How Batteries Are Powered by Child Labor

Cobalt, a key input to lithium-ion batteries, is often mined with child labor. With enormous volumes of cobalt shipped to China from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), electronic products around the world are at risk of being linked to labor abuse.

The DRC produces over 70% of the world’s cobalt. A large portion of this production comes from artisanal and small-scale mining, where thousands of children work in hazardous conditions. Children work underground in tight quarters, carry heavy loads, and face serious injury risks from tunnel collapses and falling down mine shafts.

In 2020, China imported 89.4% of its cobalt from the DRC. Most of China’s cobalt is further refined and used to produce battery chemicals and components, such as cathodes. China uses these parts to produce rechargeable lithium-ion batteries.

As cobalt ore produced with child labor is transported to be refined and prepared for export; it is often mixed with cobalt from large-scale mines. This makes traceability extremely challenging.

Lithium-ion batteries power dozens of consumer products, including cell phones, electric cars, and laptops. With the vast majority of batteries dependent on cobalt, these products may be at risk of containing an input produced with child labor.

Source: US ITC Dataweb and UN Comtrade. Trade data are from 2020.