STATEMENT

BY

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AMBASSADOR AND PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE OF THE REPUBLIC OF NAMIBIA

TO THE UNITED NATIONS

ON THE OCCASION OF THE INTERNATIONAL DAY OF REMEMBRANCE OF THE VICTIMS OF SLAVERY AND TRANSATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE (AS CHAIR OF THE AFRICAN GROUP)

NEW YORK
25 MARCH 2015
Your Excellency Mr Sam Kutesa, President of General Assembly
Your Excellency Mr Ban Ki-Moon, Secretary General of the United Nations
Her Excellency Madam Portia Simpson-Miller, Prime Minister of Jamaica
Honorable Ministers
Excellencies, Ambassadors and Permanent representatives
Invited guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I have the honor to speak on behalf of the African Group at this international gathering of women and men, all working together to create ideas, strategies and commitments to empower women across the world. The African Group aligns itself with the statement delivered by the delegation of South Africa on behalf of the Group of 77 and China.

Mr. President,

The African Group is honoured to have participated in the unveiling of the “Ark of Return”, which will serve as a permanent memorial in honour of the victims of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade. More than two centuries since slavery and the transatlantic slave trade were abolished, it remains critical that we always take time to remember the victims of this great blight in the history of mankind. Indeed, it is in keeping the memory of the victims alive that we may always remind present and future generations of the dangers of allowing one human being to completely subjugate another without censure. This memorial should also serve as a reminder of the barbarity to which mankind is capable of descending if racist attitudes are left to fester and grow unchecked in a society. Such attitudes played a large role in enabling societies and nations to tolerate the barbarity that was perpetrated against other human beings through slavery and the transatlantic slave trade.

The ceremony occurs while we just launched the international decade for People of African Descent for the period 2015-2024 as well as the celebration of the International Day on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination whose theme invited us to learn from historical tragedies to combat racism today.

Mr. President,

The African Group recognizes the tremendous contributions of member states that together with Foundations, have made this memorial a reality. The Permanent Memorial Committee established by the United Nations General Assembly through Resolution 63/5, to oversee the Permanent Memorial project, drawn from all geographical regions, with member states from the Caribbean Community and the African Union playing a primary role, has been the corner stone of this laudable initiative.

We welcome the selection of this year’s theme of the United Nations commemorative event which is “Women and Slavery”. This theme is fitting as additionally, 2015 marks the 20th Anniversary of the Beijing Platform of Action and the African Union theme for 2015 is “Women’s empowerment and Development Towards Africa’s Agenda 2063”. The African women’s decade
declared by the African Union in 2010, now marks its 5th year. Indeed all these important milestones have aligned to illustrate the important role that women play in our societies.

We are proud to be here today, to speak about women and slavery and how today historians are acknowledging the vital roles women have played in the slave communities.

Understanding the role women played in the slave trade and community is important to offer a new dynamic to the study of slave culture in general. Often, the history of slavery is studied from a male perspective and fails to acknowledge the importance of women at all levels of slavery, by belittling and devaluing their roles. What seems to be forgotten is that, not only were slave women subordinate because of their race, but they also shared the trials of the oppression of the female gender. Moreover, enslaved women played a key role in the development of slave communities through the development of Family Structure and Economic Productivity.

Even through the dynamic role played in their communities, the voices of slave women portrayed the endured sufferings, exploitation and inhumane treatment at the hand of their masters, overseers and ship crews. Through the tones of their voices and daring actions, slave women rose up in brave acts of liberty. An example of such brave acts was the Maroon women in the Caribbean. These women were rebellion leaders and priestesses who rallied troops, soaring among them was the formidable Ashanti Nanny, in Jamaica. Nanny was never a slave, but a free woman, who was painfully aware of the suffering and degradation her fellow slave sisters and country women endured, a spectacular and living example of a village that illustrates the struggle against the slave traders is Ganvie on Lake Nokoue, in Benin.

Mr. President

For Women in Caribbean History, Verene Shepherd states that up until the 1970’s, Caribbean books neglected women because early historians looked at colonization, government, religion, trade and war fare, which were activities that were very much male dominated. There was also the belief that women’s issues did not merit inclusion and where women could have been included, such as slave uprisings, their contributions were ignored. From the 70’s, the study of social history became more prominent, and looked into topics such as family life.

In slave societies of the Caribbean in the late 18th century, domestic female slaves were more common on plantations where sugar production was the most rapid. Also, more often than not slave assignments were based on what was the most profitable for the slave owner. In many cases female slaves often preferred domestic labor to field labor but as time wore on, the trend was to move women into the fields to replace the declining total of young male slaves, this was because female slaves lived longer than male slaves and the fact that female slaves were versatile in both the domestic and agricultural areas, creating this image of them as somewhat animalistic because of their unparalleled female strength.

In addition, the enslaved women sometimes were able to produce their own food or craft work for the family and market, and as such, dominated this area. The market also became the place
where the enslaved could gather news so it would be obvious that if enslaved women dominated the markets then they were also responsible for this dissemination of information, which could allow news to be passed between family members in different plantations and even help planning uprisings. The market was also a vital place in the slave communities, because here rules for enslaved congregation were relaxed. In these places, slave women could almost freely be themselves and teach their children about their culture and customs, allowing for their knowledge to be passed down to future generations and further development. This knowledge was imparted to children through their mothers’ passive resistance, which was very much common. They did this in their daily domestic tasks, by “accidentally” burning their mistresses’ favorite dress while ironing, singing their songs as they worked, and not allowing their children to forget where they came from and be proud of who they are and their roots.

As an example of how pride and self-awareness imparted through their mothers and allowed for culture and traditions to develop overtime, would be the development of capoeira in Brazil. In the senzalas, or slave quarters on the plantations, the slaves strove to use their diverse African roots and power to break out of their chains. Even though slaves did not necessarily speak a common language, they shared their passionate struggle for freedom. They fought roughly, physically preparing themselves to flee and regain their humanity. All slaves came to the conclusion that in order to escape, they needed to gather strength and unite.

Mr. President,

Abolishing slavery and the slave trade marked a pivotal moment in history and in the lives of millions of slaves, the overwhelming majority of which were people of African descent. However, it was only the first step towards ensuring justice and full equality for African descendants wherever they may be. The abolition marked not only the end of an era but also signified the start of a process which continues to this day and will only end with the total emancipation of people of African descent everywhere and their equal enjoyment of all economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights.

The 1840 World Anti-Slavery Convention in London also became an inspiration for the Women’s Rights Movement. When women were not allowed to speak at the Convention, Anne Knight became furious, and this inspired her to start campaigning for equal rights for women.

It is of paramount importance that societies remembers and learns from these powerful women. Even with the end of the Transatlantic Trade, it was not the end of the hardships and suffering for slave women. Today slavery still exists and women and children are a major focus of these modern day slavers, known today as human traffickers. We as a society should always remember that slavery is a hidden crime that denies women and children their rights and liberties. We should always pay tribute to all that have fought and will fight against slavery in the past, present and future.

As I conclude, allow me to highlight that as we remember the victims of slavery we must also redouble our efforts towards addressing modern forms of slavery and serfdom. We should
increase regional and international cooperation with a view to cracking down on such practices. No occasion can be more appropriate than the decade for People of African descent that fortunately coincides this year with the twentieth anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action to promote this important agenda. The abuse of modern technologies in this area and the increasing sophistication of human trafficking syndicates necessitate robust regional and international cooperation activities. We cannot allow any manifestations of slavery to exist in the modern world.

I thank you.