

8

Gambian Women and Their Struggle for Voice

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Fifteen-year-old Fatim Badjie sits in front of her computer typing away at a short story. She's won awards for her writing: one for a short story, the other for poetry. Of course these are major achievements for any 15-year-old, but what makes this extra ordinary?

Fatim is a 15-year-old female in Gambia, West Africa. A typical day for many girls her age would consist of taking care of the house: cooking, laundry, cleaning, fetching firewood, taking care of younger siblings, and farm work. Very important duties indeed, but nothing academic. According to an international supplement written by the Washington Times, "In The Gambia an estimated 73 percent of the women are illiterate and the majority of the female population is rural based and engaged in agricultural production" (February 1999).

How is it possible for young female writers like Fatim to defeat these odds? Why has she not joined the ranks of many girls her age? Because Fatim is armed with education. And education has the power to give voice to the otherwise silent female population in Gambia. Female writers like Fatim are able to use their education and therefore skill of writing, to become the voice of most Gambian women. But in affirming their voices as female Gambian writers, they must overcome

the obstacles that religion, cultural norms, practices, and poverty present.



Traditional roles for women bind them to their families (daughter, sister, wife, mother) and the land (farmer). Some women seem to have done quite well in the marketplace.

The Power of Women and Their Contributions

Part of the reason why the women of Gambia have not used their education to overcome their everyday obstacles is because they have not realized their full potential. They live in a country where "Women, according to national statistics, constitute 51% of the population of The Gambia, and produce 70% of the food" (Washington Times, February 1999). Although the ratio of men to women is nearly equal, the women pull more than their weight, and that weight is power. However, they often don't realize the magnitude of what they do every day. The vice president for the country explains, during a special session of the United Nations General Assembly, that "...Agriculture contributes about 30-40% of [Gambia's] GDP, the role of women at the macroeconomic level is of great importance." Since women generate much of the country's wealth, it only makes sense to empower them with additional skills so that the impact of their efforts are more effective and targeted for what the



The Gambian government is committed to increasing educational opportunities for girls at all levels, especially in primary and secondary schools.

country needs for advancement. She further states, “The world has to realize that addressing the strategic gender needs of women and girls and ensuring equality, equity and the empowerment of females, is a prerequisite for the empowerment of the whole society towards meaningful development and socioeconomic transformation for all” (Speech by Vice President and Secretary of State for Women’s Affairs, 2000).

A Washington Times report confirms this, saying that the key to “The Gambia’s success, as a whole, is dependent upon linking the progress of agriculture and education, both academic and social, together so that both progress simultaneously” (February 1999: 2). These statements point out the obvious connection between the women’s successful agricultural practices and how these lead to the equally likely success they can have in education. Since the women are the leaders for the agricultural production field, the report suggests they can also be academic leaders but in order to do that, women need to be better educated, which will lead to progress for the country. However, like many movements toward progress—progress needs leaders.

Women Writers Are the Mouthpiece

Gambian women writers have assumed the role. James Baldwin said, “The responsibility of a writer is to excavate the experience of the people who produced him” (Microsoft Encyclopedia 1998).

A quick sketch of some of the few female writers I met reveals that they are definitely excavators of those who produced them. Beatrice Prom is the resource librarian at the Peace Corps office and also a writer; Dr. Siga Jagne is executive director of the Women’s Bureau and a writer; Patience Sonko-Godwin is both a teacher and a writer; and Ramatoulie Othman is a conference secretary and writer. Most of them were educated at colleges in the United States. All of them felt they needed to bring their skills home. These women are in virtually every field—every field that can legitimately make a difference in others’ lives—women’s lives. By rights, it should be accepted that they have been dubbed the mouthpiece of a group that they are so much a part of.

There is definitely power in what these women are willing to say, but the ultimate power is making sure that people are listening.

To say that the creative contribution of African women writers has not always been recognized is to put the case mildly. In fact, the woman’s voice is generally subsumed under the massive humming and

bustling of her male counterpart, who has been brought up to take women for granted.

It has been suggested that the situation of women is key to a critique of society. If that is the case, what women writers have to say about their societies should receive serious attention, instead of the general disregard or head-nodding that is usually the case.

(In *Their Own Voices*, African Women Writers Talk, 1990:2).

