



Check Against Delivery

STATEMENT

BY

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SECRETARY OF STATE FOR FISHERIES AND WATER
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ON

**THE PRESENTATION OF THE GAMBIA'S COMBINED INITIAL,
SECOND AND THIRD REPORTS TO THE COMMITTEE ON THE
ELIMINATION OF DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN**

**UNITED NATIONS, NEW YORK
15 JULY 2005**

*Madam Chairperson,
Members of the Committee,*

I am honored to present to this committee, the Gambia's initial, second and third report on the convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women (CEDAW). I am indeed very proud of the government of the Gambia's efforts in the implementation of the provisions of the convention.

Madam Chairperson,

You will observe from the report the significant progress achieved by the Gambia in the implementation of CEDAW. I however hasten to add that despite the political will and commitment there is still room for improvement. The Government of the Gambia has a long standing commitment to protect the rights of women, eliminate all forms of discrimination against women and enhance their social, political and economic status in the Gambia. It is against this backdrop that The Gambia accelerated the process of ratifying CEDAW in December 1992.

Madam Chairperson,

As you may be aware our report was reviewed at the pre-session held here in January 2005. After the review session your committee communicated to us the questions and queries raised at that meeting. We have attempted to answer all the queries raised as well as taken stock of our level of fulfillment of our obligations as a nation which was submitted to your committee through the usual diplomatic channels.

Let me now highlight some of the achievements and challenges in the areas that are related to the Articles of CEDAW.

For the first time in the constitutional history of the Gambia the definition of discrimination was extended to include discrimination on the basis of sex under the 1997 Constitution of the Republic of the Gambia which corresponds with Article 1 of CEDAW.

The government's commitment to empower women was demonstrated by the putting in place of structures like the national women's bureau and council even before the ratification of CEDAW in 1992. These structures were set up to address women's issues. One of the most progressive things that were done was the setting up of the gender focal point network which consisted of representatives of key government departments and civil society organizations.

There also exist the select committee on women and children in the National Assembly (our parliament), a gender cabinet sub-committee and a gender technical committee

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which were all set up to better address and advise the government on women's issues in order to bridge the gap and offer a framework within which Gambian women can move out of inequality and deprivation, towards a better participation in the national development processes. Of particular importance has been the creation of the Department of state for women's affairs under the office of the Vice President. All of these initiatives are in recognition of the need to fulfill the Gambia's international obligation under CEDAW by pursuing policies that will eventually eliminate completely all forms of discrimination against women.

Madam Chairperson,

Among the policies currently being implemented, including the 1999 National Policy for the advancement of Gambian women, progress has been registered in the following areas:

EDUCATION

Over the last few years the government has increased its effort in this area as it relates to girls. It has created girl friendly schools which encourage the education of girls. Government has also made primary schooling free, thus encouraging poor families to educate their daughters. This has resulted in a much greater number of girls enrolling in primary school with much better chances of moving on to secondary and higher education. Currently women occupy 25% of the managerial positions in the public service. The current educational policy and trend for girls' enrollment would ultimately increase this percentage significantly.

HEALTH

Government has made significant progress in the area of health. The national health policy launched in 2001 to reduce maternal and infant mortality has resulted in more communities being identified as eligible for primary health care services, traditional birth attendants have been trained on the basics of safe motherhood, and village development communities have been trained on their roles to effectively manage the primary health care programmes in their respective communities. It is worth stating that the maternal mortality ratio has been brought down from 1050 per 100,000 live births in 1990 to 730 per 100,000 live births in 2001; the infant mortality rate from 92 per 1000 live births, to 84 per 1000 live births in 2001; and the use of modern contraceptives increased from 6.7% in 1990 to 13.4% in 2001. These are all deliberate efforts on the part of government to improve the health status of women in the Gambia as they are vital economic operators.

THE ECONOMY AND SOCIAL STRUCTURES

Women constitute about half of the labour force and are the main producers of food for the nation. Through their productive activities they contribute greatly not only to the physical welfare of their families but also to the economic life of the nation.

Whilst recognizing that a lot more needs to be done to increase the status of rural women, Government and partners have been *inter alia* embarking on several interventions such as functional literacy, enterprise development, skills training and micro finance as a means of poverty alleviation. The empowerment of women has risen to the extent that women have been involved in the male-dominated cash crops marketing and trade areas. Women have also been able to gain access to information and the use of ICT through community radio stations and multi media telecommunication centers.

In the rural administrative structure women have for the first time been elected as alkalos (village head) in the last five years. In the area councils 15 women were elected one of which was a deputy mayor. Women are also represented in the decentralized structures in local governance. At the national level, deliberate efforts on the part of the executive have been made to increase the number of women at the highest policy level, for example the Vice President of the Republic of the Gambia is a woman, the first and the longest serving female Vice President in Africa. Out of the five nominated members in the National Assembly, three are women. There are also three female elected members. Thirty-three percent of the Cabinet consists of women.

LEGISLATION

Generally the Gambia has incorporated some legal provisions contained in those international conventions and legal instruments it had ratified. Specifically the Constitution of the Republic of the Gambia makes provisions for the rights of women particularly in their being given equal opportunities with men in the areas of political, economic and social activities.

Recently the National Assembly enacted The Children's Act 2005. This landmark legislation makes specific provisions against the trafficking of children and provides for stiff penalties for violation. The Act also for the first time gives a unified definition of a child and makes specific provisions against child marriage and child betrothal. Furthermore, for the first time this Act also makes provisions against harmful traditional practices which affect the welfare, dignity, normal growth and development of the child.

***Madam Chairperson,
Members of the Committee,***

As stated earlier, despite the tremendous achievements registered there is, still room for improvement particularly to fulfill the obligations under Article 5 of CEDAW in terms of cultural patterns which discriminate against women. Non-fulfillment of this Article would mean that our women would continue to be dominated by their men folks, which is why efforts have been made and continue to be made to address and reform those laws which are detrimental to women. Furthermore Government acknowledges that a lot more needs to be done particularly as it relates to attitudinal change.

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Madam Chairperson,

In an attempt to adhere to Article 18 of CEDAW we have attempted to highlight to this august body the commitment of the government of the Gambia and the political will to fulfill our obligations as a party to the Convention and all the provisions contained therein. As this is the first time that the Gambia has come before this committee, we hope that we will meet the expectations of the committee and have satisfied all the requirements.

I thank you for your attention.

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