongside knowledge about legal protections provided for women and girls by domestic laws. At the end of the training, participants expressed newfound confidence and commitment to promoting positive change and eradicating FGM from their communities. Overall, the intervention significantly enhanced the participants' understanding and empowered them to advocate against FGM and child marriage. The success of this program highlights the importance of culturally sensitive and linguistically inclusive approaches in future training efforts to maximise impact and reach.

"Layboon" - Promoting Storytelling to Inspire Social Change

In partnership with the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) through the Global Youth Consortium Grant, TYW launched the "Layboon" storytelling project. This initiative was designed to combat FGM in The Gambia by empowering young women and girls through storytelling. The "Layboon" project involved a week-long residential workshop for ten young women community influencers from the Upper River Region (URR). Participants, aged 18 to 35 years, were trained in creative writing, oral history, and multimedia storytelling. The goal was to develop compelling human-interest stories addressing critical issues such as gender inequality, SGBV, FGM, child marriage, and mental health.

During the workshop, participants created stories based on their experiences and the narratives of women and girls in their communities. These stories are expected to serve as powerful tools for raising awareness and inspiring action against FGM and other forms of violence. By using storytelling as a medium, TYW aims to shift societal attitudes and foster broader community engagement in the fight against harmful practices. Participants expressed profound gratitude for the opportunity to engage in storytelling and develop their advocacy skills. They valued the chance to learn about issues affecting women and to use their voices to drive social change. The stories produced through "Layboon" will be utilised by TYW as case studies and advocacy tools to engage and educate the broader community, furthering the goal of eradicating FGM and promoting women's rights.

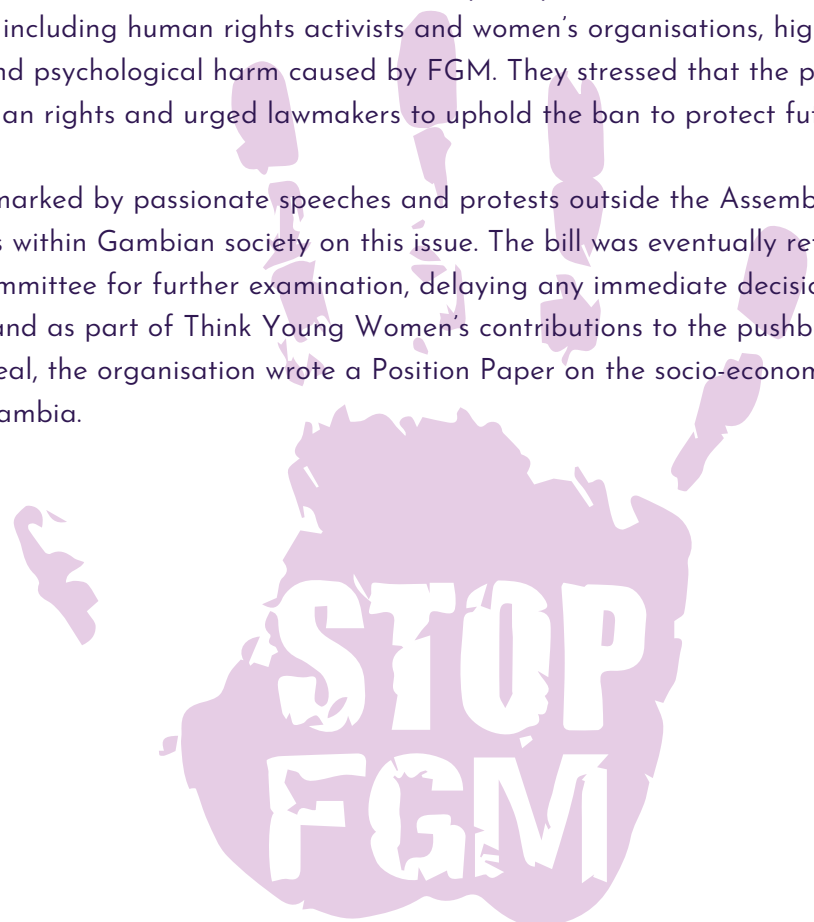
Pushback on the Proposed Repeal of the Law Prohibiting FGM

In 2023, The Gambia's National Assembly became a focal point of intense debate over the proposed repeal of the law prohibiting FGM. The law, initially enacted in 2015 under President Yahya Jammeh, aimed to protect women and girls from this harmful practice, which was prevalent due to deep-rooted cultural and religious beliefs.

