



# ERITREA

## NO ADVANCEMENT - *Efforts Made But Complicit in Forced Child Labor*

In 2023, 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. In addition, high school students are forced to participate in *maetot*, a government-mandated month-long agricultural work program, for little to no pay. Failure to participate in the program results in immediate expulsion from school.

Otherwise, the government revived the Early Childhood Care and Education Team at the Ministry of Education, which worked with local nongovernmental organizations to enroll students in childhood care and education programs. Additionally, the government renewed the Education Sector Development Plan, which establishes free and compulsory education for all children in elementary school and middle school, and expands access to education to nomadic communities through the provision of portable classrooms. However, Eritrea’s minimum age protections do not apply to children working outside formal employment relationships. In addition, Eritrea’s laws—including its existing Penal Code of 1957—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 did not publicly release information on its criminal or labor law enforcement efforts.



## PREVALENCE AND SECTORAL DISTRIBUTION OF CHILD LABOR

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

### Overview of Children’s Work by Sector and Activity



#### Agriculture

Farming and herding livestock.



#### Industry

Working in small-scale manufacturing, including recycling, remanufacturing, and repurposing metal.



#### Services

Street work including vending and begging, and domestic work including fetching water and firewood. Working in auto mechanic shops, grocery stores, the Asmara bowling alley, and open markets.



#### Categorical Worst Forms of Child Labor‡

Forced agricultural work and compulsory participation in national service or military training associated with national service prior to age 18.

‡ 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. The mandatory military training 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. During their time at Sawa, students endure notoriously harsh conditions and corruption, including allegations of military commanders offering food and better treatment to female students in exchange for sexual acts. Further, high school students are forced to participate in *maetot*, a government-mandated month-long agricultural work program, for little to no pay. Failure to participate in the program results in immediate expulsion from school.

Without completion of (and official release from) national service assignments, Eritrean children face a future of indefinite national service. These factors underlie an ongoing exodus of unaccompanied minors from the country. 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. In addition, there have been reports that *giffas*—house-to-house military roundups used to identify Eritreans who are trying, or perceived as trying, to evade or escape national service—have resulted in the imprisonment or forced conscription of children.



## **SUGGESTED GOVERNMENT ACTIONS TO ELIMINATE CHILD LABOR**

The suggested government actions below would close gaps USDOL has identified in Eritrea's implementation of its international commitments to eliminate the worst forms of child labor.

### **Legal Framework**

Extend minimum age protections to all children working outside of formal employment relationships, including those who are self-employed.

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.

Criminally prohibit the use, procuring, and offering of a child for illicit activities.

Criminally prohibit the use of a child for prostitution, and the use, procurement, and offering of a child for pornography and pornographic performances.

Establish by law the age of 16 as the minimum age for voluntary recruitment by the state military, with safeguards for voluntariness, and criminally prohibit the recruitment of children under the age of 18 by non-state armed groups.

Criminally prohibit practices similar to slavery or debt bondage/servitude/serfdom.

Establish by law free basic public education, and establish by law an age up to which education is compulsory that extends to 14 years, the minimum age for employment.

### **Enforcement**

Cease the practice of imprisoning unhoused children and children discovered evading compulsory national service during military-led *giffas*.

Publish data related to labor law and criminal law enforcement.

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.

### **Coordination**

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.

Establish a key coordinating mechanism to address all worst forms of child labor.

### **Government Policies**

Take actions to ensure that children under age 18 are not placed in military training or agricultural labor assignments as part of national service.

Cease government programs that force high school children to engage in agricultural labor and other public works as a requirement to enroll in school.

Publish information on actions taken to implement government policies relevant to child labor, including the Comprehensive National Child Policy.

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 armed groups.

### **Social Programs**

Collect and publish data on the extent and nature of child labor to inform policies and programs.

Enhance efforts to make education accessible for all children, including children in rural areas, by building schools and increasing transportation options in rural areas.

Institute sufficient social programs to address child labor, including in agriculture, domestic work, street work, and the worst forms of child labor, including in commercial sexual exploitation. Ensure that these programs and efforts are accessible to all victims of exploitation, including Sudanese children living along the Eritrea-Sudan border.

Publish information on actions taken to implement the Better Migration Management program and the Complementary Elementary Education Program on an annual basis.



## CHILDREN AT HIGHER RISK

Unhoused and unaccompanied children in Eritrea are particularly vulnerable to child labor. These children, especially those above the age of 14, are also disproportionately forced into military training or conscription by government officials. In addition, displaced Sudanese children with temporary residence living along the Eritrea-Sudan border are more likely to fall victim to child labor as they do not receive assistance from the government.



## BARRIERS TO EDUCATION ACCESS

Children, particularly in rural areas, face numerous barriers to education access, including a lack of access to teachers, as well as a lack of transportation to schools for some students, which may increase their vulnerability to child labor.



## LEGAL FRAMEWORK FOR CHILD LABOR

Eritrea has ratified all key international conventions concerning child labor. However, Eritrea's existing laws do not fully meet international standards on the minimum age for work, as these protections do not apply to children working outside of formal employment relationships; on the commercial sexual exploitation of children, because the use of a child for prostitution is not criminally prohibited, nor is using, procuring, or offering a child for pornography or for pornographic performances; and on the minimum age for voluntary state military recruitment, as Eritrea does not have laws barring children from voluntarily joining state military service before the age of 18.

