

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	386
Land:	Eritrea
Kilde:	US Department of Labor
Titel:	2021 Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor Eritrea
Udgivet:	28. september 2022
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	2. november 2023

Document #2082712

USDOL – US Department of Labor (Author)

2021 Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor: Eritrea

No Advancement – Efforts Made But Complicit in Forced Child Labor

In 2021, 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 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 maintaining its Child Wellbeing Committees. Children in Eritrea are subjected to the worst forms of child labor, including in forced military training associated with national service and forced agricultural labor. Moreover, Eritrea's minimum age protections do not apply to children working outside formal employment relationships, and therefore do not conform to international standards. In addition, the government does not have a mechanism to coordinate its efforts to address the worst forms of child labor.

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I. Prevalence and Sectoral Distribution of Child Labor

Children in Eritrea are subjected to the worst forms of child labor, including in forced military training associated with national service and forced agricultural labor. (1) 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 (%)		60.3

Table 1. Statistics on Children's Work and Education

Source for primary completion rate: Data from 2018, published by UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2022. (2)
Data were unavailable from International Labor Organization's analysis, 2022. (3)

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 (4,5)
	Herding livestock (4-7)
Industry	Mining, including gold (8)
	Small-scale manufacturing (9)
Services	Domestic work, including fetching water and firewood (4,9)
	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 (1,6,9,10)
	Street work, including vending, cleaning cars, and begging (1,4,9)
Categorical Worst Forms of Child Labor‡	Compulsory participation in national service or military training associated with national service prior to age 18, and in forced agricultural and domestic work (5,11-13)
	Commercial sexual exploitation, sometimes as a result of human trafficking (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.

The Proclamation on National Service No. 82/1995 establishes compulsory military training and service, known as National Service, for all citizens ages 18 to 40. (5,12,15) To graduate from high school and meet the compulsory training component of national service, students are required to complete their final year of schooling (grade 12) at the Warsay Yika'alo 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. (5,12,14,16) 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. Some conscripts are forced to perform agricultural labor on government-owned farms. (13,15,17) In addition, conscientious objectors, including young Jehovah's Witnesses, are not given an alternative to military service and are prevented from receiving a high school diploma, a national ID card, a regional residence card and food subsidies, opening a bank account, or any kind of official employment unless they agree to military service. This leaves them vulnerable to becoming involved in illegal activity, including the worst forms of child labor. (18,19)

Without completion of (and official release from) national service assignments, Eritrean children face a future of indefinite national service. They endure notoriously harsh conditions at Sawa, including allegations of sexual harassment of female students. Many are later unable to earn higher wages in the private sector. (5,20) These factors underlie an ongoing exodus of unaccompanied minors from the country. (4,14,21,22) 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. (4,14,23,24) It is unclear if age verification procedures are consistently applied prior to new Sawa graduates being sent to active military service. (5,25) 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. (12,14,26) Furthermore, the government did not collect or publish data on child work, child labor, or the worst forms of child labor during the reporting period. (1,5)

Children, particularly in rural areas, lack access to teachers, classrooms, transportation, uniforms, and school supplies. (5,14,18,27) To address the shortfall, through the national service program the government has deployed teachers to less populated regions to educate rural and nomadic children. (1,5) The government's national development agenda prioritizes the expansion of schooling in rural areas. (5,28,29) However, teachers may flee the country to avoid open-ended conscription into Eritrea's national service system. The resulting staff shortages and high absenteeism rates compound these challenges. (14)

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 the minimum age for work.

Standard	Meets International	Age Legislation
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Standards		
Minimum Age for Work	No	14 Articles 3 and 68 of the Labor Proclamation (30)
Minimum Age for Hazardous Work	No	Articles 3, 35, and 69 of the Labor Proclamation (30)
Identification of Hazardous Occupations or Activities Prohibited for Children	No	Article 69 of the Labor Proclamation (30)
Prohibition of Forced Labor	Yes	Articles 3 and 9 of the Labor Proclamation; Articles 108(c) and 297 of the Penal Code (21,30)
Prohibition of Child Trafficking	Yes	Articles 297 and 315–318 of the Penal Code (21)
Prohibition of Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children	No	Articles 313–318 of the Penal Code (21)
Prohibition of Using Children in Illicit Activities	No	Articles 390 and 391 of the Penal Code (21)
Minimum Age for Voluntary State Military Recruitment	No	
Prohibition of Compulsory Recruitment of Children by (State) Military	Yes	Articles 7 and 8 of the Proclamation on National Service (12)
Prohibition of Military Recruitment by Non-state Armed Groups	No	Articles 109(e) and 111(b) of the Penal Code (21)
Compulsory Education Age	No	14‡
Free Public Education	No	Article 21 of the Constitution (31)

Table 4. Laws and Regulations on Child Labor

‡ Age calculated based on available information (22-24)

