



# SHADOW REPORT

Human Rights Violation  
During the Jammeh Regime:  
Experiences of Gambian Youth



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With the support of

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Global Initiative for Justice,  
Truth & Reconciliation



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## Acknowledgements

This Shadow Report was produced by Fantanka with the intent that it will complement the final report of the Truth, Reconciliation and Reparations Commission (TRRC) on the subject of youth matters. While acknowledging that the TRRC paid particular focus on the involvement of young people in its process, this report seeks to place the spotlight on the violations experienced by Gambian youth during Yahya Jammeh's 22-year regime, and the impact of those violations on them.

The main authors of this Report are Imran Darboe and Mariama Jobarteh. Fantanka is profoundly grateful to Sara Bradshaw and Parusha Naidoo for the constant feedback and assistance in guiding and shaping the report. Fantanka also thanks our dedicated staff for their relentless hard work, and to the young people who participated in the interviews and focus group discussions that informed the bulk of the findings in this report. Despite the difficulty of recounting their painful experiences they were brave enough to accept our invitation for the interviews. We express gratitude to the International Coalitions of Sites of Conscience and the Global Initiative for Justice, Truth and Reconciliation who funded and supported this project and also provided technical support and guidance in the process. Their support for transitional justice in The Gambia has been nothing short of outstanding and we are grateful. Our thanks also go to the TRRC for their continuous cordial collaboration with Fantanka and the work we do. It is Fantanka's hope that this report will provide better insight about the experiences that Gambian youths have had during the past regime and will help motivate all stakeholders to exert their efforts towards promoting the better welfare of youth.

## ABOUT FANTANKA

Fantanka is a women-led Gambia-based civil society organisation that advocates for gender rights, sexual and reproductive health (SRH) rights, and the rights of marginalised groups in The Gambia such as out-of-school youths (those not in the formal education/employment sector) and people living with disabilities. Fantanka also provides psychosocial support for victims of human rights violations. The organisation aims to contribute to “closing the gap” in creating culturally sensitive SRH awareness and other rights, as well as engage the public and relevant stakeholders on matters affecting marginalised groups. Fantanka challenges social, religious, cultural and political barriers that promote inequality and unequal power relations.

In October 2020 Fantanka initiated a youth-focused project intended to ensure better inclusion of young people in the transitional justice and truth-seeking process by facilitating their increased participation in the TRRC hearings and by collecting and sharing their collective experiences and recommendations with the TRRC and The Gambian public. The project was mainly focused on youth outside the formal sectors, who tend to be overlooked in important national discourses. The outcomes and findings of that project are incorporated into this report, in addition to further interviews and focus group discussions with other groups of youth.

## INTRODUCTION

The Gambia Truth, Reconciliation and Reparations Commission (TRRC) was set up in 2018 to to conduct research and investigations into human rights violations committed under the 1994-2016 presidency of Yahya Jammeh. The TRRC began the truth-seeking process on the 7<sup>th</sup> January and took a thematic approach to its investigations of the human rights violations that occurred, dividing the violations into categories. Although some cross-cutting themes such as gender were included, other significant cross-cutting themes, including human rights violations as specifically experienced by Gambian youths, remain to be addressed. The TRRC acknowledged the role of youth in its work through the establishment of a Youth and Children Unit within the secretariat. However, the work of this unit was more focused on the forward-looking aspects of the Commission's work, i.e. promoting non-recurrence through sensitisation and civic education initiatives, as well as advocating for youth engagement in peacebuilding, social cohesion and reconciliation initiatives.

It is critical to capture the experiences of Gambian youth and the impact of the violations on them as one of the TRRC's stated goal is to establish an impartial historical record of the 22 years of violations committed under Jammeh. For many youths, this omission simply continues the trend of youth marginalisation in socio-political affairs and national issues. This report aims to address this gap by exploring the experiences of Gambian youth during the dictatorship, the impact of those experiences on their lives and recommendations that will address the impacts and consequences of their experiences going forward. The report relies on insights and data from previous work conducted by Gambian civil society organisation, Fantanka with youth, as well as data from interviews and focus group discussions, in addition to desk reviews of the TRRC hearings.

### Rationale

Similar to the issue of gender, youth-specific issues are related to all of the themes of human rights violations that were investigated by the TRRC. Over the 22 years of the Jammeh regime, youth were affected by human rights violations in various ways. Youths suffered both as direct and indirect victims during the period of dictatorship. For instance, they were exploited through recruitment into Jammeh's Green Boys and Girls Movement, a militant youth movement that was used to perpetrated wanton attacks on Jammeh's political opponents. In other cases, youth were victims of direct violence from security agents of the state, or through the suppression of their fundamental rights to speech, association, and more. Indirectly, they were forced to suffer the consequence of broken homes through the arrests, killings or disappearances of their parents. While some youth have testified at the TRRC in relation to the thematic investigations that the commission looked into, such as the April 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> 2000 student demonstration<sup>i</sup>, the overall impact of that event and all other violations against youths that typified the 22 years of dictatorship requires further documentation.

Youths continue to endure the impact of the former dictatorship. Statistics on socioeconomic conditions and outlooks for Gambian youths continue to be bleak<sup>ii</sup> and youths themselves continue to bemoan their marginalisation by the state in matters of national affairs. Research suggests that youth empowerment is a critical element of sustainable development. In their 2019 paper, *Youth Empowerment as a Catalyst for Sustainable Development in Nigeria*, Jegede et al argue that human capital formation focused on youth, increases their employability and private earnings and increases civic participation and overall productivity, thus boosting national development. They suggest that youth should be involved in decision-making processes, particularly on matters affecting them, that efforts should be made to ensure their security and basic social needs are addressed, and that they are afforded basic freedoms of choice, speech, movement and association.<sup>iii</sup> Thus, in issues of national import there is a need to take into account the experiences of the youth population and the impact that any decisions will have on them. In order to do this, there must be greater consultation and support for youth to actively and fully participate in all matters impacting on national development. From both Fantanka's previous engagement with youth during the Gambian

transitional justice process and interviews conducted for this report, Gambian youth have expressed the need to address the impacts of the former regime by creating new social, political, and economic possibilities for youth in The Gambia. They called for greater involvement in national initiatives where they can significantly contribute as architects of a better Gambia going forward. As a result, in addition to any recommendations in the TRRC's final report, this report charges the state and other relevant stakeholders with the responsibility to ensure that all reform initiatives take into account and address youth's needs and capabilities, thereby signalling a departure from a history of marginalising and exposing the country's youths to exploitation<sup>iv</sup>.

## Objectives

The objectives of this report are as follows:

- 1) Document experiences of human rights violations from youth of various backgrounds during the Jammeh regime
- 2) Analyse the impact of human rights violations against youths
- 3) Provide recommendations to address the impacts of violations on youth

## METHODOLOGY

In undertaking the research for this report, a portion of data was derived from Fantanka's desk review of information relating to the experiences of Gambian youth in the former regime. This research was not confined to youth as victims only or as perpetrators only, but also considered the overall systemic impact of the widespread violations on youth as a demographic. This broad approach was taken in order to capture the range of experiences and impacts among different youth groups, considering that youth should not be treated as one homogenous group.

Another source of data for the report was from information and findings gathered by Fantanka in its project addressing marginalisation of youth in the transitional justice process, implemented from October 2020 to March 2021. That project engaged two groups of youth who fall outside of the formal education/work sectors, namely, those commonly referred to as "Beach Youths" and "Black Market Boys". Beach Youth are the out-of-school and unemployed young people who earn a living through petty trading, peddling art and craft or offering themselves as tour guides to tourists around the beaches and tourist resorts. The Black Market Boys similarly comprise out-of-school and unemployed young people who peddle second-hand wares such as mobile phones, shoes, used clothes and other second-hand items in one area of the main markets. These two groups of youths are among the most stigmatised and marginalised groups of youth, with a history of being excluded from consideration in any national discourse, beyond being labelled "a problem for society". They are generally treated as social pariahs and thus exposed to serious human rights violations. Some of these youths admitted during the interviews that some among them commit criminal acts such as thefts and burglaries, but argue that such acts are a result of the desperation and lack of opportunities that they are forced to endure. For these reasons, Fantanka captured the experiences of these youths in this report, in order to promote an inclusive approach to developing measures intended to address the problems experienced by youth in The Gambia. Some of the information gathered during the project included the various types of violations youth suffered at the hands of former agents of the state and state institutions, youth's efforts to access redress for the violations, the challenges that obstructed their access to any remedy, and the impact these negative experiences had on them. The project also considered how these experiences hindered their confidence and participation in the transitional justice process.

