

Being indifferent or making a difference: that is the question!  
Laudatio for Rugiatu Neneh Turay

Alice Salomon Award 2010

Berlin, Pestalozzi-Fröbel-Haus  
May 7. 2010

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Dear Rugiatu,

Dear Madam Chair, dear friends and colleagues, dear ladies and gentlemen

It is an extreme honour for me to address you at the occasion of the presentation of the Alice Salomon Award to Rugiatu Neneh Turay

Today we celebrate women who do make a difference as is shown throughout their lives and their actions. Women who are not indifferent to other peoples pain and despair.

I like to start with a quote from Holocaust survivor and Nobel Laureate, Elie Wiesel, ' *indifference can be tempting - more than that, seductive. It is so much easier to look away from victims. It is so much easier to avoid such rude interruptions to our work, our dreams, our hopes. It is, after all, troublesome, to be involved in another person's pain and despair. Yet, for the person who is indifferent, his or her neighbour are of no consequence. And, therefore, their lives are meaningless. Their hidden or even visible anguish is of no interest. Indifference reduces the other to an abstraction* ' – (Wiesel gave this speech in the White House on April 12, 1999, as part of the Millennium Lecture series)

Alice Salomon

to whom we dedicate this award, was an example by excellence, of a woman who made a difference. She was one of the most unique social advocates at the beginning of the 20th century and one of the most prominent figures in the German and international women's movement. She helped create and develop modern social work practice by making important contributions to its theoretical and pedagogical foundations. She was a teacher, a publisher, a scientist, social reformer, lecturer and an activist in the struggle to obtain the right to vote for women.

Alice was born in 1872 in Berlin as the daughter of an assimilated Jewish middle-class family. She attended a girls' school. Like many girls from affluent families in this period, she initially was denied further education, despite her ambition to become a teacher. She continued her education through private tutoring. In 1902 she received permission to attend university lectures. She attended lectures on political science, history and philosophy. She influenced initiatives and brought enlightenment and innovation to many professional fields. In 1933 when they came to power, the Nazi party stripped her of all her offices and six years later, when she was 65, she faced interrogation by the Gestapo. The Nazis objected to Salomon's Jewish origins, her Christian humanist ideas, her pacifism and international reputation. She was expelled from Germany, where she had been running a relief committee for Jewish emigrants. She went to New York, her German citizenship and her two doctorates having been taken from her. In 1944 she became an American citizen. A year later, she was honorary President of the International Women's Federation and the International Association of Schools of Social Work. She died in New York in 1948.

Against all odds she remained faithful to herself and everything she stood for and left a great legacy for all of us to learn from. Information about her struggle, research and campaigns would not have survived if it had not been stored properly. In this respect we owe a lot to the Alice Salomon Archiv which is celebrating her 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary today. They preserved her legacy and made it accessible to all. If there are no records of women's movements and women's lives, then future generations cannot be inspired by them. They may think these issues were not relevant in our times. I would like to thank the Alice Salomon Archiv, and in particular my colleague Adriane Feustel for this important work !

### Rugiatu Neneh Turay

Women like Alice Salomon are few, but throughout history brave women like her, have been fighting for women's human rights. One of them is the woman we honour here today, Rugiatu Neneh Turay. We honour her because of her brave fight against one of the most brutal forms of violence against women, violence practiced in the name of culture. A form of violence seldom mentioned by its full name: female genital mutilation, or fgm, as it is often referred to. Talking about this issue is taboo in the country where Turay comes from. She was only twelve years old when she experienced this practice herself. She knows how it feels to be mistreated without anesthesia in the most intimate parts of the body. She was told that her belly would swell up and she would die, if she ever spoke about her circumcision. At that moment she realized that she had to do everything in her power, to prevent that other girls like her had to experience this practice.

Turay was born 32 years ago in the north of Sierra Leone, a small country in the west of Africa. She had to flee her country in 1997 because of a terrible civil war. In a refugee camp in neighboring country Guinea she met women who opposed the brutal practice of female genital mutilation as well. Together they founded the human rights organization Amazonian Initiative Movement (AIM), a grass-roots non profit organization. Their goal is to prevent that girls are discriminated against in the name of culture, and to save their lives. In 2003 she returned to her native country and began her educational work . Fighting FGM in Sierra Leone is very difficult. UNICEF estimates that some 90% of Sierra Leonean women are subjected to genital mutilation. In Sierra Leone, female genital mutilation usually takes the form of a crudely performed operation to remove the clitoris — sometimes with razor blades, penknives and even with broken glass — as a key part of the initiation ceremonies that

prepare girls for marriage and motherhood. 13 countries in Africa have by now passed laws to prohibit female genital mutilation. In Sierra Leone a new law passed last year, prohibiting FGM until the age of 18, which is just an excuse to postpone FGM until the age of 18. Even politicians support the violent practice, for fear to lose votes. Last year journalists who had commented critically on the radio on FGM, were chased and abducted. Turay herself was threatened several time.

