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The experience of violence against children in domestic servitude in Haiti: Results from the Violence Against Children Survey, Haiti 2012



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ABSTRACT

Background: There have been estimates that over 150,000 Haitian children are living in servitude. Child domestic servants who perform unpaid labor are referred to as “restavèks.” Restavèks are often stigmatized, prohibited from attending school, and isolated from family placing them at higher risk for experiencing violence. In the absence of national data on the experiences of restavèks in Haiti, the study objective was to describe the sociodemographic characteristics of restavèks in Haiti and to assess their experiences of violence in childhood.

Methods: The Violence Against Children Survey was a nationally representative, cross-sectional household survey of 13–24 year olds (n = 2916) conducted May–June 2012 in Haiti. A stratified three-stage cluster design was used to sample households and camps containing persons displaced by the 2010 earthquake. Respondents were interviewed to assess lifetime prevalence of physical, emotional, and sexual violence occurring before age 18. Chi-squared tests were used to assess the association between having been a restavèk and experiencing violence in childhood.

Findings: In this study 17.4% of females and 12.2% of males reported having been restavèks before age 18. Restavèks were more likely to have worked in childhood, have never attended school, and to have come from a household that did not have enough money for food in childhood. Females who had been restavèks in childhood had higher odds of reporting childhood physical (OR 2.04 [1.40–2.97]); emotional (OR 2.41 [1.80–3.23]); and sexual violence (OR 1.86 [95% CI 1.34–2.58]) compared to females who had never been restavèks. Similarly, males who had ever been restavèks in childhood had significantly increased odds of emotional violence (OR

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3.06 [1.99–4.70]) and sexual violence (OR 1.85 [1.12–3.07]) compared to males who had never been *restavèks*, but there was no difference in childhood physical violence.

Interpretation: This study demonstrates that child domestic servants in Haiti experience higher rates of childhood violence and have less access to education and financial resources than other Haitian children. These findings highlight the importance of addressing both the lack of human rights law enforcement and the poor economic circumstances that allow the practice of *restavèk* to continue in Haiti.

1. Introduction

Estimates suggest that between 150,000 and 500,000 Haitian children are living in domestic servitude. Child domestic servants in Haiti are known as “*restavèks*,” derived from French “*rester avec*” (to stay with), and the term carries demeaning connotations (Balsari, Lemery, Williams, & Nelson, 2010; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Interuniversity Institute for Research and Development, 2011; Hoffman, 2012; McCalla, 2002; Kennedy, 2012; Pierre, Smucker, & Tardieu, 2009; Sommerfelt, 2002). *Restavèk* children typically come from impoverished, often rural, families who wish to offer their child more opportunity and upward mobility. As such the child is placed into a higher-income, generally urban, home of either strangers or kin with the expectation that the host family will provide for the child’s basic needs and pay for the child’s education in exchange for unpaid labor (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Interuniversity Institute for Research and Development, 2011; McCalla, 2002; Minnesota Lawyers International Human Rights Committee, 1990; Pierre et al., 2009; *Restavèk Freedom*, 2011; Sommerfelt, 2002). Despite the good intent of families to provide more life opportunities for their children, the experience of child domestic servants exists on a continuum. In the best-case scenario, children live with extended family, experience no maltreatment, perform light household chores and are able to attend school, but in the worst-case scenario, conditions may be more consistent with child slavery (Sommerfelt, 2015).

For example, some studies have found that *restavèks* are often unable to attend school (Haydocy, Yotebieng, & Norris, 2015) and may work up to 12 h a day performing all the household cooking, cleaning, washing, errands, and other physically demanding tasks, like collecting water (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Interuniversity Institute for Research and Development, 2011; Hoffman, 2012; Kennedy, 2012; Sommerfelt, 2002; McCalla, 2002; Minnesota Lawyers International Human Rights Committee, 1990; Pierre et al., 2009; *Restavèk Freedom*, 2011). Compared to children of the host household, most *restavèks* receive inadequate food and clothing, sleep on the floor, and dine separate from the host family. They are expected to address all other household members, including younger children, in formal terms (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Interuniversity Institute for Research and Development, 2011; Minnesota Lawyers International Human Rights Committee, 1990; Pierre et al., 2009; Hoffman, 2012; *Restavèk Freedom*, 2011; Sommerfelt, 2002). Even if permitted some of the aforementioned privileges, *restavèk* children still face significant stigma and maintain a social status lower than other children, often being viewed as “property,” and live in fear of abandonment (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Interuniversity Institute for Research and Development, 2011; Hoffman, 2012; Kolbe & Hutson, 2006; Minnesota Lawyers International Human Rights Committee, 1990; Pierre et al., 2009; Sommerfelt, 2002).

Restavèks additionally face many documented risk factors for child maltreatment including lower socioeconomic status, lack of education, living outside of the biological home, and being separated from and not having a relationship with their biological parents (Brown, Cohen, Johnson, & Salzinger, 1998; Breiding et al., 2011; Euser, Alink, Tharner, van Ijzendoorn, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2013). As a marginalized sub-population of children, *restavèks* also face unique circumstances which may further increase their risk for experiencing violence such as social isolation; inferior social status; and potentially even a position of servile dependence. There are multiple reports and testimonies from former *restavèk* children that they faced neglect, physical, sexual, and emotional abuse as a consequence of simply being a *restavèk*, and one study on human rights violations in Port Au Prince found that female *restavèks* faced more sexual violence than other girls (Kolbe & Hutson, 2006). However, there has been little quantitative research on violence against *restavèk* children as compared to other children in Haiti (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Interuniversity Institute for Research and Development, 2011; McCalla, 2002; *Restavèk Freedom*, 2011). A recent national study (Haydocy et al., 2015) used the 2012 Haitian DHS to estimate the prevalence of *restavèk* children and compare their living situation to other Haitian children. The study found *restavèks* had less access to education and more labor responsibilities than other children, but did not experience more physical violence (Haydocy et al., 2015). However, only one adult from the household was interviewed and asked to self-report on perpetration of physical violence against *restavèks*, so estimates may not be accurate if physical violence was perpetrated by others in the home or the respondent was not comfortable disclosing perpetration. Furthermore, emotional and sexual violence were not examined in this study. Similarly, the national report on the Violence Against Children Survey in Haiti examined demographic variables associated with having experienced violence and found child domestic servitude to be one of them, but did not examine the magnitude of these associations across all age groups nor in the context of specific sub-types of violence, nor demographic variables associated with child domestic servitude (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Interuniversity Institute for Research and Development, 2011). To further expand our understanding of the experiences of *restavèks* in Haiti, the purpose of this paper is to describe the sociodemographic characteristics of *restavèks* in Haiti, assess their experiences of childhood violence, and compare these characteristics and experiences to those of youth who were not *restavèks*.

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