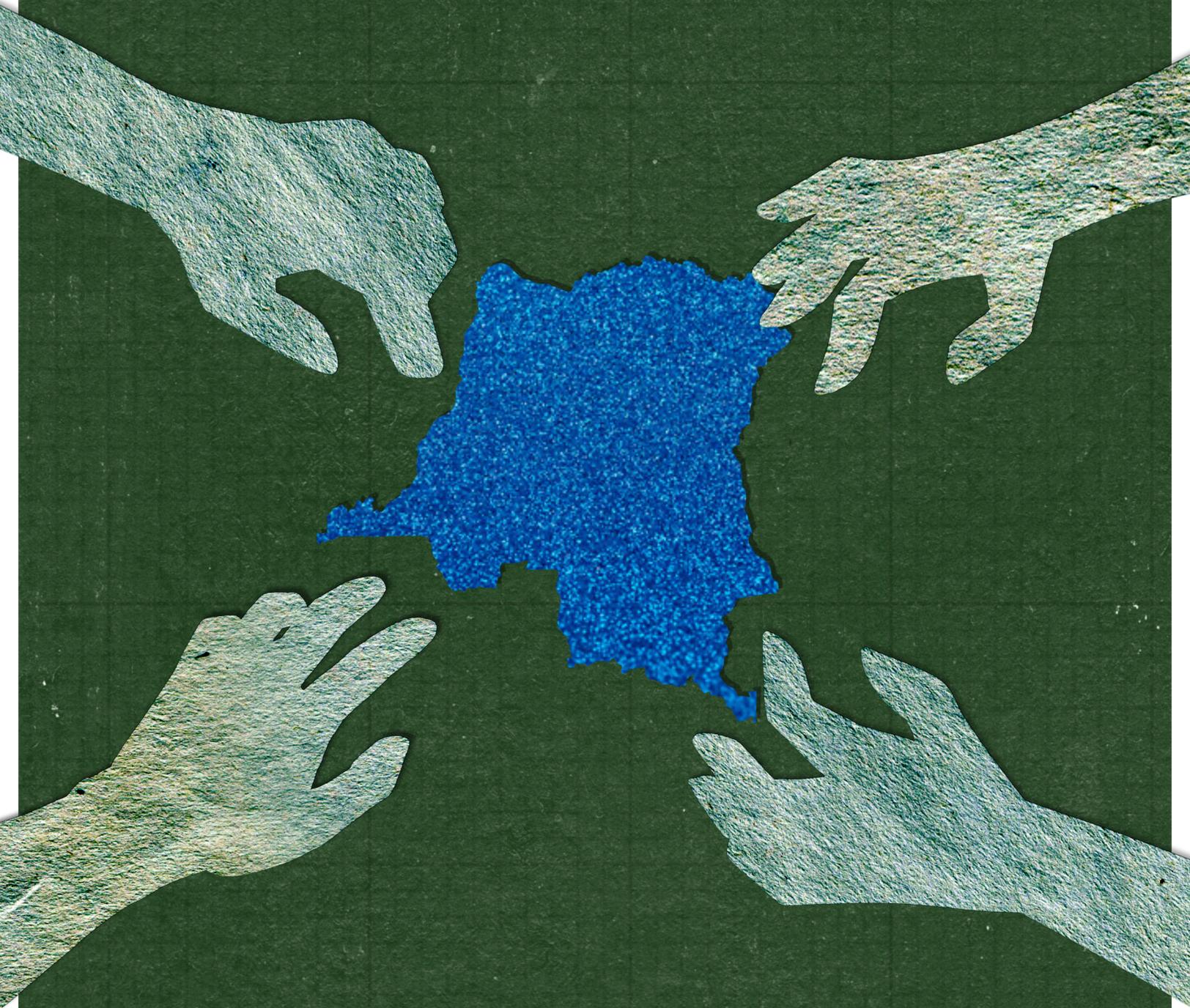


# Yale Human Rights Journal

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Spring 2022





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## A Note From the 2021-2022 Board

This academic year, the Human Rights Journal restructured itself. We introduced a commitment to community service projects and actively educating ourselves, built a new website and social media presence, and piloted multimedia projects as well as the first ever summer print issue. We modified our writing guidelines so that the voices of those impacted by human rights concerns would be directly heard from in the form of a primary source. We required a writer's reflection to not only ensure that a great amount of care and effort went into a piece, but also to allow a space for a writer's own personal growth and learning. Writing sessions fostered a sense of community and support. While we faced some limitations due to the ongoing pandemic, we are more than confident that the next EICs will build upon this foundation and further HRJ's missions to be a place of support, humble learning, service to others, and empowerment.

Gratefully,

**McKenna, Vishwa, Akio, & Sarah**

*I want to thank all of the amazing writers for their incredible work ethic and impeccable character committed to making the world a better place. I also want to thank the staff. Thank you to Sarah for your dedication and navigating far too complicated funding systems. Thank you always Akio for your awe-inspiring art and also for the insane amount of effort you put into layout design. Thank you Grace for single-handedly running our social media and Alex for your beautiful illustrations and for expertly keeping the website updated and running. Thank you to all of our editors for being a source of guidance and friendship for your assigned writers. Thank you to Faisal and Razel for your leadership work this past semester. Thank you to Vishwa for your support and patience putting up with all of the ideas that entailed extra work. It has truly been such an honor getting to learn from so many. I cannot wait to see what HRJ does next.*

— McKenna

*I am so happy to have been a part of HRJ since my first year on board. The community has left me with an incredible amount of warmth and a dedication to academia on campus. We've accomplished so very much from our issues to increasing our online presence, and I'm thankful to everyone who allowed this to happen and continues to be a part of this journal. Being the only undergraduate human rights publication is a big responsibility, and I am thankful to have helped with the effort with some of the most dedicated, kind individuals I have met in academia.*

— Vishwa

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Amelia Lake | amelia.lake@yale.edu

The ability to read is an essential skill for navigating the modern world, yet millions of adults in the United States have such poor literacy skills that they are unable to read basic sentences, fill out a job application form, or understand the instructions on their prescription labels. Without intervention, illiteracy has wide-reaching and devastating consequences, condemning its sufferers to shame, isolation, and poverty. Kirsten Levinsohn, executive director of New Haven Reads, a New Haven-based organization that works to foster children's literacy skills, explains current legislative and community efforts to address this issue.

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Isabel Arroyo | isabel.arroyo@yale.edu

In the wake of the 2021 Fall of Kabul, U.S. national leadership pledged to resettle tens of thousands of evacuated Afghans within American borders through Operation Allies Welcome. As hundreds of Afghan evacuees arrive in Connecticut and specifically in New Haven, they face hurdles securing permanent residence, housing, education, and other necessities. IRIS spokeswoman Ann O'Brien and New Haven Mayor Justin Elicker explain how nonprofit resettlement agencies and local governments work to support Afghan evacuees as they adjust to new lives in the United States.

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Amelia Winn | amelia.winn@yale.edu

Paola Santos | paola.santos@yale.edu

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Nasser Eid | nasser.eid@yale.edu

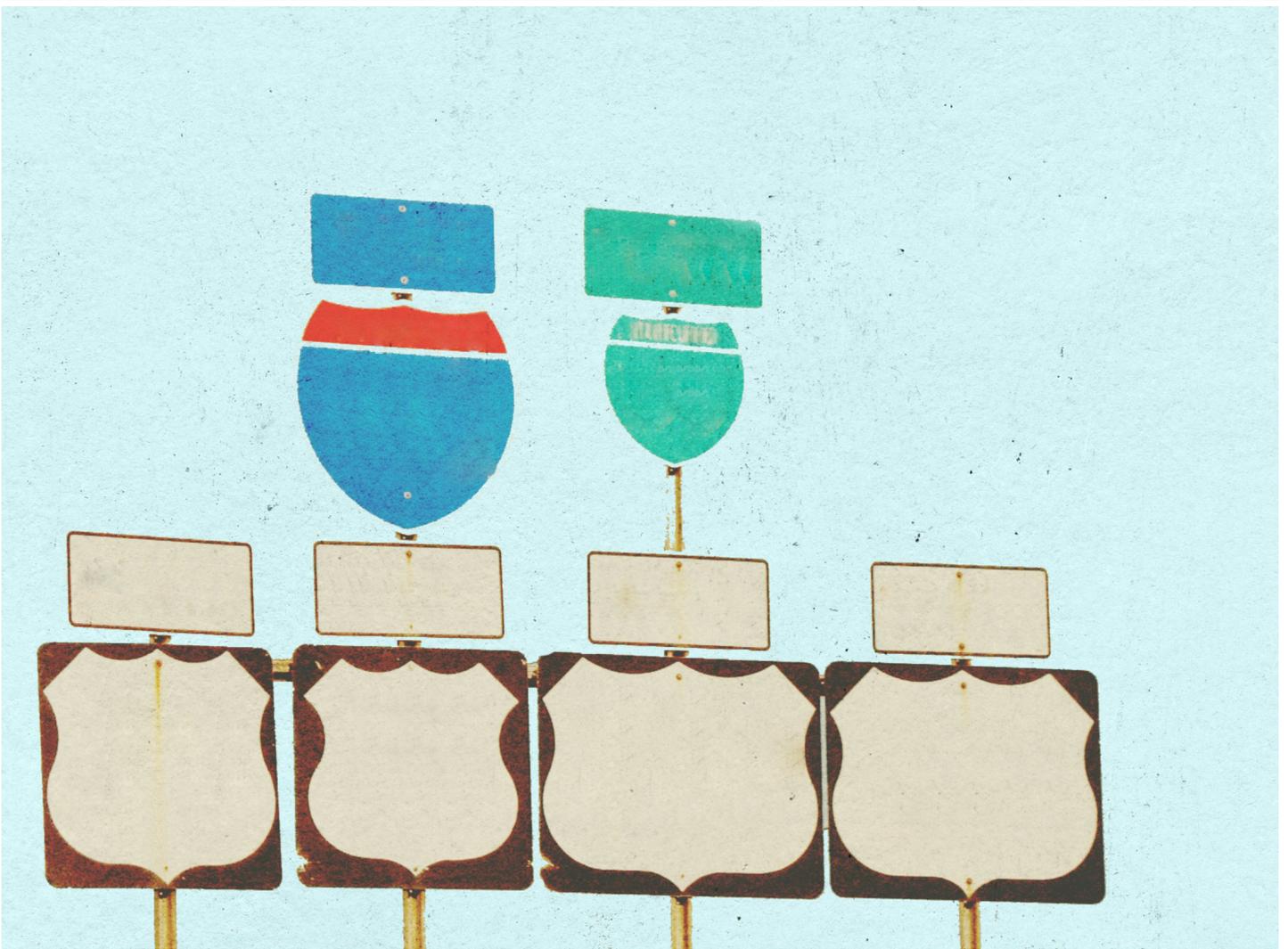
The murder of Patrice Lumumba ushered in the rise foreign investment in the country's mining sector. For decades, Congolese men, women, and children have worked as miners to excavate cobalt, a mineral resource that is essential to technology. Until recently, the United States used bribery and military reinforcement to create deals with Congo's government and maintain a stronghold on the mineral. Now, China has outbid the United States and owns an overwhelming majority of cobalt mines. Facing abject poverty and discrimination in the mines, Congolese citizens are now pushing back through building revolutionary force.

