

## The Back Way through the Deadly Sea

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“There are still so many young girls in the streets, vulnerable and at risk,” thought Fatou Saine Gaye, founder of the Foundation. “There are still so many young men desperate to find a way to live. They are so desperate that they accept the peril of going out in unsafe boats into the treacherous and unforgiving deadly sea or being smuggled through many countries in northwest Africa.” By land or sea, it was called “taking the back way,” a decision both dangerous and only marginally legal, often controlled by smugglers. Young people, educated and uneducated, attempted to travel more than 2000 miles and sought refuge in any European country that would accept them. Spain, the closest, had its own economic woes. So they traveled further: 3,000 miles of land and sea travel brought some to France, and 4,000 miles brought some to Italy, which accepted thousands. The Gambia was losing its people and its future.

The Gambia was located on the north-western coast of Africa. It was a long and thin country (15-30 miles north to south and 295 miles east to west), the smallest in mainland Africa, and was surrounded on three sides by Senegal. The Gambia was situated on either side of The Gambia River, the nation's namesake, which flowed through the center of The Gambia and emptied into the Atlantic Ocean. The population in 2015 was approximately 2,000,000. Urbanization was at 57% and was increasing annually. Young people under the age of 18 comprised 44% of the population, 38% of whom were unemployed. Overall, about two thirds of the population had to live on less than the international poverty level of USD 1.25 per day. This was one reason why scores of thousands of Gambians, mostly men trying to support others, had taken the illegal path, the Back Way. This bleak economic environment was coupled with severe discriminatory gender policies aimed at women and the LGBT community. It was to this culture that Fatou Sain Gaye returned in 2005.

### **One Woman's Vision—One Woman's Efforts**

Fatou had spent 10 years in the UK, studying and graduating in Banking and Finance, before returning to The Gambia in 2005. She gained employment in a bank. However, the passion she had pursued part-time in the UK was hair styling, not banking. With her banking career endangering her desire for work-life balance, Fatou made the decision to become an independent businesswoman. In 2007, she opened a hair salon, Gaye Njorro Hair Plus, and was successful.

But that was not enough. The young girls she saw in the streets were in danger; they had no options for work. This inspired her to transform her salon into a skills training center for hairdressing, beauty cosmetology, and massage therapy. The center became fully licensed and accredited by the National Training Authority of The Gambia and began its first year with 14 students. They all graduated and either found job opportunities or started their own businesses.

Fatou did even more with help. During the second year, Fatou built a network. Her connections now included the Social Development Fund (SDF), the Ministry of Women's Affairs, and the National Youth Service Scheme. With their support, the center enrolled 50 students.

Although this did nothing to tackle the issue of youth emigration, a second successful graduation attracted new partners. Allies now included the United Nations Development Program, with an objective teaching of young people to be independent and self-reliant. These young people could now have hope and the skills to contribute to The Gambia's future. Then 50 more young people joined the new center and graduated.

Fatou engaged with the Ministry of Trade Regional Integration and was able to access funding through the ECOWAS Spanish Fund for Migration for youth training, a program that could both train Gambian youth and expand efforts to curb emigration. With this funding, the skills center added new programs such as Catering, Tailoring and Information Technology. Thanks to this expansion, overall revenues increased by 65%.

Fatou expanded her network: the Ministry of Youth and Sport appointed her as a board member of the National Enterprise Development Initiatives (NEDI) to promote youth and enterprise development. Through further networking, a partnership with Moore University of Hair Design, based in the United States, made it possible to provide the first online Hairdressing course in The Gambia. Other partners abroad offered mentorships and grants.

Fatou was always ready to learn, and seized the opportunity to become an EMPRETEC participant. After the EMPRETEC training, she continued to seek new opportunities. "When people are worried about something, I take it as an opportunity and act on it to turn it into a business reality. For example, when the Government sees the problem of illegal migration, I take the opportunity of adding hard skills to my curriculum to encourage more youths to be trained and be self-reliant and stay in their community and work."

### **Success Continued and More Challenges Appeared**

Her approach was fruitful. From 2009 to 2016, the Foundation trained and certified over 1,200 youth in various disciplines. Success was not 100%, but the Foundation could report that 80% of its graduates were gainfully employed. Some established their own businesses; some worked for the skills centers themselves, and others for reputable institutions in The Gambia. A number even found their way safely to positions and opportunities abroad.

Fatou saw opportunities around every corner and human potential on every street near the training center and in other parts of The Gambia. Who could she help in the rural areas? Fatou conducted a survey and learned that rural Gambia and the North Bank region desperately needed training center annexes. Farafenni, located in the crossroads area of the North Bank, had the highest rate of losing people to the deadly sea. Its economy had crumbled, with much of the commerce having moved just a few miles north to Senegal. Its empty streets and forlorn market spoke of little hope. Would hairdressing and cosmetology be enough? What of other services? What resources could she spare from the Foundation? What other organizations could help?

She had spoken with the United Nations Development Program and knew they supported the opening of a training center at the border in the North Bank Region. But a woman had never crossed the boundary to the rural region to establish any major organization. Bringing training to urban Gambia had been daunting, but seemed straightforward compared to the challenge of a woman bringing a new business into the devastated North Bank.

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