The push to repeal the ban gained momentum in early 2023, driven by influential Muslim clerics who argued that the prohibition was not aligned with Islamic teachings. An independent lawmaker tabled the Women's (Amendment) Bill, sparking widespread controversy and public outcry.

During the National Assembly sessions, proponents of the repeal emphasised the need to respect cultural practices and religious freedoms. They argued that the ban infringed on these rights and that communities should have the autonomy to uphold their traditions. On the other hand, opponents, including human rights activists and women's organisations, highlighted the severe physical and psychological harm caused by FGM. They stressed that the practice violates fundamental human rights and urged lawmakers to uphold the ban to protect future generations.

The debate was marked by passionate speeches and protests outside the Assembly, reflecting the deep divisions within Gambian society on this issue. The bill was eventually referred to a parliamentary committee for further examination, delaying any immediate decision. In response to this discourse and as part of Think Young Women's contributions to the pushback against this potential repeal, the organisation wrote a Position Paper on the socio-economic implications of FGM in The Gambia.



Position Paper on the Socio-Economic Implications of Female Genital Mutilation in The Gambia

Introduction

Think Young Women (TYW) reiterates its grave concern over the proposed repeal of the Women's (Amendment) Act, 2015 which prohibits FGM in The Gambia. We note the sensitive debates currently spreading in our communities and on various platforms, often leading to the dissemination of misleading information and the attacks on the integrity and work of women's rights and development actors who continue to invest their energies and resources towards advancing gender equality and the empowerment of women in The Gambia and beyond. As a women's rights non-profit organisation and member of the coalition of CSOs calling for the eradication of this harmful practice, it is our position that FGM is a perpetuation of adverse discrimination against women and girls, and a violation of their fundamental human rights. By this paper, we seek to provide a comprehensive review of the socio-economic implications of the continued practice and entrenchment of FGM in Gambian culture.

This position paper is submitted in light of the consultations currently being led by the National Assembly Joint Committee of Health and Gender on the Women's (Amendment) Bill 2024. We hope that this paper, in addition to the contributions of other Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), will provide guidance to the National Assembly and bring clarity to the need to maintain and enhance current legal protections against FGM for our women and girls.

Our Position

Our position remains that FGM is a harmful cultural practice that has no place in a progressive society. Despite its severe socio-economic implications, it remains a prevalent and deeply entrenched social practice in many parts of The Gambia. The practice not only violates fundamental human rights but also perpetuates discriminatory attitudes and economic disparities that hinder social progress.

According to the 2019/2020 Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) conducted by The Gambia Bureau of Statistics, 73% of women aged 15 to 49 years in The Gambia and 46% of girls aged 0 to 14 years have been circumcised. This paper delves into the multifaceted repercussions of FGM on individuals, families, communities, and the broader socio-economic fabric of Gambian society.

1. Discrimination and Social Marginalisation:

Uncut women face severe discrimination within their communities. They are ostracised from social gatherings, with their food left uneaten, and in The Gambia, they are subjected to derogatory names such as "solima." This marginalisation extends to exclusion from important ceremonies, impacting their social standing and sense of belonging. Mothers who have not undergone FGM often see their children devalued within society. This discrimination extends to children being viewed as less significant or unworthy, perpetuating cycles of inequality and undermining family dynamics.

2. Low Socio-Economic Development Indicators:

It is noteworthy that 20 out of the 30 countries where FGM is practised including The Gambia are considered “least developed.”¹ This signals a possible linkage between socio-economic development indicators for individuals, families and the country and the prevalence of the practice.

3. Child Valuation and Marriageability Status

Due to the light in which circumcised girls are viewed in practising communities, FGM is seen as an investment by parents to prepare their girls for the marriage market. It is a method they perceive to help preserve the virginity of girls, thus, earning them honour and pride once married. However, we continue to see over and over again in our communities, circumcised girls falling pregnant before marriage. This marriageability factor continues to propel the objectification of girls and women as commodities and not complete human beings with rights, needs, aspirations and a desire to contribute to the growth and advancement of their families, communities and country.

