

REPORT

# Women's Experiences of Dictatorship in the Gambia

A Submission by Women from Sintet, Janjanbureh, and Basse to the Truth, Reconciliation and Reparations Commission

December 2019



**Cover Image:** ICTJ staff consult with women in Sintet, the Gambia, about their experiences during the dictatorship. (ICTJ)

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ICTJ assists societies confronting massive human rights abuses to promote accountability, pursue truth, provide reparations, and build trustworthy institutions. Committed to the vindication of victims' rights and the promotion of gender justice, we provide expert technical advice, policy analysis, and comparative research on transitional justice approaches, including criminal prosecutions, reparations initiatives, truth seeking and memory, and institutional reform. For more information, visit [www.ictj.org](http://www.ictj.org)

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## Introduction

Since the Truth, Reconciliation, and Reparation Commission (TRRC) began public hearings in January 2019,<sup>1</sup> Gambians have been transfixed by perpetrators' confessions and shocked by the revelations of abuses committed during the former President Yahyah Jammeh's 22-year rule. "We knew bad things happened," one Gambian court official said, "but we didn't know how bad."<sup>2</sup> At the direction of Jammeh, state security forces, shadowy paramilitary groups, and the president's elite death squad, known as the "jungelers," carried out arbitrary arrests, torture, forcible disappearances, extrajudicial executions, intimidation, and various forms of exploitation.<sup>3</sup> Anyone who dared oppose Jammeh or criticize his government risked arrest, arbitrary detention, torture, forcible disappearance, and death. Gambians lived in a climate of fear where injustice and impunity prevailed.

However, an important part of the country's narrative has not yet come to light or been publicly acknowledged: the experiences of women. Despite comprising over half the Gambia's population, by the end of its ninth session the TRRC had only heard testimony from 27 women out of a total 143 witnesses and victims.

A combination of factors—fear, a lack of awareness of rights, a culture of intimidation against women, a culture of impunity that normalizes violations against women, and a patriarchal and religious society that gives little space to women in the public sphere—have converged to create a wall of shame and silence around violations against women, in particular sexual violence.

This report is an effort to break that silence and bring forward women's voices to shed light on the violations they have suffered under Jammeh's dictatorship and their enduring impact on their lives and those of their families.

Working through local women's groups and mothers' clubs, ICTJ facilitated a series of consultation workshops and talking circles where women could learn about the truth-seeking process and, once trust was built within the group, speak about their own experiences, their hopes for a new Gambia, and their recommendations for the TRRC. Underlying this approach is the "do no harm" principle and an effort to ensure that women who want to share their stories receive ongoing support and accompaniment. To that end, ICTJ emphasized to the women that their

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1 The TRRC Act provides for the establishment of a historical record of the nature, causes, and extent of violations and abuses of human rights committed during the period of July 1994 to January 2017 and for the consideration of granting reparation to victims. Truth, Reconciliation, and Reparations Commission Act, 2017. Available at: [www.lawhubgambia.com/truth-reconciliation-reparations-commission](http://www.lawhubgambia.com/truth-reconciliation-reparations-commission).

2 ICTJ interview, Banjul, July 23 2019.

3 Amnesty International, "Gambia: Fear Rules" (2008), Chapters 1-6.

participation is purely voluntary. The choice not participate must be respected, and those who wish to participate have a right to decide how and under what conditions.

Following the TRRC's public hearings on sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) held in October 2019, this report presents the stories and viewpoints of women who are not comfortable giving public testimony because of numerous risk factors, but who nevertheless insist that their experiences matter and must be acknowledged at the national level. Reflecting the general sentiment among the women consulted, one survivor emphasized, "our stories should be told to prevent the repetition of the violations that happened in the former government of Yahya Jammeh."<sup>4</sup>

This report also serves as a reminder to the TRRC to seek alternatives to the public hearing format and to open new channels for women to safely and anonymously share their experiences, so that women's perspectives can be fully integrated the country's reckoning with its troubled past. Through the TRRC process, including its final report, reparations program, and recommendations for necessary reforms, the Gambia is at a historical crossroads where it has the chance to break the cycle of violence against its citizens, women in particular, and build a culture of respect and dignity for all Gambians. Through this report, women join their voices to ask that these violations never happen again and to offer recommendations to improve the protection of women's rights, facilitate acknowledgment and healing, and provide reparations for all women victims.

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4 ICTJ Interview with anonymous victim, Upper River Region, June 28, 2019.



## Methodology

The three geographical areas highlighted in this report—Sintet in the West Coast Region, Janjanbureh in the Central River Region, and Basse in the Upper River Region—were selected, first of all, because of the existence of women support groups and the prominence of SGBV, which was revealed during preliminary consultations. Secondly, it appeared that the women in these regions suffered from various types of SGBV including violations that related to their social and economic rights. Thirdly, during its first visit to these areas, the ICTJ team came to realize that women in these remote areas lacked information about the TRRC and were thus unlikely to participate in the truth-seeking process. Finally, SGBV still exists and is pervasive in these regions. The team thus selected these remote communities to help make the truth-seeking process, which is centered in Banjul, more inclusive and increase the participation and consideration of rural women.

In an effort to develop innovative and context-specific approaches to safely and confidentially collect women victims' experiences during the dictatorship, ICTJ conducted a series of consultation workshops with approximately 179 women outside of Banjul between December 2018 and November 2019. These included regional consultations with social workers and women groups to develop community-based methods for taking statements from victims of SGBV. During the consultations, it became clear that victims of SGBV, especially those in the rural areas, face many challenges including social stigma and restricted access to justice due to limited financial resources to travel to the police stations to report the crime or to appear in court. Consequently, victims of SGBV often seek the assistance of local women groups. Thus, these women's groups are important community actors and partners, as they are able to provide victims assistance as well as a platform for them to share their experiences and work to prevent SGBV.

In March 2019, ICTJ reached out to these existing women groups and contributed some funds to help them establish regular discussion meetings with the women victims and provide them psychosocial support and some assistance through home visits, with the goal to create safe, trusted, and protected spaces for victims of SGBV. The ICTJ team that visited these communities also took the opportunity to learn about the primary needs and concerns of victims of sexual violence in these communities, and made the women understand how the transitional justice process can contribute to strengthening their rights and that they and other women have a right to participate.

During the consultation workshops, the women discussed their experiences of the dictatorship, the violations and abuses they suffered, and the enduring impact of these experiences on their

lives, families, and communities. They also described how they coped, hid some of these experiences from their families, and found the strength in their own resilience to survive when no support was available.

The data used in this report come from nine consultation workshops held in Sintet, Janjanbureh, and Basse, which also brought together women from surrounding areas. (See Table 1 for a list of locations where the consultation workshops were held.) Workshops took place on March 4 to 8, May 24 to 28, and June 25 to 29, 2019, and were led by ICTJ in partnership with local women support groups for victims of SGBV. About 179 women, including women leaders and victims, participated in the workshops and shared their experiences of SGBV and other human rights violations in their communities.

