

Forced Labor Indicators Project

Sector-Specific Resource on Gold



Introduction

Gold is an extremely scarce commodity. Yet due to increasing demand for gold in the production of jewelry, electronics, and financial instruments, the world now consumes more gold than ever before. Gold production and gold supply chains across the globe have been linked to a range of exploitative working conditions, including occupational safety and health hazards, the worst forms of child labor, environmental destruction, and in some instances, forced labor and human trafficking.

The majority of the world's gold is produced by large, multinational companies using advanced technology to extract gold in large-scale mines.ⁱ However, around 20 percent is produced by artisanal small-scale mines.ⁱⁱ These include illegal gold mines, which are often linked with the presence of criminal groups and violence. Armed groups smuggle and sell illegally extracted gold into formal supply chains and use the profits to fund their operations — which may involve sex trafficking and child trafficking. Victims of displacement, minorities, and individuals who lack identity documents often work in mines due to a lack of alternative employment options.ⁱⁱⁱ

Gold is mined either through hard-rock mining, in which minerals and metals are extracted from rock in large open-pit mines or in tunnels that are dug into rock faces, or alluvial mining, in which minerals and metals are extracted from bodies of water.^{iv} After the gold is mined, it is separated from the material that bears it using gravity concentration or chemical processes.^v Gold generally passes through several layers of consolidators, intermediaries, and exporters (some of whom may be illegal smugglers) before it enters the processing level.^{vi} Once gold reaches refineries in countries including the United States and Switzerland, it becomes even more difficult to identify its origin, as gold from all over the world may be mixed and processed together. Refineries sell gold to banks, jewelry companies, and electronic producers around the world.^{vii}

What does forced labor (or forced labor vulnerability) look like in gold production?

The International Labor Organization defines forced labor as “all work or service which is exacted from any person under the menace of any penalty and for which said person has not offered himself voluntarily”.^{viii} This means that a person is in a forced labor situation if they have entered into a job against their will, or without informed consent, and cannot leave that job without penalty or a threat of penalty of any kind.



The ILO and the International Conference of Labor Statisticians (ICLS) have developed specific indicators of forced labor related to a worker’s experience that help to identify the presence of involuntary work and/or a threat or menace of penalty.^{ix} To learn more about the indicators, access [FLIP’s free online learning resource on The ILO Forced Labor Indicators](#).

Common labor abuses documented in gold production include indebtedness, hazardous working conditions for both adults and children,^x confiscation of identity documents,^{xi} and sexual exploitation.^{xii} The presence of criminal groups and violence in illegal gold mining restricts workers’ freedom of movement. The geographical isolation of many mining regions, as well as the environmental damage and displacement caused by illegal mining, can create highly vulnerable populations in mining camps and towns.^{xiii} In addition, discoveries of gold in a region can lead to “rushes” of migration, which contribute to forced labor risk^{xiv} as well as deceptive recruitment resulting in trafficking for sexual exploitation.^{xv} In some cases, these common labor abuses and vulnerabilities constitute indicators of forced labor.

The tables below present examples of indicators of involuntariness and threats or menace of penalty that have been documented in gold production:

Indicator of Involuntary Work	Documented Example in Gold Production
Situations in which the worker must perform a job of different nature from that specified during recruitment without a person’s consent	News sources cite interviews with women who were forced into prostitution in and around small-scale gold mines after being lured to other countries with promises of work in shops or salons. Trafficked women work in brothels to pay off debts incurred through their deceptive recruitment. ^{xvi}
Work in hazardous conditions to which the worker has not consented, with or without compensation or protective equipment	<p>Artisanal gold mining is highly hazardous and presents serious health hazards to all workers, especially children.^{xvii} Workers in mining shafts are at risk of death or severe injury from explosions, rock falls, and tunnel collapse. Dust or toxic gases in the air underground can lead to lung damage.^{xviii}</p> <p>Workers in artisanal gold mining, especially women and children, are at risk of mercury exposure. Verité research indicates that in some formal processing plants, workers are exposed to cyanide with minimal personal protective equipment (PPE). In illegal gold mining, many workers are exposed to mercury with little or no PPE.^{xix}</p>

Degrading living conditions imposed by the employer, recruiter, or other third-party	News sources have reported that trafficked women working in brothels in mining regions may live and work in poor conditions. ^{xx}
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Indicator of a Threat or Menace of Penalty	Documented Example in Gold Production
Withholding of valuable documents (such as identity documents or residence permits)	Incidents of document retention have been noted among migrant workers in growing mining towns. ^{xxi} In some brothels, trafficked women are unable to access their identity documents, phones, or money. ^{xxii}
Debt bondage or manipulation of debt	In some countries, miners are reportedly forced to work in order to pay off household or business debts. ^{xxiii} Trafficked women working in brothels in mining communities work to pay off debts incurred through their deceptive recruitment. ^{xxiv}
Threats or violence against workers, workers' families and relatives, or close associates	Research conducted by Global Witness has noted that miners in some countries are reportedly forced to work under threat of violence and intimidation from armed groups. ^{xxv}

Monitoring for forced labor risk in gold production:

Numerous contextual factors can contribute to forced labor vulnerability. Some factors reflect characteristics of the type of work involved, some reflect circumstances in a particular geographic region, and some reflect the risk tied to the demographics of the workers involved.