The third source of data was derived through interviews and focus group discussions conducted between September and October 2021. A total of 20 interviewees were selected to conduct key informant

interviews. As previously stated, the youth demographic is not a homogenous group, and thus in order to select interviewees that reflect the widest possible range of experiences, youth were sub-categorised into 6 groupings: children of victims, children of perpetrators, the Beach Youth, Black Market Boys, girls who work or worked in security/public institutions and were aged between 25 to 30 years old at the end of the regime in 2016; and artists and advocates. Interviewees were then selected with these groupings in mind. For the focus group discussions, 6 interviewees were brought together – drawn from each of the sub-groupings. Additionally, the selection of interviewees also considered the geographical and gender factors and included interviewees who experienced the violations as youths but are now no longer within the youth bracket. As a result, interviewees were selected with a view to having as broadly representative a sample as possible, to reflect the experiences of youth generally.

One of the challenges anticipated before undertaking the interviewing process was the mistrust that many youths have against formalised processes. From prior engagements, most of the youth interviewees perceive these processes as futile exercises that don't really address their problems. However, by leveraging the goodwill Fantanka has already established with some of the youth, this challenge was at least somewhat mitigated, and serves as a model for future engagement by other stakeholders with this cohort.

However, it is recognised that this size and scope of this report is not capable of capturing all of the variances in youth experiences of violations in the former regime. It is therefore hoped that further research will be conducted to explore different dynamics of youth in The Gambia and their experiences of the past dictatorship.

## BACKGROUND

The African Youth Charter categorises the youth demographic in The Gambia as including people between the ages of 15 and 35 years<sup>v</sup>. According to UNFPA's 2017 statistics, about 65% of The Gambia's population is between the ages of 10 – 24<sup>vi</sup>. During the 22 years of Jammeh's rule, youths experienced the consequences of most of the human rights violations that were committed by Jammeh with the state agencies and agents. They were not only directly subjected to killings, torture, inhumane and degrading treatments, and arbitrary arrests and detentions, but were forced to grow up in a repressive environment without most of their basic freedoms or fundamental rights. Some of them were also forced to endure life-altering consequences of their parents' victimisation. The state trampled on the economic, social and cultural rights (ESCR) of young people and failed to provide them the conducive environment that would ensure their positive individual and collective development, thus having a crippling effect on their ability to reach and realise their full potential.

The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) describes economic, social and cultural rights as rights relating to social security, family life, work, participation in cultural life as well as access to housing, food, water, health care and education. Article 2(1) of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights obligates states to take maximal measures towards progressively achieving economic, social and cultural rights for its citizens without discrimination. The Jammeh regime not only failed to protect most of these rights but in fact violated these rights. For example, TRRC hearings into the April 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> 2000 student demonstrations revealed that despite state security forces being responsible for killing and injuring many students, most of the surviving victims were not provided with any medical treatment, and most of them were forced to drop out of school as a consequence of the violence meted on them during the demonstrations. In addition, the actions of the Jammeh government denied many youths a secure and stable family life as well as social security and protection. The dire state of youth employment and economic opportunities was also another area in which the ESCR rights of youth were trampled on, contributing to the disproportionate number of Gambian youth embarking on the illegal migration that has become known as the "back way."<sup>vii</sup> Considering this reality, victimization of youth over the 22 years of dictatorship can be understood to have taken place in myriad forms which will be considered in more detail later in this report.

The term 'youth' itself is a collective terminology that belies the fact it encompasses numerous sub-groups whose experiences and needs are not homogenous but are rather multitudinous. While not all the sub-categories of youth can be captured here, the report will look at the experiences and human rights violations of the following specifically themed youth demographics:

**Children of victims and perpetrators** – This group of young people includes youth whose parents were victims of human rights violations during the Jammeh regime, as well as youth whose parents were alleged to have committed human rights violations during the Jammeh regime. This group of youths are fated to live with the impact of their parent's experiences, with all the consequential social, political, emotional and economic fallout that brings.

**Beach youth** – This group of youth comprise the unemployed young people who do petty trading, peddling art and craft or offering themselves as tour guides to tourists around the tourism development area. They are commonly referred to as "bumsters" (a derogatory term which they dislike). This group of youth were subject to various rights violations by state agents (the police, paramilitary forces and other institutions such as the Tourism Board) during the previous regime, including demolition of their bars and restaurants, beatings, tortures and even killings.<sup>viii</sup>

**Young women** – The socio-political atmosphere of the Jammeh created an atmosphere that led to gendered forms of human rights violations, namely sexual and gender-based violence which took on many forms. Some of these include the young beauty pageant contestants who were exploited for sexual gratification by state agents including former president Jammeh himself.<sup>ix</sup> This sub-group of youth also included young female security officers who were recruited and used as sexual partners by many heads of departments and institutions in the Jammeh government.

**Black Market Boys** – This group of youth also engage in peddling second-hand wares such as mobile phones, shoes, clothes and other items. Some of the wares that are sold at the black market are sometimes stolen items, and as a consequence, police and other security quite often treat youths that sell wares extremely harshly, and often in contravention with any proper police procedure or due process of law<sup>x</sup>.

**Artists and Advocates** – This group of youth were the voices of resistance on social and other media during Jammeh's regime, and they contributed significantly to the social revolution that brought a change in power. Many of them were denied the right to free expression during the former regime and faced arrests, torture and illegal detention at the hands of the state, while others were forced to flee and lived in exile in foreign lands, such as neighbouring Senegal.

All of these sub-groups experienced the violations of the former regime and their consequences in varied ways. Although not portrayed or viewed through the prism of youth experience, the TRRC hearings revealed the experiences of youth in the former regime through various lenses. For instance, the testimonies revealed that many politically active young people were lured into a militant group known as the Green Boys and Girls, used by the former president as a blunt instrument against political opponents. Within the oppressive environment of Jammeh's regime where youth unemployment was high and hardly any opportunities were available to them, the promises of instant (albeit temporary) financial rewards and social status were an alluring incentive to join the Green Boys and Girls. It became an escape for many youths, who enjoyed Jammeh's lavish patronage and the latitude to act outside the law with impunity<sup>xi</sup>. These youth were exploited and manipulated to commit many rights violations including reported arson attacks, damaging private property and committing assault, among other acts<sup>xii</sup>.

In addition, young girls were targeted, exploited and subjected to sexual violence by the president and other senior officials in his government. Testimonies at the TRRC described how the 22<sup>nd</sup> July Pageant (a pageant set up on the behest of Jammeh, purportedly to provide girls opportunities to pursue higher education at home or abroad) was instead abused as an elaborate system for recruiting young beautiful girls for Jammeh's sexual gratification<sup>xiii</sup>. Girls from poor families who hoped that the pageant would be a way to pursue further education they won't otherwise afford were instead manipulated, extorted and sometimes forced to satisfy the former president's sexual urges. Some girls were given jobs at the Office

of the President as “Protocol Girls” merely as a ploy to keep them close for the president’s personal satisfaction. The President’s own cousin, Jimbee Jammeh, was appointed Deputy Chief of Protocol and became responsible for finding, selecting, recruiting, intimidating and coercing young girls to satisfy Jammeh’s whims wishes, regardless of their consent. According to witnesses at the TRRC, Jimbee Jammeh physically brought young girls to Jammeh’s private bedroom and on several occasions, threatened those who refused to have sex with Jammeh. Some witnesses at the TRRC even said that Jimbee forced some of the women to abort pregnancies resulting from the rapes they endured at the hands of Jammeh<sup>xiv</sup>.

However, TRRC hearings also left out a variety of experiences of violations suffered by young people. For instance, the hearings failed to sufficiently capture the experiences of many of the young people (activists and artists, among others) who were subjected to grievous human rights violations and in some cases forced to flee the country. The hearings process also did not explicitly accommodate the experiences of children of victims and alleged perpetrators. It is these overlooked contexts and experiences that this report aims to therefore look into and address, in order to create a clearer picture of youth’s overall experience under Jammeh, the continued impacts on them, and recommendations to be considered and implemented in order to ensure that the welfare of youths is not left out in the transformative measures that seek to move The Gambia towards a more progressive and inclusive society.

