

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	400
Land:	Eritrea
Kilde:	US Department of Labor
Titel:	2022 Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor: Eritrea
Udgivet:	26. september 2023
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	28. maj 2024



Document #2098498

USDOL – US Department of Labor (Author)

2022 Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor: Eritrea

No Advancement – Efforts Made But Complicit in Forced Child Labor

In 2022, Eritrea is receiving an assessment of no advancement. Despite initiatives to address child labor, Eritrea is assessed as having made no advancement because it demonstrated complicity in the use of forced child labor. Government officials continued to force students in grade 12, some of whom are under the age of 18, to participate in military training elements of the government's compulsory national service program. Otherwise, the government made efforts by increasing the number of its child wellbeing committees from 43 in 2021 to 67 in 2022. Children in Eritrea are subjected to the worst forms of child labor, including in forced military training associated with national service, forced agricultural labor, and forced recruitment by state armed groups for use in armed conflict. In addition, Eritrea's minimum age protections do not apply to children working outside formal employment relationships, and laws do not criminally prohibit the use of a child for prostitution; the use, procuring, or offering of a child in illicit activities; or the procuring or offering of a child for pornography or pornographic performances. Moreover, the government does not publicly release information on its criminal law enforcement efforts.

I. Prevalence and Sectoral Distribution of Child Labor

Table 1 provides key indicators on children's work and education in Eritrea. Data on some of these indicators are not available from the sources used in this report.

Children	Age	Percent
Working (% and population)	5 to 14	Unavailable
Attending School (%)	5 to 14	Unavailable

Combining Work and School (%) 7 to 14 Unavailable

Primary Completion Rate (%) 55.6

Table 1. Statistics on Children's Work and Education

Source for primary completion rate: Data from 2019, published by UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2023. (1)

Data were unavailable from International Labor Organization's analysis, 2023. (2)

Based on a review of available information, Table 2 provides an overview of children's work by sector and activity.

Sector/Industry	Activity
Agriculture	Farming, activities unknown (3,4) Herding livestock (3-5)
Industry	Small-scale manufacturing, including recycling, remanufacturing, and repurposing metal (4,6)
Services	Domestic work, including fetching water and firewood (3,6) Working in auto mechanic shops, bicycle repair shops, tea and coffee shops, metal workshops, grocery stores, the <i>Asmara</i> bowling alley, and open markets (6-9) Street work, including vending, cleaning cars, and begging (3,4,6,7)
Categorical Forms of Labor‡	Worst Child Compulsory participation in national service or military training associated with national service prior to age 18, and in forced agricultural and domestic work (4,10-12) Forced recruitment of children by state armed groups for use in armed conflict (13,14)

Table 2. Overview of Children's Work by Sector and Activity

‡ Child labor understood as the worst forms of child labor *per se* under Article 3(a)–(c) of ILO C. 182.

In order to graduate from high school and meet the compulsory training component of national service prescribed by the Proclamation on National Service No. 82/1995, students are required to complete their final year of schooling (grade 12) at the Warsay Yikealo Secondary School located at the Sawa military complex. Each year, 11,000 to 15,000 students enter grade 12 at Sawa, and while many of these students have typically reached age 18 by the time they participate in the military training component of 12th grade schooling, some are reportedly as young as age 16. (4,10,15,16) During the year at Sawa, 4 months are devoted to mandatory military training, which includes military discipline

and procedures, weapons training, a survival exercise, and a 2- to 4- week war simulation, and some conscripts are forced to perform agricultural labor on government-owned farms. (11,15,17) During the reporting period, the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Education reinstituted a compulsory summer campaign program in which high school students implement “greening” programs for little to no pay, and failure to comply could result in students being fined or being unable to enroll in school the following term. (18)

Without completion of (and official release from) national service assignments, Eritrean children face a future of indefinite national service. They endure notoriously harsh conditions and corruption at Sawa, including allegations of military commanders offering food and better treatment to female students in exchange for sexual acts. (12,19) These factors underlie an ongoing exodus of unaccompanied minors from the country. (3,20,21) Adolescent children, some as young as age 14, who attempted to leave Eritrea were sometimes detained or forced to undergo military training, despite being younger than the minimum age of 18 for compulsory military recruitment. (3,20,22,23) In addition, the military periodically conducts roundups, known as *giffas*, to perform identity checks. There have been reports that *giffas* have resulted in the imprisonment of children alleged to be attempting to evade compulsory national service and recruitment into the military. (10,20,24)

