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Haiti: Government must eradicate child slavery

Authorities in Haiti must enact legislation to protect children working as domestic help in conditions that amount to slavery, said Amnesty International ahead of Universal Children's Day.

Amnesty International today launched a campaign to press the government in Haiti to enact measures to protect child domestic workers from abuse, ill-treatment and exploitation.

Many Haitian families, too poor to support their children, are forced to send them to work as domestic help. The children -- most of them girls -- end up working long hours cleaning, cooking, fetching water for the whole household and looking after other children in the family.

"Most child domestic workers in Haiti live as virtual slaves," said Gerardo Ducos, Haiti researcher at Amnesty International. "They work in inhuman conditions, suffering violence and abuse by their hosts, only for a plate of food."

UNICEF estimated that there were as many as 100,000 girl domestic workers in Haiti in 2007.

Trapped in a situation of total dependence, many girls are compelled to put up with violence and sexual abuse. Some flee the employer or host family and live on the streets where they may have no option but to sell their bodies for sex in order to survive.

15-year-old Régina told Amnesty International that when she was 10, she was sent to work as a domestic servant, but she ran away because the beatings became unbearable. She spent the next four years at Foyer Maurice Sixto, a shelter for children who have been domestic workers. During that time she was able to go to school. When she turned 14, Régina went back home, where she suffered further abuse.

"Girls in Haiti are trapped in a spiral of poverty and violence," said Gerardo Ducos. "The eradication of this modern form of slavery is the only way to protect the rights of thousands of children."

Haitian laws do not provide a protective framework for children.

In 2003, the Law for the prohibition and elimination of all kind of abuses, violence and inhuman treatment of children came into force. This law removed a chapter of the Labor Code that regulated the work of children in domestic service but failed to ban the practice of children in domestic service.

The Code had prohibited the "employment" of children under 12 as domestic workers and had provided guarantees that those aged over 15 would receive a salary for their work. The Code required foster families, among other things, to request authorization from the Institute of Social Welfare and Research if they wished

to employ a child as domestic worker.

“Ahead of Universal Children’s Day, Haiti should step up its commitment to the protection of girl domestic workers and take concrete steps to improve their situation,” said Gerardo Ducos.

Details on Amnesty International’s campaign “Overcoming poverty and abuse: Protecting girls in domestic service in Haiti” will be available from Wednesday 18 November 2009 at 00:01Hs GMT on www.amnesty.org.

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