## FINDINGS

### Violence against young women

Jammeh’s violations against Gambian youth were not confined only to the sphere of political repression or simply to consolidate power. Many more violations were perpetrated against youth only to sate Jammeh’s ego and whimsical desires. Particularly, Jammeh exploited young Gambian girls, some of whom barely reached the legal age of maturity. During the TRRC’s hearings on sexual and gender-based violence, evidence emerged that Jammeh and some of his senior officials in government (ministers and security chiefs) committed heinous sexual violence ranging from rape and sexual assault to sexual exploitation and harassment against young women. As in all other respects, Jammeh and his officials exploited the vulnerability of these young women and the power that their high positions of authority afforded them, to violate young women using fear, inducements, intimidation, violence and coercion.

One group of young women who suffered such violations directly at Jammeh’s hands was young female Gambian students from tertiary educational institutions. Disguised behind the façade of championing girls’ education, Jammeh conceived a beauty pageant named the 22<sup>nd</sup> July Beauty Pageant that overtly purported to promote Gambian cultural diversity and celebrate the beauty, grace and intelligence of Gambian women while at the same time provide them better opportunities for education and socioeconomic participation through scholarships for the winners. However, covertly, the pageant became a grooming medium for Jammeh to pick out young girls for his sexual gratification. Girls from the pageant were invited to the State house and to Jammeh’s residence in Kanilai where Jammeh lavished them with gifts and money, before subsequently sexually abusing some of them.<sup>xv</sup>

Along these lines, one of the young women interviewed for this report said,

***“[Jammeh] was dating my friend, she used to meet him in Kanilai. He bought her so many expensive gifts and the girl thought he loved her. One day, my friend took her friend with her to Kanilai and Jammeh ended up being with my friend’s friend and left my friend. Her life was a mess after that.”***

Another girl said,

***“After sleeping with me, his closest agents would have their share but threaten me that they will kill me if I say anything to him. They will call me anytime they needed me and I become a sex tool, I was disgusted with myself.”***

Some of the young women were appointed at the President's Office as "protocol girls". They were paid as government employees, stationed at the State House and some even travelled with Jammeh on foreign trips. Witnesses at the Commission testified that the girls were required to have sex with Jammeh whenever it pleased him. These young women, most of whom were from humble backgrounds, dared not defy a man who had cultivated a larger-than-life persona that awed many Gambians, a man whose word was above the law and was known for being ruthless to those who challenged his authority. Once within his circle of influence they could not freely consent; he was able to have his way with them and they were helpless to do anything about it.<sup>xvi</sup>

The sexual abuse of young women by Jammeh did not stop with the Pageant contestants. One of the interviewees for this report said that a family member found herself the subject of Jammeh's sexual interest. Jammeh reportedly assigned bodyguards to her who would tell him about everyone she talked to and everything she did. Jammeh attached bodyguards to her, and her movements were restricted so that she could not go to certain places without Jammeh's approval, and male friends were also restricted from meeting or visiting her. He would order her to be taken to Kanilai where he would have sex with her, and whenever the First lady was out of the country during that period, she would be summoned to State house. She was scared to even try to get help or date another man.

## Violence against female security officers

Female security officers were another group of young women who endured similar sexual violations, not directly from Jammeh but from other senior officials in Jammeh's government. Like the Pageant contestants, young women working within the security services also found themselves at the mercy of men in high authority who took advantage of their vulnerabilities. One of the protected witnesses who testified at the TRRC stated that *"living in poverty and being a youth made me and people like me vulnerable, and therefore were at a higher risk to experience sexual violence."*<sup>xvii</sup> These types of violations were particularly notorious within the Prison Service. During the TRRC hearings, witnesses testified to the commission that in 2007, during a nationwide tour by security officials, David Colley (then Director General of Prisons) ordered young female prison officers from Mile 2 and Janjanbureh prisons to join the tour, which also included the then-newly appointed Minister of Interior Ousman Sonko, former Director General of National Drug Law Enforcement Agency Ibrahim Bun Sanneh, officials from Gambia Immigration Department, Gambia Police Force and Customs. One of the female officers (a protected witness) testified that they felt compelled to go because *"an order is an order in the service and should be obeyed"* and since they were ordered to go by David Colley, they could not refuse.<sup>xviii</sup> Another witness told the TRRC that David Colley led her by the hand to Ousman Sonko's room, and instructed her to "spend the night" with the former minister. The witness said she informed him that she was a married woman and refused. However, no room was allocated to her so she had no choice but to sleep in the room. She said that although the former Minister did not touch her, she was forced to sleep in the same bed with him.<sup>xix</sup>

Another protected witness narrated that when they arrived at Farafenni, they were escorted to David Colley's room where he was waiting with another female prison officer. According to her, David announced to them that each of them would be assigned a room for the night, and when she entered her assigned room, Bun Sanneh was there waiting in his underwear. She was ordered by David Colley to stay and chat with Bun but as she entered, Bun locked the room door and ordered her to undress. When she told him that she did not come on the trip to have sex with any man, and that she was married, Bun got angry, insulted her and told her to get out. According to her testimony, David Colley was very angry the next day and victimized her by sending her home and did not grant her a promotion that she was entitled to. She said she faced *"a lot of harassment in that period of time."*<sup>xx</sup>

One female Gambia police force representative interviewed for this report also talked about human rights violations against young female officers in the force. She said that in her work,

***“even your leaders, they will not value you. What they want from you is sex, if they don’t get it they will not promote you. You’ll always be down and people will come from nowhere, they will promote them, but you are not going anywhere.”***

Like most of the interviewees, she explains that she has not tried to report the abuses she faced to any formal authority because she did not trust anyone of them. She explained that promotion in her work was no longer based on an examination but on the assessment of superior officers, and if those officers want sexual favours they do not get, they withhold the promotion. She says, *“Meanwhile even officers junior to you, who are sleeping with the superiors, don’t respect you anymore, they don’t respect the chain of command because they are sleeping with the superiors.”*

Another interviewee added:

***“After being unfairly dismissed, the new boss said he can reinstate me but he wanted me to be going to places first. After few trips with him within the country, I realised that he just wanted to be sleeping with me. Later, I told him that I don’t think he wanted to reinstate me because we have been sleeping together for a while now [and I haven’t gotten my job back]. After I told him that, he said I can leave if I don’t want to be patient, so I left him and I still cannot get back my job”.***

One interviewee said that one of the impacts that gender-based violence has had on young Gambian women’s opportunities is what she described as “the sugar Daddy culture”. According to her, young girls have developed a proclivity to dating older, financially successful men who they believe can take care of their financial needs.

She said young people have figured that

***“if their parents can marry them off to men twice their ages simply for financial assurance, regardless of how they feel, then they too can date older men for the same reasons.”***

She said young women resort to this because for so long whenever a young woman aimed for something, government officials and other influential men have had a tendency to prey on young girls and even young men. She narrated that she had sought out investors for a project which could help not only herself, but other young people and the country at large. However, she said:

***“One of the lessons I have learned is that the worst thing you can be in this country, is to be an attractive young woman who approaches companies or government officials. They will listen to you... if you are pretty, they will listen, but they are listening to the sound of your boobs or bum shaking, that’s really what they are interested in. And for you to get access to their support, they would want to have some sort of intimacy with you... just some weird relationship with you. They will offer you cash just to have you around and use you for their sexual pleasures.”***

Unfortunately, these types of gender-based violations and exploitation of women have been normalized to the extent that many young women themselves have accepted them as inevitable and are resigned to the harassment and exploitation they are subjected to at work, in schools and other public spaces.

## **Violations against beach youths**

The beach youth, a sub-demographic of young people generally comprising of school dropouts who have no recourse to formal employment, rely on informal work within the tourism sector to earn a living by making and selling art and crafts, peddling other souvenir items, fruit juice and other local products to tourists, driving tourist taxis or offering themselves as tour guides, among other pursuits, around the beach and tourists hotels. This group of young people were subject to stigmatisation and extremely harsh treatment from the Jammeh regime and its agents. Many of them were barred from operating around the tourism area and were regularly arrested and detained. Some were subjected to severe beatings, arrests

and detention repeatedly. According to some of the interviewees in the focus groups Fantanka conducted, a few youths were killed or died as a result of the beatings. Indeed, from the victim statements submitted to the TRRC, Alfusainey Suso, a former orderly to one of 1994 Junta members, Sadibou Hydera, said that one of the reasons he left the military was a result of the shooting of his younger brother at the beach by soldiers. Other violations committed against the beach youth included having their dreadlocks cut off by security officers (police and soldiers); still others who operated pubs and restaurants along the beach also had their structures mowed down and demolished by the Tourism Board and Ministry of Lands, with little or no warning. The harsh treatment of the beach youth by the state and the rhetoric that accompanied it – labelling them as bums and criminals who cast an ugly image of the country to the tourists and leave a stain on society’s image – stigmatized the beach youth in the public eye.

