

How Households Depend on Children's Income:

The Case for Improving Women's Livelihoods to Eliminate Child Labour in Democratic Republic of Congo's Cobalt Sector

The communities around Democratic Republic of Congo's (DRC) artisanal cobalt mines survive on just a few dollars per day.¹

Women are often the main income earners for their households,² but are struggling to make ends meet. Many families are going hungry. Children work when families get desperate, leading to a reliance on income from child labour to cover basic needs like food.

Artisanal mining is generally considered by the international community as one of the worst forms of child labour requiring it to be eliminated immediately.³ In DRC, the law outlines conditions for labour for those under 18—banning any work that exposes physical harm, or is dangerous to health or safety.⁴ The private sector has focused on seeking alternate sources of cobalt, while attempting to prevent child labour at mines sites by introducing fences, access points, and patrols.⁵ This doesn't address root causes of child labour,

but simply redirects working children to another site or sector where they may be at greater risk.

As women are often the main breadwinners and tasked with childcare—it's their income we need to augment, so that they have economic security and don't need to rely on their children's income. We need to invest in women and support skills building, removing barriers for women's work and gender equity at mine sites, and ensuring they are also part of decision making affecting their family's lives.



¹Research from Bon Pasteur in 2018 found households had incomes of less than \$1 USD and according to the World Bank, 70% of households across the country live under \$2.15 USD per day. Bon Pasteur Kolwezi Theory of Change: Strategic Plan 2018-2022, Good Shepherd International Foundation, March 2018, https://congo.gsif.it/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/SP_ToC_CONGO_v1.2.pdf and <https://data.worldbank.org/country/CD>, accessed June 1, 2023.

²Interviews conducted in person with women artisanal cobalt miners, in-person with IMPACT, November 2022 and February 2023. See also, Women in Artisanal and Small-Scale Mining in Central and East Africa: A Snapshot of Challenges and Opportunities for Empowerment, IMPACT, 2017, <https://impacttransform.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/women-mining-snapshot-central-and-east-africa-3.pdf>.

³What is child labour?, International Labour Organization, accessed June 1, 2023, <https://www.ilo.org/ipec/facts/lang-en/index.htm>.

⁴Democratic Republic of Congo's Ministry of Employment, Labour, and Social Welfare, Arrêté ministériel N° 12/CAB.MIN/TPSI/045 /08 du 08 août 2008 fixant les conditions de travail des enfants, August 15, 2018, <https://www.leganet.cd/Legislation/JO/2008/15.08.08.12.45.pdf>.

⁵Making Mining Safe and Fair: Artisanal cobalt extraction in the Democratic Republic of Congo, World Economic Forum, September 2020, https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Making_Mining_Safe_2020.pdf.

Key Findings



- Women are main contributors to household incomes in artisanal cobalt mining communities but the income they earn is not enough to cover basic needs
- Children work in artisanal cobalt mining to boost their family's income and help pay for food, clothing, and school fees
- Women understand children are not allowed to work in mine sites but see no other alternatives for their survival
- Cobalt mining is the preferred income in the area as it requires no start-up capital and guarantees cash everyday
- Children circumvent bans on child labour by moving between mine sites, adjusting hours they work, and paying informal "access fees"

Meet Gloria



**Gloria has always lived in Kolwezi.
For her, cobalt mining was a way of life.**

But now, her family depends on it for survival. Her husband Simon was a digger. He had nowhere to work, so he followed the others to just outside the gates of the large company.



**Money was tight but
they made it work.
Then things started
to change.**

Everyone started digging, everywhere, as the price of cobalt shot up. Others came to get rich. But then they were told the market changed or that their rocks weren't pure enough. Everything started to become more expensive. All the household costs started adding up.

Then, 5 years ago, Simon was killed in a car accident on his way to the village. They had three children together. They're now 14, 11, and 6.

After Simon died, Gloria's family took her in, but they couldn't stay there for long—she didn't want to be a burden. Her choice was simple, let her family starve or join the women at the mine site.

Now she washes ore. It's a difficult job standing in the stagnant water. She often worries about illnesses and is tired from backbreaking work. But she is proud. Every day she brings home money.

But she isn't earning enough.

There stopped being enough money and they didn't eat for a couple of days. Since then, the two older ones started coming with her to the mine site.

Gloria makes sure they stay close so she can keep an eye on them. If she hears the agents coming, she tells them to run back home. She knows it's not right, but they have no other choice. Despite the risks, they can cover rent and they eat a meal each day. The children keep a small bit of money and go buy some sweets or save for new clothes.

