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What Perpetuates Child Servitude? Public Opinion on Children's Domestic Labor in Haiti

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Executive Summary. The widespread practice of sending poor children into involuntary servitude as household servants or *restaveks* in Haiti constitutes a clear violation of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UHDR) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), both of which Haiti is a party to. Despite these international agreements and domestic labor laws prohibiting child labor, in 2014 an estimated 500,000 children were living as *restaveks*, raising the question of who within Haitian society is working to end such practices? While most Haitians agree that the government should make efforts to eliminate child servitude, levels of support vary dramatically across the country, and are lower in sending and receiving regions. Moreover, light-skinned citizens (who are more likely to receive *restaveks*) and food insecure ones (who are more likely to send their children to work) are less likely to support such efforts. In addition, those who are more attached to the current political system and to their community are less likely to support eliminating the practice. Nonetheless, education and democratic socialization seem to be contributing to changing norms.

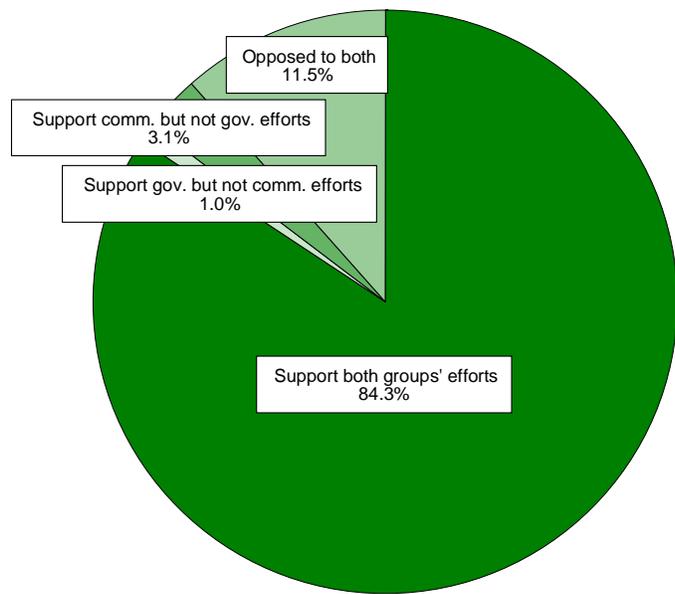
Though slavery has been illegal in Haiti for centuries, it is estimated that as many as 1 in 10 Haitian children live in modern day involuntary servitude as *restaveks*—a euphemism literally meaning "to live with" in Haitian creole (Shahinian 2009). A recent survey found that in Port-au-Prince and St. Marc, more than a third of households reported resident servant children (Pierre et al. 2009). High birth rates, very high child poverty and malnutrition, and high rates of parental mortality all contribute to the system of child slavery in Haiti (Balsari et al. 2010). In the wake of the January 2010 earthquake, Haitian children became yet more vulnerable (Balsari et al. 2010; Nicholas et al. 2012). *Restaveks*—almost all under the age of 15, and three-quarters of them female—provide domestic labor 10-18 hours a day. Some *restaveks* are orphans, and some are actually purchased on the black market (see, for instance, Skinner 2008). Typically, though, *restaveks* are sent by their parents to work for more affluent relatives or acquaintances in larger cities, often with the hope that the children will have improved access to resources, food, and education. To the contrary, *restaveks* typically face physical abuse, neglect, malnutrition, and forced labor, and seldom are allowed to attend school; many also are subject to chronic sexual abuse (for portraits of life as a *restavek*, and the health problems *restavek* children face, see Cadet 1998; Leeds et al. 2010; Padgett and Klarreich 2001).¹

International bodies, NGOs, and local foundations such as the Jean Cadet *Restavek* Foundation have recently increased efforts to prevent families from sending their children to work as *restaveks* (e.g., Abrams 2010; Aristide 2000; Shahinian 2009). In 2012, the LAPOP AmericasBarometer survey in Haiti included two questions to gauge public support for such efforts:²

¹ Prior issues in the *Insights* Series can be found at: <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/insights.php>. The data on which they are based can be found at <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/survey-data.php>

² Funding for the 2012 round mainly came from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

Figure 1. Support for Government and Community Group Efforts to Prevent Children's Servitude as *Restaveks*



