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Life as a Child Domestic Worker in Haiti

Probably the largest group of child workers in the world are child domestic workers (CDW). The International Labour Organisation (ILO) estimates that there are 250 million child workers in the developing world, and that domestic work is the largest worldwide employment category of girls under the age of sixteen (ILO 1998). However, the proportion of CDWs is not known, neither worldwide nor in Haiti. In Haiti, the estimate of CDWs has varied between 100,000 (Dorelien 1990) and 300,000 children under the age of 18 (UNICEF 1999). A common opinion from previous studies has been that CDWs are mainly girls younger than fourteen years of age, with as many as 20% under ten years of age.

In 1998, Jean-Robert Cadet published an autobiography titled, *Restavec: From Haitian Slave Child to Middle-Class American*, describing his life as a “restavèk”—a domestic servant or “slave child”—and the general social acceptance of this practice in Haiti (Cadet 1998). The book drew international attention and media coverage to the issue of child domestic labour. The Creole term “restavèk” became iconic to the topic of child domestic labour.

Some of the central points in the literature are that child domestic workers have been underprivileged regarding school, food, and goods; work much more than other children; and endure physical and verbal abuse (Antislavery 2002a). In this article, we will look at some of the living conditions for child domestic workers, in order to describe their situation compared to other children in the same age group in Haiti. Although the focus when dealing with child domestic workers is often solely on their activities and conditions, it is also crucial to conduct a comparison of their living standards with those children in the same context. The focus should be on differences in the living conditions between children living with their parents compared to children relocated from their parents' household, whether or not the latter can be defined as domestic child workers.

In societies with extensive fosterage practices, however, it may be problematic to determine which household should be regarded as the “child’s own,” and which affiliation constitutes the child’s primary family belonging. This is particularly the case in Haiti. Thus, of particular relevance for debates on child domestic labour is the fact that there are different borders between what can be referred to as “child domestic labour” and different forms of fostering and adoption systems (Bledsoe 1980, 1990a, 1990b; Goody 1975; Isiugo-Abanihe 1985; UNICEF 1999).

The legal status of the children is regulated by the 1984 Labour Law (Code du Travail), which prohibits the placement in a family of children under the age of twelve years for domestic work (Article 341, UNICEF 1993). It further specifies that children above twelve years, working in domestic service, are entitled to decent lodging, clothes, and sufficient and healthy nutrition, and must be enrolled in school or professional training (Joanis 1996; Ngom 1999). It states that children shall not work during school hours, during Sunday afternoons or on public holidays, or during the night. The children are furthermore entitled to ten hours of uninterrupted rest daily. Finally, from the age of fifteen, children in domestic service should be regarded as paid domestic servants and be given a salary equivalent to the salaries paid to other (adult) servants (articles 345, 346, 347, 350 in the Haitian Labour Law; Joanis 1996). However, even though Haitian law thus attributes legal rights to children, they are seldom enforced (Joanis 1996).

The specific objectives for this article are to:

- a. Define and characterise children depending on their workload, educational opportunities and living arrangements.
- b. Compare living conditions for Haitian children living together with parents and living away from parents, with a specific focus on the child domestic workers.

Methods and Sample

The present study is based mainly on data from the extensive Haiti Living Conditions Survey (HLCS). The HLCS is a multi-topic household survey consisting of three main questionnaires. It consists of, firstly, a household questionnaire, with questions relating to overall characteristics of the household and its members; secondly, a woman/caretaker questionnaire, with questions relating to reproductive history and health, and youth; and finally, a random interview of one person (age fifteen or older), with a

questionnaire consisting of questions referring directly to the personal experiences and view of the respondent.

The fieldwork was undertaken in 2001 by the Institut Haïtien de Statistique et d'Informatique (IHSI). The sample of the HLCS is a stratified cluster sample of 7,812 households, with a response rate of 97.8. The sample was drawn based on the master sample that is an update of the enumeration areas of the 1982 population census of Haiti. Although far from perfect, all major surveys in Haiti have been carried out using the master sample. The sample is described in IHSI (1997) and Pedersen (2001).

Since the sample is not self-weighting, weights have to be used in the estimation. The weights are based on the inclusion probabilities for each household. In addition, the weights are corrected for non-response using an adjustment cell method. This method entails increasing the weights to households that are similar to the households that have not responded (see for example Lehtonen and Pahkinen 1995).

