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Empowering girls: How NGOs improve girls' educational opportunities in The Gambia

by

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[Abstract]

Through semi-structured interviews conducted with representatives of three different NGOs located in The Gambia, this qualitative study explores how practices and activities in the organisations improve educational opportunities for girls in the country. The study identifies specific societal challenges that the NGOs try to remedy with their work, and what the focus is in their capacity building. Furthermore, the study includes an analysis of how NGO activities contribute to improving girls' educational opportunities and other aspects of their lives, based on narratives from two young Gambian women, who have once been active in NGOs. The study finds that NGOs' capacity building is not only focused on education, but also the empowerment of girls, building leadership skills, advocacy, and providing physical development necessities. The study concludes that women engaged in NGOs develop empowering skills and leadership capabilities that not only creates better education- and career opportunities for themselves, but also for their family and community.

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List of abbreviations

CEDAW	Convention of the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
EFA	Education For All
FGM	Female Genital Mutilation
GBoS	The Gambia Bureau of Statistics
GBV	Gender Based Violence
GDHS	The Gambia Demographic Health Survey
INGO	International NGO
MoBSE	Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
SME	Small-Medium Enterprises
SRHR	Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nation Development Program
UNFPA	United Nation Population Fund
UNICEF	United Nations Children Fund
SCOTG	Smiling Child of The Gambia
WHO	World Health Organisation

1 Introduction

“[..]most times, standing under a tree, the boy is able to reach the fruits, the girl is not able to reach the fruits. What do you do? - You provide something for the girl to stand on, so they are able to.”

- Fatoumata Y. Jaiteh -

Estimates worldwide show that 132 million girls are out of school, in which 34.3 million are of primary school age and 67.4 million are of upper-secondary school age. In many of the developing countries, among the girls who do enter primary school, only a small portion will reach - and far fewer will complete - secondary school (The World Bank, 2021a). The limited level of education often conditions women to insufficient and unstable livelihoods with low-wage jobs and a shortage of financial tools needed for prosperity. It also restricts access to wider society such as healthcare, politics, leadership, and technology (Lincove, 2008; Goldin & Katz, 2008; Eldred, 2013). As it has been shown that education plays a role in the ability to absorb new technologies and to sustain and create economic growth (Perkins, et al., 2012), the lack of women's education, and thereby their missing participation in society, hinder developing countries' total development significantly (Lechman & Okonowicz, 2014). Thus, the study of women's educational opportunities is fundamental for development.

In West Africa, patriarchal societies are prevalent. Here, societies are characterized by a male-dominated power structure that infiltrates both organized society and individual relationships, making women's status a secondary nature compared to men. However, according to previous studies, the influence of gender on educational outcomes is not simply a result of simply being female. Instead, it happens in the intersection of gender and other factors such as household wealth, family structures and geographic location (OECD, 2018; Rwafa, 2016). For example, compared to rich households, girls and boys in poor households experience greater disparities in access to education. Also, both direct and indirect costs of education affect girls disproportionately. School fees, uniforms or books are the direct cost of education while the indirect cost includes labour taken away from

households such as farming, trading, and care work, which negatively affects girls' schooling opportunities. In many families where income is limited, parents choose to prioritise their son's schooling over their daughter's and instead have their daughter married into another family at an early age. In addition to this, adolescent girls also encounter traditional harmful practices, contributing to lower educational outcomes. Overall, girls face barriers to education caused by poverty and social and cultural norms and practices every day. Therefore, improving girls' educational opportunities go beyond just getting girls into school.

Improving girls' educational opportunities is a part of increasing gender equality in society in general. Gender equality implies "a society where women and men enjoy the same opportunities, outcomes, rights and obligations in all spheres of life" (UNFPA, 2021). For the past two decades, the strive for enhancing gender equality in developing countries has given rise and purpose to continued work for civil society, including NGOs. The global recognition of NGOs as important actors in strengthening development and democracy has existed since the 1960s (Lewis & Kanji, 2009), and especially Africa has seen explosive growth of both western and local NGOs since then (Murray, 2010). NGOs tend to be best known for undertaking one of two forms of activity: delivering basic services to people in need and/or organising policy advocacy and public campaigns for change (Lewis, 2002). In the continent, it has been proven that involving NGOs in the development agenda can democratise a system and ensure participation in development from governments (Murray, 2010). This is also true when it comes to creating better conditions for girls. For example, NGOs have been active in encouraging the African Commission and governments to examine women's rights, which has led to many protocols ensuring women's rights by law, including females having an equal right to education as males. In addition, many NGOs work with implementing independent education programs and supporting local governments in financing and implementing education policies (IDCA, 2003). In this way, the desire to improve girls' educational opportunities for development and NGO work is inescapably interrelated.

1.1 The Gambia

A country that is not foreign to the situations and conditions described above is The Gambia. The Gambia is the smallest country in West Africa, with about 2.1 million people, making it one of the most densely populated countries in Africa (The World Bank, 2021b). The Gambia is divided into

seven local government areas where five of which make up the urban Gambia, where 57% of the population is living, and four areas constitutes the rural Gambia (The World Bank, 2021b). The Gambia is surrounded by Senegal on three sides and divided in the middle by The Gambian River. The country has eight ethnic groups whereby the three largest ones are Mandinka (42%), Fula (18%) and Wolof (16%). The ethnic groups live and co-exist well, both nationally and within families (United Nations, n.d.). The same is true for different religious groups. Here, 90% of the population are Muslims, 9% are Christian, and 1% practice indigenous religions (United Nations, n.d.). The Gambia is primarily an agricultural nation growing groundnuts, rice, maize, millet, and other cereals. Agriculture and fisheries combined account for nearly 60% of The Gambian GDP. Tourism is also a vital sector of the economy as it has become the biggest foreign exchange earner for the country and provides more than 16% of GDP (United Nations, n.d.)

The Gambia gained its independence from the United Kingdom in 1965. Today, The Gambia is a sovereign republic with a multi-party system of government, headed by its third president, Adama Barrow, who came to power in an election in 2016. During the last two presidencies, where one is considered a 28-year dictatorship, The Gambia has experienced human rights violations, institutional dysfunction, and exploitative governance, contributing to the nation's stagnation in economic development (UN The Gambia, 2019). As part of the consequence, The Gambia has high rates of educational exclusion, with girls paying the highest price (UNCDF, 2019).

Since 2017, there has been an equal number of girls and boys enrolled in primary schools in the country (OECD, 2018). However, out of 100 boys who complete their primary education, only 74 girls do the same, and only a few girls continue to secondary school (OECD, 2019). The educational inequality is highlighted by the average years of schooling as females get 2.9 years and males get 4.3 years (UNCDF, 2019), as well as in the literacy rate where women's level is 40% compared to men's 64% (OECD, 2019).

Despite a policy of free primary education for all, barriers to education for girls still exist in all education levels. Here, The Gambia is not much different from those in other developing nations with the most considerable barriers, including families' financial limitations, cultural biases and misconceptions, child marriage and gender-based violence. On average, for example, a family lives on a daily income of \$1, but education after grade six costs \$100 per year. Because of that, low-income families often invest their small income in educating their boys, whom they think will support them in adulthood, and as a result, girls struggle to find opportunities beyond domestic labour (The

Gambia Bureau of Statistics, 2018). The culmination of these obstacles prevents nearly 50% of The Gambian population from accessing education and thereby economic empowerment, resulting in the most common consequences such as limited access to family planning (e.g. prevention of pregnancy) and ownership of property (UNCDF, 2019).

To fight these issues, many NGOs work for gender equality in education in The Gambia, and often with a specific focus on improving girls' education opportunities. Therefore, this thesis sets out to explore what issues the NGOs want to remedy with their work, what the focus of their work is and how it exemplifies in their activities. Lastly, it finds out what impact the NGO activities have on girls' education. Based on this, this thesis will answer the following research question:

“How does NGOs' capacity building improve educational opportunities for girls in The Gambia?”

To structure the analysis, I have chosen three sub-questions:

1. What specific societal challenges inhibiting girls' educational opportunities are the NGOs trying to remedy with their work?
2. Which focus areas are emphasized in the construction of the NGOs' capacity, and what specific activities do they carry out following these?
3. How has participation in an NGO contributed to creating better educational opportunities for girls?

1.1.1 Definition of terms

Capacity building

Capacity building is “the process of developing and strengthening the skills, instincts, abilities, processes and resources that organisations and communities need to survive, adapt, and thrive in a fast-changing world” (The United Nations, n.d.). In this study, capacity building is regarded as those practices and activities that act as different steps in strengthening the skills of not only the organisations themselves or the communities in which they exist, but also the girls who engage with or participate in NGO work in The Gambia.

Civil society and Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO)

In many studies, NGOs are considered part of civil society, resulting in the interchangeable use of the two terms. This is because civil society is mostly used in the sense of 1) the aggregate of non-governmental organisations and institutions that manifest interests and will of citizens or 2) individuals and organisations in a society which are independent of the government (Lewis & Kanji, 2009; Lewis, 2002; Klees, 2008). Both these criteria apply to the general description of an NGO, however. An NGO is also characterised in the literature as “an independent organisation that is neither run by or involved in government, nor driven by a profit motive like private sector businesses but is operated by voluntary powers towards a common interest” (Paul & Israel, 1991). This terminology applies to all three of the represented organisations in this study and is, therefore, the definition used in this thesis.

Educational opportunities

The definition of educational opportunities in this study is shaped by what The World Bank states is necessary for girls’ education (The World Bank, 2021a). ‘Educational opportunities’ is, therefore, defined as *the learning opportunities that ensure girls feel safe while in school, that creates the opportunity to complete all levels of education, that provides the knowledge and skills to compete in the labour market, that teaches the life skills necessary to navigate and adapt to a changing world, that provides the ability to make decisions about their own lives and to contribute to their communities and the world.*

1.1.2 The Gambian education system

The formal education system in The Gambia consists of six years of *lower basic* school and three years in *upper basic* school, totalling nine years of uninterrupted basic education (Access Gambia, 2021a). After year nine, students need to take the Basic Education Certificate Exam (BECE) in nine or ten subjects to complete their basic education. Hereafter, a student may attend *Senior Secondary* School for another three years. However, this is dependent on the student’s performance in the BECE. 75% of Gambian students attend government schools where various subjects in science, arts, and commerce are offered. At the end of year 12, students may pass the West African Secondary School Certificate Examinations (WASSCE) conducted by the West African Examinations Council (MoBSE, 2015). In senior secondary school, students have a core curriculum consisting of English

language, integrated science, mathematics, and social studies and in addition, takes three or four elective subjects in sciences, arts (social sciences and humanities) or commerce (visual arts or home economics) (Access Gambia, 2021a). Hereafter, a Gambian student can further their education with a bachelor's or master's degree at the only available university in The Gambia, The University of The Gambia (MoBSE, 2015).

1.1.3 Gender and education policies in The Gambia

National policies and measures aiming to promote gender equality have been implemented in The Gambia since the 1980s (UNCDF, 2019). The Government of The Gambia recognises gender equality and women's empowerment as a critical factor for the social and economic development of the country (OECD, 2014), and even the nation's constitution dedicates sections to women's equal rights (Gambia, 1997). Some national priorities have been to establish social welfare mechanisms and increase financial access for women-owned SME's (UNCDF, 2019). In this line of empowering women, The Gambia also implemented the *Women's Act* in 2010. The act calls on political parties, the government, and the private sector to enact measures to ensure gender equality, herewith also ensuring, by law, that females should have equal education opportunities as males (Gambia, 2010).

The Gambia's education system has also undergone considerable institutional reforms in the past two decades to increase gender equality and improve social conditions (OECD, 2019). For example, interventions such as scholarship schemes and campaigns have been enacted to encourage girls to enter 'less female' education such as those in STEM (APRC, 2001). With the specific purpose of correcting long-standing gender biases in educational attainment, girls' education has also been given particular attention, so there now is a dedicated *Girls' Education Unit* within The Gambian Department of State for Education, and a decree that waives school fees for girls in secondary education (Gambia, 2015).

1.2 Purpose of the study

Based on the above, the purpose of this thesis is to understand how NGOs' capacity building contributes to educational opportunities for girls in The Gambia. The study identifies the country's societal challenges that impede girls' education and analyses the focus areas emphasized in the

construction of the NGOs' capacity by presenting the specific activities. Here, interviews with representatives from three different NGOs contribute with organisational insight into the NGO activities and its intention with its work and add two local Gambian perspectives on the global issue of unequal educational opportunities. Although previous studies have added to our understanding of how gender inequality affects education for girls and NGOs, therefore creating programs to bridge the gap, we know little about *how* NGOs' activities improve a girl's educational opportunities in practice. Therefore, the aim of the study is to identify the focus area of NGOs' capacity building improving educational opportunities for a Gambian girl and how, according to the Gambian girls themselves. The stories of the two young Gambian women may here reflect a global discourse on issues of gender inequality and educational opportunities of women and young girls. So, I believe this study may contribute with greater contextual evidence for future gender-related policies and best practices for NGOs working with education development for girls in The Gambia.

1.3 Structure of the Thesis

This paper is divided into five chapters. The first chapter provides a general introduction to women's education and their position in the world. Furthermore, it introduces The Gambia and the context in which this study takes place. The second chapter is the literature review that presents the state-of-the-art outcomes by increasing education for women, the gendered socialisation process in West Africa and in The Gambia particularly, and the role of NGOs in development. Chapter three is the methodology of this research that reveals the general aim of this research and explains how the study's empirical material is collected and used. Also, the methodology sets the method framework of the study and explains the approach to the data analysis. The fourth chapter presents the most important findings from the analysis. The final chapter consists of the conclusion and further recommendations.

2 Literature review

2.1 Outcomes of improving education for women

The improvement of gender equality has been a topic of broad interest in the development field for many years, and so, the literature on (positive) outcomes of improving women's rights and conditions is extensive. First, studies have investigated the impact of education projects in Africa as an addition to institutional reforms to see the impact and consequences of education opportunities for girls (Gajigo, 2016; Blimpo, et al., 2019; Leach & Humphreys, 2007). Here, when the school fee was eliminated in The Gambia and combined with the extra educational programs, it increased the number of girls taking the high school exit exam by 55% (Blimpo, et al., 2019).

Next, it is argued that when women are empowered, whole families benefit, and these benefits often have a ripple effect on future generations. For example, studies show that improving women's relative access to resources and legal standing, improves their children's education (Behrman & Rosenzweig, 2002; Currie & Moretti, 2003; UN WOMEN, 2018). Specifically, Currie & Moretti find that increasing a parent's education by one year increases the child's education by 0.25 of a year (2003, p. 443). Studies also show that increasing women's education level is associated with a reduction of government corruption (Dilli, et al., 2019), it increases overall economic growth (Perkins, et al., 2012), it alleviates poverty (Chant & Jones, 2005), and it decreases domestic violence (Diallo & Voia, 2016). Furthermore, mass education also speeds up cultural change, creates new cultures, lead to fertility decline later entry into marriage for girls (Frye & Lopus, 2018).

Generally, it is seen that when young girls receive the same education opportunities as boys, they learn essential skills that go far beyond the classroom. Health classes teach young women about the spread of illnesses and the importance of nutrition. Math lessons provide analytical skills that they

can apply to household finances, and language courses allow girls communication skills needed to participate, perhaps, politically later in life (Blimpo, et al., 2019). Overall, increased education gives women autonomy to manage their own lives by gaining easier access to financial services, rights to owning land and a higher chance of employment in both formal and informal sectors (African Development Bank, 2014; OECD, 2018; UNFPA, 2021).

Countries with increased women's participation and leadership in civil society and political parties tend to be more inclusive, responsive, egalitarian, and democratic (Afolabi & Olaniyan, 2014). This topic is seen in several studies where the identification of female participation in the Gambian society is seen to enhance democratic awareness and contributes to a sustainable democratic society (Ozor, 2010; Hoare, 2007). Democracy has further been explored in studies in Africa, concluding that women's participation and inclusion in democracy has been on an upward swing post-1950s and significantly increasing after the mid-1990s (Afolabi, 2017). However, it is found that the gender inequality hampers gender imbalance in political participation in The Gambia and democratic processes in educational opportunities (Ozor, 2010; Odionye & Ofoego, 2016).

It has been shown that education may not automatically lead to empowerment as each woman's situation, context, country, culture, and custom also influence whether she can exercise her knowledge and understanding (Eldred, 2013). In addition, Charles' (2006) research concludes that political, historical, demographic, and economic factors shape women and girls' developmental experiences and lives and needs to be understood to support them generally. Charles' research deems exciting and essential work and is an example of a qualitative study that dives deep into how girls and women live their identities as female and is shaped by this role in the context of their society (Charles, 2006). For example, women are less likely than men to participate in community decision-making, including parent associations and school management committees. They are less likely to take on roles of leadership and management in the workplace. Such participation is linked to education and cultural attitudes towards women (Eldred, 2013).

2.2 Gendered socialisation in Africa

Despite national legislation and policies that should guarantee full equality for women and ensuring their rights in many West African countries, women continue to experience discrimination and

inequality (African Development Bank, 2014). Reasons for discrimination and gender inequality has thus been studied in several social and economic studies. Here, researchers find that the patriarchal nature of many West African societies dominates the social net (OECD, 2018; Dilli, et al., 2019; Maphalala & Mpofu, 2017). This is no different in The Gambia where it is shown that the ideology reinforces women's traditional roles (Manion, 2011; OECD, 2010; Daly, et al., 2016; Njie, et al., 2015).

The patriarchal worldview regards women as intellectually and physically inferior to men (Coetzee, 2001, p. 301). In rural and isolated settings, this belief is often deeply entrenched. Here, deeply internalized beliefs of inferiority and incapability are challenging to change in both women and men (Eldred, 2013). This is because when an ideology is in place long enough, those who are suffering oppression will be restricted in their thinking by the distorted interpretations of reality (Schoeman, 1998, in Maphalala & Mpofu, 2017, p. 9249), meaning that women from their socialisation, are nurtured to acknowledge male authority. In West Africa, these dominant beliefs often belong to male community leaders who are seen as “guardians of values” and whose responsibility is to sustain traditional ways of life (Eldred, 2013). Thus, a woman is subject to the power structures surrounding her, making it difficult to break from her position dictated by family and society at large and thereby affecting her life path and opportunities she is given.

One of the places where gendered socialisation practices take place in West Africa is through girls' labour. While most children participate in unpaid household labour, girl's workload within the home tends to be greater as they perform a more comprehensive range of chores and dedicate more time overall to their multiple tasks (Chant & Jones, 2005). Boys are often not expected (or asked) to sweep the compound, to run errands or to accompany younger siblings to school, whereas girls regularly perform a wide range of activities including cooking, cleaning, washing, sewing, minding younger siblings and so on (Njie, et al., 2015; Nwogu, 2015). In an ethnographic study, Kea (2013) investigates the role of Mandinka girls' household labour contributions in The Gambia. Here, she finds that men and women eat separately, with boys eating with their fathers or mothers, and girls only eating with their mothers. This underlines the gendered division of labour and the separation of daily routines (Kea, 2013, p. 106).

This gender disparity stems mainly from the belief that domestic labour is fundamentally deemed 'women's work', as women are considered the principal 'homemakers' (Chant & Jones, 2005, p.

192). This is also found in other studies that show that girls' labour contributions are often naturalised, rendered invisible, and subsequently undervalued (Elson 1982 in Kea, 2013, p. 103). This is because doing work at home is associated with 'helping out' and is often not scrutinized (Kea, 2013; Njie, et al., 2015). The consequence of household labour is that many young girls spend up to four hours a day doing unpaid work at home, which then renders time away from going to school or doing homework, engaging in social life, playing and resting (Chant & Jones, 2005; Ebubedike, 2018; UNFPA, 2021). This is confirmed in the Gambian constitution, which writes that girls are being disadvantaged by their domestic chores in households with limited financial resources as it is *their* education that is sacrificed (Gambia, 1997, p. 34).

The literature also explores other socialisation practices such as marriage. Here, early marriage is found to be widely recognised as having negative consequences for physical and emotional health and social well-being, regardless of a girl's context (Dixon-Mueller, 2008). Frye & Lopus (2018) studies the role of marital timing on women's schooling in Africa and finds that in contexts where access to education is prevalent, the marital timing of uneducated and highly educated women is more similar than in contexts where attending school is limited to a privileged minority. This is also established by other studies that show that educated women in West Africa tend to marry later than their less-educated peers (Gyimah, 2009; Arnaldo, 2004).

Girls do not choose to get married early themselves, but their parents do. In one study, it is shown that in traditional societies where girls are married between the ages of 12 and 15, parents may be unwilling to invest in the education of their daughters because the girls will leave the parental households early, making the return on investment low (Jütting & Morrisson, 2005). This has shown to be the case in many Gambian families where parents prioritize their son's schooling at the expense of their daughters (Ozor, 2010; Rwafa, 2016). This is associated with Gambian belief that boys are made to pursue education and careers, so they are intellectually prepared to be leaders of their homes and thereby attain the skills to rule (Ozor, 2010; Colley, 2014).

However, gendered socialisation also goes beyond learning skills and behaviour that upholds a girl's position in society. It interferes physically with a girl's body. Here, Female Genital Mutilation is an example of a tradition that perpetuates male dominance as the practice is deeply rooted in men's beliefs of acceptable sexual behaviour (Eldred, 2013). FGM is performed to ensure premarital virginity and marital fidelity, as it is believed to reduce a woman's libido and therefore

believed to help her resist extramarital sexual acts (WHO, 2020). There are more than 200 million girls and women who have been subjected to FGM, and many live in Sub-Saharan Africa. Long-term consequences of the operation include complications during childbirth, anaemia, the formation of cysts, damage to the urethra resulting in urinary incontinence, painful sexual intercourse, sexual dysfunction, hypersensitivity of the genital area and increased risk of HIV transmission, as well as psychological effects (UNFPA, 2020). Because FGM is mostly carried out when a girl is between 0-15 years old (WHO, 2020), the cut's complications add another barrier to a girl's education.

2.3 Civil society and its role in development

There have been different versions of the concept of civil society through time. The dominant notions of civil society today are drawn from scholars such as Adam Ferguson, Georg Hegel, and Alexis de Tocqueville. Almost with consensus, they refer to civil society as a *sphere between political society and the state, above the family but below the state* (Webb, 2018). It is generally understood that civil society consists of “groups formed for collective purposes primarily outside the state and marketplace” (van Rooy, 1998, in Lewis, 2002 p. 570), and so is comprised of organisations that are not associated with the government, including schools and universities, advocacy groups, professional associations, churches, and cultural institutions (Lewis & Kanji, 2009).

Civil society is regarded as an essential building block of development and national cohesion. In a country blessed with peace and stability, civil society fills the space untouched by government and the private sector. In a fragile and conflict-ridden country, however, civil society may play an essential role of providing services that are usually the responsibility of the state, as well as it can lay the foundation for reconciliation (Ingram, 2020). Civil society organisations (CSO), including NGOs, also provide important information for citizens and governments. Some monitor government policies and actions and hold governments accountable. They also engage in advocacy and offer alternative policies for governments, the private sector, and other institutions. CSOs deliver services, especially to the poor and underserved. They defend civil rights and work to change and uphold social norms and behaviours. In civil society, volunteerism, community spirit and independent associational life is stressed (Lewis & Kanji, 2009). Thus, civil society is seen as a space protected

against the domination of society by the state, and as a counterbalance helps to keep the state accountable and effective.

Besides democracy, development and good governance, civil society and political participation tend to dominate political discourse in Africa today (Lewis, 2002). This might be because civil societies have been an important part of the livelihood and survival strategies for millions of families. For example, since the 1950s and 1960s, women's credit groups have co-existed independently of states (Gibbon, 2001), and the same goes for other women's groups who have informal self-help associations responding to local problems and crises (Brehony, 2000).

2.4 The NGO sector

In 1997, a concise definition of an NGO was proposed by Vakil (1997, in Lewis & Kanji, 2009, p. 13): "*NGOs are self-governing, private, not-for-profit organisations that are geared to improve the quality of life for disadvantaged people*". Thus, despite NGOs being considered a part of civil society, the type of organisation can be distinguished from other types of CSOs. For example, those of trade unions, organisations concerned with arts and sport, and other professional associations (Lewis & Kanji, 2009). In the development field, a more common-sense definition of NGOs is cited as: "*organisations concerned with the promotion of social, political or economic change*" (Lewis & Kanji, 2009). The variety of definitions of an NGO is also underlined by more than 45 different acronyms defining the organisation type. These acronyms vary depending on their specific focus, different country contexts, source of the organisations' resource or even the type of activities it undertakes. In terms of structure, NGOs may be large or small, formal, or informal, bureaucratic, or flexible (Cameron, 2000). Funding wise, many are externally funded, such as UNFPA and Smiling Child of The Gambia. Others depend on locally mobilised resources, such as Star Fish International. Some may be well resourced and affluent, while others may be struggling to survive from one year to the next. There are NGOs with highly professionalized staff, while others rely heavily on volunteers and supporters. In terms of values, NGOs are driven by a range of motivations; some may be charitable and paternalistic, and others seek to pursue radical or empowerment-based approaches (Lewis & Kanji, 2009; Davis & McGregor, 2000; Gibbon, 2001)

Overall, NGOs can be seen as important institutions that move in a triangular space between civil society, the state, and markets (Lewis & Kanji, 2009). NGOs are transitional institutions that play a role in determining the changing relations between civil society, state, and market institutions. As such, they can influence directions of change, the pace of change and the distribution of the costs of the transition. However, they are also influenced by the transitional processes and may change their own position in the triangle. NGOs cannot be assumed to be purely civil society institutions, but complex agencies under pressure in transitional processes in which resource allocation control is shifting from one group of people to another (Lewis & Kanji, 2009).

2.4.1 NGOs in research

NGOs have been a part of the development research agenda since the 1980s, and in 1997 a major quantitative study was undertaken, researching the relative size and scope of the sector across national contexts with important implications for understanding the diversity of NGOs (Gordenker & Weiss, 1997). Recently, there has been an increase in qualitative research trying to contextualize ethnographic work on NGOs by anthropologists and sociologists (Kelsall, 2005). Yet, NGOs have received less in-depth or systematic research attention at the empirical level (Lewis & Kanji, 2009). Much published work on NGOs has been in the form of single case studies of specific organisations, often undertaken by researchers working as consultants for those same organisations or their donors (Jütting & Morrisson, 2005; IDCA, 2003). Thereby, a lot of former research lacks objectivity and cannot be generalized.

When it comes to studies investigating why NGOs want to strengthen (civil) society to begin with, and how these motives are different from governments, it is often found that NGOs wish to build the capacity of citizens to further political or social goals (Gordenker & Weiss, 1997). For example, it has been found that one motive is to build the capacity of citizens to form networks of responsibilities and increase local involvement which will consequently build stronger education systems (IDCA, 2003). The work in education is thus often achieved through empowerment, in which “people’s abilities to achieve their human rights and exert demands on the state are enhanced” (IDCA, 2003, p. 10).

2.4.2 Critique of NGOs

Some studies discuss the space that NGOs are allowed to have and find that it is often determined by political considerations and their contribution to social and economic development (Gordenker & Weiss, 1997; Edwards, 2011). Here, examples show that when governments don't have the capacity or are inefficient in providing quality education for all, NGOs support community schools to bridge the gap (IDCA, 2003). Furthermore, African governments believe NGOs' work may compensate for low education sector investments (IDCA, 2003). However, some governments counter that their lack of progress stems from insufficient resources. When governments look at NGOs capacity in education, they state that NGOs cannot meet accepted educational standards and should thus not be involved in supplying education (Edwards & Sen, 2000). Therefore, there is an evident suspicion from governments about the motives of NGOs as they experience that NGOs shift their areas of emphasis primarily in response to funding opportunities and even states they act as "private companies in disguise" (IDCA, 2003, p. 7).

In an article, Lewis (2002) discusses whether the term 'civil society' is relevant to Africa or not. He argues that it could be, based on a positive, idealist view of building and strengthening democracy around the world where organisations and activists explicitly aim to help advance regional, national, and international initiatives to strengthen society's capacity. Nevertheless, it could also not be relevant based on the argument that the concept 'civil society' emerged at a distinctive moment in European history and questions how such a structure can make sense in contexts, such as in Africa, that are so distinctively different culturally and politically. From this perspective, 'civil society' is just another in a long line of attempts at misguided policy transfer from the West (Lewis, 2002).

In relation to that, the NGO sector has for some time been the subject of critique for reinforcing unequal development (Klees, 2008; Sakue-Collins, 2020). Among other arguments, it has been argued to be due to the (western) neoliberal focus on privatisation and curtailing governments in the past 40 years. Klees (2008) argues that despite NGOs' good efforts and intentions, rather than contributing to sustainable poverty alleviation at a systemic level, they contribute to sustaining poverty. This argument sees neoliberalism as reproductive of the social order (status quo) in the sense that its structures and policies maintain poverty, inequality, and marginalisation. NGOs can thus be considered to contribute to that reproductive apparatus.

2.5 Summary

In this chapter, I have presented the state-of-the-art topics relevant to the context in which my study about girls' educational opportunities created by NGOs is taking place. First, the development outcomes that improve education for girls show that increasing education has a rippling effect for generations. It improves a girl's life with more autonomy and better future opportunities, and improves the life of her family, community and, statistically, her future children. Hereafter, I present the different ways women are socialised in West Africa, and in The Gambia specifically, and how it is affected by the patriarchal nature of society. Also, it provides an understanding of what challenges a girl meets while in the education system and how family and society at large contribute to maintaining these structures. Then, I explain the role of civil society, in which NGOs are a part of, and how its role is situated as the third institution between state and market. Here, I also define the NGO sector and show how varied organisations tend to be. Lastly, I uncover some of the critiques that exist about NGOs and civil society in the field of development. Here, it is questioned whether civil society is even relevant in an African context and also if the NGOs close the gaps that the state cannot fill, or if they contribute to reinforcing unequal development.

3 Methodology

3.1 Research Design

In this thesis, I set out to explore how the capacity building of three different NGOs improve educational opportunities for girls in The Gambia. Throughout the thesis, the epistemological position is *interpretivist*, meaning that the focus is to gain an *understanding* of the social world through an examination of the participants' interpretation of that world (Bryman & Bell, 2007, p. 402). The ontological position of the study is *constructionism*, which asserts that social phenomena and their meanings are continually being accomplished by social actors, and thus are in constant revision (Bryman & Bell, 2007, p. 23).

As the overall aim of the study is to *understand* how NGOs' capacity building contribute to improving a girl's educational opportunities, I apply a qualitative research design. This allows for the collection of words (instead of numbers) to drive the analysis in finding rich descriptions (Bell, et al., 2019). I then apply an inductive research approach. This enables the researcher to generate meaning altogether from the collected data and the following analysis (Creswell, 2014, p. 9). To collect data, I use a qualitative interviewing approach following the *seven-step model* as defined by Steinar Kvale (2007). Thus, I conduct five in-depth interviews to utilise the interviewees' personal perspectives to get a context-specific interpretation of the phenomenon as the epistemological position prescribes. Overall, the data collection and analysis serve as the base for answering the research question. However, I also use reports and documents that were made available to me by the interviewees and their organisations to confirm parts of the findings. In addition, I use already existing empirical material from scientific articles, development reports and articles to supplement the framework for my understanding of Gambian cultural context and the NGO body in The Gambia.

3.2 Interview procedure

To form the basis of my collection of data and process of qualitative analysis, I use Kvale's *seven-step model*. The model visualises the different stages of an interview inquiry and is considered an acknowledged standardised method framework (Kvale, 2007).

3.2.1 Thematizing

The purpose of my study is to gain insight into the interviewees' understanding of their subjective experiences of working with improving girls' educational opportunities through NGO capacity building. Thus, the interviewees are this study's *key informants*. Key informants are defined as people who can offer perceptive information about the social setting, important events and individuals (Bell, et al., 2019). More specifically, I strive to find connections and patterns between the interviewees' perceived understandings. Therefore, in line with the *hermeneutic approval of recognition*, I, as a researcher, seek to understand the phenomenon in a dynamic exchange between interrelated experiences and the outside world (Nygaard, 2012). My *primary qualitative data* collection consists of *semi-structured in-depth interviews*. It is an interview variety that enables descriptions of different lifeworlds by interpreting the meaning of a described phenomenon (Kvale, 2007). This means that the interviews make me able to receive indirect information filtered through the views of the participants and, thus, I gain insight into their understanding of their experiences concerning the issue of lacking educational opportunities for girls as well as the practices they use in their organisation to overcome this issue.

In line herewith, the interviewees are carefully selected based on their diverse knowledge regarding my research field.

Firstly, I interview Lamin Camara who is currently the *Programme Analyst, Adolescent and Youth* of UNFPA The Gambia. Prior to this role, Camara had the position as *National Programme Associate and Programme Assistant*, giving him overall 12 years of experience within the UN body in The Gambia. Interviewing Camara for this study provides insight into how the UNFPA as an international organisation works with girls' education in a national context. This interview also uncovers Camara's holistic understanding about the evolution of development in women's

empowerment in The Gambia over the past many years, including reflections of the political environment that has had an impact on the field of girls' education. The interview transcription can be found in Appendix 2.

Secondly, I interview Fatoumata Y. Jaiteh who is now the *Development Director* of Star Fish International. Star Fish International is a Gambian-founded and woman-led organisation that works with advancing girls' education in The Gambia through various programs. Jaiteh is interviewed for this study to provide insight into the activities of a locally driven NGO, on the contrary to the international UNFPA. Jaiteh not only provides an overview of the NGO activities, but also uncovers the context in which many Gambian girls live, including her own and her family's story. Furthermore, Jaiteh works as a mentor for younger girls in Star Fish International when she is not in her professional role, and thereby is able to give first-hand insight into a specific activity in the organisation. The interview transcription can be found in Appendix 3.

Thirdly, I interview Jacco Verschoor who is one of the founders of *Smiling Child of The Gambia*. Smiling Child of The Gambia is a Dutch organisation founded by people from The Netherlands which works to raise funds for paying children's school fees and to build a nursery- and primary school where there are none. Verschoor is interviewed for this study to gain insight into a foreign-led organisation who works locally in The Gambia. Verschoor does not only provide insight into the specific NGO activities, but he also testifies to a non-Gambian approach to improving educational opportunities. Verschoor works in the organisation on a voluntary- and part time basis alongside his regular full-time profession which is outside the field of this thesis' topic. The interview transcription can be found in Appendix 4.

Lastly, I interview two Gambian women who both have been participating in NGO activities as girls and young women, but also currently are engaged in organisations in The Gambia. Isatou Jallow is a 25-year-old Gambian woman who currently works as an *Associate Officer in Communication and Knowledge Management* at the International Trade Centre in The Gambia. She finished her senior secondary school and recently graduated with a master's degree in Environmental Science from The University of The Gambia. Isatou Barry is a 25-year-old Gambian woman who currently works as a Financial Analyst for a global company in Oregon, USA. She also finished her senior secondary school and moved to the USA a year after that to study finance and economics at Portland University.