In November 2020, Fantanka initiated a campaign inviting young people who may have been victims of human rights violations in the former regime to come forward. At least 50 young people, including a number of beach youths, responded to the call and shared with Fantanka their experiences of violations in the former regime. Focus group discussions were held with beach youth from different locations along the coastline where tourist hotels are concentrated. The Brufut Height youths, whose beach bars and restaurants were demolished by the government under Jammeh, said that they received letters from the Tourism Board sometime in 2015, which promptly notified them that all bars and restaurants around the Brufut Beach were to be demolished. The youth wrote a letter to the former president (Jammeh), asking him to help remedy the situation as the bars and restaurant were their only sources of living. In the letter they told the president that it was through these bars and restaurants that they took care of their families, and thus demolishing them would be detrimental in many ways. The response from Jammeh was indifference, stating that nothing could be done and thus the demolition would go as instructed by The Gambia Tourism board (GT board). Not knowing what else to do or where to turn to assert their rights, all of the bars and restaurants, which represented all of their lives’ work and all they had, were demolished in June 2015. The process was supervised by soldiers and paramilitary officers with guns, and the bricks and other valuable materials from the rubble were loaded up and taken to the former president’s garden at Bijilo.

The demolitions have hit the youths very hard. Most of them could not afford to pay their children’s school fees or support their families after their businesses were destroyed. Others said they “lost hope in life” and in the system in The Gambia. Some of the youth resorted to alcohol consumption and drug abuse, mostly smoking cannabis to dull their heartbreak. Although many of them were later allowed to rebuild their businesses by the Tourism Board, subject to a number of conditions, many struggle to recover what they have lost. According to their estimation, the combined loss of the seventeen structures demolished amounted to approximately D29 million (twenty-nine million Dalasis). The youths said that having lived with the pain of their loss for years, the transitional justice process was initially a promise to regain their voices, have their stories heard, their dignities restored. However, one of the interviewees puts it this way:

***“It’s like we have always been ignored, the system is still ignoring us as if we don’t exist...we also fear building anything on these lands again because we do not trust the authorities, even if we build something here, it can be demolished again.”***

At another beach location, Palma Rima Beach, youths said that arbitrary arrests and detention were the norm during the former regime. They were prohibited from being around the beach area, and any youth found within certain areas suffered punishments included beatings with sticks, batons, etc. and being forced to do “monkey dance” (a form of punishment in which victims are made to hold their ears with crossed hands – the right hand holds the left ear and the left hand holds the right ear – while squatting up and down). One of the interviewees said that they were asked to ***“kneel down and hold bricks on each of our hands... our dreadlocks were cut off and we got chased away from the beaches like little children by the paramilitary.”***

All of the beach youth mentioned the constant castigation and stigmatization from State officials and institutions as well as the general public throughout the former regime’s tenure. It became a norm to

portray these youth as good-for-nothing young people who were a burden on society and the cause of crime and other social ills. One interviewee said that

***“we are usually referred to as ‘bumsters’ but we are not ‘bumsters’, we are chanters. We are not different from the government officials because like they go abroad and chant for support to develop the country, we also chant for survival, so we are all chanters, but they discriminate us.”***

Chanting, according to their explanation, refers to befriending tourists and sometimes soliciting financial support from them. They explained that while the state views this as portraying a negative image of The Gambia to tourists and therefore attempts to curb this behaviour with extreme heavy-handedness, they consider the government’s stance as hypocrisy. They argue that The Gambian government is heavily dependent on international aid and spend much effort in soliciting aid from the international community, purportedly for national development. Since the beach youth themselves do not see benefits of those state efforts, they argue that they do their own chanting for funds and support by befriending western tourists, in order to sustain and develop themselves and even their communities.

One interviewee explained,

***“Despite what they say about us, do you know how many schools have been built by European visitors in communities because of us and the friendships we build with them, how many clinics even, charities and foundations?”***

Another interviewee lamented,

***“We are always marginalized, traumatized, stigmatized and treated like criminals, which leaves us on our own with no one outside of our circle to socialize with.”***

Thus, the general perception among these youths is that instead of supporting them in their private enterprises in light of low employment opportunities, they are treated as scapegoats by the state and its security apparatus.

## **Violations against young artists and activists**

Young Gambian artists and activists were also severely impacted by the human rights violations of Jammeh and his government. Young musicians and activists who felt that they represented the voices of the youth and thus tried to articulate the opinions and frustrations of young people were treated with the same harsh suppression that was the typical response of the Jammeh regime to any dissenting voice. Jerreh Badjie, known by the stage-name Retsam, was forced into exile in 2016 when he released a political song 'Power of Freedom,' in which he advocated that Jammeh must be voted out. The singer was forced to flee the country after taking part in a protest that was halted by heavy-handed security forces. Killa Ace, another rapper known for the political messages in his songs, similarly had to flee to Senegal in the same year.<sup>xxi</sup> In 2016 Ace lamented the scarcity of jobs and opportunities for Gambia youth, in addition to the restriction on freedom of expression and other liberties.

Ace said,

***“If you are restricted from doing certain things you cannot show who you really are, and that gives a limit to what you really can be, especially as a youth.”***

According to the rapper, when he released a song that was critical of Jammeh,

***“My wife and I, and my manager, incessantly received death threats and calls from the NIA (Gambia's National Intelligence Agency) demanding my whereabouts.”<sup>xxii</sup>***

These young artists were considered more than a nuisance by the Jammeh regime; as part of a social media movement by Gambian youth calling for an end to the Jammeh regime, they were viewed and

treated as a threat to the former president. Another interviewee, a DJ, also narrated how he was arrested, along with the artist he worked with and their dancers, after a performance in one of the hotels in Senegambia. He said that a short distance from the hotel at which they just finished performing, the PIU (Police Intervention Unit, a paramilitary unit of the police) stopped them and accused them of disturbing some European ladies residing in the hotel. Following a denial and an argument, they were all arrested and detained at the police station without charge. Describing the conditions they were subjected to by the police, he said:

***“It was a very terrible place. It is very dark and there was no bathroom, there was just one bucket in there where everybody will use for toilet. And when it's full, they don't care who will take it out and go and pour it out. They just leave it there and it starts overflowing onto the floor. So, then you have no place to sleep, so you have to stand all night, all day all night, you have to stand, and everybody's struggling at one window. It is just a small hole... the window. When you stand there for a while, people will come and push you and have their turn to breathe a little bit of fresh air.”***

All of these experiences according to the interviewees have engendered serious distrust of the security officials in general but particularly the PIU (Police Intervention Unit). The DJ interviewed for this report stated that *“every time I pass them [PIU] I feel very hot inside, very angry, because I feel offended. They violated my rights without any reason.”*

Like most of their counterparts, these youths were also forced to endure their violations in silence, afraid that trying to seek justice could itself result in greater oppression. One interviewee said that despite his anger at being unlawfully detained and harassed during the Jammeh era, he decided not to seek any redress:

***“I did not report to any police station. I feel like it's all the same. It's under the same government. So, nothing is gonna happen, maybe something terrible can happen to me. So, I felt that I don't have to report it, because of fear. Someone mentioned to me or to us rather, to report the matter. He told us that ‘you have to report this matter to police because this is not right.’ But my mom said ‘No, let it be, because we don't have any money. If you push this problem, you might have to take it to court. We have nothing to deal with this, and the state is more powerful than you. The government is more powerful than you. So just let it be. You just need to be careful.”***

The most notorious incident of human rights violations against Gambian youth occurred on April 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> 2000 when government security forces fired live bullets at students at a demonstration that was organised by the then Gambia Students' Union (GAMSU). At least 14 students were killed. This violent repression of student protesters was perpetrated in the immediate aftermath of two other violations against two individual young people, which triggered the demonstrations in the first place.<sup>xxiii</sup>

