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## I Never Gave-up on Education: A story of courage and perseverance



Fatou Drammeh in class

For most Gambian girls, dropping out of school and marrying early is normal despite many awareness campaigns by ActionAid on the dangers of early marriage and the importance of educating the girl child. However for 32-year-old Fatou Drammeh of Moriya village, it is different. At a very young age, Fatou dropped out of school in grade 10 due to financial constraints and got married. She however kept her hopes of going back to school alive. Now a busy housewife with young twin boys to take care of, Fatou is back in senior secondary at the age of 32, thanks to the support of ActionAid. She has also developed her skills in income generating activities funded by the EU. In this interview, Fatou shares her story on the challenges she faced and where she wants to be in the future.

**You are a young woman and very pretty. Is your husband not jealous at times to let you engage in these activities?**

My husband is not jealous about the skills I have acquired. In fact, he is the one encouraging me. If

there is any training he would tell me 'hurry up, you are always late. Your colleagues would leave you behind'. He would set the alarm of his phone at 4.30. When the phone alarms, he would wake me up.

**AA: Being a young married woman with two children to take care of, having to do the household chores and go to school at the same time...this must be difficult for you.**

Fatou: It was not easy at first and I had some challenges. It is true that my parents live in the village and I was born there as well, but I was not raised there. When I met my husband, he told me about his condition and I agreed to marry him. I decided to live with him in the village. I got my first child, a female, but she died. After some time, he wanted me to go back to school but before that I got pregnant again and the whole plan was suspended.

**Fatou Drammeh**

In 2016, he again made arrangements for me to go back to school. At that time, I didn't know

that there was a senior secondary school here (in Kudang). He told me to go to Jareng Senior Secondary School to do a three-year course. Few weeks later before school re-opened, we heard that the school in Kudang had been upgraded to grade ten and so I was enrolled there.

**AA: Were you not worried about being in grade ten with very young students?**

I was not bothered that I was going to start from grade ten with the children because before I was enrolled to the school, almost all the staff knew my condition. They in fact supported me instead of ridiculing me. I respected myself as a mature student among the children. Despite all my household chores, I make sure I try very hard. I was able to catch up with them. When I started, the term had gone far, so I borrowed their note books to copy the lessons I missed. It is very difficult but I try and since the beginning of the first term none of them are ahead of me in class.

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## I Never Gave-up on Education...

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### How do you feel about you going to school at the same time with your children?

It is not a problem for me. They are seeking knowledge and I'm also seeking knowledge. When I complete my education and get employment, I will be able to support their father to meet the other needs of the family. Therefore, there is nothing wrong with that.

### AA: Where do you want to see yourself in the future?

I want to see myself at a level where I will be able to support myself. Right now I'm doing commerce at school and when I complete my education, I want to be an accountant or a businesswoman.

### AA: what is your advice to your fellow women who have experienced life similar to yours?

I am urging my fellow women who have similar experience especially early marriage, to know that they still have a chance. There are adult literacy classes and other skills training that they can engage in. They can discuss it with their husbands so that they can go and learn skills, do business or enroll at the adult literacy classes.

### What is your message to ActionAid and the EU?

My message to the EU and ActionAid is that I'm so happy and I thank them so much. ActionAid facilitated my going back to school and through the EU project, I developed skills which are now benefiting me. The training has also empowered me and thus opened ways for dialogue between my husband and I, who allowed me to attend such trainings.

## From the Farmland to New York City: Two women farmers take their land struggles to New York City



**Kumba Sanyang**



**Fatou Trawally**

Land ownership and control remains one of the biggest obstacles for women especially Small Holder women farmers in Africa. Although there are no laws that prevent women from accessing and owning land, land governance policies and processes exclude them.

ActionAid The Gambia supported two women farmers to the 61<sup>st</sup> Commission on the Status of Women held at the United Nations in New York. The women, Kumba Sanyang and Fatou Trawally were also part of the Kilimanjaro initiative which took place in October 2016 at the foot of Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania. The Kilimanjaro initiative mobilized rural women from across Africa including The Gambia using women's rights to land and productive resources as an entry point to define the future they want. The platform gave rural women space to engage with and seek accountability from decision makers at national and continental

level, with a view to securing fundamental, irreversible shifts and commitments on women's land property rights. Kumba and Fatou attended the 61<sup>st</sup> CSW together with the women's Rights Program Specialist. In this exposé Kumba Sanyang and Fatou Trawally share their experiences at the CSW.

'My name is Kumba Sanyang. I live in Toubakolong village in the North Bank Region. I am married with 6 children. My only source of livelihood is farming. Land provides 70 percent of the resources I need for my family's survival. My husband is very old and not strong to farm enough food that can feed us and pay for our children to go to school, so I had to take up the responsibility.

