



MALI

A Poisonous Mix

Child Labor, Mercury, and Artisanal Gold Mining in Mali

HUMAN
RIGHTS
WATCH

Summary and Key Recommendations



An artisanal gold mine, Kéniéba circle, Mali.

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Children carry calabashes and buckets for panning at an artisanal gold mine, Kéniéba circle, Mali.

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In many poor rural areas around the world, men, women, and children work in artisanal gold mining to make a living. Artisanal or small-scale mining is mining through labor-intensive, low-tech methods, and belongs to the informal sector of the economy. It is estimated that about 12 percent of global gold production comes from artisanal mines.





Mining is one of the most hazardous work sectors in the world, yet child labor is common in artisanal mining. This report looks at the use of child labor in Mali's artisanal gold mines, located in the large gold belt of West Africa. Mali is Africa's third largest gold producer after South Africa and Ghana; gold is Mali's most important export product.

It is estimated that between 20,000 and 40,000 children work in Mali's artisanal gold mining sector. Many of them start working as young as six years old. These children are subjected to some of the worst forms of child labor, leading to injury, exposure to toxic chemicals, and even death. They dig shafts and work underground, pull up, carry and crush the ore, and pan it for gold. Many children suffer serious pain in their heads, necks, arms, or backs, and risk long-term spinal injury from carrying heavy weights and from enduring repetitive motion. Children have sustained injuries from falling rocks and sharp tools, and have fallen into shafts. In addition, they risk grave injury when working in unstable shafts, which sometimes collapse.

Child miners are also exposed to mercury, a highly toxic substance, when they mix gold with mercury and then burn the amalgam to separate out the gold. Mercury attacks the central nervous system and is particularly harmful to children. Child laborers risk mercury poisoning, which results in a range of neurological conditions, including tremors, coordination problems, vision impairment, headaches, memory loss, and concentration problems. The toxic effects of mercury are not immediately noticeable, but develop over time: it is hard to detect for people who are not medical experts. Most adult and child artisanal miners are unaware of the grave health risks connected with the use of mercury.

The majority of child laborers live with and work alongside their parents who send their children into mining work to increase the family income. Most parents are artisanal miners themselves, and are paid little for the gold they mine, while traders and some local government officials make considerable profit from it. However, some children also live or work with other people—relatives, acquaintances, or strangers, and are economically exploited by them. A significant proportion of child laborers are migrants, coming from different parts of Mali or from neighboring countries, such as Burkina Faso and Guinea. Some of them may be victims of trafficking. Young girls in artisanal mining areas are also sometimes victims of sexual exploitation and abuse.

Many children working in artisanal mining never go to school, missing out on essential life skills as well as job options for the future. The government has largely failed to make education accessible and available for these children. School fees, lack of infrastructure, and poor quality of education deter many parents in mining areas from sending their children to school. Schools have also sometimes failed to enroll and integrate children who have migrated to mines.

Nevertheless, some child laborers attend school but struggle to keep up, as they are working in the mines during holidays, weekends, and other spare time.

In the view of Human Rights Watch, with some exceptions, Malian and international gold companies operating in Mali have not done enough to address the issue of child labor in the supply chain. Much of the gold from Mali's artisanal mines is bought by small traders who supply middlemen and trading houses in Bamako, the country's capital. A few trading houses export the gold to Switzerland, the United Arab Emirates (in particular Dubai), Belgium, and other countries.

Under international law, the government of Mali is obligated to protect children from the worst forms of child labor, and from economic exploitation, trafficking, and abuse. It also has an obligation to ensure free and compulsory primary education for all. The government must take measures to avoid occupational accidents and diseases, and reduce the population's exposure to harmful substances. International development partners should assist poorer nations, such as Mali, to fulfill their obligations under international law. Businesses, under international law and other norms, also have a responsibility to identify, prevent, mitigate, and account for their impact on human rights through policies and due diligence measures.

Encouragingly, the government of Mali has taken some important measures to protect children's rights. It has outlawed hazardous child labor in artisanal mines and, in June 2011, adopted a National Action Plan for the Elimination of Child Labor in Mali. The government has also made some progress in improving access to education, though net enrollment remains low at 60.6 percent. With regard to mercury, the government supports mercury reduction measures through the upcoming global treaty on mercury.