The first of these incidents involved the rape of a 13-year-old girl, Binta Manneh around March 2000, by a uniformed paramilitary officer during an interschools athletics competition at the Independence Stadium in Bakau. She was a Grade 7 student from Brikama Ba Upper Basic School who had travelled down to represent her school in the competition. A doctor's examination confirmed the girl was raped and the Gambia Student Union (GAMSU) pressed the government for answers. While that incident remained unaddressed, on month later, in April another student from Forster's Technical High School in Brikama, 15 year-old Ebrima Barry, was beaten to death at the hands of the Gambia Fire Service, after his teacher had asked the Fire Service officers to help discipline him. Apart from the outrageousness of the fact that fire service officers were asked to discipline a student, the government again failed to properly investigate or address the matter. The GAMSU leadership made demands and an autopsy report (which was widely believed to be a cover-up) was produced, stating that Ebrima died of natural causes. The students then requested a permit to protest, which was denied. However, the students were determined to exercise their constitutional right, and so the student leadership called its members to peacefully march toward the capital city of Banjul. The security forces fired live bullets at the students, on orders from President

Jammeh. Students from some of the rural schools also went out to protest but were met by a similar violent response.<sup>xxiv</sup>

In addition to those killed during the demonstrations, between April 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> several hundred students were arrested across the country and subjected to severe beatings and other inhumane and degrading treatment. Those who were injured received little sympathy or help from the government. Some were confined to wheelchairs for life, and others have dealt with other long-term consequences, such as Oumie Jagne, who has lived with bullet fragments in her arm for almost twenty years. The pattern of sexual abuse of women that was a consistent feature of human rights violations of the Jammeh regime also continued during the internment of the detained female students. One of those detained testified to the TRRC that when she was arrested, she was tied up and severely beaten by the Police Intervention Unit Officers. She said that one of the officers was kicking and stamping on her chest and other parts of her body. According to her,

***“He continued to stamp me even on my genitals, and at that point I passed out. The last thing I heard one of them saying was ‘she’s off now.’ I woke up at the hospital later and a female nurse told me how I got there. She said that she was working at the mortuary where they were packing the bodies of the dead demonstrators, and I was among them, labelled number 3. So the nurse said when she saw that I was still tied up, she said to herself ‘since she’s dead I cant leave her like this, I must remove the ropes before her family comes to identify her.’ She said when she was untying me she noticed that I took a breath and she told the others ‘this one is not dead’. I was taken to A&E and later admitted. When I awoke, I was told by another victim also admitted at the hospital at the time, that I had been in a coma for about a week. I could not move and I had a catheter fixed in order to pee. I also had severe pain from my genitals, and the tear that I sustained there was not stitched so I bled constantly for a while. I had to spend a long time sitting in hot water to help ease the pain. As much as I have thought about, I still cannot understand how I sustained that injury to my genitals.”<sup>xxv</sup>***

One of the interviewees for this report says that she got pregnant as a result of rape at the hands of the security officers while she was detained after the demonstrations. She admits that this is one of the most painful experiences of her life and something she has even omitted to mention in her TRRC statement. She said that she cannot even love her child because she feels that having the child destroyed her life.

In an act that epitomised the impunity enjoyed by security forces in The Gambia during the regime, in the aftermath of the demonstrations, the government passed the Indemnity (Amendment) Act 2001, which gave Jammeh powers to grant indemnity from prosecution to any person for any act committed to quell an unlawful assembly or other emergency. This Act essentially prevented victims of the student demonstration or any subsequent demonstration from seeking accountability against those involved in the violating their rights.

If there was any doubt about the stance of the government towards the rights of Gambian youths to voice dissent or demand fulfilment of their rights, the government’s reaction to the April 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> 2000 demonstration made it clear that those rights are forfeit. Not only did victims lose their lives and sustain grievous injuries, many were also forced to drop out of school because of the injuries and length of recovery times they had to endure.

The government’s reaction to the demonstrations and the denial of accountability that followed highlight not only the arbitrary violation of fundamental rights by security personnel that typified the Jammeh regime, but also the restrictions to access to justice that hampered those whose rights were violated. Several participants stated that though tempered to some degree, the abuse of power is still common among security agents of the state in the current dispensation. Like many of the revelations at the TRRC hearings, these revelations signal the need for meaningful and comprehensive security sector reforms in the Gambia, targeting the institutions, their policies, the legal frameworks that make up their mandate, as well as the capacity and accountability of the personnel who work within them.

## Children of victims and children of perpetrators

The TRRC hearings presented harrowing stories of victims narrating the human rights violations they experienced and the impacts this has had on them, as well as stories from perpetrators that stunned the entire nation and the world. The stories of what happened shocked and traumatized many people. However, one impact that has not been so conspicuously captured is how the experiences of victims and perpetrators have affected their children, both over the years as well as immediately following revelations before the Commission. In some cases, the TRRC hearings were the first time that victims' and perpetrators' children had heard of their parent(s)'s experiences.

Regardless of whether they came from well-off or poor families, youths were not immune to the impacts of human rights violations by the former regime. Even where they were not direct victims, the victimisation of their parents often left young people to deal with the brunt of the impact of those violations, sometimes without knowing why.

One young woman described how her father's imprisonment resulted in dysfunctionality within her family. Her father was a former employee of the government who later left and started his own business but fell afoul of Jammeh. Although she did not know what the original issue was about, she still lives every painful reality of its impact. She said that her family home was confiscated by the government which disrupted everything in their lives. She said:

***“Everyone has been unstable ever since. We eventually found somewhere to live, but we literally had to vacate the premises within 24 hours because we got notice that the Sheriff was coming the next day to seize everything in it apart the human beings inside. After living comfortably in our own home for 22 years, it was when we were forced to move out that we found out how much of a problem housing is in The Gambia. It was tough, though we kind of pulled through.”***

When asked about how it felt being a child of a victim of the Jammeh regime, she responded:

***“Damaged. I am damaged. The truth is when these things happened, I was in second year of university and watching my father going in and out of court... it kind of made me lose complete interest and trust in the legal profession which I was studying. It kind of destroyed my family because we all had to figure ourselves out. I was young but I had to be there for my mum and my brother who is 9 years younger than me. I don't think he has recovered from that since. My sisters were abroad and felt helpless and it messed them up mentally.”***

She admitted that although her friends at the time were helpful and supportive, she now does not have a relationship with most of them because being around them forces her to revisit that part of her life, which she prefers not to remember.

Another interviewee explained that she worked at a radio station around 2010 and she remembers that ***“all they kept drilling in our ears day in day out was, ‘make sure you do not say anything offensive about the government’.”*** When she later moved on to host a program on television with some friends, their filming equipment were seized by National Intelligence Agents. She said that one of the items the authorities confiscated their filming drone on the basis that it could be carrying a bomb. It took the young entrepreneurs at least two months before they could get the drone back, by which time their program was detrimentally delayed. She said:

***“Our intent was just entertainment, that's what our show was about. It was an edutainment show, we even made it a point not to talk about politics at all, because we wanted to stay out of trouble.”***

In her interview, she explained that having had no other economic opportunities, their television program was an entrepreneurial venture, not merely to entertain. They had invested money on the equipment (such

as the drones that were seized) with a view to creating and selling video adverts. Seizing their equipment, she said ***“did not just stop us from doing our program, it stole from us because this was a channel for us to make money on our own as the government wasn’t going to come and help us.”***

Another interviewee said she was forced to drop out of school after her mother was arrested from a political rally and jailed. She was denied any visitation rights, and her father collapsed and could not speak from then on, until he died shortly afterwards. She had no one to pay her school fees and had to deal with the loss of her father too. She said that she could not seek help from anyone due to fear. Like many other youths in similar circumstances, her life opportunities have been drastically diminished by her parents’ victimisation. She is now forced to live as a dependent with very few opportunities available to her. According to her, the state has not done much to help people in her situation improve their lives either.

Another son of a victim and alleged perpetrator, said that when he was in Grade 9, his father, who was a government minister at one point during Jammeh’s regime, was arrested at the behest of Jammeh for an alleged crime. His father’s arrest happened during his final Grade 9 exams and the stress made it impossible to concentrate on his studies. He said that he was well aware of stories of arrestees being tortured and even killed and disappeared by Jammeh’s state agents, and that caused him much fear and pain. He said:

***“His arrest affected me in a sense that when I was supposed to sit and read, I would think about him, and I wouldn’t be able to focus or read what I was supposed to. Also having to sit for exams in which my dad was not there to support or even wish me luck... everybody was devastated in the family. My mom would always cry, she would be worried, like everyone would be extremely worried. And I wouldn’t even know what to do. So it was hard for me to focus on the exams, per se.”***

This quote shows the direct and multi-faceted impact (including severe trauma) that violations against their parents have had on youths, despite being described as secondary victims in such circumstances.