Through the ActionAid and ACTIVISTA land rights campaign for women, I am now farming on my own land that no one will evict me from'.

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## From the Farmland to New York City

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Kumba Sanyang and Fatou Trawally joined the Land Rights Campaign and benefitted from all the empowerment processes that came along with it including leadership training, training on Climate Resilient Sustainable Agricultural practices, advocacy and campaigns, to the Kilimanjaro campaign where they joined hundreds of women from all over Africa to demand their rights to land.

Kumba: "I thank Allah for coming here and ActionAid for the facilitation. During our work with ActionAid I have seen so much change from 2013. ActionAid has transformed my life through improving my knowledge in farming, communication, people relations and more importantly my confidence and self-esteem. I am no longer afraid to express myself. I no longer feel I am just a woman so I can't change anything. I know I have rights, I know I am a tax payer, I know I can contribute to make change happen. My life has changed forever.

Fatou –"On a final note I also say thank you to ActionAid. We have started something and we will work with you to the end. I have realized that women's right violations happen everywhere, to all classes of women, even those women who are highly educated and economically independent. I realized that women's struggle is a global struggle and that gives me the strength knowing that we are not in this struggle alone. That gives me hope that we will overcome the issues someday but not without the involvement of men. We need men as key stake holders and institutions as facilitators to get what we want. We will go back to Gambia with positive energies and continue the struggle. With support from civil society our government will listen.

**By Fanta Jatta Sowe.**  
Programme Specialist, Women's Rights

## The Gambia's new democracy and the role played by Activista



Activista volunteers on a cross-country voter education

Activista the Gambia- ActionAid's Youth Network, played an immense role in the birth of the Gambia's democratic state. Activista empowered and enabled young people to actively participate in decision making and political processes that affect our lives, built capacities to create social change for sustainable development, thus significantly contributing to ActionAid's efforts to end poverty.

Prior to the December 2016 Presidential elections, the network shouldered the responsibility of raising funds to educate the masses especially the youth and women on civic education and the importance of voting. Seven Activista volunteers were sent to neighboring Senegal to be trained as trainers and coaches on election and election processes organised by the International Republican Institute (IRI). Activista actively engaged hundreds of thousands of people on voter rights education and why young people should not be left

out this time around as the country urgently needs change from dictatorship to democracy. The campaigners used different forms of communication: radio talk shows, community outreach, social media etc.

The series of radio talk shows focused on the importance of voting, election procedures and tackling the myths around voting. Most of the community radio stations were visited and lots of people contributed while others asked questions for clarification. This was coupled with a nationwide caravan to reach out to the major towns and villages, with a public address system to attract the attention of the people. Dialogues were held with women and youths in communities and some weekly markets "Lumo". Quiz programmes were held with electorates and T-Shirts given as rewards. Banners and posters with the message "MY VOTE MY RIGHT" were displayed

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# The Gambia's new democracy

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throughout.

Our members through our affiliate groups participated as local election observers in different polling stations and regional tallying points during the elections.

Being a non-partisan group, Activista stayed neutral during and after the process. However, a social media campaign was launched using twitter and Facebook when the former president refused to step down and announced on state television that the election results have been annulled accusing the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) of fraud. The Activista regional networks and the office unanimously mobilized members to take photo actions which went viral on social media, attracting thousands of comments and likes.

Activista became a key player in the movement **#GambiaHASDecided** whose aim was to ensure that former president Jammeh leaves power and gives peace a chance. This movement became very popular with posters, billboards and T-shirts with messages asking Yahya Jammeh to leave. A series of arrests were made by the security forces while others fled to Senegal to seek refuge.

Recently, Activista in close collaboration with The NYC and ten other youth organizations launched a campaign against the National Assembly for what they regarded as treason. They saw the National Assembly as a bunch of traitors after adhering to former president Jammeh's declaration of a state of emergency where his mandate was extended to 90 days. This brought fear to the people of The Gambia thus leading to the flight over 45,000 Gambians to neighbouring countries especially Senegal to seek refuge. In this regard, youth led by Activista gave the National Assembly an ultimatum. They gave the Assembly 72 hours to revoke their bad laws, apologize publicly to Gambians and resign or further action will be taken. The National Assembly in their extraordinary session recently tabled the petition demands of Youth Organizations and adhered to them. They apologized to the public for failing Gambians when they needed them the most. They also revoked the law that extended the term of the President but did not resign.



The Gambian youths are still pushing for their third demand to be met by the National Assembly. The campaign team has released another press statement stating that they will not relent in their efforts if the National Assembly did not resign. The Struggle continues!!!



