

## The Gambia's Adolescent Girls Being Brought Into the Development Process: The Peace Corps' Role

Keri Peterson

Going to The Gambia was not a decision I took lightly. Even now that I am home, I have been asked countless times, "Why Gambia?" Well, why not? I had always planned on studying abroad, but certain factors such as being away from friends and family for an entire semester, possibly losing out on credit, and the expense had begun to make me think that maybe I just wasn't a good candidate for study abroad. The Gambia Field Study Course was a summer program which meant I would only be gone six weeks instead of the typical semester. As well, because it was a summer course, I only had credit to gain from taking this opportunity, and I figured I could probably include any research in a St. Mary's Project. Finally, the price was right. I also figured this would most likely be a once-in-a-lifetime chance to see Africa, or at least as to see it as anything other than a tourist. The trip continued to sound better and better, but what finally clinched the decision for me was hearing that I would have an opportunity to meet Peace Corps volunteers and possibly spend time with the organization over my six-week stay. I have had a fascination with the Peace Corps for about as long as I can remember and am seriously considering volunteering after graduation and before starting grad school or my future career. The trip was now officially perfect and I was on my way to West Africa and, most importantly, to firsthand experience with the Peace Corps.



*Peace Corps Office, The Gambia.*

In 1961, President John F. Kennedy issued his famous call to service to all Americans, "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country." That same year President Kennedy created the Peace Corps to promote world peace and friendship. Today, more than 7,000 volunteers are serving in 77 countries. Since 1961, more than 155,000 Americans have joined the Peace Corps, serving in 134 nations. Volunteers serve in their host countries for two years. They are afforded no special privileges and often live in remote communities. Volunteers receive intensive language and cross-cultural training in order to become part of the communities where they live. They speak the local language and adapt to the cultures and customs of the people with whom they work. Volunteers work with teachers and parents to improve the quality of, and access to, education for children. They work with communities to protect the local environment and to create economic opportunities. They work on basic projects to keep families healthy and to help them grow more food for subsistence and income generation. Their larger purpose, however, is to work with people in developing countries to help them take charge of their own futures. The Peace Corps has three goals for every country they service: 1.) To help the people of interested countries in meeting their need for trained men and women. 2.) To help promote a better understanding of Americans on the part of the peoples served. 3.) To help promote a better understanding of other peoples on the part of Americans (Peace Corps homepage: <http://www.peacecorps.gov>).

I knew prior to leaving for the trip that I wanted to somehow incorporate the Peace Corps into the research I would have to do towards my project. I also wanted to research something in the area of my major, political science. Because I had never previously been outside of the United States, and because the culture of The Gambia was so different from my own, I wanted to know about absolutely everything. My project topic changed on a daily basis. My interests lay somewhere in women in politics, U.S. foreign policy with The Gambia, and of course, the Peace Corps. My topic was finally decided after spending one hour of one

afternoon listening to Yamai Seck Jack (associate Peace Corps director for education) and Beatrice Prom (Peace Corps in-country resource center manager) address our group on the developing state of women in The Gambia. I was particularly intrigued by the information they shared with us concerning the school-aged girls of the country and the roles, traditions, and hardships they were forced to endure. After their visit I decided that I wanted to research adolescent women's development in The Gambia and the American role in this development.



*Gambian school girls in uniform have many responsibilities at home, such as taking care of younger siblings.*

## Women in The Gambia: The Facts

I suppose that prior to leaving for Africa I had certain preconceptions. I mean, I had read all of the required readings and visited The Gambia's official website, but I realize now that there is absolutely nothing that can prepare you for the actuality of being there. The books didn't address how to overcome a phobia of lizards, or how to gracefully turn down beggars, or what the going rate is for a taxi ride. Luckily, with a little guidance, these were all things I was able to figure out on my own within a week or so. However, I never quite grasped how to overcome the overwhelming reality of being in a third world country, particularly as a woman. I tried my hardest to

be nonjudgmental of the various cultures and practices, but rather, just accept the fact that this was something different from my own culture, something that I didn't understand. The Gambia is so desperately trying to pull itself out of third world status. The country boasts of its national television service, a booming tourist market, and better than decent communication through access to telephone and Internet services. It is true that The Gambia is heading toward development, yet many of the rituals, customs, and traditional practices that still exist in this country are positively archaic, particularly when it comes to women.

