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COUNTRY STATEMENT - THE GAMBIA

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THE GAMBIA

Statement on Items (a), (c), (d), (e) under Paragraph 8 of Aide
Memoire for Regional Meeting on the Role of Women in National
Development, Addis Ababa, 17-26 March 1969

Introduction

The Gambia is a small wedge-shaped country about 250 miles (400 Km) long. Apart from a coastline of 30 miles (50 km) it is surrounded by Senegal, with which country it has much in common. Its main asset is the River Gambia which flows through the length of the country. The climate is tropical with a rainy season of 4-4½ months. The rest of the year is dry except for a very occasional shower usually about Christmas time. After the end of the rains, there is a cool season, more marked on the coast where it continues until March or April when there follows the hot weather which precedes the rains. Malaria is endemic.

The population of 315,000 is mainly engaged in agriculture. The chief crop is groundnuts which are produced for home consumption and for export. Rice is also widely cultivated but not at present in sufficient quantity to satisfy even the home market. Other cereals, chiefly coos are also grown; in a few areas beans are cultivated. Citrus fruits, mangoes, and bananas grow well. The main farming period is during the rainy season but efforts are being made to encourage the production of a second or even a third crop of rice during the year. In this regard valuable help is being given by the (Taiwan) Chinese Agricultural Mission, which is demonstrating improved methods of rice cultivation to local farmers.

Rice is the staple food of the country and forms a very large part of the average diet although in some areas it is replaced by coos, cassava, which is very easily grown, is often eaten, but usually not as the main carbohydrate constituent of

the diet. Groundnuts, of course, are widely eaten and are the common source of vegetable protein. They are often forbidden to pregnant women for fear of causing disease in the baby.

Animal protein in the more usually acceptable forms is less plentiful and tends to be expensive. Beef is the common form of meat but cattle are often kept as status symbols rather than as a source of food. Local milk is only commonly consumed by one tribe, the Fula. Sheep are plentiful and goats even more so but these are rarely slaughtered for food except on special feast days and holidays. Chicken are often kept but rarely grow to any size. Eggs are not usually given to women and girls as they are said to cause sterility, a story put about by men, no doubt, who wish to keep the eggs for themselves. Fish is plentiful on the coast and to a lesser extent in the river.

Health Nutrition and Child Care

The general nutritional state of the country compares well with that in other similar places. Many Gambians are of fine physique and are capable of doing hard physical labour.

Vitamin deficiencies are not commonly seen apart from various forms of vitamin B deficiency, much of which could be avoided by less vigorous polishing of rice.

Unfortunately, the nutritional state of infants and young children falls behind that of the adults. This is reflected in the high infant mortality rate, particularly in the remote parts of the country. This is due to many factors of which malaria is undoubtedly a very important one, but malnutrition certainly plays its part. Malnutrition is only rarely due to shortage of food, which is most marked during the rainy season, a time of increased sickness and a time when last year's stores are exhausted before new crops have been harvested.

Gambian women are good lactators and the rate of weight gain of breastfed babies is usually better than that of their European

counterparts for the first 6 months of life. After this time the growth curve of both weight and height falls below that of the European average and in many cases the weight remains stationary for several months, or even falls until, towards the end of the second year, weight is gained at the same rate as in a European child but at a lower level. This is a reflection of weaning practices and endemic disease. Cereal foods, usually corn, rice, or cassava pap are introduced at about 6 months in the Bathurst area but generally rather later in country districts and in some cases not until the child is two years old. Until recently, it was usual to continue breast feeding for two years or even longer. Unfortunately, it is becoming increasingly common for a child to be taken off the breast earlier because the father wishes to re-establish marital relations with the mother, or because a pregnancy had already started. Another rather unfortunate recent tendency has been the giving of artificial feeds to very young babies who are quite successfully breast feeding. In Bathurst, where this is more common, it usually results in nothing worse than diarrhoea due to over feeding, but in the hands of the uneducated village mother, giving a diluted feed in a rarely washed plastic feeding bottle, the results are often disastrous. Unfortunately the breast milk is often blamed for causing the diarrhoea and breast feeding is consequently stopped.

The rainy season is apt to be a trying time for all but more particularly for infants. The child who is too big to be carried on his mother's back while she is working on the farm (and a successfully breast fed baby may reach this size at 5 or 6 months) is left at home in the care of an elderly relative or another child often not more than 5 years old. Before she goes to the farm, the mother breast feeds the baby and prepares a bowl of pap (something he may never have tasted before) which is to be fed to him during the day. It is likely that he will refuse it and anyway in the hot damp atmosphere at that time of year it soon becomes sour and

This is probably also contaminated by flies. When the mother returns in the evening she again breast feeds the baby and these two breast feeds may be the only fluid and nourishment the child receives in the whole day. As the farming season advances it is probable that the hard working mother's breast milk become less, particularly as she is likely to be suffering from malaria.