During the workshops, open-ended questions were used, and the discussion topics were translated into local languages to ensure that they were understood by the participants, who were mostly illiterate. The women spoke in their native local language, and a consultant, who could speak the Gambia’s two major local languages (Mandinka and Fula languages), took notes of the proceedings of the workshops which form the basis of this report.

The ICTJ team compiled the information in a draft report. The ICTJ team then returned to each community from November 20 to 22, 2019, and convened validation workshops with the women participants to share the main findings and ensure the information was correctly captured. The workshops also provided the women an opportunity to add missing information and make additional recommendations.

By bringing to light the various forms of abuse that women endured and their lasting impact, this report aims to encourage communities to change their attitudes toward gender-based violence, provide support to victims, and take appropriate steps to prevent SGBV.

**Table 1: Location of Consultation Workshops and Number of Participants**

Regions	Villages	Number of Women Participants
West Coast Region	<b>Sintet</b>	55
Central River Region	<b>Janjanbureh</b> Banni Village Basang Brikama Baa Pacharr Dasilami	61
Upper River Region	<b>Basse</b> Kerewan Madina Samakor Manchester Sandi Kunda Hella Kunda Nyakoi Kabakam Angal Futa	63

## Women's Experiences of Repression

### Culture of Silence

Various structural and systemic factors contribute to a culture of silence in the Gambia, which has allowed for widespread violations against women. When women at the first few workshops in Janjanbureh were asked about what violations they had suffered, they answered simply “we’re fine.” Some claimed, “we did not suffer any form of violence.”<sup>5</sup> They did not see themselves as victims of the former regime, and instead focused on what happened to their husbands and male relatives. Such responses are a direct consequence of a society in which a woman’s role is mainly to take care of her family members; women worry first about their family’s well-being and will not talk about their own experiences.

In the Gambia, it is commonplace to hear people say, “When a leader is elected, it is God who has put him there, we should allow God to remove him.” For instance, one woman who was consulted explained, “it is his [President Jammeh’s] right to tell you to do something, you’re in the wrong if you say no.”<sup>6</sup> This thinking, which is rooted in culture and religion, has made it very hard for women to speak up about what they suffered under the former regime. Instead, it has forced them to accept their unjust treatment.

The former regime’s repression of the opposition also contributed to this culture of silence, as people who expressed themselves or appeared to support the opposition, including some of the women consulted for this report, were frequently arrested without legal basis and then detained in secret locations. In many cases, no reason was given to justify the arrest, and victims were denied any legal recourse. For example, women from Janjanbureh recounted that during his 2015 reelection campaign, Jammeh ordered that a massive ditch be dug in the rice field in Jahali Pachar. He then gathered the women from the area at the site and threatened that if they did not vote for him in the 2016 election, he would bury them alive in the ditch. The women were terrified.<sup>7</sup>

Sexual harassment and violence were rampant but underreported. Victims of SGBV are usually too afraid or ashamed to speak about or report abuse, particularly sexual violence, due to stigma in a society that normalizes such violence, often blames the victim, and offers little or no support for victims. In instances where women are willing to report sexual violence, their families

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5 ICTJ Consultation with the women of Janjanbureh, June 25, 2019.

6 ICTJ Interview with anonymous victim, Upper River Region, June 28, 2019.

7 Validation workshop in Janjanbureh, Central River Region, November 21, 2019.

discourage them from doing so in order to protect the family's reputation or out of fear that the authorities will not protect them adequately. As a result, most women victims of SGBV stay silent.

During Jammeh's rule, women experienced widespread discrimination in terms of matrimonial rights, property ownership, and inheritance rights. Moreover, the authorities were unlikely to offer effective protection to women, especially in cases of domestic violence and spousal rape, due to cultural and religious factors that normalize such violations and create a situation where women are treated as second-class citizens in the Gambia.

The shroud of shame is so thick and the silence so deafening, even for women who are leaders in the community and are in regular contact with other women, that participants were surprised to learn the extent of violations suffered under Jammeh's rule. During the consultation workshops, several women shared their experiences for the first time. For example, in Sintet, women spoke for the first time about the sexual violence they suffered as part of the witch hunts. (The following section will describe these witch hunts in more detail.) As one of the women helping facilitate the discussion said, "I never knew all this happened. This is my first-time hearing this."<sup>8</sup>

The consultations that led to this report submission have started to break the culture of silence among Gambian women; we hope the TRRC can help further amplify these voices and encourage all Gambians to treat women and their experiences with the utmost respect.

## Violations Against Women

Women across the Gambia experienced gross human rights violations during the previous regime. They lived in fear of being tortured, arrested, or detained for either going against the directives of former president Yahya Jammeh or for not supporting him. The main violations that came up in the consultations were sexual violence, arbitrary arrest, torture, ill-treatment, forced labor, and land confiscation. The next sections provide a detailed account of women's experiences during the Jammeh dictatorship.

### Sexual Violence

The Gambia Sexual Offences Act of 2003 criminalizes every form of sexual violence, exploitation, and harassment. This legislation amends the law and procedure relating to the prosecution of rape and other sexual offenses. The act addresses some of the barriers that have impeded the prosecution of rape and other sexual offenses in the past. The act also expands the definition of the crime of sexual assault to include conduct in which the victim is coerced into sexual acts and applies the amendments retroactively to perpetrators who would otherwise have escaped punishment.<sup>9</sup> However, in practice, this legislation is not enforced.

The Gambia is also signatory to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and has committed and is obliged to take concrete steps to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women. Article 1 of CEDAW defines sexual violence as "violence which is directed against a woman because she is a woman or that affects

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<sup>8</sup> ICTJ discussion with anonymous woman leader, Sintet, June 25, 2019.

<sup>9</sup> Sexual Offences Act, Gambia, 2003; available at:  
<https://moj.gov.jm/sites/default/files/laws/Sexual%20Offences%20Act.pdf>

women disproportionately;” sexual violence thus includes gender-based violence and constitutes a human rights violation.<sup>10</sup>

Despite these legal protections, during the dictatorship, there was widespread sexual violence, which was largely underreported due to fear of retribution or social stigma. In cases that were reported, perpetrators largely escaped punishment because of failures in the law enforcement and justice systems. While these offenses are explicitly prohibited under the Gambian Sexual Offences Act, victims of these crimes have difficulty accessing justice for social, cultural, and institutional reasons. This, in turn, further entrenches a culture of impunity for sexual violence.

When SGBV is reported to the police, in many cases families convince the victims to withdraw their complaint to preserve the family’s standing in the community. For example, a women leader from Basse, recounted, “a girl was raped by a young man in Basse on her way to water her mother’s crops. As a concerned individual and mother, I took it upon myself to report the matter to the police. But in the long run the court couldn’t proceed because the family approached me to personally ask me to let things go.”<sup>11</sup> In other cases, uninformed families of victims tamper with evidence that could have been used to properly investigate crimes such as rape. For those who do report, due to the slow progress of the police investigation, victims eventually give up and stop relying on the police. According to the women interviewed, sexual harassment, rape, forced marriage, female genital mutilation, and other sexual gender-based abuses were prevalent under the former regime, yet very few cases were reported.