The UN Special Rapporteur’s report on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, covering the period from April 2021 to April 2022, collected witness accounts of children as young as 14 years old rounded up off the streets for military conscription. (13,14) The UN Special Rapporteur also received information on the deployment of Eritrean children in military combat in Tigray. Most of the children deployed were 16 and 17 years old. (14,18) A large number of children were allegedly injured or killed during the early stages of the conflict, and dozens sustained grave injuries causing disabilities. (14,18)

Eritrea is particularly vulnerable to climate change, especially flooding and drought, which may make children more vulnerable to the worst forms of child labor. During the reporting period, the Southern Red Sea region was dealing with the effects of drought, including dead livestock, failed crops, and high malnutrition rates. (18) Children, particularly in rural areas, also face numerous barriers to education access, which may increase their vulnerability to child labor, including a lack of access to teachers, lack of personnel due to teachers fleeing the country to avoid open-ended conscription into the national service, and a limited number of classrooms, as well as a lack of transportation, uniforms, and school supplies. (4,20,25) To address the shortfall, the government recently deployed teachers to less-populated regions to educate rural and nomadic children. (4,7) The government’s national development agenda also prioritizes the expansion of schooling in rural areas. (4,26,27)

II. Legal Framework for Child Labor

Eritrea has ratified all key international conventions concerning child labor (Table 3).

Convention	Ratification
ILO C. 138, Minimum Age	✓
ILO C. 182, Worst Forms of Child Labor	✓
UN CRC	✓
UN CRC Optional Protocol on Armed Conflict	✓
UN CRC Optional Protocol on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography	✓
Palermo Protocol on Trafficking in Persons	✓

Table 3. Ratification of International Conventions on Child Labor

The government has established laws and regulations related to child labor (Table 4). However, gaps exist in Eritrea's legal framework to adequately protect children from the worst forms of child labor, including minimum age protections that do not apply to all children.

Standard	Meets International Standards	Age	Legislation
Minimum Age for Work	No	14	Articles 3 and 68 of the Labor Proclamation (28)
Minimum Age for Hazardous Work	No		Articles 3, 35, and 69 of the Labor Proclamation (28)
Identification of Hazardous Occupations or Activities Prohibited for Children	No		Article 69 of the Labor Proclamation (28)
Prohibition of Forced Labor	Yes		Articles 3 and 9 of the Labor Proclamation; Articles 565 and 570 of the Penal Code of 1957 (28,29)
Prohibition of Child Trafficking	No		Articles 94, 565, 604-607 of the 1957 Penal Code (29)
Prohibition of Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children	No		Articles 604-607, 609, 610, 776 of the Penal Code of 1957 (29)
Prohibition of Children in Illicit	No		

Standard	Meets		Age Legislation
	International Standards		
Activities			
Minimum Age for Voluntary Military Recruitment	State No		
Prohibition of Compulsory Recruitment of Children by (State) Military	of Yes		Articles 6 and 8 of the Proclamation on National Service (10)
Prohibition of Military Recruitment by Non-state Armed Groups	No		
Compulsory Education Age	No	14‡	
Free Public Education	No		Article 21 of the Constitution (30)

Table 4. Laws and Regulations on Child Labor

‡ Age calculated based on available information (22,23,26)

In 2015, Eritrea passed into law a new Penal Code that expanded legal protections against human trafficking, forced labor, and the sexual exploitation of children. However, because the 2015 Penal Code was never published in the Gazette of Eritrean Laws, as required under Article 3, the law has not officially taken effect. (12,21,31) The Labor Proclamation's minimum age protections do not apply to children working outside formal employment relationships, such as those who are self-employed, which does not conform to international standards requiring all children to be protected by the minimum age to work. (28) In addition, Article 69 of the Labor Proclamation authorizes the Minister of Labor to issue a list of activities prohibited to children under age 18; however, the government has not determined by national law or regulation the types of hazardous work prohibited for children. (32) Likewise, the Labor Proclamation's hazardous work protections do not apply to children working outside formal employment relationships. (28)