Child Labor Laws and Regulations	Meets International Standards	Legislation
Minimum Age for Work, <b>14 Years</b>		Articles 3 and 68 of the Labor Proclamation
Minimum Age for Hazardous Work		Articles 3, 35, and 69 of the Labor Proclamation
Identification of Hazardous Occupations or Activities Prohibited for Children		Article 69 of the Labor Proclamation
Prohibition of Slavery, Debt Bondage, and Forced Labor		Articles 3 and 9 of the Labor Proclamation; Articles 565 and 570 of the Penal Code of 1957
Prohibition of Child Trafficking		Articles 565, and 605–607 of the Penal Code of 1957
Prohibition of Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children		Articles 604–607, 609, and 610 of the Penal Code of 1957
Prohibition of Using Children in Illicit Activities		
Minimum Age for Voluntary State Military Recruitment		
Prohibition of Compulsory Recruitment of Children by (State) Military		Articles 6 and 8 of the Proclamation on National Service
Prohibition of Military Recruitment by Non-state Armed Groups		
Compulsory Education Age, <b>14 Years</b> ‡		
Free Public Education		

‡ Age calculated based on available information

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. 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. Likewise, the Labor Proclamation’s hazardous work protections do not apply to children working outside formal employment relationships. Laws prohibiting slavery, debt bondage, and forced labor are insufficient because they do not criminally prohibit practices similar to slavery or debt bondage/servitude/serfdom.

Laws governing the use of children in illicit activities are not sufficient because the existing Penal Code does not explicitly criminally prohibit the use, procuring, or offering of a child for the production and trafficking of drugs. Current 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 the use, procuring or offering a child for pornography or for pornographic performances. 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 age 18 into the national armed forces.

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 and the Comprehensive National Child Policy.



## ENFORCEMENT OF LAWS ON CHILD LABOR

It is unknown whether enforcement agencies in Eritrea took documented actions to address child labor in 2023.

### Agencies Responsible for Child Labor Law Enforcement

**Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare (MoLSW):** Enforces labor laws and investigates labor abuses, including child labor, through its Labor Inspection Division.

**Eritrean Police:** Enforce laws and investigate referred cases of child trafficking, commercial sexual exploitation of children, and the use of children in illicit activities.

### Enforcement Mechanisms and Efforts

Has a Labor Inspectorate	Yes	Has a Complaint Mechanism	Unknown
Able to Assess Civil Penalties	Yes	Imposed Penalties for Child Labor Violations	Unknown
Routinely Conducted Worksite Inspections	Unknown	Conducted Criminal Investigations for Worst Forms of Child Labor Crimes	Unknown
Unannounced Inspections Permitted	Yes	Imposed Penalties for Worst Forms of Child Labor Crimes	Unknown

It is **unknown** how many labor inspectors conducted worksite inspections, or whether child labor violations were found. It is **unknown** whether investigations into suspected cases of the worst forms of child labor were conducted, prosecutions were initiated, or perpetrators were convicted.



## COORDINATION, POLICIES, AND PROGRAMS

### Key Mechanism to Coordinate Government Efforts on Child Labor

Eritrea established a mechanism to coordinate some efforts to address child labor. However, Eritrea lacks a coordination mechanism to address all worst forms of child labor.

**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 Eritrean Women, and the National Union of Eritrean Youth and Students. Research was unable to determine whether the Committee took actions to address or prevent child labor during the reporting period.

**Coordination, Policies, and Programs (Cont.)**

<p><b>Key Policies Related to Child Labor</b> Eritrea established a policy related to child labor. However, it is unknown whether the government implemented the policy during the reporting period.</p>	<p><b>Comprehensive National Child Policy:</b> Addresses underlying causes of child labor through studies 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. The policy calls for the provision of free and compulsory basic education to all children, irrespective of gender, sex, ethnicity, religion, or disability. 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.</p>
<p><b>Key Social Programs to Address Child Labor</b> Eritrea funded and participated in programs that include the goal of eliminating child labor. However, these social programs are inadequate to address the problem in all sectors, including in agriculture, domestic work, street work, and commercial sexual exploitation.</p> <p><small>† 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.</small></p>	<p><b>Complementary Elementary Education:†</b> 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 by condensing 5 years of elementary education into a 3-year program to allow students to either integrate into formal education at the secondary level or access vocational education. Although research suggests that the program was active during the reporting period, research was unable to identify activities undertaken to implement the program during the reporting period.</p>
	<p><b>Better Migration Management:</b> EU-led program encompassing 11 countries in North, Central, and East Africa; aims to address the international labor market, including the trafficking of children. Research was unable to determine whether activities were undertaken to implement the program during the reporting period.</p> <p><b>Education Sector Development Plan (2022–2026):</b> Establishes free and compulsory education for all children in elementary school and middle school. Includes a strategy to ensure equitable access to education for all children, including in nomadic communities, through the provision of portable classrooms. The plan, originally set to expire in 2022, was renewed during the reporting period.</p>

For information about USDOL's projects to address child labor around the world, visit [dol.gov/ILABprojects](https://dol.gov/ILABprojects)

 **WORKER RIGHTS SPOTLIGHT**

Trade unions are not allowed to operate freely in Eritrea, and the only legally recognized trade union is the government affiliated National Confederation of Eritrean Workers. The government has also arrested, detained, and intimidated labor activists and individuals who attempted to organize independently. These factors have created an environment where workers' rights are routinely violated, workers earn sub-standard wages, and child labor often persists.

For references, please visit [dol.gov/ChildLaborReports](https://dol.gov/ChildLaborReports)