

# Fourth Quarter Activities Report 2023



GAMCOTRAP



## STRENGTHENING THE NETWORK OF EX-CIRCUMCIZERS, TASK FORCE MEMBERS, RELIGIOUS LEADERS AND TRADITIONAL LEADERS AND COUNCIL OF ELDERS TO ENGAGE AND COLLABORATE ON A CONSOLIDATED PLATFORM IN ENDING FGM IN THEIR VARIOUS REGION: SPEAKING WITH ONE VOICE

### UNFPA JOINT COUNTRY PROGRAMME 2023



A Cross session of Different Activities Conducted with stakeholders

Period: October to December 2023  
Project Location: Central River Region and Upper River Region



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## **Introduction**

This is a consolidated report for fourth quarter activities undertaken by GAMCOTRAP under the UNFPA Gambia Country Programme on FGM in the Gambia. The focus is on Strengthening the Network of Ex-Circumcizers, Traditional Leaders/Council of Elders, The Task Force Members on women and Children's rights to Engage and collaborate on a consolidated Platform in Ending FGM in their various Regions: Speaking with one voice conducted in the Central River Region and Upper River Region of The Gambia. The focused communities were Janjangbureh and Giroba Kunda (Basse). In pursuit of a shared vision to eradicate the practice of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and respond to the current challenges surrounding its potential repealing of the Law in The Gambia. Under the support of UNFPA Gambia Country Programme, GAMCOTRAP organized a series of significant activities – "Strengthening the Network of Ex-Circumcizers, The Taskforce Members, Traditional Leaders/Council of Elders on women and children's Rights". This report captures the essence, deliberations, and outcomes of this pivotal initiative. Assembled with a collective determination to address the complex connection of tradition, health, and human rights, the participants, including Ex-Circumcizers, esteemed traditional leaders/council of elders as well as the Task Force Members engaged in a collaborative effort to consolidate their influence in ending FGM within their respective communities and regions.

UNFPA responded to the urgency of the current FGM saga, coupled with the pending threat of repeal, fueled spirited discussions and deliberate actions aimed at presenting a united front against this harmful practice. This report serves as a testament to the commitment, wisdom, and dedication exhibited during the activities, outlining the key components that shaped our collective endeavors. The subsequent sections detail the objectives set forth, the methodologies employed, and the comprehensive discussions that unfolded during the sessions. It also underscores the lessons learned, recommendations formulated, and the principal impact anticipated from the strengthened network forged through this activity.

## **Goal**

The goal is to create a consolidated platform where different critical target groups can collectively address and condemn the current challenges surrounding FGM, particularly the threat of repealing the FGM Law in The Gambia.

## **Project Goal**

To accelerate the Abandonment of Female Genital Mutilation in the Gambia with specific focus on the Upper River Region.

## **Objectives**

The objective is to foster collaboration and unity among Ex-Circumcizers, Traditional Leaders/Council of Elders, Task Force Members and Religious Leaders in the two Regions. By speaking with one voice, this initiative aims to strengthen the network's influence, amplify their stance against FGM, and contribute to a unified, impactful response to safeguarding the rights and well-being of women and girls, and upholding the anti-FGM Law in the face of the current FGM- related developments.

## **Overall Objectives**

Overall goal: Contribute to the Eradication of Female Genital Mutilation in the Gambia

## **Our Mission**

“Through creating awareness about harmful practices in the Gambia, we aim for the elimination of all forms of harmful practices, such as Female Genital Mutilation, Early/Forced Marriage, and all forms of gender-based violence, while preserving beneficial practices.”

## **Methodology**

We used the following methods to facilitate these activities.

1. Prior to the onset of the implementation, the GAMCOTRAP regional coordinator in URR was informed to make necessary Pre-logistics arrangements. This involves;
  - Reporting to the chief or Alkalo about the event and seek approval and facilitate ownership of the community
  - Identifying the right target groups
  - Informing the target groups of the implementation venues
  - Identifying most appropriate site for implementation
  - Identifying cooks and accommodation for the staff and other participants.