The Gambia is a predominately Muslim African nation with eight major ethnic groups. It has a population of 1,328,814 people, 51% of which consists of women (UNDP 1998:3). Though it is Africa's smallest country, The Gambia is also one of Africa's most densely populated countries at an average of 124 persons per square kilometer (UNDP 1998:3). The concentrated urban area surrounding the capital city of Banjul accounts for 40% of the country's population (UNDP 1998:3). Sixty-percent of the total population is under the age of 25, while half that number are less than 10 years of age (UNDP 1998:3). For a country so full of young children, The Gambia's statistics on schooling are rather bleak. In the most developed area of Banjul, the average number of years spent in school is measured by School Life Expectancy (SLE) and is 7 years for boys and 5.6 for girls. In Basse, of the Upper River Division, the SLE index is 2.9 years for boys and 1.6 for girls (UNDP 1998:9).

The vast majority of women in The Gambia take on traditional roles of wife, mother, housekeeper, and overall care provider. The makeup of the Gambian government is evidence of the lack of



*Many Gambian girls never have the opportunity to attend school and therefore face futures limited to more 'traditional' female roles.*

women in the career sector. Of the 13 ministers heading various department of state organizations, only three are women. As well, of all the permanent secretaries to the various departments of state, only two are females. It is common rural opinion that a good woman marries and bears children and therefore has no business in education (UNDP 1998:9). Early marriage is common practice in rural Gambia. Among some ethnic groups such as the Fulas and Jalunkas, 13 is the average age for a woman to marry. The country's average Total Fertility Rate is 6.04; however, in the Upper River Division of the country, the average TFR is 7.3 (UNDP 1998:9). As many of these women do not finish primary school



*Some Gambian girls marry and start their families while still in their teenage years.*

and even fewer are allowed to continue into secondary education, it is not surprising to know that 65% of all women in The Gambia are illiterate (Violence and Its Effects on Women in The Gambia, 9). Women account for just 21% of all employees in the public sector, while 83% of all managerial and administrative positions are held by men (UNDP 1998:16). Seventy-nine percent of all unskilled employees are women (UNDP 1998:16). Various factors inhibit the upward mobility of women on the employment ladder. Demands of child and family care, and parental and marital obligations are some of the factors that reduce a woman's flexibility in pursuing further long-term training. As a result, most women lack the relevant qualifications for rising to higher positions.

As the fertility rate of the country is so high, it may not be surprising to know that the maternal morbidity rate is rather high at about 1,050 deaths per every 100,000 live births (UN & GOG 1999:45). Women are also plagued with issues of health and hygiene, particularly Sexually Transmitted Infections. In 1994, 834 women were surveyed in an antenatal clinic; all the women were pregnant at the time of the survey. Forty-one percent tested positive for STI. Eight types of STI were recognized in the study: syphilis, chancroid, herpes, gonorrhoea, chlamydia, trichomoniasis, bacterial vaginosis, candidiasis, and HIV. This particular study was ultimately deemed inconclusive though, because it was not inclusive of non-pregnant women and infertile women, both of which could conceivably have even higher incidences

of STI (UN & GOG 1999:43). Contraception is not widely available or used in The Gambia and is more often used as a tool for child spacing and not prevention or protection.

Beyond the common problems that women of the third world face, a large portion of Gambian women are subject to a controversial, traditional practice called female genital mutilation (FGM). There are three recognized procedures concerning FGM that vary in their levels of intrusiveness, from removal of skin from the genital area, to the complete removal of the clitoris, to the closure (stitching) of the vaginal opening. The most common of these practices in The Gambia is the total removal of the clitoris, with or without partial or total removal of the labia minora. To proponents of the procedure, it is simply termed female circumcision and is performed on girls from the age of one week and older. Most commonly though, FGM is inflicted on girls in their adolescent years as a sign of womanhood. Female genital mutilation affects 80% of the women in The Gambia and is usually performed in the name of religion (GCTP 1999:15-16). In a survey taken of adult men and women and young males and females, 70% of all adult women gave religion as their number one reason for the custom. About 50% of all youths stated religion as their answer as well (GCTP 1999:18). As The Gambia is by and large a Muslim population, it could be assumed that this is an Islamic practice. Despite common belief, the fact is that the practice has no religious affiliation at all. FGM is not practiced in all Islamic nations nor is it prescribed by the Qur'an

or the Bible, the scriptures of the leading religions within The Gambia. No religion supports the suffering of women and children caused by FGM, and those circumcised do suffer. The immediate effects of FGM can include pain, as the procedure is performed without anesthetic, injury to other organs that result from a combination of blunt instruments and struggle by the one being circumcised, shock, fractures, hemorrhage, urinary retention, tetanus, blood poisoning, delayed healing and infection. Long-term effects are difficulty in passing urine and recurrent urinary tract infection, difficulties in menstruation, painful sexual encounters, infertility as a result of pelvic infection, and difficult childbirth. If circumcision is not a religious practice, then why does it continue to prevail?

