Child labour in gold mining: The problem

Gold mining is extremely dangerous work for children. Yet still today, tens of thousands are found in the small-scale gold mines of Africa, Asia and South America. Children work both above and under ground. In the tunnels and mineshafts they risk death from explosions, rock falls, and tunnel collapse. They breathe air filled with dust and sometimes toxic gases. Above ground, children dig, crush, mill, and haul ore – often in the hot sun. Some stand for hours in water, digging sand or silt from riverbeds and then carrying bags of mud on their heads or backs to sieving and washing sites. In all mining sites, there is risk of falling down open shafts or into pits that are scattered around the areas.

Like adults, children suffer the effects of noise and vibration, poor ventilation and lighting, exhaustion and over-exertion. But children are particularly vulnerable to exposure to dust and chemicals because their systems are still developing. The result can be serious respiratory conditions (such as silicosis), constant headaches, hearing and sight problems, joint disorders and various dermatological, muscular and orthopaedic ailments and wounds, jeopardizing both their mental and physical long-term health..

Gold mining stands out from other forms of small-scale mining for an additional grave hazard: the mixing of mercury with the crushed ore or sediments to separate out the gold. Mercury is a highly toxic metal and is very often mishandled by small-scale miners. It can be absorbed through the skin, or through inhalation of mercury vapour. Seeping into the soil or water supply, it can contaminate food and drinking water. Prolonged exposure to mercury can lead to serious physical disorders and neurological problems.

Informal gold miners often do not wear protective clothing (e.g. hardhats) or know correct methods for digging tunnels and using explosives. Although aware that it is dangerous, most do not know about the proper handling of mercury. In some countries mercury amalgamation is done at home by women, which exposes other family members, including very young children, to mercury poisoning.

The following descriptions of children in gold mining areas are taken from several countries where IPEC has worked or is currently working to remove children from child labour in this sector. While the hazards and processes are fairly similar from country to country, the family

situations, working conditions, ages and gender of children involved vary according to local traditions, the level of poverty, the regulatory environment and other schooling or employment alternatives. Some children mine alongside their families or other community members after school or during holidays. Some drop out of school to work full time. In the worst cases, children are trafficked to mine sites where they are forced to work in absolutely horrendous slavery-like conditions.

Africa

The Sahel region of Africa: Burkina Faso and Niger

Child labour in gold mining, or *orpaillage* as it is called locally, is widespread and increasing in Burkina Faso and Niger. As much as one quarter of all children in the world who work in mines are in a region of the Sahel common to these two countries. The reason for this is partly economic, partly social. The droughts of the 1970s and 1980s set off a downward spiral of poverty which, in turn, disrupted communities and families to such an extent that children previously protected by traditional customs and structures became a resource like any other that could be used to increase income.

Much of the small-scale gold mining in the Sahel is casual, seasonal and informal. Estimates have shown that children under 18 may constitute up to 30-50 per cent of the entire *orpailleur* workforce (estimated at between 200,000 and 500,000 across the two countries). Approximately 70 per cent of the children are under the age of 15, indicating that children start working from a young age.

The majority of children come from villages within the area, often within 10 km of the site, although a substantial number travel considerable distances within or even outside the country. Children who choose to migrate to the site with friends, peers, sponsors or even on their own usually end up having to fend for themselves. An unknown percentage of children at the mining sites have been trafficked as well. Non-local children are particularly vulnerable to abuse and deceit by adult *orpailleurs* and tend to work full-time in the pits and for longer hours than other children whose parents are present. Foreign girls in the *orpaillage* communities (usually Ghanaian or Togolese) may have come with a person who promised them work in a petty trade. Once at the mining site, however, many of these foreign girls are abandoned and turn to prostitution in order to survive.

Virtually all gold-mining communities in the Sahel are in remote, exceedingly poor rural areas. They are rough places without sanitation, health services and regular access to clean water. These unorganized and usually temporary settlements have virtually no public facilities. Schools, if they exist, are many kilometres away. Nevertheless, in Niger and Burkina Faso many families accompany their men to these sites. Thus, a number of children are born and grow up in mining settlements. Left to themselves while their parents work and without school or supervised sports, children easily become involved in mining or other forms of child exploitation. These problems are exacerbated during “gold rushes” when migrant miners converge around a freshly discovered site.

Poor living and working conditions mean that all young children are exposed to infections and diseases

caused by unclean water and lack of sanitation and complicated by malnutrition, Dysentery, diarrhoea, malaria, meningitis, measles, tuberculosis and other parasitic and viral infections are common.

In Burkina Faso and Niger, children are engaged in almost all aspects of the mining operation, from rock breaking and transport to washing, crushing/pounding and mineral-dressing. Children are particularly "useful" in underground gold deposits as their small size and agility allows them to more easily work in the narrow shafts and galleries.