Gambian women writers also carry important messages to the world. They are not limited to subjects that will affect them exclusively. It is by nature or by curse, as some will call it, of being a woman that they would write to nurture everyone about topics affecting their culture, religion and preservation of their history for the good of society. “Women want to contribute to development. We have been contributors as mothers—you name it—the women are on the grassroots levels in every field. The vice president is a woman, especially now with the emphasis on education for women from the United Nations, they have seen that women are the underdogs, they have been especially in the developing countries,” said Patience Sonko-Godwin.



Patience Godwin is one of the more prolific women writers in The Gambia today.

“I noticed there was not a lot of history written about The Gambia and a lot of history is with the griots and is not written and we lose it when they die. This is how I got started because I first [about 15 years ago] wanted to write a novel about the development of a girl child to demonstrate all she has to go through in this society,” she continued.

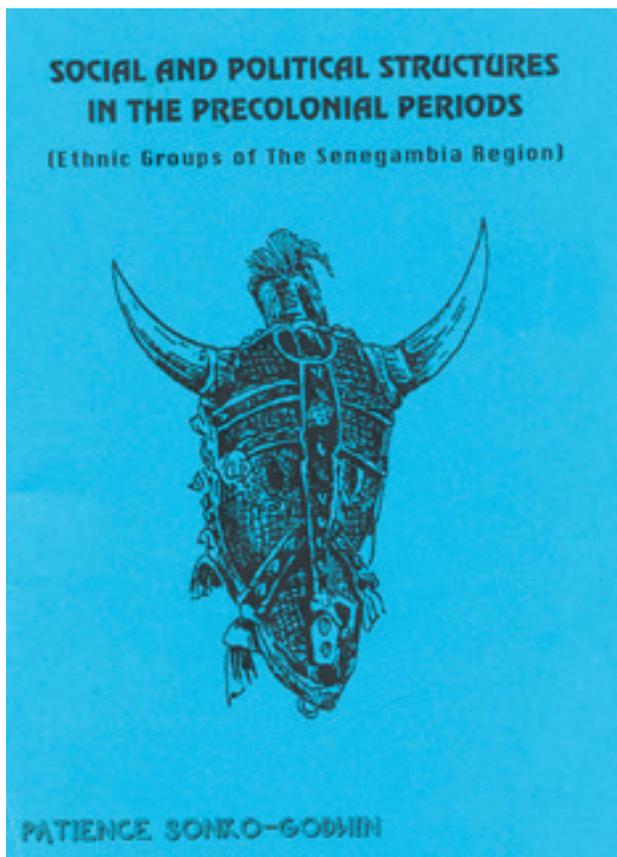
The same need to educate others and preserve history also sparked the writing career of first-time author, Ramatoulie Othman. “My people prompted me to write this book. I believe that every group should

have a history, our history [The Oku Marabou Tribe] has been battered but there is still something left to be told—and there was no one else who is really writing about my people.”

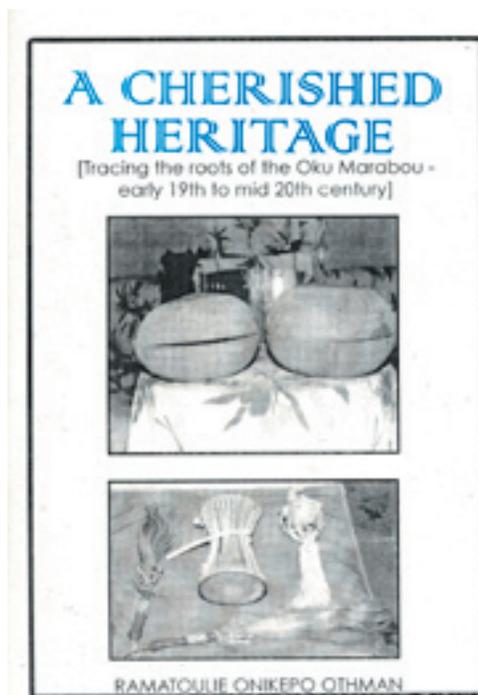
These two writers are obviously filling the gaps in “herstory” for their own societies. In fact, Patience answered the call four times; along with four history books she’s also written several books about education. These women’s books are being tucked under the arms of many Americans and other visitors to The Gambia and taken back to their countries. And their writings are touching and influencing societies other than just The Gambia.