Female genital mutilation is a tradition that has become ingrained into Gambian culture. The practice has been perpetuated through common beliefs that circumcision keeps girls pure. As The Gambia is a highly male-dominated country, it could easily be assumed that men enforce this practice. This is not true. It is actually the women who have kept this practice alive for so long. Most men have a general attitude of indifference toward FGM, as it is not something that directly affects them or their bodies. Perhaps the most important concept behind the practice, though, is social identity. Women preach that mutilation ensures a woman's virginity before marriage and her chastity to her husband after marriage. Even more importantly, a circumcised girl shares a sense of belonging with the other women of her group. Older generations of women in a family will usually force or coerce younger girls into circumcision, considering it a rite of passage.



*Gambian women face many health issues such as AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases that are the focus of educational outreach efforts by the government and non-governmental organizations.*

Many girls are persuaded into circumcision as they are raised on the notion that a girl becomes a woman when she is circumcised. The procedure is seen as an event, a celebration, and the pain is not discussed. As well, girls are told that a husband will not desire an uncircumcised woman.

## **Bringing Adolescent Girls Into the Development: The American Role**

Adolescent girls of The Gambia face issues of circumcision, marriage, abuse, harassment, stereotyping, and pregnancy on a daily basis, placing them at center stage for political debate, international inquiry, and gender development. I had definitely found a topic that spanned my interest in women, politics, and foreign affairs. As I said before, during my stay in Africa I tried very hard to be nonjudgmental of what I did not understand. For this reason, I decided to focus my attention on the positive aspects of American involvement in the process of women's development. While governmental organizations of the world sit idly by as Gambian girls continue to be oppressed, it was far more comforting to know that there are some people who care to look out for the well-being of the adolescent girls of this country. I couldn't help but feel a personal attachment to this topic. Statistics concerning adolescent girls are grim, and the reality was even harder to take at times; still, I saw so much hope for the country in these young women. The advancement of Gambian girls today gives hope to women's rights and development for the future.

As I mentioned earlier, I took a particular interest in what the Peace Corps is doing in The Gambia to include the nation's adolescents in the development process. Peace Corps offices internationally receive the Exchange newsletter. This is a publication composed of articles written by volunteers worldwide on the topic of gender development. Volunteers write about their personal experiences and share ideas on how their fellow volunteers can become involved in the cause.

Though gender development is not one of the three main facets of the Peace Corps' operation in The Gambia, it is a cross-sectoral activity involved in nearly all projects. Many volunteers have taken it upon themselves to organize secondary projects in this area of service. I met with some education volunteers who had formed after-school clubs for girls. These volunteers organize activities for the girls, such as games, crafts, or extra tutoring. One volunteer who sponsored a girls club explained to me that she wasn't necessarily preaching development to



*Two Gambian junior high school students from Nyakoi school, Upper River Division.*

her girls. She just wanted to offer her students a forum for communication and interaction with their peers, as well as with the volunteers, which they would not have available to them otherwise. Girls involved in these clubs know the distinction between the volunteers and the other women of their communities and in turn may speak more freely about issues of health, hygiene, and adolescence that are not commonly discussed in the home. These after-school clubs also serve to help Gambian youth learn about other cultures. One volunteer I spoke with arranged for the girls in her club to have American pen pals by contacting a Girl Scout troop from her hometown. Spending extra time together, volunteers and Gambians alike learn more about each other and their respective cultures.

Peace Corps volunteers involved in the health sector have also engaged in secondary projects dealing with gender development. Volunteers will visit schools to educate students on reproductive health issues that are not widely discussed within villages. For many, this is the only way they will ever receive frank and factual information about sex. At home, sex is usually spoken about in code. Often, girls are told myths, one of them that a woman becomes pregnant by sitting on the same bed as a man. It's not hard to believe that The Gambia has such rampant problems with teenage pregnancy when most girls do not fully understand the concept of sex until their first sexual encounter. In the communities, volunteers have organized town lectures for women that deal especially in prenatal care, breastfeeding and other such medical needs that Gambian

women are commonly lacking. Such meetings have not only the short-term impact of educating the attendants, but also help Gambian women, in turn, to educate themselves. Women who are present for these meetings can take their knowledge back to their villages and their families.