The results in this article are based mainly on the responses from the woman/caretaker questionnaire. The mothers/caretakers were asked questions about the children in the age group five to eighteen, questions concerning the children's workload, if the children had always lived in the household, if the parents were alive, parental contact, sleeping facilities and hours of sleep, number of meals, and the forms of punishment inflicted on the child. In addition, information from the household questionnaire was used. The head of the household normally gave this information. These were questions concerning children's education and health, in addition to identification of age, sex, and kinship relations. This questionnaire also provided information on household income, area of residence, number of meals prepared in the household, and education of the main provider.

Results

Definition of Child Domestic Workers

Asking directly about child domestic work is very difficult in Haiti. Many respondents would not admit that they have "restavèks," or child domestic workers, in their household; accordingly our definition of CDW is based on children not living together with their parents, who have a very high workload of domestic work for their age, and have not achieved an education level corresponding to their age.

To identify the children not living with parents, data from different parts of the questionnaires was used. In the household roster, all relations among all the household members were registered; in addition, questions

were asked to identify if the father and the mother of the child were still living and if the mother lived in the household. In the women questionnaire, certain questions were asked regarding children who were not living with their biological parents: whether the child always had lived in the household, if the biological parents were still alive, and where the parents currently lived. The information from the different parts of the questionnaires was collated, and twenty percent of the children were found to not live together with their parents.

The second criterion for defining CDW is education. In the household roster, it was asked if the child had ever attended school, if he or she was currently enrolled and, if yes, in what grade he or she was enrolled. If the child had never attended school, was not currently enrolled, or was enrolled in a lower grade than expected for the age, the child was defined as not having a sufficient education. Seventy-five percent of the Haitian children did not have a sufficient education.

The last criterion for the definition of child domestic workers was domestic workload. In the women/caretaker questionnaire, it was asked how many hours the child used during the previous week on each of the following activities: collecting/transporting water, preparing food, washing their own cloths, washing others' clothes, taking care of children, sweeping/washing floors, running errands, doing agricultural activities, assisting adults in their work, tending animals, and doing other work in the household. Children in the upper three quintiles of weekly work-hours for their age were classified as children with a heavy workload.

Putting these three criteria together defined the child domestic workers. Close to ten percent (9.8%) of the children between ages five and eighteen years do not live together with their parents, do not have a sufficient education, and have a heavy workload.

This means that approximately half of the children not living together with their parents can be identified as child domestic workers in Haiti. However, only 1.5% of the children in the age group five to eighteen were said to be child domestic workers according to the registration in the household roster.

This discrepancy can be partly explained by the fact that not all children moving away from their parents end up as child domestic workers. As many as one out of five Haitian children in the age group five to eighteen do not live in the same household as at least one of their biological parents (Table 1). Out of these twenty percent, half can be defined as child domestic workers—the rest are children without a heavy work-burden and with a sufficient education.

	Male	Female	Total
Child Domestic Worker (CDW)	7.4	12.2	9.8
Not living with parents	10.6	9.3	9.9
Living with parents	82.0	78.6	80.3
n	5,093	5,079	10,172

Table 1: *Child Status by Gender*

Characteristics of the Child Domestic Workers

According to our definition, seven percent of the boys and twelve percent of the girls aged five to eighteen live as child domestic workers (CDW)—or, more precisely, live without their parents, have a high domestic workload, and have a low education for their age. In addition, eleven percent of the boys and nine percent of the girls in this age group live away from their biological parents, but are not defined as CDWs. As shown in Figure 1, there are clear gender differences among the child domestic workers. The prevalence of CDWs increases among the girls older than ten years of age: 16-17% of all girls in Haiti between the ages of eleven and eighteen work as child domestics. For the boys, it is around 8-10% for all age groups after the age seven. This age difference does not extend to the children living away from their parents but not working as domestics.

