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

**Statement by Ms. Roslyn Philips**

Restavek Freedom

On behalf of Restavek Freedom I wish to say Thank You for this invitation to shed light on the practice of restavek in Haiti and Thank You to the UN Contemporary Slavery Fund for supporting our work which allows us to impact the lives of more than 1,000 children in Haiti.

As Rosemyrtha has just so eloquently outlined the issues related to a child’s life as a restavek, I want to continue on that path of explaining how Restavek Freedom works in Haiti to identify these children, advocate on their behalf, work toward the elimination of this practice and raise awareness throughout the country on the harmful impact this practice has on the country where I was born.

I am no stranger to the sufferings of children in Haiti. Being born into a rural family with 6 other siblings, my father was unable to take care of me after the death of my mother. His decision to place me in an orphanage instead of giving me to another family most likely changed the path my life could have taken. I am keenly aware of the fact that I too could have lived the life of a restavék child. However, I was adopted at the age of 5 and grew up in the United States with all the privileges that allowed.

At the age of 23, my curiosity about my heritage led me back to Haiti to discover my roots and it is during this time that I learned about the practice of restavek and began working with Restavek Freedom.

What I discovered on my return is a beautiful country lacking infrastructure, unreliable resources for electricity and little access to clean water and proper health care. This lack of infrastructure drives the need for free labor therefore the need for a little ti moun (small child) to help with all the needs of a household.

When a child enters restavek she becomes a commodity whereby the sending family is relieved of the burden of another mouth to feed and the receiving family has free labor. Thus, begins the life of a child slave in Haiti. The child spends her formative years isolated from her family, subjected to emotional and physical abuse and is required to fulfill whatever request her overseer demands. She most often works long hours without pay, performs task far beyond her years and carries loads that would be overwhelming for most adults. She is there to serve the entire family. Children arrive to these families in various ways. As one girl described to us when asked how she came to live with the family, she replied, “I was a wedding gift”. Restavék children in Haiti are often referred to as ‘La Pou Sa’, meaning ‘there for that’ which also includes sexual demands. The true nature of the relationship between the child and the family is mostly hidden because it takes place behind closed doors.

Restavék has become so common in Haiti that it is rare to find anyone that has not had some association with restavék. Either they were a restavék, have a restavék or know someone who has given a child away. While poverty remains the pretext in which one might justify this practice, it would be important to ask the question as to why the receiving family insist on such cruelty toward the child they chose to receive, leaving behind scars that require a lifetime to heal.

The restavèk system is a serious human rights violation and its implications are massive, creating many of Haiti’s social ills including poverty, gender violence, illiteracy and mental health issues. While many studies have been conducted regarding the restavék practice, there is little agreement regarding the number of children living as restavek. In a population of just over 10 million people one study indicates there are approximately 300,000 restavèk children in Haiti, two thirds (2/3) of which are young girls.

What we do know is that millions of people have endured the harsh treatment resulting from living as restavék and the scars remain throughout their life. There is a Haitian proverb that says, Bay kou bliye, pote mak sonje – The giver of the blow forgets, the bearer of the scar remembers. For many, the emotional and physical pain will always remain thus creating a population of traumatized people.

As Haiti remains on the top 10 of the global slavery index, it is imperative that we work toward the elimination of the destructive nature of this practice. By building a movement that makes restavek socially unacceptable in Haiti, our hope is that it will lead to the eradication of this practice as it currently exist.

While working to build a national movement we also work directly with victims. Restavèk Freedom (RF), works to identify children through our child advocacy program as well as through referrals from school directors, pastors and community leaders. Our child advocates, many of whom are social workers and psychologist, visit places where restavek children typically gather. Local water outlets, where children go to fetch water for the household is a common place where many restavek children are found. Other places include the public markets where children sell food and other items for the people they live with. Another way we identify children is by noticing the children who are walking the streets during school hours and the children that accompany the biological children of the family to school, oftentimes carrying them on their backs or carrying their backpacks.

Our organization has earned a reputation in Haiti for caring for these children and often times school directors, Pastors and people in the community will notify us of a child that is being abused in their community. Once alerted to the situation of a child, our child advocate will follow up to see how we might assist this child. Once a child is identified, our child advocates go to work, meeting with the host family and working with them to allow the child to enter school. Once the host family agrees to allow the child to attend school: Restavek Freedom locates a school close to the child’s residence, pays the tuition, supplies them with a uniform, books and backpack.

