

Testimony of Guerda Lexima Constant, Executive Director of Fondasyon Limyè Lavi, Haiti

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To the Tom Lantos Commission on Human Rights

Written Testimony

Mr. Chairman, esteemed members of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, ladies and gentlemen, it is a deep honor to represent the women of Haiti before you today. I give you my heartfelt thanks for hearing my testimony today.

My name is Guerda Lexima Constant and I serve as Executive Director of Fondasyon Limyè Lavi (Light of Life Foundation). Since 1993, Limyè Lavi has worked to comprehensively address the restavèk system of child labor exploitation in Haiti. We work with marginalized, largely rural communities to engage in collaborative educational and community development activities that help to build strong families and communities.

The restavèk system consists of the widespread practice of sending children from poor, mostly rural, families to join households in larger towns and cities. Families undertake this practice due to financial hardship, a lack of basic services, and the promise of educational opportunities and a better life for their children. However, the families who host restavèk children typically don't have the means to support them properly. An estimated three quarters of children exploited in the restavèk system are girls.

Children in the restavèk system are often reduced to sub-human status in the household in which they work, as well as in society as a whole. They suffer neglect and physical and psychological abuse. Restavèk children work from before dawn to late into the evening, often for 14 hours or more, carrying out chores including fetching water, hand-washing clothes, carrying heavy loads, working in the fields, caring for smaller children, and preparing meals.

Limyè Lavi works to break the silence surrounding the restavèk system, which is deeply engrained in Haitian life and rarely addressed within communities. We engage in targeted work, accompanying communities for several years. I want to share a little bit about our approach, which will help shed light on the root causes of the restavèk system. Our community model consists of five parts. First, we facilitate "open dialogue" with communities to establishment baseline information collection and engage in education on children's rights. Next, we work with parents to reintegrate children into families and communities and provide accelerated educational opportunities for children escaping the restavèk system. In order to address the root causes of the restavèk system, we work with communities to find new and improved income-generation activities. Lastly, we establish child protection committees within communities and train community leaders on advocacy techniques to facilitate long-term change.

We take a holistic approach that yields demonstrable results. Working with children forced into labor means working with their parents, often a single mother. In addition, addressing the restavèk system requires understanding and responding to the economic roots of the problem. Families often don't have the money to care for children and communities lack resources to meet the basic health and educational needs. Solutions start with recognizing the problem. This is

where we begin. We facilitate “open dialogues” in communities to bring the problem out into the open and create awareness. Parents are able to make better decisions for their children when they have the knowledge and confidence to work collaboratively within communities to find alternative solutions to sending children into restavèk situations.

Once families bring children back into their homes and communities, we provide expedited educational opportunities that generate outcomes equivalent to many years of basic education in just two to three years.

In addition, Limyè Lavi works with rural communities to address the economic root causes of the restavèk system. We work with small-scale farmers to increase agricultural production through new techniques and technologies and facilitate access to financial and money management skills and tools.

In order to precipitate change beyond just the communities where Limyè Lavi works intensively, we provide training for grassroots leaders to engage in advocacy at various levels. In addition, Limyè Lavi leads a national network of over 25 organizations called “Down With Child Servitude” and generates awareness through monthly broadcasts on Haiti’s most popular radio station. We are able to do good work with limited resources, but our efforts require partnership and support from countries like the United States, that are ideally positioned to scale up this effective, community-based approach.

The United States government has already played an important role in preventing and responding to both poverty and gender-based violence around the world, and particularly in Haiti. This is evident in USAID’s more recent commitment to support local groups tackling gender-based violence and child protection issues. Limyè Lavi partners with a U.S. organization that receives State Department funding and has been a critical partner in our work.

Despite the long-term commitment that the U.S. government has shown to its Caribbean neighbor, certain U.S. policies have also had devastating ripple effects on Haiti’s economy, especially in rural areas. President Clinton himself made a brave acknowledgment that cheap U.S. subsidized rice has put massive numbers of Haitian farmers out of business, leading to an increased state of poverty and food insecurity.

While economic instability does not in and of itself create violence, it can increase the incidence and severity of violence against women and children. The U.S. government is now addressing these economic policies and actions, and that is a move in the right direction.

Among global donors, the United States government stands in a unique position to help integrate violence prevention strategies into all of its agriculture and economic development programs. In this way, your government can demonstrate that gender-based violence is not a stand-alone issue. It is deeply woven into the fabric of every single foreign aid investment, whether public or private. This is an example that the U.S. government can and must set for donors and implementing partners around the world.

There are three concrete, cost-effective, and immediate steps the United States government could take to demonstrate its great foreign aid leadership in the world and assist the women and children of Haiti and around the globe in the process.

1. Support a New National Protection Plan for Vulnerable Children

Following the January 2010 earthquake, over 100,000 children lost the protection of families in Haiti. Hundreds of thousands more children are rendered vulnerable due to economic hardship and widespread insecurity.

The U.S. House of Representatives this year passed a resolution on gender-based violence in Haiti. Congresswoman Frederica Wilson introduced the resolution, which urges the U.S. government to continue its support of Haiti's Ministry of Women's Affairs and National Parliament in implementing a new National Protection Plan for Vulnerable Children, as well as a law to prevent and respond to violence against women and girls.

The U.S. can play an important role in working with the Haitian government as it establishes a legal framework to prevent and respond to violence and exploitation. In addition, development assistance and USAID's experience in promoting rights-based development can be leveraged to support the Haitian government's efforts to bring this policy framework to life through concrete action.

2. Invest in local organizations that are getting results

Community-based organizations grow from the roots of society and are closest to the people. Haiti is like a lot of other countries where rural communities are neglected by the government. People in the countryside are not able to have political impact. To change the system in Haiti for the better, it is critical to work with community organizations. In many ways, these organizations are fulfilling many of the roles of the government outside of urban areas. These grassroots groups have the best and most accurate perspectives on communities, yet they are under-resourced and get the least support from outside actors. A small investment yields large returns.

My organization, Limyè Lavi, and many of our partner organizations have achieved extraordinary results in changing people's behavior and getting restavèk children back into families. We reach hundreds of people and get demonstrable results at much less cost than other organizations. We work with communities in a collaborative way, spending a lot of time in villages, living with the people, and learning about their problems from their perspective. The communities themselves work through a process of dialogue and awareness-building to find the solutions. Not only does that lead to sustainable change, it is an inexpensive method. Supporting local organizations throughout Haiti is key to creating real solutions and generating social and economic progress.

3. Pass the International Violence Against Women Act

This battle against violence should not depend on the will of a single presidential administration. In order to see real results, it is critical that engagement by the U.S. and Haitian governments be consistent over the long-term. IVAWA ensures that the efforts of this administration to put into place an effective GBV strategy will become permanent.

When women and children are free from violence, individuals, families, communities, and entire countries are stronger and more secure.

Thank you. I look forward to answering your questions.