The consultation workshops revealed new details of previously known violations, notably forced nudity, sexual assault, and rape, that were committed during the witch hunts and in the forced farm labor camps. While the witch hunts had been previously documented, the extent of sexual violence that occurred during them was unknown. According to a women leader, “We knew witch hunts happened in Sintet and that most of our folks were affected, but the extent of sexual violence that occurred during the witch hunts was unknown.”<sup>12</sup>

The following sections provide an analysis of the SGBV that was perpetrated in each region where ICTJ held consultations.

### Sinet

In 2009, former President Yahya Jammeh ordered security forces to arrest a group of people whom he accused of sorcery in what is now commonly known as the witch hunts. The accused men and women were abducted from their houses and taken to the president’s farm in Kanilai where they were subjected to various forms of torture and abuse. The women suffered multiple forms of sexual violence. They were forcibly stripped naked by young soldiers and Green Boys and were forced to drink a “truth potion” made from a fruit called noni (locally known as “Kobejara”) containing a high concentration of an herbal hallucinogen.<sup>13</sup> The same concoction was used to bathe them and was rubbed in their eyes and genitals, which caused severe pain. According to one of the victims, “the concoction was too bitter and hard to swallow.”<sup>14</sup> And worse, as another victim explained, “the concoction caused me high blood pressure, constant headaches, and knee problems.”<sup>15</sup>

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10 CEDAW, General Recommendation No. 35 on Gender-Based Violence Against Women, Updating General Recommendation No. 19, page 2, July 14, 2017.

11 Validation workshop in Basse, Upper River Region, November 20, 2019.

12 ICTJ interview with anonymous women leader, Sintet, June 25, 2019.

13 The Green Boys were a youth group of former President Jammeh’s political party, the Alliance for Patriotic Reorientation and Construction (APRC).

14 ICTJ interview with anonymous victim, Sintet, June 25, 2019.

15 Validation workshop in Sintet, West Coast Region, November 22, 2019.

The women who were consulted stated that the soldiers targeted elderly people, mostly women, whom Jammeh accused of killing his aunt through witchcraft. The accused were then tortured and forced to confess to murder by witchcraft. After confessing, the victims were released or left to be found by family and community members. One of the women victims agreed to share her experience, saying:

I really suffered during the former regime. After coming from my garden, my children informed me about the coming of the soldiers in the village and advised me to hide inside my small room and that's what I did. Two men who are believed to be soldiers found me hiding in my room and drove me out and forcefully asked me to follow them; I was not allowed even to wear my shoes. When my husband told them to allow me to wear my shoes, they ended up taking along my husband, too, to Kanilai, leaving our family in pain and hunger.<sup>16</sup>

Their car was parked in the center of the village, and they forced us inside the car and drove us to Kanilai. My husband was released that very day which was on a Monday, but I spent two days in Kanilai. During my capture, they forced me to drink a concoction that made me unconscious and caused me continuous chest pain and headache. I don't have any idea of why they held me captive; the only thing I can remember is that the former president Yaya Jammeh allegedly accused the village women of being witches.

Young soldiers tortured us and left us naked during the whole incident. We were not given any food or water; the only thing given to us was the concoction. And the authorities did nothing to rescue us. I got back home with the help of a man from my village. I spent all my money on medication that left me financially broke.

In this present government, I have not experienced this type of abuse... but I am still suffering from the experience I encountered in the former regime.<sup>17</sup>

This traumatizing experience still haunts many victims. One of the women victims said, "I was stripped naked by a young soldier, as young as my children; these soldiers saw me naked and the witch doctor used the concoction on my private parts. I cried bitterly because I could not stand having a young person looking at me naked."<sup>18</sup>

Some the women fought with the soldiers to try to stop them from stripping them naked. "We were beaten and mistreated as we struggled to stop them from stripping us of our clothes,"<sup>19</sup> recounted one of the elderly women. These women were subsequently under constant surveillance and denied any privacy. For example, they recounted that soldiers would escort them to the bathroom and watch as they relieved themselves.

These women endured extreme humiliation. As a result, they kept what happened secret and tried to survive despite this painful memory.

### Janjanbureh and Basse

In the consultation workshops in Janjanbureh and Basse, the women spoke about how, during the compulsory farm work in Kanilai, the soldiers would sexually harass them and sneak into their rooms and rape them. They said that some of Jammeh's top government officials would

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<sup>16</sup> ICTJ Interview with anonymous victim, Sintet, June 25, 2019.

<sup>17</sup> ICTJ Interview with anonymous victim, Sintet, June 25, 2019.

<sup>18</sup> ICTJ Interview with anonymous victim, Sintet, June 25, 2019.

<sup>19</sup> ICTJ interview with an anonymous woman, Sintet, June 25, 2019.

visit the farm in Kanilai and entice the women into having sex with them by offering them money. According to a former women leader of the Alliance for Patriotic Reorientation and Construction (APRC) in Lower River Region, “they would identify the women during the day, and at night they would send the soldiers to get these women for them. The women were afraid to refuse for the fear of being tortured or harmed.”<sup>20</sup> Soldiers would go to the sleeping halls at night and pick up women, take them to their rooms, and bring them back before sunrise. In other cases, soldiers would give the women their room numbers and order them to go to their rooms at a specific time. Most women went to the rooms out of fear for their lives or punishment if they did not. The officials and soldiers coerced these women into sex, by threatening them or taking advantage of their economic vulnerability.

Moreover, there were no measures in place to protect the women’s privacy. For example, the women on the farm shared bathrooms and bathing facilities with men. As a consequence, they were exposed to sexual abuse.

During the workshop in Janjanbureh, women testified about sexual violence that occurred in April 2016. They said that two women supporters of the United Democratic Party (UDP) from Basang, who came out to demonstrate in solidarity with the UDP protestors who were arrested and jailed on April 14 and 16, were themselves arrested and taken to Mile 2 Prison. While in prison, the women were gang raped by prison guards every night. “It was a lucky day for the women if they were raped by only two men in a night,”<sup>21</sup> said the sister of one of the victims. These two women lived in fear while in prison and wished night would never come, as it was then that they would relive the horror of rape all over again.