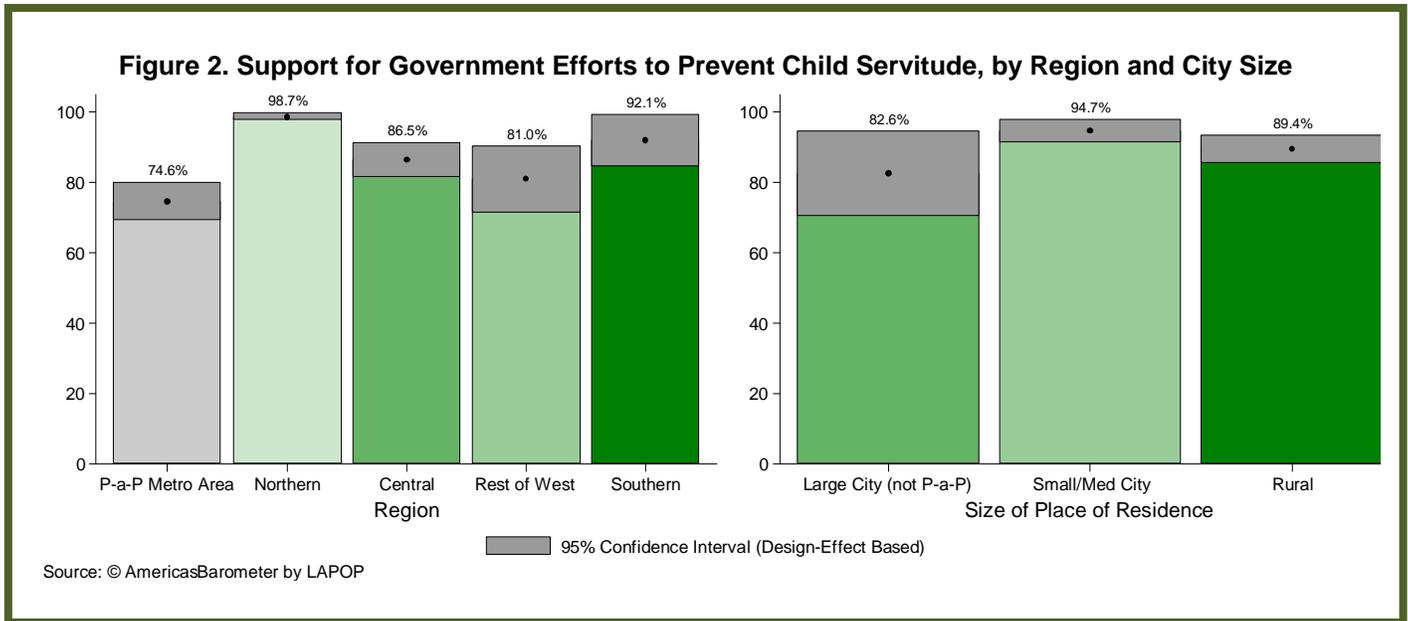
Support for efforts to end child servitude
Source: © AmericasBarometer by LAPOP

RESTAVEK1. Do you think the government should prevent families from sending their child to work as a *restavek*?

RESTAVEK3. Community Organizations. Do you think your local community organizations should prevent families from sending their child to work as a *restavek*?

In Figure 1, I examine responses to these two questions. It is perhaps not surprising, but encouraging nonetheless, to find that the great majority of Haitians support efforts to reduce child servitude, regardless of whether the efforts are by government or by community organizations. Support for community group efforts, at 87%, is slightly higher than support

Important sources of support were also the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB), the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), and Vanderbilt University. This *Insights* report is solely produced by LAPOP and the opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the point of view of the United States Agency for International Development, or any other supporting agency.



for governmental efforts, at 85% while a full 84% of respondents said they supported efforts by both community groups and the government to end this practice. From these data, then, we find widespread approval of both government and community-led actions to end the practice of restaveks. More troubling, though, are the 12% of Haitians that oppose efforts by either citizens or government to end this practice. Understanding who among Haitian society either tacitly or overtly supports continuation of this practice may help in understanding why, in 2014, the practice still exists in the country, seemingly unimpeded either by domestic or international law.³

Looking a bit more closely at the data, we find a great deal of regional variation in the degree to which citizens support efforts to end the practice of restaveks. In Figure 2, I examine responses in different areas of Haiti to the first question regarding efforts by government. While only three-quarters of respondents in the metropolitan area of the capital Port-au-Prince say they support such attempts to end child servitude, support is close to unanimous in the

northern and southern regions.⁴ In the central region and the West department outside the capital, support hovers at middle levels. Support also varies in all regions by the size of the place of residence. While almost no one in small and medium cities opposes government efforts, 10% of those in rural areas, and 17% of those in large cities other than Port-au-Prince do so.