All the interviewees are selected based on their ability to contribute to a theoretical and empirical understanding of girls' educational opportunities in The Gambia. This procedure is defined as purposive sampling (Bell, et al., 2019, p. 392). Camara, Jaiteh and Verschoor all possess a founding-, managing-, or a strategizing-, position within the NGO in which they work - and which demand them to be knowledgeable enough about the topic to do so. This places them within a category, defined by Kvale & Brinkmann (2015, p. 70), as *the elite*. Combined, they have more than 25 years of experience within the field of civil society and working with education for girls (or generally, children) in The Gambia. The NGOs they represent are all involved in development work within the field of education but exemplifies organisations of different scale in relation to available (financial) resources and in how they approach the work they do. Barry and Jallow are women who can testify to the impact NGO activities have had on their own life as they have lived experience as Gambian girls engaged in NGOs during their youth. Interviewing these people overall enables me to gain an understanding of the different societal challenges that exist according to the NGOs' work, an insight into the different NGO practices and activities as well as the impact these have on a girl's life.

3.2.2 Design of interview study

When designing an interview study, one must ask how the procedures and techniques will be executed in relation to the empirical data collection method (Kvale, 2007). In this study, I focus on continuing to enhance my understanding of the mentioned phenomenon by repeatedly challenging my own prejudices. Therefore, I preserve this effort in the design of my interview-guide and utilise the semi-structured nature of the qualitative approach to create an element of openness. Here, I let new understandings emerge by allowing leeway in how I reply to the interviewees. Although the semi-structured interview has a sequence of themes to be covered and several suggested pre-prepared questions, it does not oblige the researcher to stick to a specific order (Kvale, 2007). Yet, to find overlapping themes, I make sure some of the same questions will be asked, and a similar wording will be used, across all interviews. Interview guides can be found in Appendix 1.

3.2.3 Interviewing

As Kvale (2007) dictates, my interviews are conducted with a reflective approach to the knowledge sought and the interpersonal relation of the interview situation. Here, each of my three interviews is

conducted in a three-phase system, as described by Launsø, Rieper and Olesen (2017). First is *the opening phase* where I introduce myself, clarify the purpose of the participant's specific participation in the study and establish a trustworthy connection. In *the main phase*, I conduct the actual interview to gain knowledge by using my prepared interview guide. Here, I use a generally open question structure and encourage reflections and an openness to new relevant topics. Furthermore, I focus on various question types, e.g., reaction-oriented questions and particularly follow-up questions to get clarification and validation of meaning (Launsø, et al., 2017). In *the closing phase*, I consider ethics and social expectations and consequently let each participant elaborate on previous questions, bring forward final comments and finally I close the interview on an informal note, leaving the participant informed and in a secure state of mind.

3.2.4 Transcribing

Transcribing is done to prepare the interview material for analysis, meaning that the oral material is transformed to written material (Kvale, 2007). Altogether, my interviews provided me with 312 minutes of recording and 61 pages of transcription (available in Appendix 2-5). The transcription of an interview can in itself be seen as an analysis, as the process of structuring oral conversation into written form becomes the subject of one's own analysis (Kvale, 2007). Based on this, all my interviews are sound recorded to ensure my focus is kept surely on the participant, the phenomenon, and the overall dynamic of each encounter. However, due to technical problems, I lose the sound file of the interview with Isatou Barry and rely on my hand-written notes for this interview in the further research process. In the transcriptions, I leave the spoken language unchanged, except for sound words like 'uhm' and overall responsive sounds. This is to enhance the reading quality and to stay as authentic to the interview as possible. All interviews are conducted in English, as all interviewees use English as a lingua franca, and thereby I maintain a natural encounter. Consequently, my use of quotes in this thesis is presented in English as well.

3.2.5 Analysing

As Kvale (2007) prescribes, I choose a mode of analysis of the material based on the purpose and topic of my investigation. To examine the characteristics and underlying meanings across my three interviews, I apply the method of *coding*. Coding makes data able to be bundled and linked together

in a manner that consolidates meaning and explanation (Grbich, 2007 in Saldaña, 2009). I initiate the analysis with a first-cycle *descriptive coding*, as this method is particularly advantageous for new qualitative researchers. The method allows for data passages of words to be simply summarized in a single word or short phrasing, and ultimately lead to a categorisation of an interview inquiry (Saldaña, 2009). I code the data manually by choosing words and phrases for describing a chosen passage. This is done in the software 'NVivo' as it is a tool where I can have a good overview of the emerging words and phrases while coding. These words and phrases are chosen based on the emerging topics/themes coming from the data. Then I apply a second cycle of coding by using *pattern coding*. This is an inferential method that creates depth to the descriptive level as it groups prior coded themes into a more summarized unit of analysis (Saldaña, 2009). Hereafter, I bundle the topics that emerge across the interviews and identify 'statements' that capture the essence within each major theme. As Creswell (2014) recommends, I aggregate my data into 5-7 overall themes which accounts for my major findings. My major findings include the 6 thematized focus points in NGO capacity building: *Advocacy, Education, Empowerment, Institutional capacity, Leadership and Physical Developments*. To visualise the major themes and their connecting topics, I draw a mind map (Appendix 6b). However, I also identify two other topics stated *Societal Challenges* and *Needed solutions* and draw that in a mind map as well (Appendix 6a). The codified data and identified topics serve as the base for my analysis and thereby my conclusion.

3.2.6 Verifying

To verify my investigation, I assess the validity and reliability of the interview findings.

Validity

Validity in qualitative research means that the researcher checks for the accuracy of the findings by employing certain procedures (Creswell, 2014). Thus, validity is a criterion that assesses whether the study is identifying – or “measuring” – what it says it will measure, and that the findings are accurate from the standpoint of the researcher (Bryman & Bell, 2007, p. 410). To increase the validation of my study, I apply *triangulation* as defined by Creswell (2014, p. 201), where I compare evidence from the interviews with other data sources to build a coherent justification for themes. The different data sources are the representatives from the NGOs with one perspective, and the young women contributing with a different perspective on the same issue or solution. The triangulation is established

based on the convergence of these different perspectives from the participants to make the results trustworthy, and thereby, adds to the validity of the study. In addition, I also reflect on my positionality in the research field. I argue this to be an important strength as it contributes with an open and honest narrative about how my interpretation of the findings is shaped by my background and thereby create an authentic study. With this, I can achieve a high level of nuance with further influence from Kvale's (2007) three principles of validation: continuously checking, questioning, and theoretically interpreting my findings.

Reliability

Reliability refers to the degree to which a study can be replicated (Kvale, 2007). However, in qualitative research it more specifically refers to whether the researcher's approach is consistent across different researchers and different projects (Creswell, 2014). This is inherently because the social setting and the circumstance in a qualitative study is impossible to "freeze" and because the data is produced in a human encounter between the interviewer and the interviewee (Bryman & Bell, 2007, p. 410). Consequently, my study faces the same challenge. Another researcher may reflect on different subjects or ask different follow-up questions than I do. Moreover, transcribing and analysing the material may also be conducted with various other methods, which creates an additional uncertainty (Bryman & Bell, 2007). However, I strive to obtain an aspect of trustworthiness and credibility by trying to refrain from asking leading questions as well as let the participant talk undisturbedly without my interruption. Furthermore, I try my best to stay true to the spoken word in my transcription, so other researchers may be able to come up with similar transcriptions.

3.2.7 Reporting

As the last step of my qualitative study, I communicate the findings of the study and the methods applied in a scientifically acceptable form – this thesis. Here, I provide background reasoning for my interview study and attach the foundational material for my study composed by interview guides, transcriptions, and visual maps of my analysis (Appendix 2-6). Trustworthiness is also asserted by the description of the specific procedures by which the results are obtained (Kvale, 2007), such as this overall method section. Lastly, I present my findings through contextualized quotes which are loyal to the habitual language of the participants for other readers to validate the results.

3.3 Setting

The empirical setting of this study is via video or phone call online. Here, I either utilize the web-meeting tool 'Zoom' or the chat application 'WhatsApp'. Throughout the interviews, I activate my webcam which allows the participant to see me and my reaction to their talking during the whole conversation. I let the participants know they may use their webcam as they see fit. One of the participants, Camara, is having trouble with the network in The Gambia and thus unable to activate the camera; another participant, Jaiteh, who is also in The Gambia, is eager to use the camera, but is using her phone for the call. Consequently, she must charge the phone several times during the interview, and I watch the ceiling of the room she is in a few times, instead of her face. The third participant, Verschoor, who is in The Netherlands, have no problems with the connection and uses the webcam throughout the interview.

3.4 Ethical considerations

As this study is centred on experiences, practices, and work in The Gambia, I consider that there are cultural norms and behaviours that is unknown to me as a non-Gambian person. As four out of five participants in this study are native Gambians, there may be practices they see as common, that I may not perceive the same way, and thus influence my interpretation of its significance in my analysis. I, therefore, have a responsibility of trying to the best of my ability to reproduce the significance with the intend they were first meant to have. Furthermore, I make it an obligation to not make the participants feel offended or demeaned by anything I ask them or inquire them about. Thus, trust between me and the interviewees needs to be established. This is especially relevant during the interviews where certain topics may be sensitive to talk about. These could be issues of gender-based violence and practices of FGM and child marriage, which is still prevalent in Gambian society and which, despite bans by law, are considered sensitive topics that entail societal divisions (OECD, 2018; Women's Amendment Act, 2015).

3.5 Delimitations

This study is limited in number of NGOs it represents. I have only included three organisations despite there being more than 165 NGOs working in The Gambia, and even more when including civil society organisations such as charity associations, religious missions, and International Governmental Organisations (Access Gambia, 2021b). Furthermore, this thesis restricts to studying the work and activities targeted at girls and women, even though the three organizations provide activities and programs where boys and men are included.

This research is also bound by the online circumstances and the missing opportunity of complimenting interviews with observations of the environment that is described in this study. Furthermore, the study is constrained by only including three women's testimony to how it is growing up as a girl in The Gambia, and even though not all girls have been a part of an NGO, the female population in the country still accounts to 1.22 million (Statista, 2021). Consequently, the two interviewees comprise only a small part of the female population which together with the circumstances must admittedly decrease this study's validity. Yet, this thesis is a contextual study, focusing on the local context as experienced by few, it thereby can still contribute to the research field of development work in The Gambia.

3.6 Summary

In this section I briefly described how I am using a qualitative research design to examine how NGOs capacity building may improve educational opportunities for girls in The Gambia. I conduct semi-structured interviews with three representatives from different NGOs and two interviews with young Gambian women engaged in NGO activities. This is done to gain insight into the NGOs' understanding of Gambian societal challenges that impede girls' education and how they wish to remedy this with their work. Furthermore, I identify the focus of their capacity building and how this has affected young women and their educational- and professional life. To conduct my study, I analyse the collected data through a two-cycled coding model that includes descriptive- and pattern coding. Lastly, I present the results through a visual map and contextualised quotes in the next analysis section.

4 Analysis

The structure of this analysis follows the sequence of the asked sub-research questions: “*What specific societal challenges inhibiting girls’ educational opportunities are the NGOs trying to remedy with their work?*”, and “*which focus areas are emphasized in the construction of the NGOs’ capacity and what specific activities do they carry out in accordance with these?*” as well as “*how has the participation in an NGO contributed to creating better educational opportunities for girls?*”. Combined, they will answer this thesis’ research question:

“How does NGOs’ capacity building improve educational opportunities for girls in The Gambia?”

This analysis begins with presenting the main findings from the coded data and these overall themes. Every sub-research question is presented as a new section and the major findings from the analysis act as independent headlines under these sections. For an overview of the coded themes and their interrelated connections, please see appendix 6.

In the literature, it was found that barriers to education for girls often exist because of a patriarchal structure of society that make females secondary citizens. Here, household chores, domestic care and marriage characterize some of the areas that women are expected to maintain in traditional societies. Overall, girls are subject to expectations of what it means to be a woman, and it can be difficult to challenge the structure. Here, NGOs act as a player between state and market, working for the betterment of those less fortunate. In relation to education, many NGOs offer education programs as a compliment to formal education, but also creates activities that promote educational learning. My interviews emphasises that the findings in the literature would deem The Gambia a stereotypical patriarchal society, and that the described living conditions are the reality for Gambian girls. However, details from a Gambian context are of essence, and thus presented in the below sections.

4.1 NGOs focus on designated challenges in society

“[...] right now, government is providing free education for girls, but education does not stop at tuition. There is a lot of other issues that has to be addressed. So, there are socioeconomic aspects of their lives that has to be addressed.”

- Lamin Camara -

4.1.1 Society's expectations to what a woman is

As in the literature, the most omnipresent challenge in society that complicates girls' educational opportunities are those that dictate what a girl should and should not be. The gender-socialisation process of doing household chores is prevalent as an example of this, and prevalent in The Gambia. For girls, the time-consuming unpaid work at home renders time away from school, however it is a different case for boys. Camara explains: *“[...] in most of our communities, you will see a girl child doing household chores, where the boy is asked to go to school. So, there, a girl child will probably only come to school when she is finished doing her chores. And even when she comes back home, the boy child will be playing, while the girl child will still be doing the laundry”* (Appendix 2, l. 125-128). The above finding is consistent with Kea (2013)'s research that finds negative effects on schooling when a girl is burdened by household labour. In addition, Barry explained that doing chores and helping other women at home is also an informal way of preparing you for marriage later in life. She highlights that a good wife *“can cook, clean, and take care of babies”* (Barry, personal communication, 19 June 2021). This finding is in accordance with Njie, Manion and Badje (2015) who in addition finds that the blame for having a daughter that cannot manage these aspects of the household, is entirely on mothers.

For a family living with financial constraints, it can be difficult to send all your children to school, because as it shows it is not completely free: *“For an average student, you have to pay study fees, [...] you have to pay examination fee, you have to buy materials, you have to buy your uniform, you have to pay transportation, you have to have lunch money. That is not free education for a family that lives from hand to mouth”* (Appendix 3, l. 1265-1268). Thus, a strategic solution for parents oftentimes is to sacrifice the daughter's education at the expense of the son's: *“a girl will not go to school if we still have male preference in some of our communities”* (Appendix 2, l. 119).

Instead, parents may decide to marry off the daughter as “*Some of them feel like that is the way out (of poverty)*” (Appendix 3, l. 1303). Here, it becomes the best long-term choice as a girl is expected to leave the household anyway when she is married, thus, making paying for her education a bad return on investment (Jütting & Morrisson, 2005). Jaiteh confirms this: “[..]so they think about maybe investing more in the boy than the girl because the girl is going to go out of the family and go marry somewhere else” (Appendix 3, l. 897). This expectation of what a women’s role in society is, is described clearly by Jallow and Jaiteh: “*You live in a society where they’re constantly telling you; ‘oh, you are going to school, BUT you might not even need this education because you have to take care of a man, you have to make babies’*” (Appendix 5, l. 2433) and “[..] if you’re a woman; find a good husband, and if you’re a man; find a good wife, and then build a family together” (Appendix 3, l. 2615). Yet, it is not just family that perpetuates this belief about a woman’s position in society. Jallow explains how she at a higher educational institution was met with the same belief by a male teacher: “[..]you see in a class, a man and a woman are competing, and probably the woman outweighs the man [..]and then they will tell the man: ‘you are letting a girl do this to you? A girl that is going to end up in a man’s house!?’” (Appendix 5, l. 2396). These findings reveal that some of the challenges that NGOs try to remedy are the ones that keeps women in assumed positions in society, not only by their own families, but also continuously by other authorities.

4.1.2 Gender-based violence

“Well, it’s not expected to marry early. Time and conditions force them to”

- Isatou Jallow -

Not just are girls being married off due to poverty, they are married off in a very early age which inhibits their schooling: “[..] a lot of girls stop going to school because someone think they are fit enough to go and get married. And we all know that a child cannot get married” (Appendix 2, l. 58-60). Since making child marriage punishable by 20 years in prison by law in 2016 (Child Protection Alliance, 2005), the NGOs have worked for the banning of child marriage in the communities as the normalisation of child marriage comes from within families: “*I have family members who have been given away, and I remember my aunties when they would come to my house [..] they had comments like; ‘your head are either in your books or playing football, but your mates somewhere else are nursing their babies’ [..] So it was like a normal language that I heard*” (Appendix 5, l. 2529-2532).

Another banned practice that is normalised in many communities is that of FGM. It is a harmful intervention on a girl's genitals performed as a mean to prolong virginity and keep her from sexual activities (UNFPA, 2020). When asked about how prevalent FGM and child marriage is, Jallow says *"I come from a Fula family, [...] and these two things are like [...] embedded in our culture; like, I grew up in that culture believing these were normal things that should happen"* (Appendix 5, l. 2519-2523). The direct consequences of FGM are risks of bleeding to death, getting infections and overall creates a psychological impact on the girl which may stop her from going to school. Therefore, the NGOs work to change the perception of the harmful practices in the communities. However, it is difficult. Camara explains that communities often hold on to traditional belief, and don't regard changing laws as something permanent. With the law of criminalising child marriage, Camara says: *"because those laws were enacted during the days of Yahya Jammeh, the former dictator, some of the communities will say; oh, no – now we have a new government, so those laws don't stand anymore"* (Appendix 2, l. 408-412).

This is also related to misconceptions and stigma around menstruation where girls are subject to period shaming: *"On average, a lot of girls miss a lot of days in school because they are going through periods. And because there is a lot of period shaming, they don't want to go."* (Appendix 2, l. 91-93). Thus, the NGOs try to remedy the impact of gender-based violence, including FGM, child marriage and misconceptions around menstruation and sexual health.

4.1.3 Lack of female representation

Across the interviews with Barry, Jallow and Jaiteh it is revealed that women often lack support from rolemodels to finish their education due to the societal expectation that a woman lives to be a wife. When talking about her professor, Jallow shares: *"[...] I remember one time he came to the class [...] and he looked at me and said; 'once you are done with your bachelor's, you should go and get married and not get a master's degree, otherwise you will not have a husband'."* (Appendix 5, l. 2378-2385). She says it makes her think: *"oh, you are good at this, but eventually you will end up in a man's house, so why are you even stretching yourself?"* (Appendix 5, l. 2387-2388), showing how the other's expectations interferes with her determination to finish her education. Jallow and Barry emphasise that the experience of being supported in doing what they were passionate about, or striving for a career, were mostly provided by the few female authorities they encountered during their educational journey. However, there are not many of them: *"in university as well [...]there was*

no single female lecturer. So, you're basically like; 'I'm doing this degree, but I don't even see a single woman'." (Appendix 5, l. 2462). Jallow adds that it makes it difficult to imagine how to excel: *"every single time you look at these top positions where you might want to see yourself, and you see it's all men [...] it automatically limits you as a person."* (Appendix 5, l. 2435). This finding reveals that women often lack representation when trying to excel in education, and thus NGOs try to remedy this lack in their work.

4.1.4 Lack of critical thinking in education

It was clear from the interviews, that the formal school system in The Gambia is perceived as a space where there is not much room for critical thinking. Jallow states: *"[...] it's very curated. It's very organized. There's only so much that you can learn within that space because it's only one person coming in front of you telling you; this is A, and this is B, and this is C – and in most cases you can't even challenge that."* (Appendix 5, l. 2749). The consequence is, she adds: *"it doesn't give you the room to think on your own, to learn stuff on your own that's related to people, related to yourself and understand how it affects you and how it affects other people"* (Appendix 5, l. 2557). According to Eldred (2013, p. 15), literacy is "vital in making sense, not only of the word, but also of the world", thus underlining that the education one receives plays a role in shaping one's worldview. This also applies to the ability of imagining what future career you can pursue. Jallow explains: *"When we ask people what they want to be when they get older, it is; oh, I want to be a doctor, oh I want to be an engineer, [...] so there is not a wide range that people can choose from."* (Appendix 5, l. 2343-2345). As a consequence of this, she states: *"I was so invested in something that I wanted, but because of the way the society was built I couldn't pursue that"* (Jallow, 2021). This finding shows that NGOs work to remedy girl's narrow perception of what they can as well as the work to challenge the lack of critical thinking girls meet in the education system.

4.1.5 Lived experiences from The Gambia vs. State-of-the-art

This section uncovers that the challenges the three NGOs wish to remedy with their work includes the societal expectations to a woman's position in society, whether it is being responsible for a household or becoming a man's wife. Furthermore, NGOs tries to work with challenging misconceptions existing in the communities including those that involve various types of gender-

based violence. Lastly, NGOs also sees the lack of female representation and lack of critical thinking as challenges they may remedy with their work. In relation to the state-of-the-art, it seems as if the identified societal challenges impeding on girls' educational opportunities in The Gambia deems The Gambia a stereotypical case. And so, the lived experience in The Gambia confirms all the stated challenges listed in the literature. In the next section, I will present the focus NGOs use in their capacity building and how it shapes the activities they offer.

4.2 The focus in NGO capacity building and its activities

Coding of the data revealed that the three NGOs have different focus in their capacity building (see appendix 6c). Camara describes NGOs' general capacity building as a process for sustainable continuance of other's development work: "*once you are able to build those organisational capacities [...] (you can have) sustainability of their programs. [...] We are able to build their capacities to such an extent that the resources that we give them becomes catalytic!*" (Appendix 2, l. 197-201). Through the coding process, I have identified 6 focus areas NGOs use in their capacity building: *Physical development, education, empowerment, leadership, and advocacy.*

4.2.1 Physical Development

Star Fish International attained a piece of land 10 years ago, and have since then build a library, a business centre, a skill-centre, and an art gallery in addition to providing housing to staff and voluntary mentors. It is in this self-attained compound all the NGOs activities take place. In the same lane, Smiling Child of The Gambia (SCOTG) have renovated a nursery school in a village in Lamin, and plans to build a primary school as this does not exist in the area. However, it is the improvements that helps girls, as toilets have now been built for more privacy. Verschoor's focus in building capacity is mostly to provide the necessities for education to take place physically: "*We decided to place windows as it gave them more light, more air, more refreshment in the class room. [...] then we got a message back; 'we also have sand floors'. Ok, let's lay tiles. No problem. [...] Then so we did the tiling project.*" (Appendix 4, l. 1839). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the community has been struck by an unemployment crisis, and here, SCOTG raised funds to help the families: "*We did an emergency fundraising of giving them those huge rice bags on 50 kg, with oil and all that stuff. Within*

a week, we had 160 bags for the families [..]” (Appendix 4, l. 1967-1969). UNFPA also provides physical items such as contraceptive and emergency contraceptive: “when it comes to contraceptives, emergency contraceptives, and all other forms of contraceptives, UNFPA is solely bringing that into the country [..]. The insertions that we have, that women can choose to prolong or to space their children, those are all something we bring.” (Appendix 2, l. 278-280).

4.2.2 Education

The interview uncovered that building capacity within education may look different from organisation to organisation. For example, UNFPA works together with the government in providing sex education in schools while at the same time campaigning around the country educating communities through workshops. In general, sexual- and reproductive health and rights is the point of departure for the work of UNFPA, and here, the focus is clear: “*what we are trying to do is ensure that girls, especially, understand their bodies. [..] when we are able to do that, [..] you are able to avoid [..] unplanned pregnancies, unintended pregnancies, and a lot of the silence and stigma around sex and sexuality education. So, it also prolongs women and girls to stay in education because they know the risk involved in, for instance, unprotected sex. The risk involved in making decisions that will stop them from going to school.*” (Appendix 2, l. 76-80). Thus, UNFPA is building capacity by enlightening the in communities and facilitate conversations for change: “*it’s important that we are able to play an advocacy role within the communities to ensure communities know that, when girls understand their menstrual hygiene and health management issues, they can still go to school.*” (Appendix 2, l. 88-90)

On the other hand, Star Fish offers an education program for 100 girls each year either as a compliment or instead of formal schooling depending on the participating girl’s context. The program includes after-school teachings in the standardised school curriculum as well as other non-traditional subjects such as ‘character development’ and ‘virtues training’. Here, education is conducted through mentoring by a group of young women, who have been through the program themselves and have similar life experience as the girls attending the program: “*we are here and we are in this context and in this locality and we know what our girls would need*” (Appendix 3, l. 867-868), Jaiteh says. The focus in capacity building at Star Fish is to advance girls’ education by providing equal skills to girls, as she says: “*our saying is just that ‘whatever a boy can do, a girl can equally do’. And so, that’s how we approach our education.*” (Appendix 3, l. 607). She explains that girls are not promoted in

the STEM field and “*are left with things like teaching and doing other things that are very difficult for them to make a reliable livelihood out of.*” (Appendix 3, l. 1295-1297 2021). Therefore, Star Fish’s focus in capacity building is also to encourage girls to pursue things in areas they usually lack access to, such as those in STEM or even sports.

4.2.3 Empowerment

Across my interviews, I find that interviewees believe the ability of gaining an education relies heavily on believing in your own abilities, and thereby your own empowerment. Thus, NGOs’ focus in capacity building is empowering girls, both when it comes to their identity (being a girl and being Gambian), but also their capability to create a better future for themselves.

In SCOTG, Verschoor knows empowerment is key for transformation of the organisation: “*Everything is run by Gambians themselves. [...]we want to give to Gambians their own influence and if there comes a time where our foundation stops, they have to run it themselves. And we want to make them prepared for that day*” (Appendix 4, l. 2007). He makes his own position clear as well: “*Once I get involved and have to sort things out in The Gambia, [...] then my work goes too far.*” (Appendix 4, l. 2076).

At Star Fish, the focus of empowerment is practiced in several areas as Jaiteh explains: “*We challenge them, you know, at the age of thirteen to start their own small businesses. [...]to start community service projects and [...]to start advocating for themselves*” (Jaiteh, 2021). Entrepreneurship for the girls is encouraged to provide a sense of independence. A ‘3-way’ business model is applied: 1/3 profit goes to paying a girl’s own school fees, 1/3 goes to craft materials so the business can continue, 1/3 goes to the maintenance of the organisation. Crafts include beading, making candy, taking photos and other things the girls wish to do. As to how it enforces empowerment, Jaiteh says: “*we have the skill-centre, and that has taken back students that have been pregnant out of wedlock or worse [...]some of them don’t feel like they can go back to English and maths, but they go to the skill centre and learn things like sowing, hair dressing, cooking, and hotel management.*” (Appendix 3, l. 1277-1279). Empowerment is also seen in other areas of Star Fish’s work as they promote that all types of employments are valuable: “*What the girls believe is that [...]an educated person doesn’t sweep their street [...]. And we are trying to get rid of stuff like that.*” (Jaiteh, 2021). Furthermore, they also emphasise the importance of female role models as representation is needed to imagine yourself

becoming something in the future: *“I’m like [...] she did it, I can do it, I can do it too”* (Appendix 3, l. 754). Lastly, Jaiteh underlines the importance of centring women in women’s development issues: *“[...] we want to be able to represent ourselves. We want to be able to tell our own stories [...], our own way”* (Appendix 3, l.1475-1476).

4.2.4 Leadership

In building their capacity, NGOs also focus on leadership skills. In Star Fish, that means being a role model in more than one way. First, older girls become front runners in promoting the value of education before marriage: *“If you are not able to go to the university at least we encourage you to have a high school degree before you can go get married to someone else.”* (Appendix 3, l. 1305-1306). Here, girls are encouraged by other girls to become more independent: *“try to hold on until you are financially independent, you are able to finally use your voice, you have a business, you understand what health is, you understand what nutrition is, you can take care of yourself, you understand what maternal health is [...]and then you can go and get married.”* (Appendix 3, l. 1317-1320). However, leadership at Star Fish also means not fearing being in front of doing good work for the development of your community. Jaiteh says: *“when you become the president or the minister you feel like that position means really just ordering people and not really doing the work, but we just want to get rid of that stereotype [...] so when you are in a higher position, you are able to come down to your community and to do the work that is needed and to not look you self above other people”* (Appendix 3, l. 582).

4.2.5 Advocacy

To create long-term change, the focus on advocacy in building capacities is well-embedded in NGO activities. For example, UNFPA advocates for policies supportive of family planning, which is essential to the empowerment of women and her autonomy to choose when she wants children (UNFPA, 2020). Yet, it is not only on national level advocacy is played out. It is also in communities where Camara explains the importance as: *“it’s about building capacities of communities to really better understand the needs of women and girls, and to ensure that our communities places high premium in the education of girl children.”* (Appendix 2, l. 145). He adds that advocacy includes the purpose of reaching a girl’s parents to support her in getting an education. Advocating in local

communities entail the promotion of: *“ensure the girl child has the minimum amount of rest that is required to recuperate, to be able to do her extra classes and studies, to ensure there is fair playing field with the boy child to do what she is supposed to do as a child and excel in education.”* (Appendix 2, l. 129-132). In this lane, Jaiteh adds that advocating in the communities can be difficult: *“sometimes it can be hard and they will be like; ‘I have to wait for ten years, right? As opposed to making sure my girls is married right now and their husband is giving me the money?’* (Appendix 3, l. 937). In Star Fish, they use these experiences to push the girls to act and thereby make the girls participate in advocating for change in the community: *“they got to make sure their parents see what investing in the girl education can do for them, instead of using the girls as a means of income.”* (Appendix 3, l. 941). Still, they also try to meet the community where they are in order to advocate for change: *“we try to work within the culture, [...] for example we have a lot of cultural events, [...]we use a lot music and dance. What we call the praise singing. Because those are things the community members see, parents see, and they know; OK, these are not people borrowing western ideas, or different ideas, they are using actually what we value to build our people”* (Appendix 3, l. 924).

4.2.6 Institutional capacity

Institutional capacity here refers to the organisations ability to develop the skills and knowledge *within* themselves to sustain their work and the development they are trying to achieve. All three organisations are in one way or the other trying to make sure their work can be continued through their capacity building, however, the activities that promotes this vary between the NGOs. In Star Fish, there is a focus on mobilising resources locally, such as creating local festivals to raise funds, or as they did during the Covid-19 pandemic, hosting an online festival to attract foreign donors: *“Because Covid came [...] we had to find other ways of getting funding [...]. So, we did an online festival and we raised about 30.000 USD online.”* (Appendix 3, l. 1426-1429). Here, it is demanded that activities are run by the girls with focus on activities such as creating networks, holding speeches, and promoting their small businesses. Camara explains that UNFPA takes a different approach to sustaining capacities as they are an international organisation who instead supports local organisations financially through implementing partners: *“we support them as contractees and then have them work through an implementing partner that will receive funding on their behalf”* (Appendix 2, l. 221). However, UNFPA also mobilises communities to create change, and in that way sustain the development they wish to achieve: *“what eventually happens is that in those*

communities, now men are getting all the men [...] to know their blood groups so that they could support blood donations. So, they are also going with their women to the health facilities and they've gone to the extent of supporting the health facility to drill a bore hole to ensure that their women have water when they come to deliver." (Appendix 2, l. 494-498).

4.2.7 Comparative assessment

It is evident from this section that the three NGOs have different focus in their capacity building, even if a few of the focus areas sometimes overlap. Smiling Child of The Gambia is the only one of the NGOs that focus mainly on contributing to building schools, whereas it shares the focus on paying school fees with Star Fish International. Here, the difference is that SCOTG utilise donorships from foreigners and Star Fish utilise their skill-centre where girls can make a business and earn a profit to pay for their own schooling. In the same way, Star Fish is the only one of the NGOs that provide a full education program where the formal school curriculum is supplemented with training and education in professional areas that are often unreachable for girls. So, to promote these areas, Star Fish emphasise the need for female role models as a tool to empowering girls. Here, women are centred in all the work regarding women's issues. Empowerment is also a focus in UNFPA, but the approach here is to centre sexual and reproductive health and rights as the point of departure for achieving better conditions for women. It was also clear that UNFPA works on a higher national level than the other NGOs as UNFPA are focused mainly on policy change and the implementation of these. To push through a development agenda, they operate through advocacy to governments, but also through community programs. This is in common with Star Fish which focus on both advocacy and leadership skills for girls to create change in the community.

4.3 NGOs improve educational opportunities for girls

In the interviews with Barry, Jallow and Jaiteh, who are the female representatives in this study, I find that they believe participating in an NGO makes a difference in their life. Yet, many may argue that engaging in extracurricular or out-of-school activities would do the same. Nevertheless, in a Gambian context, the opportunities for engaging in such spaces are not plenty, and thus, the NGOs function in many ways as a place where girls develop skills and abilities needed to succeed in life

other than those provided in formal education. In the sections above, the specific societal challenges NGOs tries to remedy with their work were identified, as well as with which focus the NGOs approached these challenges. Despite the NGOs constructing their capacity through various types of activities, one overall focus is reoccurring in all three NGOs - *empowerment*. Thus, it is through *empowerment* of women that this section will answer the question on how NGOs improve educational opportunities for girls.

4.3.1 Standing in your own light

In her interview, Jallow shares how she was a shy and introverted young girl before being introduced to any organisation. However, her sister introduced Jallow to Star Fish International during her teenage years, and here she began participating in NGO activities. It is evident from her interview, that participating in the NGO spaces built her confidence and self-worth over the years. Jallow states: *“growing up I never really thought I’d be able to challenge people [...] without being paranoid [...] so before I got into the organisations, I could hardly interact with people, or even speak in public or go to the radio. But now, even with my timid personality, I am able to get on these spaces and deliver what I want to deliver and then go back to doing whatever I wanted to do”* (Appendix 5, l. 2664-2666).

Jallow also emphasises the importance of the women she has met during her engagement in NGOs, and she explains the influence they had: *“So outside of school and outside of my household, I think I really met incredible women that reshaped my thoughts around education, and also my thought around what I can do and what I can be. [...]during that period, I discovered things that I enjoyed outside of what I was doing in school.”* (Appendix 5, l. 2502). In the NGO space, she enters a space where girls are being asked about what they want, who they are, and so, it forces them to reflect. The result of this is: *“It helps you discover yourself; it helps to understand yourself better and know things that you are interested in; things that you like and things that you don’t like. [...] So that [...] you are able to know what your strengths are, what your weaknesses are [...], and that helps it get easier for you to determine where you want to be in the future.”* (Appendix 5, l. 2635-37). She then concludes: *“if I didn’t go to those organisations, probably I would be stuck [...] doing God knows what, stuff that I don’t enjoy.”* (Appendix 5, l. 2545).

As indicated above, engaging in NGO activities means entering a space where reflection is encouraged. NGOs provide comprehensive knowledge about many societal concerns, and Jallow explains: *“it’s only when I got to these spaces that I got to understand a whole range of issues. [..]”*. (Appendix 5, l. 2545). In relation to the issue of FGM, Jallow specifically highlights how she discovered the practice was harmful: *“[..] my thoughts around that were never challenged. [..] it’s only when I got to these spaces that I understood; ‘oh, this is actually not normal’”* (Appendix 5, l. 2524-28). In addition to getting more knowledgeable about issues, Jallow also adds that participating in an NGO taught her to question what other people stated as the truth. The increased confidence and believe in herself has only grown as she concludes by saying: *“You don’t stand and tell me this is not right and then I take it like that. [..] I’ve moved past that level. I’m not taking it as what I was told.”* (Appendix 5, l. 2597).

