

# Modern slavery in Democratic Republic of the Congo

## Global Slavery Index 2023 Country Study



### KEY STATS

Population (2021) 89,561,000

GDP per capita, PPP (Current intl \$) \$1,142

# 4.5

PREVALENCE OF  
MODERN SLAVERY  
per 1,000 people

# 407,000

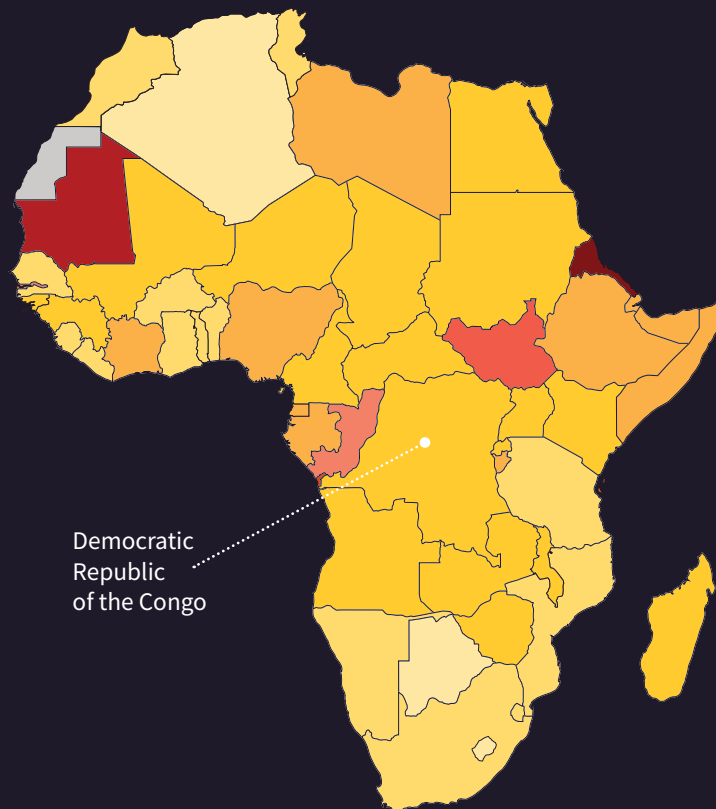
ESTIMATED NUMBER  
OF PEOPLE LIVING IN  
MODERN SLAVERY

# 94/100

VULNERABILITY TO  
MODERN SLAVERY

# 36/100

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE  
TO MODERN SLAVERY



Estimated prevalence of modern slavery across Africa



## Overview

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) took some action to address modern slavery, on par with the regional average for government responses in Africa. This reflects ongoing anti-trafficking efforts as well as a range of measures introduced in recent years, such as launching its first national action plan on human trafficking,<sup>1</sup> and establishing a free hotline to report modern slavery crimes.<sup>2</sup> However, there are opportunities for further action, including strengthening legislative protections by making human trafficking, slavery, and forced marriage criminal offences in line with international standards. The DRC is among the most vulnerable countries to modern slavery in Africa, largely driven by the effects of ongoing conflict, and has the 25th highest prevalence of modern slavery in the region.

## Prevalence

The 2023 Global Slavery Index (GSI) estimates that on any given day in 2021, there were 407,000 people living in modern slavery in the DRC. This equates to a prevalence of 4.5 people in modern slavery for every thousand people in the country. Within the Africa region, the DRC is ranked 25 out of 50 countries in terms of prevalence of modern slavery, and 97 out of 160 countries globally.

Notably, this estimate does not include the number of children recruited into armed conflicts, which evidence indicates does occur in the DRC.<sup>3</sup> This figure is best understood as a baseline number of people living in modern slavery in the DRC.

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Kolwezi,  
Democratic Republic  
of Congo (DRC),  
October 2022.

Miners at the Shabara artisanal mine, which employs some 20,000 people in shifts of 5,000 at a time, on the hunt for cobalt, a critical component in rechargeable batteries that power mobile phones and electric vehicles. The DRC produces more than 70 percent of the global supply of cobalt, mainly through its industrial mines, but it also has hundreds of thousands of informal diggers who toil in hazardous conditions. Photo credit: JUNIOR KANNAH/AFP via Getty Images.