This was not the life she dreamed of for her children. She wants them to go to school, to have a better future.



*Gloria's story has been written to reflect the experiences of interviews with women in Kolwezi to protect their anonymity. While names and details have been changed, Gloria's story is true to what we heard.



A Phased Approach to Ending Child Labour

IMPACT's Her Security project investigates how enhancing women's security in artisanal cobalt and copper mining communities in DRC can improve livelihoods and consequently decrease child labour.⁶

The first phase of this project focuses on elevating women's voices internationally to highlight the root causes of child labour in cobalt mining to drive investment and support for sustainable change. A future, second phase will engage DRC stakeholders towards women's empowerment in artisanal cobalt mining communities and support activities to strengthen women's capacity to increase their economic security in the sector.

Our findings are based on an analysis of previous research on child labour, artisanal cobalt mining, as well as discussions with academics, experts, and project implementers in this space. Additionally, we held two phases of interviews with women artisanal cobalt miners and traders in Kolwezi during 2022 and 2023, including women whose children work in mine sites. Information in this paper is based on interviews, which have been anonymized. All names throughout have been changed.

“If we really want to prevent children from entering mine sites, we must give them something to eat. You cannot forbid a child from working at the mine site when they have no food, while the one who forbade them has eaten.”

- Joelle, artisanal cobalt miner

⁶ Her Security, IMPACT, accessed June 1, 2023, <https://impacttransform.org/en/work/project/her-security/>

The Importance of Cobalt

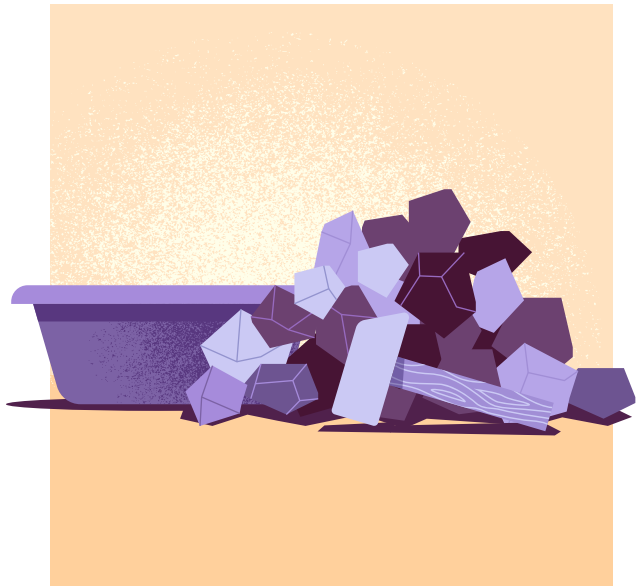


While not a conflict mineral,⁷ cobalt is critical to technology for the clean energy transition including electric vehicles (EV).

In 2021, EV's became the largest end use of cobalt and by 2026 it's expected to account for half of all cobalt use, with demand for EV's continuing to surge over the coming decades.⁸

It's estimated that over half of the world's cobalt reserves are found in DRC, and that more than 70 percent of cobalt is currently sourced from the country.⁹

The majority of cobalt in DRC is sourced by large-scale mining (LSM) companies. With the demand for cobalt predicted to outstrip supply, artisanal mining for the mineral has become increasingly prevalent. It's estimated that anywhere from 20-30% of DRC's cobalt is mined artisanally,¹⁰ and which is then sold to traders on the outskirts of the LSM operators and integrated into their legal supply chains.



“Driving them out won't improve their safety since they are supposed to be helping their family. These children are already living in insecurity at home. If they are in mine site, it is for their survival.”

- Isabelle, artisanal cobalt miner

⁷ Current United States (Section 1502 of the Dodd Frank Act) and European Union (Conflict Minerals Regulations 2017/821) regulations cover tin, tantalum, tungsten, and gold.

⁸ Cobalt: Powering the Green Economy, Cobalt Institute, 2023, https://www.cobaltinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/cobalt_institute_fact_sheet_2023.pdf and “Electric vehicles are forecast to be half of global car sales by 2035,” Goldman Sachs, February 10, 2023, <https://www.goldmansachs.com/intelligence/pages/electric-vehicles-are-forecast-to-be-half-of-global-car-sales-by-2035.html>.

⁹ Cobalt: Powering the Green Economy, 2023.