“My greatest pride is that my books are being studied by students all over the world and that they are learning about the culture from my writings,” said Patience.

One of the hardships of Gambian writers in general is that they have a small readership due to illiteracy. Patience agrees. “Many people believe because the reading population is small that you can’t make it as a writer. I always feel determined that I can do anything.”



Patience Sonko-Godwin is a historian by training and has written extensively about the precolonial and colonial periods in The Gambia.



Ramatoulie Othman’s recent book is about the ethnic group in Banjul where her ‘roots’ can be found.

“Writers complain that there is not that much readership in this country—there is one avenue—the schools,” added Ramatoulie.

In fact, Patience has deepened her investment and commitment to writing and educating others by starting her own publishing company, Sunrise Publishers, in 1985.

So far, she has published only her own books, but “If I had the backing, I want to help Gambian authors. But it is very expensive, . . . I think more women will write, there are problems because publishing houses can not support them, I hope when I get better established I can help them. I’m the only one [female publisher] in the pipeline.”

Support is what up-and-coming women writers need because according to an assistant editor at The Observer (Bakau, The Gambia), “Women are not real interested in the business of writing but we try to encourage them. We have very few women writers, maybe one or two. They stay for a few days or a couple of weeks and then just quit.” He believes they don’t feel they can handle the work and the stress.

“Women have been authorized to have low self-esteem. It is under very special circumstances that the girls excel,” said Beatrice.

Ironically, though, Ramatoulie got her start in writing for a newspaper and survived the pressures of the position. “I believe that if I work hard like any other person, male or female, I will make headways. Writing

is an investment, if you work at it, you will reap.” Patience also tells that the secret of her successes was education and family. “I had support from my parents. They were already exposed to Western ideals and my people didn’t see anything wrong with educating girls. I see myself as contributing to the development of the nation.”

Ramatoulie’s future plans include writing a filmstrip about “bumsters” (Gambian term for panhandlers) and their effect on the tourism industry. She expects it to be done by the end of the year. Patience is about to release another book called *The Development of Local Industry and Trade in the Senegambian Region*. “I did a lot of research [three years] and I know it’s going to sell like hotcakes.” She adds, as a matter of fact, “I still intend to write that novel.”

The novel she refers to is meant to teach the world about the challenges an average Gambian girl has to face during her journey to womanhood. Such a book would provide a forum for discussing these obstacles. Women from around the world need the forum to discuss issues that are relevant to their societies. Women writers not only make it possible for that to be done but they are offering permanency to information previously kept by griots. However, in changing times with changing griot functions, new prescriptions are called on to help. Even more, women are now getting a chance to comment on some issues that they did not comment on before. “I write on anything social—religion, societal problems,” said Ramatoulie.

Writing is a new art in The Gambia, and so it inevitably builds on its dying predecessor, the oral art of storytelling by griots.

Oral Beginnings

In the African countries where Islam has had a powerful influence and where chiefs exert considerable authority, much of the music making is the province of the griots. Others—the most famous—are free ranging groups of professional musicians, unattached to any employer, who hire their service out to families, groups of workers or others who wish to hear and temporarily employ them. The griots play for important occasions like marriages, circumcisions and the like and leave with considerable sums of money. For though he has to know many traditional songs without error, he also must have the ability to extemporize on current events, chance incidents, and the passing scene. Their wit can be devastating and their knowledge of local history formidable.

(Paul Oliver, *Savannah Syncopators: African Retensions in the Blues*).

Griots were traditionally broken into classes by family name. The original griots were from the Kuyateh bloodline. If you had this last name, then you were a griot.



We met a local griot at the Slave Museum in Juffure. He is playing his kora and Rita is giving him some money.

Bearing the last name of Kuyateh herself, Mamadingo got her skills honestly. In the tradition of passing this art down to one’s children, Mamadingo got her skills from her mother and father who are both griots. She performs at naming ceremonies and weddings. Sometimes people call and ask her to come perform at their homes.

In the tradition of the African griot, “Women and men both tell stories but their audiences differ slightly, men usually narrate historical instances, the women’s audiences are usually women and children,” said researcher Bakary Sidibeh. “The griots try to establish cultural beliefs and how to interact with other people and give morals through stories. Many include some clapping and dancing. They follow a formula.” Mamadingo made her own formula as well.

