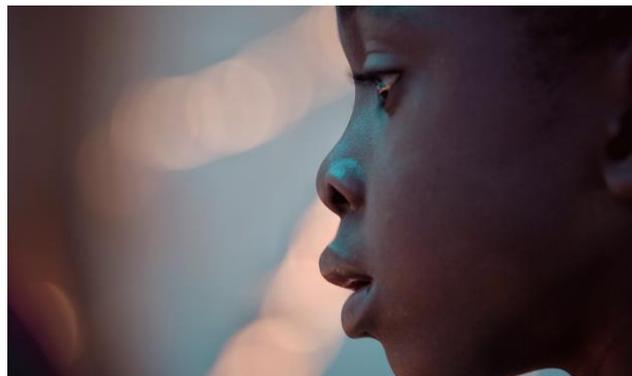


# Indentured Child Labour: The Restavek System of Haiti's Child Slaves

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This piece will focus on how the Restavek child slavery system in Haiti is underpinned by migration, gender and commodification. Haiti is the poorest country within the Western hemisphere (Wagner, 2008). Its Restavek system of child domestic slavery is ingrained within society due to tradition and culture, affecting approximately 300,000 children (Muraszkiewicz et al., 2015). The term Restavek originates from the Creole meaning "to stay with" (Restavek Freedom, 2011). Restavek's are poor, usually rural children (most often girls) living with and employed by an urban, more economically stable family in return for unpaid domestic labour (Duvivier, 2008). This system was intended to supply education, providing a better life for children who live in poverty: however, it created a system of slavery and trafficking (Restavek Freedom, 2001).

Children as young as four years old internally migrate from rural to urban settings throughout Haiti due to poverty. The southern peninsula communities of rural Haiti are the biggest purveyor of Restavek children to Port-au-Prince (Pierre et al., 2009). This barren countryside is home to peasant subsistence farmers who cannot provide for their children, due to harsh rural conditions (Wagner, 2008). They live in distressed conditions with few job prospects and no social mobility (Nicholls, 1974), this economic restraint pushes parents into giving their children away as a coping mechanism. They believe the Restavek system of sending their child to work as an unpaid servant, will increase their chances of

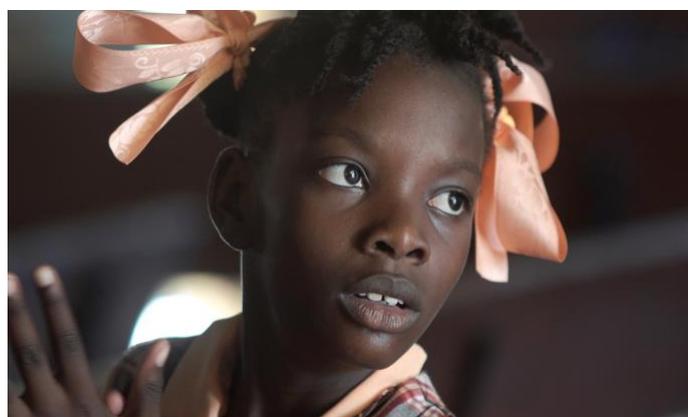


gaining an education and opportunity for employment (Restavek Freedom, 2011). This form of internal migration from the rural areas such as Les Cayes and Leogane to the city slums of Port-au-Prince has clear 'push' and 'pull' factors involved. Social and economic disparities, social exclusion, debt and extreme poverty, push the family into accepting the Restavek system. The city's pull factors are education, social mobility and the perception of being employed within a safe household (Muraszkiewicz et al., 2015). However, these children can be led to a life of violence, beatings and sexual assaults by the head of the host household, for whom they are slaves to (Bales, 2012; Muraskiewicz et al., 2015; Pierre et al., 2009). Restavek's can be found within lower and middle-class slums of Port-au-Prince, "the densest concentration of Restavek children in the country" (Pierre et al., 2009, pp.19). The slums lack running water and electricity, creating a high demand for household workers, but the lack of employment means families are unable to pay for domestic help so rely on free child labour provided by the Restavek system (Restavek Freedom, 2011). Surprisingly, data by Restavek Freedom revealed that "11% of the host families themselves send their children into Restavek placement" (2011, pp.5), reproducing power differential roles of the oppressor and the oppressed within poor communities (Wagner, 2008).

Human trafficking is the fastest-growing global industry today, unlike drugs a human can be abused and sold multiple times (Blasey, 2020). This

example of external migration happens among the Haiti and Dominican Republic border, its lack of regulations and weak law enforcement enables traffickers to move Restavek's effortlessly (Restavek Freedom, 2011). An estimated 3,000 Restavek children and Haiti orphans are in the Dominican Republic, traffickers profit on their desperation and vulnerability. There is a demand for Restavek's in the Dominican Republic for reasons such as gang begging, street work and young women/girls are recruited for sex trade (Pierre et al., 2005).

The term 'Restavek' is a euphemism for "living with others" (Restavek Freedom, 2011, pp.4). They are the observers of society, invisible due to being restricted by housework and being perceived as abnormal for their lack of education. Host families do not see Restavek's as children, believing that without their 'kindness' the child would be without food and shelter, rationalising their punishing treatment (Restavek Freedom, 2011).



As the Restavek girls grow older their lack of surveillance grows greater, now being constructed as an "invisible and disempowered class of workers" due to being a woman (Sassen, 2005, pp.7).