## Forced Labour

### Forced labour exploitation

The government reported identifying 155 victims of forced labour in the DRC in 2021.<sup>4</sup> Forced labour takes place in several sectors, including agriculture, domestic service, and mining.<sup>5</sup> In industrial cobalt mines, for example, workers face extremely low pay, lack of contracts, small food rations, abuse, and discrimination.<sup>6</sup> During the COVID-19 pandemic, workers also faced movement restrictions, with one company reportedly confining workers to its mine for three months at the pandemic's onset.<sup>7</sup> Children in the DRC are also subject to forced labour in mining, including mining of gold, tin ore, tantalum ore, and tungsten ore.<sup>8</sup> In 2019, a lawsuit was brought against global tech companies seeking damages for forced labour of children in cobalt mines in the DRC, however, the case was dismissed in 2021.<sup>9</sup> Cobalt exported from the DRC enters global supply chains to create goods such as electric cars, solar panels, and mobile phones.<sup>10</sup>

### Forced commercial sexual exploitation of adults and children

The government reported identifying 86 victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation in 2021.<sup>11</sup> While little information exists on the forced commercial sexual exploitation of adults and children in the DRC, reports suggest that abuse against vulnerable populations is sometimes perpetrated by those entrusted to protect them.

In 2020, for example, an investigation revealed that aid workers sexually abused and exploited women during the 2018-2020 Ebola outbreak in the DRC.<sup>12</sup> Further, a 2022 report identified a case where a young girl was trafficked by her family into sexual exploitation with United Nations peacekeepers.<sup>13</sup> Adolescent girls in situations of poverty reportedly sell sex with UN peacekeepers in exchange for money, food, or other goods.<sup>14</sup> Forced sexual exploitation in DRC has also been linked to ongoing conflict and violence in the country,<sup>15</sup> as discussed in further detail below.

## Forced marriage

It is estimated that 29 per cent of women and six per cent of men aged 20-24 years were first married or in union before the age of 18 in the DRC.<sup>16</sup> The rates of child marriage are higher among women from rural areas (40 per cent) compared to women from urban areas (19 per cent).<sup>17</sup>

While limited recent information exists, prior reports suggest that in some cases, families force their daughters to marry the father of their child if they become pregnant.<sup>18</sup> Forced marriage has also been linked to the effects of ongoing conflict in DRC,<sup>19</sup> as discussed below.

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## The impact of conflict on modern slavery

Ongoing conflict and violence involving over 100 armed groups in the DRC<sup>20</sup> is linked to evidence of forced labour, forced sexual exploitation, forced marriage, and use of children in armed conflict. A study by the International Organization for Migration, International Labour Organization, and Walk Free on slavery-related abuses among internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the DRC's North Kivu province found that one in five IDPs had experienced either forced labour, forced recruitment into armed groups or forces, or abduction in the preceding five years.<sup>21</sup>

The study was based on surveys of modern slavery and related experiences conducted among IDPs residing in displacement sites in North Kivu, capturing experiences before and after displacement. Most forced labour activities (75 per cent) were directly related to the conflict, involving fighting, spying, portering, and providing support services to armed groups or forces. Information on the characteristics of forced labour experiences revealed a significant link to the conflict, with armed groups or the armed forces<sup>22</sup> being involved in nine out of ten of cases (82 per cent and 8 per cent respectively).<sup>23</sup>

Sexual exploitation is also linked to the ongoing conflict in the DRC. In 2021, the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the DRC (MONUSCO) recorded more than 1,000 cases of conflict-related sexual violence, including forced marriage and sexual slavery. These cases were primarily perpetrated against women and girls at the hands of non-state armed groups and state actors.<sup>24</sup> Armed groups use sexual violence as a tactic to assert control over natural resources and territory, or as a tool of punishment for perceived collaboration with other groups or state forces.<sup>25</sup>

Among female IDPs who reported forced labour in North Kivu province, 41 per cent experienced forced sexual exploitation, compared to only half a per cent of men and boys who reported forced labour.<sup>26</sup> Among IDPs who experienced forced marriage in North Kivu province, armed groups were responsible for the forced marriage in 27 per cent of cases, followed by a spouse (24 per cent), and then parents (19 per cent) and other family members (14 per cent).<sup>27</sup>

**“We were in the field when the rebels came and forced me to become the wife of their leader; I had refused but I couldn't because I was afraid of dying”**

Female respondent from North Kivu, the DRC, on her forced marriage at 29.

Armed groups and armed forces continue to recruit and use children in the DRC.<sup>28</sup> Reflecting patterns both in the DRC<sup>29</sup> and globally,<sup>30</sup> our findings in North Kivu show that most children who were forcibly recruited into armed groups or forces were boys (94 per cent).<sup>31</sup> Respondents reported that methods of recruitment used by armed groups and forces included taking children by force (88 per cent), using threats (58 per cent), and deception (eight per cent).<sup>32</sup> This is consistent with existing reports identifying abduction as the most frequent recruitment method in the DRC.<sup>33</sup> Other sources claim that children may join armed groups due to poverty or lack of opportunities, to defend their communities, or to gain a sense of empowerment.<sup>34</sup> Some children may also view joining an armed group or force as preferable to remaining in an IDP camp.<sup>35</sup> Children who were recruited into armed groups or forces engaged predominantly in fighting and military service (76 per cent), support services (48 per cent), and portering (46 per cent).<sup>36</sup>

**“An armed group came to our village and took all the young people, I was not spared.”**

Male respondent from North Kivu, the DRC, on his recruitment at age 16.