- Also identify interpreters or serve as the interpreter for the various languages of the participants they have identified.
2. **Establishing the entry and exit point of the event:** The programme activities started with by administering to each of the participants pre-test questionnaires to gauge their entry knowledge of the issues we intend to address. This was done to evaluate and get an update of their activities and lives after abandoning FGM in their communities. This will give an informed data on the realities of why some of them were going back to the practice. The results collected from the pre-test was analyzed which set the context of the introduction of the training and entry. Also at the end of the intervention participants are asked exit questions to find out there level of understanding and way forward as well as recommendations.
  3. The Executive Director gave an overview of the whole situation
  4. Participants were given the chances to voice out their stance in the on-going situation
  5. This method was used in all the implementations sites.



Cross session of Pre-test and sharing of the FGM law

## Implementation Sites

The implementations were conducted in four communities sites Janjangbureh, Giroba Kunda, Bansang and Basse Mansanjang in the Central River Region, and Upper River Region of the Gambia. Participants were carefully selected from their various Cluster Villages.

## Target Groups

Four communities were chosen, with the aim of engaging 100 Ex-Circumcizers, 50 Traditional Leaders/Council of Elders, 50 Task Force Members and 50 Religious Leaders. The project specifically focused on Ex-Circumcizers, Task Force Members, Religious Leaders and Traditional Leaders and Council of Elders from the two Regions. Also, members were selected and sensitized to take responsibility to serve as Surveillance Systems within their communities after the training programmes.

During this process of identifying, we discovered that some of the target groups which have had interactions with the organization had passed away and some were too old to travel. We discovered that since the demise of some the Ex-circumcisers they were not replaced and this was confirmed by all the target groups during the training sessions. We had 100 Ex-Circumcizers, 50 Religious Leaders, 50 Task Force Members and 50 Traditional Leaders and Council of Elders, and 25 Members from the Task Force Members serving as Surveillance Systems Total of 250 Participants were directly reached.

## Opening Statement

After individual opening prayers in both communities over the three-day activities, the



Opening Remarks by Dr. Isatou Touray  
Executive of GAMCOTRAP

regional coordinator extended a warm welcome to the Executive Director and her team. He expressed gratitude for her dedicated outreach to the rural communities and facilitating dialogue among various target groups, emphasizing the significance of discussing issues impacting the health of women and girls, particularly in light of

the ongoing FGM Saga that threatens to undermine years of progress. The coordinator acknowledged the UNFPA Joint Country Programme as the donor partner and GAMCOTRAP the implementing partner and appreciated the support provided to GAMCOTRAP to reach out to hard to reach areas. He thanked the Executive Director for taking the lead to meet them and noted that they are ever ready to engage and end harmful practices in their communities.

The Executive Director then delivered a concise statement outlining the purpose of the activity and commending the participants for their enduring commitment to the cause. Special appreciation was extended to the Ex-Circumcisers for their resilience amidst challenges and

stigma. The Religious Leaders, Task Force Members and Traditional Leaders and Council of Elders received recognition for their positive engagement in supporting women's rights, considering the patriarchal nature of Gambian society. The Executive Director emphasized the political nature of the organization and the need to focus on protecting the health and well-being of women and girls in their communities. She noted that this project is funded by UNFPA Gambia Country Programme who has been supporting GAMCOTRAP to promote the Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights of Women and Girls.

Expressing profound gratitude and a shared sense of purpose, the Director highlighted the core objective of the gathering: to unite and speak with one voice regarding the current challenges facing women's rights in The Gambia, particularly the potential repeal of the FGM-specific Law. The initiative aimed to document the impactful outcomes of activities focused on "Strengthening the Network of Ex-Circumcisers, The Task Force Members, Religious Leaders and Traditional Leaders and Council of Elders," contributing significantly to the shared vision of eradicating FGM in the country. She further noted that there is efforts being made by some National Assembly Members and religious leaders who are calling for the repeal of the Anti-FGM law protecting girls from FGM. This came in the wake of the effective application of the law that sentenced three women who circumcised girls aged four months to two years. She urged the participants to express their opinions and views which will be the basis to move forward.

Assuring participants of an open platform for collaborative engagement, the Executive Director urged everyone to express their perspectives on the urgent need to address the challenges posed by potential legal changes related to FGM. As the day unfolded, she hoped that the detailed discussions would celebrate the unity and determination of the network community leaders, serving as a catalyst for sustained action towards a future where FGM is eradicated, and the rights and dignity of women and girls are upheld.

