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The Gambia, Topic: Human Rights

The Gambia: Developing Human Rights to Provide Women Equal Farming Opportunities

The Gambia is a relatively populated country within its region with a land mass of 11,295 square kilometers and a population of about 1.9 million people. Despite having distinct geographic components such as The Gambia River, a large freshwater source of water which cuts through the center of the country, The Gambia has extremely poor soil quality that results in only one-sixth of the land being arable (BBC, 2018). The Gambia's agricultural industry mostly consists of subsistence farming and cash crop production. Even though domestic subsistence farming composes the majority of the agricultural sector, only 50% of the required domestic need for food is met (FAO). Due to the rising prices of the international food market and insufficient domestic agricultural production, food deficit periods are becoming wider and increasingly prevalent within rural communities (FAO). According to The Minimum Development Goals Report (MDG) from 2014, minor strides have been made in advancing universal education and advocating for women empowerment in The Gambia. The MDG also acknowledges the importance of investing in agriculture when it comes to improving socioeconomic conditions in The Gambia. Issues that the country still has not been able to overcome are poverty, hunger, and combating HIV/AIDS and other infectious diseases. The Gambia gained independence from the United Kingdom in 1965 and the newly founded government became a republic under multiparty democratic rule (ICNL). Compared to its neighboring countries, The Gambia operates under a more established democratic government, meaning that many of The Gambia's relevant problems, such as food insecurity, are rooted in financial rather than political causes.

The Gambia is heavily reliant on rice imports from the international market to meet the domestic requirements for food due to the country's lack of a productive and sustainable agricultural industry. By supporting farmers and domestic production, the unstable exchange rates controlled by the Dalasi, the currency of The Gambia, will have less of an impact on The Gambia's access to food because consumers will be less reliant on the international market (FAO). The agricultural sector is the second largest contributor of economic output for the country and is responsible for producing 30% of gross domestic product. 44% of the country's workforce is also employed within this sector and it is estimated that two-thirds of the average household's income comes from jobs in the agricultural sector (WBG). Climate conditions add a level of risk and unpredictability to The Gambia's agricultural sector, despite agriculture being one of the most important aspects of the country's economy (WBG).

The ethnic composition of The Gambia is relatively diverse; the Madinka/Jahanka ethnic group is the largest in the country and constitutes one-third of the entire population (CIA). The Gambia is not as diverse religiously as it is ethnically, with 96% of the population being Muslim (CIA). Due to the country's overall homogeneous cultural traits and recent independence, The Gambia government has the ability to implement changes citizens desire because of the democratic government. The Gambia is unable to achieve a reliable level of prosperity due to the country's food insecurity and health issues. For instance, sanitation has been a massive, unsolved issue in The Gambia for a long time. About one-third of the population does not have access to safe drinking water and now many dangerous diseases such as malaria and dengue fever have become widespread (CIA). The Gambia not only lacks access to a healthcare system that is able to address the rapid spread of easily preventable diseases, but the households in The Gambia are unable to afford necessary medical treatments.

Resources for disease prevention and treatment of mental disorders are inadequate. Out of the entire population of The Gambia, about 120,000 people, or about 5.7% of the population, require medical attention for a mental disorder. Unfortunately, 90% of those who need to be treated for mental health will go without proper care due to limited infrastructure and human resources. The only inpatient facility in the country, The Campana Psychiatry Unit (Banjul), is isolated and inaccessible to those who live far away. The only mental health professionals working in the country are found in The Campana Psychiatry Unit and The Polyclinic Mental Health Unit. Despite universal education being established with the country, pushing even harder for gender equality encourages an entirely new female demographic to pursue this field (WHO).

The Gambia is a prime example of how an imbalance in gender rights can affect the country's overall level of food insecurity. According to the Gender Inequality Index, The Gambia is ranked 174 out of 189 countries on gender equality. This absence of female rights results in rampant discrimination against women in the agricultural industry. In order to resolve the issue of gender inequality and increase agricultural productivity in The Gambia, the country must raise awareness on gender inequality by allowing women to play an equal role in the economy and politics, create efficient government policies that are not biased against women, and increase aid from outside organizations that can help the country achieve food security.

When looking at global statistics, it is clear that gender equality can play a leading role in fixing The Gambia's agriculture sector. The Food and Agriculture Organizations of the United Nations (FAO) states that if women farmers have the exact same resources as men, the total agricultural output in developing countries such as The Gambia would increase by up to 4%. This means that out of all these countries, the number of hungry people would reduce by a staggering 12-17%. 150 million people would be positively affected by this change and all it takes is giving women the same productive resources that men have always had.