- Certain **types of work**, like seasonal, informal, or dangerous work, can increase vulnerability; work in gold mining is often hazardous, particularly in illegal gold mines.
- **Key geographic risk factors** that can contribute to vulnerability among miners in the gold industry include the geographical isolation of gold mining areas, large-scale land acquisition, and environmental degradation. The waste from gold production, such as mercury and acidic water, can contaminate local water sources.
- Finally, **demographic characteristics** can create risk factors that increase vulnerability. Some populations commonly employed in gold production—for example, migrant workers, workers living in poverty, workers recruited by labor brokers, young workers, and workers from minority groups—may be more vulnerable to forced labor risk.

These factors can intersect to heighten vulnerability. For example, a young and impoverished migrant may be more vulnerable than an older migrant from a wealthy and well-established family.

Forced labor vulnerability is context-specific. It is important to tailor the identification process to different sectors, types of work, locations, and population by knowing what kinds of questions to ask and what indicators and red flags to look for. To learn more about understanding risk, key contextual factors, and key questions to ask that can help identify the presence of indicators in different contexts,

access [Module III: Understanding Risk](#) from FLIP's online learning course on The ILO Forced Labor Indicators.

ⁱ *Artisanal and Small-Scale Mining*. The World Bank, 21 November 2013, www.worldbank.org/en/topic/extractiveindustries/brief/artisanal-and-small-scale-mining.

ⁱⁱ *Artisanal and Small-Scale Mining*. The World Bank, 21 November 2013, www.worldbank.org/en/topic/extractiveindustries/brief/artisanal-and-small-scale-mining.

ⁱⁱⁱ *The Nexus of Illegal Gold Mining and Human Trafficking in Global Supply Chains*. Verité, 2016, www.verite.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Verite-Report-Illegal_Gold_Mining-2.pdf.

^{iv} 'How Gold Is Mined. *World Gold Council*, www.gold.org/about-gold/gold-supply/how-gold-is-mined. ; 'Artisanal and Small-Scale Gold Mining Without Mercury.' U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, www.epa.gov/international-cooperation/artisanal-and-small-scale-gold-mining-without-mercury.

^v *A Practical Guide: Reducing Mercury Use in Artisanal and Small Scale Gold Mining*. UN Environmental Program (UNEP), July 2012, web.unep.org/globalmercurypartnership/reducing-mercury-use-artisanal-and-small-scale-gold-mining-practical-guide%2%A0.

^{vi} *The Nexus of Illegal Gold Mining and Human Trafficking in Global Supply Chains*. Verité, 2016, www.verite.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Verite-Report-Illegal_Gold_Mining-2.pdf.

^{vii} *Risk Analysis of Indicators of Forced labor and Human Trafficking in Illegal Gold Mining in Peru*. Verité, 2013, www.verite.org/sites/default/files/images/IndicatorsofForcedLaborinGoldMininginPeru.pdf.

^{viii} ILO Forced Labor Convention, 1930 (No. 29).

https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C029.

^{ix} "Hard to See, Harder to Count: Survey Guidelines to Estimate Forced Labor of Adults and Children." *International Labor Office (ILO)*, 2012. p. 53. www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_norm/---declaration/documents/publication/wcms_182096.pdf. ; International Labor Office, Department of Statistics. "Guidelines Concerning the Measurement of Forced Labor." Geneva, October 2018. https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---stat/documents/meetingdocument/wcms_648619.pdf.

^x *The Nexus of Illegal Gold Mining and Human Trafficking in Global Supply Chains*, Verité, 2016, www.verite.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Verite-Report-Illegal_Gold_Mining-2.pdf.

^{xi} Guilbert, Kieran. "Sex for the soil: Senegal's gold rush fuels human trafficking from Nigeria." *Thomson Reuters Foundation*, 30 Mar. 2017, www.reuters.com/article/us-senegal-trafficking-sexwork-idUSKBN1711A4.

^{xii} "Precious Metal, Cheap Labor. Child Labor and Corporate Responsibility in Ghana's Artisanal Gold Mines." *Human Rights Watch*, 2015, www.hrw.org/report/2015/06/10/precious-metal-cheap-labor/child-labor-and-corporate-responsibility-ghanas.