This wide variation provides us the first clue of who among Haitian society supports continuation of this modern form of slavery. The regional patterns evident in Figure 2 likely reflect the extent to which different areas of the country are enmeshed in networks for sending and receiving restaveks. Demand for restaveks may be highest in Port-au-Prince and other cities in the West, Artibonite, and Centre departments, while rural areas typically supply restaveks. If this is in fact the case, that those most involved in the restavek problem are those most inclined to oppose efforts to end it, this represents a potentially important obstacle in the elimination of this practice. For, as is the case with many

³ The two variables are correlated at .83. Non-response to RESTAVEK1 is 2.0%, and non-response to RESTAVEK3 is 3.0%.

⁴ The northern region of the sample design comprises the North, Northwest, and Northeast departments; the central region includes Artibonite and Centre departments; and the southern region includes the Grand'Anse, Nippes, Southeast, and South departments.

issues, it is often the minority with high intensity preferences that wins the day over a majority who may not have such strong feelings on the topic (Dahl 1956).

Who Supports Efforts to End Child Servitude?

To further explore the idea that those individuals most involved in the restavek trade are those most strongly opposed to efforts to end it, I next examine the individual determinants of such beliefs, asking "Who are the biggest supporters and opponents of efforts to prevent child servitude?" Beyond the evident geographic variation, I consider hypotheses related to the possible characteristics of those most likely to be involved in the exploitation of children as restaveks. Several demographic factors may shape attitudes towards child servitude. Household wealth might matter, since the poorest households are likely to be on the sending end, and the wealthiest ones on the receiving end. Education and age may also be related

to attitudes towards government efforts. On the one hand, those with the most education may be most likely to receive restaveks; on the other, they may be most socialized to human rights norms opposed to involuntary servitude. By contrast, older citizens may be less socialized to such norms. Finally, I consider the extent to which gender may help us understand attitudes on this issue, though I have no *a priori* expectations with respect to gender.

Among the lightest-skinned Haitians, only 62% support government efforts to end child servitude, as opposed to 82% and 87% of those with medium and dark skin tones.

Respondents' skin tone also may matter. While the great majority of Haitians are at least partially of African descent, the very small light-skinned minority is socially privileged and has disproportionate access to restaveks (see, for instance, Cadet 1998). As a result, those with lighter skin tones may be less supportive of government efforts to end child servitude.

I examine the role of two final aspects of respondents' personal circumstances.⁵ As evident in the AmericasBarometer 2012 report on Haiti, food insecurity is a grave and persistent problem in this country (Smith and Gélinau 2012). Since food insecure families may be more likely to believe they might need to send their children to work, food insecurity may reduce support for efforts to end child servitude. Further, those with young children in their homes may have stronger and more personally engaged feelings, either positive or negative, about the practice of child bondage.

Besides demographics and personal background characteristics, what else could shape support or opposition to efforts to end child servitude? I consider the possible importance of several political attitudes and behaviors. First, those who support government efforts to reduce inequality in general may be ideologically inclined to support efforts to end child servitude in particular.⁶ In addition, given that democracy is often linked to human rights, those more supportive of democracy may be more likely to favor ending childhood involuntary servitude.