## Project Activities

### Activity 1: Dialogue with Ex-circumcisers



Dialogue with Ex-Circumcisers

The dialogue session conducted by GAMCOTRAP in Janjangbureh, Bansang in CRR, Basse Mansajang and Giroba Kunda in URR communities served as a pivotal engagement aimed at strengthening the network of Ex-Circumcisers to collectively work towards ending

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) in their respective Cluster Communities and Regions.

Commencing with individual opening prayers in both communities, the Executive Director and her team were welcomed by the regional coordinator, expressing gratitude for their commitment for engaging at such a grassroots level. Acknowledging the significance of the dialogue in the context of the current FGM Saga and the potential repeal of the FGM-specific Law in The Gambia, the Regional Coordinator set the tone for meaningful discussions.

The Executive Director, in her opening statement, highlighted the purpose of the activity and expressed appreciation for the dedication shown by the Ex-Circumcisers, acknowledging the challenges and stigma they faced. She commended their steadfastness in supporting the organization's mission despite societal pressures. The Executive Director also recognized the positive role they played breaking from societal norms to advocate for women's rights. The heart of the dialogue lay in providing the Ex-Circumcisers, Task Force Members, Religious Leaders and Traditional Leaders and Council of Elders with a platform to voice their opinions and concerns. She noted that this project is in response to the call made by the Ex-Circumcisers to put their views as those who are speaking on the issue of FGM are not speaking for them, hence the platform. The participants were encouraged to share their experiences, challenges faced since abandoning FGM, and their views on the current FGM situation in The Gambia. The open forum allowed for candid discussions, with participants expressing their hopes, struggles, and the impact of their decisions on their lives.

The discussion touched on various dimensions, including societal acceptance, economic challenges, and personal growth. In response to the opportunity given to them, many Ex-Circumcisers expressed gratitude for the support received but outlined difficulties faced, such as economic hardships and societal stigmatization. They noted that since they abandoned the practice there were no replacements when Ex-Circumcisers die. This information was



confirmed by the Traditional Leaders/Council of Elders coming from the different Cluster communities. Despite the societal norms, they affirmed their commitment to the cause, recognizing the importance of protecting women's rights.

The dialogue session provided a platform for participants to share their perspectives and concerns openly. It underscored the collective commitment to ending FGM and navigating the challenges posed by the potential repeal of the FGM- specific Law. The dialogue set the stage for collaborative efforts, empowering the network of Ex-Circumcisers and other actors to speak with one voice and contribute to the ongoing fight against FGM in The Gambia. They noted that many organizations are claiming and talking about FGM but they have never reached out and appreciated the efforts made by the organization.

### **Opinions of the Ex-Circumcisers**

Some of the comments they made are listed below;

- There was unanimous consensus that the law should be upheld and they would be ready to come together to sign a petition to uphold the law protecting the girl-child. They were concerned that some National Assembly Members and some religious leaders were using the vulnerabilities of women and girls to sacrifice their lives. They noted that FGM is a tradition and they are well informed of the adverse effects it has on health and have decided to abandon the practice. They also affirmed that the religious dimensions were dealt with thoroughly, and it is well understood and they have great knowledge about FGM and Religion from their religious scholars.
- They affirmed that, FGM is not a religious obligation but a tradition or culture that is expected to be performed on every girl child undermining its health and emotional risk. With the knowledge gained on the effects of FGM on women's health they have abandoned the practice.
- Women and girl children are anticipated to endure the pain of FGM in the name of preserving tradition or culture and they are expected to live with that emotional disorder. The training they received from GAMCOTRAP has empowered them to challenge social norms that affect their health and wellbeing.
- They noted that, FGM destroys the reproductive health of women. That they have seen instances where women suffer prolonged labor that leads to C-section or even death of either the mother or child or even both.

- Also before the abandonment of the circumcision of girls, children (girls) in our various villages had great fear on us, they will be running away from us because they see us as threats to their wellbeing but now since we have taken an oath to drop the knife, children (girls) are now our friends and come close to us.
- Some of us were engaged in the circumcision of girls because it is a tradition that our people expect us to abide by, but we barely live with our conscience since it is human bloodletting, now that there is a law and we have taken an oath to stop the act we now live in peace and tranquility.