## IDPS AND MODERN SLAVERY

IDPs who experienced forced labour, recruitment and abductions

**NORTH KIVU, DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO**  
1 IN 5\*



**SOUTH SUDAN**  
1 in 20



**NORTH EAST NIGERIA**  
1 in 60



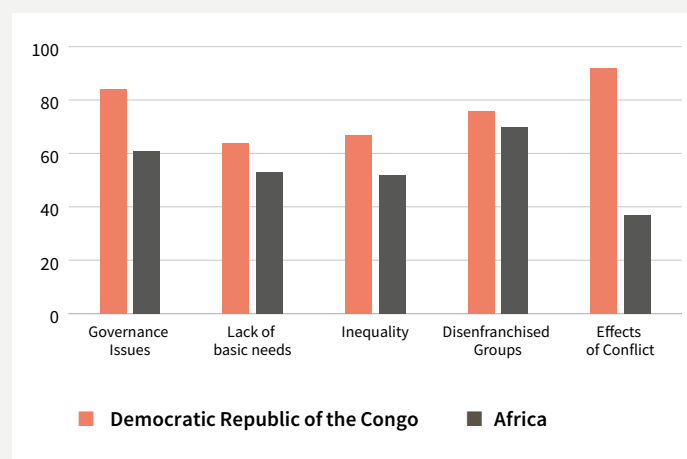
\*Among the sample of IDPs in North Kivu, Democratic Republic of the Congo

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## Vulnerability to modern slavery

**Figure 1.**  
**Vulnerability in Democratic Republic of the Congo to modern slavery by dimension, compared to the regional average**



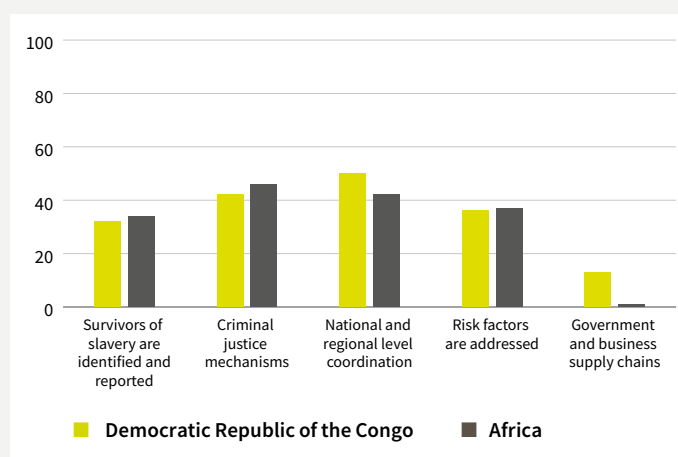
The DRC is among the most vulnerable countries to modern slavery both in the region and globally. Vulnerability in the country is largely driven by the effects of multiple complex and ongoing conflicts, which have driven mass displacement: the DRC had the second highest number of new conflict-related displacements of any country in 2017, 2018 and 2019, and the highest number in 2020 (2.2 million), bringing the total number of IDPs displaced due to conflict and violence to 5.3 million.<sup>37</sup> This population is particularly at risk of modern slavery. In North Kivu, almost half (47 per cent) of IDP respondents who were in situations of forced labour were in a displacement site when the forced labour began.<sup>38</sup> Climate change and natural disasters also drive displacement in the DRC. For example, in 2021, a volcanic eruption in eastern DRC separated hundreds of children from their families, leaving them vulnerable to abductions, child labour, or recruitment by armed groups.<sup>39</sup>

Families in situations of poverty in the DRC may adopt negative coping mechanisms, such as forcing children into commercial sex<sup>40</sup> or early marriage to ease economic strains.<sup>41</sup> The rates of forced marriage in the DRC were higher among women from households of the lowest wealth quintile (45 per cent) compared to the wealthiest households (10 per cent).<sup>42</sup> Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, economic insecurity coupled with school closures pushed many children into situations of child labour, including in domestic work.<sup>43</sup>

Corruption is also linked to modern slavery in the DRC. Despite having criminalised corruption,<sup>44</sup> the issue reportedly impacted law enforcement efforts to combat trafficking.<sup>45</sup> Corruption allegations against officials in the DRC range from directly engaging in trafficking crimes, assisting in facilitating trafficking, and obstructing justice.<sup>46</sup> Corruption and complicity among government armed forces in trafficking crimes remained a significant concern. Reports of the Congolese National Army recruiting children, including into combat roles, continued<sup>47</sup> despite policies against the recruitment of children.<sup>48</sup>

## Government response to modern slavery

**Figure 2.**  
**Democratic Republic of the Congo's responses to modern slavery by milestone, compared with the regional average**



Overall, the DRC took some action to respond to modern slavery, however significant gaps in the response remain. The government's strongest efforts were related to national and regional level coordination of the response to modern slavery, yet further action must be taken to address risk factors and identify and support survivors.