¹⁰ Emmanuel Umpala et al., Islands of Responsibility? Corporate sourcing of artisanal cobalt in the Democratic Republic of Congo, IIED, September 2021, <https://www.iied.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/2021-09/20436iied.pdf> or “Artisanal and small-scale cobalt mining and the importance of formalization,” Pact, July 25, 2022, <https://www.pactworld.org/blog/artisanal-and-small-scale-cobalt-mining-and-importance-formalization-explainer-pact%E2%80%99s-micka%C3%ABl>.



Women in Artisanal Cobalt Mining

Cobalt mining has shaped the landscape in southern DRC—providing significant income opportunities for the population. For women, they turn to cobalt mining for three reasons: it's the highest earning job, they have cash at the end of each day, and it requires no investment, little training, or skill.

But inequality at the mine sites is prevalent. At some mine sites, stigma or traditional beliefs prevent women from accessing the area for fear that their presence would bring poor fortune¹¹. When they do have access, women take on the lowest paid roles such as washing ore, they report being cheated in price when selling their minerals, or even prevented from accessing some sites. Women shared they earned between \$2.15 and \$8.60 USD daily¹², with the higher amounts being on days they find cobalt.

Many are struggling to make ends meet. Women shared that their families relied most on their income. Even if married, their husband's income is unreliable or not enough. In addition, men often delegate the responsibility of children's care and running the households to women. Rent, food, school fees, medical expenses, clothing—household costs add up. Despite a government promise for free education, parents must pay fees to cover teacher salaries and school operating costs.

As all the costs increase,¹³ it becomes difficult to pay for food. The environment is dry and dusty from decades of mining and there are not many trees. There are few small gardens or agricultural plots which could supplement food supply or income as in other parts of the country.¹⁴ It also makes food expensive, as basic food staples need to be imported from other regions.

“The important thing is to find a lasting solution that would empower parents and have them able to meet the needs of their children.”

- Daphne, artisanal cobalt miner

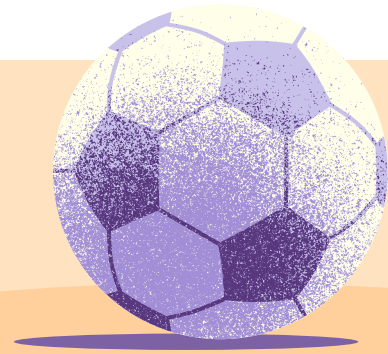
¹¹ Based on IMPACT's observation and interviews in November 2022.

¹² 5,000-20,000 Congolese Francs

¹³ The estimated living wage for a household in Kolwezi (2 adults and 4 children) was calculated to be \$480.37 USD in 2023—rising from \$402.65 USD in 2019, See: The Road to Ruin? Electric vehicles and workers' rights abuses at DR Congo's industrial cobalt mines, RAID, 2023, https://www.raid-uk.org/sites/default/files/annex_1_living_wage_2023_update_english.pdf

¹⁴ “Chakuishi Social Enterprise,” Bon Pasteur, accessed June 20, 2023, <https://congo.gsif.it/chakuishi/>

Why Children Become Miners



As mothers struggle to feed their families, they begin to rely on their children to help with household expenses. Some are encouraged by their parents, or independently follow in the footsteps of their siblings, friends, and neighbours. Mining provides the highest income in the area for children, and everyone comes home with cash at the end of the day, between \$0.86-2.50 USD per child.¹⁵

Children usually give their earnings to their mothers to cover necessities like food, although older children keep a portion. Research shows that children that keep some of their income use it towards food and clothing.¹⁶

While younger children (most often boys) remain in school, as children get older and it becomes more expensive, their schooling becomes deprioritized. In a few cases, women shared that even their youngest children had been expelled from school for non-payment of fees. Unable to leave their young children at home by themselves, they bring them to the

mine site where they can watch them and ensure their safety—exposing the lack of available and safe childcare options to working mothers. As they get older, children may also begin mining, supervised by their older siblings and other family members.

Everyone IMPACT spoke to understood that child labour is prohibited and that it's detrimental to children's health, safety, and development. But those whose children work said poverty had forced them to make an unthinkable decision. Their only other choice was to go hungry.

“It is suffering that brings children to the mine site. When living conditions were better, children went to school and played. Today, children become adults early because they must support parents in their responsibility. This is not normal!”

- Eloise, artisanal cobalt miner

¹⁵ 2,000-5,000 Congolese Francs. Interviewees stated that they were able to make as much as 10,000 Francs when they turned 18.

