

REFLECTIONS

on Child Domestic Labor

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My first exposure to the horrors of child domestic labor came from a conversation with Sr. Jeanne Davos, an ICM missionary to India who I met a few years ago. She shared this story with me.

One evening shortly after supper, the convent doorbell in Mumbai rang. As Jeanne Davos opened the door, a neighbor began a non-stop urgent appeal for help. "If someone doesn't intervene they are going to kill that child! Something has to be done. That child will never see her next birthday. Please help that little girl." Without a word to her community members, Jeanne followed her frantic neighbor to the doorway of a family whose children attended the Sisters' school. As she banged on the door, the informant abandoned the nun, and soon Jeanne was alone, and face to face with a young Indian couple who were surprised and honored to have a nun, and a European, visiting their household.

"I've come to see the child," Jeanne remembers saying. "Oh yes, Sister, we have two children, one four and the other six. What joys they are to us. Please come in." Crossing the threshold to their home, Jeanne said to the couple, "No, I am here to see the child who *works* in your home, the child domestic worker." Immediately, the couple launched into a barrage of complaints and objections. "She is a lazy and insolent little girl. She is willful and evil. We have tried to discipline her and she never learns her lesson. We are at our wits end with this child, and we are about to send her back to the streets."



As this young, somewhat affluent and well-educated couple ranted on and on about Sunitha, the household's seven-year-old child domestic laborer, Jeanne was moving from one room to the other searching for the little girl. Finally, under the slop sink of the outdoor kitchen, she found what she described to me as a wisp of a girl, squatting under the table, with a bruised and bloody half-closed eye, matted hair, and limbs that bore the marks of brutality.

As Jeanne approached her, Sunitha suddenly stood up, as Jeanne recalled, with a dignity that her suffering had not yet diminished. "Didi," (respected Older Sister) the child addressed the nun. "I knew you were coming. I knew someone was coming for me!"

The outcome of this encounter, rescue, and the relationship that grew between Sunitha and Sr Jeanne Davos eventually gave birth to Jeanne Davos founding the Domestic Workers' Movement in India. For the past 30 or more years, this movement that began with the rescue of one domestic child laborer, has liberated millions of slave laborers in India, mostly women, from heinous forms of exploitation. It has opened the door to education, fair wages, and due process under the law. Sunitha, now grown, and well educated, collaborates with Jeanne Davos, in the leadership of this organization.

All of the stages in the growth of what is today a national labor movement were seeded and cultivated in the compassionate heart of one Belgian nun, and were nurtured in the conviction of a little seven year old girl

whose faith in humanity's compassion never faltered, "I knew you were coming, I knew someone was coming for me."

Closer to home and the hearts of the School Sisters of Notre Dame is the reality of Child Domestic Labor in Haiti. The practice of parents sending their children into domestic service on the mainland of Haiti is longstanding. However, money is not the motivation. Rather, children are 'sent away,' in an effort to provide them an opportunity for education, reliable nutrition, and a fuller life—a life beyond what their impoverished parents can provide. Of course, this hope is almost always dashed by exploitation of the child's labor, as well as other forms of child exploitation and abuse. Few of the child domestic laborers in Haiti, called *restaveks*, ever see the inside of a school.

Through our SSND partnership with Beyond Borders, we are collaborating to end child domestic labor in Haiti. The root cause of child labor is the impact of intractable poverty on Haitian families. In order to allow parents to keep their children at home and in school, providing the means for parents to have economic security is key.

Toward this end, our partnership focuses on livelihood development for economically vulnerable families. Using tried and true adult education methods, Beyond Borders staff helps families to understand the nature of their economic stress, provide them with assets such as donkeys, turkeys, chickens and pigs, as well as training as to their care and economic benefit potential. The Staff also assists in the designing a business plan with families so that sustainable economic recovery and growth in economic security can happen.

Creating the conditions by which families can care for their children and nurture their development is key to ending child domestic labor in Haiti. The SSND investments in water catchment systems, as well as seed distribution, training in garden care, and teacher training align to make it possible for the hopes and dreams that Haitian parents hold for their children, all very possible.

One of the additional ways that the Province is active in transforming the practice of child labor is demanding accountability of corporations regarding labor in their supply chain. Children are regularly involved in industries such as fishing, mining, and chocolate harvesting. To eradicate this practice SSNDs continues to use the leverage of their investments in these companies to speak out and demand change of such heinous practices as child labor.

The vulnerable trust of children like Sunitha, that their life will one day flourish, should compel each one of us to do what we can to end the practice of child labor. May our efforts be ever strengthened by these words of one seven-year-old laborer, "I knew you were coming. I knew someone was coming for me."