The concept of education is also subject to change after being exposed to NGO spaces, as the girls learn about other values than those taught in the formal school: *“what people often see as education is going to get a book, read and write and speaking good English.”*, Jaiteh says. She adds: *“They don’t attach it to [..] music and dance, [..], a health program, they don’t attach it to why you will go out into the community to sweep.”* (Appendix 3, l. 1007). This is only echoed by Jallow who confirms that she now sees education as something more than what you learn in the classroom: *“it has reshaped my thoughts around what education is, what it is considered and how sometimes the education system and the four corners we are stuck in usually just limits us”* (Appendix 5, l. 2512)

When asked what he hoped the work of UNFPA could do, Camara stated: *“if we have the generation of Isatou and others, at least they are empowered enough to know, the girl child is as important as the boy child.”* (Appendix 2, l. 158), indicating that he wishes to see the younger generation of girls gaining more equality. In line herewith, the impact of empowering women can for example be seen in Jallow’s experience with her older siblings. Despite them also having higher educations, they were not exposed to NGO activities. Jallow says: *“today, we argue about issues in my house, so they start talking about it and then I am there, and then ‘in fact, let’s keep quiet, the feminist is here, we can’t have this discussion’.”* (Appendix 5, l. 2578). This could indicate that even though women may, or may not, have more equality, Jallow is an example of a woman empowered enough to fight for it.

4.3.2 Ripple effect

As Camara stated above, he wishes that the NGOs' work has a ripple effect. The interview with Jaiteh uncovered a few stories of other girls who exemplifies this. For example, the story of Mariama who entered Star Fish's education program and wanted to learn public speaking but were too self-aware to overcome her fears. During the programme, Mariama learned to do spoken word poetry and start a small business. However, Jaiteh explains: "*the purpose of education is not just for Mariama to go out and speak at the assembly [...], but it's for her to be able to go back and enrol her siblings in school [...]*" (Appendix 3, l. 1229). Even though Mariama have not testified to this, my interview with both Barry and Jallow confirms stories of the same nature.

Camara himself even tells a story, where it is evident that engaging in an NGO can have widespread impacts. He states: "*I used to have this conversation with my mom about FGM. And then she will like; 'you are crazy. Like, this is something that our families have gone through for generations, so you are not the one who can stop it'. And I will be like: 'I don't know about any other person, but my girl children will not perform this harmful act'. And then, eventually, I've been able to get her to listen. Nobody would dare touch my children*" (Appendix 2, l. 435-440). This statement could testify to the fact that getting knowledge in an NGO can contribute to a ripple effect upwards as well, and thereby suggest that capacity building in NGOs lead to communities' change of beliefs – and behaviour.

4.3.3 Paying it forward

Daly, Mbenga and Camara (2016) finds that mentorship plays a significant role in the successful education of women as it provides women with the networks, opportunities, and the right information for their advancement. The interviews confirm this finding. It is, however, especially *female* mentors and role models in the NGOs that makes girls feel represented and seen, for as Jallow says: "*they might be able to understand where I'm coming from because they've been where I am at this point*" (Appendix 5, l. 2445). Barry also shares that whenever she saw a woman in an authoritarian position, she was convinced she could get in that position as well. She stated that being represented feels like overcoming a "*you can't be what you can't see-mindset*" (Barry, personal communication, June 19, 2021). However, it has also been found that NGOs creates access to networks for women, and this is only confirmed in my findings. When asked what surprised her most about being engaged in an NGO, Jallow states: "*So, getting into these spaces, hoping to just contribute, hoping to just learn, hoping to just interact with people that I know, but in the process, I end with a network of people that I can*

count on or that can help me move things if I want to do them.” (Appendix 5, l. 2673-75). Barry only echoes this as she says that the reason she studies in the USA now, and also gets to engage in NGOs there, is due to her network of women attained through the NGOs in The Gambia (Barry, personal communication, 19 June, 2021).

The participating in NGO activities does, however, not only contribute to the girl herself, but also those around her. In her interview, Jallow shares that the NGOs have given her skills and knowledge and that she can now “pay it forward”. Through the exposure to various NGOs, she has participated in many different activities and campaigns, to such an extent that she wanted to contribute with founding her own organisation: *“I co-founded Equals Now as well, a women-led organisation in The Gambia. So, I co-founded that with radical feminism in mind and [...] we try to give more young women the platform”* (Appendix 5, l. 2711).

Furthermore, the impact of girls building capacity through NGOs is brought forward to community members. Jaiteh shares: *“I am not a nurse or doctor, but I do a lot of community development here, and my dad has been someone who has not really been very focused on girl’s education or even western education. But I remember this day when we actually went to talk about violence against women in the community and when I came, you know [...] he was like; ‘oh my god. My friends told me that they saw you in the community today and you were speaking English’. Even though he didn’t tell me he was proud of me, I could see how happy he was that I was doing something for my community.”* (Appendix 3, l. 955-57)

5 Conclusion

This thesis sought to understand how practices and activities of NGOs, their so-called *capacity building*, improves educational opportunities for girls in The Gambia. The thesis was based on sub-research questions that focused on the social and cultural impacts of Gambian society that impede girls' educational opportunities and which NGOs try to remedy with their work. The research questions were focused on characterising the focus areas in NGOs' capacity building, and how the activities concerned with these areas contribute to creating educational opportunities for girls in practice. Thus, in relation to the literature, this thesis is situated within the research field of NGOs' role on development, focusing on the local context of The Gambia and identifying the impact on two Gambian young women. This thesis was conducted as a qualitative study, utilising a method framework for an interview study and with an inductive approach to guide the analysis. The empirical data was collected from three interviews with representatives from different NGOs working locally in The Gambia, as well as two young women who both have been engaged in NGO activities.

The study reveals that the main societal challenges NGOs wish to remedy with their work are the constraining expectations to a women's role in society, including those of a girl's household responsibilities and marriage. It is also the issue of gender-based violence, including female genital mutilation, lack of female representation and lack of critical thinking in education. The study also identified six different focus areas characterising NGOs' capacity building. These are: *education, empowerment, leadership, advocacy, physical development, and institutional capacity*. The study finds that it is specifically the focus of empowerment that leads to better educational opportunities, and which is a focus in capacity building of all three NGOs. Conclusively, it is found that NGOs creates an environment for girls where they not only can be inspired by role models, but also equals, who experience the same challenges as themselves. The NGOs provide a space where girls may gain knowledge about societal matters that involve their own lives, building their autonomy. In this way, the NGO become a catalyst space for the girls that fosters critical thinking and decision-making as well as empowers them to speak up and stand up for their rights. Conclusively, NGOs improves a

girl's educational opportunities through empowerment so she can be confident and make her own choices, so she can change misconceptions and so she can build networks and inspire others.

This study discovered a need for further, and perhaps more generalisable, research. First, there is a need for more updated and detailed research on NGOs real impact on development and specifically, girl's education as the work of NGOs have been criticised of contributing to unequal development. Then, there is also a need for studying the voices of women who represents other ages and who live in other life conditions in The Gambia. Thirdly, as some Gambian women now have achieved attaining a higher education and is experiencing being a woman in male-dominated workspaces, it would be interesting to investigate the barriers she meets in this context.

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Appendix 1 – Interview guides

The appendices should be in the order that they are referred to in the main text. For instance, if Appendix A refers to something on page 25 and Appendix B refers to something on page 15, the appendices need to be re-lettered. This inconsistency occurs when text is moved around or inserted

1a) NGO representatives

XX = the organisation in question

Preparation and considerations before interviews	
<p>Problem statement</p>	<p><i>What role does civic society and organisations such as StarFish have in contributing to education opportunities for girls in The Gambia?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What factors in society makes it necessary for civic society (organisations) to contribute to the betterment of education opportunities for girls? • How can organisation contribute to improving education policies in the future?
<p>Hypothesis</p> <p>- et udsagn, der fremføres som en antagelse eller formodning snarere end som en påstand, og som ud fra teoretiske forestillinger enten formulerer en formodet sammenhæng mellem kendsgerninger eller en formodet forklaring af noget foreliggende.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I assume there are societal challenges that impacts opportunities for girls' education. • I assume there are differences in the opportunities between girls from rural and urban areas • I also assume that besides the societal challenges, there are other factors such as economic (financial abilities), religious and cultural factors impeding on girls' education, as these factors may impact decisions made by the family of these girls. • I also assume that conditions in regular society impede girl's education opportunities, and the demand for NGO's is created by this demand • I assume that NGO's may help girls with education opportunities, but not that they are a necessity*

Paradigm	Social constructionism: Truth as varying, socially constructed, and ever-changing. Reality is created collectively; social context and interaction frame our realities.
Order of the interview	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Identify preconceptions and prejudice 2. Own experiences – the what, the how and the why? What is the problem? 3. Understanding the culture/societal norms? → what is "usually" done? 4. How do we get succes? What is done, e.g. from StarFish? Does it work? What is needed for the future? Policy change making? → concrete suggestions/advice

<p>The initial phase</p> <p>(make contact and create trust)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Who am I?</i> - <i>What is the research/study about?</i> - <i>Why is this person a part of my investigation?</i> <p><i>Here, I explain the topics to the interview person.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● I am a student studying Economic Development at Lund University in Sweden. ● Interested in development on a global level; with a particular focus on female empowerment, opportunities and participation in the society. Starting with education. ● With an understanding of the NGO's role in society and the context in which it exists, I wish to understand the (lack of) education opportunities for girls in The Gambia. ● The following interview will, therefore, dive deeper into the experience that experts has with working with girls needing more education opportunities and has a role in civil society. ● ASK FOR CONSENT OF RECORDING THE INTERVIEW
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Main phase		
Research Question	Interview question	Follow up question
<p>(Understanding)</p> <p>What experiences and what perspective characterizes the person's pre-understanding of StarFish and girl's opportunities for education?</p> <p><i>Insight into the interviewee's sociodemographic background and "horizon of understanding"</i></p>	<p>1. Could you shortly describe who you are, what your role is in XX?</p> <p>2. What is XX? (background information on the org.)</p> <p>3. For how long have the organisation worked with education opportunities for girls?</p>	<p>- Name, age, education and/or professional experience</p> <p>- When was it founded? By who?</p> <p>- How long have you worked with this field?</p>
	<p>4. What was the reason behind your own first encounter with XX?</p> <p>5. What were your thoughts on education opportunities for girls in The Gambia before you started working at XX?</p>	<p>- What were your expectations to the organisation?</p> <p>- What were your first impression?</p> <p>- Can you tell me where your knowledge or experience comes from on this topic?</p>
	<p>3. Can you describe one or more situations where you were surprised by the work in XX?</p>	<p>- Why did it surprise you?</p> <p>- What impact did that have on you afterwards?</p>

Research Question	Interview question	Follow up question
(Explanation) How has the person's pre-understanding of the organisation and field of work developed and which experiences characterizes the organisations work today?	6. What is XX "why"? (Why does it what it does?) 7. Could you describe what your perspective / XX perspective is on the challenge of opportunities for girl's education? 8. How does the organisation work with that challenge today? 9. What change do you think XX is creating?	- What are the most dominant factors impacting the work? - (describe the work) - (mission)
"How" is the work done?	10. How has this impacted the girls in your education programme? 11. Could you describe a specific situation where you saw the impact manifesting?	- Do you think it will affect other girls in the Gambian society? How?

Note:	<i>I now want to move into a conversation that puts StarFish's work into a larger context of society and about topics that are more broad</i>	
Research Question	Interview question	Follow up question
What characterizes the work with girls' education opportunities in relation to the society?	12. How would you explain the need for XX's work in relation to the Gambian society? 13. How does XX contribute or add to the education system that already exists? 14. What challenges do girls especially see in the Gambian society? 15. What would you say are the most dominant challenges that impacts the girls' education opportunities?	- Why is the work needed?

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>What challenges exist?</i> • <i>What is "best practice"?</i> • <i>What competition is there?</i> • <i>Is there any support?</i> 	<p>16. Are there other larger challenges impeding the work you do?</p> <p>17. Do you have any thoughts on where these challenges stem from?</p> <p>18. How does XX help with overcoming the challenges?</p>	<p>- How would you say they also impact their lives?</p> <p>- When did you become aware of these factors yourself?</p>
	<p>19. Can you describe a part of the project that has given great results?</p> <p>20. Can you describe something / an initiative that has not worked?</p>	<p>- Why was it successful?</p> <p>- How was it achieved?</p> <p>- Who was a part of it?</p> <p>- Why?</p>
	<p>21. What is the biggest challenges XX is facing right now? (in relation to creating education opportunities for girls)?</p> <p>22. What have you done to overcome the challenges?</p>	<p>- Where/who did they come from?</p> <p>- Do you have a strategy to overcome similar challenges in the future?</p>
	<p>23. Do you experience competition with other NGO's or other organisations?</p> <p>24. Where does XX gain support?</p> <p>25. What is the nature of the support? (PR, financial aid, recruitment)</p>	<p>- What is the nature of the competition?</p> <p>- With who are you competing?</p>

	<p>26. Can you describe what change NGO's and organisations like XX wish to make?</p>	<p>- How would it look like if it was achieved?</p>
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<p>What is the capacity and driver for change?</p>	<p>27. What are XX's experience with collaborating with others in order to create change in society?</p>	<p>- What is the collaboration based on? - How does it work?</p>
<p>How does the organisation contribute to improving education policies in the future?</p>	<p>28. How have/can XX's work inspire changes in policy for the future?</p>	<p>- What can you do/provide that the regular Gambian society cannot?</p>
	<p>29. Could you mention 3 changes that is needed in society that would improve girls' education policy?</p> <p>30. Overall, what do you see as XX's biggest strengths?</p>	<p>- (summing up)</p>

The Final phase

(This is about rounding off in an ethically and socially acceptable way)

Here, the interviewee can make further additions or remarks and possibly provide an assessment of the interview and one's role as interviewer (Launsø, et. al., 2017, p.149)

- **Do you have any additions or comments?**

- **Do you have any questions for the interview? Or any elaborations?**

Then I just want to say thank you so much for your answers.
I appreciate you taking the time for me. Thank you very much.

1b) Young women

Preface (same as for NGO's)

Main phase. Questions

1. What is your name, how old are you and what is your occupation right now?
2. Could you describe your educational background?
3. Where did you go to school?
a. How were you in school? (good/bad)
4. What challenges did you see while going to school?
a. How were they related to you being a girl?
b. Where did you go for help?
5. Were any of these places an NGO?
a. Which one? What did they do?
b. Could you describe your time there?
6. What role did you have?
7. What did you participate in?
8. Were you being involved? In what? And how?
9. How was your experience with being a girl in that environment?
a. Was there anything special for girls that were not for boys?
b. Or vice versa?
10. How has the experience of NGOs shaped your view on what you can do/achieve?
a. Would you say it has contributed to your self-image? How?
b. What else has it done?
11. How do you think NGOs contribute to education opportunities if they do?
12. What problems do you see with NGOs supporting education opportunities if any?
13. Did you experience anything that you could criticise about the practices of that NGO?
14. What did your family think about you being active in an organisation?
a. What challenges did it create?
b. How did you handle these conversations with your family?
15. What challenges of being a girl would you say <i>you</i> have overcome so far?
a. What challenge would you say has been the biggest one?
b. Do you think it is the biggest one for other girls?
c. If yes, why? If no, then what?
16. Would you recommend other girls to follow your journey? Being a part of an NGO?
a. What benefits would you tell them they could gain?
b. What would you tell them they should be aware of?
17. If you were to tell me 3 things that you had not expected happening from you being a part of that NGO – what would they be?

Final phase. The same as for NGO's.

1 Appendix 2 – Transcribe of interview with 2 Lamin Camara (UNFPA)

3 *[The interviewer has presented herself, asked for consent to record the interview and explained the*
4 *aim and topic of the project].*

5 *[Small conversation about how Covid19 is affecting Lamins work and making him busy]*

6 LAM: Yes we are very busy, especially in the context of Covid.. It's business unusual, you know.
7 But we're surviving, we're here.. A lot of things we plan to do is difficult, cause you have to
8 strategize and do it in a different way. Yeah,so..

9 INT: *Yeah.. I can imagine it has made your work more difficult or challenging?*

10 LAM: Very difficult, very difficult.. Like, we are planning a campaign, we are doing this family
11 planning campaign so we used to go to a region and have 3 days there and have a multi-
12 disease approach to promoting family planning services, so [uhmm..] Now the ideas have to
13 be slightly different in the context of covid. But yeah.. we will figure it out.

14 INT: *That sounds very interesting, but seems very challenging as well. Good luck with the*
15 *campaign. And also, when you're so busy I just want to say thank you once again for taking*
16 *the time to talk with me. I really appreciate it.*

17 LAM: Of course. Sorry that it took this late for me to reply. We are planning a lot of things..
18 Globally, we are planning our strategy, and on the country level I am having to lead the
19 organisation from national consultations during this. So, it's been a crazy week though.

20 INT: *Well, then let's get to it then. Maybe we can start with talking about what your role is in the*
21 *UNFPA.. So yeah, what is it that you do, Lamin?*

22 LAM: Alright, so thank you very much.. My functional job title is *Programme Analyst Adolescent*
23 *and Youth*. So, basically my work revolves around everything that we do with adolescents
24 and young people and that includes both in-school and out-of-school.. And primarily I'm
25 focusing on empowerment, youth leadership and development. Uhhm.. Also, focusing on
26 sexual and reproductive health and rights, which also at the school level has the component
27 of comprehensive sexuality education. Maybe, filtering down to the work of my other
28 colleagues on gender, because it's actually cross-cutting; how are we able to end all forms
29 of violence against women and girls – including those in school. So uhmm, basically, my
30 role is uhmm.. developing program and providing policy guidance on how we are better able
31 to work with adolescents and young people, especially on some of these issues, because at

32 the end of the day.. I mean, we are trying to ensure that every young person's potential are
33 fulfilled, so I mean.. and like I always say.. uhhmm... if one young person, or one
34 adolescent, is affected, that is one young person or one adolescent too many. Soo, basically,
35 I mean.. It's easier said than done. But it's also basically to see how are we able to really
36 support government develop policies, support government advocate for.. uhm.. government
37 to make sure there is inclusion and – uhm—resource allocation for programs related to
38 young people and adolescents. So maybe, basically that's a brief summary of what I do, or
39 related to the work of UNFPA and what we do.

40 *INT: Thank you. It seems very broad and like you have a lot on your hands.*

41 LAM: Yeah..

42 *INT: In regards to the topic of women and girls, which I am dealing with, I would like to know*
43 *what issues in regards to education for girls that you (UNFPA) try to solve. How do you*
44 *help in that aspect?*

45 LAM: So, basically you know.. I mean, for UNFPA, we are the sexual and reproductive health and
46 rights organisation or agency of the United Nations. So everything, or most of the things,
47 that we do – we use sexual and reproductive health and rights as an entry point. And
48 because our constituency also is women, girls, and young people, the focus is; how are we
49 able to end all forms of violence against women and girls – including harmful practices.
50 Because, you will recall that.. I mean, that also hinders the participation of girls, especially
51 in-school. For instance, I mean.. The Gambia [uhm uh uoh...]. Female Genital Mutilation
52 (FGM) is actually very high. So I mean, you are talking about 76.. , almost 76% of the
53 population having gone through that. So I mean, that could be a hindrance to a lot of young
54 women and girls completing their school. Our advocacy in that area is: how are we able to
55 ensure that young people or women and girls, I mean, go into the education system as they
56 want to go. But you know. There are certain practices that UNFPA and partners are really..
57 put a lof of emphasis on as part of our work to ensure that we are able to ..uhm.. address
58 those issues. And one significant thing is child marriage. In the Gambian context, you will
59 realize that a lot of girls, uhmm, stop going to school because someone think they are fit
60 enough to go and get married. And we all know, that a child cannot get married. So, uhm..
61 So, we have worked over the years with partners until eventually when we were able to get
62 the government promote a law that ban child marriage. But it's easier said than done, it goes
63 beyond just legislation. There needs to be enforcement, there needs to be education, there
64 needs to be advocacy. Because communities need to understand why it is actually very very
65 important for their girl children to go to school. I mean, until when they're fully fit to make
66 a decision on their own as to who, when and how and where they want to be married. So, I
67 mean, that's really very very critical. So, these are two actual practices that we are ..uhm..
68 trying to end, so that it will allow girls to participate in school. In the area of sexual and
69 reproductive health, I mean we are playing a significant role working with the ministry of
70 education to ensure that we have comprehensive sexuality education in school. And what we
71 are trying to do, is to ensure that girls, especially, understand their bodies. You know, to be
72 able to make informed choices and decisions.

73 *INT: Yes..*

74 LAM: Because, when you are able to do that [Lamin coughs], excuse me..

75 *INT: That's alright.*

76 LAM: So, when we are able to do that, you know, you are able to avoid a lot of things..uhh..
77 unplanned pregnancies, unintended pregnancies, and a lot of the silence and stigma around
78 sex and sexuality education. So it also prolongs women and girls to stay in education
79 because they know the risk involved in, for instance, unprotected sex. The risk involved in
80 making decisions that will stop them from going to school. So, uhhh.. that for me is very
81 significant. And that's why we play an important role to make sure that girls are
82 empowered.

83 *INT: Yeah.*

84 LAM: And another thing, which is very recent, that we are trying to do is having a menstrual
85 hygiene and health management program. To ensure that we are able to ..uhm.. campaign
86 against .. uhm.. period shaming and period poverty. The Gambia is a very poor country, you
87 know. So, I mean.. A lot of young women and girls probably don't even have the resources
88 to buy proper sanitary pads. And even though its not free yet, but it's important that we are
89 able to play an advocacy role within the communities to ensure communities know that,
90 when girls understand their menstrual hygiene and health management issues, they can still
91 go to school. Because, I mean, on average.. a lot of girls, miss a lot of days.. uhhh.. in
92 school because they are going through periods.. and because there is a lot of period shaming,
93 they don't want to go. Especially in rural communities where people are still not aware..
94 then it becomes a challenge. So we try to ensure that we are doing a lot of work in this area,
95 advocacy role, and also.. even working to provide communities, especially women, with
96 skills to be able to produce re-usable sanitary pads, that can be affordable to those
97 communities. Like, I tell people.. I grew up seeing my sisters and people around me using
98 rags as sanitary pads, and that is the reality for a lot of women and girls in our communities.
99 So, I mean.. it's important that we are able to ensure, because that's also quite unhealthy.. it
100 could lead to a lot of reproductive health issues, including infections, that could have far
101 reaching consequences on the women. And also, to some extent stopping them from going
102 to school. So, I think for me, that is another important component; how are we really
103 encouraging girls to go to school.

104 *INT: Yeah.*

105 LAM: In terms of retention of girls, like I said.. we also work with other partners. For instance, our
106 partner agency UNICEF, I mean, have a very strong education component. And together
107 we're implementing the ..uhh.. global programme, on the accelerated abandonment of FGM
108 in the Gambia. But also on child marriage. To ensure that, I mean.. Women go through the
109 full cycle of education – especially for basic and secondary education. You know... after
110 finishing basic and secondary education, then.. most of those children are probably at a level
111 where they can make a decision as to whether they want to post-graduate education. But...

112 the barest minimum is to ensure basic and secondary education for every girl child. It's a
113 tough ask, but I mean we have to continue doing the advocacy, I mean, to ensure
114 government puts in the resources that are required. And the resources does not only stop at
115 government saying; "oh education for girls is free"..

116 *INT: No..*

117 LAM: Right now, right now, government is providing free education for girls, but education does
118 not stop at tuition. There is a lot of other issues that has to be addressed... uhhm.. So, there
119 are socioeconomic aspects of .. their lives that has to be addressed. A girl will not go to
120 school if food is not available within the family, a girl will not go to school if we still have
121 male preference in some of our communities, and that's something the UNFPA works
122 against, to ensure, I mean, that there is no male preference, especially within our families.
123 To ensure that the rights that the boy child has is the same that the girl child has. So, I
124 mean.. when we have that, it is important. But still in most of our communities, you know,
125 you will see a girl child doing household chores, where the boy is asked to go to school. So,
126 there.. a girl child will probably only come to school when she is finished doing her chores.
127 And even when she comes back home, the boy child will be playing, while the girl child will
128 still be doing the laundry, the, I mean, the other household chores. So those are some of the
129 things we are strongly advocating against to ensure the girl child has the minimum amount
130 of rest that is required to recuperate, to be able to do her extra classes and studies, to ensure
131 there is fair playing field with the boy child to do what she is supposed to do as a child and
132 excel in education.

133 *INT: This advocacy, Lamin. Does the advocacy go through UNFPA itself, or do you create local*
134 *projects? Is there a process?*

135 LAM: You know, basically.. uhhh... I mean, we.. every 5 years we have a country programme
136 cycle that we work with, to support government priorities. So, basically, we work through
137 government partners and civil society partners. UNFPA on its own does not necessarily
138 implement programs, but we work through government and through civil society to be able
139 to implement programs. So, in the context of government, we work with the Ministry of
140 Health on sexuality and reproductive health and rights issues. Through the Ministry of
141 Gender uhhh.. to the [xx social?] of welfare, we work to address issues around harmful
142 traditional practices including FGM, child marriage, sexual and gender-based violence.

143 *INT: Mmhh...*

144 LAM: So, through the Ministry of Education, we work towards implementing comprehensive
145 sexuality education within our schools. And through CSO, it's about building capacities of
146 communities uhhmm .. to really better understand the needs of women and girls, and to
147 ensure that our communities places high premium in the education of girl children. That, I
148 mean.. when you think; oh your girl child is educated is useless. I mean, so we try to make
149 advocacy to ensure that girls take up leadership roles. I mean, girls are able to advocate for
150 their own rights including sexual and reproductive health. They are able to make informed

151 choices and decisions, and ensuring that parents are supporting them in that endeavour. We
152 still have a lot of work to do, but I mean.. at least in some communities, they are listening.
153 They are listening! In some communities they are ensuring that, I mean.. they are supporting
154 the reproductive health and rights of women and girls. So I mean, it will take time. But.. even
155 if it is not going to be within our life time, what is acceptable is in-action. Standing by, and
156 seeing things happening and not doing anything.. That's not going to work. So, we'll do as
157 much as we can, hoping that the next generation will be a different generation. So, if we
158 have the generation of [Name] and others, at least they are empowered enough to know, the
159 girl child is as important as the boy child. Ensuring that she stays in school is very important
160 for her own personal development and for the development of the nation at large.

161 *INT: You have been in the UNFPA 8-10 years.. What development would you say that you have*
162 *seen?*

163 LAM: So uhhh... I am, first and foremost, I am an activist before being a UN staff, right? I
164 mean, I am passionate about the issues that I work on. I mean.. from a very young age.
165 Including in the work that I have done, I am in the organisation that I and [name] have been
166 a part of, and is still part of uhm; Lend a Hand Society. So, these are some issues that we are
167 really passionate about and then we bring our emotion and our energy into the whole issue.
168 But uhhh.. I mean in terms of development .. I mean, I would say.. Having legislation in
169 place is development. I mean, but I'm not naïve to say that that's enough. Because I mean,
170 we still know that there are gaps that needs to be filled. But, I mean.. we have seen in some
171 communities where, in the sense of FGM, where they have abandoned what they call "the
172 knife". They are saying; OK, FGM is not going to take place in our community. And with
173 that happening, that also means that girls are no longer at risk of bleeding to death or having
174 other complications that will stop them from going to school. We still have communities,
175 even though we have legislation, we still have communities that are practicing child
176 marriage. But equally important is to say that we still have a lot of uhhh communities that
177 are also encouraging their children to go to school.

178 *INT: Yeah..*

179 LAM: .. And even amongst, because.. there are a lot of really just misconceptions.. you know?
180 Even among religious scholars, we have a lot of advocates who are advocating against these
181 traditional practices and supporting the enrolment of girls in school and ensuring that .. I
182 mean, girls are not just seen as people who are supposed to be doing chores or people who is
183 not to have a voice in our community conversations. Se we are saying, eventually, a lot of
184 women-organisations that are also advocating for the rights of women, and especially girls.
185 Uhm.. over the past couple of years we have seen some sort of proliferation of that, with
186 young women-led organisations that are doing a lot of work in the communities. And, I
187 [uhm..] mean,.. supporting those organisations to be able to make improvements in the life
188 of women and girls. So, yeah..

189 *INT: How do you support these projects or organisations?*

190 LAM: I mean, mostly funding.. and also really to try to build the capacities. Like, I mean, over the
191 past 5 years we have worked with more young women-led organisations than we think we
192 have ever done before. Like, we have worked with women-led organisations like *Think*
193 *Young Women*, and *Girls Agenda*, you know.. we have *Paradise Foundation* recently. We
194 also have *Fantanka* which is an organisation that derives its name from the Mandinka word
195 Fantanka, which means prevention, kind of. So I mean , we are working with all of those
196 organisations, we are putting resources at their disposal and also ensuring that they are able
197 to build their organisational capacity because for me.. once you are able to build those
198 organisational capacities in those organisations, sustainability of their programs. I mean,
199 maybe UNFPA might not be able to provide them resources forever, but uhm.. We are able
200 to build their capacities to such an extent that the resources that we give them becomes
201 catalytic! Because, for instance, I mean most of these young women-led organisations are
202 now able to get resources from other partners, from other donors. Like, and.. I mean, and
203 from my perspective, working with them, I made a lot of recommendations that uhm..
204 organisations contact me and say; “How do you feel about working with this organisation?
205 They have requested for funding from our organisation. How do you think we should work
206 with them?”. And for a lot of projects, I mean, I’ve made recommendations for the
207 organisations, and genuine recommendations that, I mean, they receive funding from other
208 organisations.. So, at the end of the day, it fills my heart with joy to see that they getting
209 additional resources even where as we might not be able to give them all the money that
210 they probably would request but other organisations across the world are supporting them.
211 Yeah.. which is really very very important. It also would enhance, I mean, the work that we
212 do for girls and women, and that includes advocacy on education and ensuring their sexual
213 and reproductive rights, which also has a bearing on how long they stay in school and how
214 far they are able to go in their academic careers.

215 *INT: Mmmh [confirming]. What are the criterias for these organisations, for you to support or*
216 *fund them?*

217 LAM: So, basically what we do.. at the beginning of a country program.. we have a country
218 program document and we do assessment of organisations that are working in the various
219 areas that we plan to address for that particular cycle, for that 5-year cycle. And then we
220 look at organisations, sometimes based on the concepts that they share, and then we do an
221 assessment. So, I mean. Even if they don’t have the capacity to be an implementing partner,
222 we support them as contractees and then have them work through an implementing partner
223 that will receive the funding on their behalf and dispose the funds to them. Because, maybe
224 they don’t have financial management capacity, we still give them resources through a
225 partner that has strong accounts, uhm, financial management policies and procedures, strong
226 financial management, strong procurement management.. soo... what they don’t do, most of
227 them don’t get from us, is giving the funds to them directly, but it’s still a significant
228 amount of resources that helps them implement programs and report accordingly. And you
229 know.. that also helps them build their institutional capacities and the capacity of the young
230 women that works within those organisation. And in some.. most cases, they are mostly
231 voluntary organisations, but now, some of them have full-time staff on board, I mean, so it’s
232 no longer voluntary. Soo.. at least it has helped in building their institutional capacity and

233 also went down to communicates and implementing programs that they would like to
234 implement.

235 *INT: Are there any requirements to the organisation of being locally-led or could it be foreign-*
236 *led? Are there any rules to this?*

237 LAM: Mhhh, no. I mean, as long as .. you work in The Gambia, it doesn't matter whether it's
238 locally-led or foreign-led. If you are interested in working with us, and then we do an
239 assessment and we feel that you have the capacity, you know, we'll work with you. I mean,
240 mostly we are working with Gambian organisations because most of the foreign-led
241 organisations already have significant resources. Sometimes, I mean, the amount of
242 resources might not be comparable to what they get from foreign donors, so I mean, we can
243 partner with them on other areas .. including doing joint resource mobilisation to support
244 other organisations.. but yeah.. I mean, some of them they probably get far more resources
245 than maybe the envelop that we have to share among different partners that we have
246 annually.

247 *INT: What would you say UNFPA gains from them (the organisation)? Is there any criteria of*
248 *what the organisations need to give back to you, if there are any?*

249 LAM: Yeah, uhh.. you know, basically what I said is.. As far as our agreement with government,
250 we don't do direct implementation, right.. so I mean, the partners, or implementing partners,
251 or the contractees, are more or less helping us and government implement our agreed
252 country program for the 5-year cycle. Soo, its basically, I mean, helping us achieve our
253 goals that we have set in our country program document that we have agreed on with
254 government, signed with government, saying this and this is how we want to support
255 government. Because, if you recall.. Our program is aligned to the government priorities as
256 enshrined in the national development plan. So, basically, we don't do anything outside that.
257 So, government has to say; OK, this is the priority that we have on health, this is the priority
258 that we have on gender, gender equality and womens empowerment, this is the priority we
259 have on education, especially on comprehensive sexuality education and so on.. so we flow
260 with that. But then we also have civil society to help us implement those programs or
261 priority areas that we have agreed with government, in addition to the government
262 counterpass that we have. Basically, I mean, it's more like a win-win situation. They are
263 interested in a particular area as part of the scope of their work and they might not
264 necessarily have all the resources to do that. We tell them; [hoooyy sound] we have this
265 country program and we think your priorities fit within those country program outcomes and
266 outputs, so how about we give you the resources to support that. And so, it becomes a win-
267 win situation – for us, and for them.

268 *INT: So, if I understand it correctly, you are more of a catalytic unit to kind of create the*
269 *development in itself in some areas. Is that correct?*

270 LAM: Yes, definitely. So we provide them the resources to support government, or we provide
271 government with resources to support themselves achieve what they set themselves to
272 achieve in their development plans.

273 *INT: I'm wondering.. what would you think if UNFPA didn't exist to do the work that it does?*

274 LAM: Uhm well.. it's probably difficult. You know, because .. I'll give you a scenario. In the
275 Gambia, UNFPA is the sole provider of maternal lifesaving, medicin and family planning
276 commodities. So uhm, its only now that we have the global phone (?) providing for, let's
277 say, condoms, but when it comes to contraceptives, emergency contraceptives, and all other
278 forms of contraceptives, UNFPA is solely bringing that into the country and supporting the
279 government of The Gambia. The insertions that we have, that women can choose to prolong
280 or to space their children, those are all something we bring. So, imagine if UNFPA is not
281 there. Well, government have to take it on its own, or some other agencies will have to do
282 that. So, that's one area. And we are not necessarily the only partner when it comes to
283 gender equality and women's empowerment, but we are a very strong partner. And so, you
284 could imagine if maybe the work that we do, or the work that we are supporting is even 10%
285 of that. If we are supposed to, I mean, lose that 10%, then that means that's a big gap that a
286 government, that doesn't have the resources, and requires on foreign aid to do a lot of the
287 work that we do, then they will be scratched (?) to be able to do that. And, whether it is
288 going to be a part of their top priorities is a different issue. You know, soo.. I guess, in short,
289 we play a significant role, of course, with other partners, with other agencies, to be able to
290 provide vital services and resources for development, especially for young people, women
291 and girls. Because that is our constituency.

292 *INT: May I ask, how is UNFPA funded? Can you describe the structure for me?*

293 LAM: Yeah, so UNFPA is funded through donor resources, for instance, we probably have the
294 government of Denmark, the government of Sweden, the government of the United States
295 and the United Kingdom funding. For instance, I don't know whether you recall or if you
296 are aware, but for the past 5 years of Donald Trumps rule, they stopped funding UNFPA.