Notwithstanding the impact of violations and the consequent marginalisation and disillusionment of young people during the former regime, most of the research participants believe that children of victims and perpetrators can peacefully co-exist in The Gambia. Some however, said that there is likely to be mistrust between the children and families of perpetrators and victims. Thus, some of the youths say that something has to be done to break the cycle of animosity between victims and perpetrators in order for their children to be able to get over any issues. According to others, the important thing is for those in charge of the transitional justice processes and national affairs to realise that these young people did not do anything, whether their parents are victims or perpetrators, and should be afforded *“equal opportunities to work through their issues and move on to develop themselves.”* One of the interviewees who is a child of a victim said:

***“If the government provides free education and allows us to express ourselves, we will tell them how we feel and they can then help to develop us, and if they develop us, the country will develop. We have brilliant young minds, but they are hindered because of fear, they’re hindered because of lack of opportunities. As a youth in this country, you have to bend over backwards to earn a decent living, or resort to unscrupulous means, and it messes you up. And even in that sense, the government needs to do something about it – to fix our brains from all the damage they put us through.”***

The responses from these participants suggest that engagement between state authorities or agents, CSOs and the Gambian youth should be increased in order to better understand the state of mind, perceptions and needs of the youths, through their own perspectives. This will be a departure from the usual prescriptive approach to addressing youth issues, and will therefore enhance efforts to improve the lives of youths in the Gambia.

The Black-Market Boys represent another group of young people subjected to frequent raids, arrest and detention as well as confiscation of belongings during the Jammeh regime. This group of young people are mostly school dropouts who were also affected by the high rates of unemployment that have been persistent in The Gambia since that period. In order to make a living, the Black-Market Boys resort to selling second-hand goods and wares ranging from shoes, mobile phones, clothes and all other manner of consumer goods. Participants interviewed from this group of youths said that most of them do not have established shops or stalls where they do business but rather, whenever they have a secondhand item or know someone who has something to sell, they would carry the product to a specific area of the urban markets where they try to find a buyer for that product. They explained that the products can be either their own or an item given to them to sell for a commission. He said that it is the area of the market where these goods are sold that is referred to as the Black Market because of its informal nature. Although there are black markets in most of the urban market places, the youths interviewed for this report are all from the Serekunda market. According to one of the interviewees, over the years, they have been the subject of unwarranted police brutality and aggression. He said that they were raided by the police on a regular basis. In many cases, police seized any goods found on them and allege that they are stolen goods without proof. Another interviewee said, ***“I think that whenever some of these police officers are broke, some of them decide to come to the Black Market and cause trouble for the boys and take their things or their money.”*** According to the interviewees, the police counted on the Black-Market Boys’ lack of knowledge about the law and the informal nature of their enterprise in order to illegally retain their goods. They complained that because they are not considered important, nothing happened even when they tried to make complaints, and instead risked being beaten or detained. While the interviewees agree that sometimes stolen items do find their way into the Black Market, they argue that that did not justify the arbitrary violations of their rights to person and property which they were subjected to. One of them said

***“Just because someone comes to the police and says that they have lost their iPhone does not mean that they can just come to the market and anyone they see with a phone looking like that, they will just say that this is the phone and you have stolen it. They don’t even investigate to make sure.”***

The Black Market boys say that despite the change of government, they are still subject to the arbitrary raids and arrests by police, mostly on baseless grounds. They pointed out the story of Ousman Darboe, a mobile phone vendor/repairman who was arrested by the Anti-Crime Unit of the police in July 2019 and allegedly tortured to death.<sup>xxvi</sup> Anecdotal evidence from the experiences of one of Fantanka’s young clients during another project also suggest that the violations against the Black Market Boys continue even under the new administration. A qualified electrician, he had gone to the Black Market around October of 2020 to look for an electrical part, which he thought would be cheaper there. He said that while speaking to a friend, police suddenly confronted them and accused them of selling stolen products, which they vehemently denied. In the ensuing argument, one of the officers suddenly slapped the young man for talking back at him and proceeded to arrest him. All of his money and a pair of telephones were confiscated from him. He was taken to the police station but later released when the police decided that he was innocent. However, while his cash was returned to him, the officers who arrested him claimed that they had lost the phones. After seeking assistance from Fantanka, the CEO put him in contact with a senior police officer who promised to ensure that his items were returned to him. After a number of weeks going to and from the station, his phones were finally returned to him. When asked about his experiences for this report, he opined that ***“this is what they do, they know that most of us don’t know the law and are not educated, so they threaten us and abuse us. If you don’t have help you just lose your stuff.”***

They also argue that even the blame for the prevalence of thefts and burglaries should ultimately be on government, for failing to equip youth with skills, employment opportunities and socioeconomic conditions that will allow youths to earn a decent living, rather than depend on their parents to take care of them.

## **The Green Boys and Girls (July 22 Movement)**

While youth generally were either neglected or oppressed under Jammeh, he also found utility in exploiting the vibrant energy and bold enthusiasm of a group of young people. In addition to some of the young soldiers in the National Army whom he transformed into a vigilante killer unit under his direct command (the Junglers), Jammeh also organised a group of young people who were initially known as the 22nd July Movement but later became commonly called the Green Boys and Girls. In contrast to the general plight of youth in the country, the Green Boys and Girls were formed as a militant youth movement that operated outside the confines of the law to terrorize perceived enemies of the Jammeh regime and their relatives. Testimony heard by the TRRC and described in its Final Report revealed that Jammeh gave the Green Boys leverage to act with impunity and lawlessness, terrorizing individuals and local communities across the country.

Like the Junglers, the Green Boys and Girls were young people who were plied with incentives in the forms of free amounts of cash, vehicles and the freedom to do as they liked. Some of them were even sent to Libya for training. Its young members became indoctrinated into the culture of **“oga [Jammeh] before God”** which Jammeh perpetuated in the security forces, firmly making them view him as the axis around which everything in The Gambia revolved. Thus, these Green Boys and Girls were on par with the Police Intervention Unit, the National Intelligence Agency and Junglers in their commitment to maintaining Jammeh’s rule at any cost, including committing gross human rights violations. Among the documented violations committed by the Green Boys and Girls was the witch-hunting exercise initiated by Jammeh around 2009. The Green Boys and Girls, along with some members of the Junglers, were the main agents who rounded up alleged witches identified by the “witch hunters”, whom Jammeh had brought in from Guinea Conakry, to be given “treatment”. Many of these young people sacrificed their education to engage in their militant activities, consequently being left without any meaningful skills or qualification to pursue economic opportunities after the Jammeh regime fell. Furthermore, although only a few Green Boys and Girls were specifically named during the TRRC hearings, many of them are known within their communities and are now forced to live within communities who view and treat them as perpetrators. Like the Junglers, these youth are forced to reckon with their actions during the past regime without much support to deal with different effects it has had on them.

## The effect of violations on youths generally

Youth in Jammeh’s Gambia faced challenges such as unemployment and harassment from security forces, among other types of human rights abuses. Despite this fact, they dared not demand change from the Jammeh government which, despite the obvious failures, insisted on portraying conditions in the country as highly progressive. Those who dare to voice dissatisfaction or demand for better outcomes were subjected to even more severe human rights violations including arbitrary arrests, detention, torture, killings and disappearances. This realisation that they could not freely express themselves—and the knowledge that if they did, they could easily end up in prison or even worse, be killed or forcibly disappeared – has had a debilitating effect on young people and the minds of young Gambians generally. This fear prevented them from engaging the system in any manner that could positively change their lives. According to one interviewee,

***“The trauma of that period still hinders us from completely and openly expressing ourselves. We are still thinking at the back of our heads, ‘Hey I have something to say,’ but also thinking, ‘Is it safe to say it? Could this new guy decide to be like the other guy and just come and pick me up?’ You know. It’s like you wanna express yourself but you’re like, ‘Is it safe?’ The fear has transferred from the old regime to the present, and it is very much alive.”***

He said that the fear young people lived under during the Jammeh era extended to fear of anyone and everyone, because:

***“Anyone could tell on you, be they a neighbour, friend, strangers, etc., but especially anyone in uniform, because they could hit you, hurt you or even kill you, and nothing will***

***come out of it. So, you were fearful of government offices, of your phone, everything really. It was some kind of paranoia.”***

According to interviewees, as a result of this lingering sense of fear, youth have not necessarily felt comfortable being open about what they think or feel. There is an urge to just hide in a shell because they don't want to be in trouble or get their family members in trouble through their actions.