Girls as well as boys undertake heavy work, although it is more likely that boys will work underground, while girls stay on the surface. Work for both involves the transport, crushing, washing and processing of rock. Typically, children under 10 years old tend to be given less arduous tasks, such as petty trading, pushing water carts and working as messengers. Regular, full-time work usually begins between the ages of 12 to 14 years.

Children often work every day, although they occasionally get to rest for a day at the weekend. Working hours are extremely variable – from 8 to 14 hours – but almost always at least 6-8 hours per day (occasionally the children actually sleep underground). In many cases, children have insufficient time to rest and inadequate food and water. Again, those without parents are particularly at risk, having nowhere to secure a decent meal or safe place to rest before returning to work.

Although children are often expected to do the same work as adults, they invariably receive less pay. Most often, remuneration for children is a combination of in kind and cash payments. Others are not paid but work simply for food, shelter and security. For those that are paid, the cost of food, tools and medication may be deducted from their earnings such that they are left with virtually nothing. Those working with their parents are seen as simply providing an extra pair of hands to share the workload and are therefore not paid directly.

Underground, the children are often forced to undertake exceedingly strenuous work under very hazardous conditions. Most of the tools and equipment they use are primitive and heavy, requiring considerable strength to wield effectively that constantly strains children's bodies.

The "get-rich-quick" mentality that pervades mining sites undermines conventional norms of social conduct. Many young boys resort to alcohol (both commercial and locally brewed) or narcotics (especially amphetamines and marijuana) in the belief that it makes them stronger and more able to cope with the harshness of the underground environment and work. Even those that initially resist taking drugs often succumb to peer pressure. For young girls there are other threats, especially for those without the protection of their families. These include sexual assault, teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, especially HIV/AIDS. Such health risks are augmented by sexual

promiscuity and misguided local beliefs that orpailleurs will have greater luck in the pits if they have intercourse with a virgin or have unprotected intercourse and do not wash before going underground.

Ghana

Small-scale mining in Ghana, referred to locally as "galamsey" (gather and sell), has been on the increase since the early 1980s. An estimated 10,000 children are involved in various parts of the country, much of it in gold mining.

Small-scale mine operators principally engage children between ages 10 and 18 years old who are paid minimal daily wages. These children perform all sorts of low-skilled tasks, including building trenches, carrying loads of gold ore on their heads to washing sites (done largely by girls), washing the ore (done largely by boys), amalgamating the gold using mercury, and selling the product.

Although there have been efforts to regularize small-scale mining in the country in the past 15 years to improve conditions, most sites are still unregistered and illegal. They tend to be set up on private land, sometimes encroaching on concessions of legitimate mining firms. Galamsey not only involves surface mining, but also underground mining in abandoned shafts, exposing those involved to additional deadly hazards – flooding, cave in and toxic fumes.

Originally the domain of unemployed youths looking to earn quick money, the practice has grown over the years and now attracts local people of all ages and migrants, principally adult men unaccompanied by spouses. The problem has been compounded in some areas by increased unemployment in farming caused by the loss of farmland to legitimate mining operations or to small-scale miners who essentially squat it.

School dropout is a widespread problem in mining areas in Ghana. As most of the children involved come from poor homes, they initially start mining part time to help pay school fees with the consent or their parents. Many end up abandoning school altogether as the attraction of making money, even very little, is stronger than their perception of any long-term benefits of continued schooling. Given the relatively short life spans of most small-scale mining sites, these children will eventually find themselves unemployed and without skills for finding other jobs.

The expansion of small-scale mining and the increase in migrant labour to these areas has been associated with an increase in prostitution, often involving girls as young as 12 years old. This has inevitably led to increased teenage pregnancies, single parenting, and sexually transmitted diseases, particularly HIV/AIDS.

Côte d'Ivoire

An IPEC sponsored study on small-scale gold mining in Côte d'Ivoire describes some truly distressing practices at illegal mine sites in that country. In the worst cases, children are being held in slavery-like conditions. The researchers found children trafficked from neighbouring Burkina Faso, Guinea and Mali. These children worked ten hours a day, seven days a week, were paid very little and were badly nourished. Abusing amphetamines to get through the day was common. Most of the children considered being sick normal: over half said they were often sick and all complained of muscle and joint pain and fatigue.

Children hired locally with or without other family members fared only marginally better. Girls as young as 5 years old were being sent down into narrow pits with buckets to empty out water that seeped in during the night. Girls did a great deal of the hauling of mud to washing sites, requiring that they carry on their heads loads far too heavy for their body sizes. Older girls faced the extra burden of household chores after work or on days off.

