Child’s Death in Paraguay Spotlights Child Labor Problem

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The brutal death by clubbing of a 14-year-old girl known only as Carolina, whose parents had given her away as a servant in exchange for room and board, has moved Paraguayan hearts and unleashed a campaign by social organizations to eradicate the practice of unpaid domestic labor condoned under the practice of criadazgo (NotiSur, Aug. 2, 2013, and Aug. 7, 2015).

The incident, which took place on Jan. 23 in a middle-class home in Coronel Oviedo, the capital of the southern department of Caaguazú, is a repetition of something that occurs periodically and generally remains an item in the rumor mill. Once in a great while, however, such an event becomes widely known to the general public and reaches the legal system. This time, it’s known that the perpetrator is a military man and that he has been detained, but nothing more is known about him—neither his name nor his rank nor the branch of the military to which he might belong. What is known is that he hit Carolina with a tree branch to the point of disfiguring her and that he abandoned her while she bled. The Caaguazú legal system has called this an “involuntary homicide.”

UNICEF urges gradual end of criadazgo

On Jan. 27, in reaction to the Caaguazú crime, the United Nations Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF) urged Paraguayan authorities to take action toward the “progressive eradication” of child labor, of which criadazgo is a painful manifestation. For years, UNICEF has made a similar request every June 12, the day established as World Day Against Child Labor in 2002.

According to UNICEF and the UN’s International Labor Organization (ILO), criadazgo is a hidden form of slavery, a de facto institution accepted by Paraguayan society. Minors subjected to criadazgo, the agencies say, toil to exhaustion seven days a week. “They are children, who, if they are fortunate enough to be sent to school, are not able to do well because they are worn out physically and mentally,” a UNICEF report notes.

According to a Jan. 27 wire filed by the Chinese news agency Xinhua, UNICEF issued a statement to the government of President Horacio Cartes saying, “under criadazgo, children between 5 and 17 years old are subjected to long workdays, which normally are the reason they stop going to school and therefore can’t get the best occupations later, thus preventing them from escaping poverty. Many of them also fall into the hands of criminal networks dedicated to looking for boys, girls, and adolescents in the remotest and most unprotected communities with promises of better work, which ends up being exploitive work and sexual exploitation, far from their families and the control of the authorities.”

Luna Nueva, a non-governmental organization in Paraguay, encapsulates UNICEF’s description with a fact that dramatically illustrates the situation: “Nearly 90% of the sexually exploited adolescents were previously child domestic workers under the criadazgo regimen, subjected to physical and psychological abuse, besides suffering ongoing sexual abuse by their employers.”
Nearly 25% of 5- to 17-year-olds work

The latest official statistics on child labor are from 2011 and were gathered under the government of Fernando Lugo (NotiSur, Nov. 6, 2009). Lugo (2008-2012) was overthrown in June 2012 and replaced with a right-wing regime (NotiSur, July 13, 2012).

According to this study, conducted by Paraguay’s office of statistics, surveys and census (Dirección General de Estadística, Encuestas y Censos, DGEEC), 436,426 children between 5 and 17 years old—23.5% of Paraguayan children—are involved in some sort of economic activity, most of them performing rural jobs considered dangerous or risky. Of those, more than 211,000 are under age 13, the legal minimum age for working. This and other studies done by national and international social organizations point out that more than 47,000 boys, girls and adolescents—2.5% of that population—work under the criadazgo regimen. No statistics have been gathered since 2011. Child protection agencies estimate the number of child workers today above 500,000, with no fewer than 53,000 involved in criadazgo.

Given that the government lacks the framework necessary to gather statistics through which to analyze social phenomena, studies from international organizations and domestic non-governmental agencies offer the best way to assess the situation.