On the day that Beatrice and Yamai visited with our group, they mentioned a week-long event that the Peace Corps was holding in the Kombo, the more developed area of the country, the same area where we were staying. The event was called "Take Our Daughters to Work Week" and was loosely based on the American Take Our Daughters to Work Day.

Twenty-seven girls had been selected from junior secondary schools in the North Bank, Central River and Upper River divisions of the country and brought down to the Kombo for a week of career shadowing and empowerment training. Knowing my interest in adolescent development, the women graciously invited me to sit in on a portion of the event.

The girls were selected by the principals of their schools and were chosen based on merit. The Peace Corps provided transportation and accommodations for the girls and all expenses were paid for during their stay. For many of the girls it was their first time away from their families and villages, and for the majority of the group it was a first time in the city. Upon arrival in the Kombo, each girl was matched with a "mother" who she would stay with for a night and then go to work with the following day. The mothers were all career women, native to The Gambia, and were invited to be hosts for this program by the organizing Peace Corps volunteers. Each of these women held a non-traditional position. The group was made up of a wide variety of career women, including secretaries, health care workers, teachers, the headmistress of a local school, and a doctor, to mention some. Each of these women was genuinely interested in hosting a girl and serving as a role model. No pay or compensation was given to the "mothers."

After their day of career shadowing, the girls reconvened for more activities planned by the Peace Corps. A slumber party was held for the girls, and



*Participants in the first 'Take Our Daughters to Work Week' at the Girl Guides Center.*

they were assembled the next day to share what they experienced while with their hosts and to listen to lectures from a number of different women representing various local organizations. At the meeting, each girl was asked to stand up and tell the group who her host was, where this woman worked, what her responsibilities were (both at home and work), and then the girl was asked to describe her favorite part of shadowing this particular woman. The girls were shy, as most of them had never had to speak publicly before. However, you could tell in each one of them how much they respected their “mothers” and how much fun they had shadowing. Without deviation, every single participant named some form of technology as their favorite part of the day, as most of these girls had never before had an opportunity to use such tools. Learning to use the copying machine was the number one answer given when asked. I was moved by each of their accounts, as they spoke so passionately about things American girls take for granted on a daily basis.

After all participants had been given a chance to speak, a nurse from The Gambia’s Family Planning Association and a representative from the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWEGAM) were brought in to address the group. As the girls were all around the age of 13, the nurse was there to give a talk on puberty, feminine hygiene, and what I would generalize as “sexual education.” At the close of her lecture, the nurse allowed for a question-and-answer time, which some of the girls took advantage of. The FAWEGAM representative spoke to the girls on the importance of education and earning high marks. She lectured the girls on the dangers of premarital sex,

teenage pregnancy, early marriage, and dropping out of school. Again, at the end of the session the volunteer allowed for questions. This time the girls seemed a bit more eager to speak their minds and ask for advice. Many of the girls complained about not having enough hours in the day to do their schoolwork. These girls are up at dawn to perform such chores as getting the water, helping their mothers to cook, and tending to their younger siblings. After all this is done, the girls are off to school. After school, more chores await them, and schoolwork must be put off, even though many of them do not have electricity and so are left to do work by candlelight, or not at all. The girls were advised to wake earlier in the morning to finish homework and study, as sleep is not as important as education. As a foreigner listening to this discussion my feelings were divided. On the one hand, I considered these girls fortunate in that they will probably be able to continue their education longer than their own mothers and in turn be afforded more options in life. On the other hand, these girls will never comprehend the carefree concept of childhood that I was raised on. I couldn’t help but grieve for them slightly. They took the advice offered in stride though, and I imagine they rise every morning and go about their schoolwork and chores with more conviction than I will ever have to know.

Tradition was a common theme touched on by all the women who spoke during the conference portion. While these women were discussing issues of health, education, responsibility, success, and self-respect, they all warned the girls against abandoning their



*Educating Gambian girls is a priority for the Gambian government.*

culture. Though some traditional acts, such as early marriage, were cast as negative, other cultural aspects, such as wearing traditional clothing, respecting their elders, and fulfilling their duties to the family were emphasized as positives. Pairing the participants with Gambian host mothers was an opportunity for the young women to see the balance of tradition and career at work. This presented the girls with proof that they really can have the best of both worlds.

