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Learning from The Gambia's Response to COVID-19 and its impact on marginalised groups:

Lessons, Successes and Challenges

December 2020

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Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD) is the UK public body dedicated to supporting democracy around the world. Operating directly in over 40 countries, WFD works with parliaments, political parties, and civil society groups as well as on elections to help make countries' political systems fairer, more inclusive and accountable.

This report is produced by a rapporteur and reflects the views and opinions of participants during the three sessions held. The report does not therefore constitute the opinion or position of either the British High Commission nor Westminster Foundation for Democracy.

I. Executive summary

How has the implementation of the national COVID-19 response impacted the lives and livelihoods of the more vulnerable people in the country, specifically persons with disabilities and women? This was the focus of a series of national dialogues organised by The Gambia office of Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD) and funded by the British High Commission. This report presents an account of the national dialogues, conducted over three dialogue meetings, under the theme: ***Learning from Gambia's response to COVID-19: Lessons, Successes and Challenges.***

The national dialogues provided an environment for frank and constructive engagement with representatives from marginalised groups, as well as the government and national assembly. Healthcare emergencies such as the current pandemic call for rapid and large-scale responses from governments in order to protect their citizens. Amid such urgency, inclusivity can all too easily be sacrificed to expediency. Yet the healthcare crisis has disproportionate effects on particular groups and members of society. COVID-19 has and continues to impact women and persons with disabilities more negatively than other groups.

This report captures the views and arguments of participants in the dialogue, as a means of bringing these insights and viewpoints to the attention of government and stakeholders. In the dialogues, participants described being left out of the designing of the COVID-19 response policies. They suffered discrimination in the implementation of those policies as well as in the distribution of humanitarian relief support, and policies and practices intended to protect citizens from the health threat sometimes resulted in poor outcomes for marginalised groups in unexpected ways. Some key themes emerged from discussions: first, how the lack of inclusivity in design of policy interventions and implementation led to marginalised groups being inadvertently ignored or poorly-served; second, how some of the Government's active responses to COVID-19 had a greater and harder impact on marginalised groups; and third, how some specific negative consequences for marginalised groups of COVID-19 still require more direct government intervention.

It is more important than ever for all citizens and governments to reflect on the experience of 2020, and to consider recommendations for improvements in the future. Some findings are global: the disproportionate impact on women and Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) is sadly widely shared, and others are specific to each country's policy responses. This report notes the global challenge, but focuses on The Gambia's own COVID-19 response to provide a tailored report to stakeholders, distilling the key thematic findings from the wide-ranging conversations that took place during the dialogue, noting where policies and practices were found to be particularly helpful or challenging, and drawing some recommendations for the future.

II. Learning from Gambia's response to Covid-19: Lessons, Successes and Challenges: List of participating organisations.

PWD Participant List

1. Gambia Federation of the Disabled
2. Association of Gambian Albinos
3. Gambia Association of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing
4. Gambia Organization for Visually Impaired
5. Gambia Amputee Association
6. National Union for The Disabled Youths
7. Association of Mentally Disabled

Women CSOs Participant List

1. West Africa Network for Peace building (WANEP)
2. Think Young Women (TYW)
3. The CSO Gender Platform
4. Gambia Federation of the Disabled (GFD)
5. National Youth Parliament (NYP)
6. Girls Agenda
7. Team Gomsabopa
8. Child Protection Alliance (CPA)
9. Female Lawyers Association of the Gambia (FLAG)
10. Peace Ambassadors The Gambia (PAG)
11. Child Fund (CF)
12. Activista
13. Network against Gender-based Violence (NGBV)
14. Gambia Red Cross Society (GRCS)
15. United Purpose (UP)

National Assembly and Government Participants

1. Hon. Muhammed Magassy, National Assembly
2. Hon. Ndey Secka, National Assembly
3. Hon. Omar Ceesay, National Assembly Members
4. Ministry of Women, Child, and Social Welfare
5. Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education
6. Ministry of Health
7. Ministry of Trade, Industry, Regional Integration and Employment
8. Inspector General of Police
9. Department of Social Welfare
10. Women Bureau
11. National Youth Council
12. Banjul City Council
13. Kanifing Municipality
14. Brikama Area Council

