

Is your iPhone Ethical- The Horrors of the Congo Cobalt Trade

By Matilda Cathcart

Steve Jobs released the first iPhone in 2007 and the monumental moment for technology caused a market boom that is still felt today. AirPods, Laptops, Monitors, iPads, Apple watches, iPhones. The list goes on. Many technologies are so deeply integrated into our lives we can't live without them. However, they're not built to last, giving birth to the rigorous cycle of consumerism of updating your phone. From the second you buy a model there is a ticking timer placed on it, not only on the life of the phone itself but it time as the most current status symbol, for there will always be the next model to replace it in the limelight. It could be said that this cycle is certainly not sustainable due to the sheer amount of products being made, used, and sent to landfills. However many don't know of the violent conditions that people live under and the unethical labour that goes into the technology that we enjoy.

The Democratic Republic of Congo is the top producer of minerals needed in most modern technology. Cobalt is an essential element used in a variety of products. It's found in household items like phones, computers and monitors. But it's often used to create lithium batteries which can be used to fuel larger machinery like electric cars. It is also used to enhance the performance of high-intensity magnets like samarium-cobalt, which ironically is used in carbon-efficient energy sources such as wind turbines. Cobalt fuels the essential technologies of our modern world, so why don't we know more about where it comes from?

15-30% of their Cobalt is produced by artisanal mining, which is illegal in the DRC yet faces little to no regulation or implementation from local and national organisations. Small-scale mining relies on unsafe labour practices and dangerous work sites, using child labour and causing fatal accidents on a daily. The DRC's Cobalt trade is built on a foundation of violence and corruption. The country's instability from war and the West's desire for technology have created a system that is funded by the pain and suffering of the Congolese people, having their lives stolen from them for the so-called 'advancement of technology'.

By committing acts of violence and brutalisation against the Congolese people, it breeds powerlessness in the community, much like the tactics used in the Transatlantic Slave Trade. By keeping the country in political disarray by funding weapons for civil wars, Western powers retain their hold over the resources of the Congo and the cheap labour of its people.

A tool used to incite fear and complicity is the systematic assault of the women and children within the Congo. This act of humiliation is a sick action taken to keep workers docile and keep the foundation of fear and instability within the mines and the greater DRC. In *Cobalt Red: How the Blood of the Congo Powers our Lives* by Sidoharth Kara, he explains how Militia networks traffic and kidnap children to work in the mines, sometimes being sent from hundreds of miles away and being forced to dig these tunnels. It's essentially modern-day slavery, excluding the few dollars earned from the long dangerous shifts that are undertaken.

In recent years studies have shown that over generations the mistreatment enacted on the Congolese people and the trauma developed can change their DNA structure. This means that future generations could have damaged cortisol levels and a completely reset nervous system. Epigenetics is not the only thing that poses a threat, the continual exposure to cobalt, a toxic material, can have lifelong and fatal

health detriments to anyone that comes into contact with it. Many individuals who work in the artisanal mines don't have the childcare support to leave their children at home and therefore must bring them into the dangerous work sites and expose them to the toxic cobalt. With no alternative to work and means to make money, there is no other option.

The conditions within the mines surpass any level of danger one could imagine. Thousands of tunnels carved by hand, unstable and unventilated. Many each day are crushed beneath falling rubble or completely collapsing tunnels killing any that found themselves in there. The grief expressed by mothers of children who have been lost can't be properly conveyed. It's devastating, yet Western news outlets have barely discussed it.

It is of the utmost importance that on an individual level, we stop overconsuming technology products, the pain and suffering from which it was made is too great to be buying the next Apple product. Buy second-hand or don't buy at all. In boycotting these brands we take away a significant portion of the demand of Cobalt. While I know that this is only a small change in the larger problem, hence the specification on 'individual level', we all have a responsibility to fight for the rights of the Congolese people and prevent their future suffering.



An artisanal miner carries a sack of ore at the Shabara artisanal mine near Kolwezi, DRC, on Oct. 12, 2022.

Junior Kannah/AFP via Getty Images

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