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Semira Mohamed | semira.mohamed@yale.edu

Cancer Alley is an 85-mile strip of land in southern Louisiana, home to over 150 petrochemical plants and refineries. This region derives its name from the strikingly high cancer rates among its predominately low-income, African-American residents. Despite complaints from residents and healthcare officials, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality (LDEQ) have failed to adequately respond to their concerns by regulating chloroprene emissions from the Denka Performance Elastomer plant, which is highly suspected to be the source of illness. By neglecting their regulatory responsibilities to Cancer Alley residents, the EPA and LDEQ have manufactured a public health crisis that has cost countless lives.



# *Hidden in Plain Sight: The Secret Epidemic of Illiteracy in the United States*

**Amelia Lake**

*America has a literacy problem, and it's worse than you think.*

Text messages. Emails. News articles. Road signs. There is a good chance that you have encountered one of these things today, and odds are, decoding them from letters, to words, to meaning took about as much effort as breathing. The ability to read is something the majority of us take for granted, and yet it is one of the most

fundamental skills needed to navigate and be successful in our modern world. But for all too many people—maybe some you know—it is an insurmountable barrier and a source of deep shame.

The numbers are staggering. As of 2022, ThinkImpact reports that an

estimated 79% of American adults are literate. To put it another way, one out of every five<sup>1</sup> American adults are functionally illiterate, meaning that today in the United States, almost 65 million people are unable to read basic sentences, fill out a job application form, or understand the instructions on their prescription labels. This is not merely a crisis of the illiterate, but also of the underliterate: a whopping 54 percent of all American adults read at or below a sixth grade level.

“Literacy is a basic human right,” says Kirsten Levinsohn, executive director of the New Haven-based nonprofit New Haven Reads. “Reading is fundamental. You can’t be successful by any measure if you don’t first learn to read...It’s easy not to think about it, especially if it doesn’t impact you. But it’s a tragedy for every child who doesn’t learn how to read, and it’s a tragedy for the family, the community, and the state as well.”

The root of the problem is in early childhood. All too often, students who perform poorly in school are allowed to fall through the cracks. Without proper access to services that can help a struggling reader or identify an undiagnosed reading disability early on, children who are most in need of intervention are simply passed over. “If you haven’t been taught how to read before third grade,” says Levinsohn, “it’s unlikely that you ever will, because teachers are moving on. You miss the transition from ‘learning to read’ to ‘reading to learn.’”

The social and economic toll is nothing short of devastating. Starting in school, illiteracy leads to feelings of inadequacy, shame, and isolation. Students with low levels of literacy are more likely to be chronically absent, suffer behavioral problems, and drop out of school, leading to a cascading chain reaction of negative consequences. Literacy Mid-South estimates that high school dropouts,<sup>2</sup> lacking employment prospects, are almost four times more likely to be arrested and 63 percent more likely to be incarcerated than their peers. The burden is lifelong, with morbid outcomes—illiteracy has strong links to poverty,<sup>3</sup> with some 43 percent of illiterate adults living under the poverty line, and a reduced ability to access health services. According to a study by Nursing, elderly individuals who are illiterate are more likely to die<sup>4</sup> within 6 years than those who can read well enough to understand basic health information.

This suffering is not felt evenly across the board. Illiteracy is strongly generational, meaning that individuals who are illiterate are much more likely to have been raised by illiterate and undereducated parents. “Some people say, ‘Oh, the kids can’t read because the parents don’t care,’” says Levinsohn. “First of all, the parents do care. They care a lot—they just don’t have the opportunities that higher-earners have access to.” Indeed, family wealth, along with parental literacy level, is among the strongest predictors of a child’s academic success. According to Regis College,<sup>5</sup> exposure to literature—specifically, being read to and having

access to age-appropriate books—is a critical part of fostering a child’s reading skills outside the classroom. Yet more than half of all American families living in poverty (who are disproportionately likely<sup>6</sup> to be people of color, rural, Indigenous, or foreign-born) do not have children’s books in the home. Low-income earners, facing additional financial stress and grueling working hours, have less energy and time to engage in their child’s education. As the saying goes, you don’t know what you don’t know, and this is no less true when it comes to education; illiterate adults often lack the knowledge to recognize when their child is falling behind. The end result is that parents who themselves are illiterate, through no fault of their own, are simply ill-equipped to properly support a child’s academic development.

Says Levinsohn, “What’s happening now in Connecticut is that there are huge gaps in reading attainment, often having to do with disparities in income and race, which reflect the inequities in our society. In New Haven right now, about 30 percent of kids are reading at grade level or better—which, if you say it the other way, means 70 percent aren’t, which is horrendous.”

It is worth noting that these statistics are all pre-pandemic. With school closures interrupting the education of millions of students, the situation has only worsened. The blame lies partly in curriculum design. “This is not to bash teachers,” says Levinsohn, a former teacher herself. “They went into this field for a reason. They’re all working

1. ThinkImpact, “Literacy Statistics,” 2022, <https://www.thinkimpact.com/literacy-statistics/>.

2. Literacy Mid-South, “The Relationship Between Incarceration and Low Literacy,” March 16, 2016, <https://www.literacymidsouth.org/news/the-relationship-between-incarceration-and-low-literacy/>.

3. Literacy New York, “Fast Facts - Adult Education and Literacy,” <https://www.literacynewyork.org/literacy-facts>.

4. “Illiteracy linked to earlier death,” *Nursing* 37, 10 (2007): 35, 10.1097/01.NURSE.0000291985.16561.90

5. Regis College, “Child Illiteracy in America: Statistics, Facts, and Resources,” <https://online.regiscollege.edu/blog/child-illiteracy/>.

6. Poverty USA, “Poverty Facts,” <https://www.povertyusa.org/facts>.

so hard. But not all of them have been trained in the science of reading, and the science of reading is not universally accepted.”

Levinsohn is referring to the so-called “reading wars”,<sup>7</sup> an ongoing debate over how reading should be taught. This rivalry, which dates back to the 1800s, consists of two opposing schools of thought: whole-language and phonics. Proponents of whole-language theory see

learning to read and write English as analogous to learning to speak—“a natural, unconscious process” that is best taught through “unstructured immersion”. Words are taught individually, much like Chinese characters, and children are encouraged to decipher their meaning through context clues. Phonics, on

the other hand, sees written language more as a code to be deciphered. This method emphasizes phonemic awareness, meaning that it teaches children to identify the constituent sounds of words to sound them out. Despite overwhelming evidence that the phonics approach leads to better reading outcomes, there is no federal requirement for schools to implement it in their curricula.

For the past 20 years, there has been

little change in reading outcomes. As Levinsohn puts it: “Obviously, doing the same thing over and over is not working.”

The “Right to Read” Act,<sup>8</sup> passed last June by the Connecticut General Assembly under the sponsorship of Senator Patricia Miller, aims to close some of the gaps. With its \$12.8 million budget, the bill makes provisions to ensure school districts can

hire reading coaches for students who are falling behind. Furthermore, it establishes a Center for Literacy Research and Reading Success, which will oversee the development of reading curricula for

students in grades PreK-3. Its focus is, in part, on ensuring that school districts—which previously had complete autonomy in designing their reading curricula—adhere to evidence-based practices of reading instruction.

“There is a proven method for literacy instruction,” wrote Miller in an opinion piece<sup>9</sup> for the Stamford Advocate, “and that we need to use it in all of our Connecticut classrooms. Our students are entitled to it.”

Levinsohn is optimistic about the bill’s potential. “It just needs to become a priority,” she says. “There needs to be money and resources at the lowest level so kids are getting the support they need.”

But legislation isn’t the only means of intervention. Community-based organizations like New Haven Reads can and do have a tremendous impact.<sup>10</sup> The nonprofit, initially founded as a book bank, has been a part of the New Haven community for over 20 years and offers a number of programs intended to support literacy development in struggling children. Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, it sponsored school field trips for grades PreK-5 where students got to pick out five books to take home with them. “Unfortunately, a lot of kids don’t have books at home, or maybe they only have one or two,” Levinsohn explains. “We really try to put out books that would be at their grade level and their interest level. We also try very hard with this program and our tutoring program to have books that are diverse and have characters that represent our child readers.” All in all, New Haven Reads donates over 100,000 books a year,<sup>11</sup> and has donated almost 2 million since its founding.