Against this backdrop of state-sponsored SGBV and total impunity for perpetrators, women also suffered sexual violence within their own families and communities. According to one woman from the village of Basang:

Sexual violence was also perpetrated in our communities and even affected the children. Child rape and abuse was very common and still exists. It was sometimes committed by policemen, who had sexual relationships with underage children. Society could not say much about it because the police were people who have the power and can harm them. People were obliged to keep quiet to avoid arbitrary arrest and torture.<sup>22</sup>

According to the women of Central River Region-South, police do little or nothing to investigate cases of sexual violence (especially rape), which has deterred most women in the region from reporting the crime. One of the women from Basang said, “rape is very common in Basang but when cases of rape are reported to the police, they do nothing about it; they only take your statement and no further investigations or follow ups are done. As a result, we do not report rape cases because it is a waste of time and resources.”<sup>23</sup>

Most of the women in Upper River Region reported that rape is also common in their region, sometimes perpetrated by a relative, and in most cases unreported due to fear of stigma, shame, and the need to protect the family’s reputation. “We have seen cases of uncles raping their

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<sup>20</sup> ICTJ interview with anonymous women leader (and former leader in the APRC), Upper River Region, June 28, 2019.

<sup>21</sup> ICTJ interview with anonymous woman, Janjanbureh Central River Region-South, June 26, 2019.

<sup>22</sup> ICTJ interview with anonymous woman, Janjanbureh Central River Region-South, June 26, 2019. No evidence or data were available to confirm this statement, although the pervasive child marriage in the culture could be an indicator of child sexual abuse.

<sup>23</sup> ICTJ interview with anonymous victim, Janjanbureh Central River Region-South, June 26, 2019.



nieces, and they are not reported to the police because the relatives want to protect the family name,” said one of the women leaders.<sup>24</sup>

### **Arbitrary Arrest, Torture, and Ill-Treatment**

Across all areas where consultation workshops were held, women were arbitrarily arrested, tortured, or suffered ill-treatment. Chapter IV (21) of the Gambian Constitution provides for the protection of fundamental rights and freedoms including the rights to privacy and personal liberty; freedom from torture and inhumane treatment; protection of the law and the right to a fair trial; and freedom of speech, conscience, assembly, association, and movement.

The Gambia has also ratified most major international human rights treaties, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the First Optional Protocol; the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; CEDAW; the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination; the Convention Against Torture, Cruel, Inhuman and Degrading Treatment or Conduct; and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Gambia has also ratified the African Charter on Human and People's Rights.<sup>25</sup> All these conventions prohibit torture, ill-treatment, and arbitrary arrest. However, state security agencies such as the police and the National Intelligence Agency practiced torture or ill-treatment during the former regime. In most cases, victims were detained more than 72 hours without trial and were tortured and ill-treated while in custody.<sup>26</sup>

#### **Sintet**

The witch hunts in Sintet involved arbitrary arrests, torture, and cruel and degrading treatment. The torture described by victims included severe beatings with blunt objects like wooden clubs; they were also repeatedly threatened with torture and death.

The victims of the witch hunts were gathered and held in unsanitary conditions. As one of them testified, “We drank the concoction in a lavatory that smelled of stale urine and feces. The lavatory was full of dirty water where you had to stand to drink the concoction and later bathe in it. Each person was forced to drink a cup filled with the concoction and to chew the leaves that they gave you along with it.”<sup>27</sup>

Women who resisted were beaten. They were forced to drink a drug-laced concoction that made them hallucinate and unaware of the world around them, with the purpose to force their confession that they are witches. The ones who refused to admit it were forced to drink the concoction, again.

“When I was taken to Kanilai I was forced to drink the concoction and admit that I am a witch. Out of fear I had to admit it. I was undressed by a soldier young enough to be my grandson who was instructed to bathe me with the concoction,” one victim shared. “Some of the concoction was put in my eyes. I now have an eye problem due to the concoction that was put in my eyes. I have undergone several operations, but my eyes have still not improved.”<sup>28</sup>

Some lost consciousness for days. Women who were too old or weak could not endure the toxic concoction and died. According to the victims, after being released, most of the women who got sick were taken to the Sulyman Jukung Hospital in Bwiam and other public hospitals but

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24 ICTJ interview with anonymous victims, Basse, Upper River Region-South, June 28, 2019.

25 Amnesty International, “Gambia Fear Rules” (2008), p. 6.

26 UN Human Rights Council, “Report of the Special Rapporteur on Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, Addendum: Mission to The Gambia,” (A/HRC/28/68/Add.4), March 2, 2015.

27 Validation workshop in Sintet, West Coast Region, November 22, 2019.

28 Validation workshop in Sintet, West Coast Region, November 22, 2019.



were refused medical treatment because the former president instructed the hospitals not to treat them.<sup>29</sup>

“Three days after my mother’s release, we took her to the hospital at Bwiam where the doctors refused to give her medicine. The doctors told us that Yaya Jammeh instructed them to do so. The lack of medical attention resulted in my mother’s death. Almost all the government hospitals in the country were instructed not to give any medication to the victims of the witch hunts,”<sup>30</sup> explained a young woman.

A similar story was shared by the daughter of one of the woman victims who died. “My mother was a victim of the witch hunt. When my mother was released, she was very weak and could not walk. We took her to the Bwiam hospital where she spent two nights but she was not given medical treatment. We brought her home and she died the following day,” she said. “She was 60 years old when she passed away and it has been 10 years already since she died. A lot of victims died within days or a few weeks after their release from Kanilai.”<sup>31</sup>

### Janjanbureh and Basse

In Central River Region-South, particularly in Brikama-Ba, women who were politically opposed to the former government, especially supporters of the UDP, experienced numerous violations at the hands of the former regime beginning with arbitrary arrest and detention without trial. Some of the women arrested were held in prison in solitary confinement. One woman described the ordeal her friend, an outspoken woman and a supporter of the UDP, went through. “She was accused of insulting the members of the APRC and was arrested by officials of the Police Intervention Unit during a UDP political rally in Brikama-Ba and taken to McCathy Prison in Janjanbureh. The cell she was put in had maggots and they crawled all over her. She was in the cell for a month without change of clothes or proper food.”<sup>32</sup>

At the workshop in Janjanbureh, the participants spoke about women who were also arrested and detained because they were opposed to the former government. One of the women said she was arrested multiple times by the police because she opposed the former regime:

During 22 years of dictatorship, I was frequently arrested by soldiers because I was opposed to the former regime and would be reported by women of Angal Futa that I insulted APRC.<sup>33</sup> I was arrested almost every week during election periods. In prison, I was never given food and, when my family members brought food for me, the prison guards in charge would eat the food. I survived thanks to the help of my brother who is a lawyer.

My property and home were often vandalized during elections. I would repair the destruction, which cost me a lot of money. I was threatened during the December 2016 presidential election that, if Yahya Jammeh wins the election, I will be among those to be killed. After hearing this, I fled from my home and to my brother’s house. I even got sick from the fear of being arrested by Yahya Jammeh.<sup>34</sup>

The former regime commonly used arbitrary arrest, torture, and ill-treatment to intimidate, repress, and humiliate people, and women in the regions were not spared.

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29 Sulyman Jukung Hospital was named after the father of former president Jammeh; it is now called Bwiam General Hospital. Bwiam is also in Foni, close to Kanilai, the home town of Yayah Jammeh.