The Peace Corps collaborated with several other organizations in producing Take Our Daughters to Work Week. Representatives from FAWEGAM and BAFROW (Foundation for Research on Women's Health, Reproductivity and the Environment) helped in the organization process. Vehicles were provided by the Department of State for Education. The Gambia's chapter of Girl Guides donated the meeting hall, and local businesses and the Peace Corps provided the rest of the necessary funding to make the week a success. This was the first year for the program, though there are high hopes of turning it into an annual event. One organizer told me that the Peace Corps would like to ideally take a step back in planning next year's week of activities. This first year Peace Corps volunteers tried to gain community interest in Take Our Daughters to Work Week so that next year and in all the years to come it will be Gambians and not Americans orchestrating the event. Just as in the areas of health, education, and environment, volunteers working in gender development are helping Gambians to help themselves.



*The government has taken steps to assist families with one of the most commonly cited constraints to girls going to school - money.*

## Conclusion

I returned to America with such mixed emotions on what is being done for adolescent girls in The Gambia. Even as I write this report, I don't know exactly how I feel. Effort is being made and yet, it just doesn't seem like nearly enough. Before I went to The Gambia, I learned that the vice president was a woman, and I was both shocked and impressed. This is still an impressive fact. In this one executive position, The Gambia has attained an achievement that even the United States cannot lay claim to. It is hard to imagine that this is the same country where the average girl child will not attend school for more than six years. Efforts have been made to pass legislation that would ban the practice of female genital mutilation from the country, yet, so far, the president has proved to be indifferent to the issue and legislation has not been passed. It is illegal for a woman of less than 16 years of age to marry, and yet some ethnic groups still routinely marry off 12-year-old girls. In instances such as this, where customary ethnic law and national law conflict, tradition always wins. The women of The Gambia face so many complications on their way to development, and unfortunately these obstacles all too often come from the very people who should be protecting them.

The United States does not give any government funding to The Gambia. Though aid was once given, all funding has been withdrawn following a presidential coup in 1994. We do give aid in other ways, though, perhaps most importantly through our volunteers. Once upon a time, I believed that being a Peace Corps volunteer meant that I would get to live in an exotic country for two years, work hard, see daily results and improvement, and I would complete my service and go back to the U.S. feeling self-satisfied in a job well done. It turns out my fairy tale was not quite accurate. I give an incredible amount of credit to the Peace Corps volunteers of The Gambia. The volunteers of the Peace Corps are not solving all the immediate problems of health, education, and environment that The Gambia faces, but through their guidance, the volunteers are helping Gambians to build a stable future. Their efforts are not met with daily results. However, the Peace Corps does act as a catalyst for change, particularly as the organization attempts to bring adolescent girls into the development process.



*How many of these girls will be able to finish high school before something interrupts their education?*

## Works Cited

Gambia Committee on Traditional Practices. 1999 Reaching Adolescents with a Message of Reproductive Health. The Gambia:GAMCOTRAP.

Peace Corps. Home page. 17 Sept. 2000. <<http://www.peacecorps.gov/home.html>>

United Nations and The Government of The Gambia. 1999 The Gambia Common Country Assessment Report. The Gambia: The Government of The Gambia.

United Nations Development Programme. 1998 The Gambia Development Cooperation Report. Banjul: United Nations Development Programme.

Women and Laws Project. 1998 Violence and Its Effects on Women in The Gambia. The Gambia: WMUML.

## Abaraka (Thank You)

I would like to thank the entire office of the United States Peace Corps, particularly APCD Yamai Seck Jack and resource manager, Beatrice Prom for all their guidance in my research, as well as the writing of this paper. I would also like to express my gratitude to Peace Corps Volunteers Lynn Keating, Heidi and Meg for allowing me to take part in the Take Our Daughters to Work experience and for the time they each sacrificed from their busy schedules to answer my many questions. I also extend thanks to Dr. Sina Jagne of the Women's Bureau and Maimune Jalo of the Girl Guides Skills Center for their interviews. I must also acknowledge Mary Small and Frances Ford of GAMCOTRAP for their honest and revealing conversation concerning female genital mutilation, as well as the use of their offices' many resources. Last, but not least, I thank my mom and dad for making this trip a possibility for me and for their always-present love and support.



*Keri holds the baby belonging to one of the women who sold tourist goods in front of the Friendship Hotel.*