While the pandemic has forced New Haven Reads to temporarily shutter some of its usual activities, “we are still giving out books,” says Levinsohn. “Frankly, a lot to teachers. A lot of them don’t have books in their classrooms, which is quite sad. And even more sad is that a lot of schools have

“*There needs to be money and resources at the lowest level so kids are getting the support they need.*”

7. Nicholas Lemann, “The Reading Wars,” *The Atlantic*, November 1997, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1997/11/the-reading-wars/376990/>.

8. Adria Warson and Jacqueline Rabe Thomas, “‘Right to Read’ legislation passes as part of budget implementer,” *The CT Mirror*, June 24, 2021, <https://ctmirror.org/2021/06/24/right-to-read-legislation-passes-as-part-of-budget-implementer/>.

9. Patricia Miller, “A right to read, for every student,” *Stamford Advocate*, March 26, 2021, <https://www.stamfordadvocate.com/opinion/article/State-Sen-Patricia-Billie-Miller-opinion-A-16055521.php>.

10. New Haven Reads, “At a Glance 2020,” 2020, <https://newhavenreads.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/At-a-Glance-2020.pdf>.

11. New Haven Reads, “Our Impact,” <https://newhavenreads.org/our-impact>.

had to close their libraries for financial reasons, so the kids have less access to books.”

In addition to its book bank, New Haven Reads also offers a one-on-one tutoring program, which trains volunteers and matches them with a student with the intention of creating a long-lasting partnership. The program, which serves about 600 children per week, relies on the support of its roughly 400 volunteer tutors, many of them Yale affiliated—students and faculty alike. “For most of the children who come to us, all they need is a little extra individualized help,” Levinsohn says. “A lot of it is confidence for these kids. They feel that they’re stupid if they can’t read, and it’s so far from the truth. To see them grow and become more confident, it’s amazing.”

Despite the squeeze of the pandemic, New Haven Reads only intends to expand its array of services. In the works is an upcoming program intended to serve recent immigrants through a partnership with Integrated Refugee & Immigrant Services.<sup>12</sup> And volunteers are always welcome.

“It’s the community at its best,” says Levinsohn. “It’s people from all walks of life coming together to support our city’s greatest asset—our kids.”

### Writer’s reflection:

As a lover of language and a passionate learner, it’s difficult for me to fathom what it must be like to navigate everyday life, never mind education or work, without the ability to read. Yet for millions of Americans—our community members, friends, maybe even our own family—that is their reality. I want to

extend my sincerest thanks to Kirsten Levinsohn for sharing her knowledge with me, and encourage readers to consider volunteering or donating to New Haven Reads and other organizations doing important work to tackle this issue.

# Resettlement and the Road Ahead

## Isabel Arroyo

*Afghan evacuees face challenges securing visas, housing, and other necessities in New Haven. Refugee resettlement agencies are working to help.*

“Every resettlement agency, every immigration legal service provider is trying to help this population. We literally are trying to gather as many lawyers as possible and train them to take on these cases, because there are not enough trained immigration lawyers in the country to process all of these cases in less than two years.”

Ann O’Brien is a spokeswoman for Integrated Refugee and Immigrant Services (IRIS<sup>1</sup>), a New Haven-based nonprofit dedicated to supporting immigrants and refugees as they begin new lives in the United States. Since the fall of Kabul to Taliban forces in August 2021, organizations like IRIS have been working around the clock to resettle tens of thousands of rapidly evacuated Afghan citizens.



*Image: Evacuees boarding a C-17 Globemaster III at Hamid Karzai International Airport, Afghanistan, 18 August.” Image Courtesy of Lance Cpl. Nicholas Guevara/U.S. Central Command Public Affairs. Public Domain*

12. Integrated Refugee & Immigrant Services, <https://irisct.org/>.

1. Integrated Refugee & Immigrant Services, <https://irisct.org/>.

Over 68,000 Afghan nationals<sup>2</sup> have arrived in the U.S. through the federal government's Afghan assistance program, Operation Allies Welcome.<sup>3</sup> Around 8,000 more remain in temporary housing on military bases as their resettlements are processed. This population is made up of present or former employees of the U.S. government and their families, as well as translators, journalists, activists, humanitarian aid workers, and others whose careers put them at risk in Afghanistan.

Over 400 Afghan evacuees have been resettled in Connecticut, with 300 more<sup>4</sup> expected to arrive within the

year. 200 evacuees have been settled in New Haven.

Processing the immigration of so many people would be daunting under normal circumstances; in the wake of Trump- and early Biden-era refugee caps and resettlement budget restrictions,<sup>5</sup> which forced immigrant services organizations like IRIS to downsize, these numbers border on overwhelming. Even as evacuees work to adjust to new homes, schools, and jobs in New Haven, for many, a long-term future in the U.S. remains uncertain.

## NAVIGATING IMMIGRATION

Despite the urgency of the Afghan evacuation, resettlement to the United States is a complex and lengthy process. The paths to permanent residence and to citizenship look different depending on the type of documentation an evacuee holds, and in many cases a clear one might not exist. Nationwide, it is estimated that 36,000 Afghan evacuees have no clear path<sup>6</sup> to permanent residence at all.

Some of the evacuees IRIS works with have Special Immigrant Visas (SIV<sup>7</sup>). These evacuees met a series of stringent requirements that included working for the U.S. government in Afghanistan for more than a year. Upon arrival, SIV recipients automatically receive a green card, Lawful Permanent Resident status, and eligibility for citizenship after five years in the United States.

The majority of Afghan evacuees, however, are not SIV recipients, either because they do not meet the requirements or because they are awaiting approval of their SIV applications. Most are on humanitarian parole,<sup>8</sup> a program<sup>9</sup> which allows resettlement for urgent humanitarian reasons. Unlike a Special Immigrant Visa, humanitarian parole is limited in duration and does not come with a path to citizenship attached. It also expires quickly:



2. Frances Kai-Hwa Wang, "Tens of thousands of Afghans have resettled across the U.S. Now, the challenge is making a home," PBS News, February 3, 2022, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/tens-of-thousands-of-afghans-have-resettled-across-the-u-s-now-the-challenge-is-making-a-home#:~:text=%E2%80%9CThey%20fled%20with%20their%20lives,U.S.%20Department%20of%20Homeland%20Security>.

3. Department of Homeland Security, "Operation Allies Welcome," <https://www.dhs.gov/allieswelcome>.

4. Sarah Page Kyrzc, "How CT's Shoreline is helping Afghan refugees resettle: 'People were amazing,'" CT Insider, November 17, 2021, <https://www.ctinsider.com/shoreline/article/How-CT-s-Shoreline-is-helping-Afghan-refugees-16626900.php>.

5. Danielle DuClos, "Refugee organizations scramble to settle Afghans after years of Trump-era budget cuts," ABC News, September 8, 2021, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/refugee-organizations-scramble-settle-afghans-years-trump-era/story?id=79812415>

6. Amy Godshall, "Congress' responsibility on Afghan refugees," New York Daily News, April 9, 2022, <https://www.nydailynews.com/opinion/ny-oped-afghan-immigration-congress-20220409-cayemiiqdbf4vmh4ilruini65i-story.html>

7. Danilo Zak, "Explainer: Humanitarian Parole and the Afghan Evacuation," National Immigration Forum, August 30, 2021, <https://immigrationforum.org/article/explainer-humanitarian-parole-and-the-afghan-evacuation>

8. U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, "Humanitarian or Significant Public Benefit Parole for Individuals Outside the United States," <https://www.uscis.gov/humanitarian/humanitarian-or-significant-public-benefit-parole-for-individuals-outside-the-united-states>

9. Raymond G. Lahound, "U.S. Government Begins Denying Afghan Applications for Humanitarian Parole" National Law Review, December 21, 2021, <https://www.natlawreview.com/article/us-government-begins-denying-afghan-applications-humanitarian-parole>

“It’s a short term immigration status,” O’Brien explained. “They need to get that status adjusted in less than two years.”

Some protection is also provided by the recent extension<sup>10</sup> of Temporary Protected Status to all Afghan evacuees who settled in the U.S. prior to March 15, 2022. While it lasts, this status prevents them from being deported. Nevertheless, O’Brien emphasized that 18 months of TPS is not a long-term solution.

“It’s ultimately the same in that it’s temporary. It’s not a permanent path to citizenship, like a Special Immigrant Visa holder or refugee status would be.”

The price tag for a “permanent path” to citizenship can be high. Most evacuees on humanitarian parole will try to adjust their status through the asylum process, but with private asylum lawyers<sup>11</sup> ranging in cost from \$1000 to well over \$7000, thousands of evacuees turn to nonprofits like IRIS for pro bono legal representation. The arrival of so many Afghan evacuees has placed these nonprofits under significant strain: IRIS, for example, has five pro bono attorneys for 430 clients.

“The immigration courts are backed up,” O’Brien summarized. “There are just not enough attorneys and they cost too much.”

She tells me that one solution is an

Afghan Adjustment Act.<sup>12</sup> Outlined and proposed by immigration advocates, the concept of an Afghan Adjustment Act has garnered support from national security experts, refugee resettlement groups, attorneys, and local communities. As currently envisioned, the Act would allow certain Afghan evacuees to apply for permanent status after a year of humanitarian parole in the United

States and would protect them from deportation while their applications are pending. U.S. passed (albeit insufficient<sup>13</sup>) legislation to resettle evacuated South Vietnamese allies after the Fall of Saigon, and to resettle evacuated Kurdish allies during and after the Gulf War.

Advocates also argue that the bill would relieve some of the burden currently weighing down the SIV application process, which has over



(Apartment complexes in New Haven. Image courtesy of Elm City Communities)

States and would protect them from deportation while their applications are pending.

Advocates of an Afghan Adjustment Act point out that the United States has passed similar legislation to expedite resettlement and create a path to Lawful Permanent Residence before—specifically, during other conflicts and humanitarian crises in which the U.S. played a major role. For example, the

18,000 cases<sup>14</sup> in backlog, and the asylum process, with over 400,000<sup>15</sup> cases in backlog.