Laws governing the use of children in illicit activities are not sufficient because the Penal Code does not criminally prohibit the use, procuring, or offering of a child for the production and trafficking of drugs. (29) Laws regarding the commercial sexual exploitation of children are also insufficient because the use of a child for prostitution is not criminally prohibited, nor is procuring or offering a child for pornography or for pornographic performances. (29) While the Proclamation on National Service No. 82/1995 requires compulsory national service from all citizens

ages 18 to 40, the law is silent on voluntary military service, and thus places no explicit limitations on the voluntary recruitment of children under 18 into the national armed forces. (10)

Eritrea does not appear to have any laws guaranteeing free basic education or setting the compulsory education age, increasing the risk of children's involvement in child labor. However, several government policies provide free and compulsory basic education to all children below the age of 14, including the Education Sector Development Plan, the Nomadic Education Policy, and the Comprehensive National Child Policy. (26,32-34)

III. Enforcement of Laws on Child Labor

The government has established institutional mechanisms for the enforcement of laws and regulations on child labor (Table 5). However, gaps exist within the operations of enforcement agencies that may hinder adequate enforcement of their child labor laws.

Organization/Agency	Role & Activities
Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare (MoLSW)	Enforces labor laws and investigates labor abuses, including child labor, through its Labor Inspection Division. (13,16)
Eritrean Police	Enforce laws and investigate referred cases of child trafficking, commercial sexual exploitation of children, and the use of children in illicit activities. (6,13)

Table 5. Agencies Responsible for Child Labor Law Enforcement

Labor Law Enforcement

In 2022, labor law enforcement agencies in Eritrea took actions to address child labor (Table 6). However, gaps exist within the operations of the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare (MoLSW) that may hinder adequate labor law enforcement, including a lack of labor law enforcement data.

Overview of Labor Law Enforcement	2021	2022
Labor Inspectorate Funding	Unknown (35)	Unknown (4)
Number of Labor Inspectors	28 (35)	55 (36)
Mechanism to Assess Civil Penalties	Yes (28)	Yes (28)
Training for Labor Inspectors Provided	Yes (35)	Yes (4,36)
Number of Labor Inspections Conducted at Worksite	Unknown (35)	Unknown (4)
Number of Child Labor Violations Found	Unknown (35)	Unknown (4)
Number of Child Labor Violations for Which Penalties Were Imposed	Unknown (35)	Unknown (4)

Overview of Labor Law Enforcement	2021	2022
Number of Child Labor Penalties Imposed that Were Collected	Unknown (35)	Unknown (4)
Routine Inspections Conducted	Unknown (35)	Unknown (4)
Routine Inspections Targeted	Unknown (35)	Unknown (4)
Unannounced Inspections Permitted	Yes (28)	Yes (28)
Unannounced Inspections Conducted	Unknown (35)	Unknown (4)
Complaint Mechanism Exists	Unknown (35)	Unknown (4)
Reciprocal Referral Mechanism Exists Between Labor Authorities and Social Services	Unknown (35)	Unknown (4)

Table 6. Labor Law Enforcement Efforts Related to Child Labor

Inspectors, in collaboration with the local administrations and police, are empowered to identify and prosecute child labor violations. Penalties for labor violations are assessed in coordination with inspectors, administrators, and the police, and are adjudicated by judicial authorities. (7)

Labor inspectors are not provided sufficient resources, including transportation, to conduct investigations of sites where child labor is likely to occur. (4) Moreover, the government did not provide information on its labor inspectorate efforts for inclusion in this report, nor did the government provide information on actions taken by enforcement agencies to address child labor. (12,13)

Criminal Law Enforcement

In 2022, criminal law enforcement agencies in Eritrea took actions to address child labor (Table 7). However, gaps exist within the operations of the criminal enforcement agencies that may hinder adequate criminal law enforcement, including a lack of criminal law enforcement data.

Overview of Criminal Law Enforcement	2021	2022
Training for Criminal Investigators Provided	Unknown (35)	Unknown (4)
Number of Investigations	Unknown (35)	Unknown (4)
Number of Prosecutions Initiated	Unknown (35)	Unknown (4)
Number of Convictions	Unknown (35)	Unknown (4)

Overview of Criminal Law Enforcement	2021	2022
Imposed Penalties for Violations Related to the Worst Forms of Child Labor	Unknown (35)	Unknown (4)
Reciprocal Referral Mechanism Exists Between Criminal Authorities and Social Services	Unknown (35)	Unknown (4)

Table 7. Criminal Law Enforcement Efforts Related to Child Labor

Despite evidence that children younger than age 18 are forced to participate in military training, research did not identify measures taken by the government in 2022 to ensure that children were not subjected to compulsory military training. (4,6,11,28)

IV. Coordination of Government Efforts on Child Labor

The government has established a key mechanism to coordinate its efforts to address child labor (Table 8). However, gaps exist that hinder the effective coordination efforts to address child labor, including the lack of a coordination mechanism to address all worst forms of child labor.

