

# Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

[Home](#)

> [Research Program](#)

> Responses to Information Requests

## Responses to Information Requests

Responses to Information Requests (RIR) respond to focused Requests for Information that are submitted to the Research Directorate in the course of the refugee protection determination process. The database contains a seven-year archive of English and French RIRs. Earlier RIRs may be found on the UNHCR's [Refworld](#) website. Please note that some RIRs have attachments which are not electronically accessible. To obtain a PDF copy of an RIR attachment please email [Basesdedonnees.DatabaseUnit@irb-cisr.gc.ca](mailto:Basesdedonnees.DatabaseUnit@irb-cisr.gc.ca).

10 January 2014

### HTI104720.FE

Haiti: The "restaveks"; state protection provided and support offered by NGOs; Voodoo rites to which parents may subject their children (2013)

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

#### 1. Overview

The term *restavek* [also *restavec*] is used to describe children who serve as domestic workers in Haiti (Freedom House 2013; Human Rights Watch Jan. 2013, 4). Sources note that the term means [ILO English version] "to stay with" in Creole (ILO 29 Aug. 2012; Freedom House 2012). According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), [ILO English version] "[t]he use of children as domestic workers is pervasive throughout Haiti" (ILO 29 Aug. 2012).

An article from the *New York Times* states that most "restaveks, typically serv[e] as unpaid maids in strangers' homes, working for room and board" (1 Jan. 2014). Human Rights Watch explains in its 2013 annual report that the restaveks [Human Rights Watch English version] "are sent from low-income households to live with wealthier families in the hope that they will be schooled and cared for in exchange for performing light chores" (Jan. 2013, 4). According to *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2012* published by the United States' Department of State, the girls are often placed by their own parents in situations of domestic servitude while boys are more frequently exploited for labour on farms (US 19 Apr. 2013, 38). However, the *New York Times* describes the use of restaveks as "a vast system of child trafficking that is often characterized as a modern form of slavery" (1 Jan. 2014). The ILO also states that the restavek system [ILO English version] "has become a form of domestic trafficking and modern-day slavery" and that restavek is "one of the worst names to be called in Haitian society," particularly because of the economic pressures caused by the earthquake that hit Haiti in January 2010 (29 Aug. 2012). Similarly, the Executive Director of Restavek Freedom, an NGO devoted to defending restaveks, explained in a telephone interview with the Research Directorate that the term restavek is a very degrading term in Haiti, associated with the term [translation] "slave" (ibid.).

The Executive Director of Restavek Freedom stated that the restavek system is [translation] "culturally and socially accepted" in Haiti (Restavek Freedom 6 Jan. 2013). Similarly, the ILO notes that the restavek system has been [ILO English version] "culturally accepted for generations" (ILO 29 Aug. 2012). Freedom House also notes that the use of restaveks has existed for a long time in Haiti (2012).

#### 1.1 Number and Make-up of restaveks

Sources note that there are no official figures on the number of restaveks in Haiti (US 19 Apr. 2013, 29; Restavek Freedom 6 Jan. 2014). However, their numbers are estimated at between 150,000 (*The New York Times* 1 Jan. 2014; Human Rights Watch Jan. 2011, 3) and 500,000 (US 19 Apr. 2013, 38; Freedom House 20

Sept. 2012; Human Rights Watch Jan. 2011, 3). The Executive Director of Restavek Freedom stated that a great deal of information about restaveks is anecdotal, but suggested that the number of restaveks is larger than generally estimated (Restavek Freedom 6 Jan. 2014).

In correspondence sent to the Research Directorate, the Executive Director of Fondation Maurice A. Sixto (FMAS), a child advocacy NGO that is active with restaveks, stated that the number of restaveks [translation] "is only increasing" (FMAS 7 Jan. 2014). Similarly, Freedom House states that children's advocacy organizations noted an increase in the number of restaveks in 2012 (2013). Human Rights Watch noted in 2011 that the United Nations and some civil society organizations warned that unaccompanied minors and orphans, whose numbers increased after the earthquake that hit Haiti in January 2010, were particularly vulnerable to becoming restaveks (Human Rights Watch Jan. 2011, 3)

According to sources, the majority of restaveks are girls (Restavek Freedom 6 Jan. 2014; *The New York Times* 1 Jan. 2014; Human Rights Watch Jan. 2013, 4). According to Human Rights Watch, 80 percent of restaveks are girls (ibid.). The Executive Director of Restavek Freedom estimated that two thirds of restaveks are girls (Restavek Freedom 6 Jan. 2014). *Country Reports for 2012* states that the majority of restaveks are girls between the ages of 5 and 17 (US 19 Apr. 2014, 38).