Toward the end of the interview, O’Brien reiterated IRIS’s position:

“The most important thing that can be done for this population is to pass [an] Afghan Adjustment Act.”

FINDING NEW HOMES

9. Raymond G. Lahound, “U.S. Government Begins Denying Afghan Applications for Humanitarian Parole” National Law Review, December 21, 2021, <https://www.natlawreview.com/article/us-government-begins-denying-afghan-applications-humanitarian-parole>

10. U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, “Secretary Mayorkas Designates Afghanistan for Temporary Protected Status,” March 16, 2022, <https://www.uscis.gov/newsroom/news-releases/secretary-mayorkas-designates-afghanistan-for-temporary-protected-status>

11. Citizen Path, “How much does an immigration lawyer cost?” December 29, 2020, <https://citizenpath.com/immigration-lawyer-cost>

12. HIAS, “Factsheet: Afghan Adjustment Act,” December 2021, [https://www.hias.org/sites/default/files/factsheet\\_afghan\\_adjustment\\_act\\_november\\_2021.pdf](https://www.hias.org/sites/default/files/factsheet_afghan_adjustment_act_november_2021.pdf)

13. Adam Taylor, “Plan to evacuate U.S. allies from Afghanistan raises specters of Iraq and Vietnam,” Washington Post, June 25, 2021,

14. HIAS, “Factsheet: Afghan Adjustment Act,” December 2021, [https://www.hias.org/sites/default/files/factsheet\\_afghan\\_adjustment\\_act\\_november\\_2021.pdf](https://www.hias.org/sites/default/files/factsheet_afghan_adjustment_act_november_2021.pdf)

15. U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, “Number of Service-wide Forms Fiscal Year To Date,” 2021

[https://www.uscis.gov/sites/default/files/document/data/Quarterly\\_All\\_Forms\\_FY2021Q4.pdf](https://www.uscis.gov/sites/default/files/document/data/Quarterly_All_Forms_FY2021Q4.pdf)

While evacuees navigate a complicated immigration system, they must also secure housing. Those entering the United States face a post-pandemic housing crisis that has driven up average rents<sup>16</sup> by 12 percent statewide and 19 percent in New Haven over the last year and a half. More and more landlords routinely request up to three months of rent up front as a security deposit for renters—a sum well beyond the means of most evacuees.

Government agencies, state rental assistance funds, and the services of organizations like IRIS have all been important for housing arriving Afghans. In an interview for this article, New Haven Mayor Justin Elicker responded to questions about how the city promoted affordable housing for Afghan evacuees by referring to housing protections for New Haveners more generally.

“A percentage of those individuals [struggling to find housing] are refugees. But there are thousands of other residents in the city that struggle to access affordable housing, so we feel that we shouldn’t prioritize one group over another,” Elicker said. “And that we should make sure to support every-

one having more access to affordable housing.”

He references the 2021 American Rescue Plan (ARP) and other COVID-related federal stimulus bills, which have funded state-level rental assistance initiatives relevant to refugee and non-refugee populations alike. Before the program stopped taking applications in February 2022, Afghan evacuees were eligible to apply<sup>17</sup> to UniteCT,<sup>18</sup> which was an

flexibility to support individuals—including refugees who may have a lower income—to access more funds to pay rent.”

Some local advocacy groups are also trying to channel more ARP funding into housing. One such group is the Sisters in Diaspora Collective,<sup>19</sup> a local coalition of immigrant and refugee women advocating for affordable homes. They contend that the \$10 million dollars in ARP funding for New

Haven’s “I’m Home” housing initiative<sup>20</sup> is not enough to meet the needs of a city where half of households<sup>21</sup> spend over 30% of their income on housing costs alone. The Collective is pushing for \$62.5 million of New Haven’s \$115 million in ARP funds to be invested in affordable housing for everyone in New Haven, regardless of citizenship or evacuee status.

“

***Housing costs are not the only challenge evacuees face when looking for homes. Many also contend with language barriers and a total lack of credit history that makes landlords hesitant to rent to them.***

emergency rental assistance program established using federal COVID-19 relief funds. During our interview in February, Mayor Elicker expressed hope that the Board of Alders would approve more funding to support the housing needs of New Haveners in general:

“Should the Board of Alders approve our proposal, that will give us more

Speaking on behalf of IRIS, O’Brien touched on both the usefulness and the limitations of existing pandemic-era protections in helping evacuees with housing:

“The kind of pandemic relief funds that have been made available are not huge dollar amounts, but they are significant,” she explained. “It’s a lot better than what we’re going to be able

16. Ginny Monk, “Why rent has risen sharply in Connecticut the past 18 months,” CT Insider, February 6, 2022, <https://www.ctinsider.com/realestate/article/Why-monthly-rent-has-risen-sharply-in-Connecticut-16835535.php#:~:text=Rent%20has%20increased%20by%20an.2018%20and%202022%2C%20data%20shows.>

17. Camila Vallejo, “Landlords wanted: As Afghan refugees arrive in CT, housing is an issue,” November 12, 2021 <https://ctmirror.org/2021/11/12/landlords-wanted-as-afghan-refugees-arrive-in-ct-housing-is-an-issue/>

18. Connecticut State Department of Housing, “UniteCT - Emergency Rental Assistance for Connecticut’s Economy” <https://portal.ct.gov/DOH/DOH/Programs/UniteCT>

19. Havenly, “Sisters in Diaspora Collective” <https://havenlynhv.org/pages/side#:~:text=We%20are%20a%20group%20of,the%20support%20of%20Havenly%20staff.>

20. Ellyn Santiago, “City: \$53M Rescue Plan Funds Housing, Education, Climate Programs,” Patch, Jan 12, 2022, <https://patch.com/connecticut/newhaven/city-53m-rescue-plan-funds-housing-education-climate-programs>

21. DataHaven, “New Haven 2021 Data Equity Profile,” [https://www.ctdatahaven.org/sites/ctdatahaven/files/new\\_haven\\_profile\\_v1.pdf](https://www.ctdatahaven.org/sites/ctdatahaven/files/new_haven_profile_v1.pdf)

to produce on our own.”

Housing costs are not the only challenge evacuees face when looking for homes. Many also contend with language barriers<sup>22</sup> and a total lack of credit history that makes landlords hesitant to rent to them. To meet these challenges, IRIS and other resettlement agencies have offered translation services<sup>23</sup> to would-be tenants; to minimize risk to landlords, some resettlement agencies, including IRIS, commit to assisting families financially for up to a year until they become financially independent. O’Brien notes that funding for this financial assistance must be drawn from a wide variety of sources, both public and private, including donations.

“There’s a little bit that [evacuees] have when they come through the federal program, but very little—like \$1,000 per evacuee. It’s not enough to even cover an initial security deposit,” O’Brien said. “It’s literally a mosaic of different sources of funds to be able to get them a home, to get the security deposit done, and the first couple of months’ rent before they start working and are able to pay for things themselves.”

Despite the challenges involved, resettlement agencies have helped secure homes for hundreds of Afghan evacuees in Connecticut. IRIS also continues to furnish new homes with furniture, household goods, and toilets, for which they accept donations<sup>24</sup> year-round.

## HEALTHCARE, EDUCATION, AND COMMUNITY WELCOME

New arrivals must also adjust to American healthcare and education systems. Rapid-fire federal legislation<sup>25</sup> passed in fall of 2021 simplified and expanded evacuees’ access to medical treatment by making Afghans on humanitarian parole eligible for Medicaid, as well for federal benefits like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and Section 8 Public Housing. On a local level, IRIS frequently steps in to help connect evacuees with primary medical care.

New Haven is also home to a range of organizations devoted to immigrant and refugee education. For example, Elena’s Light<sup>26</sup>—founded and headed by Fereshteh Ganjavi, herself a refugee from Afghanistan—provides free in-home English language tutoring to immigrant and refugee women and children, offering special courses on practical subjects like Driver’s License Exam preparation.

IRIS also provides educational services, which include English classes for immigrant adults and backpacks, uniforms, and other supplies for evacuated children attending school. The Connecticut Institute for Refugees and Immigrants (CIRI) engages with evacuee and refugee children, parents, and local educators to promote educational success.

Mayor Elicker described public education as one of a few critical ways that

local governments can directly support resettled Afghans.

“A lot of refugees come as a family with children. And we work to integrate children into our public school system, which supports them with language learning, culturally appropriate meals—ensuring that new children feel welcome.”

Elicker then described another way for local governments to support evacuees:

“It’s just very publicly stating our values as a city that welcomes people. And that comes in many different ways. It comes in our vocalization about being against hate and any sort of discrimination. It comes in our words of support for people who reflect the diversity of our city, and enhance the diversity of our city.”

Elicker reiterated the importance of welcoming evacuated Afghan citizens to New Haven:

“In a place like Afghanistan, where so many people have worked hard with United States military at our request to help support us, for us to then not extend the welcoming hand to as many people as possible, is not only unethical, but it prohibits us from being as successful in future conflicts, because people will see that when they help the United States out, they may not be protected by the United States in the future.”

O’Brien similarly concluded with a

22. Camila Vallejo, “Landlords wanted: As Afghan refugees arrive in CT, housing is an issue,” November 12, 2021 <https://ctmirror.org/2021/11/12/landlords-wanted-as-afghan-refugees-arrive-in-ct-housing-is-an-issue/>

23. Integrated Refugee and Immigrant Services, <https://irisct.org/our-services/>

24. Integrated Refugee and Immigrant Services, <https://irisct.org/in-kind-donations-2/>

25. National Immigration Law Center, “Afghan New Arrivals and Access to Public Benefits,” <https://www.nilc.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/afghan-publicbenefits-facts-2021-11-02.pdf>

26. Elena’s Light, <https://www.elenaslight.org/>

comment on the importance of welcoming these evacuees—and of providing them with a path to citizenship:

“It seems only right to provide them the same access to stay here permanently that we would have provided if they’d gone through the refugee process. And that’s a path to a green card and citizenship. Not a \$10,000 asylum claim that may not be approved.”