Average housing conditions in The Gambia are certainly not the most ideal. Due to the country's rapid population growth, overcrowding has been extremely common in urban and rural areas due to housing not being able to meet consumer demand (CIA). The country has been doing better economically, but there have still been increases in poverty, hunger, and substandard housing conditions. The average Gambian family size has been growing larger over time, but as a result of the agricultural production being limited, 30% of the population is undernourished and The Gambia struggles to feed its burgeoning population (FAO). Typical Gambian meals are plentiful in lipids, but are limited in protein, with the two main protein options being rice and millet. Consequently, the lack of food production and nutrition value in the typical diet results in more than a fourth of children under five being affected by chronic malnutrition and that number is increasing every year (FAO). Farming in The Gambia is very traditional, most women do not own or control land despite the fact that they are over half of the agricultural workforce (IFAD). Women are in charge of the production of vegetables, fruits, and arguably one of the country's most important agricultural products, rice (IFAD). Although The Gambia has very traditionalist views of a women's role in the family, the solutions offered to increase agriculture production do not require drastically changing the cultural lifestyle many have become accustomed to. Ensuring that women have an equal opportunity to take out credit or be more agriculturally productive will allow women to have equal and basic rights without completely overthrowing the established traditions and culture. By framing gender equality as a way for the whole family to increase their income and bolster the entire country's economy, the people of The Gambia will not resist improvements made to women's rights, though there might be some initial reluctance.

The Gambia must encourage the placement of women in government positions in order to push forth regulations that will help women and establish a more welcoming environment that will create a new generation of diverse leaders. Since The Gambia operates under a relatively stable democratic

government, encouraging women to vote for candidates that will better represent them is not an impossible task. In order to encourage more women to vote in government elections, The Gambia must advertise its elections to a wider audience and encourage individual candidates to utilize in person confrontations throughout their campaign. By involving women more in the economy and politics, it will be much easier for everyone in the country to recognize that women play as much of a role in fixing the country's socio economic issues as men. The Gambia must not only support its women by promoting a more equal society, but the country must help women grow and raise more crops to aid the growth of the agricultural sector. Without credit and control of their own land, women are unable to produce as much as men, which in turn lower The Gambia's overall agricultural output. It is clear that when women's rights are infringed upon, the entire country's level of food insecurity is greatly affected. The degradation of women's rights also hinders the country's economy because by continuing to deny women equal rights and holding back agricultural production, The Gambia will not be able to lower poverty, fight hunger, and provide access to medical care. On average women are able to attain higher values per hectare compared to their male counterparts (Global Citizen). Giving women access to tools so that they can increase their agricultural productivity will reduce and prevent the amount of famine that the country experiences. The Gambia can increase productivity by simply allowing women to take credit from the government banks and giving them complete control over their own land.

Although the government must step in to combat gender inequality and improve the economy, other outside organizations provide foreign aid that plays a huge part in increasing The Gambia's agricultural productivity by directly supporting women. The National Women's Farmer Association (NAWFA) is an organization where 48,000 women farmers from 1,000 Gambian villages take part in a five-year program. Their main goal is to build support for commercial agriculture and increase the overall amount of women farmers and rates of production as well. Ensuring sustainability and food security by increasing the population of women farmers provides businesses and The Gambia's government more time to put more of an effort towards infrastructure which will, in turn, help every single economic sector in the country. Foreign aid should be used to provide the same tools and resources that are needed for an average man to successfully sustain a farm. NAWFA obtains funding from donors such as the International Fund for Agricultural Development, World Bank, ActionAid International, and more. The work of this group and similar nonprofits can be scaled up by allowing individual donors to donate to organizations such as NAWFA. Although countries such as The United States might be unwilling to directly provide aid to The Gambia, it is a much easier strategy to convince individual donors of more economically affluent status to donate to the cause instead. If in the future, these nonprofit efforts prove to be successful and The Gambia's economy clearly demonstrates patterns of improvement, countries such as the U.S might be more willing to get involved and help.