Mamadingo was not formally educated. She doesn’t speak English at all and her education resides in the tradition of the griot—family educated. “Traditionally griots didn’t go to school because they used their art to make a living. The griot was the one who was the library,” she said.

“I believe that everybody writes according to their education and there are stories in the way that they are educated,” said Siga Jagne. Becoming a griot definitely takes education. But the proper education for a griot is unlike that needed to become a writer.

The writer’s world is based upon the oral one,



A female praise singer performs at an urban wedding ceremony and reminds participants of the important forebears in the families of the bride and groom.

but writers are challenged by language. “There are language barriers. In trying to bring orality into the written form, it doesn’t always work. How do they even use the English language when some writers are removed by five languages?” asked Siga.

“The school system is not encouraging creativity of the people to tell stories and speak in their own [African] languages. They are forced to tell the stories in English and it’s not the same,” added Bakary.

There is irony in calling those writers who master the English language educated. Of course, there are other qualifications in being considered educated, but most writers must be able to write in English, the “official” language, in order to be considered universal. Perhaps the major difference between griots and writers are their audiences. The griot educates their specific ethnic group on culture and history, and the writer educates the masses on similar topics.

These female African writers, though they mostly write in English, have incorporated the decorations of oral language into the written form. Female orators and writers are linked in much the same way a foundation is linked to a house: by interdependency. “The African writer’s language, as the vehicle of her imagination, is shaped by her culture and at times by the fact that her mother tongue is not English. The language is often, therefore, colored by the oral tradition, replete with proverbial sayings, information passed down from elders, colloquial reportage, and sometimes the rambling that often characterizes our style of greeting and passing on of information.” (In Their Own Voices,

African Women Writers Talk, 1990: 5).

Ramatoulie expresses this best when she writes, “One who shies away from his or her past, stands to lose it through the space of time. Losing the past means losing a sense of direction into the future. It is only by knowing our past that we can trace our roots” (Othman 1999: 2). Ironically, this is the mission of the writer, one that was originally kept by the griot. But their role is changing. Here, the griot and the writer share a common goal but use different means and styles to achieve similar objectives.

Mamadingo acknowledges that being a griot is a dying field—one that a lot of younger people don’t have much interest in upholding.

One reason: “There is no correct

plan for the griot from government and that is why some griots come together to form some future for their children. They are disappearing. When they are not able to eat or drink they will find another job.”

But perhaps, as the Gambian women writers are demonstrating, there is a future in writing. However, any longtime success probably lies in encouraging and preparing the future generations of Gambian women. Among the most difficult challenges facing Gambian girls are the constraints of religion and culture. These are often used to justify a parent’s decision to stop a girl’s formal school education.

Girls and Education

The Common Country Assessment (CCA) published a report stating, “Between the school years 1994/95 and 1995/96 six percent of girls enrolled in primary schools dropped out, while 14 percent repeated. Girls’ enrollment ratio for secondary level education in 1995/96 was low, estimated at 14.5 percent, while the combined enrollment ratio was only 35.5 percent” (UN & GOG 1999:26).

Why is this happening? What are the first steps toward improving these percentages? The first step is basic: getting girls to go to school. But it is surprisingly difficult because of Islamic religious interpretations and other cultural constraints.

Yahar Jallow, headmistress of Bakau New Town Primary School, sees the manifestation of these



Yaharr Jallow, headmistress for Bakau Newtown Primary School, is an intellectual and advocate for women's and girl's rights. Since 1996 she has helped female students from each St. Mary's College group come to a better understanding of gender relations and politics in The Gambia.

statistics. "There is no social welfare here, it is your children that are your social welfare. If you have many children, you give to the boy, the girl is married off for money, the boy will work and take care of the mother and father," she said.

Beatrice agrees. "They [families] don't want to invest in girls because they take their wealth [with them] when they leave the family [as a result of marriage practices] but boys keep their wealth within the family," said Prom.

If the girls make it to school, there are other challenges for them. "The gender ratio of teachers shows that there are many more male than female teachers but in regards to the proportion of qualified teachers by gender there is relatively small difference" (UN & GOG 1999:27 – 28).