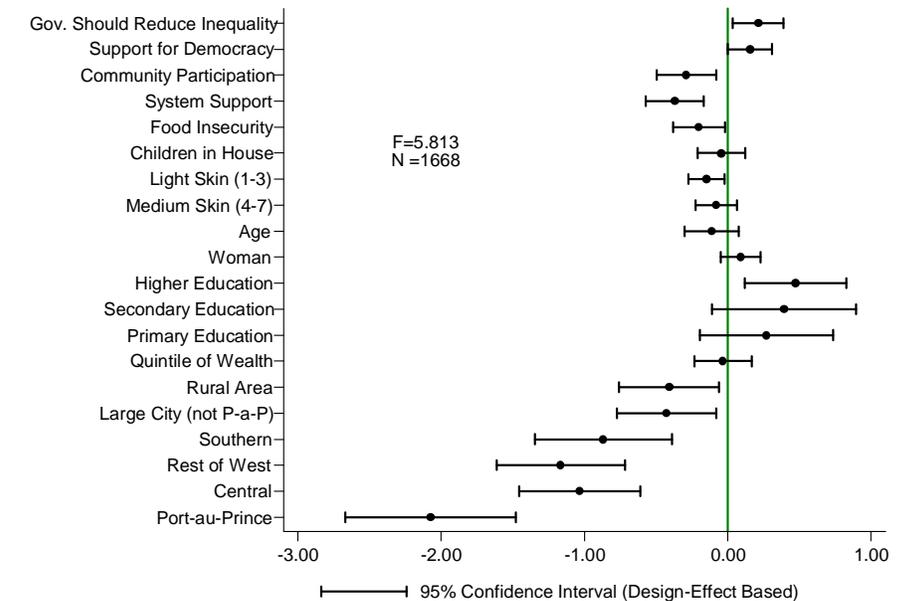
⁵ In an analysis not shown here, I also examined whether those with access to remittances are more supportive of ending servitude, since remittances may provide a buffer of income security. While access to remittances does indeed increase support, the effect is not statistically significant.

⁶ However, I considered the possibility that personal ideology on the left-right spectrum is related to the dependent variable, and found little of note.

I further examine the extent to which support for efforts to end child slavery is associated with the legitimacy of the current political system and with community participation. Both system support and community engagement are typically thought to increase adherence to democratic norms and practices. In addition, those who support the political system may be more likely to support all government initiatives, regardless of their content. Finally, community participation might generate interpersonal trust and the social capital associated with support of significant, socially necessary changes. All of these arguments suggest that Haitians who support their current political system and participate in their communities would be more likely to favor efforts to end the practice of sending children to work as *restaveks*. However, an alternative relationship is possible. The *restavek* system—including cultural practices, norms, and networks between sending and receiving families—is tightly woven into the Haitian social fabric. Those that are most attached to the current social and political system might be *more* likely to oppose getting rid of the tradition of child servitude.

In Figure 3, I assess these ideas and the determinants of support and opposition to efforts to end the practice of *restaveks*. The figure presents standardized logistic regression coefficients. Variables for which the corresponding dot is to the right of the green 0.0 axis are positively associated with support for government efforts to end servitude, while those for which the corresponding dot is to the left of the axis are negatively associated with such support. The bracket surrounding each dot represents the 95% confidence interval of the

**Figure 3. Determinants of Support for Government Efforts to Prevent Child Servitude:
Demographics, Personal Circumstances, and Political Behavior**



Source: © AmericasBarometer by LAPOP

regression coefficient. When the confidence interval does not overlap the green axis, we can be at least 95% confident that the association in question is statistically significant and not due to chance. Because coefficients are standardized, their relative sizes represent their relative importance as determinants of support for government efforts to prevent child servitude.

The figure reveals, first of all, that geography is very important; the coefficient for Port-au-Prince is the largest in the model, with residents of the capital city, along with the other regions included in the model significantly less likely than those in the north to support efforts to end child servitude.⁷ Similarly, residents of both rural areas and large cities other than Port-au-Prince are significantly less likely than those in medium and small cities to support such efforts. The fact that where one lives is the strongest

⁷ The omitted region is the northern region; the omitted category for size of place of residence is medium/small cities.

determinant of one's attitudes is consistent with the expectation that those in sending and receiving regions are much more likely to resist change. More generally, the results underscore the importance of networks and socialization in shaping norms. Entirely independent of their own self- or family interest, those living in areas where they may have friends or neighbors sending or receiving restaveks are much more likely to perceive this practice as acceptable and arguably even normal.

Turning to other demographics, wealth is unimportant, but those with higher education are significantly more likely to say that they support efforts to end child servitude than those without any education.⁸ Neither gender nor age is significantly related to this attitude.⁹ However, skin tone does matter.¹⁰ Looking at the bivariate relationship, I find that only 62% of the lightest-skinned Haitians support government efforts to end child slavery, as opposed to 82% and 87% of those with medium and dark skin tones. These differences persist once controlling for other factors, although the magnitude of the effect is somewhat muted.

Contrary to expectations, those who have young children at home are neither more nor less likely

⁸ In an analysis not shown here, I considered the possibility of a non-linear relationship between wealth and the dependent variable, but did not find a statistically significant relationship.

⁹ In analyses not shown here, I considered the possibility of a non-linear relationship between age and support for government efforts to end servitude. Though those aged 66 and up are substantially less likely to support such efforts, in no analysis was age statistically significant.

