**Expert Panel on the International Day for the Abolition of Slavery**

**Statement by Ms. Rosemeyrtha Mireille Innocent**

Restavek Freedom

Hello everyone, my name is Rosmeyrtha Mireille Innocent, I am 19 years old. I am here today to represent the children in Haiti most often referred to as restavék. I am here to be their voice because I dream about a new life for them and for all children around the world who have no voice in their own life.

Thank you to the United Nations Contemporary Slavery Fund for giving me this opportunity and for supporting the work of Restavek Freedom so they can make a difference in the lives of young girls like myself.

I grew up in a family of 7 children. Life wasn’t easy for me and my sister and brothers because my mom didn’t have a way to take care of us. At the age of 6, my aunt decided to bring me to PAP. My mom was happy because her daughter was going to the Capital of Haiti, where I would meet other people, go to school and learn new skills. My aunt also promised to send me to school, to treat me the same way she treated her own children and to take good care of me.

For the first week I was treated like a little princess but after one month, she told me that I am a girl and there are chores I am supposed to do because life is difficult and she has to feed me. And she added, “Do you think you are a princess?

At the age of 9, I realized that I could not read or write because she did not send me to school and she would always beat me for nothing. I wasn’t going to school until I met an advocate from RFF who found me and placed me in school.

During the time I lived in my aunt’s house, I felt very bad because I felt worthless in her eyes. I felt like trash in the eyes of my neighbors and my friends because of the way I was mistreated. Often, she said to me, “You will be nothing in your life”. Sometimes she slapped or she beat me. Whenever she finished to beat me up I would just go at the back of the house and sat down to cry because I didn’t have someone to talk to, I cried and asked God why it’s me ? Why?

Almost every day, my aunt reminded me with bad words how my mother is poor. She wanted me to feel bad. When she beat me, if someone said don’t do that to her because if she was your kids you would not do that to her, she would become angry and continue to beat me with rage.

I remember one day, she asked me to wash a skirt for her. I did take time to do that for her. I was 9 years old. I did my best to wash it well and make her happy. In the morning, she told me to bring her the skirt, I was so happy to go and take it and bring it to her cause I thought that she will thank me for the efforts I did. Instead she said the skirt is still dirty. I didn’t have the chance to open my mouth to tell her something before she gave me 5 slaps in my face. I had a very hard time in this house. My tears were my best friend, I felt hopeless. And I did not have contact with my mom or my dad.

Many times I tried to run away from the house but I didn’t have anywhere to go because I could not go to my mother’s house.

Sometimes I wished that I was just an object because anyone could do what they wanted with me and I would not know or feel the pain. Sometimes they forced me to do the things I did not want to do. If they ask me to wash the dishes and I did not have time because of the other work I was doing, she would take me by my ear and start to slap me and kick me everywhere. And one day she punched me on my breasts so hard that I had a lot of pain at night and could not sleep but she didn’t care about my pain….I was only there to work. When I told her that I am suffering because of the punch, she said she wasn’t responsible for that. One day my cousin, her son, brought me to the hospital. Besides that, she never took me to the hospital when I was sick.

Her children also had authorization to abuse me and it was not uncommon for them to kick me. I only had permission to play when I finished with all my chores but that was unusual. Sometimes I would finish but was never allowed to play. It was not until I came to the Restavek Freedom Transitional Home that I began to play and understand what it meant to feel free.

Several times, when I lived with my aunt, I asked God to take my breath away because my life was a hell.

In December 2010, my cousin asked me to do the dishes. I broke a pot by accident, and she beat me until my left eye was swollen so big that I could hardly see. I ran from the house to find the director of my school and when he saw my condition he called my advocate at Restavek Freedom. She came to get me at the corner of the street, where I stood in bare feet because I did not take time to bring anything from the house. It was time for me to leave that house because if was still in that house, I would not be here in front of you to talk about the misery of children that I have the honor to represent and I thank you to the Slavery Fund for supporting the home where I find my freedom.

Look at me, I am intelligent and confident and it is thanks to Restavek Freedom and those who fund this work. I would like all children to have the same opportunities that I have had over the past 7 years and 11 months: right to be loved, to have a family, to be protected, to have the right to education and to be proud to be part of the world.

On December 2010, my life of hell was over and things started to change because RFF brought me to the Transitional House. Before, I never dared to dream and now I can dream; I know I can be whatever I want in life. Work hard, stay positive and believe in GOD.

What is the meaning of child slavery in Haiti?

Child slavery is where a child was with his parents and someone in the Capital goes to the countryside asking some poor family to give them a child and they will take care of this child. Which parent doesn’t want a good life for their kids? All of them want it! Because of that, the child had to separate from his family to go to PAP for a better life. When the child first arrives in PAP, the first week is sometimes good for them, but after everything changes. The host family considers this child restavék because this child has to do all chores at the house and stay home. The host family does not send her to school. These children are the last ones to go to bed and the first to wake up. They are the one who has to make the coffee, prepare the food and take care of the whole family. If they happen to wake up late, they get beat up with electric wire, pan, sandal, mop…anything that is close by and they can get their hands on.

One of the hardest things is that most often they are the ones who cook food for the family but they are never allowed to eat it while they watch with stomachs aching from hunger. One of the worse things is that sometime the restavék child can be raped by the husband or son of the family or even a neighbor that they are loaned out to. When this happens, there is no one to go to for help because no one would believe what you say. You can only suffer in silence and fear that it will happen again.

If you talk with these children, you will feel the pain in their voice, because they always say that I can’t handle this life anymore, I’m worthless, no one loves me, I want to die because I’m not living.

The first thing I know about children rights is that: We are created in the image of God and the first article of the declaration of human rights says all humans are born and remain equal in law.

Article 19 of the convention requires that children be protected against all forms of violence, physical or mental abuse or brutality.

After so much analysis, can we say that our children really enjoy these rights? What has been put in place to ensure that these written rights are enforced?

We have several organizations in Haiti that work to combat abuse on the human being, but so far without result because not everyone is aware of what is happening around us. Sometimes we even have the impression that we are surrounded by blind and deaf people because the cries of the victims do not reach their ears.

I heard the cries of children in my neighborhood and I continue to see children suffering. I was a part of that suffering.

Edmund Burke, a great philosopher and orator, once said, “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing”. My prayer is that good men and women will rise and use their voices to combat the evil of the restavék practice in Haiti and that one day children will no longer suffer under this practice that violates all human rights especially the rights of children.

It is time that we join our efforts so that it changes because the future is the child, not only for Haiti but for the world. The restavek system in Haiti needs to stop. We can stop it.