

ACCEPTANCE STATEMENT

BY RUGIATU NENEH TURAY

I send you special greetings from Sierra Leone, a small country located on the West Coast of Africa, deemed poor but yet endowed with diamonds, gold, and rutile and a land of great hospitality that is second to none. A country rich in culture and tradition yet some are so harmful to our next generation that they violate human rights which I have given so much of my life to address.

I am humbled, honored, and elated to receive the award on 'human rights', through virtual method for which I am grateful to the organizers and the Almighty.

Globally, there are more than 750 million women living with the harsh realities of forced child marriage, and over 200 million women from over 30 countries who are living with the effects of Female Genital Mutilation shortened to FGM. These are not just human rights issues, nor just women's issues; they are gruesome violations of women's rights. The actual cutting or mutilation of a girl or woman is harmful with NO benefits what so ever. It is therefore time for us, as a global community, to take these practices extremely seriously. This cannot be seen as an African issue, it is a global issue.

I have spent most of my life advocating against the harmful practice of FGM. I am fully aware that many people argue that FGM is a rite of passage and a part of our culture. Understanding and recognizing the cultural aspects of this rite of passage, I have collaborated with many strong women who are Anti FGM Campaigners to introduce an alternative rite of passage to womanhood that does not involve any form of cutting. It has not been an easy task to implement and accomplish this alternative rite of passage, but we have set the pace and will continue to present our people with a viable alternative. I faced many challenges and was confronted by women who believe their livelihood is dependent on cutting. This continues to spur me on. The aim is not to confront or shame but to educate and build consensus on what is good for our women and girls in Sierra Leone. I am hopeful because the changes and impact from the work that I do is very visible. For example, talking about FGM is no longer taboo as we have gotten people, both men and women, openly discussing the demerits of the procedure.

Many have walked with me through this journey and it is but right that I acknowledge them here. I would like to recognize and thank all the ladies and gentlemen listening and watching today, some of you where supposed to have travelled long distances to witness this award ceremony. Veronika Kirschner, Stella Rothenberger, Jana Bawmann, Emmanuel J. Conteh, Zainab Tholley, Bomkaprie Sarah, my brother Lasana zanto kamara, my childhood friends and Sisters Fatmata Turay, Zainab Samura, Lucy Hilda Kamara, and my Lunsar family from Holland, I appreciate you all for abandoning your different engagements just to witness this day with me.

I want to acknowledge the presence of my husband, Mr Abu Bakarr Koroma, who believes in my vision and constantly provides me the comfort zone needed to rest my head when the confrontations get tougher and who, without complaining, gives me the time and space to continue doing what I love best- promoting the rights of women and girls.

Ladies and gentlemen, allow me to pay special tribute to Terres Des femmes for magnifying my little efforts and making this award possible. I want to sincerely express my thanks, deep admiration, and appreciation to Christa Stolle (the director) and Birgitta Hahn (department international cooperation and a special thanks to Veronika Kirschner who believed in me, a total stranger, several years ago when the dream of providing an alternative rite of passage was in its infancy stage. I sincerely thank Terres Des Femmes for nominating me and Esslingen and Neckar for honoring me with this Human rights Award. Ladies and gentlemen, I am very humbled and elated to be the recipient of this year's award, and I want to recognize all of the past and present donors, with specific reference to PfefferminzGreen and partners for their financial and material support without which our projects would not have taken off.

Here in Sierra Leone, I am indebted to my fearless women (the cutters) who gave up their knives and razors to save the lives of young women and girls and wholeheartedly supported the alternative rite of passage to woman hood without cutting and blood.

To my father Pa Abdul Turay, I thank you for your unwavering support in seeing my dream actualized.

Let me reiterate here that AIM was created to fight fear and intimidation and built on courage, imagination and an unbeatable determination to do the job of promoting the well-being of women and girls and protecting our culture of solidarity for women in leadership. While this project started with a vision consisting of strong women, numerous men later came in and gave their undisrupted support. At this juncture I would like to acknowledge the support of my mentors, Zainab Hawa Bangura Director General of United Nations Office in Kenya, Aisha Josiah Kamara Human Rights and gender activist, Yasmin Jusu Sheriff Former Human Rights Commissioner and Human Rights Lawyer, Aisha Fofana Ibrahim Lecturer and gender activist, Dr. Nancy Peddle, lemonaid Fund, Saran Snow of Education for Development, Laura Campbell Montgomery a British Lawyer, the Late Mrs. Linda Koroma, Former Minister of Political Public Affairs Hon. Ibrahim Kemoh Sesay who has a serving Minister publicly denounced FGM in our first zero tolerance day commemoration, Former Minister of Defence Hon Paolo Conteh who together with Hon Ibrahim Kemoh introduced the discussion with the former President, Hon Mohamed Hajii Kella current Deputy Minister of Social Welfare, Mr. Brima Sheriff Former Human Rights Commissioner, Mr. Philip Bryne of the project Fiduciary management of finance and Mr. Edmond Abu Jr Director of Native Consortium Research, whose gentle wisdom and great direction have been instrumental in encouraging me not to give up.

Ladies and gentlemen, my name may be printed on this Award, but I hold it in trust for the survivors that continue to suffer in silence and from several health issues because of being cut. I hold it in trust for women who have had complications that have led to infertility. I hold it in trust for the anti FGM campaigners in Sierra Leone and for all women, traditional and political authorities who have supported my work both openly and secretly.

I hold it in trust of all staff of Amazonian Initiative Movement. Together we achieve this award because we met the challenges together!

I will like to dedicate this award to the Guadalupe Old Girls Association (GOGA), Port Loko, Karene and Tonkolili districts women and my late mother for bringing up and nurturing a brave and fearless woman.

Ending FGM is possible in our generation and it has started with an alternative rite of passage without cutting. It is no longer a dream. It is happening, because many women like me are working hard to make it happen. This is our life. It's about our daughters, it's about our mothers; it's about our sisters. But we can't do it alone. We need your support, and we need sustainability in order for us to accomplish our goal.

Ladies and Gentlemen Please be reminded that what we have done here today is plant a seed for the future. Thank you so much and God bless you all!