## Activity 2: Dialogue with Traditional Leaders and Council of Elders

Under this activity the traditional leaders and council of elders were brought together to open



Engagement with Traditional Leaders and Council of Elders

the dialogue on the attempt to repeal the anti-FGM Law. During this process the participants dwelt a lot on the processes that GAMCOTRAP engaged the communities leading to the abandonment of FGM. They acknowledged the heightened knowledge acquired over the years resulting in a call for a law to protect the girl-child. They

noted the difficulties that GAMCOTRAP faced just to enlighten them when no one dare talk about this sensitive topic. They recalled that they were not forced to call for a law but because of the knowledge they acquired through the various training activities they felt that the girl-child must be protected. They noted that it was a surprise to hear some of the National Assembly Members attempting to repeal the law that is protecting the innocent girls. They noted that the leaders in their communities are working closely with the Circumcisers and women leaders to ensure that FGM does not happen in their cluster communities. They further noted that the issue is not religion and that most of them who are currently serving their communities have been trained and that FGM is not a religious obligation. That FGM violates the rights of women and girls and must be stopped.

## **Opinions of the Traditional Leaders and Council of Elders**

GAMCOTRAP is here to protect the youths of The Gambia. In 2004 while I was in Nigeria, I got news that a lady lost her life while giving birth in my community, so a Nigerian house doctor advised us to fight to stop or end FGM because it causes maternal mortality and other health problems:

It reduces the woman's blood capacity and sexual libido.

It also causes difficulty during sexual intercourse and leads to low sexual pleasure.

Men are husbands and fathers but we are not supporting women and our girl children, if we were helping them, then we should know that their problem is ours and when they (women and girls) are at peace we (men) are at peace.

Let us try to support women in some sectors of the economy because they are an important element in the drive for development.

I was among those that against the advocacy for to end FGM because it is a tradition but through engagements, sensitization and awareness raising, I was able to change my mentality and look through a broader perspective.

Since FGM is not a religious obligation but a tradition that affects women, then we should all attempt to protect and support the FGM Law. This is my first meeting with GAMCOTRAP but I have attended a similar meeting with other organizations on the consequences of FGM. Female circumcision is bad and it greatly affects the health and wellbeing of women and girls children. It is not a religious obligation and failure to circumcise your girl child is not a punishable crime. Female circumcision is diminishing in my community. I have witnessed an instance where a lady claimed she has circumcised her daughter to avoid or overcome disturbance or stigma of not circumcising her daughter, because there are still strong believers of this harmful tradition. Let us all try to support and protect the law against Female Genital Mutilation.

I would like to address the issue concerning child marriage. While we collectively acknowledge and share responsibility for the challenges related to Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), it is imperative to recognize that child marriage presents its own set of complex problems. In many instances, parents, particularly mothers, play a significant role in facilitating child marriages by actively encouraging their daughters' participation. Despite attempts by parents to enroll their children in schools, some young girls find themselves

entangled in marriages, coerced to follow traditions that strip them of their childhood. The mothers, acting as intermediaries, often become the driving force behind these decisions, as the young girls may lack the courage to confront their fathers directly.

In addressing child marriage, it is crucial to understand the dynamics within families and communities that contribute to its persistence. By focusing on raising awareness and fostering open dialogues, we can empower mothers to make informed decisions that prioritize the well-being and future opportunities of their daughters, ultimately breaking the cycle of child marriages and fostering a safer environment for young girls.

I am well acquainted with all the initiatives undertaken by GAMCOTRAP over the years, and I've closely followed the numerous advocacy campaigns. The messages conveyed are not new to me, they are well-documented truths that consistently resurface. However, I acknowledge that for some, these revelations may be new and eye-opening. I want to express my gratitude and appreciation for all the tireless efforts you've invested. It's crucial to recognize that your dedication has not gone unnoticed, and I want to assure you that many, including myself, stand firmly behind you. Being an educated woman who has traversed the globe, you understand the challenges of engaging with uneducated elders. My inquiry is directed at discerning the transformations that have occurred since the inception of your efforts.

Undoubtedly, you encounter criticisms, and people may hurl insults, but I encourage you to persevere and maintain patience. The journey may be arduous, especially when dealing with individuals lacking formal education. However, it's important to recognize that your persistent advocacy has yielded positive changes over the years. Having witnessed the benefits of your work in our communities for over a decade, I commit to standing steadfastly with you and your organization. Your enduring commitment to this cause has made a tangible difference, and I believe in the potential for further positive impact in the future.

### Activity 3: The Task Force Members

The Task Force Members appreciated the opportunity offered them to come together and discuss the attempt to repeal the law. They categorically noted that the Anti-FGM law



Cross session of Taskforce Members

should be upheld and even further strengthened instead of calling for its repeal.

