

‘Connecting the Past and the Future – Equality for All People of African Descent: The situation of women’

Presentation by Gaynel Curry

Expert Member of the Permanent Forum of People of African Descent

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... navigating spaces, negotiating to enter and thrive in workplaces, hoping to receive as I give good graces but often rejected, disrespected, undervalued, invisible on the bases, of the skin I am in... Black, Woman, Caribbean, Daughter of the African continent where traces of faces all look like me.

Good afternoon and thank you Chair for allowing me to share a few thoughts on the topic ‘Connecting the Past and the Future – Equality for All People of African Descent – the situation of Women’.

200 million people living in the Americas identify themselves as being of African descent, as being Black. Many millions more live in other parts of the world, outside of the African continent. The circumstances in which we live and the challenges we face differ. What is common among us, however, is that we all have faced discrimination based on the colour of our skin.

This racism born of historical injustices and the legacies of the transatlantic trade in enslaved person, colonialism, racial segregation, apartheid, Jim Crow laws, mass incarcerations, redlining in housing among other systems of oppression have entrenched Black people in a seemingly unending cycle of poverty, underdevelopment, unemployment, marginalization, and social instability.

As we have heard during these past few days of discussions in this Forum, racism faced by people of African, and indeed by Black people the world over, is systematic [it is not arbitrary]. It is structural [although sometimes subtle and often covert]; It is institutional [evident across institutions of governance, education, health, and employment].

Even organisations such as the United Nations which was founded on the principle of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion does not have clean hands - the scourge of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance were brought more prominently to the fore of this global body following the tragic murder of George Floyd and the mass demonstrations across the globe in protest. What was apparent as millions took to the streets was that burying our heads in the sand and refusing to call out racism or racial discrimination does not help; what was clear is that we all need to be intentionally antiracists if we are to overcome persistent inequalities faced by People of African Descent.

A 2018 World Bank Group report indicated that the combination of a protracted history of exclusion together with contemporary processes of structural discrimination made people of African descent one of the most persistent segments of Latin America’s poor. They were over 2.5 times more likely to live in chronic poverty.

The UN has further reported that **women of African descent** are particularly affected by unemployment and low-income jobs across several sectors.

According to Canada's National Statistical Office, the prevalence of low income among **women of African descent** was 24 per cent compared to 14 per cent for all Canadian women.

It is further noted that Africans and people of African descent face difficulties in having their qualifications and diploma obtained abroad recognized in their country of residence; and the proportion of **women of African descent** with low educational levels is much higher than that of women in the general population in some countries.

The gender pay gap is real for women of all ethnicities. UN Women has reported that worldwide, women only make 77 cents for every dollar earned by men. As a result, there's a lifetime of income inequality between men and women and more women are retiring into poverty.

This stubborn inequality in the average wages between men and women persists in all countries and across all sectors, because women's work is often under-valued. Even though the work itself may require equal or more effort and skills, it's valued and remunerated less. For women of African descent (WAD), women of colour, immigrant women and mothers, the gap widens. The so-called "motherhood penalty" pushes women into informal economy, casual and part-time work.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, on average, Black women were paid 58% of what non-Hispanic white men were paid in 2020. Like Latinas and Native women, Black women experience a substantially wider pay gap than all women due to the compounded effect of racism and sexism

It has been further noted by civil society organisation that the wages of Black women are driven down by a number of current factors including gender and racial discrimination, workplace harassment, job segregation and a lack of workplace policies that support family caregiving, which is still most often performed by women.

We have discussed during these past two days that racism is common and pervasive. But it is also very personal, affecting each person of African descent differently based on multiple and intersecting realities and experiences. Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term "intersectionality" as a way to help explain the oppression of African American women noting that they face a number of different forms of discriminations and disadvantages simultaneously based on their blackness and womanhood as well as their economic status.

Intersections of blackness and womanhood have historically placed women of African descent at the bottom of almost every social development index – even today, they are among the most marginalised and discriminated women, compared to other women globally. women of African descent are often fare worse than Black men of similar educational, socio-economic, and political experiences. There are pockets of exceptions, and we will get to some of them, including for example in the education space in the Caribbean and elsewhere girls have over the last 10-15 years outperformed boys and are more and more likely to lead following in the footsteps of Black female leaders of the region such as the Honourable Dame Mary Eugenia Charles, Prime Minister, Dominica, the Honourable Portia Simpson-Miller, Prime Minister, Jamaica and more recently the Honourable Mia Mottley, Prime Minister of Barbados.