Essential to the Restavek system is the feminisation of poverty. This signifies the rise in women's poverty, in relation to men's (Collins et al., 2014). Sassen (2005, pp.14), states that women are "considered as poor, low earning...low value-added individuals, often represented as a burden rather than a resource". For example, unpaid housework holds no economic value, as it "naturalised" and expected to be a women's chore traditionally (Budlender, 2004; Molyneux, 2007). This is especially true in urban slums where women are expected to carry out gender norm chores such as childcare, as the men exercise "domestic detachment" (Collins et al., 2014). Due to this, there is a 'feminisation of survival', where kinds of labour are dependent upon women (Sassen, 2005, pp.14). Nonetheless, women and children are still seen to "embody a special kind of powerlessness"

(Malkki, 2012, pp.11), due to this patriarchal construction of women.

The Restavek system is an example of both the feminisation of poverty and survival, as "nearly two-thirds of Restavek children are girls" (Pierre et al., 2009, pp.26). The feminisation of poverty means women increasingly need to work, facing a dual burden of productive and reproductive labour, especially in slums where it is a considerable challenge as housing is often poor quality and lack necessities such as running water (Collins et al., 2014). Dupuy (2010, pp.18), states that "76% of the population live off less than \$2 a day". Absolute poverty in rural areas increases

social polarisation within Haiti, creating the demand for unpaid labourers to complete housework in urban slums (Sassen, 2005). Resulting is Restavek's undertaking unpaid domestic labour

tasks, associated with the domain of the housewife. However, due to poverty being so high a women's status weakens, leading to the exploitation of Restavek children (mainly girls), in the form of 'physical, verbal, emotional and sexual abuse' (Muraszkiewicz et al., 2015, pp.48). Kolbe and Hutson, estimate that "one in 19 female Restavek's is sexually assaulted by males within the host family per year" (2006, pp.872). These power relations emerge, due to Restavek children's desperation to gain an education and have no viable options.

The Restavek systems economically advantaged labour, arguably giving rise to a consumer society in Haitian culture (Grint and Nixon, 2015). For instance, "women represent a type of resource" (Sassen, 2005, pp.6) within extreme poverty, as Haitian women perceive that a body can be seen a "marketable entity" (Duvivier, 2008, pp.6), meaning the Restavek system is a marketplace for free child slaves, "bought like goods and services" (Sassen, 2005, pp.5). The payment for a child is "nothing more than a floor to sleep on a small

amount of food” (Wagner, 2008, pp.35). These child commodities are seen as property, a violation against them represents an attack on the household (Kolbe and Hutson, 2006). Traffickers can also commodify Restavek’s to be used for prostitution or marriage for labour, representing “Haiti’s sexual currency” (Duvivier, 2008, pp.105). This can be seen in the aftermath of Haiti’s 2010 earthquake.

“On the 12th January 2010, a 7.0 magnitude earthquake struck Haiti, less than 20 miles away from Port-au-Prince” (Kolbe et al., 2010, pp.282). An estimated 1,269,110 people were displaced (Kolbe et al., 2010), due to desperation in finding shelter and medical care. Many children were orphaned and lost with no system in place to help individuals find their lost families (Restavek Freedom, 2011). This attracted traffickers for commodification and exploitation like “fish in pools of vulnerability” (Restavek Freedom, 2011, pp.5). This is an example of crisis as a market for opportunity. According to a children’s charity, since the earthquake, nearly 8,000 children have been trafficked over the border to the Dominican Republic (Pierre et al., 2005).

Subsequently, Haiti’s capital was ruined. The government and the US state decided upon prioritising the interests of foreign capital before the penurious citizens (Dupuy, 2020, pp.150), using a Neoliberal political strategy, called “economic shock therapy” (Klein and Smith, 2008, pp.584). Both governments did this by



“promoting urban sweatshop production” (Dupuy, 2010, pp.15), where women were the key labour force in urban manufacturing (Sassen, 2005, pp.8). The supply of low skilled, low wage workers attracted foreign investors (Dupuy, 2010), “turning Haiti into a supplier of the cheapest labour in the Western Hemisphere” (Dupuy, 2010, pp.15), by using forceful repression to keep them in line.

The Restavek system creates a cultural relativism vs universalism debate. For activists and charities, it is an example of child slavery and human rights abuse, however for Haiti it is a social good, providing for a child who lives in absolute poverty (Montgomery, 2001; Farmer, 2006). Both views are extreme, however, for Cowan (2006) cultural relativism is motivated by political opportunism with no concern for culture, which has “deep historical roots and complex meanings” (Wagner, 2008, pp.19). Restavek practise was made illegal in 2003 (Wagner, 2008), however, it is so ingrained in Haitian culture making the law ineffective (Restavek Freedom, 2001, pp.3). Conversely, this does not prevent social inequalities Restavek children face, for instance, Restavek children on average are 4cm smaller due to malnourishment (Restavek Freedom, 2011) and are at risk of mental health problems from lack of surveillance and marginalisation (Muraskiewicz et al., 2015). To protect children, their fundamental rights should be ensured and law enforcement should be strengthened along the Dominican Republic border (Restavek Freedom, 2011). By educating the population to view the system as slavery, and increasing the standard of living through the use of running water and electricity (Restavek Freedom, 2011), it will reduce the dual burden faced by women and increase the treatment of children. Creating a free school system in rural and urban areas will reduce the polarisation of wealth, by creating equal opportunities for both areas. However, NGOs and human rights agencies can only create “pockets of change” due to lack of resources (Restavek Freedom, 2011; Pierre et al., 2009, pp.56), and denials of help from western corporations, due to poverty creating cheap wages for labour.

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