They noted that young women have been organized after GAMCOTRAP trained them to be reporting FGM cases in their cluster communities. They reiterated their commitment to work with GAMCOTRAP

and ensure that their communities are free from FGM, Early/Forced Marriage. They also, flagged that there is an increasing trend in teenage pregnancies and early marriage. That girls are married early and noted that opportunities be provided to enable them go beyond grade nine. They also noted that GAMCOTRAP should continue to target women of reproductive age to be empowered with the right information because they are going to be deciding on their children's affairs.

It was noted that since this debate started, it is only GAMCOTRAP that is reaching them to create the platform for them to express their views and urged the organization not to abandon or cut down their outreach to the rural communities.

### 3.1: Community Surveillance Systems

GAMCOGTRAP have established community Surveillance Systems in the Upper River



*Members of GAMCOTRAP Task Force*

Region of the Gambia after completing a day's strengthening the Capacity of 50 Task Force Members. The Community Surveillance Systems are an active process of community participation in detecting, monitoring and following up of Circumcisers in the Region for all cases of FGM in their various communities. It was

noted that routine reporting of FGM activities is not happening and reports were not given even if FGM happens in such communities. As a result, there is need for effective functioning system and the need to establish such systems to effectively monitor and

report cases related to FGM in various cluster communities in the regions. In general few of the community members understand the importance of the surveillance system, the role of the system as a source of data, and the role of the community members in response to the elimination of the practice of FGM in the Region. These issues were discussed in depth and clarifications were sought to facilitate a good relationship between circumcisers and the surveillance team.

In the inception stage, everyone involved needs to agree on the main objectives of the monitoring and reporting systems in order to align expectations and the objectives. The main objective was to establish community surveillance monitoring and reporting systems to engage community members in the monitoring, follow up and reporting process. Members were selected based on their active participation and commitments towards the eradication of FGM to implement the monitoring and reporting system efficiently and effectively. During the discussions participants were advised to keep in mind that all communities need to feel represented in the monitoring mechanism system. By selecting these community members, we ensured that the participants had some prior level of knowledge on the importance in the elimination of the practice. The selected members were urged to work in partnership with community members and local authorities in their respective communities within the region for effective monitoring and reporting of any suspected FGM activity by any circumciser in their communities/districts within the Region.

The reporting line for any FGM case was discussed and well understood by the identified members of the Surveillance Systems. It is critical to have surveillance systems in place to improve on the promotion and protection of the girl-child wellbeing from all forms of harmful practices that affects their SRHR. **25** members were identified out of the **50** participants for the Task Force Members Strengthening Programme to serve as community surveillance system members in the Region who will be supported by members of their communities in execution of their duties as community surveillance members.

The community surveillance members have been trained to better understand the objective of the systems established and also better equipped with the right information to enable them perform as expected to contribute to the project goals in the eradication and abandonment of FGM in the Gambia. This is essential for the sustainability of the project. The trained community Surveillance members are to work closely with the relevant stakeholders in eradicating the practice for FGM free Zone.

#### **Activity 4: Engage 50 Religious Leaders**

GAMCOTRAP brought together **100** from Upper River Region and Central River Region of the Gambia to dialogue on harmful practices affecting women's health to come up with a



Religious Scholars from Satellite Villages

communicate Sealing the end of FGM in the two regions with specific reinforcement to end the practice which has health and rights implications on its survivors. After the presentation, the discussions were fruitful. Participants appreciated the

information shared and said that some of these abuses should never have happened to women. Some of them believed that the practice is a religious obligation and were forced to do more research on the matter. However, some of the participants whose culture do practice FGM bitterly argued that it is a religious obligation and it is a must for women to undergo the practice, but when they were exposed to the documentary on the health effects they testified that even if taken for granted that FGM is a religious obligation, it is harmful and will not be recommended to be practiced by any religion.

The Upper River Region and Central River Region activity has learned Islamic scholars/leaders that are respected and honored but shared different opinions on women's issues. The three day intensive engagement served as a guide for the participants as they were exposed to knowledge on FGM, Children and Women's rights issues. Their response and contributions have revealed how the training has helped in clearing some of them their doubts on FGM. Information is a powerful tool and this has proven right when people make rightful choices based on factual information. Like in most communities, these religious scholars were divided on FGM using verses from unauthentic hadiths to justify their actions. They were however educated on the issue by the resource person, drawing quotes from the Holy Quran and authentic hadiths. Many saw the rationale of the resource person's teachings and promised to make do research on the issue. The FGM Act was shared and its contents explained for them to be aware that the Act is still valid and the penalties severe.