297 *INT: Wow..*

298 LAM: Yeah, because of our work on family planning and then they have misconceptions as to
299 what work we are doing around abortion, I mean.. you know? So, uhh.. we have funding
300 from member states. Member states for UNFPA, and also private individuals and
301 organisations. So I mean, at our country office level, UNFPA has what is called the resource
302 allocation system where they categorize countries into different quadrants. And each
303 quadrant is what kind of things they can provide. For instance, Gambia is a red quadrant,
304 which means we should be able to provide services through advocacy and capacity building
305 and the like. So, in other countries.. because of how endowed they are with resources, they
306 probably are only able to do advocacy because of the service provisions the government can
307 do. So, UNFPA will not give them funding. Because government has enough resources to
308 support the health care setting, health system. That's how we are funded.

309 *INT: OK, that makes sense. Thank you. So does that mean that on a national level, you would*
310 *have to be a part of a whole global budget?*

311 LAM: Yes, so globally, UNFPA has what is called core resources and non-core resources. Under
312 core resources, they will use the resource allocation system every year to say; OK, Gambia –
313 we are providing you with this much, that's from our core resources. And from non-core
314 resources we have various projects. Like, we have the joint program on FGM, which
315 provides funding on FGM. So our FGM program is not funded from core resources, but
316 from the joint program. There is also what we call the maternal health trust fund, and then
317 we have the reproductive health commodity security .. and other projects like, including
318 ..funding on fistula ..uhm.. and the like.. so uhh.. some of them countries qualify to be part
319 of it, some of them we don't. But, we also, at our level, at our country office level, we do
320 resource mobilisation..

321 *INT: Yeah..*

322 LAM: Like, for the past, 3 or 4 years, we have been applying for funding from the peace-building
323 fund to do – uhhh-- projects on peace-building initiatives. Soo.. we have raised a lot of
324 resources on our own to be able to implement youth empowerment and leadership program
325 uhhmm.. that are, are not necessarily coming from UNFPA. We also recently got funding
326 from the Italian corporation fund to implement youth related programs, so I have a budget
327 for 800.000€ for the next .. uhm.. 3 years to implement youth leadership initiatives that are
328 (not?) able to do through the resource mobilisation. And then we're also having ..uhm..
329 almost..uhm.. 1 mio. US dollars from the UN Trust Fund on human security to implement
330 programs around women and youth economic empowerment and around gender-based
331 violence and, you know, empowerment of local structures.

332 *INT: Yeah.*

333 LAM: Tso, yeah. that's how we source our resources.

334 *INT: Okay. Thank you. Uhm.. So, what I'm hearing is that a lot of your programs is about*
335 *retaining, or how do I say it, keeping your girls in school. And I just want to ask, what*
336 *would you say are the overall largest challenges in the society that you have to deal with.. in*
337 *order to do your (UNFPA's) job?*

338 LAM: Yeah, so the challenges are many. One of them is religious misconceptions.

339 *INT: Misconceptions [confirming].*

340 LAM: Yeah. For instance, Gambia is a Muslim majority country... And.. and because of that.. you
341 have a community that is not highly literate. Whether it is in the religion itself or .. in
342 English, or other languages.. so.. we are at the mercy of religious leaders, so ..most of us..
343 when the preacher says something, we take it face value that; oh, that's the truth and nothing
344 but the truth. But sometimes, it's about; how are we able to encourage people to know and
345 understand the Quran themselves to be able to understand how it is interpreted. Because

346 sometimes, uhm.. the person that is interpreting it, interprets it the way it suits them. So.. I
347 mean, that's one of the challenges that we face. And.. and the other challenge that we face
348 could be around... uhhh.. how do we call it... around the challenge of literacy in itself.

349 *INT: Yeah?*

350 LAM: I mean, most of us.. the literacy level is actually ..uhhm.. now very high (I believe he meant
351 i-literacy), especially in rural communities. So.. I mean, sometimes ..uhhm.. it becomes
352 secondary to a family that is known to .. to send.. especially their girl children to school.
353 And poverty is also another factor, because education is not entirely free and there is so
354 much male preference. If you have limited resources, then, I mean, you would tend to think
355 that; ohh, my girl child will get married. My boy child can go to school and then take care of
356 the family later. Not knowing that your girl child could get.. go to school, get the right
357 education and still take care of the family, just like.. the same way the boy child is expected
358 to take care of the family. So.. I mean, that in itself is.. could be a challenge... And I think,
359 something that might not be directly linked .. uhm.. could also be like family sizes, which
360 also contributes to poverty, which also contributes to the preference. So, if you have a
361 family size of 10 or 15, and then you have resources to send only 1 or 2 to school.. you
362 know, you can naively think; oh, I will send the boy child to school. And the girl child can
363 stay and do chores, go to the market and sell and stuff like that, and eventually some man
364 sees them and say; oh, I want to marry that. Even if the child doesn't want to get married,
365 you still give them [away]. So, uhm.. those are some of the factors that, I mean..

366 *INT: Yeah.*

367 LAM: Some.. There are many more factors, but those are very key that, you know... that
368 contributes to the issue.

369 *INT: Yeah. Would you say that there is a big difference in rural areas and urban areas?*

370 LAM: Yeah, definitely. There *is* difference. I mean..

371 *INT: How?*

372 LAM: uhm.. The problem could be everywhere, but I mean, the disparities .. are far more apparent
373 in the rural communities.. because development is mostly skewed in the urban areas. Until
374 recently, there are limited schools in the rural areas. So, even if somebody has to go to
375 school, they have to come to the urban areas. It's now that we have ..uhm.. junior and senior
376 secondary schools all over the country, but even with that.. Teachers.. the quality of teachers
377 in rural areas is not comparable to quality of teachers in urban areas. So, I mean .. and
378 because, most of the teachers are trained in the urban areas, and because of..uhm.. the
379 limited development in the rural areas, a lot of the good teachers would not want to go to the
380 rural areas to teach. So, you probably end up having mediocre teachers, that are giving them
381 half education in some of our communities. Even though the government tries to alleviate
382 that by providing hardship allowances, some people don't still want to go, because in the
383 urban area they could have private classes and then .. or go to private schools .. in the rural

384 areas, they don't have that. I mean, parents don't have the resources to even send their kids
385 to school, how can they pay a teacher for extra classes? You know.. so, those are some of
386 the things. Yeah, so it's definitely more apparent in the rural areas than it is in the urban
387 areas.

388 *INT: Yeah. So the difference is much more apparent there then.*

389 LAM: Yeah, very..

390 *INT: Okay. Then.. in regard to your work with government – because what you said was that you*
391 *advised on policy – can you describe something that you know has absolutely not worked?*
392 *Something that you have tried perhaps, and thought 'this does absolutely not work in this*
393 *society'. Do you have an example of that?*

394 LAM: Huh, It's a tricky one..uhm.. I cannot really say something that has not worked, but I mean,
395 the reality is .. a lot of things are really slow. I mean, working with government could be
396 really slow.. because uhm.. governments are created because of the political structures and
397 government looks at .. I mean, they're mostly silent on issues that they think will not give
398 them votes.

399 *INT: Yeah.*

400 LAM: You know, so.. a community.. if a community is soo so passionate about child marriage and
401 then government – and when I say government, I extend it to our house of representatives,
402 to nationally assembly members – they are very cautious as to how they will approach that.
403 They will probably like, I mean.. from my perspective as an activist, our already radical
404 approach to say; you know what, we are going to do this. But, I mean.. government's hands
405 are tied because they might not be able to do it .. because all they are thinking about is; how
406 do I get re-elected? .. If I offend a particular community, how are we going to take it? So,
407 even though we have laws against child marriage and FGM.. It still becomes a challenge to
408 be able to ..uhm.. move the agenda forward – especially within those communities. And
409 sadly enough, because those laws were enacted during the days of Yahya Jammeh, the
410 former dictator, some of the communities will say; oh, no – now we have a new
411 government, so those laws don't stand anymore. And because you don't have government
412 coming out and saying; 'these laws are here to stay' – it becomes difficult. They are more or
413 less mute on it, they are silent.

414 *INT: Yeah.*

415 LAM: So, government's in-action is for me is our biggest challenge, because .. they are more
416 looking at it from perspective of votes, than the interest placed on ensuring the protection
417 for every girl child.

418 *INT: Yeah. Now you are saying this with the laws lasting..uhm.. Because I read about the*
419 *Women's Act that was implemented in 2010. And I'm wondering about the effect of that*
420 *law.. Because the purpose was what you are talking about; to establish that the girl child*

421 *has the same rights as males, but if people do not believe in laws that are here to stay, what*
422 *effect does it have if we change the laws in the Gambian society? What are your thoughts on*
423 *that?*

424 LAM: Yeha, for me.. like I said in the beginning of this conversation; laws are very important, but
425 we have to consolidate.. I mean, the laws ..with education. You know, uhm.. we have to
426 consolidate the laws with advocacy, ensuring that communities buy into those laws. That
427 you go to a particular community, and you know that, they know that these laws are here to
428 protect our girl children. These laws are here to empower us, our women, these laws are
429 here to ensure that, I mean.. in the long term, our girls are protected from all forms of
430 violence. So, I mean, when we are able to get communities to think that way, it goes a long
431 way. I mean, I don't believe in laws being some kind of primitive approach, but more as
432 ensuring that people take stock of, or accountable for what they do. How are we able to
433 complement that with educating society .. and that becomes difficult, especially because
434 when we talk about traditional practices that have been here for thousands of years, like.. I
435 will take myself as an example. Like, even before I got married, I used to have this
436 conversation with my mom about FGM. And then she will be.. she will, like; 'you are crazy.
437 Like, this is something that our families have gone through for generations, so you are not
438 the one who can stop it'. And I will be like: 'I don't know about any other person, but my
439 girl children will not perform this harmful act'. And then, eventually, I've been able to get
440 her to listen. Nobody would dare touch my children. Like, to say, oh we are going to ..uhm..
441 but, you know, so.. it's easy for one individual, but it's probably difficult for communities
442 especially, when you have ..uhm.. people profit from some of this, from performing some of
443 these practices. Like, in the communities, it's sometimes it's related to power. And.. you
444 have women, who, if you take this away from them, you are taking their powers from them.
445 These are the traditional cutters and the like. And also, because there is so much male
446 silence, because, you know.. there is patriarchy in our societies – that's engrained. So,
447 when.. if.. men think.. uhm.. you know, one of the reasons for instance, I'll give you an
448 example with FGM they say why it's been practiced is, uhm.. to reduce the sexual urge of
449 the woman.

450 *INT: Yeah [confirming].*

451 LAM: So, because they don't want the girl to be promiscuous. Like, if you have a high sexual urge,
452 then you are going to be promiscuous, you'll be running from one man to another. .. Who
453 decides, I mean, this sexual urge of a human being, right?

454 *INT: Yeah..*

455 LAM: You know .. who decides how a woman should behave, how a woman should control their
456 sexual urge?

457 *INT: Yeah.*

458 LAM: And then, because, men think; oh, yeah its in their interest, then they would.. well,
459 eventually, if men understand that if for instance, if I have.. If I have a spouse who has been

460 mutilated and then I can't satisfy her sexually, maybe she will try and get other partners to
461 see whether they can satisfy her! But if I leave the woman the way she is, if I leave her with
462 her clitoris, and then 'he is able to satisfy me sexually', then, I mean, she is not going to go
463 to another man. So, I guess it's about how we are able to educate our society to ensure.. I
464 mean, it's a win-win for everyone.

465 *INT: Yeah.*

466 LAM: You know .. that is important. When it comes to child marriage, obviously, because men..
467 men want younger wives. Then, they will support that. But then, if you give your child to a
468 man who is 30, 20, 40 years older than her, who has more sexual experience, who has been
469 sexually active, I mean, decades before your child was even born, you are making your child
470 more vulnerable. You know, they could have infections, they could have a lot of other
471 things, including fistulas, because, I mean.. when they get pregnant, their bodies are not.. not
472 ready to have.. to bring out a child. So, they could have fistula, and a lot of other
473 complications, including dying in labour. So, you know.. There are a lot of issues we have to
474 deal with, unfortunately.

475 *INT: Yeah.. It was quite interesting what you just said in regards to explaining things on your*
476 *own premise. I'm wondering, are there other specific projects or ways that have given really*
477 *great results in changing communities' behaviour? Maybe something where you could say;*
478 *'this has really worked well'?*

479 LAM: So, I mean .. we have a project in our.. one of the regions in the country and that now we are
480 being.. is being scaled up. We call it the 'kabilo bama' initiative. It's a Mandinka word. So
481 'kabilo' loosely translates into meaning a community, 'bama' means mother, so 'kabilu
482 bama' it's the community mothers. So, basically, we are trying to see how best way we do
483 womens economic empowerment as an entry point to..uh.. sexual and reproductive health
484 services. So, in these communities before uh.. before our intervention, like uhm.. women
485 were delivering in their own communities; they were not going to the health facilities. Men
486 will not accompany their women to the health facilities, its only women that will go. And
487 sometimes..men will even tell women that their donkies are tired, so women have to sit on
488 bicycles to track to health facilities.

489 *INT: Mmhh.. wow.*

490 LAM: So, you know. With the interventions that we have, where we were able to educate women
491 on the sexual reproductive health and rights, and also provide them in income opportunities
492 so that they could make savings as a community to support women ..uhm.. to go to the
493 health facilities. We were also able to get men to support the initiative. So, what eventually
494 happens is that in those communities, now men are getting all the men within the
495 communities to know their blood groups so that they could support ..uhm.. blood donations.
496 So they also going with their women to the health facilities and they've gone to the extent of
497 supporting the health facility to drill a bore hole to ensure that their women have water when
498 they come to deliver. Previously, women would carry water to tanks from their community

499 to bring to the health facilities. Now the water is available in the facility. And as a result of
500 that, there is zero maternal mortality in those communities since the start of this project...
501 We are currently finalizing a documentary on the work that we have done around that.
502 Uhm.. eventually, hopefully, uhm.. by the end of this month, next month it will be ready
503 which we are able to share. So, that's what initiative that I think has made a significant
504 difference. And we are also scaling up to other regions.. because this is in partnership with
505 the Ministry of Health as well as the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Welfare. And
506 because of how well the project has done, we have the West African Health Organisation
507 planning to fund it, so that we can scale to other regions. So.. I think it is a novel initiative.
508 And because of that, we have decided to do a documentary of it.

509 *INT: That sounds really interesting. Will I be able to watch the documentary once its published,*
510 *later at some point?*

511 LAM: Yeah yeah, definitely. It's going to be public.

512 *INT: That will be awesome to watch.*

513 LAM: Yeah, yup.

514 *INT: Cool.. Mmmh.. Yeah, I don't have much more to ask. But lastly, just to make sure.. Have you*
515 *or UNFPA funded or have collaborated with StarFish International?*

516 LAM: No, we haven't. But I know StarFish very well, and I'm privy to the work they are doing in
517 their communities, and I uhm.. the founder of StarFish is like an elder sister to me. Like, I
518 mean, her brother Senad Sarr who is in the US is my friend. Mam-Yassin is like a big sister
519 and mentor to us. And I went to the same school with her, but she was my senior in high
520 school. But, I'm still friends with her brother. You know? So, I know the good work Star
521 Fish is doing and I admire from afar.

522 *INT: Ah yes, I am also just asking because I have also interviewed someone from StarFish*
523 *already. So I wanted to know if there was any collaborations here.*

524 LAM: Yeah, they are doing amazing work. We are not providing them resources but I have told
525 people I work with about StarFish and the work they do. And Mam-Yassin know how much
526 I admire and appreciate the work that she does.

527 *INT: Yeah it is. I find it very fascinating how Gambia is having these women-led and locally-led*
528 *organisations that create so much change. That is very powerful.*

529 LAM: Yeah, definitely.

530 *INT: So.. do you have any additional comments to the interview or questions to me?*

531 LAM: No, well.. not really. Just to say that you can come back to me if you need any clarification
532 if anything is still not clear. I'm here, I'm here. I'm just.. I mean sometimes I could be
533 overwhelmed, but be rest assured that I'm an SMS or a WhatsApp message away. So,

534 anytime during the time of writing the thesis that you want additional clarification or you
535 think there are resources that I can provide that you can use, I'm happy to. If I don't have it
536 in my possession, I can ask people that might have it. So, basically that's it.

537 *INT: Yeah. Thank you very much. I would be happy to receive additional documents and reports*
538 *that I can use for my research.*

539 LAM: Yeah, sure. When I get to the office tomorrow, I can send you some of the resources. I will
540 send you as many documents as we have and then you can choose what you need.

541 *INT: Thank you so much. This was amazing to talk to you. I really appreciate your time and*
542 *thank you again for your thoughts. Ramadan Mubarak Left, and take care.*

543 LAM: You too June, take care and thank you.

544 Appendix 3 – Transcribe of interview with
545 Fatou Y. Jaiteh (StarFish)

546 *[The interviewer has presented herself, asked for consent to record the interview and explained the*
547 *aim and topic of the project].*

548 *INT: Could you shortly describe who you are, what your role is in StarFish?*

549 FAT: My name is Fatoumata Jaiteh, commonly known as Fatou Y. I am currently the
550 development director of the organisation. I've been in the program for a total of 11 years, so
551 I came to the program when I was 14.. and I came in as a student and so .. I progress to be a
552 high school student, and then to being a mentor and to being an operation youth manager
553 and then serving in the administration .. uuhhm... Currently, I finished my Bachelors in the
554 University of The Gambia two years ago and I studied .. uhm.. Development. Ummm.
555 Currently, I'm hoping to do my masters in ether International Relations or Sustainable
556 International Development .. uhm.. so I actually have a school and I am actually waiting to
557 do my master very soon. So I guest I will be doing something like *this* sometimes soon
558 [hahaha].. I better be nice to you so [hahaaa]

559 *INT: [laughing together] yess. That's sounds amazing.*

560 FAT: Yah so.. who am I? My role in StarFish has uhh.. how do I say.. has been everything
561 because really, uh, when the program started , you know, I saw where we started as a grass
562 root organisation and ..ah the dreams we have made and how far we have come so.. uhm..
563 really the way we approach the work even though we have time towards us.. I am the
564 development director.. I still would, , you know, , teach classes, I still would do extra
565 curricular activities with girls. I still would do public relations work and .. right now we
566 have about twenty girls that are serving in the organisation as staff. And this girls have gone
567 to the program and has come back now to serve the program and so that's how we recruit
568 out staff. You come in and we call you *a mentor*, so if you hear me say a mentor I'm
569 referring to uhhh.. mostly 90% of the staff members who has been to the program as
570 students have graduated high school, and are now back to the program to serve uhhh.. in
571 different capacities. But if you ask me about my daily routine; I clean ..uhmm.. I cook,
572 uhhh.. I do project proposal. I do things like these interviews for StarFish .. and even what
573 needs to be done in a daily bases, I would do. But then I still have my job description as
574 ..uhmm.. the Development Director and I also will tell you shortly about why we work the
575 way we do. uhm.. In terms of , you know, being a part of StarFish we just don't really want
576 folks to be like 'ok, my job is just in the office' and you go sit down in the office and you
577 don't come out to really do the work on the ground that is needed .. uhhh.. a lot of times, ,

578 you know, , uuh... I feel like even with African leaders that tends to be the case , you know,
579 when you become the president or the minister you feel like .. that position means really just
580 ordering people and not really doing the work, but we just want to get rid of that stereotype
581 and.. uhm when you grow up with that attitude and then uphold, , you know, , when you are
582 in a higher position, you are able to come down to your community and to do the work that
583 is needed and to not look you self above other people, so that's about me and my work and
584 yeah.. How I approach my work.

585 *INT: That is really cool. I think later on we will get into how StarFish is organized and stuff like*
586 *that because I really want to know more about that. Uhm.. but maybe just the whole*
587 *background now. What is StarFish, like what is it that you do?*

588 *FAT: So we do girls education ..uhmm.. but we are also one of the very organisations..few girls*
589 *education programs that have a boys education program. So, uhm.. the background; we*
590 *started in 2019 and StarFish started as a summer school program but right now it is a year-*
591 *round program in The Gambia, The Gambia is in West Africa and uhm.. its run by young*
592 *people. We have quite uhm.. other people like the core founders, , you know, , who guide us*
593 *and do a lot of the other work but, the StarFish must be composed of young girls who are*
594 *back into their communities to uplift other girls, and the students we target are high*
595 *achieving girls but also girls who come from financially challenged backgrounds and need*
596 *help, , you know, , in terms of paying their school fees uhm.. we also target girls who are*
597 *interested in financial independence, because the big part of it is them been financially*
598 *independent and helping themselves along the way ..uhmm.. we also focus on giving the*
599 *girls a voice.. so helping them find their voices and at the same time being able to use it and*
600 *everything we do is centered on 'service to humanity' so ..uhmm.. we do all this for the*
601 *girls. StarFish doesn't really ask for anything in return except for the girls to go back into*
602 *their communities, and to do service that better their communities. And every year we target*
603 *100 girls.. and we also target 30 boys. And the reason why we open up our horizon to the*
604 *boys is that, we have to understand that we cannot do this work alone, even with the girls we*
605 *cannot do it with just with the girls, and so, I know there is a common saying that 'whatever*
606 *a boy can do, a girl can do even more or even better', but our saying is just that 'whatever a*
607 *boy can do, a girl can equally do'. And so, that's how we approach our education. We do a*
608 *lot of community service because as we are developing the girls, we don't expect them to*
609 *wait until they graduate high school, or until they have PhDs to start making the change. We*
610 *challenge them , you know, at the age of thirteen to start their own small businesses. At the*
611 *age of thirteen to start community service projects and the age of thirteen to start advocating*
612 *for themselves, and that is why the organisation has five pillars.. And these pillars are*
613 *nobility, independence, courtesy, knowledge and service. And so, every activity, every*
614 *opportunity is..uhm.. really anchored on these five pillars helping the girls to embody this*
615 *type of qualities and been able to manifest it. And hopefully as we go into the discussion*
616 *you will be able to see how these are manifested by the activities we do.*

617 *INT: That sounds really nice.. so, when you say that you are a girls education program, do you*
618 *provide the education or do you help girls get education in a regular society?*

619 FAT: We do both actually ..uhmm.. we have the girls to be consistence with their regular schools,
620 so we are not a school yet, we are just an after school program or an organisation that works
621 with them and.. So we have them to go to their regular schools, because we have ..uhmm.. a
622 memorandum of understanding with different high schools and right now we have about
623 eight of them that we are partnering with and so they send us the students. And we integrate
624 the students and we take the student. So, we pick a hundred students; a hundred girls and
625 thirty boys. We also have a waiting list because, , you know, , there are a lot of them that are
626 interested and.. we don't, , you know, , want to turn them down given that they feel like
627 StarFish is a good place for them ..uhmm.. so really that's how we uhmm.. support the girls
628 in their regular schools.. But then they come to us, , you know, , and every week they are
629 supposed to spend eight hours with us, depending on the shift they are in and the grade, and
630 their schedule so they will, , you know, , maybe pick 3 days out of the week to come to
631 StarFish. And we are in Lamin [a village], soo ..uhmm.. a lot of these students have access
632 to our compose right now, and they all come and spend 8 hours .. and during those eight
633 hours ..uhmm.. they benefit from tutorials so study classes and these study classes are
634 centered on English, maths, science.. the subjects they do in school. And we just help them,
635 , you know, , to understand maybe topics they didn't understand in class, and these are
636 taught by the mentors in the program. And then we also have extracurricular activities and
637 these activities ..uhm.. are all centered on areas where we feel like they need to go. And..
638 how we determine that is; we talk to them. When we interview them, we talk to them about
639 their needs. We do.. every three months we do the flushings (?) or evaluations to look at
640 what their needs are and so the extracurricular activities we .. uh.. we design, are centered
641 on their answers and the 5 pillars I spoke to you about which are nobility, independence,
642 courtesy, knowledge and service. So they will do uhmm.. poetry, they will do music and
643 dance, they will do yoga, they would do.. We have support groups as well, because the
644 education we provide on our campus we like to uhmm.. do holistically. We like to approach
645 as a , , you know, , uhmm.. , you know, an whole education. If you are.. because we don't
646 just want to focus on their academics, we also want to focus on their social wellbeing, on
647 their mental wellbeing, on their emotional wellbeing and their physical wellbeing - so that is
648 why I was telling you, as mentor I do everything and that means that if I am teaching a class
649 and there is a student who is crying or needs help or wants me to go talk to their parents, I
650 would have to put someone in charge, and I would have to go home with them all the way to
651 their house and talk to their mom or their dad. And then I would have to keep checking in
652 with that student, , you know, uhmm.. so really that's the way we do our education.

653 *INT: Okay, so it's like an after school program that has extra .. it's like extra quality education*
654 *on top of what you already get from the state or from your regular school.*

655 FAT: Yeah. Exactly.

656 *INT: That is nice. When was it founded again? 2009, right?*

657 FAT: Yes.

658 *INT: By who and how did it come about? That it was establish.*

659 FAT: Yeah.. so, the co-founders are called .. uhmm.. Mam-Yassin Sarr and David Fox uhmm..
660 Mam-Yassin are we calling 'Aunty Yassin' ..uhmm.. so and 'Uncle David', yeah. So, they
661 started the organisation in 2009. Aunty Yassin is a Gambian and uncle David is American
662 and they are a couple so uhmm.. and both had the dream of serving humanity. And so when
663 they got married .. as Aunty Yassin would be uhmm.. when usually she talks about her
664 dream , you know, uhmm.. when she was eight years old, her parents went through a bitter
665 divorce and ..uhmm.. as a really young girl she has seen a lot of, , you know, , basically the
666 struggles her mum went through and uhmm.. where the StarFish campus is, actually, she
667 would usually point to that place and be like when she was leaving that night with her mum,
668 when she reached at that particular spot uhmm.. , you know, , on the street she remembered
669 thinking that she wanted some day come back to The Gambia to start an organisation that
670 would help to make sure, that no woman ever feels as her, blessed as her mother had felt
671 that night, and that no girl, , you know, , feels as lonely as she was feeling at that point, , you
672 know, .. and so really, the dream started then; when her mum started going through that
673 divorce and she had seen really how her mum had this high school education, and with that
674 high school education she has seen how her mum, yes, went through a lot of struggle, , you
675 know, , even ended up sleeping in peoples couches and trying to get a job and all of that, but
676 with that high school education, her mum was able to get a job, was able to send them all to
677 school, to university and uuhh.. and a lot of her peers, Aunty Yassin's peers were dropping
678 out of school .. And it wasn't really because her family was richer or better, it was just
679 difference.. the difference was that her mum had a high school education and so she has
680 always known what education, the role education would play in the life of course, and that's
681 when she started dreaming doing something like that. And so, yes, she really started it in
682 honour of her mom and.. uhm.. because she was born and brought up in Lamin, she decided
683 to come back to that community because she knew the problems they were facing and tried
684 to design something like StarFish for girls and women uhmm.. so I know I spoke a lot about
685 the girls but we even work with women. For example, we have what we call the 'Generosity
686 Project', because if you are dealing with the girls and their mom is really, really struggling,
687 to some extent it affects the girl. And so we have uhh.. what we call 'The Mothers Group'
688 and the *generosity project*. The *mothers group* is a support group for the women and the
689 *generosity project* is a financial support system for women that we work with.

690 INT: mmh.. the *Generosity Project*. Okay.

691 FAT: Yeah..and why she started in 2009 uhmm.. she was actually going to wait to have her PhD
692 uhmm.. after she did her Master's, but she talks about this story of her mother in law, who is
693 uncle David's mom, was having cancer and was going through chemotherapy, and so she
694 would usually go with her to the hospital and uhmm.. she actually shaved off her hair in
695 solidarity with uhmm.. her mother-in-law, and usually when the medical personnel come in
696 to call in the cancer patient, they would look at her like 'is it you or is it her?' and she would
697 be like 'no, I'm not the patient'. But, she said what it reminded her of is it could have been
698 her, actually, right? And what would she have regretted not doing at that point in life.. and
699 she knew if, , you know, , if something were to happen to her, she would have regretted not
700 coming back to her community, knowing how girls needed help, how women needed help -
701 not coming back to do something for them *then*. And so, she just, , you know, , got up with

702 uncle David and came back. When they came back, they didn't even have any resources,
703 except their knowledge and their heart. And they came and we started under a mango tree.
704 And, uhm.. sometimes we didn't even have a black board, , you know, , she had a hundred
705 girls and thirty boys. She was seven months pregnant with a three year old. And every day
706 she would come, and people like me will be looking at her like; what is this woman doing..
707 but, she did it and we are all here with her 10 years, and 11 years later doing this work.

708 *INT: Wow, so what made you come under the mango tree?*

709 *FAT:* Well, , you know, , when we started we didn't have our own space, so we will go to St.
710 Peters and before we could start working on a memorandum of understanding and all of
711 that, we would use just the outside.. But later, the school decided to open up their class
712 rooms for us, but the days that we didn't have the classroom, , you know, .. uhhh.. it's just
713 this idea of 'I need to have all the resource to do what I want'. And we don't uhhh.. she
714 didn't want us to think like that. She was like; 'you are here, I am here, we have a tree, and
715 we can do something'. You know, we don't have to wait to have huge buildings and all of
716 that to start something and really that's base from.. and now we have our campus, we have
717 class building, our library, a business centre, our skill centre, our art gallery, a six hectar of
718 land where we want to build our StarFish Academy someday. So yeah, but that's where we
719 started.

720 *INT: That is awesome, that is really great. Before, I meant more what made you go under the*
721 *tree, I mean what why was the, why was StarFish for you? What was that reason that you*
722 *had this first encounter with StarFish?*

723 *FAT:* Hahaa okay.. I like the question!

724 *INT: [Laughing with Fatou]*

725 *FAT:* Okay, so honestly, when I first met Auntie Yassin, I was like she is crazy.. and.. I don't
726 know what she is up to, but I'm gonna join the program. So, I joined the program I didn't
727 really understand what it was about, because the scholarship programmes we were used to,
728 you don't really have to meet the person paying your school fee. You just pay.. you just
729 wrote a letter and thanked them, and they get you school fees paid. But this woman came
730 and the first day she spoke to us, and she was like; Okay, , you know, , if your school fees
731 are going to be paid, you have to study hard. If you are a A student you have to work to be
732 an A student, you have to start your small business, you have to do community service, so it
733 was very different. And people like me - I like different. So, like, this might be something
734 interesting.. But also, , you know, , I.. from a very early age I kind of like had an idea of
735 what I wanted do and I was very ..uhhh .. exposed to really, my mom's story, and how I
736 wanted to make a change in my family.
737 So, my mum was actually a child bride, because she got married at 15 and had all of us, and
738 I just saw how much having an education would have made our lives, I don't know, I don't
739 want to say better, because I am grateful for my life, but a lot of things would have been
740 easier, , you know, , if only she had an education. Because, she was in school but her dad

741 actually pulled her out of school and she got married and that was mostly it. So for me, uh..
742 at a very early age, I kind of knew that I didn't want my story to be the same as my mom,
743 and I didn't want to get into early marriage and I wanted to have a voice and I wanted to
744 speak about issues, so.. and I knew just being in school and in class, that wasn't going to do
745 that for me because there, I just go and it was purely academic. So I needed a different
746 environment where I could really focus on what carrier I want, , you know, , what was my
747 passion, what my goals were and ..uhmm.. given that there were so many other obstacles
748 against .. uhm.. that girls goes through, , you know, , to have an education, to have a voice, I
749 knew that I needed that extra support and strength. So when I came to StarFish, even under
750 the mango tree, and I saw this woman was asking me about, , you know, , uhmm.. my goals,
751 and she were making us do personality type test, we were doing career counselling , she was
752 bringing in speakers, , you know, , women in the community who made it, and I looked at
753 her, and she was like; 'I was born and raised here, I went to the US, had an education, and I
754 am back doing this' and I'm like; I can do it too - I can also do it - she did it, I can do it, and
755 really that is why I came to StarFish ..uhmm.. Now, I am feeling emotional.. [hahah] But
756 really, that was why I came and that was why I stayed.. And as I stayed I realized there were
757 so many other girls who needed this help, and given that we had some who was doing it and
758 who was not even asking .. anything from us, meant a lot to me. And she was doing it at the
759 same time preserving my dignity, , you know, , even with the school fees I got at the end of
760 the day, I felt like I worked for it. It wasn't charity for me, it was something I worked for
761 because I went to study classes, I did community service and so I didn't see myself as a pity
762 case.. a charity case, and someone that people pitied.. And Aunty Yassin she was furious, ,
763 you know, , even with the pictures people took of us she was like; 'look at that child, if they
764 were your child is that a picture you will put on the internet?' so she was super protective of
765 us and.. So I came back and it was home for me [laughing]. It was home and it has always
766 been home for me.

767 *INT: Wow, that sounds also like a journey. I was just thinking now that you said that you*
768 *needed another place for your education, I'm wondering, what were your thoughts on*
769 *education opportunities for girls before entering StarFish? What did , you know, about the*
770 *education for girls at that time?*

771 *FAT: Yah, so ..uhmm.. purely it was just go to school. I didn't deal with a lot of focus on getting*
772 *girls in school, but there was not a lot of focus on how to retain us in school, and while we*
773 *are in school, for example, things like uhmm.. going through puberty and menstruation and*
774 *our needs uhmm.. , you know, that kind of like, would support, ahh the extra assistance we*
775 *needed in other areas of our life wasn't really there and ..uhmm.. sometimes we feel it, but*
776 *we didn't really know if, who was supposed to provide that for us. I guess that's answers*
777 *that some of us didn't have. So..uhm.. we knew what we were lacking, we just didn't know*
778 *how best to get it.*

779 *INT: mmh .. [confirming]*

780 *FAT: And ..uhmm.. I also feel like, , you know, , the girls were.. uhm.. the enrolment was high. A*
781 *lot of us were getting in school, but by the time we graduated some of our friends dropped*

782 out along the way, some of our friends were just being pushed through because you will
783 reach grade nine and you are still struggling to write a regular .. a correct sentence, so all
784 this were issues, and for me .. I said like.. uh.. in order to compete for opportunities within
785 The Gambia and outside The Gambia, there has to be more and .. uhmm..