Because of her immunity this is probably not severe but will tend to make her anaemic. The baby is also liable to have malaria but in his case it is likely to be very severe as he has recently lost the immunity he had from his mother and has not yet built up his own.

Milk which may be given to the very young breast-fed baby is not so often given to the child over 6 months as a part of his weaning diet. In Bathurst and other towns the modern mother frequently buys special foods for the baby which are more easily prepared than the traditional pap. Unfortunately she usually considers that these are sufficient by themselves and rarely adds milk to the custard of cornflower. Vanilla custard, because of its yellow colour is thought to contain eggs and therefore to be far superior to cornflower.

The child who survives the early hazards is, at the age of 18 months to 2 years, permitted to share in the family meal, which usually consists of rice with a sauce made of groundnuts or palm oil, with the occasional addition of vegetables, small pieces of meat on some days, and nearly always hot peppers. It is a wise child indeed who gets a fair share of protein from this mixed bowl. Fish, which may be given to adults, is often withheld from children for fear of giving them worms. A degree of undernutrition is therefore not uncommon during the weaning and post-weaning period. Severe malnutrition is rare except when it is precipitated by illness, commonly malaria, gastric-intestinal or respiratory tract infections, or measles. Kwashiorkor is not common but does occur, particularly following measles epidemics and in the latter part of the rains and ensuing months.

Maternity and Child Welfare Clinics are held in Bathurst and at 21 rural units throughout the country. Although they mainly serve as treatment centres, preventive inoculations are given and some health education, particularly advice on infant feeding. Dried skimmed milk, which was first supplied by UNICEF and more recently by the Catholics Relief Services, is distributed when available with suitable advice as to its use. Dried full cream milk, provided by the Gambian Government is also available in limited quantities and is usually given to orphans or twins if the family is not able to buy milk. The Clinics are very popular, large numbers attending and it is hoped to establish regular health education sessions at them.

Last year during the rainy season malaria prophylaxis in the form of Daraprin was distributed at the Clinics to children between the ages of 6 months and 2 years. The success of this programme has unfortunately been marred by the frequency with which the mothers seem to move about the country or even out of it.

Another very valuable preventive campaign, financed by the USA, which is going on at the moment, is the country-wide vaccination of all those over 3 months against smallpox, and of those between 6 months and 6 years against measles. It is hoped that this will wipe out the former terrible epidemic of measles which occurred in alternate years, causing a high death rate and followed by severe cases of malnutrition from which many succumbed.

Several attempts have been made, with varying degrees of success, to establish day nurseries in the villages where small children can be adequately fed and cared for while their mothers are out at the farm. These have mostly been supported by the Gambian Red Cross Society or by women's organizations and their popularity has often proved their undoing, the numbers seeking admission proving too great for the staff to manage satisfactorily.

Education and Training opportunities for Women

In considering women in the Gambia I think it will be wise to deal with a wide range of women particularly adolescents in

and out of school, and young adults. These women fall within the following categories:

- (i) Illiterate girls and women;
- (ii) School girls;
- (iii) School leavers from Post Primary and lower forms of High Schools;
- (iv) School leavers with the General Certificate of Education, 'O' level, and those who have reached the Sixth Form;
- (v) Professional Women.

Even where girls receive the same teaching as boys at school right up to the school leaving class, it has been found that in fact, girls have fewer chances; and that adolescent groups, once they leave school are sadly neglected. Careful study of how school curricula could be improved to meet the special needs of girls is now being carried out.

The country is aware of the need to prepare girls for positions demanding high academic attainments for careers in the technical and practical fields. Educated women in good position are aware of the vast majority of illiterate girls and women in the Gambia and therefore have drawn up programme of activities to help their less fortunate sisters to be literate. In a few villages in the Gambia groups of women have undertaken upon themselves to run adult literacy classes for women. Cookery, fabric dyeing and other types of handicrafts are taught to assist the women to make good use of locally grown produce, to improve the quality of their daily diet and to equip them with skills in certain trades so that they would be able to earn a living. There is room for greater expansion in this vital field of work but the problems of finance and personnel are formidable.