III. Introduction and COVID-19 context

The Gambia has entered a crucial phase in its COVID-19 response. The first case of COVID-19 was recorded in March 2020 and at the time of submitting this report, at the beginning of the second week of December 2020, nearly 4000 cases have officially been confirmed. The curve, in terms of new infections and deaths, has visibly been flattened. Life generally has returned to normal. But the virus has not gone away. The Gambia remains a high-risk country with fears of a second wave. The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) advises against all but essential travel to the whole of the country based on the current assessment of COVID-19 risks. With a fragile health system and COVID-19 misinformation, a second wave could be more catastrophic. Marginalised groups such as women and persons with disabilities are at risk of further harm.

In response to COVID-19, The Gambia Government rolled out a range of measures, from lockdowns to humanitarian relief packages. The country has been under a state of public emergency since March. The borders - land, sea and air - were open to only 'essential travel'. Public gatherings were banned. Curfew was introduced in May. Schools were shut down. Meanwhile, COVID-19 support was given to the people, from protective gear to food and cash relief support. Some of the relief programmes were directly funded from public funds while some others came in the form of bilateral and multilateral support. The private sector, individuals and development and civil society organisations contributed significantly in the fight against the global pandemic in the country, by donating cash and equipment to the Government and relief supplies to communities. There was an information campaign to inform citizens about COVID-19 and recommended health advice.

This report on ***Learning from Gambia's response to COVID-19: Lessons, Successes and Challenges***, examines the COVID-19 response in The Gambia from the perspective of often marginalised groups, and seeks to better understand the varied impact on citizens.

- The first meeting was held virtually on 12 October 2020, bringing together persons with disabilities and those working in the advocacy for their rights and welfare. They narrated their experiences with COVID-19 and their perception of being under-served and neglected by the national response policies.
- The second meeting was held on 3 November 2020, bringing together civil society organisations, particularly those working on issues of women's rights. They gave a thorough insight of how disease outbreaks affect men and women differently; that the impact is exacerbated for the women simply because of their gender roles.
- The third and final meeting was held on 27 November 2020, drawing representation from key government offices as duty bearers, including security, relevant government ministries, department and agencies and the National Assembly. This meeting afforded a platform for the duty bearers, from those responsible for designing and implementing policies to the approving authorities, to respond to queries that emerged during meetings with women and persons with disabilities about the policies on the national response to COVID-19.

We are grateful for the constructive and positive engagement from all partners participating in the dialogues.

The national dialogues provided an environment for frank and constructive engagement. From the engagements, it was clear that COVID-19 has and continues to impact women and persons with disabilities more negatively than other groups. The outbreak has amplified the challenges these vulnerable people have been facing on the margins of the society and created new ones for them to grapple with. Unfortunately, for many participants of the dialogue, the national response was perceived to have failed to reflect the concerns of women and persons with disabilities sufficiently. In the discussions, they described being left out in the designing of the COVID-19 response policies. They suffered discrimination in the implementation of those policies as well as in the distribution of humanitarian relief support.

This report is divided into three main sections: a brief note of the ceremonies and description of the activities, followed by a main section detailing key findings of the discussions. These are concluded by some proposed recommendations for reforms.

IV. Launch of dialogues

Mr David Belgrove OBE, who assumed office as the British High Commissioner to The Gambia in August 2020, presided over the official opening ceremony of the meeting with women's rights organisation and expressed support for the work of WFD in The Gambia. He said although COVID-19 has affected everyone in the world, it was important to particularly look at how vulnerable members of the society were affected. Doing so, he added, will help guide authorities in the formulation of policies that reflect the needs and concerns of the different groups in the society. He added: 'I am pleased that we've got good representation of the civil society in this meeting as you are a vital part of democracy. It is helpful to see civil society thriving the way they are in The Gambia.'

