

Labor Shortage

In Haiti, children are regularly loaned to other households, and the unluckiest are treated like slaves. The quake won't change that.

by Katie Paul February 01, 2010

The days after the earthquake brought joyous reunions for some families. Others faced the grim realization that they'd been suddenly robbed of parents, children, or siblings. For 9-year-old Manuchka, there was neither. Manuchka is a *restavek*, a child servant who has done domestic chores for two sisters and their families since she was 6. Since she was 4, her life has consisted of fetching water, going to market, and scrubbing laundry. Sometimes, she was beaten by her caretakers. After the earthquake, she was denied food. So when she and her host families arrived at a campground for Haitians displaced by the disaster, she asked an aid worker to let her stay with him. With plans to leave Port-au-Prince and little use for a *restavek* anymore, the sisters said he could have her.

Slavery—which ended with independence in 1804 is illegal in Haiti. And technically *restavek* children are not slaves. But the irony seems lost on *restavek*'s perpetrators; some 225,000 children are living as indentured servants in the first black republic born out of slavery's broken shackles. And, even after the earthquake, *restavek* is likely to live on.

Restavek's roots aren't all bad. Caribbean culture has always accommodated some form of child lending between families (usually relatives), to pitch in with extra work or care for the elderly or sick. This practice has evolved, and now many impoverished parents living in the countryside send their children to live with wealthier families in the city. In exchange for domestic help, those children are supposed to receive lodging, food, clothing, medicine, and—most importantly—education. In as many as half of the cases, they do (though classifying treatment in private homes is notoriously difficult). The unlucky ones, called *restaveks*—from the French *rester avec*, or “to stay with”—are essentially children loaned through normal channels but are denied schooling and subject to horrific abuse and social degradation. Before the earthquake, they resided in up to 22 percent of Haitian homes, according to a study funded by USAID and published by the Pan American Development Foundation in December. Keeping *restaveks* is technically illegal but child loans are fine, and given the extent of Haiti's governmental dysfunction, it has become harder and harder to tell where one bleeds into the other. Conditions for children in the worst households have worsened over time, as poor urban families are decreasingly likely to provide educational opportunities. In the slum of Cité Soleil, *restavek* children can now be found in 44 percent of homes.

Now that the earthquake has thrown family networks into disarray, the already sparse social ties supporting *restaveks* are likely to break down, too. “For families struggling in the wake of a catastrophe, *restavek* kids are the first to go,” said Glenn Smucker, an anthropologist

who specializes in development work in Haiti. Thousands of Haitians were killed in hurricanes and floods in 2004 and 2008, and each time, he said, the *restaveks* were most at risk to be turned out on the streets or trafficked—a modern-day echo of slavery. “Whenever these things happen, *restavek* children always fare worse.

Their parents are not there to watch out for them, so they're far more vulnerable than the rest of the population." The same stood for orphans, who often wind up in restavek situations. Girls, seen as more submissive than boys, were most at risk, making up more than two thirds of the restavek population.

But while the supply of children at risk has risen with each catastrophe, the demand for restavek children may abate after the quake. An exodus of thousands of urban residents from Port-au-Prince is reversing decades of migratory trends. If the shift sticks, it means there will be less need for restavek services in the city. "Since many children have returned to the countryside, there's the possibility that parents will keep their children rather than giving them away. That's what I am hoping will happen," said Jean Cadet, the founder of the Restavek Foundation (in whose care Manuchka was left).

At the same time, things could worsen just as easily as they could improve. For one thing, some host families are simply leaving their restavek children behind when they flee the city—and not always with an aid group. And it's still possible that families suffering from the earthquake's economic aftershocks will feel extra pressure to lend out their children, even as it becomes more likely they'll become restaveks. That pressure, combined with the spike in new orphans, means Haiti will probably see a rise in street children.

Ultimately, though, the system itself will stay much as it has been. Like much of the tragedy broadcast out of Haiti, it is a reflection of decades of shoddy governance that has led poor families to believe—perhaps rightly—that this is their children's best chance for upward social mobility. Where there is no state-run social safety net, informal agreements fill the vacuum. That absence will only be exacerbated as Haiti's government struggles to pick up its pieces, and the underlying dynamics that led families to come to those agreements—poverty, dysfunctional politics, and scarce opportunities—remain essentially unchanged. The only alternative to a system of child relocation is through a revision of the basic school contract. Even though this quake will change Haiti radically, nobody thinks it will remake the country's social structure.

The silver lining is that the same culture of child lending that gave rise to restavek abuses may smooth the way for the incorporation of Haiti's orphaned and unaccompanied children into new households. Haitians insist that relocation is beneficial much more often than it's abusive, says anthropologist Gerald Murray. That claim is impossible to verify, and there is evidence that up to half of the children considered legitimate boards are subjected to restavek-style indignities (like being barred from the family dinner table). Still, with a government unable to respond to the scale of the crisis, people's readiness to take someone else's child into their home can only help. "Just as Haitians themselves had to dig out those buried under the rubble, so it will be ordinary Haitians, not their government, that care for children orphaned by the earthquake," said Murray. Now, as before, and for better or worse, that will happen on their own terms.