Yet, the government has not put its full political weight behind these efforts. Existing initiatives, such as the work of the National Unit to Combat Child Labor, tend to be isolated, understaffed, and lack full support from other ministries. Health policy lacks a strategy to prevent or treat health problems related to mercury use or other mining-related conditions. Child laborers, including those in artisanal mining areas, have not benefitted from government's education policy, and the education system has not been adapted to their needs. Mining policy has focused on industrial mining, carried out by international companies, and has largely neglected problems related to artisanal mining, including child labor. Meanwhile, local government officials and traditional authorities such as local chiefs have benefitted financially from artisanal mining. Government policies on crucial areas such as health, education, and artisanal mining, are also sometimes undermined by the *laissez-faire* attitude of local government officials, who carry considerable weight in the current decentralized governance structure. Such attitude



Children and a woman pan for gold at an artisanal gold mine, Kéniéba circle, Mali.

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effectively undermines the government's efforts to address child rights issues, including child labor in artisanal gold mining.

Donors, United Nations agencies, and civil society groups have undertaken some important initiatives on child labor, education, or artisanal mining in Mali. For example, the International Labor Organization (ILO) and a Malian non-governmental organization, Réseau d'Appui et de Conseils, have assisted children in leaving mining work and starting school. But such initiatives have been limited in scope, suffered from paucity of funding, and lacked consistent political backing. The United States and the European Commission have drastically reduced their funding for international child labor programs in Mali, contributing to a funding crisis at the ILO. At the international level, the ILO has failed to follow up on its 2005 call to action "Minors out of Mining," in which 15 governments—including Mali—committed to eliminating child labor in their artisanal mining sector by 2015.

Hazardous child labor in Mali's artisanal mines can only be ended if different actors—central and local governments, civil

society, UN agencies, donors, artisanal miners, gold traders and companies—prioritize its elimination, give it their full political support, and provide financial support to efforts aimed at ending it. There is an urgent need for feasible and concrete solutions that can bring about change.

As a first step, the government should take immediate measures to end the use of mercury by children working in artisanal mining, through a public announcement reiterating the ban on such hazardous work for children, an information campaign in mining areas, and regular labor inspections.

Beyond this immediate step, the government and all relevant stakeholders should come together to implement the government's action plan on child labor. The government should also take steps to improve access to education in mining zones, by abolishing all school fees, introducing state support for community schools, and establishing a social protection scheme for vulnerable children. The government and other actors should provide stronger support for artisanal gold miners, such as support in the creation of cooperatives, and the introduction of alternative technologies that reduce the use of mercury. The government should also address the health impact of mercury on artisanal miners, in particular on children, and address other mining-related health problems. International donors and UN agencies should support the government in its efforts to eliminate hazardous child labor in



Women work with mercury in the presence of small children at Baroya mine, Kéniéba circle. Miners habitually handle mercury in the course of gold processing.



A woman holds liquid mercury, used to extract gold, in her bare hand at Baroya, Kéniéba circle. The mercury binds to any gold present, creating a gold-mercury amalgam. A local trader burns a mercury-gold amalgam. The mercury vaporizes during the process. Mercury vapors are highly toxic.

artisanal mining, politically, financially, and with technical expertise. There is the need to convene a national roundtable on hazardous child labor in artisanal mining in Mali, to bring together all relevant actors—government, civil society, UN, donors, experts, and business—and create momentum for concerted action.

Malian and international companies should recognize their responsibility regarding child labor and other human rights issues. Companies should introduce thorough due diligence processes and engage in meaningful dialogue with their suppliers and their government, urging measures towards the elimination of child labor within a specific time frame, for example, two years. They should also directly support projects that aim to eliminate child labor, such as education and health programs for children in artisanal mining areas. An immediate and total boycott of gold from Mali is not the answer to human rights violations in Mali's artisanal gold mines. Boycott risks reducing the income of impoverished artisanal mining communities and may even increase child labor as families seek to boost their income.

