NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

A former slave fights slavery

Beverly Bell | Dec. 8, 2009

Helia Lajeunesse, left, and another activist gain inspiration at the Lincoln Memorial in Wahington. (Tim Murphy)

Women: Birthing justice, birthing hope. Part 3 of 12

Today there are an estimated 27 million slaves in the world, more than at any time in history, including during the transatlantic slave trade. One current slavery system is in Haiti, where roughly 300,000 children suffer in forced servitude in a system known as restavek, *literally ?to stay with.? Helia Lajeunesse is part of a group of* restavek *survivors who are raising visibility of the* restavek *system and fostering opposition to it. Lajeunesse is part of a global movement of people working against all forms of commercialization of human life.*

By Helia Lajeunesse

Port-au-Prince, Haiti -- The *restavek* system is modern slavery. If the child doesn?t work hard enough, they beat him or her. The child can?t eat with the family, and usually just eats scraps. The child sleeps on the floor. They don?t pay the child. They never used to send the child to school. The family views that child as an animal.

This horrible system is due to the economic situation. Families with a lot of kids may not be able to afford to give the child even food, so they send him or her to the home of someone else in the hopes that that person can provide better care. Let me give you an example from my own life: I had five children. They lost their father, and I couldn?t feed them. I was obliged to give four away, even though the youngest was only 3 years old. I only kept one who wasn?t even a year old then.

Urgent update, Jan. 19, 2010: Haitian women's group decimated by quake [1]

Here?s my story. My mother died when I was 7 months old. I went to live with my grandmother, but she died when I was 5. My relatives didn?t have the means to care for me, so they gave me to someone. Whatever work had to happen there, I was the one to do it. I got up at 4:00 to make the fire and cook the food, I went to fetch water and carry it back up the mountain on my head. They didn?t give me any food; I had to go scrounge around

in the street to get my own. They used to beat me on the head. I got beaten once for asking for a little pencil and a notebook so I could learn. Once when I was 9 years old, the child I was caring for fell down and hurt her knee. The mother called the police to come arrest me, and I spent a day in the police station.

I lived in five different houses. Misery was killing me, but I didn?t have anywhere else to stay or anyone to care for me. I said to myself, ?One day my life is going to change.?

Finally I moved in with a young man of good faith. We had five children. In 2004, a gang of men broke into our house. They raped me and my oldest daughter. My husband tried to protest and they took him away; we?ve never seen him again. My daughter got pregnant, so then I had a grandchild from rape. I was raising five children and a grandchild all by myself.

That?s when I found KOFAVIV, the Commission of Women Victim-to-Victim. It?s made up of about 5,000 women, both those who?ve been raped and those who were *restavek*. Only then did I learn that my life wasn?t over.

But I suffer so much because my 18-year-old daughter is still living as a *restavek*. She doesn?t want to come to the neighborhood where I live because the person who raped her and killed her father is close by. Here I am struggling against the system, but I still have a child who is in it. I can?t live in peace, my heart hurts so much.

We do a lot of things in KOFAVIV to end slavery in Haiti. For example, on May 31 we held a march in Port-au-Prince with thousands of people. We wore T-shirts and handed out flyers that said, ?I?m against the *restavek* system. And you, what are you waiting for?? It was beautiful.

Another thing we do is raise the level of consciousness of people who keep *restavek* children. We help them understand that they should look on that child as though it?s their own child. Make their life easy. Send them to school.

We also help parents in the countryside who think they?re doing their child a favor by sending them to a family in town. We encourage them to do whatever is within their means to not give their child away into servitude.

We also embrace children who are *restavek* today to help them not get discouraged by life. We?ve established a school for them, too.

We?re getting neighbors to know they have a responsibility. We say, ?If you hear someone beating a child in their home, go tell them to stop. Tell them that this is a human being and you need to treat them well.? When we can?t confront the person directly because we?re worried about what will happen to the child as a result, we put a tape recorder outside the violator?s window to record them beating the child, then we take that tape to the radio station. The family hears it on the radio and, we hope, becomes ashamed and gets a different level of understanding about its treatment of the child.

We?re seeing people change the way they treat *restavek* children. It?s an enormous struggle, but just like I?ve learned and am speaking out, everyone will become aware that this system has to end. It will end; that?s certain.

About the "Women: Birthing justice, birthing hope" series

Among income inequality, seemingly endless wars, and debilitating climate change, it is difficult for many to imagine a path to a better way. In fact, throughout the industrialized North and the global South, solutions to these great challenges are in various stages of construction -- and much of the lifting is being done by women. Grass-roots women?s movements -- progressing often almost without money or access or institutional power -- are emerging and offering alternative and empowering visions.

The above is part of a series, titled "Women: Birthing justice, birthing hope," which will appear in NCR *by writer and organizer Beverly Bell, coordinator of* ***Other Worlds****[2]. She features empowered women who offer alternative visions as they birth a new and more just world order.*

Seven of the articles in this series are available in a 2010 Lenten booklet, *Cry Justice! Cry Hope!* with additional reflections by Sister Joan Chittister. Click here to order. [3]

All the stories from the "Women: Birthing justice, birthing hope" series

1. Emem Okon: First hand account of organizing women in Nigeria [4]
2. Coumba Touré: The Link to Humanity, Giving as a Way of Life [5]
3. Helia Lajeunesse: A former slave fights slavery [6]
4. Marcela Olivera: Water is where everything intersects [7]
5. Melody Gonzalez: People of the sun [8]
6. Ilda Martins de Souza: With every new day, you struggle for a better tomorrow [9]
7. S. Ushakumari: Not wasting the waste [10]
8. Shilpa Jain: We have everything we need: Reclaiming control of education [11]
9. Nayeli Guzman: This land is my teacher: Preserving Native agriculture and traditions [12]

Source URL (retrieved on *12/08/2013 - 21:07*): http://ncronline.org/news/women-religious/former-slave-fights-slavery

Links:
[1] http://ncronline.org/node/16665
[2] http://www.otherworldsarepossible.org
[3] http://store.benetvision.org/cryjucryho.html
[4] http://ncronline.org/node/15899
[5] http://ncronline.org/node/16037
[6] http://ncronline.org/node/16104
[7] http://ncronline.org/node/16256
[8] http://ncronline.org/node/16352
[9] http://ncronline.org/node/16419
[10] http://ncronline.org/node/16478
[11] http://ncronline.org/node/16603
[12] http://ncronline.org/node/16673