Each child in our program is assigned an advocate who meets with the child weekly to make sure the child is progressing in school and receiving better treatment in the home where they are residing. The advocate also conducts home visits to work with the host family on better treatment of the child and conducts parent meetings at the schools to talk about trauma and how it impacts the brain and development of children. For those children who are older when they first begin school, we offer an accelerated program to reduce the stigma of being an older child in the first grade.

The advocates also host school meetings with teachers and school directors to encourage them regarding better treatment of restavék children in their classrooms and to ask them to extend more grace to these children. The advocates encourage the teachers to eliminate corporal punishment on these children as they are routinely beaten in the homes where they reside.

We see tremendous change in these children over the course of 6 months as they begin to trust in their advocate and open up to them about their life. They know that they have someone looking out for them and someone that cares about their wellbeing. Often times the advocate becomes aware of very difficult situations including serious medical problems that are sometimes life threatening as well as sexual abuse, requiring intervention from the police. In these situations, RF works closely with the police to remove the child from the home and place them in our transitional home until the parents can be located. Where parents have deceased, the children remain in our care until they complete school. The transitional home works with young girls to help them heal from the effects of the trauma that has been inflected. They attend school, and are provided with all their basic needs including psychosocial support from local psychologists. However, it is the love provided by our director, Adeline and the advocates who stay connected, that allows the girls to feel valued and begin to heal.

While beatings are common place for children living as restavek, it is interesting to note that many children confide in their advocates that they can handle the beatings but it is the words that are inflicted on them that they find the most difficult to bear. Words that are often demeaning and belittlee these children are hard to forget and require skilled practitioners to help them overcome feelings of worthlessness.

Summer months are often difficult for these children as the work load can often be more intense with longer hours and working in the hot sun. In order to counter the workload, we host summer camp programs for the children to give them time to play and continue with their academics.

Currently we have more than 1,000 children in our program with 17 well trained child advocates. It would be impossible for us to remove the large number of children living in restavek so our goal is to work with families to encourage better treatment of children in their care and to encourage biological families to stop sending their children to live with others.

We are grateful for the support of the UN Contemporary Slavery fund which gives us the opportunity to increase our number of child advocates in order to support more children living as restavék.

While RF works directly with victims, we also work to increase the capacity of the police department in charge of the protection of minors. Restavek Freedom has created a child protection data base that helps track and monitor all incoming children in the west department. This data base allows the police to store digital information of all children that enter their program including a photo of each child. This allows quick access to find children who are missing if their record is in the data base.

As our mission is to end the practice of restavék we are working on a national scale through our Justice Curriculum, Songs for Freedom, Zoukoutap, a creative soap opera reaching more than 2 million people and our Child Protection Committees. Our goal is to have more than 350 child protection committees operating throughout the entire country. These committees will work to register children living outside their biological families and identify those who are the most vulnerable as well as help identify children who have no record of their birth. RF will then work to provide birth certificates to each child whose birth was never recorded.

As Rural Program Director in Haiti, I work to help design and implement programs that counter some of the root causes of restavek. From our Learning Center in the south of Haiti we first implemented a census to better understand the community we serve. This was the first census to take place in this area. This helped us understand the situation in which families live and how we might better assist and strengthen them in order for them to keep their children and reduce the supply of children entering restavek. We also host maternal health programs, job training programs and assist with reuniting children with their families while supporting their education. We have a child advocacy program in the south where we have more than 100 restavek children, working closely with the police to monitor some of the more difficult situations.

One of our goals is to influence the next generation regarding the treatment of children and to help end the practice of restavek. We do this through offering English and computer classes and sports programs. By working with the youth, they begin to trust us which then gives us the opportunity to influence their opinions and thoughts regarding the practice of restavek. We are seeing changes in attitude and some youth are actually challenging their parents about the treatment of children in their homes.

Our programs are very comprehensive as we are keenly aware that it will take time and a multifaceted approach to change attitudes regarding such an engrained practice in Haiti’s culture. We do believe we are making progress but we also understand that these types of changes take many years. As we continue to raise awareness regarding this issue more people are becoming aware of the destructive nature and impact of this practice on our country and are joining us in working toward a stronger Haiti.

One of my favorite quotes is from a famous abolitionist, Fredrick Douglas. He says, “It is better to build strong children than to repair broken men.” Therefore, it is imperative that compulsory measures be put into place that will protect the rights of children in Haiti not only through written laws but also enforcing those laws so that Haiti will once again rise as the “Pearl of the Antilles” and all children will recognize their self-worth.

Thank you for your attention.