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To cite this article: Amy Bracken (2006) Haiti's Children Pay the Price of Poverty, NACLA Report on the Americas, 39:5, 22-25, DOI: [10.1080/10714839.2006.11725339](https://doi.org/10.1080/10714839.2006.11725339)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10714839.2006.11725339>



Published online: 31 May 2016.



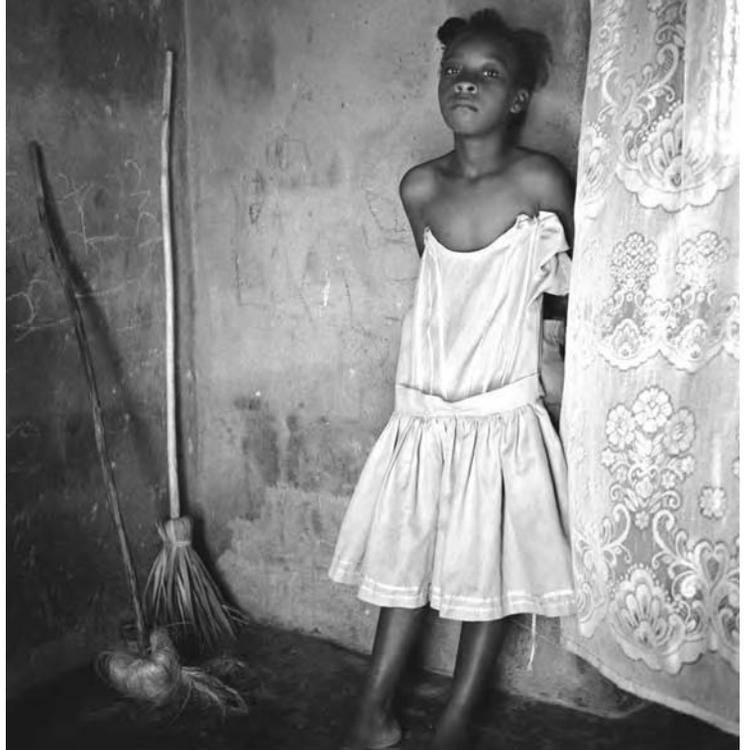
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# Haiti's Children Pay the Price of Poverty

Ten-year-old Josiméne lives in a two-room house where she works as live-in maid, or *restavèk*, for a family of four.



by Amy Bracken

“AFTER 200 YEARS OF BEES, LET’S HAVE 200 years of honey.” So proposed a T-shirt issued by the Haitian government at the end of 2003 to celebrate the impending bicentennial of independence and freedom from slavery. But with no honey in sight, there wasn’t much to celebrate, as anti-government violence coupled with a dismal economy stifled any potential revelry. President Jean-Bertrand Aristide’s New Year’s Day speech in the town of Gonaïves, where independence had been declared two centuries before, ended with government officials fleeing the stage as gunfire rang out all around. The President’s entourage returned to Port-au-Prince to find the capital’s streets littered with burning barricades.

Two months later, Aristide was flown in a U.S.-dispatched plane into exile to the Central

African Republic in the wake of an uprising by a group of 200 armed rebels. A 9,000-strong UN “stabilization” mission now patrols the streets, and the international community has pledged more than \$1 billion to help the beleaguered nation. Yet violence persists, and ever more Haitians talk about living in “*lamise*,” Creole for economic despair.

Haiti’s victory of 1804 was an extraordinary feat by global standards, with former slaves leading a rebellion to abolish French slavery and then rid Haiti of French colonial rule altogether. Although the French lost what was known as “the Pearl of the Antilles,” the source of unsurpassed sugar-generated wealth, they demanded the modern equivalent of \$28 million to compensate for the loss of the slave colony, plunging the new state into lasting debt.

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In reference to Haiti's dependence on the international community, Aristide called his country "a *restavèk* state." The term *restavèk* comes from the French for "stay with," and refers to a widespread system in Haiti in which children between five and 17 years old are sent away by desperately poor parents to work unpaid in other families' homes for food and shelter. Some Haitians translate the term as "child slave." Although housing an unpaid child servant has declined among Haiti's small upper class, where the practice has become taboo, it has simultaneously grown among poorer Haitians, especially those living in Port-au-Prince's sprawling slums, where maids are unaffordable and household tasks more difficult without plumbing, electricity and modern appliances. The pervasiveness of the *restavèk* system 200 years after Haiti's official abolition of slavery is both symptomatic and emblematic of the state of the nation—a state of despair that robs people of self-determination and begs the question, is it possible to be free when subjected to such unrelenting poverty?

Estimates from 2002 of the number of *restavèks* in Haiti ranged from 173,000—or 8.2% of the five-to-17-year-old population—to 300,000. But experts believe the number has grown dramatically in recent years because of the dismal economy, rising prices and ongoing environmental degradation. All of these factors aggravate the already burdensome strains on rural parents, pushing them to do what seems unimaginable: blindly casting their children off into indentured servitude, with some essentially selling them (taking money from middle-men or the "guardians" themselves), and others accepting the lifting of the load as payment enough. Haitian activists and the international community have been unable to stop this virtual enslavement of children. So far, public awareness campaigns, laws banning the practice and the forced return of children to their parents have proven no match for the forces of crushing poverty and despair.

