

# Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade

## Official Opening of the Exhibit

### *'Women and Slavery: Telling Their Stories'*

12 March 2015, Visitors Lobby, United Nations Secretariat

Statement by Ms. Michele Mitchell

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Once the trans-Atlantic slave trade stopped in 1808, slaveholders in the Americas could only legally acquire additional slaves through domestic slave trades, through natural increase, or by actively “encouraging. . . slaves to have children.” Thomas Jefferson, who was then President of the United States, bluntly claimed, “I consider a [slave] woman who [gives birth to] a child every two years as more profitable than the best man on the farm[.]”<sup>1</sup> Indeed, enslaved women in the United States had fairly high fertility rates during the nineteenth century: an enslaved woman typically began having children before her twenties and most “continued having children at two-and-a-half-year intervals” up until “the age of thirty-nine or forty.”<sup>2</sup> In the Caribbean, where enslaved women’s fertility rates were notably lower, “incentives were introduced after 1790 to encourage women to have more children.”<sup>3</sup> Overall, “women’s lives under slavery in the Americas always included the possibilities of their wombs.”<sup>4</sup> Enslaved women nonetheless “attempted to regulate childbearing to accord with their own notions of the proper timing and frequency of motherhood.”<sup>5</sup>

Enslaved women’s sexuality subjected them to a range of dynamics. Both women and men were sexually exploited under slavery but women were particularly vulnerable to rape and sexual abuse. On the Brazilian frontier during the nineteenth century, enslaved women “met the sexual and familial needs of frontiersmen.” Although some such women occasionally became “legal wives,” bondswomen were more frequently used as concubines,

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<sup>1</sup>Wilma King, “Suffer with Them Till Death’: Slave Women and Their Children in Nineteenth-Century America,” in *More Than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas*, ed. David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), pp. 145-168, here p. 145.

<sup>2</sup>Deborah Gray White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: Norton, 1985), pp. 97-98, 114. See also Cheryl Ann Cody, “Cycles of Work and Childbearing: Seasonality in Women’s Lives on Low Country Plantations,” in Gaspar and Hine (ed.), *More Than Chattel*, pp. 61-78, esp. p. 71.

<sup>3</sup>Again, it is worth stressing that that the fertility of enslaved women in North America was higher than elsewhere in the Americas. Childbearing patterns were therefore likely to have been different in the Caribbean, Central America, and South America. Barbara Bush notes that there were “conflicting accounts of women’s fertility” in the Caribbean during the eighteenth century. Not only were there high mortality rates in the Caribbean generally among the enslaved, but the harsh “treatment of women” in sugar economies “possibly discouraged reproduction” as well. Significantly, enslaved women in the Caribbean also seem to have practiced late weaning to a greater extent than enslaved women in North America. This practice—along with the associated “two-year postnatal taboo on intercourse common to many African societies”—might have played a role in lower birthrates in the Caribbean among the enslaved. See Bush, “Hard Labor: Women, Childbirth, and Resistance in British Caribbean Societies,” in Gaspar and Hine (ed.), *More Than Chattel*, pp. 202-203.

<sup>4</sup>Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), p. 3.

<sup>5</sup>Marie Jenkins Schwartz, *Birthing a Slave: Motherhood and Medicine in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 31.

mistresses, and even prostitutes.<sup>6</sup> In Barbados and elsewhere, “female domestic slaves” routinely experienced “sociosexual manipulation” by male slaveholders.<sup>7</sup> And, in North America, there was a “fancy girl” trade of young women who were sold into concubinage or prostitution.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, a number of slave narratives testify to the sexual exploitation that women faced under slavery as well as to how frequently women were separated from their children by sale.<sup>9</sup>

Enslaved women not only survived such oppression but they also found various ways to resist.<sup>10</sup> Although bondswomen were less likely to engage in open rebellion and escape due to their childbearing and childrearing duties, women were among enslaved people who formed maroon communities throughout the Americas.<sup>11</sup> And, during the revolutionary wars at Saint Domingue and Guadeloupe” during the early nineteenth century, “women participated in the fighting.” Indeed, during these rebellions in the French Caribbean, “slave women also served as messengers, transported ammunition food, and supplies, cared for the sick, acted as cover for men under fire, and chanted revolutionary slogans[.]”<sup>12</sup> Throughout the Americas, enslaved women filed legal challenges to slavery as well.<sup>13</sup>

Enslaved women participated in forms of everyday resistance, too. If enslaved women were less likely to run away than enslaved men, bondswomen did engage in truancy and they also “enabled the short-term flight of others.” They withdrew their labor, poisoned food, and feigned illness. In the U.S. South, some “bondswomen [even] procured, preserved, and displayed abolitionist propaganda in their homes”; such use of material culture served as a particularly visible form of resistance.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, women -African-descended as well as those considered “white”- were integral to the trans-Atlantic abolition movement itself. Whether formerly enslaved or freeborn, African-descended women in the abolition movement were,

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<sup>6</sup> Mary Karasch, “Slave Women on the Brazilian Frontier in the Nineteenth Century,” in Gaspar and Hine (ed.), *More Than Chattel*, pp. 78-96, here p. 84. See also Richard Graham, “Another Middle Passage? The Internal Slave Trade in Brazil,” in *The Chattel Principle: Internal Slave Trades in the Americas*, ed. Walter Johnson, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), pp. 291-324, esp. p. 300.