Coordinating Body	Role & Activities
Interagency Steering Committee on Trafficking and Migration	Aims to prevent and address human trafficking among vulnerable groups, including children. Includes representatives from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, MoLSW, the national police, the Immigration and Nationality Department, the National Union of Youth and Students. (18) The government did not report any action taken by the steering committee during the reporting period. (18)

Table 8. Key Mechanism to Coordinate Government Efforts on Child Labor

Eritrea has 67 child wellbeing committees, 19 of which were established in 2022, that operate at the local level and coordinate representatives from the political, health, educational, legal, and civil society sectors. They are charged with ensuring that children in distress receive specialized care. (4,7) The committee mandates are primarily focused on reducing female genital mutilation and child marriage, and are not directly related to addressing child labor. (4,6) Although Eritrea has a coordinating mechanism to address human trafficking, it does not have a coordinating mechanism to address other forms of child labor. (13)

V. Government Policies on Child Labor

The government has established policies related to child labor (Table 9). However, policy gaps exist that hinder efforts to address child labor, including a lack of efficacy in carrying out policies.

Policy	Description & Activities
Comprehensive National Child Policy	Addresses underlying causes of child labor through studies of and assessments on the nature and conditions of child labor, designs advocacy and public awareness campaigns on the worst forms of child labor, and empowers communities and the public sector to monitor and prevent child labor from occurring. (33,37) The policy calls for the provision of free and compulsory basic education to all children, irrespective of gender, sex, ethnicity, religion, or disability. (38) The policy outlines the creation of a National Action Plan for the elimination of child labor, but this plan has not been drafted, leaving children vulnerable to the worst forms of child labor. Although reports suggest that components of the policy are being implemented, research was unable to identify activities undertaken to implement the policy during the reporting period. (12,33)

Table 9. Key Policies Related to Child Labor

VI. Social Programs to Address Child Labor

In 2022, the government funded and participated in programs that include the goal of eliminating child labor (Table 10). However, gaps exist in these social programs, including inadequate efforts to address the problem in all sectors.

Program	Description & Activities
Complementary Elementary Education†	Program created by the government in partnership with UNICEF in 2007 that addresses the educational needs of out-of-school children ages 9 to 14 in remote and rural areas. Condenses 5 years of elementary education into a 3-year program to allow students to either mainstream into formal education at the secondary level or access vocational education. (3,17,39) During the reporting period, the Ministry of Education established 11 complementary elementary education centers with essential teaching and learning materials. (40)
Better Migration Management	EU-led program encompassing 11 countries in North, Central, and East Africa; aims to address the international labor market, including trafficking of children. The Government of Eritrea joined the program on May 28, 2019. (6,41) Research was unable to determine whether activities were undertaken to implement the policy during the reporting period.

Program	Description & Activities
Education Sector Development Plan (2018–2022)	Established 8 years of free and compulsory education for all children. (39,42) Included a strategy to ensure equitable access to education for all children, including in nomadic communities, through the provision of portable classrooms. (37,39) Research was unable to determine whether activities were undertaken to implement the program during the reporting period.

Table 10. Key Social Programs to Address Child Labor

For information about USDOL's projects to address child labor around the world, visit <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/ilab-project-page-search>

† Program is funded by the Government of Eritrea.

‡ The government had other policies that may have addressed child labor issues or had an impact on child labor. (40,43)

During the reporting period, the MoLSW supported more than 5,000 children to enroll and resume their education in an effort to prevent children from engaging in child labor. The MoLSW provided children with education materials and cash to cover their school uniforms, registration fees, and books. (4) Despite this effort, research found no evidence of programs to assist children working in agriculture, domestic work, and street work, or that address all worst forms of child labor in the country.

VII. Suggested Government Actions to Eliminate Child Labor

Based on the reporting above, suggested actions are identified that would advance the elimination of child labor in Eritrea (Table 11).