• According to the 2010 Inter-American Development Bank’s (IDB’s) “Program of support for the battle against human trafficking, especially women, girls and boys” (“Programa de apoyo a la lucha contra la trata de personas, especialmente mujeres, niñas y niños”), which was co-signed by Paraguay’s Secretaría de la Mujer (Department of Women’s Issues), five out of every 10 victims of human trafficking were domestic workers before being captured by traffickers. This complements the fieldwork of the previously cited organization, Luna Nueva, that says nine out of every 10 victims of sexual exploitation were previously child domestic workers under criadazgo. That information is detailed in the document titled “Human Trafficking in Paraguay: Exploratory diagnosis on human trafficking for sexual exploitation,” published in 2005 (“La trata de personas en Paraguay: Diagnóstico exploratorio sobre el tráfico y/o trata de personas con fines de explotación sexual”).

• Also in 2010, a survey co-authored by the non-governmental organization Centro de Documentación y Estudios (Center for Documentation and Studies, CDE) and the ILO provided three relevant statistics. First, about 45% of Paraguayan boys, girls and adolescents toil seven days a week and 26% of them said they had less than five hours a day to rest. Second, about 50% of those interviewed said that they lived with their employers or people unrelated to them. And third, 70% of the children said they were mistreated by their employers, including receiving insults (33%), having to eat the leftovers of the family that employed them (20%), being hit or kicked (12%), or being sexually abused (5%).

• The children who are victims of criadazgo are not the only ones being mistreated. Children also experience violence in their own homes. A study about child abuse inside the family, which UNICEF and an organization called Base Educativa y Comunitaria de Apoyo (Network for education and community support, BECA) conducted at the end of 2015, said that 61% of children experience some type of physical or psychological violence from their parents.
Criadazgo complaints peak in January

Following Carolina’s death, the Secretaría Nacional de la Niñez y Adolescencia (Department for Children and Adolescents), in an almost triumphant tone, made the disturbing announcement that complaints for criadazgo were up. In any event, the numbers are discouraging: “Of the 59 complaints presented in the last three years for this type of exploitation, 12 corresponded to January of this year, a figure similar to the number of those registered in all of 2015.” More than 80% of the complaints received via “Fono Ayuda,” a free telephone line, were about girls and young women between 9 and 17 years old who had been sexually abused.

Carlos Zárate, the head of the Secretaría Nacional de la Niñez y Adolescencia, has called criadazgo “the prelude to sexual exploitation.” He noted that there are legal instruments, such as adoption or guardianship, that allow authorities to guarantee the respect for the rights of minors in the custody of adults who are not their parents. But he pointed out that Paraguayan law does not establish specific penalties for those who hold children and adolescents under criadazgo, which leads to impunity.

“The main reason parents put their children into criadazgo is that they want their children to receive an education, but this part of the agreement is rarely met,” said Rosa María Ortiz, former rapporteur on the Rights of the Child for the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR). “Victims of this type of exploitation go to school only when their work in the home allows, they don’t have a right to recreation, they lose contact with their family of origin, and frequently they receive the worst physical punishments, such as in the case of Carolina.” Ortiz added, “Criadazgo goes beyond labor exploitation to become slavery and takes away all of the victims’ rights while violating their right to their identity.”

Tina Alvarenga, an active member of the organization Articulación de Mujeres Indígenas (Organization of Indigenous Women) who worked as a servant from age 10 to 18, explained the situation to the Spanish news agency EFE: “Criadazgo is based on racial and class prejudices inherited from the colonial system established during the Spanish conquest by the Spanish crown and the Catholic Church. It sets up forced, unequal kinship relations between the indigenous population, still a substantial part of the Paraguayan population, and the colonists. This feudal mentality is still pervasive: The ruling class believes they are the owners of the land and the people, and consider campesinos and indigenous people—our parents, who at some point had to turn us over as servants—inferior.”

According to Alvarenga, in homes where there are children in criadazgo, “there develops a situation of affective dependence between victims and employers—between Carolina and her killer. They are made to believe they will be forever indebted to them, which makes it difficult for them to escape their situation.” Ortiz said abusive criadazgo relationships, while not the same, are similar to the sympathetic bonding between hostages and captors that is known as the Stockholm syndrome.