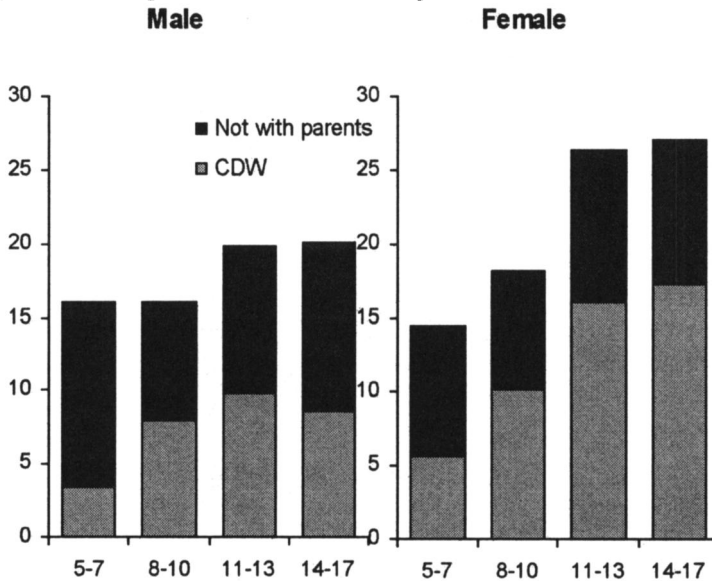


Figure 1: *Prevalence of child domestic workers (CDW) and children living in households without their biological parents, by gender and age.*

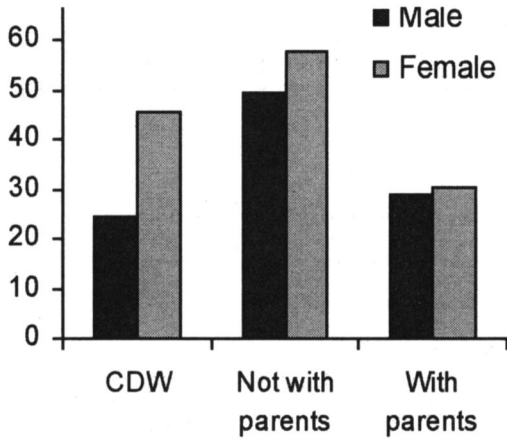


Figure 2: *Living in urban area, by gender and status (CDW=Child domestic worker; Not with parents=children not working as CDWs and not living with biological parents; With parents=living in same household as at least one of the biological parents)*

Two-thirds of Haitian children aged 5 to 18 live in rural areas. The rural-urban distribution of CDWs is different, however, as seen in Figure 2. Nearly half of female CDWs (45%) live in urban areas (the equivalent figure for boys is 25%). However, among the children living away from their parents and not working as CDWs, 49% of the boys and 58% of the girls live in urban areas.

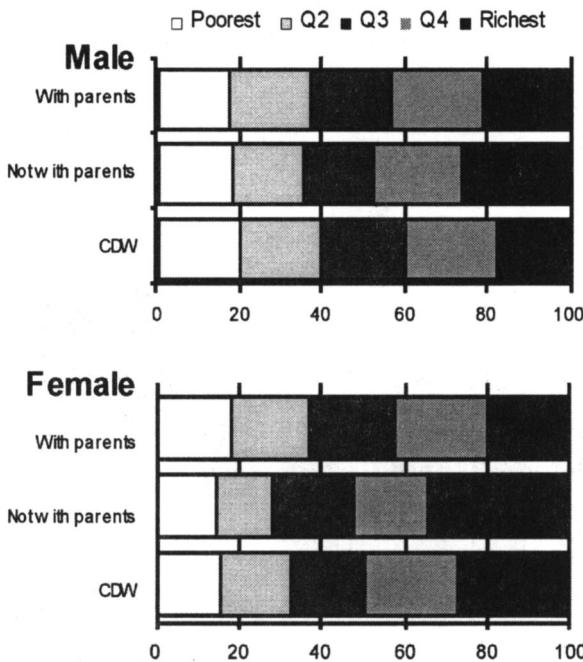


Figure 3: *Quintiles of household income by gender and status (CDW=Child domestic worker; Not with parents=children not working as CDWs and not living with biological parents; With parents=living in same household as at least one of the biological parents)*