The FAO found that women tend to invest a higher percentage of their earned income in their families and communities. Therefore, supporting women will also increase the strength and overall value of the average household in The Gambia, proving that supporting women measurably improves the economic standing of the whole country. The United Nations provides a list of other organizations and programs that aim to give women more access to credit such as the Social Development Fund (SDF), Gambia Women Finance Association (GAWFA), Women in Development, NGO Fund, and more. These organizations are credit programs introduced by the government, but they are only able to provide 55% of the credit needs for women in The Gambia. By taking more support from outside organizations, the country will be able to provide credit to the remaining 45% of the women who need it as The Gambia's economy continues to get better due to international support. That is why social change must be promoted not just through international efforts, but domestically as well, in order to prevent future conflicts with traditionalists while also utilizing outside organizations to provide resources that the country just simply doesn't have. Once women help strengthen agricultural production, The Gambian economy will recover to a point where it does not need to be as reliant on foreign aid.

Climate change is another factor that has proven to be a hindrance for the agricultural sector for it has negatively impacted The Gambia's land- significantly lowering food production rates from domestic farmers. The International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) finances essential infrastructure components such as roads and takes part in creating development plans that are intended to make land and tools more resilient to climate change. Women in developing countries are also held back by climate change because of the same resources that limit their productivity which include less access to land, loans, and machinery. Since women in the agricultural industry have less resources to protect their land from hazardous weather conditions, crops grown by women are more likely to be damaged. Favoritism towards men farmers, despite men being less involved within the agricultural industry, restricts women farmers from being able to produce the same amount of or even more product due to issues such as not having the proper tools and infrastructure to protect crops from environmental conditions. The UN Environment Programme created a plan that would help defend The Gambia from climate change by implementing the largest natural resource development project in the history of the country. Funded by the Green Climate Fund (GCF) and the Government of the Gambia itself, millions will go into restoring farmland, forests, and coastal zones. This will prevent the further reduction of farmable land and rebuild infrastructure which will decrease the risk of diseases spreading due to sanitation issues. Although this plan is currently being implemented, it is imperative that outside organizations and the government continue to fund these developmental plans. Fortunately, the government's approval is quite clear based on support that has been demonstrated through government funds being put towards the UN Environment project.

Ensuring that agricultural facilities owned by women are upgraded to increase productivity in the face of the negative effects of climate change should be The Gambia's priority. Required quotas and a specified procedure implemented through policy changes within the government are extensive measures that could be put in place in order to guarantee fair treatment. Fairly representing women will make unify the country and encourage community mobilization against the effects of climate change. The government and a variety of international organizations are willing to provide support to not only to reduce the gender privilege gap, but to increase the overall wellbeing of the economy and food security. The most important source of support must come from community leaders who can stand up for individual women who are being taken advantage of in the agricultural system and listen to informal complaints made by women who have personally experienced mistreatment within the agriculture industry.

In order for women farmers to gain productive assets and a quality of infrastructure that is equal to those of their male counterparts, the government's credit system must be fixed. The government has to foster room for economic improvement while also eliminating the economic inequalities between genders that ultimately limit the economy's growth. Investment credit is practically unusable, especially for women, because of the unbelievably high 30% interest rate placed upon a developing country (World Bank). The amount of credit that contributes to the overall GDP (16%) in The Gambia is quite underwhelming compared to Sub-Saharan Africa's 65% share (World Bank). This means that Gambian companies tend to use internal funds to support operations within their businesses rather than rely on the credit system. Banks argue that the lack of corporate governance results in poor applications, a lack of credit information, and unusable financial statements. Because the interest rate is extremely high, measures must be taken so that the country's credit system can be a reliable resource for small businesses. Since most women do not have security when it comes to accessing credit, the situation becomes immensely more difficult. Women must rely on their friends and family for credit, making their operations less profitable. By supporting national organizations such as the National Association of Cooperative Credit Unions of Gambia (NACCUG) and The Gambia's Women Finance Association (GAWFA), who provide credit to small-run operations which tend to be mostly made up of women due to their lack of credit, the development of the private sector will improve the overall economic and business climate of the country.

Providing women with the same access to credit will allow them to increase their agricultural productivity. The ability to grow more products allows them to feed their families and reduce the country's overall hunger levels. The government and outside organizations can work together to combat the negative effects of climate change that The Gambia faces by continuing to implement various development operations. The Gambia's government must create awareness about gender equality within their own country by providing women an equal amount of access to credit in order to later reap the benefits of an increased amount of agricultural output. The country must also accept help from outside organizations for extra funding until the country becomes economically stable again. By helping women in The Gambia in order to grow more food for the country, food security will increase and the percentage of undernourished people living in The Gambia will diminish.

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