Mr. Madi Jobarteh, Country Representative of Westminster Foundation for Democracy, spoke at each of the meetings, giving background to the project and highlighting the objectives the dialogues set out to achieve. He said: 'Since the emergence of COVID-19 in the Gambia in March 2020, the Government has made budgetary appropriations, received donor funding and implemented COVID-19 response programmes and imposed restrictions for purposes of containment and providing relief. But how did the more vulnerable people - I am talking about women and persons with disabilities - fare under those arrangements? This is a conversation we need to have and hopefully to present a report to the Government and stakeholders as a resource to influence government policy for today and for tomorrow.'

This present report is the result of these constructive dialogues.

Mrs. Anna Nancy Mendy, principal education officer, Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education, also presented in two of the three sessions. Mrs. Mendy gave an overview of the situation and status of women in The Gambia, noting that the majority of women live in rural areas and are mostly engaged in agricultural production where they provide about 75 per cent of the labour force.

Mrs. Mendy provided an overview of the body of laws, policies and institutional mechanisms put in place by successive governments over many decades towards the empowerment and advancement of women, from the setting up of the Women's Bureau, an agency responsible to advising Government on women's issues, to the newly created Ministry for Women's Affairs - the first of its kind in The Gambia. The Women's Act provides comprehensive guarantees for the protection and promotion of the rights of women, in addition to other legislation such as Domestic Violence Act, Sexual Offences Act, Tourism Offences Act and Children's Act. These in their various ways, protect and promote the rights of women. She further highlighted the international instruments binding upon the country concerning the rights and welfare of women and persons with disabilities. Key among them is the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).

She argued that although significant progress has been made, women continue to face barriers to full realisation of human rights, suffering from sexual and physical violence, and other threats such as FGM and domestic violence. The COVID-19 global pandemic has further amplified the challenges faced by women and persons with disabilities.

V. Summary of emerging issues

The wide-ranging dialogues were an opportunity to draw out the direct experience of how COVID-19 affected women and persons with disabilities in The Gambia, as represented by key CSOs and democratic representatives.

The concerns, observations and views of the participants in the dialogue are therefore summarised below.

They have been organised around three areas: first, how the lack of inclusivity in design of policy interventions and implementation led to marginalised groups being inadvertently ignored or poorly-served; second, how some of the Government's active responses to COVID-19 had a greater and harder impact on marginalised groups; and third, how some specific negative consequences for marginalised groups of COVID-19 require more direct government intervention.

Inclusivity in designing interventions against COVID-19

No prior consultations with marginalised groups

There exist several national civil society organisations with decentralised structures, having years of experience and track record working on the rights and welfare of women and persons with disabilities. Issues of women and persons with disabilities are handled by the Ministry of Women's Affairs, Children and Social Welfare. However, the participants - representatives from the Gambia Federation of the Disabled (GFD) included - noted that the Government did not involve or consult them in the designing or implementation of the national COVID-19 response. Participants argued that the result is that the COVID-19 response was not sensitive to the needs and concerns of persons with disability.

Women's groups reported a similar experience as they observed that there was a general lack of gender-sensitive approach to the national response to COVID-19. The government officials acknowledged in general that sufficient steps were not taken to involve persons with disabilities and women groups to capture their voices and concerns in the design of COVID-19 implementation programmes. However, some government departments had made efforts to be more inclusive over the course of 2020. For example, the Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education had conducted media and community outreach programmes to get feedback on their COVID-19 response programmes.

From the discussions across the three meetings, it appeared that the Government has approached COVID-19 from a narrow public health angle. The Ministry of Health became the leading, if not the sole office in charge of COVID-19 response, effectively leaving out other ministries and key departments.

A participant stated:

'Persons with disabilities were never consulted in terms of the interventions. From March to date, no government consulted us with regards to state of emergency. So, we were left alone from the start. The Federation wrote officially for the government to involve us in their strategic planning, but the government has not accorded us the opportunity. Inclusion is the key here and what we need to talk about.'