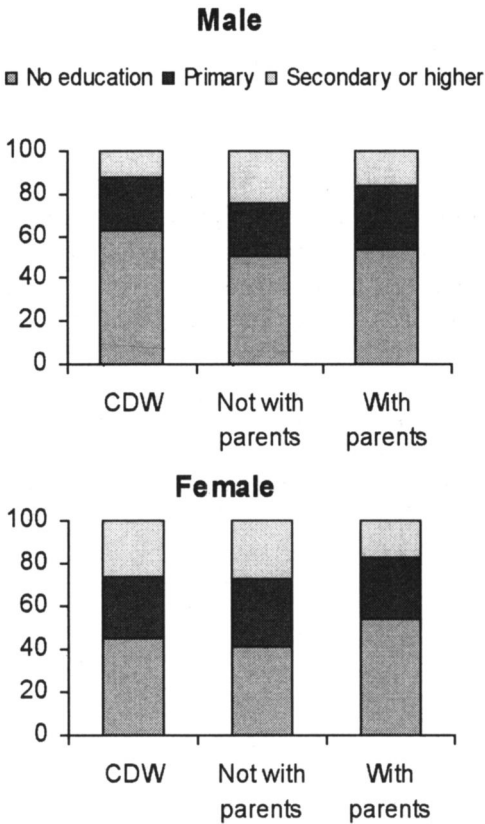


Figure 4: Education of main provider in the household, by child's gender and status (CDW=Child domestic worker; Not with parents=children not working as CDWs and not living with biological parents; With parents=living in same household as at least one of the biological parents)

Our data shows further that there is a tendency to find CDW girls in richer households (Figure 3); 27% of these girls live in households in the highest quintile of income. For the girls not living with parents and not working as CDWs, as many as 35% live in the richest households. These patterns do not hold among the boys: there seems to be no difference in the diversity of income quintiles of CDW boys versus the boys living with their parents. However, boys living away from their parents but not working as CDWs more frequently live in richer households, as is the case with similarly situated girls. However, CDWs of both sexes do live in households of all income levels, and therefore cannot solely be seen as a phenomenon of the rich.

While 54% of the children living with biological parents stay in households where the main provider does not have any education, the situation

is different both for CDW and the other children living in strangers' households, and differs for girls and boys (Figure 4).

More of the male CDWs (63%) live in households where the main provider has no education, whereas only 50% of the boys not working as CDWs but living away from their parents live in such households. The girls living away from their parents tend to stay in households where the main provider has more education, regardless of whether or not they are CDWs (41-45%).

Comparing Living Conditions for Child Domestic Workers and Other Children

Health

Four percent of all the children in the age group were reported to suffer from an illness or injury of prolonged nature. Fewer prolonged illnesses were found among the child domestic workers than among other children (Table 2). It is likely that a child suffering from a chronic illness would not be as attractive to take into the household as a child without such problems.

	Male			Female		
	CDW	No parents	With parents	CDW	No parents	With parents
Illness prolonged nature	2.0	2.9	3.4	3.9	3.2	4.9
Severe prolonged illness	0.7	1.1	1.2	1.4	1.5	1.4
n	379	541	4,174	619	470	3,990
Illness last two weeks						
Yes, but carried out normal duties	0.5	3.3	2.4	2.4	6.0	2.5
Yes, prevented from normal duties	1.9	3.6	3.1	3.2	2.4	3.7
n	367	522	4,013	592	449	3,780

Table 2: Prevalence of chronic and acute illness by gender and status

Acute illness was reported for nearly seven percent of the children. One could imagine that the child domestic workers are more vulnerable to illnesses because they work much more than other children but, as Table 2 shows, the prevalence of acute illnesses was somewhat lower than for the other children, especially among the boys. There might be several explanations for this. One is that it is the healthiest children who are recruited as CDWs. Another explanation is that the heads of household (the ones responding to the questionnaire) are less aware of the CDWs' health than the health of other children in the home. For the CDW boys, only 0.5% were reported to have had mild acute illness, a much lower level than for the other boys. It is conceivable that the CDW boys are pushed to work even if they are ill, and that little attention is given to their health situation.

Less than half of the children with acute illness during the two weeks preceding the survey were brought to medical consultation and given treatment for the disease. Slightly fewer of the child domestic workers received medical attention compared to the other children (data not shown). The two main reasons for not seeking help were that the child was not ill enough, and that the household could not afford the consultancy. Indeed, these are the main reasons for all the children that suffered from acute illness during the two preceding weeks.

Meals and Sleeping

The respondents to the women and child questionnaire were asked how many prepared meals the child ate the day before. This question was similar to a question asked in the household questionnaire: “How many meals were prepared in the household yesterday?” This question is an attempt to understand the nutritional health of the child and the household.