4. Financial Burden on Families and Communities:

In addition to the cost of FGM itself, significant amounts of money are spent on elaborate ceremonies following the cutting, to signify the rite of passage and the initiation of girls into womanhood. These elaborate ceremonies place a financial strain on families. While these expenses cover the cost of gifts for the girl, and in some instances her mother, feeding guests attending the ceremony as well as payment or gifts for the circumciser and her team, expenses could otherwise be directed towards essential costs such as education, healthcare, or other needs of the family.

5. Increased Burden on the Health System

Beyond the immediate health risks associated with FGM, such as infections and complications during childbirth, the long-term socio-economic burden includes increased healthcare costs, lost productivity due to health issues, and diminished quality of life.

The economic cost of managing FGM-related health complications further strains our already overburdened health system, thus preventing the efficient utilisation of our under-resourced health budget. According to the WHO Cost Calculator, if The Gambia continues its current course of FGM prevalence, 1.3 million girls are projected to undergo FGM and the health cost related to this is projected to rise to USD 8.4 million per year. However, if we can completely eradicate the practice in The Gambia, about 870,000 girls will be protected from it and by 2047, the country will save about USD 5.7 million annually. If current trends persist, the number of girls and women subjected to FGM will significantly rise in the next 15 years, thus resulting in a rise in the national costs for health care provision to them.

6. Diminished Quality of Life and Limited Performance in the Labour

Given the health consequences faced by women and girls subjected to FGM, their ability to contribute to economic development diminishes. Affected women who join the labour force are at risk of below-standard performance due to potential long-term health implications of the practice as opposed to women not subjected to the practice.² A study in Gambia found that due to FGM, one out of every three circumcised women requires a medical gynaecological examination.³

Research Insights and Policy Implications

Research from sub-Saharan Africa underscores that socioeconomic and demographic factors significantly influence the prevalence of FGM. Wealth status emerges as a key determinant, with women from poorer households more likely to undergo the practice and face exacerbated socio-economic challenges. Education plays a critical role, as higher levels of education are associated with reduced likelihood of the practice among women and their daughters, highlighting the importance of educational interventions in combating this practice.

Our Recommendations for Your Consideration

Emphasising that FGM has several negative implications on women and girls subjected to it including socioeconomic implications, we appeal to the National Assembly of The Gambia to consider our recommendations in addition to other recommendations made by members of the CSO coalition against the practice.

1. Maintain Legal Protections

Maintain and strengthen the current legal prohibitions of FGM and promote the enforcement of punitive measures against perpetrators. Additionally, legal provisions should prioritise protecting the rights of women and girls who refuse to undergo the practice.

2. Promote Community Engagement and Education

Implementing comprehensive advocacy programs, including focus group discussions, peer teaching, and mentorship initiatives, are essential in enhancing public awareness and inspiring voluntary abandonment of harmful norms and practices. We appeal that the National Assembly through its members in various constituencies support efforts at grassroots level to engage with the public to dispel myths and raise awareness about the harms of FGM.

4. Support Research and Evidence Generation

Given that FGM has been proven to have adverse health implications on women and girls subjected to it, it is natural that most research efforts into the practice focus on its health dimensions. However, there is a need to further study the direct and indirect implications of the practice on the socioeconomic development indicators for individuals, communities and the country. Thus, we appeal to the National Assembly to task and allocate resources to the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Welfare in collaboration with the Gambia Bureau of Statistics, to study these socio-economic implications, thereby identifying linkages between the harmful practise and the country’s development trajectory.

Conclusion

The socio-economic implications of FGM in The Gambia underscore the urgent need for comprehensive, evidence-based interventions that address the root causes of this harmful practice. Efforts should focus on community engagement, education, advocacy, and policy reforms to eliminate FGM and promote gender equality and sustainable development. By addressing the socio-economic determinants of FGM, The Gambia can move closer to achieving its developmental aspirations while safeguarding the rights and well-being of its women and girls.

Women And Youth Inclusion In Leadership, Development And Transitional Justice

Since The Gambia voted out the brutal dictator Yahya Jammeh in 2016, ending his 22-year reign, the country has taken significant strides to promote the participation of young people and women in decision-making processes and their meaningful inclusion in the transitional justice process.

In a quest for a more inclusive development process, women and youth have been significant stakeholders in advancing the transitional justice process. Nationwide consultations, community engagement interventions and focus group discussions continue to be led by the government and CSOs seeking out the voices and aspirations of women and young people in the transitional justice process.