In the meantime, resettlement agencies will continue to lend a hand to Afghan evacuees navigating new systems and new challenges in the United States. Readers interested in volunteering with or donating to IRIS,<sup>27</sup> CIRI,<sup>28</sup> or Elena’s Light<sup>29</sup> may find more information about doing so on those organizations’ websites.

#### Writer’s Reflection:

Researching for this piece introduced me to a complex web of nonprofit organizations, advocacy groups, and local, state, and federal government entities. I would like to extend my sincerest thanks to Ann O’Brien and to Mayor Justin Elicker for their time and for the information they provided. If I were to write this piece again, I would try harder to interview Afghan evacuees directly, so that I could center the lived experiences of the individuals navigating the systems which this article explores. I encourage readers interested in supporting resettled families to look into volunteer opportunities at IRIS, CIRI, and Elena’s Light, and to contact their representatives about an Afghan Adjustment Act.



## The State of Reproductive Rights in Latin America: Ripples and Rollbacks

Amelia Winn and Paola Santos

*Amidst a sea of progressive rollbacks on abortion rights in states like Texas and Idaho in the United States, we may look to Latin America’s Marea Verde, or Green Wave, movement for hope of an imminent new age of legal protections over one’s bodily right to choose.*

#### THE GREEN WAVE: WINS IN ARGENTINA, MEXICO AND COLUMBIA

The influential and dynamic Green Wave<sup>1</sup> movement originated in Argentina, getting its name from the green scarves worn by women as they took to the streets to fight for the right to safe and legal abortion in 2018. Their resistance echoed that

of the white-scarved Grandmothers and Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo during the state-sponsored terrorism of the Dirty War in 1976. They wore white to protest the murder of their loved ones, particularly their children. Today, the symbolic green marker caught on, with women and supporters of the movement across the globe wearing scarves to represent their cause. In addition to encouraging legislative changes, the movement aims to destigmatize abortion, considering the consequences for people forced to carry a child to term when they have reason not to because of legal, social, or cultural barriers. Research<sup>2</sup> from the Guttmacher Institute, which aims to advance sexual and reproductive health, found in 2020 that when abor-

27. Integrated Refugee and Immigrant Services, <https://irisct.org/>

28. Connecticut Institute for Refugees and Immigrants, <https://cirict.org/>

29. Elena’s Light, <https://www.elenaslight.org/>

1. Ximena Casas, “How the ‘Green Wave’ Movement Did the Unthinkable in Latin America,” The New York Times (The New York Times, November 1, 2021), <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/01/opinion/abortion-latin-america.html>.

2. Maggie Fox, “Abortion Rates Go down When Countries Make It Legal: Report,” NBCNews.com (NBCUniversal News Group, March 21, 2018), <https://www.nbcnews.com/health/health-care/abortion-rates-go-down-when-countries-make-it-legal-report-n858476>.

tion access is legal and widespread, abortion rates decrease.

The movement had a recent win in December 2020, during which the Argentinian Supreme Court legalized abortion in the 14th week, making it the largest country in Latin America to do so. The decision also marks the defeat of the Catholic Church's ubiquitous influence in the country, "coupled with the stigma around abortion nestled in the identification of womanhood with motherhood," as Cora Fernandez Anderson, Assistant Professor of Comparative Politics at Mount Holyoke, wrote in *Ms. Magazine*.

Additionally, in September 2021, Mexico's Supreme Court made a landmark ruling decriminalizing abortion. Several states in Mexico permit abortions up to 14 weeks. The court also ruled the Sinaloa Constitution's protection of life from the moment of conception invalid. In both rulings, the court prioritized and empowered pregnant women's reproductive rights. Recently, the Causa Justa Movement successfully fought to expand abortion rights in the steadfastly Catholic and conservative country of Colombia. The Green Wave's first successful legal action took place in 2006 when Women's Link Worldwide filed a petition with the Colombian Constitutional Court arguing the law declaring abortion as a crime under any circumstance should be unconstitutional, as it violated women's fundamental rights. The emerging movement's growing momentum secured a favorable court decision on the basis of this violation. The court partially decriminalized abortion, in cases of rape, risk of

maternal life or health, and a nonviable pregnancy. In the ruling, the court declared a state's responsibility to protect fetal life could not achieve that by treating women as "a reproductive instrument for the human race." Prior to 2006, Colombia had an absolute ban on abortion, making it one of the most reproductively restrictive countries in the world. The Center for Reproductive Rights estimates about a third of women having unsafe abortions in Colombia will undergo complications necessitating medical attention. Yet, historically, one-fifth of those women will not receive the medical attention they require due to the stigma and fear of criminalized abortion. Even more, of these women who face the tangible repercussions of banned abortion, most are low income or from rural areas. A staggering 97% of almost 5,000 cases on criminalized abortion from a period of 20 years were from women and girls living in rural areas, as reported by the Report on the Judicialization of Abortion in Colombia of the Attorney General's Office.

This past February, Colombia partially legalized abortion. The Constitutional Court ruled people will be able to seek an abortion during the first 24 weeks of gestation, with special exceptions on the grounds of health, viability, and rape. This decision makes Colombia the eighth country in Latin America and the Caribbean to decriminalize abortion during the beginning of pregnancy. One of the lawsuits that helped spur this legal breakthrough was filed by Causa Justa, which aimed to eliminate the criminalization of abortion for healthcare providers, women, girls, and other individuals seeking abortion care, as well as reducing barriers

to this type of healthcare. Although Colombia's court has still not decriminalized abortion entirely, this law will begin to break down stigmas, expand access to abortion information and sex education, reduce deaths from unsafe abortions, and dignify those making this choice.

With Colombia's latest ruling, now three of the four most populous countries in Latin America have expanded access to abortion.

#### LATIN AMERICAN ROLLBACKS

Despite these monumental steps forward, other countries in Latin America face setbacks. Where Colombia was once the country with some of the most stringent abortion laws in Latin America, Guatemala is taking its place. Guatemala recently passed a bill putting women who receive abortions in prison for up to 10 years. In fact, this measure is, in some ways, a response to the broadening access to abortion in Latin America. Guatemalan congressman Armando Castillo is quoted in the *New York Times*,<sup>3</sup> describing his backing of this bill as spurred on by a desire to prevent the trend of broadening abortion access from reaching his country.

Although Guatemala previously required prison time for women who got abortions with exceptions for cases in which their life was at risk, the new bill is even more restrictive. It requires doctors who perform abortions to get another physician to determine the procedure medically necessary—another hurdle for those living in areas where medical professionals are scarce. Doctors who do not meet this

3. Natalie Kitroeff, Oscar Lopez, and Jody García, "Guatemalan Women Face up to 10 Years in Prison under New Abortion Bill," *The New York Times* (The New York Times, March 10, 2022), <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/09/world/americas/guatemala-abortion-prison.html>.

requirement can face up to 12 years in prison for performing the procedure. For Guatemala's President Alejandro Giammattei, it is suspected that this bill serves as an appeal to his conservative base at home and in the United States during a time when he is under fire for suspected corruption and bribery.

Similarly, out of protest to Argentina's emerging reforms, the Honduran Congress reenforced their country's staunch conservatism by altering their constitution to prohibit abortion on all accounts. El Salvadorean President Nayib Bukele also banned changes to abortion laws in the country's constitution. His draconian policies encouraged Salvadorean courts to sentence women to up to 40 years in prison for attempting to access an illegal abortion, which women often seek after miscarriages and stillbirths.

Still, activists are hopeful the expansion of abortion rights will spark broader outcry and action against gender violence in all its forms, particularly femicides, in Latin America. The #NiUnaMenos (Not One Woman Less) movement's adoption of green scarves in 2018 is a physical representation of this solidarity.

#### A HISTORY OF EUGENICS AND REPRODUCTIVE RESTRICTIONS IN LATIN AMERICA

Despite the undeniable presence of cultural influences stemming from

Latin America's history of colonization by European countries, as well as the role the United States has played, Latin America has its own history of eugenics in family planning movements. Emilie Egger, a PhD candidate in Yale's Department of History and Public Health, spoke on these specific historical trends that has been the focus of her research.

Egger differentiates between the Malthusian eugenics movement prev-

“*The movement aims to destigmatize abortion, considering the consequences for people forced to carry a child to term when they have reason not to because of legal, social, or cultural barriers.*”

alent in the United States and Europe versus the Lamarckian eugenics movement that was rampant in Latin America. The Lamarckian branch of eugenics was founded by Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, a French scientist who theorized that if you changed people's behaviors and environments, you could change their genes over time. This prejudiced thinking incentivized government population control tactics like sterilization, and went so far as to blame alcoholism, criminality, and diseases like tuberculosis, syphilis

and other mental health conditions on racial genetics, rather than to treat them as long-standing social issues. The government sorting of various racial groups and ethnicities of the Latin American population into desirables or undesirables based on these conditions fundamentally boiled down to the continuation of a repressive reproductive governance rooted in control, including that of capital. Although it was rarely explicitly stated, the mindset was one that determined who the state was and was not willing to invest in, “[of] bring[ing] these families into capitalism in a very specific way.”

Egger explained that eugenic practices are still prevalent in Latin America today, with rural and/or indigenous populations facing the brunt of disparities in access to resources and education, as well as the repercussions of any restrictions of abortion or sterilization practices. The time between 1995-1998 marked a widespread family planning campaign in Peru, which ultimately resulted in the sterilization of over 250,000 indigenous women, largely without full consent. Much of this ambiguity took shape in consent forms written in Spanish, which these women were not necessarily proficient in. In addition, they were often told to sign while they were in labor, further obstructing their decision making. “[It was] hard to get a huge idea on who consented to what,” Egger clarified. The general consensus, however, was that these women had little opportunity to have an informed say in these decisions.

