



STRENGTHENING CHILD PROTECTION AND EDUCATION

in The Gambia

CASE STUDY 2024

Awa Badjie, a dedicated GRCS Volunteer and Teacher Coordinator at Kappa School, engages with children on self-protection and disaster preparedness. She also collaborates closely with the GRCS to develop local strategies aimed at preventing school drop-out and addressing child protection risks.
Photo credit: Audrey Oettli, IFRC.

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Fatou Darboe, a dedicated GRCS volunteer, leads a focus group discussion with students who have hearing impairments, exploring the impact of natural disasters on their lives and education. The session aims to identify proactive measures to adopt ahead of the upcoming flood and hurricane seasons, ensuring these students are better prepared for future challenges. Photo credit: Audrey Oettli, IFRC

Background

The Gambia is highly prone to disasters, particularly floods, and children face a high prevalence of violence, including corporal punishment, child labor, child marriage, female genital mutilation, and physical and sexual abuse, especially against girls in schools, communities, and the tourism sector. Social norms and values, including a culture of silence around violence against children, challenge the consistency of child protection services and weaken the child protection system.¹

More than 46,000 children never attend school,² and many more drop out before completing their education. The primary school completion rate is 88%, upper basic school 65%, and senior secondary school 47%.³ In addition, the West Coast region, particularly the Foni districts, faces regular cross-border population movements due to armed clashes between the Senegalese army and the separatist Movement des Forces Démocratiques de la Casamance (MFDC).⁴

Women and children are usually the most at risk when violence resurges, facing increased family separation, sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), and interrupted access to education and protection services. Access to quality education is also jeopardized as waves of additional students strain local schools or unrest causes school closures.⁵

GRCS Interventions

The Gambian Red Cross Society (GRCS) has developed interventions to mitigate the risks of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), child protection, and educational discontinuity in the area.

1 <https://www.unicef.org/gambia/child-protection>.

2 **More than 46,000 children in Gambia out of school**, Gambia, January 25, 2024.

3 **Joint statement** by Minister of Basic and Secondary Education Hon. Claudiana A. Cole and UNICEF The Gambia Representative Ms. Nafisa Binte Shafique on the International Day of Education, 24 January 2024.

4 Gambia, 2023 IFRC Network Country Plan.

5 Idem.

This is in line with the authorities' overall recommendations to:

- Reinforce emergency humanitarian response by providing additional support to affected populations and by identifying solutions for key risks such as displacement, contaminated water, and protection threats.
- Improve response preparedness through planning, prepositioning, and coordination mechanism strengthening; including leveraging regional and international capabilities if in-country capacities are insufficient for future crises.⁶

With its approach, GRCS aims to support children, their families, and communities to ensure students can enroll or remain in school until completion and gain skills for a better future.

Prevention and Capacity Building

The project provides capacity-building sessions on self-protection and preparedness, identifying focal points to elaborate local strategies for preventing school drop-out and child protection risks.

The project involves representatives of student bodies, education stakeholders, including school authorities, parents or caregivers, and community members from the Foni Kansala District. Students from four schools along the border between The Gambia and Senegal, which receive displaced children and have rising cases of SGBV, are enrolled. Participants include adolescent girls, pregnant women, young mothers, GRCS volunteers, and teacher coordinators.

The modules cover the GRCS Code of Conduct, SGBV, Menstrual Hygiene Management, self-protection messages, and information on the government-run child helpline 1313 and GRCS emergency line 1199.

Isatou Bah, PGI Coordinator for the GRCS, explains:

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The children shared many examples of violations in their communities, including GBV, harassment, child labor, and even child trafficking. To help them address these issues, we provided lifesaving information, such as how to safely seek support. Many children were unaware of the mechanisms within the Red Cross and other institutions. It was crucial to explain the support available, such as psychological first aid for trauma, health treatment and medications, educational support, and other tailored assistance. We also explained our partnerships with institutions like Social Welfare and shared hotline numbers for making complaints or seeking further support for themselves or their friends in the future.

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Improving Menstrual Hygiene

Conversations on menstrual hygiene management are key to creating a supportive and inclusive educational environment, ensuring girls can continue their schooling without disruption.

Adolescents often experience isolation during their menstrual periods due to cultural beliefs associating menstruation with bad luck. Many parents feel uncomfortable or consider it taboo to discuss menstrual hygiene management or sexual education, resulting in girls resorting to using inappropriate materials like old rags. In fact, many adolescents believed discussing menstruation was forbidden and were provided with old rags to use as pads when they began menstruating.

⁶ UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, The Gambia floods: Rapid needs assessment report and response recommendations 2022, p. 4.