^{xiii} *The Nexus of Illegal Gold Mining and Human Trafficking in Global Supply Chains*, Verité, 2016, www.verite.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Verite-Report-Illegal_Gold_Mining-2.pdf.

^{xiv} "Gold rush in Kédougou, Senegal: Protecting Migrants and Local Communities." *Global Eye on Human Trafficking*. International Organization for Migration, 2012, publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/globaleyeissue11_29feb2012.pdf.

^{xv} Guilbert, Kieran. "Sex for the soil: Senegal's gold rush fuels human trafficking from Nigeria." *Thomson Reuters Foundation*, 30 Mar. 2017, www.reuters.com/article/us-senegal-trafficking-sexwork-idUSKBN1711A4. ; Mednick, Sam. "Growth in Burkina Faso Gold Mining Fuels Human Trafficking." *The Associated Press*, 30 Apr. 2021, apnews.com/article/united-nations-burkina-faso-africa-human-trafficking-government-and-politics-b945a64f01c56bb575f0bc12ac514bd6.

^{xvi} Mednick, Sam. "Growth in Burkina Faso Gold Mining Fuels Human Trafficking." *The Associated Press*, 30 Apr. 2021, apnews.com/article/united-nations-burkina-faso-africa-human-trafficking-government-and-politics-b945a64f01c56bb575f0bc12ac514bd6.; Guilbert, Kieran. "Sex for the soil: Senegal's gold rush fuels human trafficking from Nigeria." *Thomson Reuters Foundation*, 30 Mar. 2017, www.reuters.com/article/us-senegal-trafficking-sexwork-idUSKBN1711A4.

^{xvii} "The Hidden Costs of Jewelry: Human Rights in Supply Chains and the Responsibility of Jewelry Companies." *Human Rights Watch*, 8 February 2018, www.hrw.org/report/2018/02/08/hidden-cost-jewelry/human-rights-supply-chains-and-responsibility-jewelry#_ftn12.

^{xviii} "Child Labor in Gold Mining: The Problem." *International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labor (IPEC)*. International Labor Organization (ILO), June 2006, www.ilo.org/ipecc/areas/Miningandquarrying/MoreaboutCLinmining/lang--en/index.htm.

^{xix} *The Nexus of Illegal Gold Mining and Human Trafficking in Global Supply Chains*, Verité, 2016, www.verite.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Verite-Report-Illegal_Gold_Mining-2.pdf.

^{xx} Mednick, Sam. "Growth in Burkina Faso Gold Mining Fuels Human Trafficking." *The Associated Press*, 30 Apr. 2021, [apnews.com/article/united-nations-burkina-faso-africa-human-trafficking-government-and-politics-b945a64f01c56bb575f0bc12ac514bd6](https://www.apnews.com/article/united-nations-burkina-faso-africa-human-trafficking-government-and-politics-b945a64f01c56bb575f0bc12ac514bd6).

^{xxi} Guilbert, Kieran. "Sex for the soil: Senegal's gold rush fuels human trafficking from Nigeria." *Thomson Reuters Foundation*, 30 Mar. 2017, www.reuters.com/article/us-senegal-trafficking-sexwork-idUSKBN1711A4.

^{xxii} Mednick, Sam. "Growth in Burkina Faso Gold Mining Fuels Human Trafficking." *The Associated Press*, 30 Apr. 2021, [apnews.com/article/united-nations-burkina-faso-africa-human-trafficking-government-and-politics-b945a64f01c56bb575f0bc12ac514bd6](https://www.apnews.com/article/united-nations-burkina-faso-africa-human-trafficking-government-and-politics-b945a64f01c56bb575f0bc12ac514bd6).

^{xxiii} *The Congo Report: Slavery in Conflict Minerals*. Free the Slaves, June 2011, www.freetheslaves.net/document.doc?id=243

^{xxiv} Mednick, Sam. "Growth in Burkina Faso Gold Mining Fuels Human Trafficking." *The Associated Press*, 30 Apr. 2021, [apnews.com/article/united-nations-burkina-faso-africa-human-trafficking-government-and-politics-b945a64f01c56bb575f0bc12ac514bd6](https://www.apnews.com/article/united-nations-burkina-faso-africa-human-trafficking-government-and-politics-b945a64f01c56bb575f0bc12ac514bd6).

^{xxv} *The Congo Report: Slavery in Conflict Minerals*. Free the Slaves, June 2011, www.freetheslaves.net/document.doc?id=243 ; *Faced With A Gun, What Can You Do?* Global Witness, 2009, www.globalwitness.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/englishsummary.pdf.