



Fall 2018

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Inside this issue:

FGM/C Elimination Project Grant	1
Meet Our National Program Director	2
Local FGM/C Efforts Intensify	3
NSGA Summer School Update	4

UNICEF Grant Enables NSGA to Lead Project for Elimination of Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting

As many of you know, the NSGA was founded in the mid-1980s and has a 33 year history of development work in The Gambia, focusing on education, health, and community development. Since 1990, the NSGA has used its “signature” project (a unique, school and community-based peer health education program) in virtually every middle school, high school, and village in the country.

That program will now be tapped to try and help bring an end to the centuries-old and still-pervasive practice of female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) in The Gambia. The 2013 Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) indicated that the prevalence of FGM/C among women aged 15-49 in the Gambia was at 75%.

The potential negative physical effects of FGM/C are severe. Early complications include urinary retention, infection, and bleeding, while late complications include long-term urinary issues, scarring, pain, fertility/sexuality difficulties, and infection. The psychological effects can be as debilitating as the physical complications, with PTSD, depression, anxiety, and somatization reported.

In December 2015, after years of advocacy against the practice, the Gambian Government amended legislation to finally prohibit it. However the practice is both widespread and deeply ingrained in The Gambia and neighboring countries, and is expected to take years to eliminate entirely.

UNICEF has engaged the NSGA to actively tackle the issue. The NSGA-led pilot will last six months and then be assessed for effectiveness and potential expansion. The total grant is nearly 6.5 million Gambian Dalasi (\$170,000 Canadian), and along with its direct role the NSGA will administer five other Gambian not-for-profit organizations.

NSGA’s special mandate will include using its professional drama troupes in selected local villages and communities, followed-up by discussions in local languages; using the drama troupes to identify and train existing community groups in the rural areas to conduct their own dramatic performances and information sessions; leveraging the Peer Health Education strategy to educate students in 16 secondary schools across the country, who will in turn educate thousands of their fellow students.

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Meet Our National Program Director

If you haven't already, meet Abdou A. Kanteh, National Program Director of the NSGA. Originally hailing from the rural Pakalinding Village in the Lower River Region of the Gambia. Abdou's journey with the NSGA began at his high school in the Gambia, Tahir Ahmadiyya Senior Secondary School, where he learned the presentation, drama, and community engagement skills that ultimately drew him to the NSGA's Peer Health Education work.

In high school, Abdou worked hard to help fund and revitalize his school's Peer Health Club (of which he was president). When an NSGA Regional Coordinator came to his school to recruit Peer Health Educators, Abdou's leadership and dedication made him one of two chosen from his school.

"I am a living testimony of how successful the NSGA has been. I grew up with it...climbing through the ranks to becoming the leader of the organization in both countries. That is something remarkable in my life, and it's something personal that I always want to share.

-Abdou A. Kanteh

Abdou and his fellow recruits attended several weeks of training the NSGA head office on the Gambian coast, and then returned to their respective regions to conduct community engagement activities, reaching out to communities in village squares,

marketplaces, and schools on various health related topics. After completing the initial summer contract, Abdou gratefully accepted an offer to stay on with the NSGA.

Abdou has been with the NSGA, in one capacity or another, for nearly 12 years. Occasionally, Abdou's engagement with the organization was on a part-time or volunteer basis, such as when he was attending the University of The Gambia (UTG) and the Gambian Technical Training Institute (GTTI). Abdou received an honours undergraduate degree in development studies at the UTG, and diplomas in numerous fields at the GTTI, where he pursued law and community development. But being a student of many disciplines did not deter Abdou from working, often full-time, as an employee of the NSGA.

Now the National Program Director, Abdou's responsibilities include providing leadership in both countries, being the main representative of the organization, building the profile of the organization, and mobilizing resources (writing, submitting grants, etc.). At the same time, Abdou is completing the second year of his Master of Public Administration at Dalhousie University, so he has more work on his plate than ever. Despite the challenge of a constant workload, Abdou admits that he loves what he's doing, and that his journey from volunteer to the leader of the organization is rep-

resentative of the success of the organization as whole in its work as a non-profit developmental and health promotion organization.



Abdou with Halifax Mayor, Mike Savage.

Abdou's vision for the future of the NSGA is ambitious – enhance our current strategic direction so that the organization can operate at capacity in terms of human resources, in terms of liquidity, and in terms of our networking and partnerships.