786 *INT: Yeah..*

787 *FAT: And, even within the subjects we were doing in school, there were some things I feel like,*
788 *we were also learning, that were not really true to our context, but we were just , you know,*
789 *.. maybe learning at that point, and uhmm... You could not connect how it was going to be*
790 *useful in the future for you.*

791 *INT: Can you give me an example? I just want to understand it correctly, , you know, in the*
792 *regular school you mean, right? Can you give an example of that?*

793 *FAT: Yeah, yeah. So, I'm actually trying to think about for example, let's say .. uhmm.. at that*
794 *point when we did social and environmental studies for example, right.. uhh, , you know,*
795 *we learned about our history and , you know, , the people who came and colonised us and*
796 *all of those things. .. Well, you have the knowledge, but then I didn't see really how it was*
797 *supposed to impact us .. uhmm.. to kind of like make a connection to; OK, how are we*
798 *supposed to move as a country, really? It was like somebody came, they colonised the*
799 *grandparents and yeah, that's it. And the rest of us are left with; OK, are we supposed to still*
800 *continue treating them like our master's? or is this information.. how are we supposed to use*
801 *it to know that; OK, we have a long way to go as a continent, or what are we supposed to*
802 *do? To me, those kind of information were missing in our educational system.*

803 *INT: Mmh yeah. I'm thinking, in regards to what you just said, could you say something, could*
804 *you describe then a situation or a part of the work that StarFish does that have surprised*
805 *you?*

806 *FAT: Uhh.. surprised me?*

807 *INT: Yeah.. it can be in like a good way of surprised you if it has worked or surprised.. in*
808 *what impact the organisation has had.*

809 *FAT: Uhh ..uhmm.. Ok, I think there is one .. uhmm.. I wouldn't say surprised, but kind of*
810 *like I wasn't expecting it so soon.*

811 *INT: Mmhh [confirming curiously]*

812 *FAT: And.. that's really.. Actually, there's two things. One is ... the StarFish land that we got.*
813 *Uhm.. because, really, it's been ten years into the workn and we haven't actually been out*
814 *there advertising our work, so if someone then talk to you about StarFish or if you drnt meet*
815 *someone who was connected to StarFish uhmm.. it will be difficult to come across us in a*
816 *way, because we are not all over the media, or on tv, or the radio. Uhmm.. because really,*
817 *for the past ten years we've just been focused on doing the work. And like, then we are like..*

818 but the time will come for us. In fact, we want to build on something solid, you know, so
819 that when we start talking about our work and what we doing, people will see, you know,
820 what we are talking about instead of saying ten years later we want to do *this*, but they will
821 be able to see something tangible, and that's why during the past 10 years we have focused
822 on just staying under the radar and doing the work.

823 *INT: Yeah..*

824 *FAT:* So, the StarFish land where we want to build our academy.. I remember since the first year
825 since aunty Yassin came and started doing this summer program, we have always wanted to
826 build a StarFish academy, and uhmm.. for me it was kind of like a dream and I didn't even
827 know if at some point.. Okaay..hahaha [Humming and music from the Mosque in the
828 background gets really loud].

829 *INT: [laughing with Fatou]*

830 *FAT:* At some point, I didn't even know if we were going to realize the dream, because it was just
831 like, you know, the co-founders wanted to build something that was world class, or first
832 class, you know, education centre; it's gonna have a pre-school, an elementary school,
833 middle school, high school..uhmm.. a place for a Master's Program, a community centre ..
834 So, it was just a lot. And I was like 'Oh my God, are we ever going to be able to do
835 something like that?'. It's just us.. a few girls, and a few people and then.. but, what it has
836 taught me is to believe in the beauty of your dreams and just put thing out there in the
837 universe. I feel like, if you are doing things for the rights reasons, help will come.
838 So last year, actually, we got a volunteer who came over, you know, and just wanted to
839 come and see what we are doing, and then we took her to the place and we are like; we are
840 eyeing this land, we like the land, but it's going to cost a lot' because it was like two
841 thousand dollars.

842 *INT: Oy.*

843 *FAT:* It was a lot! And we were, you know, worried about how to pay our girls hundred dollars, so
844 that was a lot a money to get, right? And then so, this volunteer came and we took her
845 around and said, you know, we want to get a land for our academy someday.. and..
846 somehow he fell in love with the program, and was like - oh they, they were a couple
847 actually - and they were like; 'we will fundraise this project', and still we were like;
848 Okaay... But then today we have the land because they've been able to fundraise for it.

849 *INT: Woow..*

850 *FAT:* And from when we got the land to now, we have actually started projects and its already
851 benefiting the community. We've had a festival there, we've had an exhibition there, it's
852 just been great and the students have been going, you know, uhm.. to do agriculture, to do
853 education, to do art. So, I guess .. eleven years ago being a fourteen year old seeing aunty
854 Yassin stand and speak about that dream, and today standing and actually seeing people on
855 the land and seeing student being educated.. I'm just like; Woow, Okay. I didn't really know

856 if we were going to do this but yeah, I guess I was surprised with it, so that's one. Another,
857 really, has to do with how StarFish has been able stay true to its principle for 11 years. Like
858 for me .. uhhh.. I don't know, some of them don't like.. I hope we will be able to get
859 through this. Because even though we have a long way to go, we are not really .. kind of like
860 ..uhmm.. after people, begging for help, you know, uhhh.. or just out there being like; 'hey,
861 come to *us*'. What we do is, we do the work and we are like.. we going to use what we have,
862 to do what we can, while we are here. And when the help comes, its going to come meet us
863 here. So doing that kind of work is not easy, because in places like the UN and The World
864 Bank and, you know, other places that wants you to reach out, and want to give you funding,
865 but with conditions and all of that, and for us we have just been able to focus on angle (?)
866 donors, because we don't want them dictate what we do, and the help that we provide for
867 our girls. Because, we are here and we are in this context and in this locality and we know
868 what our girls would need, and the girls know what they need. So, being able to stay true to
869 our principals and doing the work we do, despite, you know, help that we have already said
870 no to, you know. A lot of partnerships, and sometimes people, will be like; 'StarFish is not
871 very open' but its just because we want to just stay true to our dignity and what we promise
872 the girls that we are going to do. And that has been surprising because it's not been easy.
873 There are times that when we really needed that money and we could have put aside that
874 principle and chose the money, but we decided to go with the principle and let the money
875 go.

876 *INT:* *Mmmh [confirming]. So what was different with this volunteer coupl? Did they come from*
877 *outside of The Gambia, like were they from a different country or?*

878 *FAT:* Yeah. They came from the US. Uhh.. I don't think they are Americans, but they came
879 from the US and uhm.. they came to see the program and uhm.. you know, they just
880 observed, they didn't even tell us they where going to do anything, we just you know..
881 because when volunteers come it's not like we change our programs to impress them or do
882 anything different. We just do the things we do. They stay with us here, they sleep with us
883 here, they eat what we eat, they do what we do, and, you know.. so really that's what we did
884 and they were like, you know; 'we see what you are doing, and there is a lot more you can
885 do' and they offered to help.

886 *INT:* *Okay, so that's what you mean with they come to you and then you can accept their*
887 *assistance if you want to.. ok that makes sense. Uhm, I want to go into a little bit more on*
888 *this with the challenge on education for girls. Can you describe how StarFish look at this*
889 *issue? How is it a challenge, can you describe that?*

890 *FAT:* Mmhh, yeah uh huh. So, I think for StarFish .. uhhh.. when we think about girls
891 education we know a big part of it has to do with uhh.. economics, you know, the economic
892 development of our communities. Because, even though we are seeing a lot of parents
893 prioritize the boys, you know, taking them to school or maybe making sure they get a high
894 education, a big part of it has to do with the kind of support each family is able to provide
895 for their girl to go to school. And when you think about it, they are thinking; OK, they have
896 a boy, they have a girl, but the boy is, you know, going to go to school and is going to marry

897 into the family, you know, and then the girl has to also go to school, get a high school
898 education, but yet, still, they are going to marry outside of the family - so they think about it
899 in more of maybe investing in, more in, the boy than the girl because the girl is going to go
900 out of the family and go marry somewhere else. So I know a big part of it's been economic,
901 and at the same time is being uhmm.. cultural, you know, the cultural mindset of the role of
902 girls in our communities. So, the way we approach it, that is why we really.. we think it as
903 something .. For girls to be educated in The Gambia, one party cannot do it, StarFish cannot
904 do it alone, the schools cannot do it alone, the parents cannot do it alone, the government
905 cannot do it alone. Uhmm.. it's supposed to be everyone's business, you know, and why
906 should it be everyone's business? Because we are the first educators, you know, we are the
907 first nurses, the first advisors, mostly the first role models and really that is why there is
908 focus.. And I think a lot of time, people are like are you prioritizing the girls? Of course,
909 yes, we're prioritizing the girls because we feel it's the smarter way to go about
910 development and because we are seeing what without educating our girls has cost our
911 community. So the smart thing to do would be like why don't we start doing things a little
912 differently. – And that doesn't even mean forgetting about the boys, right? It's just saying
913 that most times, standing under a tree, the boy is able to reach the fruits, the girl is not able
914 to reach the fruits. What do you do? You provide something for the girl to stand on, so they
915 are able to. That doesn't mean you are trying to undermine what the boys is doing. Uhmm..
916 so that is why, with the way we approach it, we work with the school, we work with the
917 parents, we work with the community, we work with the ministry. So we engage all these
918 stakeholders in what we do. Because the problem is deep rooted and we cannot do it alone.
919 And at the same time, you know, even that it has something to do with the culture, culture
920 here is very powerful. You cannot come and try to do thing outside the culture, or try to
921 eliminate the culture. But what we do is we try to work within the culture and how do we do
922 that, you know.. uhmm.. for example we have a lot of cultural events uhmm.. we go into the
923 family, we know the parents at a personal level and uhmm.. even the ** we do, and the
924 advocacy that we do, we use a lot music and dance. What we call the praise singing.
925 Because those are things the community members see, parents see, and they know; OK,
926 these are not people borrowing western ideas, or different ideas, they are using actually what
927 we value to build our people and uhmm.. that is why we work within the community so the
928 culture is able to understand what we are try to do. Of course there are things we want to do
929 away, with for example when you think about things like FGM that has no health benefit for
930 a girls, we don't go and support those kinds of things but even with that - we approach from
931 within the community. We don't attack and we don't go against, because when you do that,
932 people just resist and when they don't want to do things, they will not do it, right? And then
933 another approach we used with girls education is for the girls that has been able to make it
934 through. You bring it.. you bring them back into the community and you put them forward
935 as examples.. and when the parents are, because when I look at a thirteen year old and I am
936 telling a parents ohh they are going to drive away (?) and they are going to help you and all
937 of that, sometimes it can be hard and they will be like; 'I have to wait for ten years, right?
938 As opposed to making sure my girls is married right now and their husband is giving me the
939 money and all of that. So what we do is, we challenge the girls at that age to start doing
940 something for them self and their parents. It can be hard because they have to go to school,

941 and they have to balance all of that, but that is what they got to do to make sure their parents
942 see what investing in the girl can do for them, instead of using the girls as, you know, a
943 means of income. And uhm.. we have a very strong health program, for example, we have
944 girls who wants to be nurses and doctors and when we go out into the community to do
945 clinics, we bring in those girls and so, you see a parent, they come in, and they are like;
946 Uhm.. this young girl is going to diagnose me? They are going to test my blood pressure?
947 They are going to prescribe..? But by the time they are done with the girl, you can see that
948 their entire mind that has been changed, you know, and to that parent it will be easier for
949 you to go and be like allow your girl to go to medical school. Allow your girl to do seven
950 years in school and see what they can be able to do. I am one of those girls for example. I
951 am not a nurse or doctor, but I do a lot of community development here, and my dad has
952 been someone who has not really been very focused on girl's education or even wester
953 education. But I remember this day when we actually went to talk about violence against
954 women in the community and when I came, you know - he named me after his mom, so he
955 was like; 'Mom, oh my god. My friends told me that they saw you in the community today
956 and you were speaking English'. Even though he didn't tell me he was proud of me, I could
957 see how happy he was that I was doing something for my community. And so when I went
958 back to him and I was like I want my younger siblings to go to school, it was kind of like a
959 push and pull but he agreed -because he kind of got a glimpse of what educating his children
960 can do for him and the community.

961 *INT: Mmh yes. I feel like there is are sense of representation kind of in the way that you do*
962 *things.*

963 *FAT: Mmmh [confirming] yeah.*

964 *INT: That is great. What would you say maybe is the is the most challenging? Because now you*
965 *are also talking about parents who are very, maybe, set on their cultural ways and you try*
966 *to use that for your benefit. But what is the most difficult challenge in this work? Is it the*
967 *parents? Or is it society? Or what would you say is a specific issue here?*

968 *FAT: Haahaaaa. hallenges challenges challenges. Yeah. Actually, a lot of those. I mean*
969 *there are times that I would just come.. and the meeting I was at actually I cried before I*
970 *came [here].*

971 *INT: Ohhhh..*

972 *FAT: Uhm.., you know, because sometimes we will just sit down and be like; we cannot do*
973 *this aunty Yassin, but really also that is why we have things like support groups and we do a*
974 *lot of activities on mental health and because you need it for this work.*

975 *INT: I understand.*

976 *FAT: Yeah, so we actually have things like devotions and uhhh.., you know, heart lights,*
977 *and multicultural exchanges, just so.. during the day you have some space where you can go*
978 *meditate or just, you know, being back with your spirit. But, okay, let's talk about the*

979 challenges. I think the challenges comes from all angles. When you think about the parents,
980 or the parent, when they think about the community, when you think about the government.
981 But what we believe, and what keeps us going is that we feel like for things like girls
982 education in countries like The Gambia there has to be a critical mass of people who believe
983 in what we are trying to achieve. Otherwise along the way people are going to pack up and
984 leave, and people are going to give up. But we believe that there needs to be a critical mass
985 of people who would sacrifice, who would know what is uhhh.. what is at stake because
986 every day we see the suffering. We come from families that are going through the suffering,
987 so when you see that - no matter how big the challenge is - you don't give up, right? uhhh..
988 so for example let's say with the ministries.. For an educational institution like StarFish we
989 have MOU's [Memorandum of Understanding] with the ministries; The ministry of
990 education, The ministry of health uhhh.. The ministry of justice. We work with these
991 ministries and uhhh.. for example with The Ministry of Finance, you know, I was talking
992 to you about out StarFish land which somebody outside came and paid for, but they are
993 trying to charge us about twenty thousand dollars to pay in The Gambia as tax, even though
994 that land is been used by the community .. and where are we going to get that money?, you
995 know. The government is supposed to help us, the government is supposed to assist us, and
996 even if they would charge, they will be like; OK, because you've invested in over thousand
997 girls in the Gambia, who are not only serving in our communities, but are serving The
998 Gambia, they would join us in that, but still now over one year, these people have paid this
999 amount of money and we are still not able to get all of the paper work to show that we can
1000 own this land and we can do the work we want to do. So you can see, at some point the
1001 work you're doing is kind of being undermined, because, I don't know.. corruption, or
1002 because people just don't want to look at what you can do for your community, I really
1003 don't know what the issue is. But that is some of the thing we go through at the government
1004 level. When it comes to parent level, it can be hard because uhhh.. like I said, our
1005 approach is kind of new and different and it's holistic and really, what people see as
1006 education is going to get a book, read and write and speaking good English. They don't
1007 attach it to why you would do music and dance, they don't attach it to why you would be in
1008 a support group, they don't attach it to why you would be in a health program, they don't
1009 attach it to why you will go out into the community to sweep. What they believe is that, you
1010 go be an A student, be a minister or be an educated person, and so for many an educated
1011 person doesn't sweep their street and stuff like that. And we are trying to get rid of stuff like
1012 that. So, for us to be able to convince the parents sometimes can be hard, because the girls
1013 are like thirteen and fourteen, to balance everything that they have to do in StarFish honestly
1014 can be, you know, hard and sometimes student will drop along the way, because their parent
1015 feels like; my child cannot do this, my child cannot do that. And we are like; we are not just
1016 looking at the child, we are looking at our community, so that is where I kind of feel like the
1017 clash comes, because the parent is just looking out for the child and we are looking at both
1018 the child and the community, and we are like; yes, it's going to be hard, but they can do it.
1019 And sometimes the parents they don't understand that. And for a lot of us that are mentors,
1020 you know, connecting with that child, seeing what they can do, and some day knowing that
1021 they are not gonna come, can be really heart breaking and so ..uhhh.. that has been a little
1022 hard. But it's been a challenge when a parent is like; no, noo.. and, you know, what you can

023 do for the child. You know how you can assist them and accompany them, but your hands
024 are tied and you can't do that. Ummm.. so that's it. The schools, the institutions.. there are
025 also challenges because sometimes the schools feel like you are competing with them, and
026 they don't tend to fully support, you know, because for example the classes we provide are
027 free classes, but then the schools are expecting the student to pay, and go to their classes so
028 when our student choose the free tutorial over their paid classes, that's kind of like
029 something that ummm.. they are not very open to but I will say.. overall, the schools, they
030 have opened up to us, really.. they've..ummm.. for example we started with St. Peters and
031 they gave us their class room for free ummm.. they gave us students and the schools has been
032 very, very receptive.

033 *INT: Cool. I am going to ask.. In regards to the parents, this thing you said that they have this*
034 *imagination that they go to school, they read a book to learn and write and read and then*
035 *speak English. The parent's opinion.. where do you think it stems from? Because I'm*
036 *wondering if there is a resistance to .. alternative learning, to western learning? What do*
037 *you think it comes from?*

038 *FAT: Huh! Uhm.. I'm thinking.. uhm.. first of all, it's the way the educational system has*
039 *been set up, and I think that comes from, I don't know, our colonisers.*

040 *INT: Yeah.*

041 *FAT: Making education look like wearing an uniform, making it look like sitting in a class room,*
042 *and making it look like, you know, being able to speak English, and being in an office or in*
043 *administration is .. better than some of the things our forefathers had. And not classifying*
044 *that as education, right? For example, let's say someone doing agriculture and, I don't*
045 *know, someone being in an office are both doing an education, are both working, but then,*
046 *to some extent, more class has been given to the one in an office than the one being at the*
047 *farm. So anything outside that structural education that is.. that like.. OK, this is learning,*
048 *and this is not really learning, and this is not really seen as something in a better class by the*
049 *world, uhm.. I think that's where it stems from. I think that's the way the educational system*
050 *is structured. Because, if the school include things like.. I know the school have clubs and*
051 *all of that, but none are really engrained in the educational system. And.. the educational*
052 *system don't have things like community service by the students and all of that. So that has*
053 *it look like education has nothing to do with some of those things, and I think that is where..*
054 *Because the students were used to the schools more, they don't see institutions like StarFish,*
055 *you know, as academic institutions.*

056 *INT: That makes a lot of sense also, because then the society values something over another.*

057 *FAT: Right.*

058 *INT: And then of course a lot of people will feel like less if they exist in that category. I wrote*
059 *here; how does your organisation work with that challenge today, but I think you have*
060 *already described the work that StarFish is doing and how it's organized. However, you*

061 *also mention, that because there are so many challenges, you of course need support on*
062 *mental health and all of that. I am wondering, who is facilitating this?*

063 FAT: Uhm..so you talk about the mental health support I spoke about, right?

064 INT: *Mmhh [confirming], exactly.*

065 FAT: Yeah, so, actually we have different programs. And.. the first one we started with we call
066 *attitudinal healing*. And it was brought in by a StarFish volunteer from the United States.
067 And so, it's kind of like based on a curriculum, that's how we started, you know, and ..
068 uhm.. it has things like meditation, and principles and centering yourself to be able to give,
069 you know, from the heart ..uhm.. Because at some point, this has to be hard work, not just
070 hard work, so.. uhm.. So, yeah. Over the years, we just developed that curriculum. And for
071 things like multicultural exchange, those are initiatives that StarFish just observed what its
072 mission is, and decided to do something like a multicultural exchange. Multicultural
073 exchange is like when we have people from, because we have volunteers every year.. and
074 they come from different parts of the world but mostly from the United States, and they
075 come here and they teach different classes. But even those classes that they teach, they are
076 partnered with Gambians. So like, I've taught etiquette class with a person from the United
077 States, I've taught Modern United Nations with a person from the United States, so we
078 partner and we teach these classes. And.. as we are teaching the classes, you know, uhm..
079 one of the things we do, we have multicultural exchange every day.. because we sit down
080 and bring forward things that we feel like that can obstruct our work because of our different
081 backgrounds, because of our different cultures. And.. so we have things like that at StarFish,
082 to help with our mentality and our emotions, uhm.. and I feel like a lot of times, people
083 actually leave that out. Because they are looking at; okay, how..what should we do with
084 your do list, at the end of the day be productive and go. But at the end of the day, you don't
085 tend to do things at your level best, because, as a person, you can only be a person and you
086 can *not* pay attention to that. And, uhm.. yeah. So we do *heartlight*. Heartlight is uhm..
087 for our mental wellness, it's based on a curriculum, uhm.. and multicultural exchange is
088 something that StarFish designed, and StarFish is doing with different people.

089 INT: *Okay. I'm thinking, these volunteers – they come from the US? How do they find you? I*
090 *mean, you mentioned StarFish was not so much 'out there' yet, so I'm just wondering how*
091 *do volunteers find you, and how is their stay established?*

092 FAT: Yeah. So our volunteer programme, uhm.. We actually.. we have different partnerships with
093 a few universities, about 4 or 5. And those would send us college students, you know. To
094 come and root a service learning with us. So we get a lot of our volunteers from that. We've
095 also had professionals, you know, because.. we have our facebook page and sometimes
096 when people come, they make it their business to go and spread the word like; 'Oh my god,
097 StarFish – you should go there!', and so people would contact [us] and be like; 'oh, my
098 cousin came', or 'my friend came' and I wanted to come, right? Really. That's what it has
099 been, and Aunty Yassin and Uncle David would also go to the United States every year, and
100 .. I don't know how they've been able to do it, but almost every volunteer who've been here

1101 they would just go from school to school to thank people, uhh..to just check on people and I
1102 feel like that's meanted a lot of our partnerships, because, sometimes people can just be
1103 focused on business, but, it's also been .. let's focus on creating that human to human
1104 relationship.

1105 *INT: Yeah.*

1106 *FAT:* Mmh, and so people would organize dinners where they would go and present, people
1107 would organize gatherings in communities where they would go and present, and people
1108 would just sign up and contact our volunteer coordinator in the US, you will do a statement,
1109 you'll do an application, we'll talk about the fees and then, you know, you pay that, and then
1110 you come over to us heheh...

1111 *INT: [Laughing]. Hehe, and how is it then? Because you said, you will be partnered up with a*
1112 *Gambian, right?*

1113 *FAT:* Yes.

1114 *INT: So, does the volunteer have their own autonomy, or do they follow the work that you already*
1115 *do? .. How is that?*

1116 *FAT:* Uhm.. yeah. So remember, I said that they also fill a form, and they write a statement.
1117 Uhhh, so we use that, and then when they come, we also interview them.

1118 *INT: Okay. Like that.*

1119 *FAT:* And then really.. For the activity you do with us, is.. we base it on first your passion, when
1120 you are coming in. We look at what you are passionate about, because really, the work we
1121 are trying to do, like I said.. and these girls they are at the centre. Everything we do revolves
1122 around them. And we want you to be able to bring your very best to them. Right? In doing
1123 that, we don't just look at what your profession is, so for example if you are a medical
1124 doctor, but really sport is your passion, we would design a program for us with the sports
1125 activities, because when things get rough, and here, it's raining and its hot, and you miss
1126 your ice cream from America and all of that, it is only really your *heart* that can keep you
1127 going. So you have to be able to do something you love, and that's why we don't prescribe
1128 what you should do with the girls. Uhm, every year, like I said.. when we do our
1129 evaluations, we note down the needs of our girls. When you come as a volunteer with your
1130 passion, we match that with the needs of the girl. Right?

1131 *INT: Ah, okay.*

1132 *FAT:* So really, so that's how we design the program, and then, uhm.. if you want to do something
1133 regarding your career, even if that is not your passion, we have room for that. But then there
1134 are other things you also have to be able to do while you are here, like, for example, the
1135 multicultural exchange, because, like I said, the bigger goal is unity and peace, and yeah..
1136 we do almost everything! [laughing]. But yeah, that's how we design the volunteer

137 programme. And they stay with us, like I said. You know, when you come here, you don't
138 go to a hotel, and then.. just come to serve us, you know, uhm.. you don't come and then
139 you eat a different food. Because.. if you really come to work with us, and you have really
140 come to find ****.. you have to be able to do what we do, and so you really can understand
141 what you are trying to do with us. This is not just to you or to me, but it's really because you
142 want to make the world a better place.

143 *INT: Yeah. Out of curiosity, what is StarFish's thoughts on bringing in this work from the*
144 *outside? I'm thinking in regards to.. uhm.. I assume that a lot of these people are also white*
145 *people, from the U.S. And that then they come, and possesses a role as teachers. I'm*
146 *wondering, what is StarFish's take on these volunteers coming from other countries? ..*
147 *In the beginning, you said that StarFish is doing the work for the local communities, with*
148 *local women and you are using the Gambian girls who have already been in the programme*
149 *to give back to the community. So, I was just thinking – what are your perspective then on*
150 *these people coming to volunteer, who come from other countries, who are also white, who*
151 *have a western mind set – how do you deal with that?*

152 **FAT:** Yeah, I understand what you are saying. So really first of all what we say is that when you
153 coming as a volunteer, first of all you are not coming to save anybody, nor coming to serve
154 refugees, you are not coming to basically deliver anyone from poverty and war and all of
155 that. So if you have that mind set please put it aside.

156 **INT:** Mmmh.

157 **FAT:** If really when coming you probably would get more than what you are given so we do
158 approach it from a sense of, you know, you are coming from the United States, I'm coming
159 from the Gambia, we happen to meet in a community that has needs, in a globe that we both
160 are in and you come with this on the table, I put something on the table and together we
161 start. So you are not coming feeling like 'I am the one in college so am the one having all
162 the knowledge'. Because *I* am the one in this culture and I understand the culture more than
163 you do. So we both are bringing valuable knowledge to the table and together we can make
164 the classes go effectively and that is why I mention that for every class where you have a
165 westerner, you have a mentor. Because these mentors have connections with the students.
166 They understand the language the students use to learn, and to understand, and they
167 understand issues the students go through where as if we just throw you as the westerner in
168 that class you really won't know what to do. So, our mentors serve as tools, but also we
169 have this thing. For example, the morning work, the morning work when you come as a star
170 fish volunteer you need to do. You get up at 7 am and you go into the community, you go
171 around with a mentor, and first of all what it allows you to do is to live within the
172 community as a community member and not as a *toubab* and at the same time it make you
173 understand the culture you are serving, the community you are serving, and you become a
174 part of those people. Because you are not coming to save anyone, we are also able to
175 recognize that you are part of us then. What we put in place when you come, you see people
176 first day when they come, the kids will be like *toubab, toubab*. But then even the mentors
177 will make it their role to call that child and be like 'first of all don't address them as toubab.

1178 When you have a guest in your community what do you do. You greet them you introduce
1179 yourself you know, you would not ask a guest to give you candy or pen - you would come
1180 and give them something'. And so, we do a lot of education even on the outside. So the
1181 following day, if you come June, the first day someone will be like toubab and second day
1182 you will see a kid, they will be like 'June how are come to my house for this', you know,
1183 and the interactions changes and even the that volunteer or that white person behaves in our
1184 community changes then, you know, if they want to help anybody that is fine, there is a way
1185 to go about that, but that is not based on materialism and it's not based on you the toubab
1186 gave them this huge African land from you, so we kind of take all those structures and all
1187 those kind of stereo types in the volunteer program. And then the last thing we do and I
1188 think has been very effective is that they in the life of the starfish girl, where the volunteer
1189 goes into the life of the starfish girl go into their home. Because they teach them and they're
1190 in a class together, but when they go to their house that is a different case. Because even in
1191 the class, even when the mentor is there you are still thinking like 'I am the teacher am
1192 really impacting this girls life' and all of that but when you go to their house you see them
1193 get up in the morning, fetch water, sweet, cook, go to school, pass their exams you have a
1194 different level of respect for them and you are like 'oh my God I should be opportune to
1195 have the opportunity to accompany this girl because they are just a strong person'.

1196 *INT: So you are giving the empowerment back, actually, to the girls.*

1197 *FAT: Yes.*

1198 *INT: That is so awesome. I was thinking now we talked about this amazing work. Do you have an*
1199 *example of the impact that starfish has had on a girl? Could you a situation where you are*
1200 *thinking "ok this is starfish's work - we did this!"*

1201 *FAT: Yes I can. I will start with one of them. She is in eleventh grade right now and her name is*
1202 *Mariama Trawally, and when Mariama came into the program she was one of those who..*
1203 *where public speaking was her thing, and you know how sometimes you can just be self-*
1204 *aware you want get up and speak, but you are thinking what people would say or what*
1205 *people will think about you, and also she came from a family that was struggling a bit*
1206 *financially as well, and she was one of the first girls going to school in her family by then,*
1207 *so she came to our program and went through the classes and the business and all of that and*
1208 *I think one of the biggest accomplish in her life, Mariama is in the eleven grade right now*
1209 *but when she was in the eighth grade was when she started. So she started her small*
1210 *business, right. When she came in, she started with selling candy, making pens and making*
1211 *different things then selling it. And she didn't even tell us this, but on the whole she has*
1212 *been saving some money, right, and some day she came and spoke to one of her mentors*
1213 *and said like "I have some money and I want to take my siblings to school, both of my*
1214 *younger siblings to school" and then we are like "uhh.. where did you get the money?". She*
1215 *is like "the business money! I have been dividing it in three portion and I save enough to*
1216 *take my younger siblings to school", and we were just like 'ok what'. And she thought about*
1217 *all of this while we were doing all these activities and she herself took her brother and sister*
1218 *and took them to school, and enrolled them and has been continue to do her business*

1219 because she knows that her parents can't pay for them. Even though we have been going to
1220 the community and doing all of that, we didn't necessarily think she will go back to her
1221 immediate family to do that, and so today you know, both of her siblings are going to school
1222 and she is doing her business. Mariama is one of the top poets in her school, she has written
1223 pieces and done a lot of poetry pieces on self-esteem and standing up to speak. Currently..
1224 before we had a starfish girl as the school head girl in their school and they just nominated
1225 another starfish girl as their school head girl. And Mariam is one of the prefect of the school
1226 and she is in debate club, the drama club.. the impact is just really beautiful, you know,
1227 especially if you have seen where this started and where they are. It's really incredible and I
1228 think that is really, like I said, the purpose of education is not just for Mariama to go out and
1229 speak at the assembly and not really mind what people would say, but it's for her to able to
1230 go back and enrol her siblings in school. And so, she almost got into early marriage but she
1231 survived all of that, she escaped it, she spoke for herself, she did her business and she is like
1232 "I'm staying in school" and that has been wonderful and we have a lot of other Mariama's
1233 out there you know that are doing their own things and changing their narrative and serving
1234 their communities.

1235 *INT: So the business that she started actually came from an idea in starfish or? Because you did*
1236 *not even know about it to beginning with, right?*

1237 *FAT: Yes, yes. But we have weekly business classes and this will be on business start-up, this will*
1238 *be.. sometimes they would actually make candies, they do beading, they do soap making,*
1239 *they do tie-die, they do partake, they do all of this, they do photography. So, I guess during*
1240 *those sessions she was inspired to like "let me make my own candy, my own bracelets".*
1241 *They saw her selling and they are like 'ok other girls do that'. I mean, we have other girls in*
1242 *starfish who made it in some places where you will be like 'woow'. But for us at starfish*
1243 *because we expect the girls to do that, it's not such a big thing. But then when she went*
1244 *extra to say that at eight grade to be able to start sponsoring her two siblings we were like*
1245 *'wow', we are glad she is doing that.*

1246 *INT: That is so awesome. I want us to come back a little bit. I want to maybe understand the*
1247 *context of these girls a little bit more, because you say they were what you call high*
1248 *achieving girls, what does that mean?*

1249 *FAT: So what we mean by high-achieving is not just in the academics. Of course we look at ok,*
1250 *where are you in your academics and how can we support you, but we are not necessarily*
1251 *defining high-achieving as in being an A-student, right. But what I mean is, you go to*
1252 *school, you do your small business, community service for us. And if you are able to*
1253 *balance all of these things, we would consider you a high achieving student because you are*
1254 *able to do all of that. That is why I say we target high achieving students who are from*
1255 *struggling families.*

1256 *INT: Yeah, ok, that makes sense. So, I just want to understand maybe the society a bit better.*
1257 *Because it's clear you know a lot about the organisation, but I'm thinking; these girls they,*
1258 *just like you, they search in to starfish because there are some challenges in their lives and*

1259 *in the society they need help with. What are these challenges that exist for girls generally in*
1260 *the Gambian society?*

1261 FAT: I think one of them is staying in school. We have found a lot of them who've come and be
1262 like 'my parents are struggling', even though, supposedly, it's supposed to be free
1263 education, it's not free education.

1264 INT: *Why?*

1265 FAT: For an average student, you have to pay study fees, which is sometimes thousands of
1266 dalasis, you have to pay examination fee, you have to buy materials, you have to buy your
1267 uniform, you have to pay transportation, you have to have lunch money. That is not free for
1268 a family that lives from hand to mouth. It will be very difficult for them to provide and it's
1269 not just *you*. In every family you have about 4-5 kids, like an average family. And you have
1270 to take care of all of those people. So usually the starfish student will come and be like I
1271 need support, because my parents.. if it was just me they can do it, but there are other people
1272 they are taking care of. And when health crisis happen or things like that, along the way
1273 they can be able to support you, and then maybe in their eight grade some family crisis will
1274 happen, and then you, the girl, are not the priority anymore.

1275 So we have had those instances. And for some of them who is enrolled in the starfish
1276 program and used our mentors to advocate for them to go back to school, or for some of
1277 them we've put in our skill centre, because some of them don't feel like they can go back to
1278 English and maths, but they go to skill centre and learn things like sowing, hair dressing,
1279 cooking, and hotel management.

1280 I think another issue that I will say girls face, is more of really being able to make it to the
1281 university. That get it through high school, which is our focus, has not been that bad. A lot
1282 of them sometimes will make it through, but then going to the university as well getting a
1283 scholarship can be a big deal. At starfish though, for our mentors that are here; we pay their
1284 tuitions fees, so for example starfish helped me to pay for my Bachelor's. And that was
1285 because I was here, I was serving the girls, and in additions to our stipend, I could get my
1286 school fees paid. But for all our hundred students, all of them cannot become mentors and
1287 the students in the other high schools, once they're done, and especially because the result in
1288 the gamba has not been very good and the university only takes a few of the students that
1289 graduate, the rest are left to go to these computer institutions, or do something or start a
1290 business, so a lot of them will come and be like you know 'what advice would you give,'.
1291 So, I think career counselling has been very effective for us, and we have that program and
1292 we have been doing that, not just with me, not just directly with our students, but with other
1293 girls who come to seek advice as well. Aunty Yassin alone, when she goes through her
1294 contacts, she will tell you how many girls will contact her on a daily basis to be like 'what
1295 should I do'. And because there are not a lot of new things here, we want to do something
1296 that someone else will be doing. If you want to do it you have to be able to add value and
1297 girls are not promoted in things like the sciences, the maths, the engineering. So at starfish
1298 we have a club, we have a STEM club because we have also seen that girls will finish and

1299 then feel like they can't venture into this area. These areas don't become an option for them.
1300 So they are left with things like teaching and doing other things that are very difficult for
1301 them to make a reliable livelihood out of. So, those are some of the areas I can think of for
1302 girls.

1303 Uhm.. Definitely marriage is becoming an issue. Some of them feel like that is the way out,
1304 but for us, what we say is, even with your high school degree that will make a difference. If
1305 you are not able to go to the university at least we encourage you to have a high school
1306 degree before you can go get married to someone else. That is another whole issue for a
1307 woman or a girl in the Gambia and we don't even want to start on that [laughing].