30 ICTJ interview with anonymous victim, Sintet, June 25, 2019.

31 Validation workshop in Sintet, West Coast Region, November 22, 2019.

32 ICTJ interview with anonymous woman Leader, Janjanbureh Central River Region-South, June 26, 2019.

33 Angal Futa is an area in Basang, mainly dominated by Fulas from Guinea Conakry.

34 ICTJ interview with anonymous woman Leader Janjanbureh Central River Region-South, June 26, 2019.

## Forced Labor

Chapter 4 (20) of the Gambian Constitution stipulates that “No person shall be required to perform forced labour.”<sup>35</sup> Article 8 (3)(a) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which the Gambia is a party, states that no one shall be required to perform forced or compulsory labor.<sup>36</sup> However, the Gambia’s criminal code does not include a provision criminalizing forced labor.<sup>37</sup>

Despite legal protections against forced labor, in practice many Gambians were subjected to it under the previous regime. In his quest to improve the country’s agricultural sector, former President Jammeh urged Gambians “to go back to the land” and work. The slogan of this campaign was “grow what we eat, eat what you grow.” Yet, Jammeh made it impossible for many Gambians, particularly women, to do just that by forcing them to work on his large farms in Kanilai and elsewhere, without pay and in very difficult conditions. Women were called to work on the president’s farms through the “alkalo,” or village leader. The alkalo would ask the local women’s associations to organize groups of women to go to the president’s farms. The women would wake up early every morning during the farming seasons to travel to and work on the president’s farmlands. If they did not, they would be considered part of the opposition and be arrested. In Kanilai, the president set up accommodation for workers, and the women would sometimes spend consecutive days working at the president’s farm without returning home.

“For two days, I went to ‘Lampedusa’ with my very young son.<sup>38</sup> I had to stop because it was not healthy for my son to be under the sun without proper protection, but some women would beg me not to stop going to the farm because I might get in trouble, possibly arrested, tortured, and jailed. I was afraid, so I went back. I worked on the farm for the whole month of Ramadan. I woke up every morning with my baby on my back to go to the farm. The bus to Lampedusa leaves from Kalagi, so we had to walk from Sintet to Kalagi to board the bus. And walk from Kalagi to Sintet from the farm,” recounted a woman from Sintet.<sup>39</sup>

Women in Sintet, Janjanbureh, and Basse were subject to hard labor on Jammeh’s farmlands. In Central River Region-South and Upper River Region, the women reported that they had no idea what was happening when they were first sent to the president’s farm in Brikama-Baa. When they arrived, to their surprise, they were forced to work and were sometimes beaten if they rested.

## Sintet

Two weeks after the victims of the 2009 witch hunts were released from the president’s farm in Kanilai, soldiers arrived in Sintet with a truck full of bags of groundnuts (peanuts), which were given to the Alkalo to shell. The bags were distributed among the households. The women victims of the witch hunts were forced to do the work while they were still in pain. One declared, “We broke the groundnuts with tears in our eyes. It was hard and painful to work for someone who caused you so much pain.”<sup>40</sup>

35 Constitution of The Gambia, 1997, <http://hrlibrary.umn.edu/research/gambia-constitution.pdf>

36 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on 19 December 1966; <https://treaties.un.org/doc/publication/unts/volume%20999/volume-999-i-14668-english.pdf>, p. 175.

37 Gambia Labour Act 2007; [http://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/natlex4.detail?p\\_lang=en&p\\_isn=79075&p\\_classification=01.02](http://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/natlex4.detail?p_lang=en&p_isn=79075&p_classification=01.02)

38 The women called the farm “Lampedusa,” because it was a place of hardship without proper food or enough water to drink. Many of these women’s sons lost their lives in Lampedusa, one of the Italian Pelagic Islands in the Mediterranean Sea, trying to migrate illegally by boat to Europe.

39 Validation workshop in Sintet, November 22, 2019.

40 ICTJ Interview with anonymous victim, Sintet, June 25, 2019.

Later the same year, the soldiers asked the villagers to hand over bags of salt for the president in exchange for bags of rice; it was agreed that the villagers would receive two bags of rice for every bag of salt they produced. At the end of the day, the soldiers collected the bags of salt, but they never delivered the bags of rice. “He [Jammeh] made us his horses,” one of the victims lamented.<sup>41</sup> Another victim explained:

We collected salt from the seaside and strained it until it was clean. Then, we had to collect firewood from the bush. We had to spend money, again, because the firewood was so heavy that we had to pay a donkey cart to carry it to our houses. Then, the salt is cooked and strained, again. We continued this process until each had a bag. Some made more than one bag of salt, hoping that they would get more bags of rice to feed their families. We took the salt to the alkalo’s house where it was collected from us, but we never received the bags of rice we were promised.<sup>42</sup>

The women of Sintet recounted that in 2015 they were sent to work on the president’s farm in Mayork, without any remuneration; they even paid their own transportation costs.<sup>43</sup> The community was promised that each individual who worked on the president’s farm in Mayork would be paid D10,000 as compensation for their work. However, they were never paid, nor did they receive any other benefit. While working on the farm they were not given enough time to rest or food to eat. In the words of one of woman, “each time we wanted to rest, we were only allowed five minutes to do so, and, to ensure that work was done, the farm was surrounded by soldiers who monitored us. The lunch would come late, and it was usually plain rice.”<sup>44</sup>

According to them, they were threatened with arrest if they did not go, which is why they went. They had to wake up early every morning during the farming seasons to go work on the president’s farm. “We were searched to make sure that we went home with nothing, not even a grain,” one woman said.<sup>45</sup> Another recounted, “in Lampedusa, there was no taking a rest, and women and men did the same amount of work. We could not even play our roles as mothers and wives because we were too busy working in Lampedusa to have any time for our families. The little money we saved we had to spend on commuting to Lampedusa.”<sup>46</sup> Some went to the extent of taking loan from shop owners to pay fares, in hopes of paying it back once they received the promised amount.

Sharing her experience, another woman said, “We worked without rest because the soldiers would patrol around to make sure everybody work. That is how we continued working in Lampedusa until the entire field was cleared. I developed a very bad headache from working in Lampedusa and it was the worst headache that I ever had in my entire life. And to add to my pain, I did not receive a single butut [penny] from the D10,000 we were promised.”