And expansion is in the forecast. The positive results in The Gambia demonstrate the solid structural capacity of the Peer Health Educator (PHE) model - a model that may prove successful in other African countries. Abdou believes that with the success achieved through the NSGA's PHE programs, the organization has an elevated local and international profile that will enable future partnerships.

Under Abdou's bold direction, and with his clear vision, the NSGA is looking forward to the future.

**NICOLE REGAN,
Board of Directors**

Intensifying Local Efforts to Effectively End FGM/C in The Gambia

Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting is a deeply rooted practice in the Gambia, as majority of girls have undergone the practice. More are at risk - even a generation yet unborn - if intervention efforts such as that of the Nova Scotia Gambia Association's Peer Health Education Program are not strengthened.

There are lots of misconceptions regarding the practice. Some see it as a religious and cultural obligation, while others believe it has health benefits; that it "cleans or purifies" a girl. They see it *as normal as* naming a child after 7 days from birth. Those are *myths* and many efforts are being made to inform people and subsequently change behaviours.

Efforts to end the practice have been going on a long time, but they have also faced a lot of community resistance, which is less intense now.

Although the NSGA has received this funding support from the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), this initial seed funding needs to be complemented/matched with further support. With adequate funds raised in support of interven-

tion, the NSGA will be able to conduct Peer Health Education (PHE) Programs around the FGM/C, and related gender-based violence topics, all while empowering women and girls. We will encourage parents and caregivers to completely stop the practice. We will raise behavioural change awareness and provide community engagement campaigns targeting young people (the survivors and potential victims of the practice) including parents and the general population. While engaging the communities, we will popularise the law that banned the practice in The Gambia.

As Project Coordinator responsible for the projects on FGM/C at NSGA, I have met many communities and schools in particular and coordinated along with field staff/social workers to conduct trainings in secondary schools, coaching our students-teaching-students-through-drama performances, including our Health Promotion Caravan sensitizations reaching out to many people across the country as possible.

NSGA has a unique approach that needs to be strengthened to push the advocacy efforts forward and through *Magnet or Forum Theatre*, which is

used to discuss sensitive/complex issues such as FGM/C using drama and entertainment. In other words: ***solving a complex problem easily through popular engagement approaches***. With our media production unit, NSGA con-

"I have a daughter and by the grace of God, she will never undergo the ordeal. I am stronger and more empowered now to protect my own child, thanks to training and skills opportunities I received my Peer Health Education program. We need to end this horrible practice in our generation."

Binta ML Ceesay, Project Coordinator

tinues to produce educative drama episodes in films shown by our cinema crew in remote and *hard-to-reach* areas. It helps in spreading the messages and reaching out to many underserved people. These efforts of ours (NSGA) need to be consolidated with continued funding and dedication; thank you for your support.

BINTA M.L. CEESAY,
Project Coordinator

NSGA Summer School and Other Milestones

With funding from the Panicaro Foundation in Ottawa, the NSGA was able to successfully deliver a three week intensive health education training for 100 youth (from more than 25 schools!) in one of The Gambia's remote hinterland districts, where knowledge and skills on preventative health is reportedly very low. This is the Lower River Region; the district is a transit hub for long distance trucks and travelers that plight across the Gambia from the North to the Southern neighbouring country of Senegal, and to other parts of the West Africa sub-region.

Young people in this region are vulnerable more than any part of the country, as the region appears to be the highest and hottest spot for the prevalence of the deadly HIV/AIDS pandemic during the last epidemiological survey by the National AIDS Secretariat of The Gambia. During the three weeks training, these boys and

girls were trained on comprehensive sexuality education that empowered them with Life Skills and prepared them to become role models, peer counsellors, and youth educators in their various schools, homes, and communities. We are happy to announce that these peer educators have already begun engaging their friends, teachers, parents and communities on complex adolescent and reproductive health issues. Their life-saving drama and public presentations do not only educate, but also entertain, as the performances nudge and compel people to change and make healthier choices!



Abdou and PHEs, teachers, and principal after monitoring session

The prevalence of teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections in those schools has been diminished, and the young people empowered through our program are catalysts of change in their classrooms and communities. They are leading discussions in their communities on various important topics, such as how young people can: delay sexual activity, stay away from drugs and addiction, develop life skills, focus on education, and understand safe and responsible sexual health behaviors. All these efforts are part of our contribution to guaranteeing a sustainable future for young people in the Gambia. NSGA is proud to be associated with these amazing achievements, made possible by the benevolent and selfless support of our Canadian counterparts.

Thank you!

ABDOU A. KANTEH,
National Program Director

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