In the poorest country with the highest birth rate in the Americas, having many children is common. "It's the work of God," says the mother of one *restavèk* girl in explaining why she has had so many children. She had been pregnant 10 times, but miscarried when she had a stroke and two other children died at ages two and 13 of malnutrition and a mysterious high fever. "Yes, it's hard having so many children," her husband conceded, "but if we have another, it will be the will of God."

Roughly 80% of Haiti's adult population claims adherence to the Catholic Church, which maintains an anti-contraception position. Yet a UN Population Fund

(UNFPA) survey found many women want fewer children but don't have access to the necessary information, services or contraception. On average, women in Haiti have 4.7 children—5.8 in the countryside and 6.4 among those with no schooling. Declines in these numbers over the last decade have been negligible, and birth rates actually increased among women with no education. The survey found Haitian women would prefer, on average, 3.5 children. The UNFPA has partnered with the Haitian Ministry of Public Health and international and local organizations to distribute family planning information and contraceptives throughout the country, but there is limited contact with the rural population, for whom the rate of contraception use is less than half that of the urban population. "The population is growing very fast, the environmental and economic situations are terrible. Every sector must realize contraception is a key factor for long-term development of the country," says UNFPA representative Hernando Clavijo. "It's also a human rights issue," he adds. "A woman should have the right to decide how many children she'll have."

LOOMING OVER THE CROWDED, POT-HOLED STREETS OF Port-au-Prince, a billboard makes a simple demand. Beside the image of a smiling young girl are the words in Creole, "Give me... give me tomorrow... Down with the *restavèk* system." The billboards, dozens of radio and TV spots and community meetings across Haiti are all part of the anti-*restavèk* public awareness campaigns sponsored by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) in conjunction with a slew of local and other international organizations. But participating organizations say they just don't know if any of these efforts are having an impact.

Meanwhile, government initiatives have proven ineffective. The Minister of Social Affairs signed a plan of action this year to collaborate with UNICEF to protect vulnerable children—especially those working as domestics—through law enforcement and other measures. But Marie-France Mondésir, a ministry spokeswoman, said she doesn't know if the laws are being enforced by Haiti's barely functioning justice system. Nor does she have any copies of the laws. She says the government will begin

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providing entrepreneurial grants to parents giving their children away to help them get businesses off the ground so that they might be enabled to generate income and keep their children, but the initiative has yet to receive funding. The government also created a hotline to report child abuse and exploitation, but after a few months, with a limited staff and little capacity for follow-up, the number no longer works.

Haiti's government is clearly too hamstrung to follow through on these efforts, but many question whether the practice is even stoppable. The organization Sant Pon Ayiti, which raises awareness about problems along the Haitian-Dominican border, has been fighting the trafficking of an estimated 2,500 children a year from Haiti into the Dominican Republic to work as domestics. Spokesman Pierre Richard Thomas says it's a losing battle: "Why? Because even if it's illegal, they are better off: there is more to eat with the host family, and they don't want to return." Although some children undergo terrible abuse and run away, he explained, many of those who return to their biological families for vacation do so looking fatter, healthier and better dressed. Meanwhile, traffickers spread the word that life is easier and that there are greater opportunities in the Dominican Republic. Indeed, to the guardians, middlemen, parents and even many of the children involved, the *restavèk* system is a necessary evil.

The case of Ronald Joanel, a middleman in the system, shows both the inherent harm of the *restavèk* system and the reasons it persists. At times, speaking with him is like getting the standard spiel from an anti-*restavèk* activist. He acknowledges that most *restavèks* are psychologically, physically and sexually abused, and that most run away or are thrown out by their guardians, winding up on the streets, begging, stealing and prostituting themselves. But Joanel is no human rights worker. He shuttles between his two-room house in the city and his rural hometown, where he helps overburdened parents send their children away to be *restavèks*. He describes his middleman role as that of a Good Samaritan, insisting he only brings children to families with steady incomes that seem unlikely to be abusive. In fact, he has a *restavèk* of his own. And though he portrays himself as a benevolent guardian, he admits he is just that, a guardian, not an employer or an adoptive parent, but someone exploiting a child for unpaid labor.

Joanel's *restavèk*, 14-year-old Tablita Desir, is forced to sleep on the floor, while other members of the household sleep on beds; she eats squatting in the cooking

shack while everyone else dines at a table, and she spends most of every day working for her guardians for no pay. This life perfectly fits what UNICEF spokeswoman Sylvana Nzirorera defined to me as slavery. Yet, despite having to get up early every morning to fetch water, then mop, bathe her guardians' toddler, cook every meal, wash the dishes, run errands and take the children to school, Tablita dreads being returned to her parents' home, saying her life there would be worse.