<sup>7</sup> Hillary Beckles, “Black Female Slaves and White Households in Barbados, in Gaspar and Hine (ed.), *More Than Chattel*, pp. 111-125, here p. 117.

<sup>8</sup> White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman?*, p. 37.

<sup>9</sup> Claire Robertson, “Africa into the Americas? Slavery and Women, the Family, and the Gender Division of Labor,” in Gaspar and Hine (ed.), *More Than Chattel*, pp. 3-40, esp. p. 13. See also Robert S. Levine, “The slave narrative and the revolutionary tradition of American autobiography,” in *The Cambridge Companion to The African American Slave Narrative*, ed. Audrey Fisch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 99-114; Xiomara Santamarina, “Black womanhood in North American women’s slave narratives,” in Fisch (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to the African American Slave Narrative*, pp. 232-45.

<sup>10</sup> For a discussion of enslaved women in the Americas and resistance before the nineteenth century, see David Barry Gaspar, “From ‘The Sense of Their Slavery’: Slave Women and Resistance in Antigua, 1632-1763,” in Gaspar and Hine (ed.), *More Than Chattel*, pp. 218-38. For the nineteenth century US, the following two works provide useful discussion of resistance: Stephanie M.H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); and Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Sylviane A. Diouf, *Slavery’s Exiles: The Story of the American Maroons* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), pp. 87-92.

<sup>12</sup> Bernard Moitt, “Slave Women and Resistance in the French Caribbean,” in Gaspar and Hine (ed.), *More Than Slavery*, pp. 239-58, here pp. 242-42.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Moitt, “Slave Women and Resistance,” in Gaspar and Hine (ed.), *More Than Slavery*, p. 255; Loren Schweningen, “Freedom Suits, African American Women, and the Genealogy of Slavery,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 71:1 (January 2014): 35-62.

<sup>14</sup> Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, quotations on 10, 61, and 71.

furthermore, among those who began pressing for women's rights during the nineteenth century.<sup>15</sup>

It is vital to remember that enslaved women and men worked to meet their own needs. Whereas "full female hands frequently did the same kind of work as male hands," enslaved men's and women's work tended to follow gendered divisions of labor in slave quarters themselves.<sup>16</sup> Men provided food through hunting and fishing; they also made "furniture, shoes, and tools." Women tended vegetable gardens, cooked, and washed clothes; they also produced clothing, quilts, and home goods such as baskets, candles, and soap.<sup>17</sup> Enslaved women also served as midwives and herb doctors within their families and within larger slave communities. Not only were enslaved women particularly prominent as health practitioners; "healing work" among the enslaved additionally "overlapped with the women's work of cooking, cleaning, and laundering."<sup>18</sup>

To be sure, both women and men passed down a range of skills to children under slavery, but women were perhaps especially responsible for teaching children "not to talk too much" in order to shield their inner beings and how to defer to whites without losing their sense of self.<sup>19</sup> As enslaved populations became more creolized, enslaved women performed the vital work of transmitting culture to children, which arguably contributed to African retentions in the Americas. Hairstyles, dances, and musical traditions taught to children by adults reflected "cherished traditions remembered from Africa and practiced in [the] America[s]."<sup>20</sup> Finally, throughout the Americas, enslaved and free women alike helped preserve African-derived funereal traditions, foodways, spiritual practices, language, and folktales; they -along with men- were critical in the formation and maintenance of African-descended communities throughout the African diaspora. These enslaved people and their descendants are so rightfully honored by the Permanent Memorial in Honour of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade.

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<sup>15</sup> For a foundational statement on black women in the U.S. antislavery movement, see Shirley J. Yee, *Black Women Abolitionists: A Study in Activism, 1828-1860* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992).

<sup>16</sup> Deborah Gray White, "Gender Roles and Gender Identity in Slave Communities," in *Major Problems in African-American History, Volume 1: From Slavery to Freedom, 1619-1877*, ed. Thomas C. Holt and Elsa Barkley Brown (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), pp. 268-77, here p. 270.

<sup>17</sup> Ira Berlin and Leslie S. Rowland, "Slave Communities Are Grounded in Family and Kinship," in Holt and Brown (ed.), *Major Problems in African-American History*, pp. 264-68, here pp. 266, 269; White, "Gender Roles and Gender Identity in Slave Communities," p. 272.

<sup>18</sup> Sharla M. Fett, *Working Cures: Healing, Health, and Power on Southern Slave Plantations* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), quotations on 2, 118.

<sup>19</sup> King, "Suffer with Them Till Death," in Gaspar and Hine (ed.), *More Than Chattel*, pp. 153, 154.

<sup>20</sup> Peter H. Wood, "Strange New Land: 1619-1776," in *To Make Our World Anew: A History of African Americans*, ed. Robin D. G. Kelley and Earl Lewis (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 89. children." Overall, "[w]omen's lives under slavery in the Americas always