As Table 3 shows, the children living away from parents, whether CDWs or not, tend to eat somewhat more prepared meals than the children living in same household as their parents. This might be explained by the fact that children living away from parents live in richer households (Figure 3). However, when the number of meals eaten by the child is compared to the number of meals prepared in the household, only 4-5% of the CDWs have eaten more than the number of household meals, while 7-8% of the other children have eaten more meals. However, the differences are not significantly large.

Number of prepared meals yesterday	Male			Female		
	CDW	No parents	With parents	CDW	No parents	With parents
0	2	1	1	1	1	1
1	43	45	45	39	36	44
2	46	45	47	49	50	46
3+	9	9	7	12	13	9
Number of meals compared to HH						
Less	6	11	7	8	10	8
Equal	90	82	86	87	82	85
More	4	8	7	5	8	7

Table 3: Number of meals eaten yesterday, and comparison with number of meals prepared in the household.

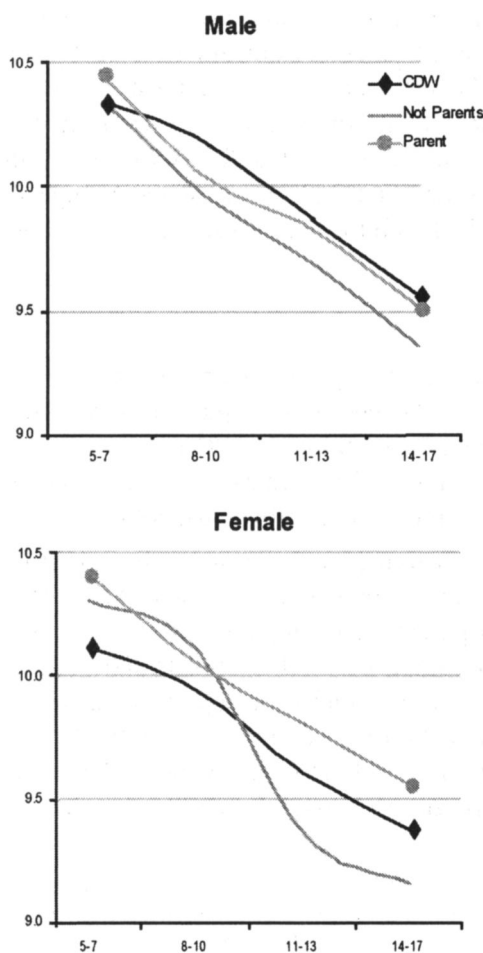


Figure 5: Mean hours of sleep per night by gender, age and status (CDW=Child domestic worker; Not parents=children not working as CDWs and not living with biological parents; Parent=living in same household as at least one of the biological parents)

The heavier workload for child domestic workers compared to non-child domestics is not reflected in their reported hours of sleep per night. Almost none of the children get fewer than seven hours of sleep. Hours of sleep decrease, as expected, by age. But even for the children between 14 and 18 years of age, 80% get at least nine hours of sleep per night. For all the age groups, the mean differences in reported hours of sleep are less than ten minutes between CDW and other children (Figure 5); however, male CDWs tend to sleep some minutes more than average in all age-groups except the youngest, while female CDWs sleep a bit less than the other girls (6 to 18 minutes). However, compared to the other children living in households away from their parents, the CDWs sleep more in all age and sex groups with the exception of the two youngest girl groups.

The child domestic workers do not have any poorer sleeping arrangements than other children. In the richer households, the CDW girls tend to sleep in their own beds, and less frequently on a mat or mattress. The CDW sleeps in shared beds less often than other children, regardless of income-group (data not shown).

Punishment

In the HLCS, we asked the women listed as caretakers in each household about the methods for punishment of each child. In the analysis, we checked the punishment method for the children's gender and according to whether

