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New report: Child labour in diamond mines in the DR Congo

A new report from Swedwatch and Afrikagrupperna shows that the sustainability certification scheme that many jewellery companies rely on does not protect those who are most vulnerable. In the DR Congo, many young children work in artisanal mining instead of going to school and girls are often forced to marry at an early age.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), is one of the leading diamond producing countries in the world. As widely documented, however, many diamonds that are extracted are done so under difficult conditions. The diamonds are part of a global million-dollar industry that includes markets in Europe and as traceability is difficult, it is likely that diamonds from the DRC end up in the supply chains of jewellery companies in Sweden.

Swedwatch has visited the DRC's isolated diamond regions in order to investigate the occurrence of child labour in the mines. The results of the study, published in the report "Childhood Lost – Diamond mining in the Republic of the Congo and weaknesses of the Kimberley Process", are discouraging. Of 49 interviewees, mostly children and adult mine workers, only one person, a government representative, denied that child labour occurs in the mines. In the region, children, primarily boys, often start working in the mines from about ten years old in order to afford schooling and food. Once they turn 14 the work becomes heavier and this leads children to often being unable to cope with school as well. Instead, they start working full-time. Girls in the mining areas are especially exposed to risks.

- The most disheartening is the testimonies about the sexual exploitation of girls, which is described as widespread in the mining areas. Forced marriages from the age of twelve is common for many girls in the region, says Therese Sjöström, researcher at Swedwatch and author of the report.

The report also highlights the extensive flaws regarding traceability of the origin of the diamonds. In order to determine how Swedish jewellery companies address the human rights risks of the diamond industry, Swedwatch asked seven Swedish jewellery companies about their sustainability work. The results indicate that their implementation of applicable frameworks, particularly as regards human rights due diligence, is low.

- The extractives industry is an extremely high-risk sector from a human rights perspective. This has been well documented in the past as regards the DRC but also, for example, as regards Angola and Sierra Leone. The minimum that can be expected is for companies to follow international frameworks and guidelines that protect children and other vulnerable groups. But it is not clear how the companies reviewed do this in practice, continues Therese Sjöström.

Most jewellery companies refer to the so-called Kimberley Process, the certification available with the most significant reach. However, the certification is internationally criticised since it only regulates that diamonds are not financing armed conflict and it does not include criteria to prevent, for example, child labour or promote the respect of human rights.

- The weaknesses of the Kimberley certification, regarding traceability and the narrow focus, have long been known. It is therefore remarkable that the EU, the Swedish state and jewellery companies continue to rely on such a harshly criticised sustainability initiative. It is clear that legislation is needed to protect human rights, in particular the rights of children, says Gabi Björnsson, Secretary General of Afrikagrupperna.

The report provides recommendations to private and public actors. First and foremost, the companies should implement due diligence procedures for identifying and preventing possible adverse impacts on human rights in their supply chains. The companies are also encouraged to use existing practical tools, developed by the UN and OECD, in order to address risks. Additionally, they should demand that the Kimberley Process is reformed to include OECD's guidelines for responsible supply chains of minerals.

Download the report here: www.swedwatch.org

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