### Basse

Women from various communities in the Upper River Region travelled far to work on the President’s farms in Kanilai and Mayork (in West Coast Region) and to Brikama-Ba (in Central River Region).<sup>47</sup> The president also had a farm in Sotuma (in Upper River Region) where some

41 ICTJ Interview with anonymous victim, Sintet, June 25, 2019.

42 Validation workshop in Sintet, November 22, 2019.

43 Mayork is about 18.1 kilometers from Sintet.

44 ICTJ Interview with anonymous woman, Sintet, June 25, 2019.

45 ICTJ Interview with anonymous woman, Sintet, June 25, 2019.

46 Validation workshop in Sintet, November 22, 2019.

47 Kanilai is about 313 kilometers (five hours drive) from Upper River Region. Mayork is about 298 kilometers (four hours and 41 minutes drive) from Upper River Region. Brikama Ba is about 134.2 kilometers (two hours and 38 minutes drive) from Upper River Region.

of the women worked. The women had to wake up early to get to the meeting point in Basse where they boarded on trucks and tractors that took them to Brikama-Ba, Mayork, or Kanilai. For those going to Sotuma, tractors were sent to pick them up at various meeting points on the way to the farm.

Jammeh used various tricks to lure women to come work his farms. “The first time we went to the president’s farm in Kanilai, the [tribal] council member told us that we were invited for an event in Kanilai,” one woman said. Only after the women arrived on the president’s farm did they discover they were going to serve as laborers, and that the conditions were grueling. “There is nothing more to working on the president’s farm than just pain and suffering,” explained one victim. Another woman recounted:

Some women including myself were chosen by our community, Jiroba, to participate in an agricultural training that was organized by the women’s bureau. After the training, we were asked by our council member to work on the farm in Kanilai, where we worked in for three days. After working in Kanilai, we were sent to work on the president’s farm in Sotuma for another week. Even if you were not raped by the soldiers, the pain and suffering alone are a huge problem. Once the forced farm work ended, they had to go to the hospital, because of the constant pain they experienced afterward.<sup>48</sup>

Even as these women were forced to work on the president’s farms, they struggled to provide for their families. In the words of one victim, “Initially, when we started going to the president’s farm to work, we thought that we would be given bags of rice or even paid money as compensation for working on his rice fields.”<sup>49</sup> However, they received neither rice nor money. They had to abandon their own farms to work on the president’s and were thus left with nothing to feed their families.

#### Janjanbureh

Jammeh also had a farm in Central River Region-Region, at Brikama-Ba in Jimara District, called “Dalasi” or “Dalassoo.”<sup>50</sup> Women from across the region and as far as the Upper River Region were forced to work on the farm during the farming seasons, leaving their families behind. Trucks and tractors picked them from various meeting points and dropped them at Dalasi.

Victims in Central River Region-South (CRR-South) reported that they had to walk long distances to get to the meeting points. Every household was expected to send at least one person to work on the farm. Again, they worked without pay or other benefit. The women recounted that, at Dalasi, they worked the whole day without water or food, and some of them resorted to drinking water from the swamps, which gave them diarrhea. A woman said, “I had diarrhoea for seven days because of the swamp water I drank.” According to her, a baby died on her mother’s back while the mother was working on the farm. “No one could tell if it was due to the sun or lack attention from the mother,” she said.<sup>51</sup>

At the time, the women could not talk about these experiences out of fear of Jammeh. “We kept going because we were afraid that we might get arrested for not going—that was the impression our village chiefs gave us.”<sup>52</sup> In CRR-South, the women of Brikama-Ba and Basang were

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48 Validation workshop in Basse, Upper River Region, November 20, 2019.

49 Ibid.

50 Dalasi is the name in the Mandinka language.

51 ICTJ Interview with anonymous victim, Central River Region-South, June 26, 2019.

52 ICTJ Interview with anonymous victim, Central River Region-South, June 26, 2019.

the most affected. They even said that husbands were threatened into allowing their wives to go work on the president's farm.

### Land Confiscation

Chapter 4 (28) of the Constitution enshrines women's right to "full and equal dignity of the person with men" and equal treatment before the law, including equal opportunities in political, economic, and social activities. While there is no national policy that denies women the right to land or property, local custom privileges the rights of men over women.

According to the women of Sintet, under President Sir Dawda Jawara,<sup>53</sup> lands were allocated to women in the area to farm. But when former President Jammeh took over the country in 1994, men from the Jola tribe claimed these lands, confiscating them from the women (who mostly belong to the Mandinka and Fula tribes). Jammeh belongs to the Jola tribe, and he granted members of his community many privileges, which sometimes led to abuses against other communities. These land seizures harmed the women farmers economically, as they were unable to access and farm their land, leaving them without a source of income. Some women had to resort to borrowing land to farm from the community or family members.

During the consultation workshop in Basse, the women complained that they were not allowed to inherit land from their parents or husbands, and, even if they did, the men in the family would take it from them. This practice is still prevalent in the regions the ICTJ team visited. The Gambia is a patriarchal society with very deeply rooted traditions and customs in which men inherit land unconditionally. In contrast, when a woman is entitled to an inheritance, it must be approved by the community elders. In this way, the *alkalo* and the council of elders are responsible for land allocation and distribution at the village or community level, while the heads of individual families (who are mostly men) allocate land at the family or clan level. This kind of arrangement makes it difficult for divorced and widowed women to access land, especially when there is limited land to share.

Land-related injustices that affect women include a lack of access to fertile rice fields, from which they can make a living. This, in turn, limits women's ability to produce enough food and increases their and their families' food insecurity, poverty, and economic vulnerability.<sup>54</sup> As one victim recounted, "we had to work on the land that was seized from us by the president, and everything that was grown on the land went back to the president, and we did not benefit from the farm produce." As a result, "we could hardly get enough food or pay our children's school fees."<sup>55</sup>

In Janjanbureh, the women described how the former president seized the rice field in Jahali Pacharr for more than 10 years. One of the women told the story as follows:

Jammeh came around to tour the rice field, and there was one area in the field that did not have access to water and was thus dry. He promised to provide them with facilities that would pump water to that part of the field. The other part of the rice field was fertile, and it belonged to the entire community. Each household had a portion of that land. It was a major source of livelihood for the women. When President Jammeh saw that land, he told the women that we were going to be his co-wives in that area because he was going to take a part of the land. After

<sup>53</sup> Sir Dawda Jawara was the first president of the Gambia (add years he was in power).

<sup>54</sup> Republic of the Gambia, "Review of the State of Implementation of Praia Orientations (on Land Tenure) in the Gambia," [www.hubrural.org/IMG/pdf/cilss\\_praia\\_gambie\\_rapport\\_national.pdf](http://www.hubrural.org/IMG/pdf/cilss_praia_gambie_rapport_national.pdf).

<sup>55</sup> Validation workshop in Basse, Upper River Region, November 20, 2019.

the tour, he decided to take the entire rice field and made it his own farmland instead.<sup>56</sup>

Once Jammeh took the land, he forced the women to farm it for him without pay or any benefit. After the harvest, the rice was packed onto huge trucks and taken away. Some of the women believed that the rice was taken to Cassamance and given to the rebels.

## Impact of Violations Against Women

Most of the women victims of the dictatorship suffered physical and psychological harms resulting from violations including forced labor, ill-treatment, and arrest. Well after the dictatorship ended, the consequences of past violations, especially against women, continue to have negative repercussions on the victims and their families. “The scars of this vicious rule still haunt many victims and families,” noted one victim.<sup>57</sup> It is therefore imperative to fully unpack the legacy of the dictatorship on women in order to find effective remedies for past harms and break the cycle of violence.