Girls do not get to see many women teachers as role models. Even more, as Beatrice points out, some female students are sometimes even romantically pursued by their male teachers, which also contributes to the dropout rate of girls.

Another barrier against girls' going to school is that "there are still many that are married off early, as early as 12 or 13, and so they are expected to bear children and take care of the house," explained Beatrice. Islam maintains that "You are blessed when you have a lot of children." Beatrice added as an aside, "Religious teachings rebuke family planning, so some seek side abortions." Of course, this presents a whole new set of social and religious conflicts.

"Women weren't educated, so we were hidden from the nitty gritty in the Koran," said Jallow. "But

now since we are better educated, we now know that prophets helped their wives. As a woman I believe that we should not be content with what we have."

Many women are not—and it is helping to bring about foreseeable change.

Agenda for Change

One of those persons is The Gambia's vice president and secretary of state for women's affairs. She stated in a speech to the UN General Assembly:

On the home front, the 1995 Beijing Conference on Women has had a major impact on gender relations in The Gambia. The Gambia Government, like other third world governments, had answered the clarion call of the UN Copenhagen conference with an Act of Parliament – which set up the National Women's Council and the National Women's Bureau...

Significant progress has been registered for the girl child since the inception of the 1998-2003 Education Policy, which has put a lot of emphasis on the education of the girl child, within the framework of the government's commitment to increase access to education. This emphasis, which was reviewed in the revised policy, has culminated in the introduction of Girls' Education Program as the enrollment rates for girls at the primary level have surpassed the Government target of 60 percent. To address the problem of girls' retention in school, a Trust Fund for Girls' Education has been established and implemented by the Department of State for Education, Forum for African Women Educationalist Gambia (FAWEGAM) and other NGO's. There are science clubs and scholarship schemes for girls doing science. The first national report on the Convention on the Rights of



This ad, opposite the entrance to Gambia College in Brikama, lets people know about funds to help meet educational expenses for girls.

the Child has been prepared and submitted to the United Nations (Speech by VP and Secretary of State for Women's Affairs).

The Gambia Common Country Assessment Report further explains, "In the endeavors to encourage the education of the girl child, efforts to train more female teachers should also be made. This would be especially valuable in junior and senior secondary schools, where female teachers would also serve as role models for girls" (1999:28). This would also help to relieve some of the pressures of a young girl who may have been pursued in the past by male teachers, as Beatrice noted earlier.

What this all boils down to is that education is the route to change. Women already influence the economic scheme of The Gambia in a major way. As the old saying goes, "Work smarter, not harder." Gambians' earnings could be increased significantly by broadening the skills of women.

The country should see women as a tool towards betterment. If a person who could not see well were handed a pair of glasses—it would be as if the whole world were opened up to them because details were now available. As with eyeglasses, education would open some woman's eyes to the possibilities and details that she previously thought were not existent to her.

In order to get the necessary prescription filled, females have to somehow combat the cultural and religious constraints they face. There is room for women to worship the Lord and respect themselves at the same time. It is women like Yahar Jallow, Beatrice Prom, Siga Jagne, Ramatoulie Othman, Patience Sonko-Godwin who are paving the way for other women, saying that education is a critical tool for self-improvement and self-esteem. These women writers are not just writers; they are at the forefront of their society, trying to make improvements in everyone's lives. They are able to look at griots and admire them for their talent and their immense knowledge. They can put that into the churns of change and create information that is universal and permanent. Griots will hopefully always have a function in the Gambian community, but it will perhaps always be more of a specialized voice than that of the writer's. Writers represent change and are a manifestation of education. Thus, they represent what's to come in the future. Hopefully, with the change in agenda for girls in education, it will be bright.



Junior high school girls in Nyakoi, Upper River Division working in the library. They symbolize the hope that more women with a formal education will be able to help shape tomorrow's changes in The Gambia.

Through 15-year-old Fatim Badjie we already see a change. As she sits in front of her computer drafting the next short story or poem, we know that she is doing more than that—she is drafting a plan for the future, not only for herself but also for her country.

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Keisha speaks to students at Nyakoi school assembly during our trip to the Upper River Division in June 2000.



Students we met in Nyakoi Junior High School pose for a group picture in their library.