Egger noted that “[t]his campaign was presented to the Peruvian public and the whole world as a feminist campaign.” In fact, the United Nations conference at which the Peruvian

president at the time, Alberto Fujimori, announced that sterilization was legal was the very same one in which Hillary Clinton famously coined the statement, “Women’s rights are human rights.” In other words, President Fujimori’s announcement was in an era that celebrated women’s reproductive autonomy, and expanding liberties. So, when what Egger characterized as the “coercive campaign that targeted indigenous women” commenced, it was seen by the world stage as an expansion of rights, rather than an attempt to reshape the population.

When asked about how these trends specific to Egger’s research in Peru applied across Latin America, she emphasized that the histories of reproductive rights were very specific to the country. In Argentina, for example, the popularized image of a white-dominant, European-adjacent nation was created by the physical removal of indigenous populations and the exclusive favoring of white European immigrants. In Mexico, the culture turned towards embracing their mestizo heritage, seeing themselves as a kind of “cosmic race.” The claim they were all an indistinguishable mix of European and indigenous blood fueled the myth of racism’s impossibility in the region, therefore leaving systemic inequalities unaddressed.

#### THE FUTURE OF THE MOVEMENT

There have been a considerable number of indigenous-led movements in Latin America, many of which center around the idea that their indigenous identity and womanhood are inextricably and non-negotiably linked. Acts of resistance, and indigenous women’s ongoing fight for reproductive

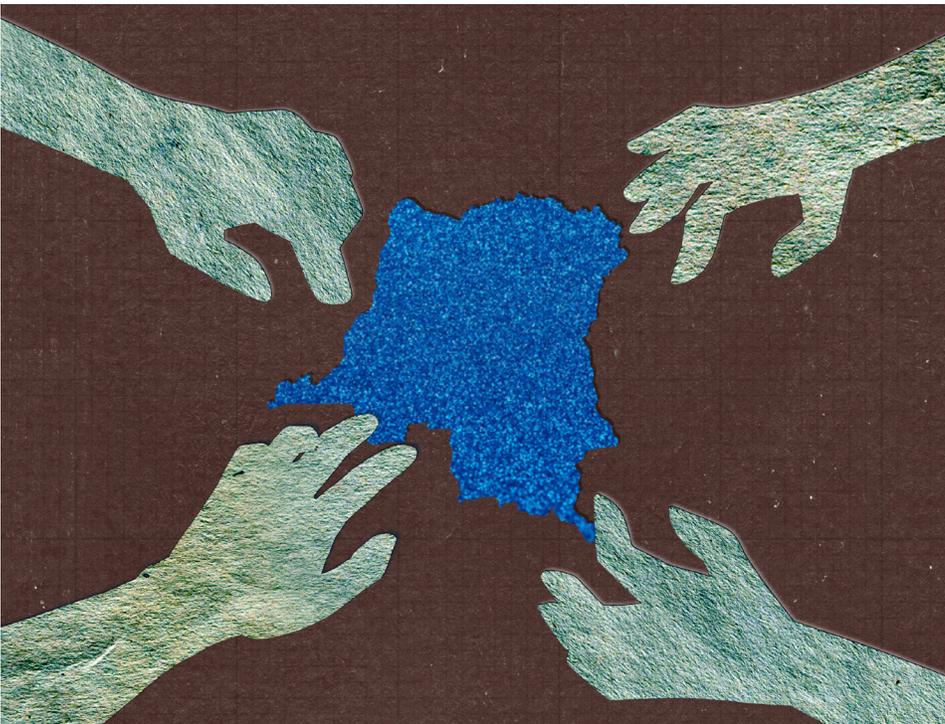
liberties, despite prevalent racial animus making these campaigns more palatable in the public eye, further embrace feminist historian Laura Briggs’ saying that “all politics are reproductive politics.”

“Backlash will always follow,” Egger remarked. In this unavoidable tension between growing momentum in the advancement of reproductive justice and conservative backlash, new strategies will have to be employed in addressing these age-old patterns. “Words change, states are always interested in eugenics,” she went on to say about the persistence and resurgence of conservative movements and policies which uphold this framework of controlling reproductive autonomy as a means of controlling economy. The return of the fascist right in the past few years is not unique to the United States—in Latin America, organizers will have to find new strategies to combat this unexpected return of these antiquated ideologies.

#### Writer’s Reflection:

Through our research, we hoped to further understand whether these incidents of expanded rights signal a soon-to-be rippling overhaul of long-standing reproductive rights restrictions in Latin America. If not, we wanted to discuss what specific conditions allowed these countries to make these progressive reforms and if those are likely to be replicated. We are so grateful to have had this opportunity to explore such a complex history, and gain a better understanding of the trends that have contributed to the reproductive freedoms of our Latin American roots.

“*The return of the fascist right in the past few years is not unique to the United States—in Latin America, organizers will have to find new strategies to combat this unexpected return of these antiquated ideologies.*”



# Cobalt: The "Blood Diamond" of the Congo

**Nasser  
Eid**

*Since 1996, over six million Congolese citizens have died as a result of genocidal wars and the exploitative conditions of Western finance capital. Now, as China emerges as the primary investor of the region's mining sector, locals are facing a new threat.*

In 1885, King Leopold II claimed the Congo as his private property and committed mass genocide against at least 10 million Congolese to extract rubber. The stage was set for local populations to resist colonialism for decades until they won independence in 1955 with the election of prime minister Patrice Lumumba. Today, the Congolese are subject to a new form

of exploitation: large-scale commercial mining of cobalt.

In an interview with Al Jazeera, D.R. Congo cobalt miner Manix Kemia stated, "We're working very hard and digging very far to take this out, but we're getting almost nothing for it. The conditions are dangerous but we're not paid for our level of sacrifice."<sup>1</sup>

Two-thirds of the world's cobalt production comes from the Congo, putting it at the center stage of the clean energy revolution.<sup>2</sup> Cobalt is necessary to make battery-powered cars, along with lithium, nickels, and manganese. As a result, China and the United States have engaged in a contest over cobalt deposits for over a decade. Since the Obama and Trump administrations, a company backed by the Chinese government bought two of the latest cobalt mines over the past five years.<sup>3</sup>

As the production of electric vehicles is expected to increase to 11 million units in 2025,<sup>4</sup> China has continued its strides to secure access to raw materials and production. In response to China taking this swift action, President Biden noted at General Motors that "We risked losing our edge as a nation, and China and the rest of the world are catching up. Well, we're about to turn that around in a big, big way."<sup>5</sup>

1. AlJazeeraEnglish. "DR Congo Cobalt Miners Work in Treacherous Conditions." YouTube. YouTube, November 25, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1TL7hTx-5z0k>.

2. Person. "Cobalt-Rich Congo Tries to Push into Battery Manufacturing." Reuters. Thomson Reuters, November 25, 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/markets/commodities/cobalt-rich-congo-tries-push-into-battery-manufacturing-2021-11-24/#:~:text=Congo%20mines%20around%20two%2Dthirds,electric%20vehicles%20and%20electronic%20devices>.

3. Lipton, Eric, and Dionne Searcey. "Chinese Company Removed as Operator of Cobalt Mine in Congo." The New York Times. The New York Times, March 1, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/28/world/congo-cobalt-mining-china.html>.

4. Lampinen, Megan. "Are Electric Vehicle Projections Underestimating Demand?" Automotive World, April 26, 2021. <https://www.automotiveworld.com/articles/are-electric-vehicle-projections-underestimating-demand/#:~:text=By%20mid%2Ddecade%2C%20shoppers%20around,units%20a%20year%20by%202030>.

5. Searcey, Dionne, Michael Forsythe, Eric Lipton, and Ashley Gilbertson. "A Power Struggle over Cobalt Rattles the Clean Energy Revolution." The New York Times. The New York Times, November 20, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/20/world/china-congo-cobalt.html>.

China accounts for over 50% of cobalt demand in the Congo because it established ties with the country's government elite over a decade ago.<sup>6</sup> In 2005, former Chinese president Hu Jintao hosted a reception for Congo's new president, Joseph Kabila, at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing.<sup>7</sup> Although China agreed to use \$6 billion to fund hospitals, railways, roads, schools, and electricity in a US-backed agreement,<sup>8</sup> a leak of more than 3 million documentaries revealed that Chinese interests channeled \$55 million to Kabila and his family.<sup>9</sup> This bribery schedule paved the way for Chinese interests to now own 15 of the 17 cobalt operations in the Congo.<sup>10</sup>

For Congolese citizens, China appeared to be an ideal trade partner. Chinese investment in the region lacked any ideological purpose<sup>11</sup> that would seemingly tear away the human dignity of locals as Belgium and the US had done in the past. Moreover, China has an unmatched record when it comes to rapid modernization. President Kabila referred to China's model as "La Modernité", suggesting his belief that the Chinese government would present a mutually beneficial relationship;<sup>12</sup> China was to extract raw materials and Congo was to repair its infrastructure and improve its

production.<sup>13</sup> Yet, in addition to the disparity of benefits in the contract,<sup>14</sup> no long-term plan was created to consolidate Chinese investment and improve the infrastructure so that services could be rendered to the Congolese population.<sup>15</sup> These factors, along with unexpected costs, meant that the DRC's poor institutions would most likely have been able to fully maximize any deal with China.

However, it is evident today that China has failed to have good practice in the agreement. The Chinese companies who were responsible for the execution still fail to properly assess the environmental and social impact of their presence. Companies such as the China Railway Engineering Company and Sinohydro promised to build roads and hospitals in exchange for a 68% stake in the Sicomines venture. However, these companies failed to live up to their end of the government, causing criticism about their lack of transparency.