### Health Impacts

The potion that the women victims of Sintet were forced to drink and that was rubbed in their eyes and genitals caused severe pain and has had a lasting impact on their health. Victims have experienced chronic pain, hypertension, anemia, constipation, continuous headaches, pneumonia, general body pain, sight problems, and ulcers. Some of the women victims died in the days, months, and years that followed, reportedly from health complications associated with the concoction. For other victims, the potion caused vision problems; those who could afford it underwent a medical operation to resolve them, while those who could not continue to live with vision problems. For many of the elderly women, the problems have led to a partial loss of their vision. Some women reported chronic pain in their genitals, while others claim they became infertile after exposure to the potion. For instance, one woman from Sintet reported that a victim of the witch hunts who was pregnant at the time developed high blood pressure from the ill-treatment she experienced in Kanilai, which caused her to have a miscarriage. “The majority of women victims of the witch hunts were unable to conceive afterward as a result of the concoction they drank and that was rubbed in their private parts,” explained one leader.<sup>58</sup>

Several women suffered psychological trauma as a result of detention and separation from their families, especially their children.<sup>59</sup> Injuries sustained by some of the women who were raped in prison resulted in sexual reproductive health complications such as traumatic fistula or physical disability that prevented them from bearing children. “My sister is now disabled as a result of the gang rape she experienced while in prison,” one woman testified.<sup>60</sup> According to a woman leader, “in some cases the rapists wore masks, so it is unknown to us whether these women were raped by inmates, security personnel, or guards.”<sup>61</sup> This uncertainty heightens the victims’ fear that they might meet a perpetrator and not know it as well as the sense of impunity, which contribute to their psychological trauma.

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56 Validation workshop in Janjanbureh, Central River Region, November 21, 2019.

57 ICTJ Interview with anonymous victim, Sintet, June 25, 2019.

58 Validation workshop in Sintet, November 22, 2019.

59 Validation workshop in Janjanbureh, Central River Region, November 21, 2019.

60 ICTJ Interview with anonymous victim, Central River Region-South, June 26, 2019.

61 Validation workshop in Janjanbureh, Central River Region, November 21, 2019.



## Economic Impacts

The abuses women suffered during the past regime adversely affected their economic circumstances at that time and have increased their vulnerability into the present. Most of them had to spend a lot of money on medical treatment, and some can no longer work to support their families because of resulting health problems.

Women who were forced to work on the president's farms were unable to spend much time farming their own land, which reduced the amount of food they were able to produce and increased their families' economic vulnerability. "When we started going to Lampedusa to work for the president, I had begun working on my own farm. But because I did not give it much attention, I did not yield any crops from it because they got destroyed. I lost everything during that time because I was never paid the D10,000, and did not make any profit from my own farm," said one woman from Sintet.<sup>62</sup>

These experiences have had a negative impact on some children's education. The women victims had to go to great lengths to put food on table for their families. This struggle for the basics left little or no money for their children's school fees, and some mothers could not afford to enroll their children in school. Some of the women victims are single parents and have health problems as a result of the violations, both of which have made earning a livelihood and supporting their families that much harder. "I have spent a lot of money on hospital bills to regain my eyesight, but I still cannot regain my full vision, and have become penniless in the process," one woman explained. "I could not engage in any economic activity due to my eyes; as a result, some of my children dropped out of school."<sup>63</sup>

This economic loss was compounded for the women victims of forced labor, who had to pay between D50 and D80 per day to travel between their home and the president's farms. Similarly, women who were arrested and detained for weeks or months were unable to attend to their farms and thus lost out on the benefits of any crops they would have otherwise grown. These setbacks continued to harm the women and their families economically as they struggled to recover from them. For example, some parents who were the victims of unlawful land seizures still do not possess land and cannot afford to pay their children's school fees. Women reiterated that these lands should be returned to their rightful owners. For example, the former president unlawfully seized the mangrove fields. Even though some of the land's owners have passed away, it should be returned to their wives and children.

## Social and Psychological Impacts

Despite the existence of laws protecting women, violations against women continue in many communities. The prevalence of human rights violations and SGBV during the previous regime and the fact that victims have never received support to address their trauma have caused many women to live in fear. This fear has kept a lot of Gambians, especially women victims, from speaking out about past and recent violations they suffered.

According to the women leaders who participated in the workshop in Sintet, "Weeks after the release of victims (of the witch hunt) from Kanilai, some victims would still run to the bush whenever they saw a person in red clothing,<sup>64</sup> thinking that the witch doctor was back."<sup>65</sup>

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62 Validation workshop in Sintet, November 22, 2019.

63 ICTJ Interview with anonymous victim, Sintet, June 25 2019.

64 The witch doctors, who according to the testimonies came from Mali and whom Jammeh directed to conduct the witch hunt, wore red clothing.

65 ICTJ Interview with anonymous victim, Sintet, June 25, 2019.

Participants reported that depression and anxiety caused the death of several victims. Victims still vividly remember the trauma and sense of insecurity that the violations they suffered at the hands of Jammeh caused. He terrorized the women with threats of arrest, torture, or death.

During their detention, the women were forcibly separated from their families for long periods. New mothers were separated from their infants for several months. Even when they returned, they could not take care of their children immediately as they were recovering from injuries and trauma sustained during torture and ill treatment.

The witch hunts have also had an impact on the next generation, as the children of the women victims have been ostracized at school and in the community. The girls, for example, cannot marry easily. In the words of one of the victims, "We are still called witches and our children are referred to as children of witches. Some do not invite us to social event or even mingle with us."



## Women Victims' Expectations of the Gambian Government and the TRRC

The women consulted have high expectations for the TRRC and the Gambian government. From the TRRC, they expect acknowledgment, reparations, and guarantees that witnesses, especially victims, receive emotional support and protection. To ensure women participate fully in the process, they urge the TRRC to develop mechanisms for their safe participation, including collaborating with local women groups, conducting home visits, private statement taking, and taking steps to protect their privacy. Along these lines, one of the women leaders in Sintet emphasized the need for psychosocial support. “Most of the women still carry the wounds of the human rights abuses they suffered under the previous regime, and therefore they should be given psychosocial support to help them heal,” she said.<sup>66</sup>

The women expect the TRRC to include their experiences and voices in the narrative of the country's history and come up with recommendations for the government to enact strong laws and policies that will empower women and protect their rights. In the words of a woman from Basse, “We are willing to participate in the TRRC'S truth-seeking process, by telling our experiences, to ensure that the TRRC is aware of these experiences, is able to make good recommendations, and can influence government policies and ensure violations against women in the former regime do not recur.”<sup>67</sup>

The women in Sintet shared a common opinion that they do not want apologies from neither Yahya Jammeh, nor the witch doctors that subjected them to all the pain and suffering they went through. Instead, they want concrete reparations and said, “we want God to judge them as he is mighty and will give them their fair punishment.”