Democratic Republic of Congo

During the recent war in Congo, thousands of children were abducted and forced to become child soldiers. In the mineral rich eastern region of the country, many children were doubly exploited – while they weren't fighting, they were forced into hard labour in the numerous small-scale mines that supported the local militias and their sponsors. Following the withdrawal of the Ugandan and Rwandan armies in 2002-03 and the arrival of United Nations peacekeeping forces, demobilization and rehabilitation of child soldiers has moved forward in many areas of the DRC. In some of the hotly contested mining areas, however, resistance to demobilization by tribal militia leaders has been violent and has made progress nearly impossible. Children in these areas are out of reach of international relief organizations and continue to risk being recruited into militias or forced to work in mines. It is known that many of those who have managed to demobilize themselves, particularly older boys, have resorted to mining to survive. Cut off from their families and without an education or other skills, they have very little choice.

Asia

Mongolia

Mongolia is rich in gold deposits, and informal gold mining has become an important and growing source of income in rural areas. It has been estimated that 20 per cent of the country's rural workforce is involved either full or part time. Children, mostly boys, work with their families or with a group from their village. The average age of these mining children is 14 years old. However, below the age of 13, there are actually more girls than boys at mine sites. Children's contributions to family incomes are often vital; in many cases, they are actually providing the main source of income to the household.

Many children at Mongolian mines do not go to school; others go to school on

weekdays and work during weekends and holidays.

The most frequent problems are hunger, fatigue, illness, and injuries due to accidents. In addition to being exposed to mercury, children face various other health problems. These include physical exhaustion, respiratory, kidney and urinary tract diseases, and joint and back pain.

Settlements near mining sites tend to be overcrowded and unhygienic; there are high levels of alcohol abuse and often no access to emergency and health services. Informal mines often encroach on legal concessions belonging to formal mining companies. This creates tensions that have been known to lead to violent altercations between mining company security staff and informal miners.

Philippines

In the Philippines, gold deposits are can be found in many areas. Small-scale gold mining is thus widespread, employing perhaps as many a 500,000 people across the country. There are essentially two types of small-scale mining in the Philippines: "indigenous", which is carried out by communities or tribes for collective benefit and somewhat self-regulated by social norms and ritual, and "gold rush mining" which attracts poor migrants an others who work a site until it is considered empty and then move on. Most child labour is found in the latter.

Children working in small-scale mines generally work alongside older family members in different steps of the processing and provide support services. The typical child gold miner is a boy between the ages of 15 – 17 years old who is a school dropout and who contributes about 30 per cent of the overall family income. Girls are sometimes involved, particularly in panning, but generally are exploited in other ways – by having to forego education to look after younger siblings are perform household chores, or worse by getting pulled into prostitution or domestic labour for third parties.

In the Philippines, children participate in a particularly dangerous gold mining practice called compressor mining. Here child miners dive into and open, muddy well perhaps two metres wide and up to seven metres deep. They extract soil in a murky environment with zero visibility wearing crude eye masks and breathing oxygen from a tube with the help of a compressor. The miner works in a squatting position, anchoring himself with elbows or knees pressed against the walls while shovelling mud into sacks. He usually stays down anywhere from three to five hours before taking a break.

Latin America

The Andes region of South America: Bolivia, Ecuador and Peru

Child labour is prevalent in small-scale gold mining in Latin America. This is mainly because there are so many families or entire communities that earn their livelihood from this dangerous work. There may be as

many as 65,000 children participating in Bolivia, Ecuador and Peru alone. Since the 1990s a significant expansion of small-scale mining has occurred, not only in countries where mining has traditionally played an important role in the economy, such as Bolivia and Peru, but also in other countries where mining is of less importance, such as Ecuador.

Mining communities in the Andean region are usually located far from any important town. They are particularly isolated during the rainy season (January to March), as roads, which in many cases are unpaved, become treacherous. These isolated settlements lack basic services such as decent housing, water, electricity, medical services or schooling facilities for the children.

Working conditions are very poor, as production systems are generally obsolete and inadequate. Work days can last up to 10 hours. The work done by children varies according to the type of mine from which ore is being extracted (underground, rivers or surface deposits). Many children (generally adolescents) work with their parents in such activities as extraction, hauling ore, crushing and grinding the ore, and mercury amalgamation. It is usually unremunerated family labour, but there are cases in which adolescents work for third parties as day labourers.

Small children begin working with their mothers at a very young age. As they get older, boys begin to do more difficult tasks with their fathers or for third parties, while girls continue to work with their mothers, recovering and processing ore from waste rock. Due to cultural beliefs, miners generally do not allow females to enter the mines: the majority of children working down in the mines are boys. Outside the mines, girls process the ore and sift the mineral from the slag.

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June 2006