### Violence against women

The UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women is the first international human rights instrument to exclusively and explicitly address the issue of violence against women. It affirms that the phenomenon violates, impairs or nullifies women's human rights and their exercise of fundamental freedoms.

The Declaration provides a definition of gender-based abuse, calling it "any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life".

Article 2 of the Declaration, identifies three areas in which violence commonly takes place: one of them is : female genital mutilation and other traditional practices harmful to women

### Female genital mutilation around the world

According to the World Health Organization, 85 million to 115 million girls and women in the population have undergone some form of female genital mutilation and suffer from its adverse health effects. Meant to prepare girls for marriage and motherhood, female circumcision is often associated with Islam. Neither the Koran nor the Bible mention it, however. But girls who have not been circumcised are considered 'unclean.'

Every year an estimated 2 million young girls undergo this procedure. Most live in Africa and Asia, but an increasing number can be found among immigrant and refugee families in Western Europe and North America. Indeed, the practice has been outlawed in some European countries.

In France, a Malian was convicted in a criminal court after his baby girl died of a female circumcision-related infection. The procedure had been performed on the infant at home.

In Canada, fear of being forced to undergo circumcision can be grounds for asylum. A Nigerian woman was granted refugee status since she felt that she might be persecuted in her home country because of her refusal to inflict genital mutilation on her baby daughter.

There is a growing consensus that the best way to eliminate these practices is through educational campaigns that emphasize their dangerous health consequences..( *Published by the United Nations Department of Public Information DPI/1772/HR--February 1996*)

*“Educating people is empowering them. It is only through their minds that you can change the attitude of people,”* and I am quoting Turay herself here.

The multi-sectoral approach which has been developed by the Amazonian Initiative Movement (AIM) focuses on

1. education and empowerment of a new generation of women
2. involving the local community
3. involve in the local politics
4. a special program in Sierra Leone that targets FGM practitioners educates them regarding FGM's tragic consequences and persuades them to abandon the practice
5. at the moment Turay is in the process to create a safe house for girls

Ad 1) Let me tell you a bit more about education and empowerment.

The Amazonian Bi-Lingual School in Guinea is dedicated to educating youth about the dangers of FGM. The school that started with only 25 pupils has now grown to 250 pupils, ranging in age from 3 to 21. The school is unique in that it incorporates anti-FGM lessons into its curriculum in a non-threatening way. The school also arranges community meetings for parents and other community members to discuss the consequences of FGM as a cultural practice. The school has become well known throughout the region for its academic success and enrichment opportunities. Children are taught English and French, and are provided after-school activities such as sports, band, and cultural dancing. The school's reputation has also led girls to seek refuge at the school when attempting to escape FGM. Despite minimal funds, these girls have been welcomed with open arms, and cared for with food, shelter and education. Turay believes that the Amazonian School is an extremely effective way to eradicate FGM because it provides training and access to future leaders, who will spread anti-FGM messages, and offers a way for discussing a taboo topic. Another bi-lingual school is planned in Sierra Leone.

Ad 2) involving the local community

AIM realizes eradication of FGM must be generated and sustained at the community level, and can only succeed with and by the experiences of survivors of FGM. This is achieved by organising community meetings, where youth, parents, and community members people share their experiences and are being informed about the dangers of Female Genital Mutilation.

ad 4)

AIM operates a program in Sierra Leone that targets FGM practitioners, educates them regarding FGM's tragic consequences, and persuades them to abandon the practice. This process is followed by a renouncement ceremony where practitioners turn in their cutting tools, publicly renounce the practices, and sign a declaration confirming their commitment to stop practicing FGM.

The circumcisers, who are female, are highly respected in their society and well paid. AIM does not try to publicly shame them. They are considered by some to be custodians of the culture. As such, following the renouncement AIM presents the practitioners a monetary stipend, provided funds are available, to ease the transition to alternative income generation. AIM also seeks ways to retain the practitioners' status in society and provides vocational training. By now more than 1200 practitioners renounced FGM.

In conclusion

Through AIM, Turay makes a difference in the lives of countless girls and women in Africa, who now have the opportunity to take a dramatically different path in life.

A difference between being educated versus ignorance

Being able to make choices instead of being victims

Earning a living versus poverty

Having faith in the future instead of despair!

YES, Women can make a difference. One woman can make a difference. That's the message Alice Salomons showed in her time and Turay shows the world today.

I am delighted to congratulate you with the Alice Salomon Award 2010.

Thank you.

Tilly Vriend

Berlin, May 7, 2010