Distribution of relief packages: marginalisation of persons with disabilities and women

The Government had introduced a number of COVID-19 emergency response initiatives, including a nationwide food relief package launched by President Adama Barrow in April 2020. From the seven hundred and thirty-four million dalasis (GMD 734,254,864) allocated in the national budget for this initiative, two hundred and thirty thousand bags of rice were bought and distributed across the country. The same number of bags of sugar as well as one hundred and forty-eight thousand gallons of cooking oil were also distributed. The relief was meant for vulnerable households.

However, participants in the dialogue considered that persons with disabilities and women were largely marginalised and discriminated in the distribution of these food and cash relief packages. The support required to be directly handed to 'household heads', an approach which did not give specific consideration to persons with disabilities and women who do not usually fit under the traditional definition of 'head of household'. As a result, women and others who did not fit into traditional family structures (including women heads of families and people with disabilities who did not live in family homes) did not always receive their relief allocation.

The participants also noted that the Government did not conduct a comprehensive needs assessment to establish the needs identified by the beneficiary communities before distributing these relief packages. Instead, there was the general assumption that every household needed rice, sugar and cooking oil. Nor did participants feel that the interventions were fully transparent about the full details of the distribution exercise. Several months after the completion of the exercise, a number of communities reportedly have not received the relief package. The dialogue considered criticisms that the process was politicised and some citizens believe certain stakeholders at both local and central level government levels diverted some of the supplies.

A participant said:

'COVID-19 was a political issue. The relief sent by the Government was a political move - it was in the hands of politicians. The relief was more of a political tool, than humanitarian, and women did not benefit from it fair and square.'

Limited access to new education programmes

Following the introduction of the state of public emergency, the Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education (MoBSE) devised a new strategy in order to continue with the learning and teaching. The theme of that strategy was 'schools are closed but learning continues'. The services of online and broadcast media houses were engaged to deliver lessons on radio, TV and online, covering core subjects including Mathematics, English, Science and Social Studies. The University of The Gambia also introduced an e-learning programme for their students.

Persons with disabilities said they were not consulted by the Ministry in designing or implementing the e-learning programmes. Most of the students with disabilities did not have laptops, limiting their access to courses, and those with visual impairment do not necessarily have screen reading materials either to aid their participation in the online class. Lessons on radio and TV also excluded persons who are hard of hearing as sign language interpretation was not consistently available from the beginning.

Information on COVID-19 did not reach all persons with disabilities

As part of the fight against the pandemic, the Ministry of Health opened a dedicated website and social media channels (on Facebook and Twitter) to provide COVID-19 related information. There were also daily updates in the form of news briefings on the COVID-19 situation. However, some persons with disabilities reported that they could not readily access COVID-19 information being relayed on the media. Persons with visual impairment and hard of hearing were particularly affected because the information was not communicated to them in the format that they could access and understand. As a result, they were not informed or trained on time and fully on how to wear a face mask or apply sanitisers.

Negative impact on marginalised groups of some government initiatives to counter COVID-19

How the state of public emergency affected persons with disabilities and women

A state of public emergency was initially declared by the President on 18 March 2020, and in April, the National Assembly approved a bill to extend the state of public emergency for 45 days. COVID-19 was rising at the time in the country where there were circa 2,700 cases, and in neighbouring Senegal the cases had dramatically risen to over 13,000. The declaration, since extended several times by the President, introduced a raft of sweeping regulations, including a nightly curfew, the closure of non-essential businesses, and the banning of public gatherings.

The dialogue participants observed that the public health regulations did not take into account the particular circumstances of persons with disabilities and women. The nightly curfew came with high demand for public transportation in order to travel home before the time of curfew. Commercial vehicles were also required by the Government to take in only half of their capacity in order to ensure social distancing, and many increased their fares as a result. With increased fares and fewer spaces in the vehicles, persons with disability and women were often left behind in the scramble to board public transport.