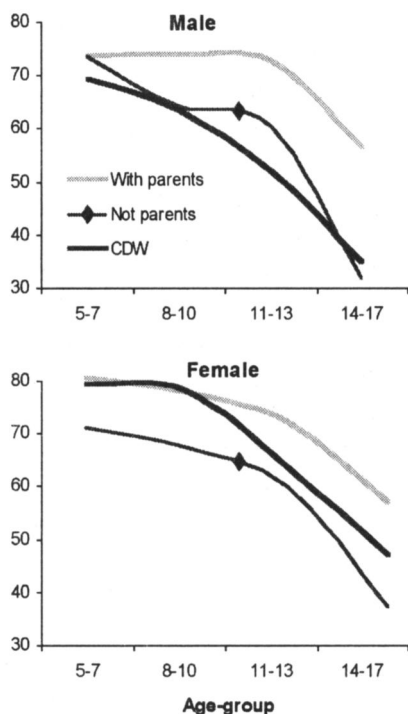
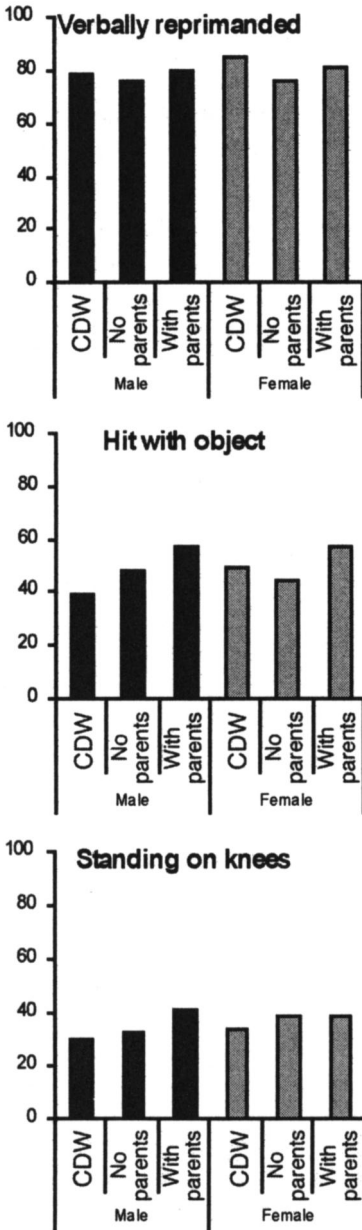


Figure 6: Percent of the children usually punished by gender, age, and status (CDW=Child domestic worker; Not parents=children not working as CDWs and not living with biological parents; With parents=living in same household as at least one of the biological parents)

they are classified as child domestic workers, other children living away from biological parents, or children living in the same household as at least one parent. The results show differences that are too small to be significant (Figure 7). The most frequent form of punishment was verbal reprimand, followed by hitting with objects and forcing the children to stand on their knees. Less than ten percent of the children were punished by restriction on activities, spanking, or other forms of punishment. Looking only at physical punishment, and checking it for age and gender, we find that there are no differences between the CDW girls and girls living with parents. However, other girls not living in the same household as their parents tend to be punished less. The young girls are more frequently punished than the older ones. Boys living away from their parents, whether they are CDWs or not, are physically punished less than the boys living with their parents (Figure 6).

Discussion

Defining child domestic workers as children who have a heavy workload, have not reached their educational level for their age, and do not live with parents, fits well into the definition of the underprivileged children in a society (UNICEF 1999). Our data show, however, that even though these children are unfortunate in certain aspects—namely that they have a heavy workload and insufficient education—it is not the case that they are worse off in all other aspects of life. Our results show that the CDWs are not punished more than other children, their health status is equal to others, they do not have poorer sleeping arrangements, they get as much sleep as others, and they get an equal number of meals as the rest of the family.



One of the main objections that can be raised to our approach is the definition of child domestic workers. Everyone agrees that child domestic workers do not live together with their biological parents, but the definition of heavy workload is not as clear. We tested the results by putting up a stricter limit for heavy work (two upper quartiles of work-hours adjusted for age instead of the upper three quartiles), but that did not influence the results at all, except that the total number of CDWs was reduced. We did the same exercise for education, redefining CDWs as those who have never attended school or are not currently enrolled, compared to our original definition which also included children with a lower education than expected for their age. Again, there were no differences in the results, except that the total number of CDWs decreased from ten percent to three percent of the child population. Because it is commonly understood that CDWs may go to school, but their progress in the system is delayed, we maintained our original definition of CDW.

Worldwide, figures indicate that 90% of the child domestic workers are girls (UNICEF 1997). In Haiti, however, former studies have shown that a significant number of boys are employed as domestics (Antislavery 2002b). This is also shown in our

Figure 7: Prevalence of the most usual forms of punishment by gender and status (CDW=Child domestic worker; No parents=children not working as CDWs and not living with biological parents; With parents=living in same household as at least one of the biological parents)

survey, where 38% of the CDWs were boys. In general, the majority of children in domestic labour are between 12 and 17 years of age. The legal minimum age for Restavèk, or child domestic work, in Haiti is twelve (ICFTU 2002); however, our results showed that 46% of the male domestic workers and 41% of the female domestic workers were less than twelve years of age.

