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Collisions at the Intersection: Intersectionality of Labor Trafficking, Trauma, and the 'Resource Curse' Phenomena within the Cobalt Mining Industry in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

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Kerr, Patrick L., "Collisions at the Intersection: Intersectionality of Labor Trafficking, Trauma, and the 'Resource Curse' Phenomena within the Cobalt Mining Industry in the Democratic Republic of the Congo" (2023). *Biennial Conference: The Social Practice of Human Rights*. 4.
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Collisions at the Intersection: Intersectionality of Labor Trafficking, Trauma, and the 'Resource Curse' Phenomena within the Cobalt Mining Industry in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

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First proposed in the early 1990s, the “resource curse” phenomenon describes situations in which countries/regions that are resource-abundant- e.g., metals, minerals- are economically outperformed by countries that are resource-deficient. The resource curse concept also commonly refers to situations in which resource-rich developing regions/countries suffer rather than flourish because of exploitative, extractive industries perpetrated by resource-deficient countries. Rooted in colonialism, this phenomenon has been identified across industries in several African nations. Cobalt mining in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is a prominent example. Although DRC’s cobalt deposits were discovered in 1914, the past decade has introduced a new surge in demand for this mineral. Recent expanded uses for cobalt have contributed to a cobalt boom in DRC. This has included mass adoption of high-demand consumer technology products that are produced using cobalt components- e.g., smartphones- and increased demand for emerging “green technology”- e.g., electric vehicle accessories, solar power systems/batteries. As with any resource boom, increased resource demand has contributed to increased demand for labor. Rapidly developing single-resource economic cycles often increase risk for labor exploitation, including labor trafficking of adults and children. There is growing empirical evidence of labor trafficking related to cobalt mining in DRC (Sovacool, 2021). The individual and communal trauma of labor trafficking represents one hypothetical mediator in the relationship between resource curse and resource booms. Recent research (Yilanci et al., 2022) has found that DRC may be uniquely vulnerable to the resource curse phenomenon for cobalt mining relative to other cobalt-abundant nations that are less adversely affected- e.g., Canada, Cuba. This paper describes unique vulnerabilities of DRC to resource curse effects. A model of differential risk mediated by labor trafficking prevalence is presented; and empirical evidence supporting and negating this model is described. A public health-oriented human rights framework for intervention and prevention is proposed.

Keywords: *labor trafficking; cobalt mining; Democratic Republic of the Congo; trauma; resource curse*

References:

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- Yilanci, V., Turkmen, N. C., & Shah, M. I. (2022). An empirical investigation of resource curse hypothesis for cobalt. *Resources Policy*, 78, 102843.