Despite these pockets of success, significant numbers of women of African descent remain disadvantaged in terms of gender stereotyping and racial discrimination in the employment sector –

in both the private and public sectors. Discrimination based on disabilities, gender and sexual orientation, nationality, migration and socio-economic status, adds layers of discrimination for those groups of women of African descent. Understanding these multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination is essential to combatting the interwoven prejudices and discrimination that women of African descent face in their daily lives.

A recent report by the Economic Commission of Latin America and the Caribbean on the topic ‘Afrodescendent women in Latin America and the Caribbean: Debts of equality’ highlights this important issue of intersectionality in understanding the broader discussion on the rights of WAD and in overcoming the inequalities that they face today and historically.

‘Sojourner Truth, a free Black woman who attended a convention on women’s rights in Ohio in December 1851 and gave a speech that came to be entitled “Ain’t I a Woman?”, held up the bourgeois concept of femininity for examination (Viveros, 2016) and highlighted the interrelationship between racial and gender-based discrimination. Challenging the men in the audience who defended the idea of feminine fragility as a means of blocking women’s attempts to gain entry into public affairs, Truth argued that the fact that she worked hard and bore a heavy load did not make her any less of a woman or less of a mother than the white women who were seen as weak and in need of constant help and protection’

Women continue to fight for space on national, regional international agendas and to narrow the inequalities they face in almost every sphere of their lives.

Indeed, gains have been made since the Women’s Suffrage movement, which was slow in embracing women of African descent. The Commission on the Status of Women, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and its Optional Protocol, the Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment, and Eradication of Violence against Women (Convention of Belém do Pará) and the global normative and policy framework, such as the Beijing Platform for Action and the 2030 Agenda on sustainable development which mainstreams gender continues to expand the work on the rights of women globally.

However, much more work is needed to advance the rights women of African descent. Dedicated and deliberate efforts must be made to ensure that women of African descent and the discrimination they face based on race and gender do not remain on the periphery of these broader women’s rights agendas. We must ensure that they are no longer overlooked and lost in a fruit salad of terms and mechanisms that claim to represent all women emerging from the broader women’s rights movement. If we are to achieve sustainable progress on gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls, we must ensure that women of African descent are central to the global agenda.

Recommendations

women of African descent need to remain a group in focus for the Permanent Forum of People of African descent

Need for data and evidence-based research which has been sparse throughout my many years of working on this topic.

While the Forum is working to strengthen collaboration with other human rights mechanisms and organisations working on racism, racial discrimination and the rights of people of African descent. Efforts must also be made to effectively engage those entities mandated to promote the rights of women and girls among others. The Forum should encourage a particular focus on women of African descent who are often on the periphery of the women's rights and gender discussion. I commend UNFPA for its work on women of African descent in the Americas, including their maternal as well as their sexual reproductive health and rights. We look forward to the UNFPA Fact Sheet on the Maternal Health of women of African descent. The recent decision of the US Supreme Court to overturn Roe v Wade decision on abortion rights raises further concerns for the sexual reproductive health and rights of women of African descent.

The Forum should establish and maintain for example strong relationship with CEDAW, the Working Group on Discrimination against Women, the Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women given the high incidents of violence against women of African descent – the UNODC has reported that a number of Caribbean states, with significant populations of people of African descent face some of highest incidents of Intimate Partner Violence as well as rape. I had the occasion to travel with the Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women to the Caribbean where she expressed concern about the normality and pervasiveness of gender-based violence. I also joined the Special Rapporteur on her visit to the United States where she raised concern about the high levels of incarceration of women of African descent and the continuum of violence they face even while in detention.

Violence against women is not new and the Special Rapporteur description of violence as a continuum is quite apt. My colleague June Soomer mentioned yesterday in her presentation on historical injustices, the particular situation of enslaved women who faced attacks on their bodies in addition to the burdensome workload they carried. Today the bodies of women of African descent continue to be under attack.

We look forward to seeing a strong reference to the rights and concerns of women and girls of African descent in the draft Declaration on the Rights of People of African Descent.

The Forum should consider, engaging with the Commission on the Status of Women, UN Women and relevant regional mechanisms in Africa, the Americas and Europe bringing to those agenda measures to promote and protect the rights of women and girls of African descent - not just as an add on- but as a substantive element of the work.

I will end here Chair and look forward to a robust discussion on the issues raised.

Thank you.