Women’s contribution to emancipation struggle must be recognised

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Women’s contribution to emancipation struggle must be recognised – Professor Verene Shepherd

The Caribbean was urged to take action to honour women who contributed significantly to the fight for emancipation yet still remain unknown for the most part. Speaking at the third in the series of commemorative lectures to mark the 250th anniversary of the 1763 Slave Rebellion, Professor Verene Shepherd, urged a correction of this lack of recognition and make history compulsory in all schools. Professor Shepherd from the University of the West Indies, Jamaica said, “A Guyanese woman, Cecile Nobrega inspired the first public monument to a black woman in England, but we are not focusing on our own deficiencies in the area of symbolic decolonisation, and one of the reasons there’s no groundswell is that we don’t know who they are.”

The lack of awareness of these icons, the professor added, that could empower girls and women and give them strength in the face of the impact of socio economic tribulations is partly, is attributable to the lack of history education in schools. “The lack of awareness of women’s contribution to Caribbean development also feeds hegemony, masculinity- men find the education system support the feeling that women’s role in the Caribbean’s development was negligible,” she further stated. Text books ought to be revised too to correct this deficiency and the need for reparations cannot be overlooked,
the professor said, “Apology and regret without reparation equals hypocrisy and immorality”.
During the lecture titled, *United in Anger, United in War, Gender and Anti Slavery in the Caribbean*, the professor said that women’s actions during the various struggles for emancipation have been noted to some extent and cited the case of slave women of Clonbrook Plantation who, though locked up, waved their handkerchiefs and shouted words of support during the rebels’ fight during an insurrection.

A section of the attendees at Professor Verene Shepherd's lecture titled ‘United in anger, united in war; Gender and anti-slavery in the Caribbean’

Women have not been given their rightful place alongside the pantheon of male activists singled out each year for emancipation celebrations, during the anniversaries of major wars and certainly during black history month. She read the names of several slave rebellion leaders such as Taky, Accompong, General Boodoo, Martin King and Kofi and said that most of the women who fought alongside or participated in the same struggles were mostly unknown. Susana of the 1823 Demerara War, Marilee from Fort Zeelandia, Lucretia, Diana, Jackba, Christina and Amba of other Guyanese plantations, Cecile Fatima of Haiti, Alena of Suriname, Betty Douglas of St Kitts Nevis, Harriet Tubman of the USA and several others who are all recognised as quintessential rebel women, who embodied the spirit of black women’s resistance to domination.

The words of Bob Marley’s song, “Babylon’s System’s the Vampire” and Buju Banton’s “Murderer” were played and these were two of several inspirational songs used to illustrate her points. Using examples from her native country of Jamaica, Professor Shepherd listed some of the women who contributed to the emancipation struggle in the island’s early history and the harsh punishments meted out to them for their actions. Most ranged from hundreds of lashes and dismemberment to execution.
Contrary to popular belief, while some Africans collaborated, many fought against enslavement and “laid the psychological foundations for the self determinist postures of modern Caribbean societies whose nationalist luminaries later attacked the imperialist assumptions and impositions. They too were abolitionists,” the professor said. They laid the groundwork for the more commonly known contributions of the later abolitionists, who were mostly white intellectuals from Europe.

It was a fight that started in Africa and several early examples were noted, such as the action of Queen N’Zinga who was determined never to accept the Portuguese conquest of the country.

The professor pointed out that contrary to popular belief, the women did most of the work on plantations in the New World and comprised most of the field gangs who performed the hardest tasks. “On sugar plantations, women planted, harvested, weeded, and worked in the factories where many lost fingers ….they laboured in slavers’ residences as domestics, nursed the sick in the hot houses.” The enslaved women were also subjected to exploitation by owners and she quoted a passage from the historical book, ‘Night Women’.

Women also suffered mentally when their families were torn apart by owners who sold family members at will and several cases and their effects were cited for the audience. The struggles for freedom would not have been successful were it not for the contributions of various slave women who supported rebellions in various territories in numerous ways.
No story of anti slavery in the Caribbean can be told without the inclusion of women and women’s independent economic power and their contribution to the development to the development to European industry, Professor Verene said. She saluted the women such as Dame Eugenia Charles, Janet Jagan, Baroness Amos, Portia Simpson Miller, Kamla Persaud-Bissessar and even singers Debra Cox and Rihanna noting that their road was made easier by the sacrifice of women who went before “They have inherited a tradition of political activism because anti slavery activism was deeply political.”

Professor Shepherd, a fellow of the Cambridge Commonwealth Society, is University Director of the Institute for Gender & Development Studies and Professor of Social History at the Mona Campus, UWI. She is a member of the United Nation’s Working Group of Experts on People of African descent, is the Immediate Past President of the Association of Caribbean Historians and was the first woman to chair the Board of Trustees of the Jamaica National Heritage Trust (2006-2007)

Among her publications (sole-authored, co-authored, edited and co-edited are; Livestock, Sugar & Slavery: Contested Terrain in Colonial Jamaica (2009); I Want to Disturb My Neighbour (2007); Maharani’s Misery: Narratives of a Passage from India to the Caribbean (2002) and Engendering History: Caribbean Women in Historical Perspectives (1998).