It is often held that domestic child workers are particularly vulnerable to physical punishment (UNICEF 1997). Our data show that 57% of child domestic workers are usually physically punished. These numbers are high, but one must take into account the context—specifically, that as many as 68% of the other children are also physically punished.¹

The Labour Law of 1984 establishes that children are entitled to ten hours of uninterrupted rest daily. Our results show that the mean hours of sleep were between 9.4 and 10.4 hours for all age- and sex-groups, both for domestic child workers and other children. However, 37% of the children slept fewer than ten hours each night. It is important to note that the number of hours of sleep is not the same as uninterrupted rest; it is conceivable that the children have already had some rest before they go to bed. This means that the intention in the Labour Law is fulfilled for most of the children, both domestic child workers and others.

It is also stated in the Labour Law that domestic child workers are entitled to sufficient and healthy nutrition. According to our results, most of the children, both child domestic workers and other children living away from parents, get as many prepared meals per day as the rest of the family. It is, however, important to note that very few get more than two meals a day. This might be too little to cover their needs for energy and nutrients. A minimum of three meals per day is recommended to cover the nutritional needs of children; poor nutritional conditions will lead to increased health problems. As we have shown, the domestic child workers are not more frequently ill, either with prolonged illness or acute illnesses, than other children. This indicates that they are not suffering under much worse nutritional and health conditions than the rest of the household members. That said, a significant limitation with our data is that information was given by the head of household. To get more accurate data on the health and nutritional situation for child domestic workers, we would recommend using an approach that uses information from sources other than members of the households.¹

According to Cadet (2001), restavèks, or child domestic workers, are denied medical care when struck by illness. Our results do not confirm this statement. There appear to be no differences between CDWs and others

in terms of receiving medical consultancy when they are ill. However, the percentage of those ill was so low that our sample did not allow us to go into further analyses of health expenditures and the use of different health services. However, it does not seem likely that child domestic workers are denied medical care.

Conclusion

Child domestic workers in Haiti have long been described as a vulnerable group. Our study concludes that the physical living conditions for this group are not worse than for the other children in Haiti. Actions to prevent the physical punishment of children should therefore be directed not only towards domestic child workers, but towards all children in Haiti. Likewise, children in Haiti seem to eat too few meals, which could be a health risk, but this is not a problem limited to CDWs. However, our study did not take into consideration the psychological effects on children living apart from their biological parents. Child domestic work is a much more complex phenomena than is often implied in categorising it as the exploitation of children for work. Actions should be taken towards CDWs to improve their education and reduce their workload.

Editor's Note

¹ The data used in this article are from reliable sources (see bibliography) and the author indicates that the findings show significantly difficult circumstances not only for restavèks, but for the greater percentage of all Haitian children. However, the findings do not include data collected from the children themselves. For this aspect, the editor suggests the following sources which take the position that conditions are much worse for restavèks than other Haitian children in the areas of general health status, corporal punishment, hours of sleep, number of meals, sleeping arrangements, and schooling: Marlène Racine-Toussaint (*Ces femmes sont aussi nos soeurs! Temoignages sur la domesticité féminine en Haiti et en diaspora*, Multicultural Women's Press, 1999), who conducted extensive interviews with female domestic workers, revealing the harsh treatment that women and children endure as domestic workers and restavèks—including sexual violence, corporal attacks, poor sanitary and sleeping conditions, limited daily food ratio, limited (if any) schooling; and Lucía Suárez (*The Tears of Hispaniola: Haitian and Dominican Diaspora Memory*, University Press of Florida, forthcoming 2006), who, through a variety of literary texts, including Jean-Robert Cadet's autobiography, documents the poor living conditions faced by children who are restavèks. She has done research in Haiti documenting human rights violations against children working as restavèks or domestics in general and looked at the long-term psychological impacts of these devastating experiences, what she calls traumatic memories. Social workers, such as Danielle Romer in Miami,

have also alerted the international community to the terrible human rights abuses against children kept in domesticity and mistreated both in Haiti and in the US. These sets of data all shed light on serious human rights violations against children in Haiti that need to be addressed both nationally and internationally.

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