## **Recommendation**

- GAMCOTRAP should intensify advocacy and awareness campaigns, particularly targeting rural communities where ignorance about the harmful consequences of FGM persists.
- Immediate support is needed for the Ex-Circumcisers whose Alternative Employment Opportunity (AEO) Programmes were disrupted. Assistance should be provided to help them rebuild and sustain their livelihoods.
- Specific economic support, such as milling machines, power tillers, and threshing machines, should be extended to women in villages like Sutukoba, Basse Mansajang, and Koba Kunda, promoting sustainable economic empowerment.
- Collaborative efforts between GAMCOTRAP and community leaders, Task Force Members including Ex-circumcisers, Alkalos, and elders, should be strengthened. Addressing concerns about potential threats to their families' futures is essential to maintain their commitment to the cause.
- To recruit more community based facilitators and train them on the Rights based approach women's and children's rights issues.
- Support programs should be implemented to alleviate the harsh stigma faced by some Ex-Circumcisers in their communities. As they age, these individuals need assistance and understanding that their villages may not be providing.
- To intensify community Radio Programmes to sustain the advocacy and widen the reach across the districts was emphasized.

## **Lesson learnt**

- Female Genital Mutilation is an act that is diminishing because of the comprehensive understanding of its consequences.
- Ex-circumcisers are willing to forever abandon the act and they pray not to be involved in it since they have sworn to an oath to end that inhuman act.
- Religious and traditional leaders have reconfirmed that FGM is a tradition and not a religious obligation.
- Since the dropping of the knife, ex-circumcisers are supported by their community or village and collectively fight for the end of FGM to protect their girls.



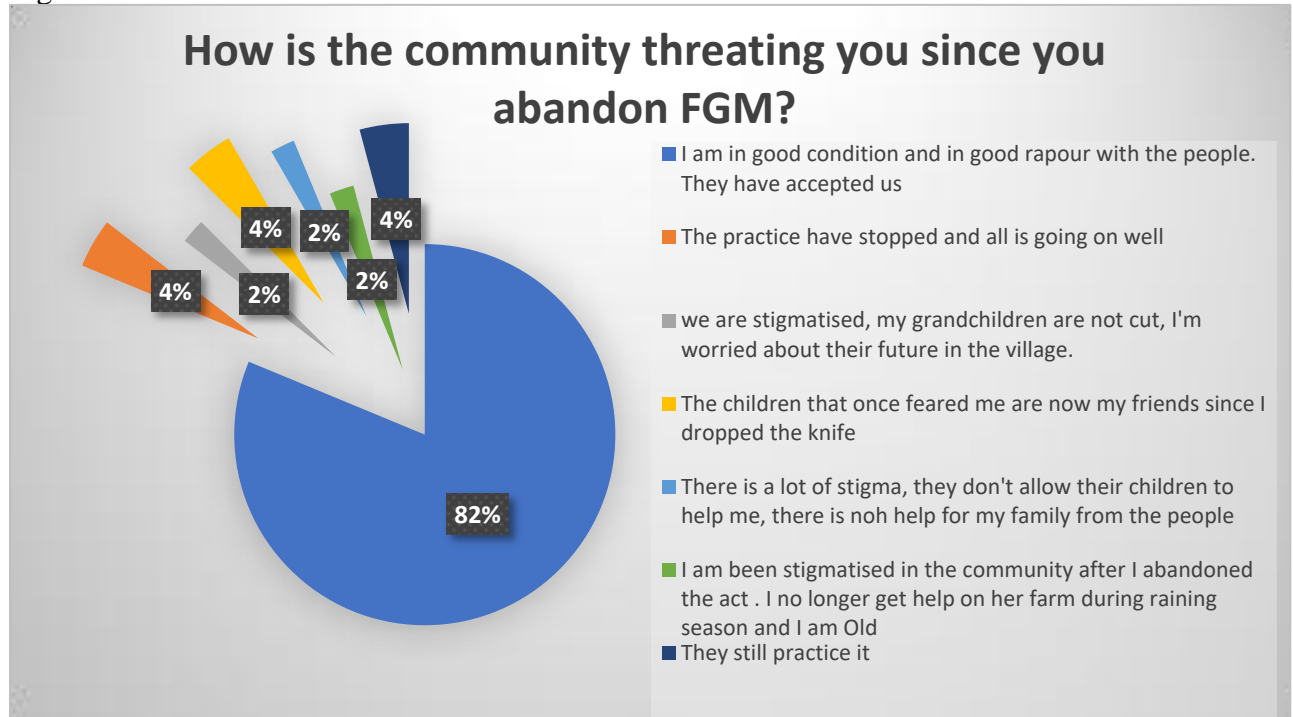
- The rate of maternal mortality has dropped significantly since the dropping of the knife in some communities.
- Ex-circumcisers are not faced with discrimination or stigma following their decisions to drop the knife.
- That the Task Force Members have been very useful in ensuring that harmful practices are stopped and this has created a very strong network among themselves to discuss issues affecting their cluster communities.