The Executive Director of FMAS stated the following:

[translation]

There are many more restaveks in urban areas than rural areas, because almost all of them come from the provinces (rural areas), the most isolated areas of the country (7 Jan. 2013).

## 1.2 Treatment

The Executive Director of FMAS stated that [translation] "treatment of a restavek may vary from one family to another," but that "the majority of restaveks are always mistreated" (7 Jan. 2013). Sources state that restaveks are often victims of ill treatment by their adoptive family (Restavek Freedom 6 Jan. 2014; US 19 Apr. 2013, 37; Human Rights Watch 2013, 4). Human Rights Watch states that restaveks [Human Rights Watch English version] "are often unpaid, denied education, and physically or sexually abused" (ibid.). The ILO also states that [ILO English version] "[i]n addition to working long hours, these children are often physically, sexually, and verbally abused" (29 Aug. 2012). The Executive Director of Restavek Freedom also stated that restaveks may be victims of rape (6 Jan. 2014). According to Freedom House, "several thousand" restaveks have been trafficked to the Dominican Republic (20 Sept. 2012). A report by the United Nations independent expert on the situation of human rights in Haiti states that

[UNHRC English version]

[t]here appears to have been a marked shift in terms of the kinds of families that receive "restavek[s]." In the past, host families were relatively well off; now they tend to be poorer families in which the children are at greater risk (UNHRC 7 Feb. 2013, para. 68).

The independent expert adds:

[UNHRC English version]

Since March 2012, several children's organizations have noted a fresh surge in the number of "restavek [s]" (child domestic workers) who leave the place where they are living to go and live on the street, or who risk being subjected to violence, exploitation or other forms of abuse (ibid.).

## 2. Protection Measures

### 2.1 Governmental Measures

Without providing details, Human Rights Watch states that efforts have been made to end the practice of using restaveks (Jan. 2013, 4). Freedom House states that the government has made efforts to increase protection of children through the work of the Institute for Social Welfare and Research (Institut du bien-être social et de recherches, IBESR) and the Brigade for the Protection of Minors (Brigade pour la protection des mineurs, BPM) of the Haitian national police (Police nationale d'Haïti, PNH), but their effectiveness has been limited by "funding and capacity" (Freedom House 20 Sept. 2012).

*Country Reports 2012* also states that the BPM and the IBESR are the two most important child welfare protection agencies and that they have been decentralized and have had representatives in each of the 10 departments of the country since October 2012 (19 Apr. 2013, 29). *Country Reports 2012* also states that the IBESR began collaborating with local NGOs to promote children's rights throughout the country and that it established a special hotline for at-risk youth (ibid.)

According to *Country Reports 2012*, in November 2012, the IBESR, working with UNICEF and several NGOs, launched an awareness campaign on the problems and abuses associated with the restavek system (US 19 Apr. 2013, 37). According to *Country Reports 2012*, the director of the IBESR stated that the government hoped to change "the cultural acceptance of the restavek system and [report] and mitigate child abuse" (ibid., 29). The ILO also states that in 2012 [ILO English version], "a new campaign [was] launched to combat what is one of the worst forms of child labour" (29 Aug. 2012).

However, the Executive Director of FMAS stated that the state only [translation] "timidly" intervenes through the IBESR (7 Jan. 2014). *Country Reports 2012* states that "the BPM [does] not pursue restavek cases for investigation because there [are] no legal penalties it could impose on those who exploited children in this manner (US 19 Apr. 2013, 37). The Executive Director of FMAS also stated that there is no standard law regarding restaveks (FMAS 7 Jan. 2013). She added that [translation] "recently, laws were established on the protection of children in Haiti, but they are not applied" (ibid.). The Executive Director of Restavek Freedom also stated that, although there are laws regarding the employment of minors, they are ignored and not applied by the authorities (6 Jan. 2014).

