**Statement by Mr. Louis Mendy**

**Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education**

**The Republic of The Gambia At The**

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**Mr Vice President, Excellencies and Distinguished Delegates,**

It is my honor to address this august gathering and share the strides The Gambia has made in advancing education, promoting gender equality, and ensuring inclusivity for all in our educational system.

Over the years, the Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education has implemented several policies and initiatives to create an inclusive, human-rights-friendly, and equitable education system. We remain steadfast in ensuring that every Gambian child, irrespective of gender, ability, or socioeconomic status, has access to quality education.

To combat discriminatory practices and promote the rights of women and girls, the Ministry has ;

* Conducted community sensitizations and engagement on issues such as child, early, and forced marriages, and the harmful effects of discriminatory practices against girls.
* Established a re-entry policy since 2004, allowing schoolgirls who drop out due to teenage pregnancy, financial constraints, or early marriage to return to the schools of their choice. These re-entered girls receive counseling, monitoring, and sponsorship through the School Improvement Grant (SIG) program.
* Collaborated with partners like the Female Lawyers Association, Think Young Women, Network Against Gender-Based Violence, Women’s Bureau, and GAMCOTRAP to sensitize communities on the Women’s Act, challenge patriarchal norms, and empower women to participate in community decisions affecting their lives.

In addressing gender-based violence (GBV) and harmful practices like female genital mutilation (FGM), the Ministry has:

* Developed a Gender Training Manual for teachers and conducts ongoing training, including the annual training of new teachers.
* Adapted Comprehensive Sexuality Education, now referred to as Comprehensive Health Education, to provide students with accurate information on sexual and reproductive health.
* Established a reporting mechanism for cases of GBV in schools, where school heads report incidents to the regional gender focal point, who collaborates with child protection services and the police.
* Disseminated Sexual Harassment Policy Guidelines and guidelines against sexual abuse in schools to ensure safer learning environments.

Recognizing the rights of children with disabilities, the Ministry has taken concrete steps to ensure inclusivity in the educational system:

* A Policy on Special Needs Education is being developed and incorporated into the national education policy to cater to every child. A new Directorate of Early Childhood and Inclusive Education has been established under the Ministry to spearhead this effort.
* Schools across the country are equipped with resources such as Braille machines for the visually impaired and hearing aids for children with hearing impairments. Teachers are trained to use these resources and assess children with special needs in collaboration with health personnel and itinerants.

The Ministry also continues to promote human rights through:

* Human Rights Friendly Clubs in schools, supported by Amnesty International, to instill the principles of equality, dignity, and justice among students.
* Policies encouraging girls' education, including free education, which is supported by the Constitutional provisions and the Children’s Act to guarantee the right to education for all.

**Mr. Vice President**

Despite the progress made, challenges remain. However, we are determined to address them with the support of our partners, including UNICEF, the World Bank, and civil society organizations. Through collaboration and innovation, The Gambia continues to make significant progress in creating a more inclusive and equitable educational system.

**Thank you.**