## **Monitoring and Evaluation**

All participants willingly consented to undergo evaluation through pre-activity questionnaires. These inquiries aimed to delve into the personal experiences of individuals post their decision to abandon Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). Additionally, the questions sought insights into the community dynamics surrounding those who have forsaken this cultural practice. The assessment also explored the impact of the AOB support extended to the Ex-circumcisers and their perspectives on the current FGM saga.

A recurring sentiment among the participants was a desire for assistance in reviving their businesses or acquiring farm equipment to facilitate their work during the rainy season. Upon evaluation, a noteworthy discovery emerged: 55 participants, constituting 82.09%, had received training or education on FGM, while 12 had not, this includes both male and female. Recognizing the societal norms and the treatment of individuals advocating for women's and girls' rights in The Gambia, we sought to understand how the community has treated those who have abandoned FGM. The ensuing chart depicts the diverse responses obtained, offering a detailed understanding of the participants' experiences within their communities.

Fig. 1



82% of them responded that they are in good condition and have a good rapport with the people. They have been accepted into the society and have also earned respect for their decisions. Another 4% responded that the practice has completely stopped, and an additional 4% mentioned that during the time of practicing FGM, children used to be afraid of them, but now the children are free and comfortable around them. These positive comments reflect the achievements. However, 6% of them expressed that they still face stigma in their communities. Out of the 6 individuals facing stigma, 2 mentioned concerns about their grandchildren, who have not undergone the practice, fearing for their future in the community. Another 2 stated that during their time of practicing FGM, they received a lot of respect and support from the community, but now they do not get the same level of assistance. The remaining 2 mentioned that due to their old age, they are unable to work in their farms, and the villagers no longer extend the same help or support as before. Additionally, 4% responded that they are aware that the practice is still ongoing in their communities, but they find it challenging to intervene before it happens.

After the Circumcisers underwent training and publicly swore an oath to abandon the practice, they were enrolled in a support program called the Alternative Opportunity Employment (AOB). This program aimed to substitute the income they used to earn from the practice with alternative livelihoods to alleviate poverty and reduce the likelihood of returning to the harmful practice. However, during the follow-up on the current status of their

individual AOB, it was discovered that many could not sustain it, leading them to depend on their families. This dependency might pose a risk of considering a return to the practice, as seen in the Bakadagi FGM Saga.

In analyzing why cases are not reported, 36 of them mentioned that they have not encountered any cases of violations, 2 heard but did not witness, and 4 acknowledged that cases of abuse, especially battering, are still occurring. In these instances, cases were resolved amicably within the community, with 2 reporting to the Alkalo. One participant expressed ignorance about the case, as it was taken to urban areas, making it challenging to follow up.

The chart below illustrates the affirmation from participants regarding the absence of FGM in their communities, with 64% confirming its absence, 5.97% stating the practice is ongoing and 2 participants not being sure.