The Executive Director of Restavek Freedom also stated that, although the government is trying to improve the situation, there is no [translation] "real protection" for the restaveks, and there are no spaces available for children withdrawn from a restavek situation (Restavek Freedom 6 Jan. 2014). She added that there are shelters but that they are full and crowded (ibid.) She also stated that a child or adult who was a restavek has access to [translation] "very few [support] resources," and that, in particular, a person who was a restavek is likely illiterate because of a lack of education (ibid.).

## 2.2 Support Offered by NGOs

The Executive Director of Restavek Freedom stated that her organization manages a shelter for 12 girls and supports 800 children in Port-au-Prince by providing them with an education and clothing (ibid.). The organization also raises awareness about restaveks in the country (ibid.).

The Executive Director of FMAS stated:

[translation]

We conduct awareness sessions on the restavek system in the schools, universities, churches, rural communities and Lakous (places run by Voodoo priests and priestesses.) We work alongside women's groups, disadvantaged youths, associations and former restaveks. Although our work is small, it has a significant impact on Haitian society (FMAS 7 Jan. 2014).

Without providing details, the Executive Director also stated that her organization works with the BPM and offers follow-up and guidance to restaveks (ibid.).

## 3. Voodoo Rites

Information on Voodoo rites associated with restaveks or on children abandoned by their parents could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

## References

Fondation Maurice A. Sixto (FMAS). 7 January 2014. Correspondence sent to the Research Directorate from the Executive Director.

Freedom House. 2013. "Haiti." *Freedom in the World 2013*. <<http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2013/haiti>> [Accessed 3 Jan. 2013]

\_\_\_\_\_. 20 September 2012. Beatrice Lindstrom. "Haïti." *Countries at the Crossroads 2012*. <<http://www.freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/Haiti%20-%20FINAL.pdf>> [Accessed 7 Jan. 2013]

\_\_\_\_\_. 2012. "Haiti." *Freedom in the World 2012*. <<http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2012/haiti#.Us3BQPRDtPM>> [Accessed 3 Jan. 2013]

Human Rights Watch. January 2013. "Haïti." *World Report 2013 : Events of 2012*. <[http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/related\\_material/haiti\\_fr.pdf](http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/related_material/haiti_fr.pdf)> [Accessed 3 Jan. 2013]

\_\_\_\_\_. January 2011. "Haiti." *World Report 2011: Events of 2010*.  
<[http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/related\\_material/haiti\\_1.pdf](http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/related_material/haiti_1.pdf)> [Accessed 3 Jan. 2013]

International Labour Organization (ILO). 29 August 2012. "Esclave en pays libre."  
<[http://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/features/WCMS\\_188047/lang--fr/index.htm](http://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/features/WCMS_188047/lang--fr/index.htm)> [Accessed 6 Jan. 2013]

*The New York Times*. Nicolas Kristof. 1 January 2014. "A Girl's Escape."  
<[http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/02/opinion/kristof-a-girls-escape.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/02/opinion/kristof-a-girls-escape.html?_r=0)> [Accessed 6 Jan. 2013]

Restavek Freedom. 6 January 2013. Telephone interview with the Executive Director.

United Nations (UN). 7 February 2013. Human Rights Council. *Rapport de l'Expert indépendant sur la situation des droits de l'homme en Haïti, Michel Forst. (A/HRC/22/65)*  
<[http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/RegularSession/Session22/A-HRC-22-65\\_fr.pdf](http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/RegularSession/Session22/A-HRC-22-65_fr.pdf)>  
[Accessed 7 Jan. 2013]

United States (US). 19 April 2013. Department of State. "Haiti." *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2012*. <<http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/204668.pdf>> [Accessed 3 Jan. 2013]

### Additional Sources Consulted

**Oral sources:** Attempts to contact the following organizations were unsuccessful: Fondation Jean R. Cadet; Respire Haiti; UNICEF – Haiti.

**Internet sites, including:** Amnesty International; Centre d'information sur les catastrophes en Haïti; Développement et Paix; ecoi.net; ICF International; Ouest France; Radio France internationale; ReliefWeb; United Nations – Integrated Regional Information Networks, Refworld.

[Tips on how to use this search engine.](#)

[Top of Page](#)

Date modified: 2014-06-11

**The attached reproduction is a copy of an official work that is published by the Government of Canada. The reproduction has not been produced in affiliation with, or with the endorsement of the Government of Canada.**