In the city, Tablita goes to school in the afternoon. But at home in the countryside, she says work would be her only option and that she would have to suffer abuse from her mother. Now she fears being turned out by Joanel's wife, who believes she is growing too old to control and wants to exchange Tablita for her nine-year-old sister. Joanel doesn't want to kick Tablita out, partly because she is only three years shy of completing elementary school, but also because she could wind up on the streets and into a life of prostitution. But he says he has to go along with his wife's desires in order to save the marriage, adding that he'll try to support Tablita once she leaves.

Though Joanel seems to care about Tablita's well-being, there is only one reason for her presence in his home. "I would be able to pay somebody to work for us, but that person wouldn't do things properly like the *restavèk* does," says Joanel. "She would already have an attitude, her own way of doing things, whereas when you have a *restavèk*, after two or three years she wakes up in the morning and knows what she has to do. You don't have to give her orders any more." According to Joanel's wife, the reason they "took in" Tablita is the reason to get rid of her now. They need someone they can truly control.

Joanel knows he is perpetuating a system in which children, usually girls, are exploited during their most formative years, then cast out in their early to mid-teens. Still, to him, the food and shelter and five years of education he provided the girl just might increase her odds of living a happy, or adequate, life.

**WHILE ON A RARE DAY-TRIP TO HER MOUNTAINTOP HOME**, another *restavèk*, 12-year-old Arthemise, smiles, grasps her big sister's hand and hunts for crabs in a stream. In the city, even at Foyer Maurice Sixto, a free school for *restavèks* in suburban Port-au-Prince, she is always glum, according to Sixto social worker Pascale Douyon. Yet Arthemise harbors no fantasy of going home for good. Asked if she wanted to return to her parents to live, Arthemise quickly replied, "It could never happen."



Foyer Maurice Sixto, a free school for *restavèks* in suburban Port-au-Prince.

On her last visit home, Arthemise was accompanied by both Douyon and her guardian. When the guardian left the house for a few minutes, Arthemise told her parents that her guardian works her non-stop and hits her for reasons beyond her control—being unable to carry a full bucket of water on her head or not finding what she needs at the market. Arthemise's mother wept, and she and her husband called the guardian's behavior unacceptable. But within hours, Arthemise was riding a bus back to the city with her guardian, because her parents couldn't afford to feed all of their seven children or pay for any of them to go to school nearby.

A few days later, sitting in Douyon's office, Arthemise denied she had told her parents anything about the mistreatment. It seemed the fact that they knew she suffered and still had no choice but to send her away was too difficult for Arthemise to face. Unfortunately, believing the *restavèk* practice can be ended through public sensitization or law enforcement alone involves a similar sense of denial. Sixto administrators monitor the placements of many of their 300 students, and follow up on reports of abuse, making unannounced home visits and meeting with guardians. In some cases, the abuse has been severe and ongoing, but in 16 years the center has never managed to return any of its students to their parents.

Still, for some, there is nothing delusional about committing themselves to fighting the *restavèk* practice. Experts like Father Miguel Jean-Baptiste, who founded Maurice Sixto, scoff at the idea of forced returns, believing instead that the answer lies in prevention. Although the center's initiatives, such as church outreach, cooperative bank plans, micro-loans and family planning

counseling to parents and guardians have not diminished the practice, they provide a start, he says.

On the parent side, Jean-Baptiste says the state and the international community must provide assistance to farmers, better roads and bus systems to reach schools and markets, and larger, free schools. On the guardian side, churches and civil society must sensitize the population to the rights of the child. He dreams of a day when "solidarity" replaces exploitation and families altruistically take in the children of poorer families to help them.

Yet others maintain that, despite the challenges, the practice is so odious that everything must be done to stop it. "It's a big problem, and we don't pretend we can solve it," says UNICEF's Nzirorera, "but we still have to do something, and we still have to advocate for the rights of the children."

To Coleen Hedglin of the children's rights organization Fondasyon Limyè Lavi, one must believe the problem can be solved: "It's slavery, and it shouldn't exist," she says. Poverty is obviously a significant factor, adds Hedglin, "but as long as people think it's okay to dominate another in the way that they do these children, you can't just sit around and not say anything."

In the meantime, can progress be made along the path that leads from slavery to solidarity? Eliminating the *restavèk* practice altogether would mean desperate, overburdened parents would have to rely on the charity of others, in a world where the warm, fuzzy feeling of helping others is a far weaker incentive than free labor. Could free child labor be allowed to continue while the government and civil society pursue mitigating measures—clamping down on child abuse, requiring or facilitating education of all children and pushing for the maintenance of contact between child and parent?

Determined activists don't claim the right to tell Arthemise she must go home and go hungry. Nor do they advocate returning children to their biological families if it means more abuse or greater risk of malnutrition. The goal becomes one of providing children and families with a real choice: to be properly cared for at home or properly cared for elsewhere. But if 200 years of revolutions, coups d'état, rebuilding and international interventions have left Haiti mired in *lamise*, it could be two more centuries before hundreds of thousands of parents can enjoy real choices for their children. ■