At the regional level, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) should ensure that the future ECOWAS Mining Code prohibits child labor in artisanal mining, including the use of mercury, and mandates governments to take steps to reduce the use of mercury. At the international level, the future global treaty on mercury should oblige governments to take measures that end the practice of child laborers working with mercury. The ILO should build on its past efforts to end child labor in artisanal mining by reviving its “Minors out of Mining” initiative.



A bar of gold melted at a trading house in Bamako.

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A boy climbs out of a shaft at an artisanal gold mine, Kéniéba circle, Mali.

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A boy digs a shaft at an artisanal gold mine, Kéniéba circle, Mali.

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KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- The Malian government should immediately take steps **to end the use of mercury by child laborers**, through information dissemination and outreach with affected communities.
- The Malian government and international donors, including the United States and European donors, should give full political backing and sufficient financial support for the recently adopted **National Action Plan on Child Labor**, including to programs for the withdrawal of children working in mines.
- As part of a nationwide **campaign on child labor and the right to education**, local authorities—with oversight from national government—should raise awareness in the mining communities about the laws on hazardous child labor and compulsory education. Labor inspectors should start inspections in artisanal mines and sanction those who use child labor in contravention of the law.
- The Malian government should improve **access to education** for children in artisanal gold mining areas, by lifting school fees, introducing free school meals, increasing state financial support for community schools, and improving school infrastructure. It should also establish a social protection scheme for child laborers, including those in mining areas that ties cash transfers to regular school attendance.
- The Malian government, together with civil society groups, should develop a national action plan for the **reduction of mercury in artisanal mining**, with attention to the particular situation of children and pregnant women living and working in artisanal mining areas.
- The Malian government should develop a comprehensive public health strategy to **tackle chronic mercury exposure and mercury poisoning** in Mali, with a particular focus on child health.
- The Malian government should improve the **livelihood of artisanal mining communities** by providing training on improved mining techniques, assisting artisanal miners in efforts to set up cooperatives, and offering income-generating activities in other sectors.
- National and international companies buying gold from Mali's artisanal mines should have **due diligence procedures** that include regular monitoring of child labor. If child labor is found, companies should urge the government and suppliers to take measurable steps towards the elimination of child labor in their supply chain within a defined time frame, and directly support measures to end child labor.
- The International Labor Organization should renew its **“Minors out of Mining” initiative**, in which 15 governments committed to eliminate child labor in artisanal mining by 2015.
- All governments should support a **strong global treaty on mercury** that requires governments to implement mandatory action plans for mercury reduction in artisanal gold mining. The action plans should include strategies to end the use of mercury by children and pregnant women working in mining, and public health strategies to address the health effects of mercury poisoning.



A group of boys working at Tabakoto mine, in Kéniéba circle. Young boys frequently dig holes or pull up the ore with buckets.

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Child Labor, Mercury, and Artisanal Gold Mining in Mali

Child labor is common in artisanal mining, one of the most hazardous work sectors in the world. This report, based on over 150 interviews, uncovers the human rights abuses child laborers suffer in the artisanal gold mines in Mali, Africa's third largest gold producer. An estimated 20,000 to 40,000 children work in the mines, digging pits, working underground, carrying, panning, and crushing ore, and using mercury to extract the gold. Mercury is highly toxic and particularly harmful to children.

Children start working as young as six years old, and many never go to school. Many child laborers are migrants, and risk becoming victims of trafficking or sexual exploitation.

Mali's government and donors have done far too little to end child labor in artisanal gold mining. The government has outlawed hazardous child labor, but failed to enforce the law. A June 2011 action plan against child labor is awaiting implementation. Education policies lack specific efforts to improve access to education for child laborers. The government has also failed to address the harmful effects of mercury.

Mali lacks strong international support in its fight against child labor. The United States recently cut funding for child labor programs in Mali, and a 2005 initiative by the International Labor Organization to eliminate child labor in mining has fizzled out. Malian traders and international companies have not done enough to address the issue of child labor in the supply chain. The two main international export destinations for Mali's artisanal gold are Switzerland and Dubai.

The Malian government, UN agencies, donors, civil society, artisanal miners, traders, and companies should urgently take action to end the use of child labor in artisanal gold mining, improve access to education for child laborers, and address mercury-related problems.

*Children work in an artisanal gold mine,
Kéniéba cercle, Mali.*

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