These efforts reflect a broader commitment to nurturing a more inclusive development process and creating a society that reflects equitable values and recognises women and youth as valuable stakeholders. However, women and youth continue to be grossly underrepresented in all sectors of development. Leading up to the 2023 Local Government Elections, 58 women were nominated for positions in local councils. While this is the highest number of aspiring women candidates for any elections the country has ever recorded, only 17 of the women won seats. Similarly, young people's participation in broader leadership and development processes remains limited. This calls for increased investments in their education, empowerment and meaningful participation in all development processes.



Project Implementation Summaries

Victims United to Demand Reparations

In 2020, TYW with support from the International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ) and in collaboration with its partners conducted a victim mapping exercise that identified Sabah Njieyen (North Bank Region), Soma (Lower River Region), Kudang (Central River Region), Basse (Upper River Region), and Gunjur (West Coast Region) as communities that had been affected by human rights violations by the former political regime of The Gambia, under the leadership of then President Yahya A.J.J Jammeh. The mapping exercise identified victims in specific communities that the TRRC did not reach. Given the significance of women inclusion in The Gambia's transitional justice process, fifty women, 10 from each of the five regions highlighted earlier, were engaged in conversations to enhance their understanding of the transitional justice process. As a result, a network powered by the target communities was created to increase support among victims and contribute towards achieving the goals of the country's transitional justice process.

Building on the previous engagements in the above-mentioned regions, TYW as part of the second phase of the project conducted a message development activity, to collect and document victims' reparations priorities identified by the target communities and facilitate the transformation of their demands into an open letter from the victims of human rights violations, to the Government of The Gambia. Held from 23 to 27 January 2023, this social mobilisation and message development activity created an opportunity for victims to identify ways of communicating their reparations demands to the Gambian Government. Bringing together about 125 men as well as women who participated in phase one of the activity, the message development engagement enabled participants to create consistent messages for use by their communities, thus facilitating the creation of an in-sync victims' demands movement throughout the targeted five regions of the countries.

As an outcome of this engagement, the network of victims developed consistent messages which culminated in an open letter addressed to the Attorney General and Minister of Justice as head of the government agency responsible for reparations.

Victims' Open Letter to the Attorney General and Minister of Justice

Honourable Dawda A. Jallow
Attorney General and Minister of Justice
Banjul, The Gambia

8th July 2023

Dear Honourable Minister,

Justice and Reparations for Victims of Human Rights Violations by the Jammeh

I present compliments to you and your Ministry from the Think Young Women team.

Following the publication of the Government of The Gambia's White Paper on the recommendations of the Truth, Reconciliation and Reparations Commission (TRRC), Think Young Women with support from the International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ), from the 18 to 22 July 2022, sensitised 125 men and women victims of the former Jammeh regime, from CRR, URR, LRR, NBR, and WCR, on Transitional Justice processes.

Following this engagement, a network of 125 victims was created with the aim of ensuring consistent messaging in demanding reparations and holding the Government to account for its commitment to deliver justice. In line with the above, the network of victims, through Think Young Women, writes this open letter to the Government of The Gambia via your good office, to seek accelerated implementation of the TRRC recommendations and to continue to demand inclusion in the entire transitional justice process.

Honourable Minister, when the TRRC was established in 2017, victims of the former regime including us, were elated by the hope that justice will be served. We were positive that we were a step closer to heal from our wounds and finally receive closure. However, today we write to you with heavy hearts and aching souls to remind you that, as victims of human rights atrocities meted out by former dictator Jammeh and his cohorts from Basse, URR; Kudang CRR; Sabah Njieyen, NBR Soma LRR; and Gunjur WCR, our stories have not been told, our pleas have not been heard and there is no semblance of justice for us that we foresee now.

Reminded that we have suffered unspeakable atrocities through which some of us have lost our loved ones, our livelihoods and our dignity, we regret to re-echo that we have been abandoned to pick up pieces of what is left of our shattered lives. We are still haunted by the trauma of what we have endured, and we continue to struggle immensely to move forward without adequate support and reparations.

Acknowledging that the TRRC was tasked with a challenging job of truth seeking and has made concrete recommendations, we urge you to implement them with immediate effect. We demand justice and reparations and want our voices heard loud and clear. We demand that you engage with us directly, hear our stories, and understand our pain.