Area	Suggested Action	Year(s) Suggested
Legal Framework	Publish the Penal Code of 2015 in the Gazette of Eritrean Laws and ensure its full implementation.	2022
	Ensure that minimum age protections extend to all children working outside of formal employment relationships, including those who are self-employed.	2010 – 2022
	Determine the types of hazardous work prohibited for children and ensure that all children are protected by hazardous work prohibitions, including children in the informal sector and those working outside of formal employment relationships.	2015 – 2022
	Criminally prohibit the use, procuring, and offering of a child for illicit activities.	2013 – 2022

Area	Suggested Action	Year(s) Suggested	
	Criminally prohibit the use of a child for prostitution and procuring and offering of a child for pornography and pornographic performances.	2014 2022	-
	Ensure that the law establishes age 16 as the minimum age for voluntary recruitment by the state military with safeguards for voluntariness.	2022	
	Criminally prohibit the recruitment of children under age 18 by non-state armed groups.	2016 2022	-
	Ensure that the law establishes 16 as the minimum age for voluntary recruitment by the state military with safeguards for voluntariness.	2022	
	Establish by law free basic public education.	2016 2022	-
	Establish by law an age up to which education is compulsory that extends to 14 years, the minimum age for employment.	2016 2022	-
Enforcement	Cease the practice of imprisoning children discovered evading compulsory national service during military-led <i>giffas</i> .	2022	
	Publish information on labor inspectorate funding; total number of inspections conducted at worksites; number of violations found; number of violations for which penalties were imposed and collected; number of targeted, routine, and unannounced inspections conducted; and whether complaint mechanisms and referral mechanisms are in place.	2009 2022	-
	Ensure that labor inspectors are provided with sufficient resources, including transportation, to access sites where child labor is likely to occur.	2019 2022	-
	Publish information on criminal law enforcement efforts, including initial and refresher training for new investigators; the number of criminal investigations, violations, prosecutions, and convictions related to the worst forms of child labor; the number of penalties imposed; and whether a reciprocal referral mechanism exists.	2019 2022	-

Area	Suggested Action	Year(s) Suggested	
Coordination	Ensure that there are reciprocal referral mechanisms between labor authorities and social services.	2021 2022	–
	Publish activities undertaken by agencies responsible for child labor law enforcement to address child labor on an annual basis, including activities by the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare, and the Eritrean Police.	2022	
	Publish information on the Interagency Steering Committee on Trafficking and Migration's efforts to coordinate government activities to address human trafficking on an annual basis.	2022	
Government Policies	Establish a key coordinating mechanism to address all worst forms of child labor.	2009 2022	–
	Take actions to ensure that children under age 18 are not placed in military training or agricultural labor assignments as part of national service.	2009 2022	–
	Cease government programs that force high school children to engage in agricultural labor and other public works as a requirement to enroll in school.	2022	
	Publish information on actions taken to implement government policies relevant to child labor, including the Comprehensive National Child Policy.	2021 2022	–
Social Programs	Enact policies to address all forms of child labor using the framework outlined in the Comprehensive National Child Policy, including child labor in agriculture, manufacturing, the services industry, and in armed groups.	2022	
	Collect and publish data on the extent and nature of child labor in all sectors in which it is known to occur, including farming, to inform policies and programs.	2009 2022	–
	Enhance efforts to make education accessible for all children, including children in rural areas, by building schools, removing financial barriers to attendance, and improving safety to ensure the retention of qualified teachers and students.	2010 2022	–

Area	Suggested Action	Year(s) Suggested
	Publish information on actions taken to implement the Better Migration Management program on an annual basis.	2019 – 2022
	Institute programs and publish information regarding efforts to address child labor, including in agriculture, domestic work, street work, and the worst forms of child labor, including in commercial sexual exploitation.	2009 – 2022

Table 11. Suggested Government Actions to Eliminate Child Labor

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ecoi.net description:

Annual report on child labor (covering 2022)

Country:

Eritrea

Source:

[USDOL – US Department of Labor](#) (Author)

Original link:

<https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/resources/reports/child-labor/eritrea>

Document type:

Periodical Report

Language:

English

Published:

26 September 2023

Available on ecoi.net since:

10 October 2023

Document ID:

2098498

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Austrian Centre for
Country of Origin and
Asylum Research and
Documentation
(ACCORD)

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ecoi.net is run by the Austrian Red Cross (department ACCORD) in cooperation with Informationsverbund Asyl & Migration. ecoi.net is funded by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, the Austrian Ministry of the Interior and Caritas Austria. ecoi.net is supported by ECRE & UNHCR.