In response, the national government released a statement that it would review some mining contracts and ensure they sufficiently benefit Congolese citizens. For some analysts, this decision is believed to be the result of Western pressure pushing back on China's



6. "Cobalt - USGS." Accessed April 16, 2022. <https://pubs.usgs.gov/periodicals/mcs2021/mcs2021-cobalt.pdf>.

7. Uren, David, Author David Uren is a senior fellow at ASPI. Image: Per-Anders Pettersson/Getty Images., Author, and David Uren is a senior fellow at ASPI. Image: Per-Anders Pettersson/Getty Images. "How China Wrested Control of the Congo's Critical Minerals." *The Strategist*, December 6, 2021. <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/how-china-wrested-control-of-the-congos-critical-minerals/>.

8. "10. China's Infrastructure Footprint in Africa - China in Africa - Age (African Growing Enterprises) File." Institute of Developing Economies. Accessed April 16, 2022. [https://www.ide.go.jp/English/Data/Africa\\_file/Manualreport/cia\\_10.html](https://www.ide.go.jp/English/Data/Africa_file/Manualreport/cia_10.html).

9. Al Jazeera. "Document Leak Shows Kabila Family, Associates Looted DRC Funds." *Crime News*. Al Jazeera, November 19, 2021.

10. "Noodles Browser Compatibility Check." Fortune Minerals Limited (via Public) / COBALT NEWS. Accessed April 16, 2022. <http://www.publicnow.com/view/91690A9B23DB324767693C2E91DD738BFAA5495F>.

11. "Congo Peoples Republic of: Chinese Ambassador to Congo (Brazzaville) Ma Fulin attended the handover ceremony of the Aid to Congo Vaccine Airport". *TendersInfo*. March 12, 2021 Friday. <https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:626F-9531-F11P-X1V9-00000-00&context=1516831>.

12. Kabemba, Claude. "China-Democratic Republic of Congo relations: from a beneficial to a developmental cooperation." *African Studies Quarterly* 16, no. 3-4 (2016): 73+. Gale Academic OneFile. <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A491093168/AONE?u=a04fu&sid=googleScholar&xid=a570b2da>.

13. "China's Belt and Road Initiative in the Global Trade ...". Accessed April 16, 2022. <https://www.oecd.org/finance/Chinas-Belt-and-Road-Initiative-in-the-global-trade-investment-and-finance-landscape.pdf>.

14. "GBR - the Chinese Power Grab in the DRC." *Global Business Reports*. <https://www.gbreports.com/article/the-chinese-power-grab-in-the-drc>.

15. By Michael Davie in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. "The rush for cobalt in the Congo reveals the human cost of the world's green energy future". *ABC Premium News (Australia)*. February 24, 2022 Thursday. <https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:64VH-NM31-DY47-50YT-00000-00&context=1516831>.



lucrative gains in the region. China’s ambassador to Congo said that the country “must not be a battlefield of major powers,” but it is increasingly evident that both powers are not interested in revitalizing the region. While the royalty rate to be paid to Congo increased from 5% to 15%, China has not paid its share of the project. The deal was signed in 2018 but construction still has not yet begun.

These current-day complications are

not surprising given China and Congo’s long history of working towards the development of Central Africa. During King Leopold’s rule, Belgium shipped Chinese workers to the region to build national railroads. Due to the region’s vast landscape, large-scale mining, which depended on railroads for access to laborers and tools, did not begin until the latter half of the 20th century.<sup>16</sup> Foreign investment in Congo has never been meant to improve the living conditions of the country’s

*(“Manono, Province du Tanganyika, RD Congo. Une femme congolaise nous présente un sachet de cassitérite qu’elle vient d’extraire dans une carrière située aux alentours de la ville”. Image courtesy of MONUSCO. Licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0)*

citizens. Since World War II, the United States took a keen interest in the region to use Congolese uranium as material for atomic bombs.<sup>17</sup> To protect these interests, the US and the CIA bankrolled mercenaries and Congolese troops and used warplanes to suppress Soviet-backed revolters.<sup>18</sup> The United States attempted to outbid other countries in the region for decades by investing in Congo's national development.

In subsequent years, Mobutu knew the importance of Congo's cobalt mines to the United States and attempted to maximize his personal gains in every deal he struck with them. In 1970, Richard Nixon and the first lady held a bouquet for Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire at the White House.<sup>19</sup> As a leader of a newly-independent country, Mobutu was launched into global clout and was determined to keep control of the country's natural resources and use it as a bargaining chip in dealing with the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. According to Professor David Engerman, a scholar of twentieth-century international history who has written on a variety of topics related to the history of develop-

ment assistance, "The Americans were working on leverage as well, whether it's USAID or especially through the World Bank and the IMF. But that sort of leverage was an effort to push through certain kinds of policies. It wasn't necessarily about ownership ... Chinese lending in Africa has been applying more direct collateral." Although hundreds of millions of dollars had been sent to Mobutu before his trip to Washington, he stated that he contracted a Belgian company to excavate the mine.<sup>20</sup> In a panic, the United States sent several giant C-130 transport planes and \$60,000 worth of Coca-Cola at the insistence of Mobutu.<sup>21</sup> The US also invested \$800 million to bring electricity to the region.<sup>22</sup> In the 1970s, Mobutu requested material support to industrialize the Democratic Republic of Congo and sought technical collaboration for railroad development.<sup>23</sup> However, by the early 1990s, he and his army pillaged mining villages like Gécamines as the country drifted towards civil war.<sup>24</sup>

The relationship was detrimental to the Congolese. Families in these villages sold off their remaining mining equipment in order to feed themselves.<sup>25</sup>

This created a gap for foreign companies, like China's Creusers, to come in and begin digging at abandoned sites. Shortly after Mobutu was deposed, Chinese businesses and the Beijing government had the opportunity to make heavy investments in the region.<sup>26</sup> Not only was Congo rich with mineral resources but it also lacked regulations to protect workers.<sup>27</sup> This was the ideal situation for China and other foreign investors: they could gain access to the materials they needed without fearing legal persecution. As Professor Engerman stated, "The Chinese have been using the leverage of debt in a more draconian way than the Americans did. The Soviets did less strongarming even than the Americans during the Cold War." Today, this has left millions of Congolese villagers in extreme poverty and on the brink of death.

Due to facing abject poverty, hundreds of thousands of Congolese individuals and families have migrated to mining areas with the hope of working as miners or even discovering cobalt on land they can purchase.<sup>28</sup> Most Congolese individuals in the region of Kolwezi have become creusers, or "artisanal

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diggers.”<sup>29</sup> The cost of living is incredibly high, so many of these diggers are willing to work at and sneak into licensed mines for cobalt excavation.<sup>30</sup> However, Congolese miners are also working collectively to fight for better wages and living conditions. In one DRC mine, employees’ demands included an extra \$100 a day per worker and contractor to compensate for working in isolation, and a bonus of \$4,000 per person before they would return to work.<sup>31</sup>

Negotiations between workers and mining companies are often marked by violence. According to spokesman Odilon Kajumba Kilanga, when creuseurs’ demands were not met, they would “go in to work and say, ‘No, I won’t do anything.’” Kajumba also said that “The Chinese will feel unsafe and call in the police.” Then, the police do the company’s bidding: “They know they will get a gift from the Chinese, so they will threaten you with teargas and batons.”<sup>32</sup> When Congolese citizens own the mines they operate, they are able to build economic power within their own communities.<sup>33</sup>

For example, at first, the discovery of gold along the banks of the Ituri River led to a free-for-all, but locals quickly organized the mining zone into a cooperative. In contrast with the privately-owned cobalt mines, the cooperative provided safety equipment and regulations barring child labor. People who work at the camp say the workers demonstrate consistent discipline. At Yale, students and faculty who



engage in conversation about foreign investment in Congo should center the lived experiences and stories of those harmed by neo-colonial practices. When we fail to connect the historical transformation of external

domination from Belgium to Congo, we reduce the daily realities of Congolese triumph, joy, and sorrow. By entering discussions from a place of wanting to build collective consciousness, we can create the conditions for

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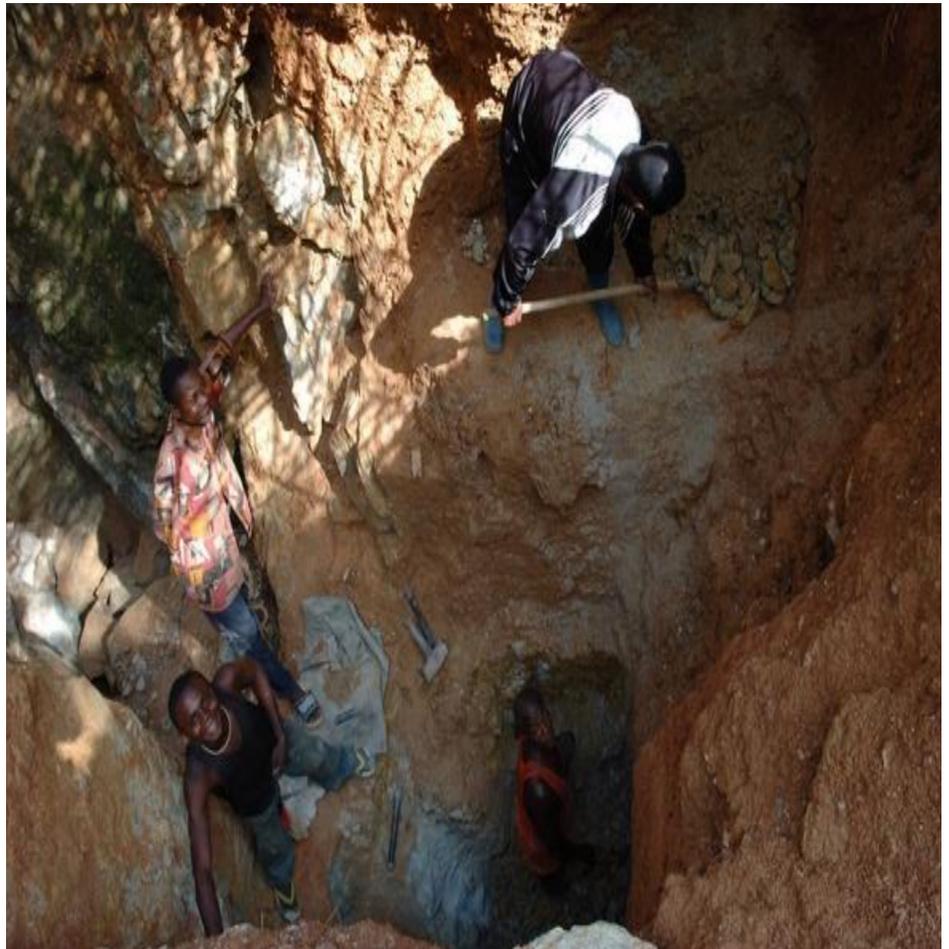
building solidarity and feeling fundamentally connected to those on the African continent.