Emphasising that for justice to be served, we need to be assured of the Government of The Gambia's will and readiness to engage with us beyond making empty promises, we need to see meaningful action. To this end, we need a public apology from the Head of State, who is yet to acknowledge the pain and suffering that we have endured and call on his government to take responsibility for addressing the atrocities the Jammeh regime committed against us.

Understanding that the road to reparations is long, we would like to reiterate the significance of taking swift action to provide us with the reparations we deserve, to help us regain our dignity, livelihoods and health. To ensure this, we will specifically need support to care for ourselves and our families. We demand that the government creates an opportunity to facilitate our healing and access to justice.

Recognising the critical role of your Ministry in the Transitional Justice process and as part of phase 3 of the project, Think Young Women plans to conduct an interface dialogue between victims and the Ministry of Justice in WCR, LRR, URR, CRR, and URR. This activity will create a platform where the victims can directly engage with the Government through your office, to build and foster exchanges and communications, thus strengthening public confidence in the Government's commitment to ensure effective implementation of the TRRC recommendations and by extension the entire Transitional Justice Process.

While we applaud you for your efforts towards the country's Transitional Justice process thus far, we hope for your Ministry's positive reception of our concerns and invitation to jointly engage with the network of victims and their communities. We look forward to your support and collaboration.

Cc Mr Kimbeng T. Tah
Deputy Director CL&IL and Head of International Arbitration
Attorney General's Chambers & Ministry of Justice

Sincerely,
Musu Bakoto Sawo
National Coordinator

Think Young Women

On behalf of the victims of human rights violations by the Jammeh regime in Basse, Kudang, Sabah Njieyen, Soma and Gunjur

Sensitisation on the TRRC Recommendations Implementation Plan

Building on the gains made in phases one and two of the Wellspring project, an interface dialogue between victims and personnel from the Ministry of Justice was planned to be held in WCR, LRR, URR, CRR, and URR. This was geared towards creating a platform where the victims can directly engage with the government to build and foster partnership and collaboration and also boost their confidence in the government's commitment to implement the TRRC recommendations. However, due to the unavailability of the Ministry of Justice to join this activity, TYW in consultation with ICTJ redesigned this activity to suit the prevailing context. As such, the new activity sought to sensitise victims on the Implementation Plan of the Government's White Paper on the TRRC recommendations, with specific focus on reparations. Through this activity, victims were also engaged on their capacity gaps and needs and their overall perceptions on the Wellspring project as well as other CSO-led initiatives to support The Gambia's transitional justice process.

Overall, the project highlighted several key observations, including a deeper understanding of the reparations process among victims, a clear demand for enhanced advocacy training, and frustration with the slow pace of reparations. Victims expressed a need for a more urgent and transparent implementation process to address their needs effectively.



Feminist Leadership Development

In The Gambia, feminist leadership is making significant strides in advancing gender equality within the country's unique socio-cultural and political landscape. Traditional gender norms and cultural practices have long limited women's roles, presenting substantial challenges to achieving gender parity. However, ongoing efforts seek to address these barriers and promote a more inclusive leadership environment. Supportive networks have become pivotal in this process, providing mentorship and resources to women navigating leadership challenges. While challenges such as resistance to traditional norms and intersectional issues persist, efforts made are vital for advancing a more equitable and inclusive leadership landscape in The Gambia. CSOs like TYW and other stakeholders play a crucial role in this progress. These efforts are transforming societal attitudes, creating more opportunities for women in leadership, and contributing to a more equitable leadership landscape in The Gambia. These initiatives are essential for driving broader societal change and ensuring a future where gender equality is a lived reality.



Project Implementation Summaries

Regional Girls' Mentorship Programme in LRR

With support from UNFPA The Gambia through the 'leave no one behind' campaign, TYW launched the Girls' Mentorship Programme in LRR. This initiative provided a five-day residential mentorship experience for 20 girls from four upper basic schools in LRR. The program was designed to support the girls' development in multiple areas. It started with personal hygiene education, providing practical advice and support for managing menstrual health effectively. Participants also received training in essential life skills, such as communications, problem solving and decision making.

A significant component of the mentorship programme involved equipping the girls with advocacy skills and a solid understanding of basic human rights, focusing on Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and harmful practices like FGM. The goal was to prepare the girls to be active voices against these issues in their communities. Additionally, the programme enriched participants' knowledge of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), offering comprehensive sexuality education to ensure they have accurate information to make informed



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