Furthermore, as they were unable to return home in time before curfew, some were reportedly subjected to arrest and sometimes harassment by the security forces as they were seen to have violated the regulations.

Police harassment of women market traders and lack of gender-sensitive facilities at police detention centres

Participants reported that a lack of knowledge among women traders about the regulations was combined with a heavy-handed response to violations by the police, resulting in a disproportionately high number of arrests of women, and a lack of resources and systems to deal with the arrests properly.

To promote effective enforcement of the COVID-19 regulations, the Government deployed security forces to various areas within towns and cities, including markets. The majority of vendors at markets are women, and these vendors tended not to have any proper coaching or information on COVID-19 prevention and the importance of face masks. The vendors reportedly came under harassment from security forces for not following regulations.

Women market traders were also particularly affected by curfew timings, of which they were not well-informed. As a result, a disproportionate number of women were reportedly arrested by the police for inadvertently breaking curfew. Participants in the dialogue explained that some traders could not find any means of transport to go back home and had to walk long distances because of the curfew which started at 10pm.

COVID-19 restrictions therefore led to the arrest of many more women than usual, who were often detained in facilities that were not prepared for dealing with them respectfully. The police acknowledged that the structures and processes of the criminal justice system were not changed during COVID-19 to handle the unusual number of arrests of women more professionally. There are no separate detention facilities for men and women in most police detention centres, potentially placing women in an intensely vulnerable situation.

A participant from law enforcement said:

'To be honest, when COVID-19 came, we sat as a team to plan but we didn't have any representative from women or persons with disabilities and their issues were not brought forward or discussed. We are a Force and our structures are what they are but we tried to wear gender lens in our operations and in fact made a decision not to arrest persons with disabilities for breaching COVID-19 regulations.

'But, frankly, we do recognise that women have special needs but the structures that we use are not accommodating. We could not even cater for the influx of women being arrested. We had instances where women were arrested and we do not have facilities. We raised it with our command. Most police facilities are rented. There are some things you cannot do. We had the challenge of mobility. We are a force that is ready to be more democratic and sensitive to gender.'

Negative consequences of COVID-19 to which marginalised groups are particularly vulnerable, requiring more government attention:

A spike in sexual, domestic and gender-based violence

This was a topical issue across the three sessions. Participants expressed serious concern that large numbers of women experienced increased sexual, domestic and gender-based violence as lockdown measures were being enforced. For months, victims were forced to cope with perpetrators under conditions of restrictions of movement. Though there is not yet data available to confirm the severity of the problem, the participants shared the view that there was a surge in rape, child marriage and female genital mutilation during the periods of state of public emergency. Domestic violence was also perceived to have become more prevalent in the rural areas as women lost their financial independence and means to provide for the family. Participants in the dialogue felt that very little attention had been given to the survivors of this violence.

Access to health care was a challenge. Maternal death has increased.

In The Gambia, women are understood to use more health care services than men; for themselves and for their family. Participants expressed concern that as the country's fragile health system faced COVID-19, access to health in general, and for women became a serious challenge. Maternal death is reported¹ to have increased during COVID-19. Priority was given to COVID-19 in public health facilities as some women needing reproductive health care were allegedly turned away. Participants said that some private health facilities had temporarily shut their doors to taking care of reproductive health issues during COVID-19. Among women patients, there was also a fear of contracting the virus at the health facilities and as a result, many delivered their babies at home.

A participant said:

'The pandemic did not affect only rural women with respect to access to reproductive health services. I am a victim of such. I was eight months pregnant when the public health regulations were introduced. In fact, the day of the declaration coincided with my scheduled visit to the hospital and we were told on arrival that anyone above 60 years and those expecting were not to be attended. It was a private clinic. Then, they changed their policies later on to allow us in but the clinic already had cases of COVID-19. That scared us. I was disturbed psychologically. We had over 50 women coming there daily but from that moment on, only about eight of us were reporting it and I ended up not going there anymore.'

