

The Brutal Life of Haiti's Child Slaves

By [Mike Thomson](#)

Global Research, February 01, 2010

[BBC](#) 3 December 2009

Theme: [Crimes against Humanity](#)

In-depth Report: [HAITI](#)

As soon as dawn breaks in Port-au-Prince the first children appear, staggering under the weight of five-gallon buckets of water. The water carriers, many as young as 6-years-old, are some of the thousands of children living as virtual child slaves in the country.

Given away to other families by parents too poor to feed and clothe them, they cook, clean and fetch water without any payment. Under what is known as the restavek system, the children are supposed to get food, shelter and a place at school in return. But for many, the reality is very different.

"Sometimes they beat me with lengths of electrical cable and sometimes they punch me," says 14-year-old restavek Jenette. "I was grinding a coconut and I wasn't doing it very well so they took a knife and cut me with it," she says.

"My mother is dead and my father doesn't care for me. I would like to run away but I have nowhere to go."

'No clue'

Unicef estimates that there could be as many as 300,000 restavek children in Haiti, thousands living with the constant threat of violence. "There is physical abuse, psychological abuse and there are cases of rape, and there are children who actually die from the abuses," says Julie Bergeron, Unicef head of child protection in Haiti.

She says that parents are often unaware of how their children are being treated. "Someone approaching the family will often say to parents that their child will have a better life," she says. "And often the parents do not have any feedback, they don't know what is happening.

"If they do have, it is through the intermediate, and they will say 'your child is doing fine'. So the parents have no clue."

Jean Robert Cadet, founder of the Restavek Foundation, knows the life of what he describes as "child slavery" only too well.

At the age of four he was given to another family soon after his mother died. For the next 16 years he slept under a kitchen table, was forbidden to smile, laugh or speak unless spoken to, and endured sexual abuse and savage beatings.

Thirty years later, he says, the abuse of restavek children in Haiti continues.

“They use a cow hide whip. One hit will split your skin open,” he says.

“Some families who own these children, they still use cheese graters – you will find they have two of them.

“One for the normal cooking in the kitchen, and if they have an old rusty one, they use it to punish the child. The child has to kneel on a cheese grater after the beating.”

Rejection

Deep in the Haitian countryside, two hours by car from the capital, a ten-year-old boy sits stiffly on a small wooden chair.

Clad in a freshly washed white shirt and dark trousers, the boy has just been returned to his parents, eight days after running away from the family he was given to. His mother smiles, constantly looking from me to him as I ask how she came to part with her son.

Suddenly, my translator Mario halts the interview. “She’s completely confused,” he says. “She thinks that we are the ones who are interested in the child.”

So that is why young Jean is dressed so smartly. But after explaining that I am not there to take him away, Jean’s mother, who has six other children, looks almost disappointed. “It is very difficult, very difficult indeed for me to feed the children. My husband is in prison and I have to rely on help from friends and neighbours,” she says. “If someone wants to come and take the child, they can come and take him.

“I am concerned about the state of my children. They don’t even have proper clothes to wear. None of them are in school, I simply don’t have the money to send them there.”

The government social worker who helped return Jean to his family later warned his mother and her neighbours that the restavek system is now illegal in Haiti. The Haiti’s parliament ratified two UN conventions banning child labour in 2007.

But with little enforcement of the law, the system continues unabated.

A prayer

There are projects in Haiti to alleviate the suffering of the restavek children.

At the Foyer Maurice Sixto School, 200 restavek children are given an education inbetween their daily chores. As soon as lessons are over they return to their life of bondage. The School’s Director, Granpierre Jeremie, says that abuse is common among the children who come to the school. “We have a lot of children that come here covered in bandages. They have wounds all over their bodies,” she says.

“We pray that this system will come to an end. It is bad for the children and bad for the future of our country.”

But with deep poverty still gripping Haiti and so many parents unable to cope, prayers alone are not enough. "Sometimes I look at other children around me and I wish I was like them," says 14-year-old restavek Jenette. "I dream about that."

Some of the names in this report have been changed to protect participants' anonymity.

The original source of this article is [BBC](#)
Copyright © [Mike Thomson](#), [BBC](#), 2010

[Comment on Global Research Articles on our Facebook page](#)

[Become a Member of Global Research](#)

Articles by: [Mike Thomson](#)

Disclaimer: The contents of this article are of sole responsibility of the author(s). The Centre for Research on Globalization will not be responsible for any inaccurate or incorrect statement in this article. The Centre of Research on Globalization grants permission to cross-post Global Research articles on community internet sites as long the source and copyright are acknowledged together with a hyperlink to the original Global Research article. For publication of Global Research articles in print or other forms including commercial internet sites, contact: publications@globalresearch.ca

www.globalresearch.ca contains copyrighted material the use of which has not always been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. We are making such material available to our readers under the provisions of "fair use" in an effort to advance a better understanding of political, economic and social issues. The material on this site is distributed without profit to those who have expressed a prior interest in receiving it for research and educational purposes. If you wish to use copyrighted material for purposes other than "fair use" you must request permission from the copyright owner.

For media inquiries: publications@globalresearch.ca