1308 *INT: [echoing laugh]. You mean the role in marriage for women? Is it expected to marry early or*
1309 *what are the expectations in society for girls?*

1310 *FAT:* Well, it's not expected to marry early. Time and conditions force them to, but I will say at
1311 twenty you are expected to get married. So people like me who turn twenty seven, I am seen
1312 as some sort of rebel.. and I know my parents are just looking at me like 'you think we are
1313 not seeing you every day'. Marriage is one of the priorities for people here. They are
1314 looking at you like 'you can still go to school and get educated'. You can still get married
1315 and go to school, but sometimes, once you get married, it gets difficult for you and when it
1316 comes to choosing, they are going to make you chose the marriage. So that is why
1317 sometimes they are like just try to hold on until you are financially independent, you are
1318 able to finally use your voice, you have a business, you understand what health is, you
1319 understand what nutrition is, you can take care of yourself, you understand what maternal
1320 health is and all of that and then you can go and get married. If you ask people, they will say
1321 a StarFish mentor will never get married. A few of us have gotten married, but the rest is
1322 like 'these mentors will not get married'. But it's not that. People think we are just trying to
1323 resist, but it's not what we are thinking about.

1324 *INT: Have you experienced that people think that its ok to not get married now that you are*
1325 *doing your education kind of like compensating for it? or does people mind change because*
1326 *oh now I understand because she is taking an education so that's alright or how is that?*

1327 *FAT:* I don't think they understand. Most of them just don't know what to do, but part of it is that
1328 I don't, I'm not depending on anyone and I don't ask anyone for anything, so even if they
1329 want me to do it they will be ok well she is taking care of herself. I work to pay my own
1330 school; I take care of everything. If I need anything from my house even today, it's just to
1331 go see my mum and maybe spend the night. Literally I am not depending on anyone for
1332 anything so it's kind of hard for them to push me, but I know the expectation is to go get
1333 married, say yes to that man.. oh lord.

1334 *INT: Yes, but you are right it's a different conversation I will say.. hmm.. Can you explain*
1335 *maybe how is starfish organized? Like do you have a hierarchy or?*

1336 *FAT:* So, really we have the co-founders and we have the administration where you have
1337 different coordinators and different directors, and that means when you are put in charge for

1338 example, when I say you are the media house coordinator, you are the person who would
1339 answer for the media house, you are the person who will supervise all that is supposed to
1340 happen there. But we also have the council and the council is made up of students, mentors,
1341 admin members and all of that because it has to consist of all across the board. Because the
1342 decisions have to come from the cofounders, from the development director, it has to come
1343 from a student representative, a mentor representative and admin representative and all of
1344 that. So yeah, on paper we do have the hierarchy, and yes there is an order of instruction.
1345 You know, this came from that person and we have to pass it through. But we have systems
1346 that kind of like, makes it, decision that makes everyone able to say something. And so, we
1347 have weekly staff meeting where those decisions are made there. The coordinators have 1-1
1348 meetings with the co-founders where you report on your projects, what you're doing, what
1349 your task list is for the week, you know. And within us mentors, ourselves, we meet and we
1350 go through 'ok, what do we need to do'. Cause at the end of the day, as a development
1351 director, I am answerable to the person teaching the math class, you see... 'I am Fatou Y, the
1352 grand we need for the math class' and all of that, I don't wait until I have to report to you.
1353 So those are the systems we out in place when it comes to hierarchy and the organisation
1354 and how we report to each other. It has not been easy, because we didn't use any example
1355 from any other organisation. We just looked at what would work for us, and over the years,
1356 it has taken naking and breaking the system; 'ok, this is not working. Ok, we need two
1357 operations managers', and now we have five operations managers, right? We didn't use to
1358 have a development director, but after 10 years, they were like, 'ok, we need a development
1359 director' and we need a communications director. And all of these people are not people we
1360 hire from the outside. We have mentors who have been nurtured to do the work.

1361 *INT: So, you use the inside resources actually.*

1362 *FAT: Yes. We use them internally.*

1363 *INT: How many people are included in this? You said you have 20 mentors who were staff, but*
1364 *how many is the whole staff consisting of then?*

1365 *FAT: Uh.. that will be about 31 people.*

1366 *INT: Okay, that's a big management.*

1367 *FAT: Yes, it is [laughing].*

1368 *INT: Can you describe how it the organisation is run? Is it a kind of business, are you paid to do*
1369 *what you do or is it on a voluntary basis?*

1370 *FAT: Administration, yes. We get paid. And then, I just started about two years ago, but when I*
1371 *started, it was all based on volunteering. So, when you come, it's volunteering. And today,*
1372 *we have that method. Because, like I said, it can't just be about the payment, right. So when*
1373 *you come in, you come in as a mentor-in-training, and you don't get anything. You come,*
1374 *you get trained and the other mentors who have gone through the training and are now*
1375 *mentors, evaluate you. And they decide when you are ready to 'be a Star'. If you are ready*

1376 to get your school fees paid, if you are ready to get a stipend from StarFish, even for that,
1377 you have to work for it. So, you come in, and you can be here for 3 months, and if we look
1378 at all of the qualities of a mentor, and you have all of them, we engage you and give you
1379 challenges, we test you and we sit and you have passed, we say 'you're promoted'. For
1380 some people it might take 2 years. But like I said, we look at the student and the suffering
1381 they come from, and if you don't rise up to a certain standard, we cannot trust you with a
1382 student. Cause we feel like these are lives that we are dealing with, their parents have
1383 entrusted us with these students. Some parents will have issues with their kids, they will call
1384 us and be like 'please talk to my kid for me', and those are huge responsibilities. Cause
1385 being a student, is like being in a ... and being a mentor is like, 'ok this is the real world'.
1386 The first sleep over we had at work, one of the students, she had just graduated high school,
1387 she just stood there and cried, and I was like 'oh, sorry, you did not know this is what's
1388 going to be happening'. So later, I was like 'I should be thankful to my mentors, they work
1389 hard'. But anyways, that's not the focus.

1390 But really, at the end of the day, you come in, you get trained. When you reach a certain
1391 standard, you get a stipend and for people like me now, I'm gonna get paid, because I've
1392 finished my Bachelor's. And now, I'm talking about impact of education.. I have to be able
1393 to make money! Just because we are trying to make our communities better, doesn't mean
1394 that I'm not gonna get paid - no! I want to be rich. Oh yes, I want to be rich. Yes, StarFish is
1395 paying me and when I need help to pay for my school, they are going to take care of it.

1396 *INT: So, does that mean girls start out as a 'StarFish', and then rise up to be a 'Star'?*

1397 *FAT: [laughing]. Yes yes, that is a good analogy.*

1398 *INT: We were talking about how the schools were becoming a challenge for you [StarFish], and*
1399 *you mentioned how they saw you as a challenge. I was wondering if you have any other*
1400 *competition?*

1401 *FAT: No.*

1402 *INT: No? Not at all?*

1403 *FAT: No idea. I mean, schools are our competition. There are other organisations in The Gambia,*
1404 *great organisations doing a lot of work, and that inspires us to do what we are doing because*
1405 *we know we are not in this work alone. But really, what we say is that we cannot even*
1406 *compete with anyone. There's just a lot of work to do, and if you understand how much*
1407 *work we have to do and that even if we had a lot of time to do it, we would not even focus*
1408 *on [competition]. If we shared the work, we wouldn't even finish it, so there's nothing to*
1409 *compete for. You can only come and do your part, I come and do my part. And then we will*
1410 *come and some of us will die and leave this work here. We cannot finish it because there is a*
1411 *lot to do, so.. If somebody else is doing the work in a different capacity, we applaud you*
1412 *and we support you, because we feel like, you are, kind of like helping us, because we want*
1413 *to do this for them without asking us to do it. In whatever way we can partner, in whatever*
1414 *way we can support, we want to do that. That's the least we can do. So those are really*

1415 mostly open, collaborations and those things. And if we are not able to collaborate with you,
1416 it doesn't mean we feel like you are not doing the work. Like I said, the students are always
1417 at the centre at any point in time. If for example one organisation wants to take a StarFish
1418 student to talk about something, and first of all we feel like this person is not ready to be on
1419 TV, or we feel like this student has issues, background issues that, uhm.. maybe they are in a
1420 fight with their parents about early marriage, and so being on TV to talk about early
1421 marriage is not gonna make things any better. We are going to protect that child. That child
1422 is not gonna go on TV. And maybe, for an organisation that will say something like
1423 "StarFish is not sharing their students", but we are trying to look at what that student is
1424 going through and what they need to continue their education.

1425 *INT:* So, you want to also support other people, but I'm wondering; who is supporting you?

1426 *FAT:* Well, actually we have a great support system. Last year in October, we did an online
1427 festival. Because Covid came, our volunteer program stopped, and we had to find other
1428 ways of getting funding and all of that, cause we needed to survive that. So we did an online
1429 festival and we raised about 30.000 USD online.

1430 *INT:* Wow.

1431 *FAT:* So that can show you that we have a lot of support. Even though we have a lot of students,
1432 there are people who see the beauty of our work and understand that. And also, you asked
1433 who supports you, I will say our communities does! There are understanding here, and we
1434 wouldn't be able to have our buildings and all of that if the communities didn't support us. I
1435 remember for the classroom building, we had the funding to buy the materials but we didn't
1436 have any funding to pay for people to do all of the work. So community members, parents
1437 were coming, students were coming. I did painting, I did tiling, I tied the rots for the
1438 building for the concrete you know.. And some parents came in to help, and so that support
1439 has been there, and I feel like for every initiative, we would, yes, people who would not
1440 understand and support you, but we have a foundation and that's important. We work with
1441 the village development committee here. Every community we go to, we start from the
1442 village development committee, from the village head, the *alkalo*, we make those
1443 collaborations. Because actually right now, we have mini starfishes in *every* region of the
1444 Gambia. I have my own chapter [organisationa], I come from the central river region of The
1445 Gambia, a place called Nyanesukuta. That's where my parents are from. Two years ago, I
1446 went back and started my own Starfish there, and doing great things with them. All the other
1447 mentors, about 9 other mentors, have their own StarFishes in these regions in The Gambia.
1448 And they go to these communities, they collaborate with these Village Development
1449 Committees. They support us, the high schools, they support us. The ministry of Education
1450 we've been collaborating with for over 11 years, and they've been supportive; they come to
1451 our events. When people send stuff over, they give us duty waivers to receive our items
1452 without being taxed. When we go to the airport, we take the duty waivers and our volunteers
1453 are not usually charged as much as someone on a regular price, so those are some of the
1454 ways we have been supported.

1455 Oh, graduations! We do graduations every year from our summer program. We will have
1456 around 200 parents who are there, even some of them who have been like ‘no no no’ - they
1457 will come and they will dance with us, you know. So yeah, we face challenges but I will say
1458 the support is there. It’s just hard for them to understand some of the things. But even with
1459 that, we are working. I feel like in the next 10 years, a lot of things will be different.

1460 *INT: Mmh yeah. And how about PR? Marketing I mean. Because you said before that you were*
1461 *not so much ‘out there’, but I researched a bit and I think you are actually ‘out there’! I*
1462 *found articles about the organisation, your girls and especially Mam-Yassin. But, you said*
1463 *you have a media director who is in charge of your marketing and promoting your activities.*
1464 *How do you do that?*

1465 *FAT: Mhh, yeah. So, the last 10 years have been not out there, but definitely people like me have*
1466 *made it my business to make sure StarFish is out there. I actually told aunty Yassin that I*
1467 *feel like we are doing the work and we are doing a lot of hard work. And we need the*
1468 *materials to come, we need the resources, we need the word out there and we need people,*
1469 *you know. Because it’s not just a national program, it’s an international program. So lately*
1470 *we have been focusing on, uhm.. If you check our facebook page, which I maintain since*
1471 *I’m the media coordinator, we try to post at least every week. And if you look at those*
1472 *activities they are all like new initiatives, new things we are doing, so yes, we are looking at*
1473 *new ways to getting the work out there. We have the media house. The media house is*
1474 *supposed to telling our story, our own way. So even though we are focused on using these*
1475 *the next 10 years to go out there, we want to be able to represent ourselves. We want to be*
1476 *able to tell our own stories. So, videos and pictures do a lot of the telling, and at the same*
1477 *time.. we actually have a public relations group as well. So If we need to go and present*
1478 *about our work, we do that. If something is happening.. we’ve talked about even world*
1479 *issues, I remember when #EndSARS thing was happening in Nigeria, we made a video, you*
1480 *know when Boko Haram was happening, so for things like that we will be out there. We will*
1481 *do videos, and we will do letters, we will do articles, and we produce magazines as well*
1482 *every three month which we call the *Kumaya News [Mandinka: Important News]* and that’s*
1483 *also all about our initiatives. We send it out to our network and our volunteers just to keep*
1484 *them updated with what we are trying to do. Because we are not that much in the media all*
1485 *the time. We also have a radio program, the radio program I do with one of the operation*
1486 *managers, and we do it every Sunday, one hour. So that has also really helped to just*
1487 *understand what our work is, because sometimes people know “yes, StarFish”, but *what* is*
1488 *Starfish? That’s the question. And that’s what we need to be out there about. So yeah. Uhm..*
1489 *we also have a communications director. If someone.. If you want to have a StarFish school,*
1490 *who should you contact? We have a billboard, on the main road now, going to the airport.*
1491 *Although there’s a StarFish restaurant, but we are Starfish *International*, but there is a*
1492 *restaurant called Starfish. So that has also given some attention cause people are like “are*
1493 *you the restaurant we saw on the way?.. Oh no, we are StarFish International”. Even though*
1494 *we’ve heard that name before, and I don’t know how they went to the ministry of justice and*
1495 *still got the same name.. it’s an issue, but we go with the *international* and there has only*
1496 *been a few people who has been like “Oh we went to this StarFish restaurant, Fatou Y, and*
1497 *we hoped you were there”, and I’m like “I don’t work there” [laughing] ☺. So the restaurant*

1498 people have been like ‘who is this StarFish International?!’, and people would be coming
1499 there and saying ‘where are the mentors?’, and they will be like “we are just chefs, we are
1500 not mentors” 😊.

1501 *INT: Wow [laughing]. That is such a big misunderstanding! So why is it called StarFish*
1502 *International? Is it now in other countries than The Gambia?*

1503 *FAT: So, you know, we are 501C3 organisation?*

1504 *INT: Okay.*

1505 *FAT: We have kind of like, I would call it, a part in the US. Because that allows us to do a lot of*
1506 *transactions between the US and The Gambia as a non-profit organisation. And yeah , the*
1507 *international is actually because it is registered in the US, and it is registered in The Gambia*
1508 *as well.*

1509 *INT: Ah okay, I saw an article, I think it was a Zambian organisation that was linking back to*
1510 *your organisation in The Gambia. It said something like “we are supporting StarFish*
1511 *International in The Gambia” and we wish to do something of the same work. So I was like,*
1512 *okay – are you expanding now or what is this about.*

1513 *FAT: Yeah. I think I remember Zambia.. I think we did a collaboration with them. It had to do*
1514 *with breast cancer awareness. But I don’t know what it was exactly about as I had just*
1515 *coming into being a mentor.*

1516 *INT. Yes, okay.*

1517 *FAT: But you know, what I actually want to do one day, is to have Starfish in other African*
1518 *countries. June, you should come with me! And explore Africa [laughing]*

1519 *INT: [laughing too]. That sounds like such a great journey. I only have a very few questions left. I*
1520 *just want to look at the overall picture. What would be the greatest contribution to your*
1521 *community that StarFish could do for them?*

1522 *FAT: So, from this 2021 to 2030 we want to look at 3 components, right.. Because if you look at*
1523 *it, we are in almost everything, doing what we can. So, for the next 10 years, we want to*
1524 *focus on 3 areas and the way we want to think about community development is 3-crowned.*
1525 *We want to look at 1) Education. And not just primary education, but like, the education*
1526 *level of the community. And when I say education, I look at both quality and holistic*
1527 *education. And then we are looking at 2) agriculture. Cause when people are hungry and*
1528 *when they don’t have means of being fed and all of that, it’s just.. and then we are also*
1529 *looking at 3) health. Because that’s gonna influence what they eat and how they transmit*
1530 *their knowledge to being people who are well. And so, it’s only the right way to go about*
1531 *making them productive members of our communities. So these 10 years, we are looking at*
1532 *Agriculture, Health and Education. And the programs we have started, we are looking at*

1533 consolidating those programs. And then when we have consolidated those programs, then
1534 we will start looking at expansion.

1535 You know, what we need in different regions. And each region having a strong educational
1536 program, a strong agricultural program and a strong health program. And then all of this,
1537 still calling on service. Really, we are not doing it as business, and we don't want to lose
1538 sight of that focus. What we want to do is the people that are doing the work. Yes we want
1539 to make sure that their lives are better. Because, for example, I am a girl and I am coming
1540 into this work and yes, I'm doing it for The Gambia, but at the same time, how do I make
1541 sure that my life is being impacted as well. I want to build a better house for my mom, you
1542 know? She has used her whole life to serve me, so I want to do it. So we want to do all of
1543 that and at the same time not shorting ourselves, because we are doing the work. I
1544 remember, last year I had just started these project proposals and all of that and I realize
1545 what we've been doing is; when we do projects, we are looking at; ok, what materials do we
1546 need – list them down – and we never charge! For payment. And at the end of the day we
1547 don't have stipends. Uh, oh my god. At some point I was like, 'you know what Auntie
1548 Yassin, you are not very good at asking for money, you are not very good at asking for
1549 payment, so I'm going to do that'. Cause I've been there and I know how to. And even, in
1550 fact, that's is why the role of development came to StarFish. We are looking at how to better
1551 uplift the people that are here, finance any.. the spiritual aspect, the moral aspect I feel like
1552 we have a good control over that. And even other things, yeah.

1553 *INT: So, where do you ask for money or finance? Where do you go?*

1554 *FAT: If you ask me, personally, I'm going all over the place. Internet, grand opportunities, you*
1555 *know what I mean? I'm like 'people, send it all to me'. But – we are doing fundraisers on*
1556 *our ground. You know, our book club, or choir club, they are throwing events and charging*
1557 *people to pay for it, so that's one way of getting the funding. And like I said, we just did an*
1558 *online event, and we did another one again for our StarFish Chapters. We are using our land,*
1559 *the StarFish land that I was talking about. There are several projects there because we have a*
1560 *lot of cashews there [cashew nuts]. And so, we are doing cashew production and we want to*
1561 *start with a multi-purpose centre that is going to process the fruits that are going to be*
1562 *underlined that are going to be used for things like jam, chutney. We are doing bee keeping*
1563 *to make honey, so we are growing a lot into agro business. And using that to be self-*
1564 *sufficient and to make sure we have money. So using the land in all its capacity to raise a lot*
1565 *of funds. And we have the skill-centre as well. And at the skill-centre we are charging the*
1566 *students a bit of a fee to make sure it runs itself. So the focus is going to be, you know, each*
1567 *project is supposed to make money to fund itself. Regardless of what other donations are*
1568 *coming into the organisation.*

1569 *INT: Ah, so like a self-sufficient circle.*

1570 *FAT: Mmmh yes.*

1571 *INT: Do the girls get a part of the profit they do in their work? Is that the idea? Like if you make*
1572 *beads, and you go and sell them. Do you earn money from that, or does it go back to the*
1573 *project?*

1574 *FAT: Yeah, we divide it into 3 portions. The first portion goes into the business because we need to*
1575 *buy materials to make more. And then the other portion goes into money to raise for your*
1576 *school fees, and the third portion goes to the girl to use for lunch or to buy a school bag,*
1577 *shoe, or pay for her study fee.*

1578 *INT: Okay, I see. Uhm.. Then I just want to know. We have talked much about government and*
1579 *policy, but do you think StarFish could inspire the state or the government to change their*
1580 *policies?*

1581 *FAT: Yes. I think.. so, we don't do politics at StarFish. There are two things we don't focus on,*
1582 *one is politics, another is religion. Because those are quite sensitive and they can easily*
1583 *cause a lot of division. So, I will say that we don't do 'practice and politics', so kind of like*
1584 *directly engaged in politics. Even though, we have things like education, cause you can't*
1585 *provide a holistic education and don't look at things like that, you know. Students know*
1586 *their rights and responsibilities as citizens, so we do things like that. When it comes to who*
1587 *to vote for, you won't find us going there like "Jammeh!" [current president] or "Daboh!",*
1588 *or things like that. So, really I think how we inspire, I would even say we have started, that*
1589 *is based on the human beings we are raising and sending out into the public. So far we have*
1590 *had doctors and people that have worked in the Ministry of Education and the different*
1591 *public sectors. And I feel like, to some extent.. and this is not based on research, maybe at*
1592 *some point we should go talk to our alumni and see how they think of these systems and*
1593 *these policies, but for us, I feel like, our work is not directly on people production and all of*
1594 *that, but instead it's on building those humans who are going to change those polices.*
1595 *Because no matter what you do with the policies, uhm, .. they can be there and, beautiful,*
1596 *but if you don't have someone who will execute those policies, they're just gonna be there,*
1597 *not really being effective. So I think StarFish, from our angle, what we've chosen, is to*
1598 *produce those human beings who are going to go into those sectors, to being those teachers*
1599 *or those permanent secretaries and those chairmans and members of the National Assembly*
1600 *who are going to impact policies and execute them.*

1601 *INT: Would you say that the society has changed now in the 10 years that Starfish has existed?*
1602 *Has there been policies that have changed the society or something like that? What are your*
1603 *thoughts on that?*

1604 *FAT: I wouldn't say policies have changed, because maybe from within our community, the*
1605 *students that we are producing, most of them they come from the Lamin community and the*
1606 *surrounding as well. And now we have different students from the different regions of The*
1607 *Gambia. But what I will say is, I think more girls have been to school, or more girls have*
1608 *been attained in school, because we have served over 1000 girls which is based on our*
1609 *records; ok, every year, how many girls come through the program and then make it through*
1610 *high school. So, I don't know if I would say that has changed the policy, but I know it has at*

611 least changed the number of girls that have been attained in school, that I can say for sure.
612 So yeah, that is what I want to say. With regards to actual policies being changed, I know,
613 for example, let's say someone being pregnant and being out of school, you know, that has
614 been one concern for our communities, cause usually when girls get pregnant, they don't go
615 back to school. But with Starfish, we have the skill-centre, and that has taken back students
616 that have been pregnant out of wedlock or worse; experiencing a pregnancy and coming
617 back into the skill-centre. And some of them have come back to being mentors and we just
618 started the community school at StarFish that is actually starting this week, that is basically
619 targeting those students that fall under that population. So, hopefully in the long run, policies
620 will be able to look at institutions like Starfish that have already found a model that is
621 working, and then be able to change their policies to accommodate what already to work.

622 *INT: Could you mention 3 things or 3 changes that you would say is needed in your society that*
623 *you would say could help improve girl's education?*

624 *FAT: Wow. 3!. Okay.. I think I can..*

625 I don't want to start with the families.. I don't want to start with the families, because I feel
626 like to some extent.. I don't want to say; know any better, but I feel like, they *know*. And it's
627 kind of difficult, because; if my mom is not allowing me to go to school, it's not because
628 they don't want a good life for me. It's just a difficult point for them to let me go to school,
629 because they need me at home to do the chores. And I know, I think Starfish is already
630 making that change by putting the students out there to show the parent what girls'
631 education can do.

632 Okay.. so I think .. we need to continue. I don't want to say we need to start, because I feel
633 like a lot of the things we already started. If you have any other ideas, you can bring them
634 on. I feel like, for example with the advocacy for girls' education, I think we need to be able
635 to talk about it. Not just talk about it – but take action. When you say girl's education, you
636 get attention, right. Especially as an organisation or as an individual, people support you and
637 all of that. But I don't know how many people are actually doing the work day and night.
638 And really that is what is needed to change the narrative. It's not just about writing a good
639 project proposal and making a great Facebook post, but then, how many of the people are
640 out there in the rural areas, right. Not just sitting down in an office and waiting for a girl to
641 tell you 'I need my school fees paid', but you are actually in the rural area, going to meet
642 most of all marginalized families. I think that is really needed in our communities. Because
643 from where I come from, we don't even have a middle school for the girls. They go to
644 elementary school, and that is where they can stop. And so, the government can't really tell
645 me that their policies have ensured that every girl has access to education and all of that.
646 And then the school building that is there, they are having Arabic educations there. And I
647 feel like, it's one thing to build a building but it's another to actually design and formulate a
648 program and then push in a correct teacher to actually do the education with the girls. That's
649 been missing, right, even in my village. So yeah, I think the first thing that needs to change
650 is the work. The way we are all doing the work, I think we need to put in more energy and
651 more focus and actually walking our talk. Uhm.. Not just for the sake of attention or fame,

652 but really because we know that. You know, if I get to save my family, my great grandkids
653 are going to be in this country. And whatever happens at the end of the day, it's come down
654 to them. So I think actually doing the work. And then, finally I will say working with each
655 other. I feel like collaboration is going to be a big part of the answer; the government
656 extending the role of other institutions, the institutions understanding the role of the schools,
657 the schools understanding the roles of the parents and all of us really stationing each other as
658 equals – not feeling like this other person has a greater role to play, right?

659 *INT: Yeah.*

660 *FAT:* I think collaborations will go a long way, so first, good work, and then while you are doing
661 the work; collaborate – open up your doors to other people and see how best you can help
662 them. And then thirdly, I will say, uplift the women in the journey, the moms. Because at the
663 end of the day, I feel like they are the ones who sacrificed a lot. At least with what I have
664 experienced working with the girls and my own life story. So I would say supporting the
665 women, you know giving them good businesses, you know, giving them better livelihoods,
666 providing support systems for them. At the end of the day, if I were to drop out of school,
667 only my mom would have me drop out of school, honestly. Like, if I had seen that that, now
668 let's say she had gotten really sick and needed money and all of that and she didn't have a
669 business, I would have dropped out of school; go and do a business, or maybe go get
670 married or do something to make sure that I was helping the family and not being hard on
671 her. I think bringing in parents, and especially mothers, and seeing how we best can promote
672 their agriculture, their gardening, their farms, would go a long way in girls having a piece of
673 min din schools and focusing in schools and attaining a higher higher education.

674 *INT: That was a lot - not just 3. But I see your three points, that was amazing. I actually don't*
675 *have so much more. Is there anything you want to elaborate on or comment on?*

676 *FAT:* Yeah, I think one other thing I want to talk about. Character development. Since we started
677 our education at StarFish, we've had a virtues program, and that virtues program, you know,
678 every Saturday we meet with our students, we look at virtues-inspired books, we look at
679 stories, we look at how they can learn virtues like truthfulness, being determined and all of
680 that. And I know that we come from The Gambian context where we have communities that
681 are very value based. Communities that have a lot of regard for values, like discipline and,
682 you know, being truthful. But I think there is a separation of that, like I was talking about
683 education; that is separated from who the person is in their character. On a large extend that
684 has taken our communities back. When we talk about poverty, when we talk about
685 corruption, you know the things, the issues, that characterize our poverty, I feel like a big
686 part of it are *all* on, I don't know; I don't want to say the leadership, but the people who
687 have the resources and the positions and that are actually looking back into our
688 communities. For me, sometimes, that is heart breaking. Because I go into offices, right, to
689 do Starfish paper work or to advocate for students. It's not nice when you do this kind of
690 work, when you go into offices and you see people who are there just for their self-interest.
691 But even when they leave, then it is their sons, or their other relatives who take their place.
692 But then here at Starfish we believe that we are developing human beings who are going to

1693 make the changes, but then it's difficult – how will they make the changes if those
1694 institutions are not even being opened up to them? Right? I can educate them, I can give
1695 them all the voice they need, but when they .. and because at StarFish, they are used to being
1696 truthful, they are used to being hardworking, and doing things the right way and all of that,
1697 when they go to those offices, they don't thrive. Because people see them, and they see us as
1698 threats or someone who want to rebel against the system! To a big extent, like I said, that is
1699 also why we are also bend on building a critical mass of people, who will understand what
1700 we are trying to do. But unless we change those systems of corruption widely and stop
1701 looking out for our own self-interested, even the girl's education we are trying to do, we are
1702 not going to do well. So I don't really know who we have to trying to find that answer. Let's
1703 say for example, if the government is there and we cannot impact the government, and for
1704 StarFish we know; ok, we can only raise people who hopefully in the next twenty years or
1705 thirty years can make things a little bit different, and we can put our hope on that. But if we
1706 can have answers right now, asking how best we can impact the immediate government,
1707 immediate institutions, you know, that will be great. But really, I don't think we even have
1708 that answer, June.. not right now. We can only do what we can do.

1709 *INT: How do you think this will contribute to your society? I mean, how would it look like in the*
1710 *future if people are growing these virtues as you are talking about in character*
1711 *development. How would the society then look like in the future?*

1712 *FAT: I think life would be so much easier. I'm not saying it as we will be materially progressed,*
1713 *but, I think, actually we will be more materially progressed. And I also think that our health*
1714 *systems will definitely be way better. I think agriculture will boom and production will be*
1715 *way better. I think our educational systems would improve; there would be better quality*
1716 *education and access. Really, I feel like our communities would be.. development would*
1717 *kind of be .. quicker. Like, at the pace that it's happening, I feel like, it could have been at a*
1718 *quicker pace, so.. With these virtues, I feel like more doors would open. Maybe you will not*
1719 *see a lot of great buildings and all of that, but you would see a lot of more people with jobs*
1720 *who know how to do the jobs, you will see more girls being attained in school.. I think our*
1721 *health system would do better with regard to the medication that is being given at the*
1722 *hospital, the maternal mortality rate would definitely reduce, our communities would be*
1723 *more open to advocacy and sensidisation (?). I can just sense development happening in its*
1724 *full essence happening, really. Otherwise, I feel like as far as the same people with the same*
1725 *interest keep being in the same positions and manage the systems, we will be working at a*
1726 *slower pace.*

1727 *INT: Is your experience that this is the only place or you are the only organisation that works*
1728 *with this?*

1729 *FAT: I don't know any other organisations that are full-time character development.*

1730 *INT: No?*

1731 FAT: I'm not gonna say they don't have values, but like I said; we are communities with values,
1732 so every organisation in The Gambia is definitely going to have that, but I don't know how
1733 many are making it as the anchor of what they do. As in, you are putting that girl out there to
1734 go and attend a workshop and get paid, but what they are saying at the workshop, right, is it
1735 the truth? Are you putting them out there to just get that opportunity, or add a video hoping
1736 that you're gonna learn how to serve other people? How to give that speech because they
1737 want to make other people's life different? Or because at the end of the day, they are going
1738 to get paid? I don't know. But really, I know StarFish, for sure, because I'm in that system.
1739 Somebody might speak better for theirs [organisation]. I know that's been our focus. And
1740 because of that, sometimes it can be lonely, the work in that way, but that's the way we
1741 choose. And that's what we gonna do.

1742 *INT: I think that was a very beautiful ending. Unless you have more.. I found it very interesting*
1743 *that you got into this character development as an anchor for your work. That you take a*
1744 *point of departure in the girl and the girls need from the beginning. Do you have any*
1745 *questions for me?*

1746 FAT: Well, what are you gonna do? Are you gonna transcribe it and write it? Now that I am going
1747 in to my master's, I'm wondering – how does it work?

1748 *INT: [explains my method of how I will transcribe and analyse my interview with her as well as*
1749 *give her a few pointers on the topic at large]*

1750 FAT: Ok, dear June.. looks like you have some work to do. Yeah, I'm so glad you wanted to do
1751 this with StarFish and interviewing me.

1752 *INT: Thank you so much for your time, Fatou, I really appreciate it.*

1753 Appendix 4 – Transcribe of interview with 1754 Jacco Verschoor (Smiling Child of The Gambia)

1755 *[The interviewer has presented herself, asked for consent to record the interview and explained the*
1756 *aim and topic of the project].*

1757 *INT: Let's maybe just to get into it.. Could you describe who you are and what is your role in The*
1758 *Smiling Child of The Gambia?*

1759 JAC: So, as you might have read on our website, we are a local NGO. We are based in Lamin
1760 Kerawan, on the airport side. We are mainly focused on helping the children regarding the
1761 school fees and helping with primary education. So currently we have a nursery school and
1762 we are helping in building a primary school. So basically, that's what we are doing.

1763 *INT: Mmh confirming].*

1764 JAC: And well, I am Jacco, living in the Netherlands. I came in 2016, 2017 we came across The
1765 Gambia and felt immediately in love by giving them a support in their future, especially for
1766 the children as they are so poor and uhm .. we want to give them an opportunity to grow and
1767 give them a better future they otherwise would not have if we wouldn't be there.

1768 *INT: Ok, and you are what, the founder?*

1769 JAC: Well yeah, I am the founder together with Marc.. and we started the foundation in April
1770 2017. So, just recently four years. We have done many projects already, so we are going
1771 quite good for us in the development and uhm.. yeah that is mainly because we are both
1772 doing the fundraising, we are both responsible on fund raising but also, Marc is responsible
1773 for all the financial stuff regarding the foundation and I am the one who is doing the
1774 marketing and yeah, getting more awareness regarding our foundation as well.

1775 *INT: Can you describe the process of being founded, because you said you came across, you*
1776 *know you went to Gambian in 2016 - but how did it all become and organisation or a*
1777 *foundation?*

1778 JAC: Yeah, well when we were in the Gambia for the first time, we meet a taxi drivers on the
1779 street, one of those green cabs, and well, the tour operators advised us not to go with one of
1780 the green cabs.. well, we decided; why not? Give the locals some more support instead of
1781 the tourist operator, obviously. So, we met with a really nice guy and we talked to him and
1782 he was willing to take us around to a bit of the area of Gambia. We were only there for a
1783 week so we could not go far. But we wanted to visit some cultural highlights and as well as

1784 schools which is definitely not supported by any other NGO or tour operator or tourist site,
1785 or that stuff. Uhm..

1786

1787 So, we came at a school in Lamin. A really small like nursery school where the walls and
1788 the bricks were really of poor cement, holes were in there, electricity was going right above
1789 the head of the children and they have really small benches where they could write their
1790 thoughts on, but they also have to sit on there, so it wasn't really comfortable. But a hole in
1791 the ground, just a toilet and all that stuff, uhm, so the conditions were really bad. Well, we
1792 entered the school area, there came 5 of those little nice kids came around us, and as I am
1793 one ninety they started to climb in me and on me, and there was one on my head, and one
1794 on my arm and one on my shoulders. It was really cute.. And we entered a class and we
1795 were invited by the teacher to enjoy one of the classes so we really felt the environment of
1796 the school of the children, how they got taught and all that stuff. Well s, even though we
1797 didn't know from each other, we immediately said to each other we have to do something
1798 about this; the situation in here is so poor, let's give them a chance for a better future. Well,
1799 then you came back to the Netherlands after you holiday, and you start thinking; what have
1800 you experienced? What have you done there? What have you seen there? The culture, the
1801 people, the beaches. But also, what have you experienced at school? Then usually it starts
1802 running, you get back in your normal life but in the back of my mind and our mind was still
1803 to help these children to give them a better opportunity. And then we decided in April 2017
1804 to go for it and let's do it and let's see where it takes us in a new adventure.

