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Of Haitian Bondage

By Tim Padgett/Miami and Port-Au-prince;Kathie Klarreich/Port-au-Prince

Michele wishes now that she had grown up in her squalid Haitian birth city of Port-de-Paix. When she was a young girl, her impoverished parents sent her to live with her more affluent aunt and uncle in Haiti's capital, Port-au-Prince, with the promise of a better future. She got instead an old mattress in a closet, 18 hours a day of cooking, cleaning and waiting on her aunt's large family, and years of beatings and sexual abuse by her cousins. Her slavery continued when, a few years later, she was forced to emigrate with her Port-au-Prince family to Miami and then move with them to New York City. They kept her illiterate, denying her schooling even in the U.S. Only two years ago did she break free, running away to Miami. Now Michele (not her real name) is "finally starting life" at age 26. "But please don't use my name," she says in a hushed but heavy voice. "I don't want people here to know this about me. And I don't want my aunt to get mad."

Child slavery is an entrenched tradition in Michele's homeland: the Haitian government estimates that 300,000 youngsters in Haiti are restaveks, or child slaves. Like malaria and political violence, the scourge was thought to have been left behind in Haiti. But as more young people like Michele emerge from the refugee shadows, they have exposed the problem of slaves being kept in the U.S., undetected by local authorities amid the two-decade-old wave of Haitian migration. Says Danielle Romer, director of the private social services agency Haitian Support Inc. in Miami's Little Haiti: "It's much more widespread here than any of us wants to admit."

Restavek in Creole means "to stay with." It's a kind word for a cruel practice that has dogged Haiti since it won independence from France in 1804. Why does a black republic--whose colonial population was composed almost entirely of plantation slaves--still tolerate child bondage? "There was no value placed on children during the slavery era," says the Rev. Miguel Jean Baptiste, a Roman Catholic priest who runs the Maurice Sixto shelter in Port-au-Prince for restaveks who have run away or whose owners allow them a little schooling each day. "Unfortunately, we've carried that mentality with us today." Indeed, it is not uncommon to hear a Haitian say, "Timoun se ti bet": kids are animals.

By the late 1990s, Haitian-American community activists like Romer had begun to detect the presence of restaveks in Miami. When the activists began to broach the issue on Haitian radio shows and at church gatherings, they first faced denial and even veiled threats of ostracism from some of the community's old guard. But the phenomenon could no longer be covered up after Oct. 2, 1999, when Florida officials working on a tip from neighbors removed a 12-year-old Haitian girl--filthy, unkempt and in acute abdominal pain from repeated rape--from the affluent suburban home of middle-class Haitian-American merchants Willy and Marie Pompee in Pembroke Pines. The girl, a restavek, said she had been forced to have sex with the Pompees' 20-year-old son Willy Jr. since she was nine. The father and son, who police say are on the lam in Haiti, have been charged with slaveholding and sexual battery, respectively. Marie, who would not take repeated phone requests for comment, remains under investigation.

It is impossible to estimate how many others like the Pembroke Pines girl, nicknamed Little Hope in the Haitian community, are laboring in American households. But Romer and other Haitian-American social workers report that current and former restaveks are coming to them in greater numbers now for help, largely because the Pembroke Pines case galvanized support for such victims. Several organizations have set up hotlines for kids seeking help; they offer ex-restaveks assistance in finding homes, jobs and opportunities for schooling.

So far, the work of sniffing out restavek cases has fallen mainly to these private agencies, since local police say they rarely have the information necessary for that kind of sleuthing. And restaveks, who know most cops in Haiti to be brutal and corrupt, are generally loath to approach police in the U.S. Plus, they fear that turning in their captors to authorities may elicit reprisals.

Restaveks who do get away have grim stories to tell. A young man recently went to Romer with hideous burns from an iron, a punishment by his West Palm Beach, Fla., "host" family whenever he didn't press their clothes correctly. Aside from losing their childhood, restaveks suffer separation from their own families. At the Maurice Sixto shelter in Port-au-Prince, Ania Derice, 18, recalls how her parents in rural central Haiti, who couldn't afford to feed and clothe her, sent her to a house in Port-au-Prince to be a restavek. When Ania was 12--after six years of labor that included emptying bedpans and making six half-hour treks a day to gather water in a 5-gal. container--she was allowed to visit her parents for a week. She told them she wanted to return home for good. "But my mother told me that no matter how bad my life was in Port-au-Prince, it would be even worse there," says Ania. "She made me go back." Ania hasn't seen her family since.

It's that stark dilemma for most restaveks--slavery or privation--that allows their masters to rationalize the practice as more benevolent than benighted. "She's like a member of our family," insists Micheline Dornevil, 43, whom Ania serves as well as Dornevil's five children. "No, none of this restavek stuff. What we've done is help her." Romer often gets the same response from restavek "hosts" in Miami. "They actually think they're doing a positive thing for these children," she says. "And if they bring them to the U.S., ooh, then they really think they're doing a good deed."

As it turns out, however, being a restavek in the Haitian community in the U.S.--where immigrants acquire a higher self-image--is usually a source of more shame than it is in Haiti. Whereas restaveks in Haiti spoke freely with TIME, all the Miami restaveks interviewed pleaded that their real names not be used and their photos not be taken.

Still, that the community is acknowledging the practice at all is a start, and a sign that Haitian Americans, like Cuban Americans before them, are beginning the passage from huddled refugees to more confident immigrants and players in the U.S. "We are not going to let Haitian traditions like restavek flourish here because we know now that America is the great equalizer among us," says attorney Phillip Brutus, who in November was elected Florida's first Haitian-American state legislator. "We're making giant leaps from where we were 10 years ago in that sense."

Back in Haiti, President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, the former priest who took up his second term of office earlier this month, has promised to address the keeping of restaveks--which is technically illegal there. In an interview with TIME, Aristide called the practice "one of the cancers on our social body in Haiti that keep democracy from growing." He pledged to enforce the law but noted that "this first requires an intense education policy, because it is so ingrained in Haiti that too many people don't even know they are breaking the law." At least now, word is finally getting to Haitians like Michele's aunt that slavery has no place in America.

--With reporting by Kathie Klarreich/Port-au-Prince

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