Even though the transitional justice processes promised an opportunity for the country to share their experiences of dictatorship, many young people soon discovered that they still are not fully considered in national matters. In the TRRC process for example, although youth were engaged on matters such as promoting non-recurrence, reconciliation and other forward-looking issues, very little focus if any was given to their experiences during the former regime. This is particularly apparent for those youths who have largely been relegated to the fringes of society, such as the beach youth. Despite the proliferation of capacity-building programs and national stakeholder initiatives of various kinds during the transition period, inclusion of youth has been tokenistic, largely comprising of the same participants purported to represent youths generally. Even where such events are initiated in the name of advancing youth interests, the approach has been largely prescriptive and thus youths have largely been restricted to a beneficiary role rather than active agents advocating for their own interests. One of the participants said that he had spoken to a few organisations about issues affecting young people in the transitional justice process but admitted that he had not participated in the transitional justice process as much as he would have wished to. He says,

***“The reason [I haven't participated much] is that whenever youth are involved in national issues, it tends to be politicised, hence I tend to shy away from it. However, when I find organisations and individuals who I feel I can trust, then I engage them.”***

## **ANALYSIS**

The research presented here clearly shows a systemic violation of the rights of young people that has left them relegated to the margins of society. However, the treatment of young people is part of a pattern that has been exposed through the TRRC hearings. Looking at the human rights violations that occurred in The Gambia under Jammeh from a broader angle, it becomes clear that there was a deliberate logic to the violations despite the seemingly arbitrary nature of them – a determination to control the narrative by silencing any dissenting voice that challenged the image of a benevolent, spiritually gifted, God-ordained saviour of the Gambian people which he sought to portray. From the immediate period following his coming to power, Jammeh schemed to consolidate his power through the destruction of all social structures that could pose a threat to his rule. This is evident from the systematic persecution of the leading members of the former People's Progressive Party-led (PPP) government immediately after taking over. Subsequently, Jammeh attacked the media with the same viciousness, and the legal system was subject to similar treatment. Jammeh set out to create an awe-inspiring persona that exploited social beliefs, and religious affairs also became a tool to be manipulated for power consolidation. Jammeh treated Gambian youth in a similar vein. Politically active youth were induced and exploited, either as part of the militant Green Boys and Girls, or suppressed with crushing effect when they dared question his authority. Youth who attempted to exercise constitutional rights such as during the April 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> 2000 protests were subject to violent repression, and young Gambian women found themselves under the yoke of sexual, psychological economic and physical subjugation by Jammeh and his agents, aimed at disempowering the women and stifling their voices and spirits. Thus, a demographic that has the potential to determine the destiny of a nation (as seen during the Arab Spring and elsewhere) was weakened by the Jammeh regime in the interest of consolidating his power.

The impact of 22 years of dictatorship on Gambian youth was far-reaching. Most significantly, the suppression of dissent and self-expression in The Gambia during the Jammeh regime meant that youth could not freely express themselves without fear of consequence. As interviewees have indicated, most youths lived under constant warning against crossing the government, and witnessed the wrath of the

state on those who dared to express their free opinion. Youth thus lived in constant fear of the state and frustration at the inability to express themselves. Since the change of government, the space has opened for young people to exercise their voices, yet many youths still believe that even though they are able to speak out now, they are still being given a deaf ear. Consequently, despite the overt confidence shown by many young people, there are many still who struggle to deal with the internal turmoil borne out of their experience of the former regime. From Fantanka's work with victims in the TRRC process, it is clear that many young people currently suffer trauma as a result of their experiences during the Jammeh regime. Signs of trauma are visible among youths who were direct victims of various rights violations (including some of the young women who were subjected to SGBV and the Beach Youths), as well as children of victims and children of perpetrators. This is not surprising as trauma is very common longer-term emotional response after painful or disturbing experiences. As some of the participants interviewed for this report have pointed out, they have found it hard to maintain relationships with family and close friends, suffered flashbacks and mood-swings, and other mental health impacts. A number of women who have benefitted from Fantanka's psychosocial support program are also grappling with their children who are clearly traumatized and have resorted to substance abuse as coping mechanisms.

Those youths whose lives were disrupted by the victimisation of their parents face additional mental health implications. Most of them were forced to grapple with the devastating changes resulting from the violations their parent(s) experienced, without the space to process these events properly. Many of these young people were forced to mature quickly and learn to take up responsibility, often forced to be the pillar of support for a distraught parent and siblings. They became deprived of normal childhoods and more often than not, their futures as well. Losing the breadwinner in the family often meant that their education was disrupted for lack of financial support, resulting in the cessation of personal development opportunities. Many such youth have grown up harbouring bitterness over their broken dreams. In addition, they were also forced to deal with these complex life changes, which in most cases leads them to feel emotionally distanced from family members, experience dysfunctionality within their families, and suffer depression.

The impact of the experiences discussed above falls under what psychologists describe as intergenerational or transgenerational trauma. The term denotes trauma that has been passed on from direct victims who have been subjected to traumatic incidents (in this case parents who suffered gross human rights violations at the hands of the state) to the next generation. However intergenerational trauma can also manifest among a subsequent generation of a community or group of people who have been subjected to collective traumatic experiences. Thus, in the case of Gambian youth who lived under two decades of oppressive rule and gross human rights violations, the oppressive environment has obviously had that effect, not only on those whose parents were directly affected, but on youth as a collective demographic. For Gambians who were very young when Jammeh and his cohort usurped power in 1994, and those who were born during the early part of his regime, the only reality they have lived and experienced has been dictatorship. Psychologist Angela Conolly states that one of the factors in the intergenerational transmission of trauma "is the incapacity on the part of the survivors to remember, to mourn and to symbolize the trauma."<sup>xxvii</sup> Gambian youth throughout the lengthy duration of Jammeh's rule were not afforded the space to remember, to mourn or to even ask for help to heal their wounds, physical or emotional. It is evident from the interviews and focus group discussions conducted for this report, as well as Fantanka's work with young people and victims, that youth are suffering either from direct or intergenerational trauma. There is thus a critical need for provision of proper mental health and psychosocial support for these young people that can help them come to terms with their past experiences in order to move forward as active citizens.

In most cases Jammeh and his government only engaged young people when doing so presented an opportunity to exploit them. For the young women who encountered the former president and other senior state officials, what started out as opportunities to participate in national affairs or develop themselves in life became a violation of their most intimate rights – control over their own bodies. Jammeh and his officials violated the sexual and reproductive health rights of countless young women who came into their sphere of influence. These young women have had to endure years of feeling used and discarded. Their

confidence and outlook on life has in a lot of cases been diminished and their lives are no longer what they used to be. Some of the women have grown up having to hide their identities for fear of stigmatisation. In addition to the actual trauma of the violations, the sociocultural norms of The Gambia have forced these young women into a dilemma between voicing out their experiences and risking stigmatisation or remaining silent and being consumed by the psychological trauma. In a country where support for mental health and psychosocial support is limited and worse still, considered a taboo, most women prefer to suffer in silence than risk further social stigmatization. The trend of abuse from the head of state and his machinery was not a secret in The Gambia. Consequently, the objectification of women by the higher echelon of the former regime trivialised sexual violence against young women and reinforced within wider society the disregard for SRH rights of women and women's autonomy over their bodies. This abuse continues today, as evidenced by the fact that a senior state counsel at the Ministry of Justice recently told one Fantanka staff that approximately 95% of the sexual abuse cases currently being dealt with at the Ministry are perpetrated against girls under the legal age of consent.

For the young women who have dared to speak up about their experiences of sexual violence, the social reaction has mostly been vilification. The misconception has been that they were only too happy to enjoy the attention from powerful men and the lavish gifts they were offered. This narrative, however, fails to appreciate the power dynamics within which the violations occurred. It is not unnatural for a teenage girl to be intrigued by material promise, attention and patronage from people in positions of power and wealth such as the president. On the other hand, it is natural to expect that a head of state and government ministers will consider themselves in positions of trust in their interactions with such young girls. To use their position as a façade to exploit and sexually abuse such young women cannot therefore be anything but abuse of trust.