Educational Facilities Available for Women

The facilities that exist are inadequate. While in theory there is no discrimination against girls in education, in practice,

it is a fact that conditions for study, for most girls, are unfavourable. Not only is Gambian Society indifferent towards formal education for its girls, but the home environment is particularly hostile to academic pursuits. Many Muslim parents still do not hesitate to withdraw their daughters from school as soon as they can find eligible husbands for them. While Christian parents, in an attempt to train their daughters, often burden them with domestic chores which interfere with their school work. These are some of the reasons for wastage in the secondary school course.

School Curricula

Sir John Newsom (of the Newsom Committee on Education) in a conversation with "The Observer" stated that "the natural interests of girls, the things they are good at and want to pursue, are certain practical skills to do with nature and the arts - all the arts, music, drama, the visual arts, as well as literature". He continued saying that it was therefore necessary to produce courses that would foster and continue these interests and where abstract subjects (like the scientific subjects) were introduced there should be a new teaching approach that could make them more interesting to girls. There is virtually no art taught in our secondary schools; and the Sixth Form course so far is more suited to the needs of the boys than the girls. In the field of sport and physical education, the needs of girls are thoroughly overlooked. Needlework and domestic science lessons are either not available or, are quite inadequate.

Training Programmes for Women

Like other educational facilities, these are limited, and it should be emphasized that the Gambia needs the help of well qualified women in many fields. Indeed the country is bound to suffer from the lack of balance in the education and training of the two sexes. This discrepancy is particularly obvious in the

award of scholarships overseas. While only a very small number of young women qualify for university scholarships every year, it is possible that many more would benefit from Diploma Courses abroad, if these were open to them. At this stage of the Gambia's development, such courses in a wide variety of subjects would not only benefit girls who have reached the General Certificate of Education 'O' level, and those slightly below university standard, but would be of considerable advantage to the community. It is therefore an opportune time for an assessment to be made of the potential of women in our developing country.

For the non-academic women, there are very few opportunities for any kind of skilled training. Whereas young men have been given vocational training in a technical school in Bathurst and in a few other places in the Provinces for years now, no comparable institution for women exists. There is great hope that the new vocational training Centre will improve standards and open new opportunities for women.

Employment Opportunities

(i) Illiterate Girls and Women

These constitute the majority of the women in employment. They engage in farming, petty trade, domestic work and all forms of unskilled labour.

(ii) School Leavers from Junior Secondary Schools and the Lower Forms of Senior Secondary Schools

Generally, these girls are employed as nurses, teachers, clerical assistants, telephone operators, shop assistants, nannies, dress-makers. In short, the majority of girls who leave school are either absorbed in jobs, which require very little from them in terms of skill, or, are unemployed and, in consequence, create social problem. This is the group that would benefit most from vocational training.

General Certificate of Education holders or those who have reached the General Certificate of Education Class

This is a comparatively small, but expanding group. The majority are absorbed in the medical and teaching fields after training locally, or, in junior posts in the Civil Service. A few receive training overseas, either at their own expense, or on Government or Mission scholarships, and on return to the Country are appointed nursing sisters, stenographers, education officers and senior teachers etc.

Graduates and those with Higher Professional Qualifications

Opportunities for employment are the same for graduate women as for graduate men; though there is limited employment for women with high academic qualifications. Women graduates at present are a mere handful, and are mostly employed as teachers.

Contribution of Women to the Development Effort

In an emerging country like the Gambia, women are trying with a lot of setbacks to make their own contribution towards the development of the country. Since the Gambia became independent four years ago, women were not represented in Parliament. The recent appointment by the Prime Minister of the first nominated woman Member of the Gambian Parliament is an indication that the importance of the role of women in changing Gambia is being carefully considered. This is a challenge for Gambian Women to contest some of the elected seats in the next General Election in the Gambia.

Though the voices of women have not been heard at Government level yet their contribution at Nation level have been invaluable. Most of the voluntary services are organized and run by women - the Adult Literacy Classes, the Day Nurseries, the Red Cross Relief Programmes.

In improved and increased farming conditions, the services of women in the Provinces are indispensable.

Legal Status of Women in The Gambia

Women may be divided into two categories: Unmarried women and Married women.

(1) An unmarried woman enjoys generally the same rights as a man. This is the modern trend in an independent Gambia. Previously, an unmarried woman had no say in the choice of her husband. She had to obey the will of her parents. She had no right to reject a suitor and her position was a little above that of a slave. With the expansion of education, parents were induced to send their children to school and more particularly their daughters. This caused a great revolution - much to the dislike of some of the parents. Now an unmarried woman is no longer subject to the will of her parents, and she can marry the man of her choice.

As regards nationality, she takes the nationality of her father; and if she were illegitimate, she takes the nationality of her mother.

