

Nuremberg International Human Rights Award 1999

Tribute to the Prize _Winner by
Wei Jingsheng

FATIMATA M'BAYE

Today, I would like to introduce to you an ordinary human being.

Fatimata M'Baye was born in Mauritania in 1957. She is divorced, mother of three children, and presently lives in Nouakchott, the capital of Mauritania.

She has the same feelings as all people: enthusiasm and anger, joy and unhappiness. An ordinary human being who doesn't look any different from all the many other human beings we meet in the streets every day, without any noticeable distinguishing marks.

For what makes persons different from others is not their outward appearance or their wealth or the fact that they lead a different life from most of us. They are special because of the outstanding services they have rendered to human society; because of the fact that they do not only worry about their own lives, but that they are active for many other people, particularly for those on whom fortune hasn't smiled. The heart of these people is full of compassion, and they possess the ability to fight for less fortunate people by taking on the forces of evil. It is their compassion and their courage which lifts them above ordinary people.

Today, I have the great honour of introducing to you Fatimata M'Baye, a person who is distinguished by this noble-mindedness.

After finishing her studies at the University of Nouakchott, she was admitted to practise as Mauritania's first female lawyer. She lived the life of all lawyers and might have continued to lead an ordinary life similar to that of thousands of other lawyers. Nothing would have been wrong with that. Nobody would have reproached her for leading this kind of life. If she had chosen this path, she could have become a respected lawyer in a developing country without incurring any dangers at all. Many ordinary people lead such lives.

Fatimata M'Baye, however, did not choose this simple path. Her compassion and her courage made her choose a more difficult path. In 1991, with some friends, she founded the first human rights organisation in Mauritania, the AMDH, and to this day, she has remained active in this work.

In 1997, Fatimata M'Baye was arrested as a consequence of her committed struggle for equal rights for all races, and was imprisoned for three years. After her release, she did not stop her struggle for human rights.

In 1998, Fatimata M'Baye publicly denounced on television the practice of slavery still in existence in Mauritania. For this, she, as well as Prof. Kamara and other human rights activists were sentenced without judicial order to thirteen months' imprisonment and a fine of 30,000 Ouguiya. This by Mauritanian standards is an extremely high fine which would have ruined most people for ever.

Fatimata M'Baye's appeal was unsuccessful. It was only after an international campaign demanded the prisoners' release that the country's president pardoned her. Since then she has done her work as usual and has continued working for the rights of the oppressed.

President Havel asked me to introduce Fatimata M'Baye to you. Not because I know her particularly well, but because all of us, who are fighting for the rights and for the interests of the general public, understand each other in a very special way. I have a lot of friends who, just as Fatimata M'Baye, have been fighting for the rights of others, for many years



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and at the cost of their own interests. They have taken upon themselves great hardship and pain, a fact which many people find difficult to understand. But all these people have one thing in common: Their work brings them joy, and they feel honoured by it. And that is what makes them seem so special to us.

But still they are quite ordinary people. The suffering which breaks other people, has a completely different effect on their bodies. After they are released from prison, very often their families are destroyed, their wives divorced them, their children are scattered everywhere, their lives have no foundation at all, they can never again lead ordinary lives. So it may seem to us that these are the most unfortunate and unhappy of people, taking on themselves a suffering they did not deserve.

But nevertheless these people are obviously full of optimism and confidence, as if they were the luckiest and happiest people in the world. Once an old prison warden asked me: "Why do you always give the impression of having a better life than all of us? You have lost all your teeth, and you suffer from any number of diseases. You don't see the sun all year, you don't meet friends or relatives. For more than ten years you have been locked up in this dark and damp hole. How can you be so cheerful every day?"

I only laughed and did not reply. Many days later, the same warden told me: "I understand now that you political prisoners are different from normal prisoners. Those are imprisoned because they harm other people for their own advantage, whereas you sacrifice yourselves for the interest of others. That's why you are different from them." Last week I helped an old lady push her shopping trolley across a bridge on the corner of the market. It really made me sweat. At home, my wife asked me full of astonishment: "What made you so cheerful today?" And it suddenly became clear to her that the joy you get from helping others is a very special joy. "Now I understand why you are so full of confidence and joy every day."

Today, we honour Ms Fatimata M'Baye, who certainly did not do her work so that she would be honoured with this award here today. I know that her sacrifices and the suffering she had to experience are a source of happiness for her. The joy you experience through helping others is the most noble feeling we human beings are capable of.

If you are given a sum of money, if you marry a pretty woman, this makes you glad. Some people get even greater pleasure from positions of power. But all of this is nothing compared to this noble feeling. This, and nothing else, is the highest happiness a human being can strive to achieve.

The seed for this happiness lies hidden in the heart of each human being. But in the hunt for personal advantage, people miss countless opportunities. They see helping others as detrimental to themselves. The result is that they deprive themselves of the possibility of achieving their own happiness. This is the difference between ordinary people and people like Fatimata M'Baye.

Who is the wiser person? Everyone must answer this question for him or herself.

Wei Jingsheng
September 1999