1805 And since we have been registered, it all went quite fast. Immediately came donations from
1806 families and people around us, as well as other NGO's here in the Netherlands which
1807 thought our message was really good, and by that we could grow on the financial support
1808 from others here in the Netherlands which we could send to Gambia. But, the difficulties
1809 was; we did not make any negotiation with the school yet. So we came back in June 2017.
1810 We wanted to make negotiations with the land owner of the nursery school in order to
1811 protect all the investment which we do once he sells this lands or whatever, so he decided
1812 not to agree on that. So, we were forced to make a decision that we could not support that
1813 specific school. Well, the time we were there, was only two weeks which was quite short.

1814 We went to another NGO, a British one. They taught us how to make the negotiations, how
1815 to make an agreement on what every development are made at the end of the land owner and
1816 well the time flew by so fast, so we couldn't meet any school which might could use our
1817 help. But we were still in contact with the same taxi driver, so we told him; we are travelling
1818 back to the Netherlands but at the same time we want to look together with the British NGO
1819 for another school which really could use our support. So that is how we came .. ended up at
1820 Lamin Karawan airport side.

1821 We got to know them for the first time in September. All our contact was through
1822 WhatsApp and was so rapidly, so fluently, they were like very eager to celebrate and see
1823 what we could do for them, but then the school was named Rosie Applery Nursery school

824 and at the moment it's call Smiling Child Nursery school and Smiling Child Upper Basic.
825 They were used to having sponsors by their side, you know, in order to make developments,
826 so that was an advantage for us. They are used to communicating with the ministry of
827 education as well or other company or organisation in Gambia in order to process to make
828 the education better, and continue on, so that was really convenient for us, but you also have
829 to make a transaction - and you make a transaction from the Netherlands to Gambia, but at
830 the main time you want to make it secure, and that your money does not get lost and all that
831 stuff. So we got some banking details and we tried it few time with small money, like less
832 than fifty euros, but it go lost 3 times. Like, really lost, like no one knew where it was and I
833 ended up in Nigeria and it was somewhere there [laughing]. After 6 months on the phone
834 and I was like; no way!

835 But then, in October we managed, by the end of September, we managed and uhm.. we
836 started to do a first development and making windows at the school, because they had these
837 brick downs. Mhm the small ones. We decided to place windows as it gave them more light,
838 more air, more refreshment in the class room. That first little project succeeded very well,
839 very quickly, and then we got a message back; 'we also have sand floors'. Ok, let's lay tiles.
840 No problem. Let's start with tiles. Then so we did the tiling project and then October, that
841 was finished. So we flow from the Netherlands to the Gambia in order to finally meet the
842 teachers and the children of - at that time Rosie Appleby Nursery School - and it felt so
843 warm, so good to be there and they really.. it really was a school, is a school that really need
844 our support because it's one of the last electricity points of the Gambia around that side.

845 Uhhh.. children are coming from Lamin Kombo and Lamin Karawan area, so they have to
846 travel quite far, they have to walk on sand parts to the school and for some is like fifteen
847 minutes or for some it's like forty-five or an hour, and they all go walking. While we started
848 to rebuild the nursery school, we also build a new toilet block with very funny little men
849 toilets, what you call them, uhm.. And a French toilet for the girls, and also one for the
850 teacher, and shower in any case an accident happen they could wash the kids.

851 So once we were working on that, the teachers come to us; listen the parent have one big
852 wish. Beside our school, there is a secondary school being build. At that time, it was already
853 operating, but it was government supported as well with donations from the Netherlands, but
854 mainly government school. But they said; we have only one problem, we don't have any
855 primary school. We have a big big wish for the future ahead. We said; ok well, once we are
856 done rebuilding the nursery school and the toilet block, we will decide on building probably
857 a primary school, but we have to decide if we can manage regarding all the foundations and
858 everything because we also want to support the children themselves on the school fee, give
859 the teachers their salary, so you are not.. uhm, usually a teacher in the Gambia gets paid
860 when they work, but when he stops working, there is no salary anymore, or when anything
861 happens cause he is ill or when he doesn't show up or there is a pandemic and the school is
862 closed, usually they don't get paid. Uhm, and we decided to cover them, giving them the
863 financial support as a salary in order to provide them with a continued basis that they can
864 also invest in any materials they need or stuff they need at school at school or for them self
865 and their well-being and everything. Because ones you are a teacher, you are quite happy

866 and they are also more eager to gain more experience and given better education than when
867 it's a volunteer work.

868 *INT: Do you know what the reason for not having a primary school is that is government or*
869 *what.*

870 JAC: It was not uhm.. It was their land owner. They started with the school in 2003, and they it
871 was a private initiative to start a community school for Lamin Karawan airport side as there
872 was any nursery school or primary.. there wasn't anything there on that side. And as it was
873 already for some of the kids, it was already like forty-five minutes' walk from the sand on
874 bare feet.

875 And when you come out of Lamin Karawan and you go to the main road, you will see the
876 first government school which is St. Jones in Lamin, but for those who have to walk already
877 forty-five minutes to Lamin Karawan side, they have to walk another 45 minutes to that
878 school, so that will be 1,5 hour which is too far and not safe at all.

879 *INT: So, there was a school but the geographic distance was just too far?*

880 JAC: Yes, true. Very much too far. And children were.. It was just too difficult for them to get to
881 school and the parents have to take the children to the governmental nursery school, but they
882 did not have all enough time because of their work, or other thing going on in their lives -
883 whatever - so many of the children were going on their own, and forced to walk there at a
884 really young age. And if you have to walk on those sand roads where animals are walking,
885 when it rains there is a lot of dirt and dust and anything, but also there is a lot of dirt in
886 general in the streets where children could harm themselves. Beside that, maybe any
887 vandalisms from other people, so uhm.. What you saw at Lamin Karawan at that time was
888 that a lot of children didn't go to school at all, they were just at home, sitting, eating,
889 drinking and by the time they got the age of the recruit, could be of any help or assistance on
890 the fields, they started working.

891 *INT: Do you think that distance was the main reason to not go to school or where there other*
892 *reason for them not to go to school?*

893 JAC: Well, a couple of them could not afford it money wise. The distance itself, the danger on the
894 road, what could happen, what could not happen. Those were the main focus. As well,
895 parents were having a too tight schedule, which we cannot even imagine our self because
896 here in Europe you are busy all the time, but in Gambia it's a little bit different [laughing
897 indicating they work even harder].

898 Yeah, so they decided in 2003 to start as a private initiative. Then they got support in 2017
899 by the Rosie Apple Nursery School. Then that woman died, she passed away and they came
900 without any support so they were not able to develop the school any better. Our nursery
901 school and primary school is a private school, but at same time we allow children from very
902 poor families to enter the school, to register them and we look for sponsors in providing the
903 school with school fees for the children.

1904 INT: *How did you end up with the financial side because you said the money disappeared to*
1905 *Nigeria but how did it end?*

1906 JAC: Ohh how did I end up with the transfer? The transfer I want to the bank here in the
1907 Netherlands and got all the information regarding a proper transaction. Meanwhile, I still
1908 lost the other three transactions and I thought it was somewhere in December that I finally
1909 got it back and found it in Nigeria somewhere in a bank account, so I had to call one of
1910 those banks in Nigeria and I was like; apparently, it has come to you but it has to go to
1911 Gambia, but how did it end up with you? And they said; we usually do the transaction to
1912 Nigeria and then we send it to the Gambia. Yeah, it should have been there already, so why
1913 is it still with you? – Ohh, we don't know we forgot it.. No no no no. You have not forgotten
1914 it. I am one of those who is stupid enough to call you twenty times a day like 'where is the
1915 money?'. And then, uhm... finally, they send through the payment, and it still goes on that
1916 way. It goes to Germany, then to Nigeria and then because it's the Trust Bank, so probably
1917 the main office of the trust bank, it is long time ago that I forgot but probably the many
1918 office of the trust bank is in Nigeria where all the transaction is going, and they have to send
1919 it to The Gambia.

1920 INT: *But is that how it is working now going through all this?*

1921 JAC: I don't think it's going now, because we now make .. because the transactions has changed.
1922 It runs through the program (?) What we do is, when we do the transaction today, you
1923 probably have it by Friday in your bank account, so we still have steps in between. I believe
1924 Marcus is now sending it to Germany. Because there is no direct way to send this money
1925 from the Netherlands to the Gambia. So we have to ether way go to the UK or to Germany,
1926 and then it goes straight away to the Gambia.

1927 INT: *Ok, and your organisation is established in the Netherlands or?*

1928 JAC: Yeah. So we are in the Netherlands and Yeah. It runs now.

1929 INT: *Yeah, and now it runs smoothly.*

1930 JAC: Smoothly, finally, but now they are changing bank accounts numbers, so..

1931 And since the lock down is in, we haven't been able to travel to the Gambia, so, they
1932 changed the bank account of the school, so we said; Listen, when you are changing the bank
1933 account number of the school, you have to let us know beforehand, because if you changing
1934 it now, we can't do anything from here because we need more information regarding your
1935 bank account because we have to send through Germany or the UK to get it to you. So we
1936 probably stick up finding, we still doing it the old way because the bank account is still
1937 valid, but we have to start making the transactions to the new account because that one is
1938 signed by three person authorized and all that stuff, hmmm, and it's been changed to our
1939 new school name; Smiling Child of the Nursery, Smiling Child Nursery School and we have
1940 one bank account for Smiling Child Primary School in order to split the financial support.

1941 *INT:* *Ok, I'm wondering about the projects, because you talked about you did a lot of projects*
1942 *that involved the building like more windows and the floor and all of that. Is there a project*
1943 *you find particularly very successful? That you can see has created something good?*

1944 JAC: Well, all of the projects has been very successful I believe. Because the difficulty is once
1945 you decide to do a project, you also have to gather your funds from others around you and
1946 they have to believe that it's like really going to help the children, that you are doing what
1947 you stand for. So all of our projects that we are doing, uhm.. we are really proud of all of
1948 them, actually. But once we started to launch the privately sponsored children, we got like
1949 40-50 children a bit sponsored. At the moment we are at 150.

1950 *INT:* *150?*

1951 JAC: Which are privately sponsored with the school fees. And as well for nursery and some of
1952 them are primary. And, so that's growing bit by bit. Not rapidly, it goes slowly but that's
1953 fine. Because if it goes too fast, myself and Marc would not be able to control all the
1954 finances and everything, because we are doing it completely voluntary. Because the only
1955 thing that that we want is for the Children to get a better future. So we don't book tickets or
1956 nay other expenses out of the foundation, it all goes to The Gambia. Even our bank costs,
1957 and other costs we do regarding marketing purposes, we pay them ourselves, privately. So it
1958 will not go from any school fees from the children. So when we buy banana (?) books for
1959 example, we always ask our donors to pay an extra 7.5€ in order to get banana books
1960 transferred. So we don't have to pay any extras from the donations in order to get the
1961 transportation. Because what we believe is sending those banana books is like a secondary
1962 thing. It's nice to have but it's not helping them directly. Toys and all that stuff, sometimes
1963 there is some clothes and all that stuff.. but they can get it. They can get it. They can get
1964 clothes if they need it. It's only an extra thing we do. At the moment there is 60 boxes on the
1965 way. Expecting to arrive this week. What we did last year was during the coronavirus. We
1966 got to know that a lot of the parents have lost their income because of many of the
1967 occupations fell away. Because the economy was not running, nothing. We did an
1968 emergency fundraising, of sending, or giving them those huge rice bags on 50 kg, with oil
1969 and all that stuff. Within a week, we had 160 bags for the families, so that was one of those
1970 actions and fundraising you do in time when they need it the most. And that is something we
1971 are very proud of because we could manage to do it within one week. And seeing all the
1972 children giving their parents all the sacks, that was nice to see.

1973 Yeah.. what else..

1974 We have done so many celebrations, because we really are an NGO that not only focuses on
1975 making results, but we also celebrate the results very big by culture and folklore, which is
1976 coming on at the school. We take the children out on trips, arrange a day at the beach or the
1977 zoo once we are there. So, we want to do it both way, we want to support them, but not
1978 forget to celebrate all of the things you are doing. Because it is not only us who are doing it,
1979 we are doing it with the teachers, with the children.

1980 *INT: How do you measure the results? Can you see it in regard to school like more children in*
1981 *school, or their grades? Is there a kind of measurement you use?*

1982 JAC: We started in 2017 with 150 children at school. We have at the moment 350. So that could
1983 be a good measure. We also measure the satisfaction of the parents. Each PTA meeting that
1984 we have with the parents, the teachers are asked the parents; how are they, are they satisfied
1985 with the school, the environment, the developments we are doing, the support we are giving.
1986 We also realize that once we get the child sponsored individually, the results get
1987 immediately better. Because then they are even more eager to get better results. And the
1988 parents are more grateful that their child is sponsored with the school fees and have a chance
1989 of a better future. So, there is actually a bit of that.

1990 *INT: Okay.*

1991 JAC: And what we see as well is, and another thing is our school has strong relations with the
1992 Gambia college. And we get a lot of requests of getting trainees to our school, because once
1993 they pass the traineeship, they know they can get a paid job. We are offering the best one –
1994 mainly we have 2 or 3 during the school term – we pick, or the teachers pick out, the best
1995 and one which we offer a paid occupation as a teacher at our school.

1996 *INT: Ah okay. So when you say Gambia college, is that the institution where you get educated as*
1997 *a teacher, right?*

1998 JAC: Right. Yeah.

1999 *INT: Right. Then they become a trainee at your school and finish that. Who decides? Is it the*
2000 *teachers?*

2001 JAC: Yes, it is the headmaster together with the teachers. They decide among themselves.

2002 *INT: So, are they the ones running the school on an everyday basis and how many are they?*

2003 JAC: Yep. We have at the moment 9 teachers.

2004 *INT: Nice. And do you have any voluntary work or is it basically Gambian teachers there?*

2005 JAC: Gambian teachers there. Everything is run by Gambians themselves. Because we want them
2006 to be fully self-supported. So no any volunteers from the Netherland or whatever, we don't
2007 need them. That is not our purpose, because we want to give to Gambians their own
2008 influence and if there comes a time where our foundation stops, they have to run it
2009 themselves. And we want to make them prepared for that day, so they are prepared for that.

2010 *INT: Okay.*

2011 JAC: What I forgot to tell you is, we measure the results in .. uhm.. well, it's not really measure,
2012 It's not like we really take tasks or questionnaires or whatever, but we are seeing a high
2013 level of, our children are getting really well-educated. That comes with the results of their

2014 examinations, but we are also seeing and notice there are many nursery schools wanting to
2015 connect to our foundation and taking over the same method of education as our teachers are
2016 having.

2017 *INT: Ahh, so how is that going? How are you handling that?*

2018 JAC: Well, we're not. We stopped with that because.. uhm.. we really appreciated that many of
2019 those school are requesting to connect to our school as well on different areas of The
2020 Gambia, but for now, our foundation is really too small to take control of that. And we want
2021 to first finalize our Smiling Child Education Centre in order to the environment is running
2022 smooth, the area is nice and clean, there is enough toilet blocks for around 700 children,
2023 because we are going to 700.. That's our main task. Then we have to see by then if the
2024 whole area is then, well, successfully build and ready. Either way starting to connect to
2025 other schools, or we are going to start with emergency post regarding the care and health of
2026 the children and its parents in the village. So that's something we still have to decide on. Or
2027 a 24-hour emergency post for health and that stuff, maybe together with a dentist and eye
2028 examination. So that's one thing we are thinking of. The other thing we are thinking of
2029 deciding, is whether we want to connect other nursery schools to our foundation and our
2030 education centre. For the education centre, it wouldn't be a problem that they

2031 transfer the knowledge regarding how to educate the children and giving them the same
2032 system as what we have, but regarding the foundation it would be a problem as we are not
2033 that big yet. We are not so big that we could handle them easily, because once they connect,
2034 they also want to ask for some financial support from us; Salary for the teacher and all that
2035 stuff, and that's difficult because we are not that big as they think we are. Because we are
2036 REALLYYYYYY small, but we are doing a big effort [laughing].

2037 *INT: [laughing with Jacco] Okay. I'm wondering; what would you say is your biggest challenge?*
2038 *You are talking about these goals – what are the biggest challenge for your organisation to*
2039 *reach these goals?*

2040 JAC: The biggest challenge at the moment is to get enough financial support from others around
2041 us. That's one of the.. the main biggest challenge, which we have. It does really depend on
2042 the time of the year because with festive seasons and all, you get mostly a bit more, but
2043 during the year round, it's difficult to get up those financial support because there are *so*
2044 *many* NGO's, *so* many foundations, and as well for the Netherlands itself, in care, in health,
2045 in poorness [i.e poverty], that it's really difficult because.. we are an NGO, but we are not..
2046 for the main Dutch people, we do not really care. Because Gambia is too far (away) for
2047 them. It's too far away, it's another continent. "They have to sort it themselves", all sorts of
2048 things.. "it has always been like this", so you are not going to change it there. That's what a
2049 lot of people believe and partly of them, I understand.. But.. And I do understand that you
2050 don't want to give money to them big NGO's where they don't see where the money is
2051 going. Because by us, you see where every single penny that comes in, you see what goes
2052 out. [stays silent..]

2053 INT: *Yeah.. I think that is a very classical problem, generally.*

2054 JAC: Yeah, it is! And there are so many great foundations which you can give your support to.

2055 INT: *I want to ask you, how has your belief also changed? What was it before you went to the*
2056 *Gambia and how is it now? In regards to the Gambian education opportunities for example.*
2057 *Did you have an idea before you went there of how it would be lik or how it would look like*
2058 *in the country?*

2059 JAC: No, I went completely blank! We were invited by the parents of Marc to travel to The
2060 Gambia as it was in 2016 there 50th anniversary of their marriage. And as I work as an event
2061 manager and a travel organizer, I always decide I am going on holiday, then I won't look
2062 into the country, what things we could do or whatever, I'm not going to get prepared,
2063 because when I am prepared – I am at work [laughing]. So, I was completely blank, going to
2064 The Gambia. And I was like; "Gambia? .." We are even a couple [referring to him and
2065 Marc], married.. he asked me in The Gambia [for hand in marriage/proposal], in front of
2066 many Gambians. I was like; Is it a wise decision to do this thing here whilst there is a death
2067 sentence considering above my head now? But OK, we managed. We are still surviving and
2068 living, but I didn't know anything. I only knew it was.. like.. poor. And that there would be a
2069 big cultural difference. And the biggest cultural difference is till big and that's something,
2070 day by day, you still get the chance to cover the cultural difference. For example, right now
2071 we have an eye examination going on, because we did a fundraising on 400 glasses, and I
2072 have been pushing the teachers to ask if there is someone who can do an eye examination in
2073 The Gambia? Is there an optician? Like, I don't know. I have really no idea. So, they have to
2074 sort it out, because I am thinking about the fundraise – they sort out if they can manage it in
2075 The Gambia. That's how we work. Once I get involved and have to sort things out in The
2076 Gambia, like 'you have go to this optician to get an eye examination', then my work goes
2077 too far. So they really have to do it on their own. They really have to. As teacher you get
2078 your salary, and we do understand that you work for that because you are giving the children
2079 their education, but you also need to work in order to get our help and assistance and us
2080 continuing. Because for me, when I'm working on the fundraise, in the meantime doing my
2081 own work, if I have to contact opticians in the Gambia for instance or workers regarding
2082 building the school, it's not gonna work. Because then it costs me too much time and I
2083 won't be focused anymore. So, they have to do it. But then if you're asking like, if you're
2084 sending a text on WhatsApp, you don't know what day the message will reach them. If it's
2085 today, tomorrow, or like after a month because probably the (??) are gone. That's one of
2086 those challenges like 'what's going on there' and their culture, and trying to understand their
2087 culture is different as well.. like, they are clever, but they are also very shy. And I still
2088 believe, and think they still have to, every time they are in contact with us, they try to get
2089 use to us or something. They are not really familiar with our direct way. Cause we are
2090 asking just simply; 'hey, did you call the optician?', and then you get a whole story like
2091 'yes, well.. no. I tried to contact the optician, but then I drove by. Then I passed by, and my
2092 cab did not stop and .. '. Then I said, 'No, the answer is; yes or no.'. I don't want the whole
2093 story, is it yes or no? [laughing]. Just be clear. The 'yes, but...' and all that, so you really get
2094 the differences in the communication as well, and then once you are there its.. They're even

2095 more shy. For example, we invited them like, we had 14 people out for dinner at the strip of
2096 the Gambia, we invited all the teachers to go on dinner, and it was when they were in their
2097 Ramadan. And they had to pray. So we said like 8 o'clock. I don't know, I don't pray. So, I
2098 said; '8 o'clock, is that fine? 'Yes okay' that's fine, we'll be there'. They showed up around
2099 21:00. And we were waiting and waiting and waiting, and like.. 9 o'clock, why is that?
2100 'Yeah, but we had to pray'. "Can you tell us the next time that 8 clock is not convenient
2101 because you have to pray? It's fine, but you just have to tell us". Then we know we have to
2102 think, or decide and reschedule our meeting, but that's how it works. There are differences.

2103 *INT: Yeah.. I was just thinking, now you are an event manager and you prepare before you go to*
2104 *other destinations. Have you then now spend time looking into the country, knowing more?*
2105 ..

2106 JAC: Yeh yeh yeh yeh ..

2107 *INT: And what have you found out? Anything in particular you find interesting?*

2108 JAC: The most interesting thing is that people are so loving and caring. And always willing to
2109 help anyone which comes across, there is no harm or anything. For what I have experienced
2110 so far, I realize that with the corona crisis that a lot of work and income has been lost for
2111 many people, so there's probably also a bit of vandalism at the moment. But yeah, mainly
2112 the people.. the really nice cultural side. What I really find interesting is, and I don't even
2113 like it, actually, it's a bad thing about the Gambia at the moment, is that Gambia is
2114 cooperating with the Chinese by building a convention centre in the middle of a monkey
2115 park whilst there is space enough to do it somewhere else, but they are doing it in the middle
2116 of a monkey park, since Gambia has a really nice nature. So.. yeah, not really happy about
2117 that, but it's an interesting development which is going on there. Uhm... yeah, basically
2118 these things.

2119 *INT: Yeah okay..*

2120 JAC: And what's so funny is, when you reach The Gambia, you are going back to.. back to your
2121 roots or something. Really, you are going back to yourself.

2122 *INT: Yeah? Can you describe it? What do you mean?*

2123 JAC: Well, everything goes on really basic way. For example, we decided to go the first time, the
2124 first one tour to.. Once or twice we stayed at a luxury hotel, but then afterwards we decided;
2125 look, we are not going to stay luxury anymore, because the teachers are not allowed to go
2126 inside the hotel. But it doesn't feel good as well when you are doing your great volunteering
2127 work, that when you go back to your hotel, and you are in such a luxury position, then the
2128 ... your feeling goes like from the good side of helping the children to like, the other side in
2129 being completely luxurious situation that doesn't match with each other, you know! You get
2130 friction, or, I got friction in there; I am so.. 'Why am I here?!'. It doesn't feel right. I should
2131 be in a cheaper hotel because I am doing a great work for the children, but then, although I

2132 allow myself to be in a luxury position, but then it doesn't feel, uhm.. good, when you are in
2133 contact with the teachers and with the children. It doesn't help you a lot. Yeah.. these things.

2134 *INT:* *Yeah..*

2135 JAC: We did our honeymoon in Georgetown, one night with all the teachers. We went to
2136 Georgetown, travelling like 6 hours, while its only 300 km, so once you're making a
2137 distance.. when you are on the transport for 300 km here in the Netherlands, it costs you
2138 only 3 hours, but there it costs you like 7 or 8 hours, like a whole day travelling. Because
2139 you have all these stops on the road, you don't go faster than 50 km/hr. Well, anyway.

2140 So when we, were with the teachers in Georgetown, near the Gambia river, and we stayed at
2141 a lodge, and I was like; 'oh we gonna stay at a lodge'. So, curious how luxurious *that* would
2142 be [laughing]. And we were just sleeping on a mattress, no sheets, no linen, nothing. There
2143 was only some mosquito nets, but it was completely wet so I didn't put in on like [making a
2144 ewhhwhh sound]. I left It hanging at the roof. We were really.. it felt like, really as going
2145 back to basic as camping and yeah, it was a really nice experience, to do that together with
2146 the teachers actually.

2147 But that's also, that's something which, when it comes to cultural differences; you are
2148 inviting like we are saying; come on, we'll go with the head master and the head teacher,
2149 yeah? The teacher which is giving class to the oldest students and then with the headmaster.
2150 So just two of you. And we are going, so we are together with four.

2151 *INT:* *Yes.*

2152 JAC: When they show up by the taxi, because we are having our own school taxi so we have like
2153 taxi driver driving for our school, and we take him along, so 5, we are. Going to
2154 Georgetown, we thought. And they showed up like.. and they came like; 1,2,3,4,5,6,7 out of
2155 the car like; 'we're going with you!'. And we're like "Okay, but you could not tell us in
2156 front?!"[laughing]. It's really nice, but we have to check on the money, we have to get
2157 everything cash here in The Gambia, you can't pay anything with your credit card on the
2158 road, you have to get everything cash. 'Oh!, we didn't think of that'. And we were already
2159 driving around, like, we left already like 'okay, how do we get the money then? Let's se..'.

2160 *INT:* *So, it ended up with everyone going?*

2161 JAC: Almost everyone went, yeah. Without noticing beforehand [laughing]

2162 *INT:* *So, you found a solution [echo laughing].*

2163 JAC: Yeah, we found a solution definitely.

2164 *INT:* *I was wondering, do you have any partners; like do you collaborate with anyone else in The*
2165 *Gambia? Now you said a lot of other nursery schools wanted in on your foundation, but do*
2166 *you work with other NGO's in particular?*

2167 JAC: [Shakes his head on screen]. No, we only share knowledge with other NGO's but we do not
2168 collaborate. Once we had to send to much items, we send them to another NGO.

2169 INT: *Okay, like that. And then you said, the school were working with the Ministry of Education*
2170 *as well or?*

2171 JAC: Yes, the school has contacts with the Ministry of Education, yeah.

2172 INT: *Okay, like that. So no NGO collaboration in that way..*

2173 JAC: No, no, no. Just us.

2174 INT: *Okay.. thank you. And then, because my thesis is mostly about girls. Can you talk about;*
2175 *what is your observation in your school in regards to gender? Is there a difference between*
2176 *boys and girls? A division between boys and girls?*

2177 JAC: Number wise, I believe it's 50/50. Maybe a bit more girls than boys actually, yeah. I think
2178 maybe girls are like 60/40, something like that.

2179 INT: *Have you heard about any challenges in regards to the difference of boys and girls?*

2180 JAC: No.

2181 INT: *Oh, okay...*

2182 JAC: Because what we have is, our teachers are.. uhm, I believe we have man teachers and female
2183 teachers. And they all see each other as one. There is no difference between men, or boys
2184 and girls or men and women, it's all one. And it doesn't matter which religion you have or
2185 where you come from. No one is judged.

2186 INT: *How old are the kids in your nursery school?*

2187 JAC: From 4 to.. what are the eldest now.. 11, I think? 4 to 11.

2188 INT: *Okay. I'm asking because it's quite interesting. Uhm.. Generally, Gambia have issues with*
2189 *girls having less education than boys, and it's usually because of religious and cultural*
2190 *things, and also there are some patriarchal structure in the society. So for example, they*
2191 *prefer sons to go to school. And for girls, with menstruation, they cannot go to school. For*
2192 *some NGO's it's a huge issue, and you say that it's not, so I find that very interesting.*

2193 JAC: Yeah, no.. we don't have any problems on that.. no, definitely not on that. And also not on
2194 the tribes they are from. Because we got Jola everything. Or everybody is – of course they
2195 make jokes about the different tribes – but no..

2196 INT: *Are there many different tribes or how is it?*

197 JAC: The mix I believe, we mainly have Jola and Wolof, but we also have a little from other
198 tribes as well. I believe in total there are 7 or something. But mainly is Jola and Wolof.
199 Yeah.

200 *INT: Okay..*

201 JAC: We have one agree with the teachers, and it's like everyone should be handled as one. And
202 if a girls want to vice president or president, she should get the opportunity to become the
203 president. And if there's a girl who wants to be a doctor, then she should get the opportunity
204 to become a doctor. Or if she wants to be a nurse, a nurse. And if there's a boy who wants to
205 be nurse, then he should be nurse. There is really... if a girl wants to go into technician, she
206 goes into technician. That is what we stand for, so everybody is one.

207 *INT: That's great... Jacco, I don't have many more questions. I think.. If we want to wrap up;*
208 *what can you say are your biggest strength of your organisation?*

209 JAC: The biggest strength of the organisations is that we are pure.

210 *INT: What does that mean?*

211 JAC: Pure with a good heart in order to give these children, really, not only us, but also our
212 teachers, we have one goal, and that's give the children the best chance they wish they could
213 get for a better future.

214 *INT: Okay. Thank you. Do you have an comments or questions?*

215 JAC: I'm really curious if I helped you a bit.

216 *INT: Well, yes. Or I hope so. One thing is to have the interview and conversation, but now I will*
217 *have to transcribe and analyse everything and see. So now I look forward to really get into*
218 *the work.*

219 JAC: Yeah. I believe if you can could get like a really big NGO, and not a small or deprived one
220 like we are, then I believe you're seeing the difference that the big ones are standing further
221 away from their.. their actual .. where it all has been started. Because it has started
222 somewhere small and they became so big that they can't control it anymore. So there are
223 coming so many layers in between and then finally there is someone there need a project
224 who is, uhm.. implementing his vision, or her vision, which just might be slightly different
225 than the vision of the NGO, and I believe that once you get the smaller ones, because they
226 are limited in stuff or voluntary work, but also limited in the opportunities. That they are
227 more focused on getting the opportunities out of the Gambians themselves, and they give
228 them just the stuff they need or the financial support they need, and they require, and let
229 them guide. Actually, we decide to let *them* guide us to what they need. Because they are
230 there with .. they are together with the children and with the teachers, so they should.. And
231 they are amongst, in contact with the parents. So, once you involve your whole community,
232 nothing can go wrong, because they know the chances in their country. They know where

∴233 they should focus on and how they can improve their education or their opportunity to get a
∴234 better future. And I believe that once you are a smaller foundation, that you have, that
∴235 you're more in direct contact with your own teachers. We are having like every day, text
∴236 message – well, if they have credit – on what the developments are [laughing about the
∴237 credit comment].

∴238 *INT: Would you say that is the goal of your organisation? Is it for them to take over at some point*
∴239 *or for it to grow? What is your path?*

∴240 JAC: Oh, we don't know. We hope that we can build the education centre so strong that there is a
∴241 moment where they are, they will tell us that there is no need anymore to continue going on
∴242 with the support and that they can support themselves. Hopefully, some time. There comes a
∴243 moment they come and say like; 'well, we have to divide our paths and we can continue on
∴244 ourselves' or something. And yeah, that would be the best compliment of our work, I think.

∴245 *INT: Yeah. I think that was a great end note.*

∴246 JAC: Yeah! [laughing].

∴247 *INT: So Jacco, thank you so much, thank you for your words and your time.*

∴248 JAC: Thank you, June. Maybe we meet each other in the future when we are all able to travel
∴249 again. Thank you. Bye bye

1250 Appendix 5 – Transcribe of interview with
1251 Isatou Jallow (Gambian woman)

1252 *[The interviewer has presented herself, asked for consent to record the interview and explained the*
1253 *aim and topic of the project].*

1254 *INT: Thank you for creating time for this interview, maybe let's just get started? Can you start*
1255 *with telling me; what is your name and what is your occupation at the moment?*

1256 *ISJ: I'm Isatou Jallow, I'm 25, and I currently work with the International Kids Center here in*
1257 *The Gambia as an Associate Officer in Communication and Knowledge Management.*

1258 *INT: For how long have you been doing that?*

1259 *ISJ: So, I've been here for 7-8 months, or there about.*

1260 *INT: Could you describe your educational background? Where did you go to school, how many*
1261 *years?*

1262 *ISJ: Okay. So, uhm.. I started school when I was 4 years old, so literally I've been in the school*
1263 *system for about 21 years, 22. And so I went to Ndows Comprehensive School, so from*
1264 *daycare all the way to my senior secondary school. So I went to Ndows daycare and then I*
1265 *went to Ndows primary school and then I went to St. Joseph ex-pupil's for my higher level*
1266 *of the primary school which is literally still on the Ndow side. So there I did my entire*
1267 *school. From primary, and senior secondary school under the same school, so; from daycare*
1268 *to primary school, to junior high and then to senior secondary school as well in Ndows. So*
1269 *from, let's say primary school all the way to junior school, I was.. uh, so because of the way*
1270 *the Gambian school system works, doing that period, you literally do everything, so you*
1271 *don't specialize at that part, so you do every other subjects that every other student is doing,*
1272 *whether you like it or not, but when you get to senior secondary school, which is like grade*
1273 *10-12, that is when you get to specialize in 3 different fields that most majority of the*
1274 *schools in this country has, so there's like the science field, there's commerce field and then*
1275 *there's the arts field. And then so, for me in high school, I went to, I was in the science*
1276 *track, I was in the science field. So, I did my grade 10-12 in Ndows comprehensive, and*
1277 *then right after graduation from high school, I went to university of The Gambia to study*
1278 *environmental science where I did 4 years to get my degree and then started working since*
1279 *then.*

1280 *INT: Okay. And when did you graduate?*

1281 ISJ: [laughing]. This is a tricky one. So I completed my degree, or my program in 2018, so I
1282 started uni in 2014, and then I completed my program in 2018, BUT, I had to write my
1283 thesis, and so I was working at the time and I lost what I was studying in uni, and I was
1284 mostly concentrated on work, so I didn't do my thesis until like 2 years after, I think. So yeah.. I
1285 actually graduated uni last year, yeah in 2020. So 2 years after I completed my program I
1286 decided to complete my thesis and then graduate.