Awa Badjie, Teacher Coordinator at Kappa School and GRCS volunteer, highlights the importance of providing practical information to girls:

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Some of the girls lacked knowledge about using pads safely to prevent infections. They might use fabric that doesn't breathe, leading to discomfort or serious health issues. We educate them on proper pad usage and explain why regular changes are essential, promoting safer practices.

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Assistance was also provided via care packages containing dignity kits (towels, toothbrushes, toothpaste, laundry and antibiotic bathing soaps, underwear, bras, menstrual pads) and learning materials (exercise books, pencils, pens, mathematical instruments, calculators, and school bags).

Overall, the training facilitated discussions on gender discrimination and negative socio-cultural attitudes that impede education. It also promoted community engagement and social behavior change to enhance demand for, and access to, education and protection services.⁷ Additionally, it helped reclaim lost school hours previously affected by menstrual periods.

Enhancing community-based child protection mechanisms via Red Cross Links in schools

The newly formed participants are now in close contact with the community based Red Cross branch to enable information flow between the school, encompassing students, teachers' coordinators and school heads, and other local disaster preparedness activities.

They also identify and refer child protection issues, acting as focal points for support between the communities and respectively the protection mechanisms and educational institutions in the Foni District.

Case Study: The Power of Training and Support

One example vividly depicts how training students can be vital.

In the West Coast region of the Gambia, at Kappa Basic Cycle School, a sixteen-year-old girl named Aisha endured a harrowing ordeal. Living with her aunt, Aisha faced severe physical abuse, marked by brutal beatings that left her body covered in scars from electric cables and open wounds. This abuse made it difficult for her to attend school or sit comfortably in class

Aisha's plight came to light when Mariama, a Red Cross volunteer and fellow student, noticed the signs of abuse. Mariama saw Aisha's constant pain and decided to intervene. Initially, Aisha was too frightened to disclose the truth, fabricating a story about a bicycle accident. However, Mariama's concern only deepened, especially after noticing Aisha's severe injuries.

Determined to help, Mariama brought Aisha to the local Brikama Red Cross branch. There, Aisha received psychological first aid, and the Red Cross tended to her wounds, ensuring she received the necessary medication and care. After mapping out her options with the team, they contacted the police, who promptly acted. With the assistance of the Red Cross, the police removed Aisha from her aunt's home and arrested the abusive woman. The police's child protection and gender unit played a crucial role in ensuring Aisha's safety.

⁷ National Study of Out of School Children in The Gambia, the Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education (MoBSE) and UNICEF, (2017).

The Red Cross also coordinated with Social Welfare to change Aisha's custody. Meanwhile, they arranged for a temporary shelter for Aisha. Mariama's family offered to provide a safe haven for Aisha during the legal proceedings. This arrangement ensured Aisha was protected from any undue influence. During this time, the Red Cross ensured Aisha's safety and well-being, transporting her to and from school, providing school feeding support, and covering her basic needs.

The Red Cross further assisted by tracing Aisha's family members. Her mother was unreachable, migrating in Equatorial Guinea. However, through the efforts of a family friend, Aisha's father was contacted. Separated from Aisha when she was very young, he had been living abroad. Upon learning about his daughter's situation, he returned to the Gambia. Aisha and her father were reunited at the police station - an emotional reconnection after years apart.

The case proceeded to court, where custody of Aisha was transferred to her father. The court also fined the aunt, warning of severe consequences if she repeated her actions. With the support of the Red Cross, in coordination with the police and Social Welfare, Aisha began to heal. After the court ruling, Aisha was able to resume school and a normal life with her father and brother.

Aisha's journey is far from over, but with the support of her father and the Red Cross, she was able to return to a normal family life and continue her education. This case highlights the importance of training students and educators to recognize and respond to signs of abuse. Education and awareness are crucial in protecting children and ensuring no child has to suffer in silence. Aisha's story shows how compassion and a supportive community can make a profound difference in a child's life.

Names have been changed for confidentiality reasons.



Kappa School in The Gambia's Foni district faces numerous challenges, including frequent cross-border population movements from armed clashes in the Casamance region, seasonal floods, and widespread poverty. These issues disrupt access to quality education, leading to school closures during unrest, the repurposing of the school as an evacuation shelter, and the strain on already limited resources from sporadic influxes of additional students. Photo credit: Audrey Oettli, IFRC.

Key recommendations

- Integrated programming between education in emergencies and child protection in humanitarian action is key to improving outcomes for children and young people and enhancing community-based response mechanisms.
- Train School Management Committees (SMCs) and Mothers Club on the importance of child protection.
- Discuss issues that hinder girls' access to education, such as stigma and lack of resources, to create a supportive and inclusive educational environment, ensuring that girls can continue their schooling without disruption due to menstrual challenges.
- Continue advocacy around the centrality of children and their protection.
- Mobilize parents and caregivers to help identify barriers to learning and challenges to protection, and develop plans to address them at the community level.