**Facilitating access to justice for people of African descent especially legal aid for women**

 **Monorama Biswas**

Member of the Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent

People of African descent have, for centuries, been marginalized as part of the legacy of slavery and colonialism and have been victims of racism, racial discrimination, and denial of their rights. They have been relegated to subhuman status in many aspects of public life, suffered exclusion and often been “invisible” in official statistics. It is important that the world recognizes the continuing socioeconomic vulnerability imposed upon the people of African descent as a result of historical injustice and egregious violation of human rights such as slavery and colonization, systems of inherited status as well as long-standing formalized and State-sponsored and seek to redress them urgently.

Racial injustice lay at the heart of human rights because it concerned the fundamental principle of their universality and respect for human dignity and social justice.  Racism — an “old wound” of humanity — had adapted itself to the contemporary world in attempts to gain political, moral and juridical acknowledgement and it is utterly unfit for the 21st century world. No countries can remain immune from moral outrage of racial injustice and skirt their responsibility to fundamental rethinking towards righting the wrongs of the past. At the forefront of correcting the past legacies of unspeakable injustice inflicted upon the people of African descent lies in the facilitating access to justice for people of African descent who are victims of racism. There are a number of ways we can accomplish that such as:

1. **Supplying the requisite legal information about their rights:** Coordinated international efforts to adopt global charter about individual rights and responsibility are vital to ending racial discrimination. History held too many examples of mistrust and conflict that can be attributed to ignorance and fear of the unknown.  Greater knowledge, intercultural dialogue, tolerance and respect for diversity are essential tools of overcoming bigotry, misinformation, and hatred. At the national level, many countries have amended their constitutions to include clearer references to their multicultural characters. In some countries, legislation has been adopted, which includes affirmative action policies and other initiatives of interest to people of African descent.
2. **Promoting, in areas where people of African descent live:** The role of media in representing the diversity of multicultural societies and thus fighting racial discrimination, social injustice and related intolerance must be unwavering and relentless. States have created national institutions to promote racial equality. Individual countries and organization can make a huge impact in mitigating the old wounds of racial injustice against African Diasporas by undertaking educational and information campaigns in the target communities and encouraging them to seek the recourses and remedies available to them. It is a fundamental fact that the full exercise of seeking justice by people of African descent will depend significantly on their knowledge of the options they have and the way to seek it.
3. **Institutions such as free legal help and advice centers:** The legal remedies must be made readily available, affordable and viable to the people of African descent for them to embrace it for the community of African Diasporas is disadvantaged in every measurable socioeconomic parameter due to historic systemic discrimination and injustice inflicted upon them. It is a hopeful sign that many such private and government sponsored have already formed such as NAACP, ACLU in the U.S. But more is needed around the world.
4. **Centers for reconciliation and mediation:** The defeat of apartheid in South Africa and many other so called “civilzed” countries in the world represented a powerful symbol of the victory of mankind over inhumanity, underscoring the indomitability of the human sprit and its ability to overcome unimaginable adversity and hardship confronted by indescribable odds. We all know and recognize that the people of African descent had suffered a great deal, having been enslaved and deprived of their rights. There should be mechanisms in place to adequately quantify the damage and to make appropriate reparations.
5. **Granting victims effective judicial cooperation:** The 1950s and 1960s saw the peaking of the American Civil Rights Movement with the desegregation of schools in 1954 and the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964. The act prohibited discrimination in public facilities, in government and in employment. It became illegal to force segregation of the races in schools, housing or hiring. The courts were instrumental upholding and validating the newly adopted laws, despite many challenges from the segregationists, and focused a bright light on the racial injustice African descents faced in America. Had it not been the U.S. Courts and courageous leaders of the country working in tandem at the time, we would have seen a different picture of America today. But the country hasn’t accomplished all it could in terms of racial equality. The courts and lawmakers should continue to recognize racism when they see it and should stand ready to act to end it and offer victims the full cooperation and opportunities.
6. **Legal aid including the assistance of counsel and an interpreter free of charge:** Many countries now offer counsel and language services free of charge to people seeking justice who can not afford one. Limitations such as financial hardships, language barrier, literacy, transportation needs, and social perceptions affect people’s participation in judicial system. People of African descents are impacted by them all in great magnitude. Removing these barriers are important tools to serve justice for the weak and persecuted.

.

The aforementioned processes have resulted in more people getting justice and the changing visibility for people of African descent in the society. These also to some extent have increased their empowerment. But the states and organizations need to strive to completely eliminate any form of racial injustice from the society and ensure that the people of African descents and all marginalized and vulnerable groups are not excluded from fully exercising their human rights.