1287 INT: *Okay, well congratulations!*

1288 ISJ: Yeaah.. thank you.

1289 INT: *It's nice that you finished it in the end, I mean life happens.*

1290 ISJ: Yeah that's the most important.

1291 INT: *Exactly. I was wondering, is the job you have now based on your education?*

1292 ISJ: So, no. This is .. So, my current work is entirely different from everything I learned in
1293 school, so.. From high school, because all of the other places or all the other time I was in
1294 school, I was literally doing everything there was to be done, so I was doing science
1295 subjects, I was doing commerce subjects, and I was doing art subjects as well, but like I
1296 said, when I got to high school, then I had to specialize, and that was a problem as well.. I
1297 wanted to go to another school, but then because in The Gambia here, when you are in grade
1298 9 and you, uhm, so, we have an exam you have to write to get to grade 10 which is the
1299 WAEC (West African Examination Council), I'm sure you've heard about it. So, for the
1300 WAEC, and here you select a school in the form that they give you, the school that you want
1301 to go to. So, the school that I selected, I didn't select the school that I wanted to go to when I
1302 got to grade 10 so when I went to the interview there, because I didn't select the school, I
1303 had to go back to the school that I left, which is still Ndows. So the problem there was, I
1304 wanted to do art, but because of my grades, when I transitioned from grade 9 to grade 10,
1305 the school, because they didn't have enough students in science as well, so maybe.. I am
1306 saying a lot of things that maybe make you confused as well, so if there's anything you
1307 don't understand, just ask me after, so.. In the Gambia here, as well, there is a level of
1308 importance put on science. So, if you have a really good grade from junior school going to
1309 high school, it is expected that you can get into the science field. So, from grade 9 I got
1310 really good grades, I went to high school and I wanted to do art at that point, and I knew at
1311 that point that there were a few things in there that I was interested in. And so I wanted to do
1312 art. But when I got to the interview in the school, the school said they wouldn't register me
1313 for the art field, so if I didn't want to do science, then I would have to go look for another
1314 school. And at that point me and my father had already done so many plans .. I'll just do
1315 science, and so I did that in high school. And then from high school as well and to university
1316 I didn't get enough time I guess and then, so there was not enough time to discover what I
1317 wanted to do and so there was a transition; like 'oh, environmental sciences and its popping
1318 right now, and I thought 'alright, I'll just do it'. But when I got to my first transitioning from
1319 my first to my second year it's when I got exposed to a lot of things outside of the corners of

2320 the school, so I got into organisations, I got to do a few radio shows here and there, I got to
2321 meet a lot of young people who are doing incredible work. And during that period, I
2322 discovered things that I could do, or things that I enjoyed outside of what I was doing in
2323 school. So, that was where the transition in me happened. At that point I wanted to divert
2324 my course to do something else. At that time, there was no.. so I wanted move to journalism
2325 and media, but the problem was that at that point the school, the university was just
2326 established and I wasn't sure, so I was like let me just finish and then move on to what I
2327 really want to do, like what I really want to do with my life. So I got a job in my second year
2328 with a social media company in the country, and that's literally how it started for me. So
2329 even though I was doing all these other things at school, I mean it was only to get over the
2330 degree, at least I might as well finish it and then move ahead with something I really want to
2331 do. So from there, I worked as communications officer, moved from there to the UNFPA
2332 where I worked as a communications associate as well and then some time last year I moved
2333 to the International case centre.

2334 *INT: Wow. You have had a lot of experience since graduating then. I was wondering.. You said*
2335 *that the program.. there's this emphasis on choosing science when you're good in school.*
2336 *Does that mean that you didn't really choose it yourself, but that the school did? Or who*
2337 *was it that chose that for you?*

2338 *ISJ: So, for me.. at that point it was relay because I didn't have the courage to push for what I*
2339 *really wanted. Because the school like 'because you have good grades, we're not gonna*
2340 *enrol you in arts'. If you don't choose science then you have to go to another school. So, for*
2341 *me, I think it's also because of the way education is structured in our country as well. Unlike*
2342 *most countries, in The Gambia.. it's also not knowing, so when I was going to school, when*
2343 *we ask people what they want to be when you get older, it is; oh I want to be a doctor, oh I*
2344 *want to be an engineer, oh I want to be .. Just all those things you hear all over.. so there was*
2345 *not a wide range that people can choose from. So you only know .. So if someone went to*
2346 *the science field or that person is going to be a doctor. So you don't know a wide range of*
2347 *options you can do with your life or you can choose from. So, a lot of us were not sure, even*
2348 *when we got to high school, we were not even sure. I mean we had a counsellor in school,*
2349 *but literally, when I was in my final year, I used to go to the office every day with a new*
2350 *thought of what I wanted to be. So today, it's a doctor, tomorrow I want to be a*
2351 *psychologist, the next day 'oh I think I want to be an engineer now', so there's not that*
2352 *much exposure for a lot of people. But also, that mean it's from the curriculum what the*
2353 *people know in the country and it's a whole lot of things to be honest.*

2354 *INT: Yeah.. I think that's really interesting. Would you say that there are specific issues here for*
2355 *girls, or anything that has to do with gender related challenges?*

2356 *ISJ: Uhm, yes. There is. So when. I was growing up.. I feel like I'm a very Tom-Boy when it*
2357 *comes to this country, so, I used to play football a lot. When I was like 14, I liked sports,*
2358 *and I literally did all the sports possible in the school, so if there's anything like physical*
2359 *activities I could do, I wanted to do that. There was a physical education I wanted to try out,*
2360 *I would be the person for that. But understanding the way the country works this is not*

2361 something that women are expected to do. So, as a young girls, you're expected to stay at
2362 home, help my mom in the kitchen; cook, clean, do whatever, and not be outside with the
2363 guys and play football – even if that's what my interests are. So, for me I think sometimes
2364 too, I think about it, and then I blame how.. it was difficult for me to decide what I wanted
2365 to do because I was so invested in something else that I wanted, but because of the way the
2366 society was built I couldn't pursue that .. because the school, you couldn't.. so, the only
2367 times you had to do these things to play football maybe or run or do other things was when
2368 you had the free period of school. So, the boys had the opportunity to play football or do
2369 whatever they wanted, be at the basketball lawn or do whatever they wanted regardless of
2370 what they dreamed of being after school – whatever they wanted to do outside of the school
2371 period, they had the liberty to do that. But as girls, you didn't have that liberty. The only
2372 time you had to do that was during the 13-minute break or PE that you have, but even at
2373 that, you have to maybe sneak athletic clothes and all of these things. So, for me that was a
2374 struggle. Transitioning from that.. and because the school curriculum does not open up
2375 about this as well, so it's like, even when you go to school, there's a certain way that they
2376 treat girls different from the way that they treat boys. Sometime, I was in Uni – this is in
2377 university – I was in my third or final year I think, and then we had this lecturer and every
2378 single time he came to the class, he would say, he would make really nasty jokes around..
2379 about women, about men and all of these things, and I remember one time he came to the
2380 class and he said, and he looked at me, because most of the times when he threw these
2381 things in the class, I'd be the first one to jump and just attack or business or whatever
2382 ..because I can't just sit there, right? And so, I remember this one time he looked at me and
2383 said; once you are done with your bachelor's, you should go and get married and not get a
2384 master's degree, otherwise you will not have a husband. So.. it's the masses of the people,
2385 but also how the hierarchy is built, so even though people are educated, they still can't see
2386 pat *a woman* and *a man*. So, it's that, they don't even pay attention to excelling women or
2387 women being good at something in school, so it's always like 'oh, you are good at this, but
2388 eventually you will end up in a man's house, so why are you stretching yourself or why are
2389 you doing all of these things?'. So, there's like.. in a way, you come to the school and they
2390 don't tell you like 'because you're a woman, you're going to get married, so we are not
2391 gonna pay massive attention to you' – they don't explicitly say that, but you can see it in
2392 their actions, you can see it in the way they treat men and women, and the comments they
2393 throw around as well. So it's like, the woman is excelling, or the girl is excelling, but still,
2394 they are going to end up in a marriage. And then sometimes, you see in a class a man and a
2395 woman are competing, and probably the woman outweighs the man or does better than the
2396 man, like in the final year or something, and then they will tell the man: "you are letting a
2397 girl do this to you? A girl that is going to end up in a man's house". So, it's common like
2398 that and the way they treat these people, and how they don't open up a lot of room for young
2399 girls as well.

2400 But also, another thing that we don't really discuss in the country is the issue of violence
2401 that happens between teachers and female students as well. So that is another hindrance
2402 against girls when it comes to school, because sometimes you go to school, it's mostly in
2403 high school and maybe you're a little matured, you are having breasts and all of these

2404 things, and then, you know, the male teachers really think they can *come* at you like that,
2405 and sometimes it affects the education of a lot of girls. Some people have had to drop out,
2406 because they can't stand up to the teachers – again, you have to respect them – but also,
2407 sometimes the teachers have made advances that break these students and maybe got them
2408 pregnant some time and they have to drop out of school. It's in the statistics as well. And the
2409 country shows that when you get to the lower levels of education (primary), there is most
2410 likely more girls than boys, but when you get to higher levels, you will realize that a lot of
2411 the girls have dropped out of school. And that is due to a range of issues that's a
2412 consequence of society, but also the school system as well. So sometimes, a girl gets
2413 pregnant out of the school and automatically, even if it's a girl and a boy that are in the same
2414 grade or the same class, and if the girl gets pregnant, the girls has to drop out of school and
2415 that boy can still continue his education. So that's.. pheew! [sound]. It's a very complex
2416 issue, but the education system, like any other system in the country, is not very conducive
2417 for women and girls.

2418 *INT: I am wondering if there is any kind of support system in the education? These teachers you*
2419 *are talking about now, I am assuming they are all males? Or what is the gender*
2420 *composition of teachers or authorities there?*

2421 *ISJ: So, they're mostly male.. there are more male teachers than females. In my senior secondary*
2422 *school, I can see that if we had like over 30 teachers in the school, then at least 5 were*
2423 *women. So the majority were men. The only female that actually comes to my head is 1, and*
2424 *the other one in school was when I was in grade 10, so outside of that person, I can't even*
2425 *see another woman that I can remember from the school. So, there's a difference, or the*
2426 *ratio is waaay.. the range is very huge. It's way more men in education than there are*
2427 *females.*

2428 *INT: How do you think that impacted you in thinking about your education opportunities?*

2429 *ISJ: So, the education is like every other system like I said, so when you look at The Gambia,*
2430 *most top positions are occupied by men. So, when I was younger, I was looking at it and it*
2431 *automatically brings limitations in my life. I don't see a lot of familiar faces, and you live in*
2432 *a society where they're constantly telling you; 'oh, you are just going to school, BUT you*
2433 *might not even need this education because you have to take care of a man, you have to*
2434 *make babies' and all of these things, and so, every single time you look at these top*
2435 *positions where you might want to see yourself, and you see it's all men; it strengthens what*
2436 *these people are telling you; so it's like 'oh!', so it automatically limits you as a person. It's*
2437 *like 'I want to go to school, BUT can I really push through?'. So, it takes only people that*
2438 *are courageous enough to push to get to where they want. So, in school, I remember, the one*
2439 *teacher that I remember from high school, was one that I really related to in school, so she*
2440 *was my favourite teacher back in school. And we used to have a XX .. and all of that. And*
2441 *so, it just explains that a female teacher, so because she was a woman there were so many*
2442 *things we could talk to her about, there were so many things that were easier with her, so it*
2443 *was easy for us to always go to the woman and talk to her about issues we were going*
2444 *through, but most understanding; 'oh, there's a woman in this position. I can be in that*

2445 position as well' or they might be able to understand where I'm coming from because
2446 they've been where I am at this point, so it was easier to go that person to talk to them
2447 regardless. So, I remember when I was talking about the career struggles that we had, I
2448 remember when we told her - we told her, literally, almost every time - 'oh, we're not sure
2449 about what we want to do with our lives and all of these things, and most of them would just
2450 brush it off, but I remember when we told her about that particular struggle, she took it up
2451 upon herself and she came to the class and every single time we had her - she used to teach
2452 math - and every single time we had her, she allocated 10 minutes to literally just discuss
2453 careers that she thinks that some of us might be interested in and some of us might want to
2454 pursue. And just bringing in all of these examples. So, it really just shows how deep it.. I'm
2455 not saying this goes to all women, but some of them there's a deep level of care that comes
2456 with them being in those positions, because for one, they understand that when they were in
2457 that position, I mean, they didn't even have as much girls as we had when we were in
2458 school. So she understand some of the struggles we might go through, and then she talks to
2459 us bout boys, she talks about men and trouble in school. The first person they call, instead of
2460 my parents is her - that is the dynamic that we had. And then in university as well, when I
2461 was in university, my the entire department, there was no single female lecturer. The only
2462 woman that was in my department was the faculty officer. So, you're basically like; 'I'm
2463 doing this degree, but I don't even see a single woman'. So I went through my entire 4-years
2464 program, I remember when I was writing my thesis, and then I was to get a supervisor, and I
2465 was looking for a woman to do that with me, cause I didn't want to, I mean in this situation,
2466 I like to relate to a woman more, so I wanted a woman to supervise me and went through the
2467 ministries and I went through the National Environmental Agency and all of these places, I
2468 couldn't find a single woman to do this with me. So, it's really difficult when you're a
2469 woman, and as women you get to a certain point where you look and you realize 'oh, it's
2470 just me here', and then you look down there's a whole lot of women that are struggling
2471 down there with a lot of complex issues that we don't even understand, because; for one, we
2472 have privileges that, really, you did not have to struggle with to do all of that, so really, it's
2473 really difficult. Even at this point of my career, I look sometimes and I'm like 'oh, where do
2474 I push from here?' because you look at the top and there's maybe a hand full of women you
2475 can look up to, and sometimes you still think about what other people were saying like 'oh,
2476 you still need a man', even as much as you want to defy that and let them know that I can
2477 push through without that marriage, without a man pushing me or being with a man, but
2478 still, it's difficult sometimes.

2479 *INT: Yeah.. I was then wondering if you think that was different in the NGO? What was different*
2480 *in the environment?*

2481 *ISJ: Yeah, so for me, I think so. Because it's also different organisations we have in The*
2482 *Gambia. The most organisations that I've worked with are women-led organisations. So,*
2483 *most people that I've worked with outside of school or outside of my house have been*
2484 *women. That's the only space that I go, and then you realize 'oh, everything they tell me*
2485 *outside of this space is a lie'. So most of the organisation I work with a women-led, I*
2486 *worked with Think Young Women where it's purely women working in that organisation*
2487 *and they are working for women. So, in these spaces that you go, 95% of the time you spend*

2488 together, you talk about your daily struggle, you talk about pushing through and all of those
2489 things, and 5% of the time you are talking about how you are winning, how you are pushing
2490 through, and it helps you re-organize and focus and to understand ‘oh, these people are
2491 getting through in these areas’. But for me as well, I think the most important thing with
2492 organisations is, I think that is what shaped majority of what has worked for me these past 5
2493 years, approximately. Most of the women that I met, during that period, are the ones that are
2494 still holding my hand, pushing me through struggles that I go through. Sometimes I just look
2495 at them and then I admire the work that they do. So, they exposed me to a lot that have..
2496 even though they are still pushing through the struggles, they are still defying what society
2497 is telling them, but I can still look to them and be like ‘oh, this person has gone through a
2498 lot, so I can get to that particular level as level’. But also, when I get stuck somewhere, I can
2499 call one of them and be like ‘yo, this is what I’m going through, what do you think?’ And
2500 career wise, I’ve met one person that is like a replica of what I want to do with my life, so
2501 even if I get stuck at work, I’m able to just send her a message and be like ‘this is what’s
2502 happening, what do you think about it?’, and get her professional opinion on that. So outside
2503 of school and outside of my household, I think I really met incredible women that reshaped
2504 my thoughts around education, one, and also my thought around what I can do and what I
2505 can be, so I think these organisations are really.. so, when I was going to school, I
2506 understood that I didn’t need the papers that the school was giving me to actually excel in
2507 life, but now it has been strengthened. And for me, the major thing is how it’s not a
2508 blueprint – not everyone went to primary school, went to senior school, went to university
2509 and now they’re excelling in their careers. I’ve met women that have like, gone to primary
2510 school and agriculture that are excelling in their life. There are some people that maybe
2511 gone to junior school, and they got married off and they have kids, but still are excelling in
2512 their lives. So, it has reshaped my thoughts around what education *is*, what it is considered
2513 and how sometimes the education system and the four corners we are stuck in usually just
2514 limits us and we can do so much more outside of that.

2515 *INT: Can you describe what it was that these organisations did to shape your thoughts?*

2516 *ISJ: So, uhm.. I started to work with Think Young Women, a young women-led organisation in*
2517 *The Gambia, I think it was in ’17. So that is where I learned about issues, I really didn’t*
2518 *think were issues. So, I come from, like, a typical example is the issue around Female*
2519 *Genital Mutilation (FGM) and Child Marriage. I come from a Fula family, the Fula tribe in*
2520 *The Gambia, and these two things are like... I don’t know how to say it.. are like *embedded**
2521 *in our culture; like, I grew up in that culture believing these were normal things that should*
2522 *happen, right? Even though it’s never talked about, it’s never discussed, but, you know, it’s*
2523 *the big elephant in the room and it’s normal. And so, until I got into these spaces, my*
2524 *thoughts around that were never challenged. So, nobody stops me and asks ‘oh, what’s your*
2525 *thoughts on FGM’ and oh, I’m like, ‘I think that’s normal’. But nobody took the time to say;*
2526 *‘have you heard about the harm it causes on women or have you thought about so and so*
2527 *and so?’. So, for child marriage for example, even though I have always been against it, it*
2528 *exists in my family because I have family members who have been given away, and I*
2529 *remember my aunties, when they would come to my house when I was younger, and they*
2530 *had comments like; ‘your head are either in your books or playing football, but your mates*

2531 somewhere else are nursing their babies'.. right? So it was like a normal language that I
2532 heard, that I've learned, but nobody challenged that, or challenged my belief on that, so it's
2533 only when I got to these spaces that I understood; 'oh, this is actually *not* normal', right?
2534 And those are just specific examples. I remember, so, when I was going to school, I was not
2535 the one that went like, outside, the class, so it's literally my school and the house, so I was
2536 always going to school and coming back home, so I didn't explore a lot outside of these
2537 places, so you can understand how *stuck* my range of thought was during that period
2538 because all I knew was go to school, come back to the house and, ok, sometimes, go outside
2539 and play, so you can imagine just how... the only thing that I know, is what I was taught in
2540 school. I grew up .. I wasn't a big fan of TV, I didn't watch a lot of TV, I didn't listen to a
2541 lot of radio as well, so most of the things that shaped my thoughts were from school and
2542 from my house. So, it's only when I got to these spaces that I got to understand a whole
2543 range of issues. So, it was even when I got there I understood 'oh, you are going to school,
2544 but you know that you can do something outside of your school, right?'. So, if I didn't go to
2545 those organisations, probably I would be stuck in Ministry of Environment doing God
2546 knows what, stuff that I don't enjoy. So, when I started going to these organisations, when I
2547 got exposed to the idea, which I realized I liked, and then I started taking photos and
2548 realized I like that as well, and I just came into organisations that shaped my career to this.
2549 So, I went to school, I understand the things you taught me in school, but I can still excel
2550 outside of the four corners of the classroom, but also relating to people, understanding their
2551 daily struggles and how some things that you might not consider problematic or something
2552 like that are harming other people as well. So, now that I'm at this point in my life, every
2553 single time I think about something, I have to really sit and think and analyse, even if all I
2554 want to do is joke. So, I really have to sit and analyse 'oh, is it going to harm the person that
2555 I'm saying this to, is it going to be offensive?', so, it's made me more empathetic I'd say,
2556 again. The school system is very straightforward, if you think like this, then that's it - that's
2557 how we're taught in school. You just go to the school day, fill your head up with stuff and
2558 then we gonna take care of the exam. That's literally the school system, so it doesn't give
2559 you the room to think on your own, to learn stuff on your own that's related to people,
2560 related to yourself and understand how it affects you and how it affects other people as well.
2561 So, a perfect example is; in school, they tell you the boiling point of water is 100 degrees, so
2562 it's not like you sit and think about 'ohh.. can it be less than that, or why is it at 100
2563 degrees?' – "why this, why that", so they say that to you and that's what you have to believe
2564 and that's what you have to give back to them. So, outside of the school, I got to the point
2565 where, every single time you have to say something or do something, you have to think
2566 about it again, think about how it affects you as a person, or how it affects the next person.
2567 So to just generally be a better person to the world, to contribute development, without just
2568 copying and pasting what the school gave me.

2569 *INT:* *I'm wondering; what does your family say to this now? That you have been a part of these*
2570 *organisations and that you learned so much more on critical thinking?*

2571 *ISJ:* [laughing]. Ohhh.. so the funny thing is, so both my mom and my dad are not educated.. my
2572 siblings are, all of us are educated. And most of us have a degree and all of that, so the
2573 problem now is, because of the expose I have is, most of my siblings don't necessarily have

2574 that exposure – I have like 5 older siblings and I’m the last person – so most of them don’t
2575 have that exposure. So for most of them, it was just school and then home and then some of
2576 them got to do their degree. So, outside of that they didn’t really explore a range of issues on
2577 how it affects people, so until today, we argue about issues in my house, so they start talking
2578 about it and then I am there, and in fact ‘oh, let’s keep quiet, the feminist is here, we can’t
2579 have this discussion’. So, for my mom, she doesn’t even get what we are talking about or
2580 what I’m into, because I have to literally sit and explain; this is what it is, this is what I’m
2581 doing, this is dadadada, and then sometimes I don’t have the time or the patience for that. So
2582 for them, sometimes it’s just; I am going to work, I am working at this place, I am working
2583 at this and, you know, all of that, but they don’t understand the depth of what I do or how.
2584 But for my siblings, I’d say.. So I have two older sisters, and three older brothers, and my
2585 two older sisters; one of them is almost at the level of where I am because she’s the one that
2586 actually threw me into activism and all of these things to be honest. But for me, they
2587 understand the work, they understand what I do, but the problem there is whether they
2588 believe it or not. So my older sister still thinks ‘oh, I’m not gonna get married because I’m
2589 getting old..’, I’m like, ‘sis, I’m trying to make money and all that comes with it, *that* is my
2590 focus at the moment’, so.. I think it’s because I was privileged enough to get that exposure.
2591 It’s not like my thoughts, or my analysis is always right to be honest. Sometimes, they say
2592 the wrong thing, and I am on the wrong, but for me, I think the difference is that I have the
2593 privilege to get to positions where I have to really think about stuff, so I don’t just take
2594 things. So, when my parents, or when, so there’s this thing in Africa, I don’t know if you
2595 know about that, so your parents tell you; this is not right or this is right, and then you don’t
2596 have to question it, so it’s like; oh, they say this is right or it’s wrong, and I have to take it
2597 like that. So, I moved past that level. You don’t stand and tell me this is not right and then I
2598 take it like that. So, you tell me this is right, and I take it like that. I want you to think; the
2599 way you are thinking about it now, it’s actually wrong or affect this person and all of that, so
2600 for me I’ve moved past that level. I’m not taking it as what I was told. And then sometimes..
2601 for me, it’s generally understanding when to stop. Sometimes, even with my family, I have
2602 to accept they don’t understand, and not everyone will understand what it is you are talking
2603 about or what you believe in, or what you say. And so, it’s understanding when you need to
2604 talk about it or whether you think they are absorbing it, otherwise just keep it, or else it will
2605 create friction that both of you don’t need in your lives. For example, I have a niece, she is
2606 very stubborn and then every single time she goes to school, she gets in trouble, and I keep
2607 telling her mom; ‘don’t you think that maybe the school system is not really working for
2608 her?’ Maybe, because for that person the first instinct is to cage her, to just take her
2609 somewhere because she is getting in trouble and you don’t want her to go to other places
2610 and cause more trouble. I’m like; maybe the school system is limiting her? Or maybe your
2611 household is limiting, cause literally she doesn’t want to be there. Sometimes she goes to
2612 people who are her friends, so maybe she needs to see more people, or maybe she needs to
2613 interact with more people; ‘don’t you think you need to expose her or get her to do other
2614 things that might actually control or help shape who she is’. It’s a better way than just
2615 caging. But because of the way people think in this country as well it’s ‘oh, this person *has*
2616 to go to school’, it’s like a linear line to success. That person has to go to school, then find a
2617 new XX, then if you’re a woman; find a good husband, and if you’re a man; find a good

1618 wife, and then build a family together, so sometimes people don't understand; maybe you
1619 have to move the other one further, and then move the other one; so you can move the
1620 pieces around just so it fits the person, not move the person to fit the pieces, if that makes
1621 sense.

1622 *INT: Yeah.. would you then recommend her or other girls to follow your journey? Maybe to be*
1623 *exposed to these organisations or civic society?*

1624 *ISJ: Yeah, a hundred percent. If any young girl, or any girl that have the opportunity, I definitely*
1625 *recommend that they get this exposure and join organisations. It doesn't have to be*
1626 *organisations that are, I mean, I highly recommend feminist organisations because we have*
1627 *to fight the causes of women, but literally just go outside the four corners of the class room,*
1628 *go outside of the four corners of your household, just put in something outside of those*
1629 *things to do with your life. It helps you discover yourself; it helps to understand yourself*
1630 *better and know things that you are interested in; things that you like and things that you*
1631 *don't like. So, it's easier to shape your career when you.. otherwise, you only know what the*
1632 *school is giving you, or what your parents are giving you. You can not discover yourself*
1633 *when you are in those spaces where you are just taking in, so you have to be in spaces where*
1634 *you are exploring, where you are giving. So that, in those instances, you are able to know*
1635 *what your strengths are, what your weaknesses are, what you're good at, what you like and*
1636 *all of these things that helps shape, and helps it get easier for you to determine where you*
1637 *want to be in the future. Otherwise, you will just be there; oh, my aunty XX said this or my*
1638 *mom and my dad said that I'm taking that. You might contribute to the world, but you might*
1639 *not be able to meaningfully contribute to the development of this world to be honest,*
1640 *because you would only be a person that in this world is just taking in people's ideas or*
1641 *taking people's thought, but you don't really give out or challenge people's ideas because*
1642 *you have not left the spaces, or you've not been in spaces that gives you room to challenge*
1643 *and give out ideas and all of these things. So, I highly recommend it. Just yesterday, I was*
1644 *talking to some of my colleagues and one of them is supposed to do her master's degree and*
1645 *she was advised to take a gap year and travel, or do something else with her life before she*
1646 *gets to decide on what she wants to do with her master's degree, and I told her; I wish*
1647 *someone had told me that when I was moving from high school to university. I wish*
1648 *someone had told me to take a gap year during that period or someone had just told me to do*
1649 *something outside of school, or something outside of my house to discover myself and to*
1650 *discover my purpose. So I hundred percent recommend.*

1651 *INT: Yeah. So if you were to tell me 3 things that you did not expect happening as being part of*
1652 *these organisations, what would they be?*

1653 *ISJ: Uhm.. So I think one thing that surprised me was that I got my career, or my life, in shape.*
1654 *Because, in school, it was literally all over the place; today is A, tomorrow is B. But for the*
1655 *past 5,4,3 years it has really taken shape, and even I looking at it, understand how I have*
1656 *transitioned from a very chaotic space to how everything is really just taking full shape on*
1657 *how I'm able to understand how to build in my thesis and understand how I can move it to*
1658 *any other space that I want to be in.*

1659 INT: *Yeah.*

1660 ISJ: Uhm, the other thing that I didn't expect by being in these spaces would be, maybe you
1661 don't realize, but I have a very timid personality, right? And so, growing up I never really
1662 thought I'd be able to challenge people, one, but literally just interact with people without
1663 even my (something nervous?), without being paranoid, but now I'm able to understand; so
1664 what I didn't expect, getting to this observation, so before I got into the organisations, I
1665 could hardly interact with people, or even speak in public or go to the radio. But now, even
1666 with my timid personality, I am able to get on these spaces and deliver what I want to
1667 deliver and then go back to doing whatever I wanted to do, so I really didn't expect that
1668 getting into these spaces.

1669 I guess the third one would be, I didn't expect that.. that I would meet as much influential
1670 people as I have met during the course of these years that have been there. So, I got into
1671 these organisations, done a range of work with people and for people, and literally, if there's
1672 anything I want to do in the country, there's someone to help me do that, it's literally just a
1673 phone call away. So getting into these spaces, hoping to just contribute, hoping to just learn,
1674 hoping to just interact with people that I know, but in the process I end with a network of
1675 people that I can count on or that can help me move things if I want to do them. And that
1676 has really been helpful in my career as well, because most of the things that I do – I didn't
1677 sit in school and do it or learn it in university, high school or whatever, these are things that
1678 I learned from people that I worked with, learned from networks that I build – and so, that is
1679 one thing; cause I got into it and I was like; I'll just pop in and pop out and do whatever, and
1680 now it's like I built a network of people that I can just literally have to get a lot of things.

1681 INT: *Yeah. I want to know who got you into an organisation. How did you start being exposed to*
1682 *all of this work?*

1683 ISJ: So, actually I think I was in grade 10, but it started with my sister. She met someone; so she
1684 studied in Marocco, she was doing medicine in morocco, and so she met someone who she
1685 thinks had kind of the same personality as me, but who were still able to interact with
1686 people; speak in public and all of that, and so we were not together, I think a period of 2 or 3
1687 years, and then she came back, and then she realized I had gotten worse. I can't look at
1688 people, I can't talk to people, I can't.. Like, literally I'm just in my little corner, reading my
1689 book or whatever, so the interesting is; I started with StarFish International. And so she went
1690 there for, I think they had a public speaking day or a funding, and so she realized how brave
1691 these young girls were, how courageous they were and how they just went on the stage and
1692 said whatever they wanted to say without thinking about what anyone said, and on the spot,
1693 she signed me up, and then she came back home and then she was like; I saw these girls, and
1694 I think we should go there. As soon I was like 'no! I'm not going'. And then we had a bit of
1695 push and pull, and so, I went to StarFish International. And as far as I remember, these girls
1696 were speaking, and I was like; I don't know what my sister was thinking, but I'm not
1697 coming back here. So, it went on like that, and I think I didn't.. even though my summer
1698 was distorted, I'd go this day, and then when they say I have to speak in public the next day,
1699 I would not show up that day, but then I'll show up the day after. But I did an entire summer

2700 at StarFish and a few other summers there. And I think from there on, things just started
2701 taking shape. And from StarFish International I moved to Lend a Hand Society, where I met
2702 a whole lot of young people that were doing great work, and in Lend a Hand, I started doing
2703 radio programs. And then I went to Think Young Women which has really contributed to
2704 *my* career and the work that I do now. So, I think Think Young Women, that was where I
2705 started interacting with more women and got into feminism and women's right activism and
2706 all of these things. And during that period I did radio programs, and a whole lot of other
2707 things as well, so from there I met people, and then I moved on. So yeah, I think my
2708 voluntary work stopped at Think Young Women and from there I started working with State
2709 of Mic. But still, I volunteer with Think Young Women up to date and...

2710 *INT: So you are still actively working with the organisations?*

2711 *ISJ:* Yes, so I still actively work with Think Young Women, I still support their work, and I co-
2712 founded Equals Now as well, a women-led organisation In The Gambia. It's radical
2713 feminism and all of these things. So I co-founded that with radical feminism in mind and
2714 since then we have been doing a lot of.. For a lot of organisations in The Gambia as well,
2715 they don't come right up and say; this is a feminist organisation, so it's like; it's a women's-
2716 led organisation and dadadada, so I kind of feel like it waters down the movement, and so
2717 we were like 'oh, let's come up with an organisation and the label or the brand of the
2718 organisation will be feminism', so young feminism, it's a feminist network, it's a feminist
2719 organisation and we are going to do the feminist work in the country, both online and
2720 offline. So, from 2019 to date, we've done a host of activities as well, so what we do is we
2721 have a digital volunteer's network, but also, we try to give more young women the platform.
2722 So, in Equals Now it's not a very formal organisation where you have to, you know, let it
2723 this way and all of that, this creates just a lot of division where people are able to come in
2724 and listen to the experience or work with women or organisations, or working within a
2725 movement so they are able to build their skills on maybe movement building or organizing
2726 events and doing all of these things while also contributing to gender equality in the country.
2727 So for a lot of young women who pe-realized as well, I think sometime in 2019, we had a
2728 call from the .., and a lot of people send in their CV's where they lie, so it's funny how, you
2729 feel like you expect people to have something that was in your CV or a cover letter for
2730 people that have graduated high school or are in the university – some of them still can't do
2731 this. So we realize that; oh, I think something is wrong in the school system, maybe they are
2732 not teaching all the skills that they need. So we opened up our space, so that other young
2733 women can come in and learn skills that will be beneficial in their work. So, that's
2734 something basically under .. from start to finish. That something *you* might need, the school
2735 would not teach you that. It will not teach you how to organize an event, you will not learn
2736 that at university. But doing that in the organisation is something that you may require when
2737 you go on to work. Because the work places, most of the times, they organize events and if
2738 you're not familiar with this then it's difficult for you to do that. So, still actively in
2739 organisations in The Gambia. I mostly work with women-led and feminist organisations, so
2740 yeah.. that is..

∴741 *INT: That is so cool. And it sounds really really great. So Isa, actually we have been talking for*
∴742 *one hour now. I don't have any more questions, but I would like to ask if there's any*
∴743 *comment you would like to add at this point?*

∴744 *ISJ: Mmh..*

∴745 *INT: Or anything you feel like you didn't get to say.*

∴746 *ISJ: I think I pretty much said a lot. I said a lot of things. But.. uhm.. It's just to say that, when it*
∴747 *comes to education, there are so many things that you would have to learn outside of the*
∴748 *school. I mean the formal school. Because it's very curated. It's very organized. There's*
∴749 *only so much that you can learn within that space because it's only one person coming in*
∴750 *front of you telling you; this is A, and this is B, and this is C – and in most cases you can't*
∴751 *even challenge that. So, it's very important for every single person. So, most of the learning*
∴752 *that people would do, they are going to do it outside of the school. You will have a lot of*
∴753 *young people that tell you; I went to school, I learned equation, I learned algebra and all of*
∴754 *these things, but I'm not applying it in my job and that's because the education system is not*
∴755 *curated in a way that teaches you what is relevant for your growth as a person and how you*
∴756 *can continue with your ideas. But the education is important because that is what gives you*
∴757 *a job, and a job is how you are able to get a living, but if you truly truly want to learn or you*
∴758 *truly want to fill yourself with stuff that will benefit you as a person, and benefit the world*
∴759 *as well, it happens outside of the corners of the education. And this is in organisations, this*
∴760 *is in the platforms that you engage in, and this is in daily, or the day-to-day ways you have*
∴761 *people, or you have a person or how you're able to interact with people, how you're able to*
∴762 *engage with them. You contribute to their life, but also they contribute to your life. So, it's*
∴763 *outside of the classroom, it's much more how you engage with people and how they*
∴764 *challenge your thoughts, and how they challenge the ideas that you have. That is what*
∴765 *makes you who you are and that is what shapes you as a person. Cause sometimes you are in*
∴766 *school, and because you don't get challenged, or because you don't challenge anyone, you*
∴767 *don't even know that maybe you share an idea and someone opposes you, it makes you*
∴768 *angry. Because you are not exposed to that in the school, and you can only know that when*
∴769 *you get on the platforms and say "it's A", and someone tells you "no, it's not A, it's C", and*
∴770 *you realize that because they said "it's not A, it's C", and that angered you. So that is how*
∴771 *you are able to discover yourself and how you are able to know what your purpose truly is*
∴772 *like and how you can pursue that. I guess that's the comment I have [laughing].*

∴773 *INT: Thank you so much Isatou for making time to talk to me and I really appreciate your*
∴774 *answers and your contribution for my thesis.*

∴775 *ISJ: Thank you.*

Appendix 6 – Coding

6a) An overview of the coded transcriptions identifying the societal challenges in the Gambian Society as perceived by the interviewees (lower rihgt). Here is also an overview of the needed solutions to the challenges as suggested by the interviewees.



6b) An overview of how capacity building is done in the NGO's overall (all NGO's together). The capacity building is coded into 5 themes, from where various activities, projects and thinking is created.