1. In September 2020 hundreds of people marched in the largest city of The Gambia, Kanifing against the increasing incidence of maternal deaths, organised by civil society organisations and human rights activists.

Loss of financial independence as markets were closed down

While COVID-19 restrictions were in place, markets were allowed to operate on a shift basis in urban Gambia. However, the Government imposed a ban on rural weekly markets called 'Lumo'. These weekly markets are staffed and attended predominantly by women.

Women in the informal sector in The Gambia are mostly employed in retail at these markets and horticultural production to provide for the family. Most had no access to storage facilities, so their goods perished during the market shutdowns. For some, this loss of income for the family was seen to contribute to further domestic abuse, as abusive family members were antagonised by the lack of resources, and women's means of earning money for an escape were even further limited.

The Ministry of Women, Children and Social Welfare Affairs did take steps to alleviate some of this pressure, inviting certain private businesses (such as hotels and restaurants) to buy tomatoes directly from women growers. This was welcomed by workshop participants, though they pointed out the limitations of the intervention as it did not cover the entire country, or most types of produce.

Persons with disabilities and women were disproportionately affected by the cut back of staff at various workplaces

With COVID-19 rising and public health regulations fully in force, a number of businesses have scaled-down operations, or temporarily closed down. Staff were laid off as a result. Participants in the dialogue described how persons with disabilities and women often occupy the bottom rank in most workplaces and were thus the hardest hit by COVID-19 induced cutbacks of staff.

Those in the informal sector were also affected, including working on farms in rural areas, as well as in illegal sectors. Due to the closure of motels and brothels, and the imposition of the curfew, sex workers also found themselves unemployed.

The overall economic security of women, across sectors and work types, was understood to have been disproportionately badly affected by the pandemic.

Wider context

Participants in the dialogue also made reference to the wider challenges for persons with disabilities and women in The Gambia, which had contributed indirectly to the problems experienced during the pandemic. These included:

Persons with Disabilities Bill awaiting parliamentary approval

Across meetings, participants have expressed frustration over the delay in the passage of the Persons with Disabilities Bill, 2020. The Bill was tabled six months ago in the National Assembly and it has not yet passed. A great deal of advocacy over a long period had called upon the Government to present the Bill, and its presentation was viewed as a success. However, the participating persons with disabilities in the dialogue expressed concern about the delay and called on the National Assembly to give priority to the Bill.

Across meetings, participants expressed frustration over the delay in the passage of the Persons with Disabilities Bill, 2020. There is no single piece of legislation that provides broad and purposeful guarantees for the rights and welfare of persons with disabilities. Participants in the dialogue felt that as a result, their issues are often neglected without any legal ramifications.

Representation of persons with disabilities requires transparency

Some of the government departments and local councils reported having persons with disabilities sitting on COVID-19 response committees. Though this was welcome, there were concerns among workshop participants that often those representatives do not have the power to influence decisions, and that they are not selected through an open and consultative process.

The failure of the Draft Constitution

The participants across meetings shared their thoughts on the draft constitution which failed to pass in the National Assembly, arguing that it provides broad guarantees for fundamental rights and freedoms, including rights of women and persons with disabilities.

Government's action and plans:

The Government noted several direct initiatives that it had taken to address the particular needs of women and people with disabilities during the pandemic, including:

- The Department of Social Welfare reported that it has given cash support to at least a thousand women with children under five by giving them one thousand dalasi per month for three months.
- About 40 Islamic schools were supported with food, rice and oil, as well as cash to prevent such schools from sending out the students to beg in the streets.
- To deal with sexual and gender-based violence, two helplines were created with the support of UNFPA for reporting cases.

The Government is also planning a number of new initiatives that are relevant to the development of support for women and persons with disabilities:

- the Children's Act 2005 and Women's Act 2010 will be reviewed in 2020 or 2021;
- the National Gender Policy 2010-2020 expires this year and a replacement is being discussed;
- the Ministry of Women, Children and Social Welfare is setting up a domestic violence Secretariat;
- next year, there will be a disability survey, the first since 1998;
- the Government is also setting up a shelter for children and the elderly in the rural town of Basse.