## Zero Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)



The Network against Gender Based Violence in partnership with ActionAid International and member organisations joined the rest of the international community to commemorate International Day of Zero Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation and 16 Days of Activism against Gender Based Violence in February. The celebrations were motivated by the global commitment to end FGM by 2030 and are observed across the world through diverse approaches and initiatives. In The Gambia, both activities were conducted under the AmplifyChange project and in the form of caravans which traversed the length and breadth of the country. The theme for the commemoration under the theme: 'End FGM, Child Marriage and Sexual Violence'. The caravans were also used to popularize the anti-FGM and child marriage laws. Communities were sensitized on these laws and encouraged to report cases of violence whenever and wherever they occur in order to help protect the rights of women and girls.

The caravan, which lasted for 3 days, afforded the team the opportunity to sensitize communities and share IEC materials on FGM, child marriage and sexual violence as they intensified the call for an end to these practices. A series of activities ranging from community dialogues, school outreaches, film shows, radio talk shows to sporting activities among others, were held. During the interaction with communities and students, some of them shared their thoughts on why FGM and child marriage should stop:

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## Zero Tolerance for FGM

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**'We hope to see more of these activities. They do not only inform us about a critical reproductive health matter such as FGM but also prepare us to form a strong voice against the abuses we encounter', a student explained.**

A young woman in one of the forums said: **'Our dreams become distant ambitions because girls and young women's academic and professional goals are often crushed with the obligation of marriage, which are often arranged and characterized by dependency, violence and loneliness in most cases'**. In response to the laws meant to protect children, she stated, **'children are denied the enabling environment to report rights violations because of ignorance of the laws meant to protect them, and even when they are knowledgeable of such laws, cultural factors become barriers to gain legal assistance.'**

**A glaring example is an old man in Kartong who confessed that he regretted mutilating his daughters. 'I would have protected them from FGM if I had known the consequences this team just mentioned to us. You have to keep doing this, it will protect many from torture and pain'**

The caravan for the 16 Days of activism caravan took a wider coverage in 5 regions namely, NBR, LRR, CRR, URR and the Fonis of

West Coast Region. Its theme was 'From Peace in the home to peace in the world- End FGM, Child Marriage and Sexual Violence'.

During one of the community dialogues, one of the girls echoed: **"The law on Forced/ Early marriage is here to help our parents. How can a child discipline another child? If your girl child is less than 18yrs and married off, she will become a young mother thereby making it difficult for her to equally take care of another child"**.

The radio program conducted in Basse attracted a wide range of listeners who called to share their views on the topics of discussion. One of them said: **"I am so happy to listen to young people discussing issues that used to be a taboo publicly on a radio, keep up the good job and be rest assured that FGM is no longer celebrated here as it used to be"**.

The caravans served as catalyst to engage communities and individuals on very critical subjects such as the law and its enforcement at a time when the majority of FGM-practicing communities expect the immediate withdrawal or non-enforcement of the law that criminalizes a strong social norm.

This situation complicates our work but it is hopeful that more intensive community and social mobilization efforts will take place by specifically popularizing laws meant to address GBV and urge the government to maintain its strong stance to address all forms of Gender Based Violence.

## Inauguration of Wellness Centres in three Communities



The communities of Basse in the Upper River Region, Soma in the Lower River Region and Barra in the North Bank Region and their surrounding villages now have greater access to basic health care services, thanks to the establishment of three 'Wellness centers' in these areas. All these areas are linked to border posts and transit towns where large number of trucks stop, load and offload and where sex work and informal trades flourish.



The centers were established by ActionAid through funding from the Global Fund. They will provide comprehensive health care including general health check-ups, treatment for a range of illnesses including sexually transmitted infections and malaria, counseling and testing for HIV, anti-retroviral treatment referral, free condoms distribution and information on topics such as tuberculosis, hypertension, diabetes, and positive gender relations.



Traditional performers in Esseu at the ceremony

# Inauguration of Kumbaney Vegetable Garden in Kumbaney



On Wednesday 19<sup>th</sup> April 2017, ActionAid handed over to the women of Kumbanyi, the Women's Vegetable garden there. The 2 hectare garden was supported with the erection of a fence, a waiting shed, the construction of eight concrete lined wells and a toilet worth over 2 million dalasi, under the EU-funded project titled: **Promoting Women's Socio-economic Rights in the Central River Region.**



Women of Kumbaney and the handing-over ceremony



AAITG Executive Director



The 2 hectare garden



The shed and the toilet in the garden

With the handing over of the garden, the women of Kumbanyi have taken ownership of it and will now manage and control it on their own, increase their income earning level, enhance their living standard and above all have a balanced diet.