¹⁰ Skin tone is coded using variable COLORR, for which the interviewer rated the facial skin tone of each respondent on a scale from 1 to 11, where 1 is the lightest, and 11 is the darkest. See the Haiti 2012 questionnaire and Telles and Steele (2012) for further information.

to support efforts to end child servitude.¹¹ However, those in households suffering from food insecurity are significantly less likely to do so, though here again, the effects are relatively minor in size.

Turning to political attitudes and behavior, there are a few key results. First, both those who support democracy and those who believe government should reduce inequality are more likely to agree with government efforts to end childhood slavery in Haiti. Moving from the lowest to the highest levels of support for government efforts to reduce inequality leads the predicted probability to jump from 84% to 92%.¹² Similarly, moving from the lowest to highest levels of support for democracy leads to a jump in predicted probabilities from 85% to 92%.

However, beyond abstract ideals, Haitians who are more attached to the current political

system and engaged with their community are actually *less* likely to support ending child labor. These are substantively important associations. At the lowest level of system support, the predicted probability of agreeing with government efforts to end servitude is 95%; at the highest level of system support, the predicted probability is only 78%. Similarly, among those who are least involved in their communities, the probability of supporting government efforts is 94%, versus 80% for those who are most engaged. These findings are troubling in that they suggest that those most actively involved in politics within their communities, who also tend to be most effective in putting forth their views on political issues,

¹¹ In analyses not shown here, I considered the possibility that the impact of having young children at home varied by family socioeconomic status or food insecurity, but did not find statistically significant effects.

¹² Predicted probabilities are calculated holding all other variables at their mean values.

Haitians who are most strongly engaged with the current political system and community are 14-17% less likely to agree with government efforts to end child servitude.

appear to be more in favor of maintaining the status quo with respect to the restavek practice.

Conclusion

The exploitation of Haitian children's labor through the restavek system is one with tragic consequences for children, families, and society as a whole. Current efforts to discourage families from sending children to work as restaveks, and to find alternative sources of income and food security for families and children, are critical to human rights and human development in this country. But such efforts will only succeed if supported by changing cultural norms across society, especially in a state struggling to shore up its capacity to enforce laws. Thus, the question of who supports efforts to eliminate child servitude has profound implications.

The findings from this report indicate that cultural norms supporting the restavek system may be hard to change. The good news is that majorities of Haitians in every single segment of the population we considered support these efforts. Nonetheless, significant minorities oppose the efforts. Those areas most enmeshed in receiving networks are least supportive of eliminating the practice, while sending regions also have relatively low levels of support for efforts to end servitude. Likewise, support is lower among light skinned citizens, who probably are more likely to be on the receiving end of a restavek network, while among food insecure families, those most likely to be on the sending side of this network, we also find lower support for ending the practice. And most strikingly, those who are most attached to the current political system and most strongly engaged in their communities are also less likely to want to eliminate this system of child slavery.

Nonetheless, norms may change. Education increases support for eliminating the restavek system, as does support for democracy. Perhaps

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the best hope for eradicating childhood slavery permanently in Haiti relies on long-term human development, education, and inculcation of democracy and democratic norms.

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Appendix

Table 1. Determinants of Support for Government Efforts to Prevent Families from Sending Children to Work as Restaveks, Haiti 2012

	Coefficient	Standard Error
Community Participation	-0.01*	0.01
System Support	-0.02*	0.01
Support for Democracy	0.01	0.00
Support for Government Efforts to Address Inequality	0.01*	0.00
Quintiles of Wealth	-0.02	0.07
Primary Education	0.68	0.62
Secondary Education	0.86	0.58
Higher Education	1.90*	0.75
Female	0.20	0.14
Age	-0.01	0.01
Medium Skin (4-7)	-0.16	0.16
Light Skin (1-3)	-1.03*	0.45
Children in the Home	-0.09	0.17
Food Insecurity	-0.22*	0.10
Port-au-Prince	-4.36*	0.62
Central Region	-2.69*	0.55
Rest of West Department	-3.20*	0.61
Southern Region	-2.36*	0.66
Large City	-1.40*	0.56
Rural Area	-0.81*	0.35
Constant	5.54	1.09
<i>Number of Observations</i>	1668	

* $p < 0.05$

Note: Coefficients are statistically significant at * $p < 0.05$ two-tailed.

Country of Reference: Costa Rica