VI. Recommendations

These recommendations were discussed by participants during the various dialogue sessions. They are provided for consideration and as ideas to further the dialogue on reform.

1. When responding to healthcare emergencies, the Government should work more closely with civil society organisations engaged in advocacy for the rights of women and persons with disabilities to ensure that their particular needs and concerns are understood. CSOs should be engaged not just by way of consultation but involved in a way that enables them to participate directly and influence the designing, implementation and monitoring of national policies and programmes.
2. CSOs have grassroots networks that could be useful to the Government in reaching their citizens. As part of the COVID-19 response, the Government should consider leveraging the experience and structures that the civil society organisations have in reaching vulnerable groups and marginalised citizens.
3. The Government's communication strategy in times of public health emergencies should be inclusive of persons with disabilities so that all citizens have access to crucial information. The Government should ensure sign language interpreters in all important broadcasts and interpret public information in formats accessible to persons with disabilities.
4. In designing security measures during public health emergencies, such as COVID-19, the Government should consider waivers for persons with disabilities, and this should be properly communicated to them. This will prevent unnecessary clashes with the security officers, leading to their harassment and abuse.
5. In introducing relief packages and COVID-19 testing, the Government should give priority to the most vulnerable members of society, including women and persons with disabilities.
6. The Government ministries and agencies often claim that lack of resources constrains the implementation of programmes in ways suitable to persons with disabilities. However, PWD associations believe that the Government must take every necessary step to cater the needs of persons with disabilities and it was recommended that the Government talks to them to find solutions, rather than assume that the cost of catering to their needs is beyond their means.
7. There is no shortage of laws and policies and institutional mechanisms. There is a challenge of enforcement; hence it was agreed that relevant government offices should work more closely with civil society organisations towards effective implementation.
8. The Government should consider ways to be more transparent in its COVID-19 response. Details of the distribution of food and cash relief packages and the entire COVID-19 expenditures are so far not accessible to the public, fuelling accusations of mishandling and politicisation of COVID-19 relief packages. This could be addressed through transparency and explanation.
9. Women - those in retail and horticultural production in particular - should be equipped with knowledge and skills in the use of technology to enable them to sell their products online or through the phone.
10. The National Assembly should give priority to passing the Persons with Disabilities Bill, 2020.
11. Political parties, on their own initiatives actively provided support to communities across the country, many in terms of information sharing and relief supplies in response to COVID-19. The Government should involve political parties that are in the opposition in its COVID-19 response. This could rally everyone, regardless of political leaning, behind a common cause. The Government should reach out in a more effective and proactive way so as to obtain wider public involvement and support to the national response.

12. Recruitment or selection of representatives from among women's organisations and persons with disabilities to represent them at various levels of decision-making should go through a competitive and consultative process. This will not only ensure that most qualified persons are engaged to serve at those levels but also that representatives will enjoy legitimacy among their peers.
13. As the Government, through the Department of Social Welfare, plans to embark on a disability survey next year, efforts should be made to consult and involve the organisations for persons with disabilities. Participants from PWD CSOs advised inclusion of and consultation with The Gambia Federation of the Disabled as a first step.
14. The level of civic awareness in the country is low, particularly on issues related to persons with disabilities and women. The implication, among others, as witnessed during COVID-19, is that they easily fall prey to abuse and exploitation. There is need to come up with initiatives aimed at improving law enforcement officers' awareness and understanding of the human rights of some of the most vulnerable groups in society. Such programmes could be extended to the general public to make them aware of the sources of violations against women and persons with disabilities. During the dialogues, Westminster Foundation for Democracy was specifically called upon to support the empowerment of women and persons with disabilities through capacity building.

VII. Photo gallery - a collection of photos of the events



Second dialogue with women CSOs





Third dialogue with NAMs and Government officials



Third dialogue with NAMs and Government officials

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