In 2022, the DRC government increased efforts to support survivors of modern slavery by developing standard operating procedures for frontline responders<sup>49</sup> and establishing a free hotline to report trafficking cases.<sup>50</sup> However, the government did not operate any services dedicated to supporting survivors of modern slavery. As a result, officials generally referred victims to shelters run by civil society.<sup>51</sup> Although the government worked with civil society to remove children recruited by armed groups in eastern DRC,<sup>52</sup> cases have also emerged where children were detained by authorities for associating with armed groups,<sup>53</sup> particularly groups in opposition to the government.<sup>54</sup> These children are detained in correctional facilities, often in poor, overcrowded conditions without sufficient access to food. Reports of sexual abuse of girls in detention have also emerged.<sup>55</sup>

Since the 2018 GSI, the DRC has implemented significant measures to improve national and regional level coordination in responding to modern slavery. For example, the government launched its first national action plan on human trafficking for the period 2020 to 2024, focusing in particular on awareness raising and stakeholder training.<sup>56</sup> Although the government allocated some resources to the plan, these resources were insufficient to fully implement the plan.<sup>57</sup> The DRC also established the Agency for the Prevention for the Fight Against Trafficking in Persons (APLTP) in 2019, comprising government and UN representatives, and civil society organisations to lead the government's anti-trafficking efforts.<sup>58</sup>

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Although the DRC has criminalised some forms of modern slavery, gaps in the legal framework persist. The government has not yet criminalised human trafficking or slavery in line with international standards in national legislation. Comprehensive anti-trafficking legislation has been drafted by ALTIP and the Ministry of Justice in partnership with an international organisation, though the law has been pending for several years.<sup>59</sup>

Further, although the Child Protection Act of 2009 sets the minimum age of marriage at 18 without exception,<sup>60</sup> forced marriage is not criminalised in line with international standards. Under Article 174f of the Penal Code, the offence of forced marriage only applies to parents or guardians of the victim.<sup>61</sup> This does not protect victims of forced marriage where parents or guardians are not the perpetrators.

In a positive step, the government identified the mining sector as being high risk for forced child labour and has taken action to work with the sector to eradicate forced child labour.<sup>62</sup>

In August 2020, a zero-tolerance policy for forced child labour in the mining sector was issued as part of a decree focusing on mining communities. Since then, inspectors have continued to visit and screen mines for labour violations. Despite this, the ability to effectively monitor mining sites is reportedly impacted by limited capacity and resources, as well as informants (including government officials) warning mining companies of unannounced inspections.<sup>63</sup>



**THE  
GLOBAL  
SLAVERY  
INDEX  
2023**



For more information  
on modern slavery,  
visit the Global Slavery  
Index 2023 website.



## Recommendations

- 1 Survivors identified and supported**
  - Address gaps in support services available for people who have experienced modern slavery. Ensure survivors can freely leave shelters and that children who were recruited into the armed forces receive specialised support services. Ensure that needs-based, protection-specific assistance is provided in areas of high displacement.
  - Activate safe referral and incident reporting mechanisms in humanitarian settings. Ensure frontline humanitarian and peacebuilding actors are trained on modern slavery concepts and responses, particularly how to identify and refer cases of exploitation to support services.<sup>64</sup>

- 2 Criminal justice mechanisms**
  - Ensure that survivors of exploitation are not punished or detained for crimes committed while under the control of criminals, including children recruited by armed groups.
  - Ensure adequate protection in national legislation, including by effectively making human trafficking, slavery, and forced marriage criminal offences in line with international standards.

- 3 National and regional level coordination**
  - Address resourcing gaps to fully implement the national action plan on human trafficking.
  - Support the integration of anti-slavery action into humanitarian and peacebuilding responses, including humanitarian response plans; action plans to address grave violations against children in armed conflict; Women, Peace and Security agendas; and transition measures for peacebuilding and peacekeeping.<sup>65</sup>

- 4 Risk factors are addressed**
  - Work with humanitarian actors to raise awareness of modern slavery among populations at high risk of displacement.
  - Ensure sufficient funding is allocated to conduct labour inspections to identify modern slavery, and that inspections are regularly taking place in the informal sector.
  - Investigate official complicity in modern slavery cases.

- 5 Government and business supply chains**
  - Expand efforts to address forced and child labour in high-risk sectors, such as mining,

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## Endnotes

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