The Labor Proclamation's minimum age protections do not apply to children working outside formal employment relationships, such as those who are self-employed. This does not conform to international standards requiring all children to be protected by the minimum age to work. (30) 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. (25) Likewise, the Labor Proclamation’s hazardous work protections do not apply to children working outside formal employment relationships. (30)

Laws governing the use of children in illicit activities are not sufficient because offering and procuring a child for the production of drugs is not criminally prohibited. (21) In addition, laws regarding the commercial sexual exploitation of children are insufficient because the use of a child for prostitution is not criminally prohibited, although there are criminal penalties associated with the procurement of children under age 14. (21) Furthermore, voluntary military service of children under age 18 is not authorized in Eritrea because the Proclamation on National Service No. 82/1995, which requires compulsory national service from all citizens ages 18 to 40, defines national service in such a way that it is limited to people in that age group. (12)

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 National Education Policy, and the Comprehensive National Child Policy. (25,32,33)

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
Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare (MoLSW)	Enforces labor laws and investigates labor abuses, including child labor. (16) According to the government, child labor inspectors operate in every administrative zone. (27)
Eritrean Police	Enforce laws and investigate referred cases of child trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation of children. (9)
Citizen Militia	Performs night patrols and refers cases of commercial sexual exploitation of children or other exploitative practices to the Eritrean police. (9)

Table 5. Agencies Responsible for Child Labor Law Enforcement

Labor Law Enforcement

In 2021, 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 enforcement, including lack of referral mechanisms.

Overview of Labor Law Enforcement	2020	2021
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Labor Inspectorate Funding	Unknown (1)	Unknown (5)
Number of Labor Inspectors	28 (1)	28 (5)
Mechanism to Assess Civil Penalties	Yes (1,30)	Yes (5,30)
Initial Training for New Labor Inspectors	Yes (1)	Yes (5)
Training on New Laws Related to Child Labor	N/A (1)	N/A
Refresher Courses Provided	Yes (1)	Yes (5)
Number of Labor Inspections Conducted	Unknown (1)	Unknown (5)
Number Conducted at Worksite	Unknown (1)	Unknown (5)
Number of Child Labor Violations Found	Unknown (1)	Unknown (5)
Number of Child Labor Violations for Which Penalties Were Imposed	Unknown (1)	Unknown (5)
Number of Child Labor Penalties Imposed that Were Collected	Unknown (1)	Unknown (5)
Routine Inspections Conducted	Unknown (1)	Unknown (5)
Routine Inspections Targeted	Unknown (1)	Unknown (5)
Unannounced Inspections Permitted	Yes (1,30)	Yes (30)
Unannounced Inspections Conducted	Unknown (1)	Unknown (5)
Complaint Mechanism Exists	Unknown (1)	Unknown (5)
Reciprocal Referral Mechanism Exists Between Labor Authorities and Social Services	Unknown (1)	Unknown (5)

Table 6. Labor Law Enforcement Efforts Related to Child Labor

Because child labor laws do not extend to private farms and homes, it is unlikely inspectors inspected private farms and homes.(1) Moreover, research indicates that the number of labor inspectors is likely insufficient for the size of Eritrea's workforce, which includes approximately 2.7 million workers. (28) According to the ILO's technical advice of a ratio approaching 1 inspector for every 40,000 workers in less developed economies, Eritrea would need to employ about 68 labor inspectors. (28,29)

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. (1)

Research was unable to determine whether reciprocal referral mechanisms exist between labor authorities and social services. (9,10) The government did not provide information on its labor inspectorate efforts for inclusion in this report. (1)

Criminal Law Enforcement

In 2021, 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 enforcement, including a lack of criminal law enforcement data.

Overview of Criminal Law Enforcement	2020	2021
Initial Training for New Criminal Investigators	Unknown (1)	Unknown (5)
Training on New Laws Related to the Worst Forms of Child Labor	N/A (1)	N/A
Refresher Courses Provided	Unknown (1)	Unknown (5)
Number of Investigations	Unknown (1)	Unknown (5)
Number of Violations Found	Unknown (1)	Unknown (5)
Number of Prosecutions Initiated	Unknown (1)	Unknown (5)
Number of Convictions	Unknown (1)	Unknown (5)
Imposed Penalties for Violations Related to the Worst Forms of Child Labor	Unknown (1)	Unknown (5)
Reciprocal Referral Mechanism Exists Between Criminal Authorities and Social Services	Unknown (1)	Unknown (5)

Table 7. Criminal Law Enforcement Efforts Related to Child Labor

Under the Proclamation on National Service (No. 82/1995), all Eritreans over the age of 18 must undergo 6 months of compulsory military training at the National Military Training Center. (12) 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 2021 to ensure children were not subjected to compulsory military training. (5,9,13,30) The government does not publicly release information on its criminal law enforcement efforts. (9,20)

IV. Coordination of Government Efforts on Child Labor

Research found no evidence that the government has established mechanisms to coordinate its efforts to address child labor.