¹⁶ Bon Pasteur Kolwezi Theory of Change, May 2018.

Circumventing Bans on Child Labour



Some children work with their family members such as their mother or may be hired to perform tasks for others in the supply chain—such as diggers or traders. Women noted a strong desire to protect their children at the mine sites, with a clear gendered distinction of the type of work children are allowed to do, and areas of the mine they are allowed to go to. While boys collect and transport ore, mothers watch closely over the girls who wash minerals.

It's clear there is an ambivalence to the prohibition of children within mine sites, with many colluding for their own benefit, as children are cheap labour. Women shared how some security or government agents turned a blind eye, while others demanded payment or threatened them and their children with jail time and heavy fines if they didn't pay an informal "access fee."¹⁷ This environment adds to women's insecurity as they are put further at economic and physical risk during each confrontation.

Despite how artisanal mining may appear to be chaotic to outsiders, it's well organized. Children set their work around the hours of

security agents, they know their locations, and have signals to alert each other or their families. More importantly, while some mine sites have stronger patrols, families may move to a different site where checks are less rigorous or where there is a perception that children will be safer.

Women with working children shared that children are "omnipresent" in cobalt mines, coming in waves depending on the time of day or season. There is an influx of children during rainy season when ore is at the surface and easy to collect, as well as during school holidays—or even before and after school hours.



“[That mother] is the only person who knows why she must work with her child. No one has the right to judge her.”

- Nanette, artisanal cobalt miner

¹⁷ Numerous women we spoke to said they were forced to pay stiff penalties to ensure their children would not be sent to jail. However, according to DRC's laws, jail time or prison would be considered a last resort for children under 18, highlighting the need to educate women on DRC's legal system.



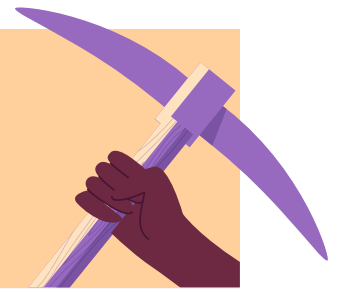
What This Means for Ending Child Labour

The solution can't be to simply ban children from mine sites. If children are mining out of desperation and hunger—and being encouraged to do so by their family—they will continue to need to work.

Putting a fence up at a mine site displaces the child miner to another mine site, potentially to a more precarious area or with a more predatory actor. In the absence of mining, children may move into agriculture, domestic work, markets, or even odd-jobs in the community—all carrying their own risks.

If money that children are earning is going to pay for family needs like food, then we need to increase the income of the main breadwinners—women. To do this, we need to increase their overall security and ensure that they are part of leading their communities.

Women across the artisanal cobalt mining sector need:



- skills and tools to take on higher paid roles within mine sites
- support towards fair pricing, health and safety measures, and community savings
- voices in decision making within their homes, mine sites, and communities
- access to women-led organizations including cooperatives or mining associations

Supporting locally women-led programs are essential complimentary measures to responsible sourcing projects in cobalt. By addressing the root causes of child labour we can create conditions that support human rights and peace. Artisanal cobalt mining has the potential to be a driver for development and economic prosperity for DRC.

Ending child labour starts with investing in women artisanal cobalt miners in Democratic Republic of Congo.

What You Can Do



As a consumer

- Share Gloria's story with your friends, families, colleagues, and networks.
- Learn more about how and why investing in women can help to end child labour in Democratic Republic of Congo's cobalt mines.
- Ask questions about how your products are sourced and from where.
- Tell companies you are interested in purchasing products sourced with materials from artisanal miners.

As a company sourcing cobalt

- Don't boycott sourcing from Democratic Republic of Congo as cobalt mining is an important livelihood for local communities.
- Proactively engage with local communities to address the issue of child labour by moving away from enforcement, which is putting children and women at further risk, and introduce sustainable, evidence-based measures through a progressive improvement approach.
- Invest in improved practices and gender equality by funding local actors in DRC to meet the identified needs for women in the artisanal cobalt sector.

As a policymaker

- Listen and actively engage those working in the sector, especially women themselves, to understand the context and evidence-based solutions to end child labour.
- Introduce policy reform and its implementation that supports women's rights and ends discrimination at mine sites.
- Invest in increasing women's security and women-led solutions by funding local actors in DRC to meet the identified needs for women in the artisanal cobalt sector.



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