An unmarried woman who has a child born out of wedlock has all rights to that child. She can succeed to the estate of that child.

In the Gambia, quite unlike some countries like the United Kingdom, there is no discrimination as regards the salary to an unmarried woman or women generally.

(2) Married Women

A married woman in the Gambia is capable of acquiring, holding and disposing by will or otherwise of any real or personal property as her separate property in the same manner as if she were a "femme Sole" without the intervention of any trustees.

She is capable of entering into and rendering herself liable in respect of and to the extent of her separate property on any contract, and of suing and being sued either in contract or tort or otherwise in all respects as if she were a "femme sole".

Children

A married woman having separate property is liable for the maintenance of her children and grandchildren as her husband is by law liable.

In the Gambia, the wife is presumed to have her husband's authority to pledge his credit for household and necessities. Both husband and wife may freely make and enforce contracts with each other and may convey property to each other with or without consideration subject to the rights of creditors.

Generally one spouse cannot sue the other for tort except it relates to the property of the other. Likewise no action will lie against the other for personal wrongs.

Nationality

A married woman does not automatically take the nationality of her husband. In the Gambia, a married woman may apply to be registered as a Gambian; but she continues to retain her original nationality unless she takes steps to demonstrate that she wishes to exercise her right under her original nationality when her Gambian citizenship may be revoked.

Domicile and Residence

A married woman takes the domicile of her husband. As regards residence, the husband is presumed to choose the matrimonial residence in consultation with his wife.

Access to Court

A married woman has free access to the Courts in the Gambia but if she intends to take divorce proceedings she has to show that she is domiciled in the Gambia or if the husband is not a Gambian or if a Gambian with a foreign domicile, that she has been resident within the jurisdiction of the Court for a period of at least 3 years immediately before the presentation of her petition for divorce.

A married woman who has been deserted by her husband may summon the husband for maintenance. And if the Court is satisfied that the husband is able but wilfully refused or neglected to maintain his wife and has deserted her, it may order the husband to pay either a weekly sum not exceeding £2 or monthly sum not exceeding £10. Failure to obey the order may result in the husband being committed to prison.

As regards competency and compellability of one spouse to give evidence against another in a criminal case, this depends on whether the marriage is a Christian Marriage. If the marriage is one other than a Christian Marriage, then each spouse is competent and compellable as a witness on behalf of the prosecution or of the defence, but neither shall be compelled to disclose any communications made on him or her during the marriage. If, on the other hand the marriage is a Christian Marriage, then each spouse is competent but not compellable as a witness. Where a person is charged with an offence, the wife or husband as the case may be, is a competent witness for the defence. Even then, he or she may not be asked to disclose communications made to the other.

A wife does not become an accessory after the fact to an offence of which her husband is guilty by receiving and assisting him in order to enable him to escape punishment; or by receiving or assisting, in her husband's presence and by his authority, another person who is guilty of an offence in the commission of which her husband has taken part, in order to enable that other person to escape punishment.

Right to work

A married woman is entitled to work and to apply her earnings for her sole benefit. The husband cannot stop any establishment from employing her.

THE INTER-CHANGE OF DEVELOPMENT AND THE POSITION
OF WOMEN IN AFRICA

If we took the Second World War as a watershed we would notice that the position held by the African women was a function of varying factors. Where the time of descent and succession was matrilineal the women wielded much power in the affairs of the tribe. Even in a patrilineal society, although ostensibly the men made the decision, yet in actual fact, the old women were first consulted and invariably it was their advice that was accepted. The same could be said of acephalous societies.

Traditionally the place of the woman is in the home, but depending upon the taboos of the land and the division of labour, other than her mere homely tasks, the women were the Commercial Agents of their tribe or state, rulers and even soldiers.

At the same time the woman as wife had to subject herself to the whims of the husband and as in almost every country in the world a higher standard of morality was expected of her whereas the man would sow as many wild oats as he could.

This is a very brief picture of the position of women in Africa before the Second World War. With the war and the men going to battle women were now being employed in jobs other than the usual nursing or teaching as the men in almost any field that in my opinion has had the greatest effect in the position of women in Africa. They became in thought and deed the equals of men and felt that some of the old inhabitants which constructed them were no longer valid and therefore shed them. They were the equals of men, but at the same time wished to be looked upon as weak. This is the paradox of their position today.

In every walk of life today the African woman stands shoulder to shoulder with the man - in commerce, law, politics, architecture, medicine, the woman is ranking with the man but unfortunately she is still not prepared to shoulder the real responsibility which the new-found equality means.