Eritrea has 43 Child Well-Being Committees 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. (1) While the committees were active in 2021, research found that their mandates are focused on reducing female genital mutilation and child marriage and do not extend to efforts to address child labor. (5,9)

V. Government Policies on Child Labor

The government has established policies related to child labor (Table 8). However, policy gaps exist that hinder efforts to address child labor, including a lack of efficacy in carrying out policies.

Policy	Description
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 to sensitize on the worst forms of child labor; and empowers communities and the public sector to monitor and prevent child labor from occurring. (34,32) The policy calls for the provision of free and compulsory basic education to all children irrespective of gender, sex, ethnicity, religion, or disability. (35) Research was unable to determine whether activities were undertaken to implement the policy during the reporting period.
Education Sector Development Plan (2018–2021)	Established 8 years of free and compulsory education for all children. (36,37) Included a strategy to ensure equitable access to education for all children, including in nomadic communities, through the provision of portable classrooms. (34,36) Research was unable to determine whether activities were undertaken to implement the policy during the reporting period.

Table 8. Key Policies Related to Child Labor

‡ The government had other policies that may have addressed child labor issues or had an impact on child labor. (33)

VI. Social Programs to Address Child Labor

In 2021, the government funded and participated in programs that may contribute to eliminating or preventing child labor (Table 9). However, gaps exist in these social programs, including inadequacy to

address the problem in all sectors.

Program	Description
Complementary Elementary Education (CEE)†	Government program created under the Education Sector Development Plan 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. (4,17,36) UNICEF pledged to support continuity of education for over 600,000 children in 2020–2021. (38-40) Research was unable to determine whether activities were undertaken to implement the program during the reporting period.
UNICEF Country Program (2017–2021)	\$19.5 million (\$31 million requested) UNICEF-funded program nested under the UN-Eritrea Strategic Partnership Cooperation Framework (2017–2021); in collaboration with the government, expanded access to quality basic education for all children, and protected children from violence, exploitation, and abuse. (41,42) Research was unable to determine whether activities were undertaken to implement the program during the reporting period.
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 Eritrean government joined the program on May 28, 2019. (9,43) Research was unable to determine whether activities were undertaken to implement the policy during the reporting period.

Table 9. Key Social Programs to Address Child Labor

† Program is funded by the Government of Eritrea.

Research found no evidence of programs that target 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 10).

Area	Suggested Action	Year(s) Suggested	
Legal Framework	Ensure that all children are protected by minimum age laws, including those who are self-employed.	2010 2021	–
	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.	2015 2021	–

	Criminally prohibit the use of a child for prostitution.	2014 2021	–
	Criminally prohibit procuring and offering a child for the production of drugs.	2013 2021	–
	Criminally prohibit the recruitment of children under age 18 by non-state armed groups.	2016 2021	–
	Establish by law free basic public education, and establish by law an age up to which education is compulsory that extends to the minimum age for employment.	2016 2021	–
Enforcement	Publish information on labor inspectorate funding, total number of inspections conducted at worksites, number of violations, number of targeted, routine, and unannounced inspections, number of violations for which penalties were imposed and collected, and whether complaint mechanisms and reciprocal referral mechanisms are in place.	2009 2021	–
	Increase the number of labor inspectors to meet the ILO's technical advice.	2018 2021	–
	Ensure labor inspectors are provided sufficient resources, including transportation, to access sites in which child labor is likely to occur.	2019 2021	–
	Publish information on criminal law enforcement efforts, including initial and refresher training for new investigators, and data on the number of criminal investigations, violations, prosecutions, and convictions related to the worst forms of child labor, and if reciprocal referral mechanisms exist.	2019 2021	–
	Ensure there are reciprocal referral mechanisms between labor authorities and social services.	2021	
Coordination	Establish coordinating mechanisms to directly address child labor.	2009 2021	–
Government Policies	Ensure that children under age 18 are not placed in military or agricultural labor assignments as part of national service.	2009 2021	–
	Publish information on actions taken to implement the Education Sector Development Plan (2018–2021) and the Comprehensive National Child Policy.	2021	
Social Programs	Ensure that all children, including in rural areas, have equitable access to education by building more schools and removing financial and	2010 2021	–

religious barriers to attendance, as outlined in the 2018 Education Sector Development Plan.

Collect and publish data on the extent and nature of child labor to inform policies and programs.	2009 2021	–
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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 2021	–
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Table 10. Suggested Government Actions to Eliminate Child Labor

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ecoi.net description:

Annual report on child labor (covering 2021)

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:
28 September 2022

Document ID:
2082712

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Origin and Asylum Research and
Documentation (ACCORD)

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