Fig. 2



Given the current FGM situation in the country, we sought to understand the future engagements with these groups. Participants were asked if they still intend to work with GAMCOTRAP by standing on the oath they had sworn. The majority, 70.15%, expressed their unwavering loyalty, affirming their commitment to continue standing by the truth. However, 7.46% remained indecisive, and 2.99% conveyed that they cannot continue with us, citing reasons they were not willing to disclose. The significant percentage of participants pledging their commitment reflects a positive outlook for future collaborations in the ongoing efforts to eradicate FGM. Their continued support is crucial in addressing the challenges posed by the potential repealing of the FGM law in the country. It is noteworthy that a portion of participants expressed indecision. This suggests that there may be factors or concerns that need further exploration or clarification to ensure their continued active involvement. Open communication channels and engagement activities may play a vital role in addressing any uncertainties and reinforcing the shared commitment to ending FGM. Engaging the community Radios and creating a platform for masses to engage in discussing matters of reproductive health matters can unleash unprecedented progress.

The small percentage indicating their inability to continue with GAMCOTRAP highlights the complexity of the situation. While the reasons were not disclosed, it underscores the need for sensitivity and tailored approaches to address the specific concerns or challenges faced by individuals within these groups. Strengthening these engagement strategies will be pivotal in maintaining a united front against FGM and upholding the rights and well-being of women and girls in The Gambia.

Fig. 3

Value	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	47	70.15
Indecisive	5	7.46
No	2	2.99

Most of them were not updated on the current FGM Saga because they lack the gadgets that could help them access information. Thirty-six (53.73%) of them knew about the case, while 19 (28.36%) did not. They were not even aware of the threat to repeal the FGM Law.

Taking a stand, the chart below indicates the participants' stance in the FGM fight. The data records responses reflecting individuals' perspectives on the continuation. Notably, 10.45% of respondents expressed having "No idea" if they will continue or not. However, the majority, at 4.48%, believes that "It should be stopped." Another significant portion, at 2.99%, emphasized the importance of obeying the law.

Additionally, there were various responses indicating a commitment to abandoning the act, with phrases like "We have sworn to abandon the act and we stand to protect it" and "We have sworn and learned about the negative effects, so we should stop it." Individuals stressed the significance of honoring one's words and commitments, aligning with their sworn pledges. Other responses conveyed a sense of responsibility and accountability, the ex-circumciser who break the law such as "If you swore to something then you must work towards stopping it." Some participants acknowledged personal growth, like "Since I have dropped the knife, I will not support it the repeal of the law." There were also instances of attributing responsibility, with statements like "She (meaning the circumciser) caused it because if you swore to stop the act and you go and do it again, then it is your fault," concerning the Ex-circumciser that was prosecuted.

Religious and legal considerations emerged, with responses like "If you are Muslim and you swore to stop the act, then you should continue honoring your words" and "Since it is illegal and it affects women, then it is necessary to stop the act." Overall, the responses reflect a range of perspectives, including moral, legal, and religious considerations, as individuals grapple with the decision to discontinue a particular practice.

## **Conclusion**

In January 2023 three girl children between the ages of four months and two years were subjected to FGM in Bakadagi Mandinka at the Central River North of the Gambia. The case was discovered by the regional coordinator of GAMCOTRAP and reported the matter which was taken to court. The culprits were sentenced and this evoked resistance from a few NAMS and religious leaders. This created a lot of public debates among various actors with CSOs/NGOs working on the issue engaging.

In the wake of the FGM saga, UNFPA supported GAMCOTRAP to reach out to various critical target groups to create the platform to hear their views about the current efforts mooted by some National Assembly Members and religious leaders to repeal the Anti-FGM law that protects girls from the practices of female genital mutilation in the Gambia.

GAMCOTRAP in response organized a series of activities reaching out to various target groups whose voices and perspectives were critical. Based on the active participation and valuable contributions from all participants, the activities conducted in both communities were deemed successful. The presence of the Executive Director brought a sense of encouragement to the Ex-circumcisers, who felt supported in their ongoing struggle against societal norms. This reassurance was particularly crucial given the challenges some of them face in trying to challenge conservative practices. The Ex-circumcisers openly shared their emotions and the complexities they navigate within their communities.

Furthermore, the Task Force Members, Religious Leaders and Traditional Leaders and Council of Elders expressed their perspectives from both religious and traditional standpoints. They affirmed their commitment to standing by the truth and supporting GAMCOTRAP in safeguarding the health and future of women and girls in The Gambia. The collective resolve exhibited by all participants signals a unified front in the ongoing battle against harmful practices, emphasizing the importance of collaboration for positive societal change. There

was consensus that the Anti-FGM law should be upheld and they called for the state to protect the girl-child.

## **Annex**

### **Facilitation Team**

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### **Lead Facilitator**

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## Pictorials of the different events

