

Case Study 2.3

Mining for use in mobile phones – gender-based violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo

This case study shows how scarce and valuable mineral resources necessary for the production of mobile phones can fuel conflict and widespread, extreme gender-based violence. Companies have been under pressure to rid their supply chains of conflict minerals, specifically tin, tungsten, tantalum and gold.

Under the 2010 Dodd-Frank financial reform law, publicly traded US companies must disclose whether they use minerals that originate from central Africa, and what steps they have taken to determine the source of those minerals.

A certification framework developed by a group of African nations has enabled companies to make steps to eliminate conflict minerals from their supply chain. The Regional Certification Mechanism, developed by the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR), is an intergovernmental organization of 12 African countries, established in 2011.

The certification framework has led to a growing list of validated conflict-free mines, which makes it easier for companies to clean up their supply chains.

For further information see: Guardian (UK) “African nations work together to rid supply chains of conflict materials.” Available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/2015/sep/14/conflict-minerals-africa-dodd-frank-apple-ford>

Despite the steps taken to rid supply chains of conflict materials, evidence shows that women, as well as girls and boys, in artisanal mining areas are at high risk of gender-based violence. (ITUC/ICEM 2011; Nathan & Sarkar, 2011) In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) young men far from home, family and community dominate the mining camps. In mining settlements where high concentrations of ex-combatants reside, gender-based violence is especially widespread. However, state and non-state security actors around mines are also responsible for perpetrating gender-based violence.

The gender-based violence that occurs as a consequence of the conflict in the DRC is sustained and fuelled by financial gain. Some girls are trafficked into prostitution with false promises of legitimate employment. Rape is a common form of sexual violence committed in mining areas against women and girls, by individuals or groups of men, often under the influence of alcohol or drugs. Rape is such a common instrument of control that the eastern region of the Congo has been labeled the ‘rape capital of the world’. Rape is reportedly mainly perpetrated by those involved in mining and members of the army, but also by police and intelligence service personnel, and mineral traders. Mining communities are also characterized by a high number of forced marriages, often with minors, in some cases after rape, or after a period of service as a prostitute.

A general culture of unsafe sex persists – women are forced to engage in unprotected sex, which increases the risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and HIV/AIDS. As a result of sexual and gender-based violence, teenage pregnancies and child abandonment have also increased.

The ITUC and global union ICEM (now part of IndustriALL) (2011) have documented the extent of sexual violence in the mining sector and recommend that:

- Multinational enterprises improve transparency and due diligence measures in line with the OECD Guidelines, with full involvement of trade unions, to promote international labour standards in the supply chain and put the issue of violence against women on the agenda of social dialogue.
- Local trade unions create women's departments and support the organizing of women in trade unions, along with measures to give women voice and improve conditions of work and fair pay, provide training for women and put violence against women on the agenda of social dialogue.
- Local and international women's organizations raise awareness about women's rights, precarious employment and violence against women in mining areas, provide literacy education, and improve women's livelihoods through development programmes.

In the preface to the ITUC /ICEM report, the UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict stated: I want to commend ITUC and its three affiliated organizations in the DRC, the CDT, UNTC and CSC as well as the ITUC Africa, for their efforts to address the issue of violence against women, including sexual violence. The role of trade unions is extremely important, not the least within the framework of social dialogue. We can all try to be role models by speaking up against the horrible crime that conflict-related sexual violence is, because only by talking about it openly can we together hope to break what has been called history's greatest silence.