

*There cannot be any meaningful development without the full and active participation of all of [The Gambia's] citizenry, particularly women and girls (...). In this connection, the attainment of Gender equality and women's empowerment still remains a critical goal to be achieved.*

H.E. Aja Dr. Isatou Njie-Saidy, Vice President of The Gambia, 2010: 1

## **Towards development? Reconstructing gender norms**

### **Assessing the Marlborough Brandt Group's impact on women in Gunjur, The Gambia**

Women have come to occupy a significant role in development thinking. The recognition that their active participation in all areas of social, economic and political life serves both as a means for advancing development and as a marker of 'development' has generated increased interest in promoting their inclusion in development initiatives. Furthermore, modernisation's binary vision of development, driven and measured by economic growth, requires an overhaul which allows for a more holistic understanding. It is no longer satisfactory to think of development in purely economic terms. When taken to mean the achievement of equality between men and women, development incorporates meeting all aspects of human needs and capabilities (UNESCO, no date). Achieving development in this sense is often inhibited by norms which present barriers to gender equality. Norms which limit women's active participation in all aspects of society present strong forces of resistance to equality. However, since norms are susceptible to change and change is often introduced by external actors, organisations and individuals have a powerful role to play in promoting development.

The Marlborough Brandt Group (MBG) established a link with Gunjur, The Gambia, in 1982 with a vision of 'linking people for a fairer world'. The belief was that through mutual learning both communities would benefit and that the gap between the developed and the developing world would be made smaller. With the MBG's involvement in Gunjur being aimed at development in a direct sense (through its development programmes) and a less direct sense (through the exchange of people and ideas), it stands at an important nexus between the different faces of development. It is positioned to push for change at a local level by supporting development endeavours, but also able to influence and challenge attitudes through its interactions, dialogues and activities. The MBG has made important contributions to women, making them the focus of an integrated development programme, 'Women's Livelihoods', and engaging them in cultural exchange programmes. These contributions are significant given the position of women across The Gambia and have assisted in generating shifts in norms within Gunjur.

Despite being formally afforded equal status under the 1997 constitution, women in The Gambia exist in a culture dominated by the mutually reinforcing systems of patriarchy and Islam. Relegated by these systems to positions subordinate to men,

women have experienced limited access to jobs, constrained decision-making ability and restricted social inclusion. Gender norms prevalent throughout the country are deeply embedded in custom and tradition and have received continued common observance. Change in widespread, informally held attitudes and practices will provide the impetus for the institutional reforms to become normalised. The MBG has begun the process of generating change at the local level, which is facilitating progress towards equality and thus development.

The activity of the link has had significant impact on women in Gunjur over the past twenty eight years. In this time, there have been observable changes in the norms surrounding women's appropriate role and standard of behaviour. Not only have women been empowered to better assert themselves and challenge gender-biased practices, but have also been capacitated to make important contributions socially and economically which has had a feedback effect on male perceptions of them. Gradually norms are beginning to change in ways that are allowing women to adopt more egalitarian positions. The head of the women's community stated;

*'...And the role of women today – their stand is very firm, and they can speak, their voices raised...'* (Nyansimba, July 2010).

Since it was set up in 1996, the MBG-funded development programme, *Women's Livelihoods*, has engaged hundreds of women in business skills training, microfinance, vegetable gardening, literacy and numeracy. Over 200 women are now employed in the vegetable garden, where they harvest crops for sale at markets. Through this scheme, they are able to generate an income equivalent to 725 US dollars per year. This contribution is significant given that the average GDP per capita in The Gambia is 1, 921 US dollars (UNDP, 2007: 231). Women expressed the importance of the programmes for enabling them to sustain their livelihoods;

*'This is my livelihood...even if I harvest my vegetables and I use it for my family that is enough for them to be able to eat'* (Interview, July 2010).

*'Apart from the food, if I have money, I can pay my children's school fees...and pay for my children's lunches'* (Interview, July 2010).

Furthermore, women demonstrated that through their involvement in the programme they are being empowered to access resources which enable them to have choice. By gaining economic autonomy, women are able to act independently. Not only is this breaking the cycle of economic dependence but is also bringing about changes in the way that women view themselves;

*'The vegetable gardening is for bringing confidence to the women that they can do anything for themselves, and again to empower them...The women, the money they earn, they know it's their money...'* (Interview, July 2010).

*'That vegetable gardening...this is the most important thing for us in Gunjur. For the first time, the women here are getting free-er' (Interview, July 2010).*

Recognition of women's increasing independence is changing male perceptions. Men are beginning to understand the valuable contributions that women make and, as a result, are granting them increased status. Men are aware of the mutual benefit that allowing women to earn will have for them;

*'Things are changing. People are knowing, if my partner is empowered how much it will help me' (Interview, July 2010).*

These changes are being reinforced and furthered through the cultural exchange programme. The exchange, which has seen an estimated 400 Gunjurians visit Marlborough and some 900 individuals travel to Gunjur, has exposed women and men to alternative practices. Arising from a context where women are largely emancipated and considered equal to men, the result of the exposure has been to challenge the tradition of women's voices being silenced. The MBG has encouraged female participation in all aspects of the link's organisation and women are given confidence to speak;

*'The women speak, and this is a direct result of the MBG. Before, they would not have had the courage to speak...the link is directly trying to ease that problem (Interview, July 2010).*

Groups travelling to Gunjur are often lead by women and this creates a strong impression of women in authoritative and powerful roles. Women are strengthened in their ability to engage in discussions and this has lead implicitly to women feeling able to challenge gender relations and to question gender norms which affect them negatively;

*'Women are being empowered, being educated, being sensitised about what things are affecting them...individuals are making women understand what their rights are. The MBG has been part of that' (Interview, July 2010).*

As women's voices are being heard more in the public sphere, they are also being heard more in the private sphere. Although the MBG has not actively sought to address issues such as early marriage or female genital cutting, it has encouraged and enabled open discussion and learning about all aspects of life, through its focus on cross-cultural exchange. As a result of their voices being raised, women are showing an ability to assert themselves against men;

*'The women, because they are educated, because they know their rights, most of the men will now listen to their wife, rather than outsiders' (Interview, July 2010).*

*'If the man does something that is not right, the woman fight back...even young women, they fight for their rights' (Interview, July 2010).*

The MBG has enabled discussion, argumentation and persuasion to take place and this has had an important impact on causing individuals to re-evaluate norms. The MBG has implicitly facilitated the transfer of norms which arise from a society where women are largely empowered to make their own choices. As a result of the interactions with women from the UK, Gunjurian women have gained increased self-confidence which has enabled them to make their preferences more explicit. The changes that have come about as a result of the link are making important contributions to the realisation of development. Women are gradually becoming more equal. The significance of these changes, combined with the economic empowerment women have gained through the *Women's Livelihoods* programme is great when development is viewed broadly. Fostering cross-cultural dialogue provides a vital tool for realising development goals and overcoming the norms which pose barriers to development. The MBG plays an essential role in empowering women to achieve equality and this has been both the result of the facilitator for their vision to 'link people for a fairer world'.

## **Sources**

Interviews: various anonymous interviews conducted during July 2010.

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