Young people who were lured into the Green Boys and Girls (22<sup>nd</sup> July Movement) were similarly exploited for political benefit. Just as Jammeh incentivised his assassination squad (the Junglers) with money, drugs, alcohol and the power to act with impunity, the Green Boys and Girls were similarly used to commit assault, arson and many other violent acts against perceived opponents of Jammeh. Most of these youths did not foresee the fall of the Jammeh regime and, having spent most of their time doing Jammeh's bidding, they were left to fend for themselves after the end of the Jammeh regime. Many of them had forgone their education and relied on Jammeh's patronage, but are now forced to face the realities that their fellow youths had been subjected to throughout Jammeh's rule, i.e., unemployment and marginalisation, as well as the consequences of their actions within their communities. Although Fantanka has not engaged directly with any youths from this group, it is believed that they also need mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) to help them come to terms with their past actions and help them reintegrate and reconcile with their peers and wider society.

For the beach youth and other groups of young people who experienced years of arbitrary arrest, beatings and torture from state agents, there was nowhere to turn to for redress. Most of them did not have the educational background or knowledge to navigate the formal institutional infrastructures that could or should have provided redress. In addition, the experience of being subjected to stigma for years eroded their trust in the state and their sense of belonging to the country. The effect over time has created a segment of the youth population who are largely indifferent to social issues, politics and matters of national import, such as participation in elections, constitutional and legal reforms etcetera. They have been deterred from participating in national development and instead believe that since no one seems to care about their interests, they must focus and prioritise eking out a living for themselves by creating their own means of earning a living. Their perception is that they are not considered part of the system and their rights don't matter to authorities. As the DJ who was interviewed for this report said, after his encounter with the PIU officers, he did not report the incident because he felt ***"it's all the same. It's under the same government."*** In fact, he feared that he could even suffer further consequences for reporting that his rights had been violated. Other youths interviewed for this report point out that the rate of unemployment is greatest among youth and has never been seriously addressed. They thus argue that politicians and government officials are only concerned about their own enrichment and that engaging in national politics is futile.

One ‘backway’ returnee who receives psychosocial support from Fantanka said that unless he sees numerous free skills centres set up for youth in the country, he will never believe that government cares about youths. Similarly, when the Beach Youth from Brufut Heights tried to submit complaints of the demolition of the beach bars during the Jammeh regime, they were told that those violations were not within the mandate of the TRRC. When Fantanka worked with these Beach Youth and engaged the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), they were told that the violations this suffered happened during a time that is outside the mandate of the NHRC and thus that commission cannot deal with their complaints. Experiences like these have resulted in the type of apathy towards national matters described above. Youths are also highly suspicious of all formal processes, settings, individuals, institutions or organisations, believing that such engagements are always designed to exploit them further. Many of the youth believe that government and civil society often seek funding and financial support in the name of youth empowerment, yet the youth themselves hardly ever see the benefits of such efforts.

Youth who became musicians, poets or advocates faced limitations to their artistic expression under Jammeh. They experienced the same oppressive environment that media and journalists faced under the Jammeh regime, where any utterance that was considered to be against the regime was labelled seditious and incurred severe consequences such as arrests, detention and beatings from state security agents. For many of these youths, the lack of formal avenues of self-development and job opportunities meant that their prowess in the entertainment industry was their only opportunities to make something meaningful of their lives. Yet, even then, the oppressive atmosphere stifled their creativity and hindered opportunities for them to develop their talents and skills better.

The experiences of the Black Market boys have been similar to those of the other youth sub-groups in that they were and continue to be frustrated with a system that did not provide them any opportunities but did not also afford them their basic human rights to pursue their own opportunities without being subjected to abuse. Like most of their peers, they lived in fear of arbitrary arrest, detention and loss of property from the security forces, as well as the brutal heavy-handedness that characterised interactions with these forces. In addition, many of them do not know what avenues are available to them to seek remedies when their rights were breached. Consequently, many of these youth have also lost trust and confidence in the state’s ability to protect their wellbeing and do not feel part like part of the society but rather relegated to the margins.

It is clear in the assessment of the experiences of all these groups of young people during the former regime and its impact on them collectively that there is a dysfunctional relationship between the state and Gambian youth which needs to be addressed if The Gambia is to move towards a progressive transformation. It is also clear from the findings in this study that the impact of the dictatorship on youth is very much present and must first be addressed before any efforts to rebuild trust between the state and Gambian youths. As the largest demographic in the population, addressing these issues will be critical to the transformative agenda that the transitional justice process in The Gambia envisaged.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This report reveals a multitude of issues affecting youth as a consequence of their experiences of human rights violations (both direct and indirect) over the 22 years of dictatorship in The Gambia that ended in 2016. The dictatorship denied youth of their civil and political rights but perhaps more significantly, it also denied them the economic, social and cultural rights that were necessary for their development and future progress. For Gambian youth generally, their past and present has been characterised by poor access to proper and quality education, suppression of basic rights to free expression, speech, assembly and association, as well as increasing unemployment and marginalisation within wider society. The result is debilitating trauma, fear and loss of confidence in the ability of the state to take care of their interests, as well as increasing poverty and limited prospects for the future. As The Gambia emerges from a transitional Justice process that aimed to address the legacy of the former dictatorship, it is clear that there is still much to be desired in the way youth matters have been addressed. However, the findings in this report

present an opportunity for all stakeholders to take stock of the plight of youth in the post-Jammeh era. The report proposes a number of recommendations which, though not exhaustive, can set the right course for ensuring that youth participation and youth affairs are a central part of national development in The Gambia going forward. The recommendations suggested in this report are as follows:

### **The Gambian Government**

- Security Sector reforms should include training police and other state security agents on ethical engagement with youth. This is vital for peacebuilding and reconciliation.
- Commit to providing free, quality basic education and establishing vocational training programs for young people in every region of the Gambia.
- Reduce youth unemployment by creating a Youth Investment Fund to promote youth entrepreneurship through grants, loans and similar incentives.
- As part of implementation of reparations, provide mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) to youths who need it. This can be done in partnership with CSOs that have the capacity to provide such support to the youth.
- Facilitate suitable mechanisms through which youths, especially out-of-school youths and those who operate in the informal sectors, can express themselves and have their issues heard and addressed. These may include body-mapping exercises which have proven effective in helping them express their experiences; however it is important to develop any such mechanisms in consultation and collaboration with the youth.
- Enhance civic education in the school syllabi to ensure young people understand their rights, the means to hold the state agents accountable, and avenues of redress when their rights are infringed upon.
- Conduct further research into the relationship between youths and the security services. Understanding the history of this relationship and an in-depth analysis of it will enable better measures improve it, thereby improving peace and stability.
- Devise strategies and interventions to help those considered secondary victims, particularly children of perpetrators, to prevent their stigmatization as a result of their parents' actions. This will help prevent a cycle of victimisation from one generation to another.
- Support CSOs who have the expertise, to provide intergenerational psycho-education to those whose families have experienced human rights violations resulting in some dysfunction in their family structures. Helping rebuild healthy family units will further help young people within these settings address the trauma which resulted from their experiences.

### **International partners of The Gambia**

- Drive funding to strengthen and support Gambian civil society in its efforts to empower youths. Civil society in The Gambia has undergone a revival since 2016 and can be vital in helping youth understand and protect their rights in various ways, from civic education initiatives to pro-bono legal representation, to challenging matters in court.
- Provide capacity building support to CSOs in the area of youth development. By providing technical training for CSOs on the ground, the increased competence and efficiency will enable them advocate for youth more effectively and more importantly, train other youth to engage with the state and advocate for themselves more effectively.

## Civil Society

- Provide MHPSS services that are easily accessible to young people, particularly children of victims and perpetrators.
- Initiate community reconciliation initiatives that help youths such as the Green Boys and Girls reconcile with communities they affected in the past.
- Facilitate dialogue and social cohesion initiatives between security institutions and young people. This will promote better understanding and a more conducive relationship between them.
- Create alternative truth-telling opportunities suited to youth. These will enable youths to express themselves freely without the distrust that they have for more formalised processes.
- Conduct civic education and sensitisation outreach activities for youths to better understand their rights and how to protect them.

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