Women believe that the TRRC and government must develop a comprehensive and suitable reparations package to address the violations committed against women. This package could include more opportunities for truth telling, documentation of women's stories, public acknowledgment, medical treatment, and psychosocial support for victims. The women demanded that victims who are sick and are in urgent need of medical care be given medical treatment so that they can get back on their feet and move on with their lives. Scholarships should be given to children of the victims who can no longer go to school due to their parents' predicaments. Several women also want to be compensated with money that they can invest in their own businesses, so that they can take care of themselves and their dependents. “What happened to

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66 ICTJ Interview with anonymous woman leader, Upper River Region, June 28, 2019.

67 ICTJ Interview with anonymous victim, Upper River Region, June 28, 2019.

women in the former regime was heinous; thus, victims and victims' families should be fairly compensated for the violations they suffered. And these victims should be consulted on their reparation needs,"<sup>68</sup> said one woman leader.

In addition to material reparations, these women would like to see acknowledgment and symbolic forms of reparations to affirm the dignity, honor, and reputation of victims. For example, in Sintet, victims of the witch hunts want their names cleared of the wrongdoing of which they were falsely accused. "We call on the TRRC to take this issue very seriously because we want the whole world to know that we are not witches," one victim declared.<sup>69</sup>

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68 ICTJ Interview with anonymous woman leader, Central River Region-South, June 26, 2019.

69 Validation workshop in Sintet, West Coast Region, November 22, 2019.

## Recommendations

At the end of each workshop, the participants joined their voices to give recommendations, most of which are directed to the TRRC and the government.

To the TRRC:

- We recommend that the TRRC avoid posting photos or videos of the women victims on (social) media during their operations (hearings, community engagements, or outreach activities), unless there is express consent from the victims, as doing so will discourage women from participating fully in the process.
- We recommend that the TRRC collaborate with local women groups or organizations to establish a gender-sensitive statement-taking approach to safely collect women's experiences. Such an approach would include creating safe spaces for women to tell their stories privately and providing them with psychosocial support.
- We recommend that the TRRC conduct more public outreach programs to inform people in the remote villages of the country about the TRRC and its mandate, how to access it, and the mechanisms in place to make it safe for women victims to participate in the process. In conducting these outreach programs, the TRRC should:
  - work with traditional communicators, such as the Kanelengs, as they are very effective in spreading information in communities;
  - work with the local women groups and organizations as they have closer ties to women victims;
  - work with community radio stations, which are the favorite media among people living in rural areas.
  - hold women-only dialogues or focus group discussions.
- We want the full truth about the 2009 witch hunts to be revealed, and we call on the TRRC to clear our names, affirm our dignity, and let the whole world know we are not witches.
- We request the TRRC to investigate cases of arbitrary arrest of women.

- We recommend that the TRRC conduct consultations with women victims on the long-term impacts of the violations they suffered to determine a reparations program that would address their needs and ensure they receive fair reparations.
- As part of a reparations program, the TRRC should:
  - provide medical treatment to victims with health complications as a result of the violations they suffered
  - provide scholarships to children of victims whose schooling was disrupted as a result of the violations
  - provide women who were victims of forced labor and land confiscation with farming equipment to help reduce their workload

To the government of the Gambia:

- We recommend that the government enforce laws that protect the rights of women, such as the 2010 women's act and the 2013 sexual offences act, to ensure that the violations that happened in the past do not recur.
- To ensure that women, especially women farmers, can own land or have access to land, the government and local authorities should revise the land distribution process and regulations.
- A provision on forced labor should be included in the criminal code to ensure that the Gambian people, especially women, are not subjected to forced labor.
- The government and civil society organizations should educate the Gambian people about their rights and responsibilities through community-based outreach activities, civic education, and women's empowerment initiatives.

## Conclusion

This report presents just a small sample of women’s testimonies and experiences in the Gambia. To advance the Gambia’s national reckoning with its past, many more women’s voices will need to be heard and acknowledged. It was painful for these women to relive their memories of the past violations, and they told their stories with tears in their eyes. However, it was rewarding to see the women gather together and testify. It became clear to the women that sharing their experiences would help shape the national narrative of the past, strengthen protections for women and victims, and contribute to the Gambia’s transition to democracy. They hope the TRRC’s recommendations will help the government put mechanisms in place to ensure the non-recurrence of past human rights violations. To that end, they stressed the need for the TRRC to take concrete steps to ensure that women can participate fully and safely in the truth-seeking process. As one woman said, “We should be given the platform to tell our stories, for we do not want our children to suffer the same violations we did. The TRRC should ensure women participate in the truth-seeking process, by creating safe spaces for them to talk about their experience and receive psychosocial support.”<sup>70</sup>

The women want their voices to be heard and considered in the TRRC process, so that the future of Gambian women will be brighter. In the words of one woman, “we want the TRRC to consider our recommendations and develop approaches that will enhance our participation in the TRRC process.”<sup>71</sup> The women want to see the government enforce existing laws such as the 2010 women’s act and enact new ones that will ensure women are protected. “To achieve the goals of the ‘Never Again Campaign,’ we ask the government to strengthen protections for women and apply the laws that protect women,”<sup>72</sup> said one victim. In the words of another, “I am delighted this information will go to the highest level because the issues that we have raised need to be looked into. [In this report] what we are saying to the TRRC is something that is coming from us and not something that another said on our behalf.”<sup>73</sup>

In telling their stories and expectations with the TRRC, the brave women who shared their experiences hope that justice will prevail and the victims of the former regime will receive reparations. The “TRRC is the gateway between us and the government,”<sup>74</sup> as one woman said.

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70 ICTJ Interview with anonymous victim, Central River Region-South, June 26, 2019.

71 ICTJ Interview with anonymous victim, Upper River Region, June 28, 2019.

72 ICTJ Interview with anonymous victim, Sintet, June 25, 2019.

73 Validation workshop in Basse, Upper River Region, November 20, 2019.

74 Validation workshop in Basse, Upper River Region, November 20, 2019.

The pervasive culture of sexual and gender-based violence cannot be fully confronted and dismantled unless all Gambians understand and acknowledge the impact of violations on women and collectively agree to commit to the promise of “never again.”<sup>75</sup>

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75 The Network Against Gender-Based Violence has recorded 1,954 cases of gender-based violence from 2015 to 2019; 47 percent (941) of which are rape cases. The data were collected from the records of eight state institutions including hospitals and police stations. Fallu Sowe, the network's national coordinator, cited these figures in an interview on the television program, Kerr Fatou's Saturday Brunch. See: [www.kerr-fatou.com/nagbv-stats-shows-scary-trend-of-rape-in-gambia/](http://www.kerr-fatou.com/nagbv-stats-shows-scary-trend-of-rape-in-gambia/).



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