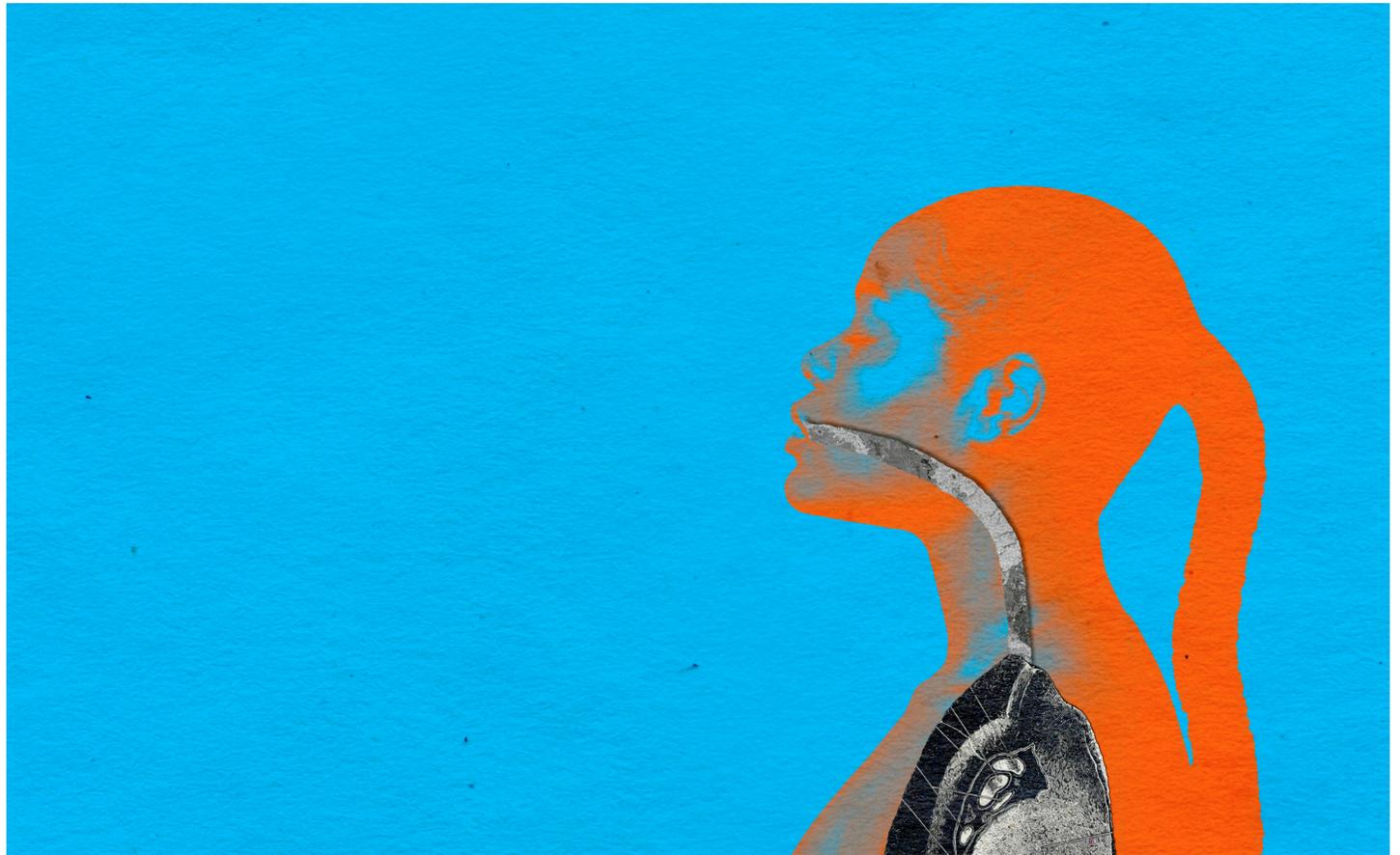
**Writer's reflection:**

When writing this article, I wanted to highlight the language that we should be using to link the history of colonialism that the West and China has forced upon the Democratic Republic of Congo through debt and labor exploitation. I also wanted to highlight the agency of Congolese miners and how they have captured the revolutionary spirit of past anticolonial movements. Ultimately, I hope to demonstrate how the working-class movement of the Congolese can serve as a model to destabilize forces of power and racism through unionism and community. I'd like to thank Professor David Engerman for taking time out of his busy schedule to speak with me. If you are interested in learning more about the situation in Congo, I encourage you to form or join a work-study circle that analyzes the history of neo-colonialism and the methods that can be used to move the mass struggle forward.

*Overleaf: "Discussing Fairphone with the creuseurs at the Gecamines site". Image courtesy of Fairphone. Licensed under CC BY-NC 2.0*

*Below: "Mining in Kailo". Image courtesy of Julien Harneis. Licensed under a CC BY-SA 2.0*





# *Breathing as a Human Right: Cancer Alley as a Case Study of Environmental Racism*

*Semira Mohamed*

*What's in a name? Cancer Alley is a term coined to describe a region in southern Louisiana with high rates of cancer and other serious illnesses among its residents. Over 150 petrochemical plants and refineries live alongside these residents. As the health of the population deteriorates, residents call upon local and federal government leaders to regulate toxins from these factories, but their complaints fall on deaf ears.*

Cancer Alley is an 85-mile strip of land in southern Louisiana with strikingly high incidences of cancer among its residents. Cancer Alley is home to more than 150 petrochemical plants and refineries that emit toxic pollutants into the air. Denka Performance Elastomer, a rubber manufacturer, owns one of these petrochemical plants in St. John the Baptist Parish. Denka's rubber manufacturing process results in chloroprene emitting from their plants. These emissions have been linked to higher incidences of cancer and other serious illnesses among St. John the Baptist Parish residents; however, Denka, backed by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), has denied these claims. This paper explores

the potential of a direct relationship between chloroprene emissions and incidences of illness in Cancer Alley. I argue that exposure to chloroprene at the levels present in Cancer Alley puts residents at greater risk of developing serious illnesses, including cancer. Ultimately, this paper advances the notion that policy-makers are more willing to compromise the health and wellbeing of low-income Black and Brown communities than white communities.

### CHLOROPRENE CARCINOGENICITY

Chloroprene—or 2-chloro-1, 3butadiene—refers is a “chlorinated hydrocarbon monomer,”<sup>1</sup> characterized as a “volatile, synthetic liquid”<sup>2</sup> used in the manufacture of latexes and synthetic rubbers. Chloroprene is a commonly used petrochemical that is instrumental in producing polychloroprene, otherwise known as Neoprene. Synthesizing chloroprene involves “a two-step process consisting of a chlorination of 1,3-butadiene to 3,4-dichloro-1-butene, with subsequent caustic dehydrochlorination to 2-chloro-1-3-butadiene.”<sup>3</sup> Denka Performance Elastomer manufactures Neoprene, and as a result of this process, chloroprene is emitted from its factories.

The EPA has classified chloroprene as a likely carcinogen<sup>4</sup> after a series of studies established links between ex-

posure to chloroprene and the development of liver and lung cancers. Chloroprene has many structural similarities to known carcinogens such as 1,3-butadiene. Additionally, the EPA found evidence of chloroprene engaging in a mutagenic mode of action that would form cancerous tumors in humans. The National Toxicology Program<sup>5</sup> conducted experiments examining chloroprene as a carcinogenic agent in laboratory rats and mice. Researchers observed that there were statistically significant increases in tumor formation among the mice when they were exposed to chloroprene emissions and that higher levels of exposure indicated earlier tumor development.

Because of its harmful effects, the EPA recommends that chloroprene emissions do not exceed more than 0.2 µg/m<sup>3</sup>. In the home of the Denka Performance Elastomer plant, emissions far exceed the EPA’s recommended guidelines. A 2021 study of chloroprene emissions in Cancer Alley found the mean chloroprene levels of samples tested was 0.7 µg/m<sup>3</sup>, over three times EPA recommended guidelines, and the health of residents reflects this reality. One article explains, “cancer, skin rashes, and respiratory problems are rampant. It has become normal for kids to go to school with respirators and for the local newspaper’s obituary section to be filled with reports of infant death.”<sup>6</sup> Residents of Cancer Alley have a risk of cancer that is roughly



“Chemical Plants” Image courtesy of St. Gil, Ma

forty-six individuals per one million as opposed to the national average of thirty individuals per one million. A 2021 study found that St. John the Baptist Parish residents reported higher than likely incidences of cancer and other health conditions associated with chloroprene exposure, such as respiratory irritation and cardiac palpitations. Despite these statistics, Denka Performance Elastomer maintains that its factory has nothing to do with residents’ poor health.

### ENVIRONMENTAL RACISM IN CANCER ALLEY

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7. Salas, Renee N. “Environmental Racism and Climate Change – Missed Diagnoses.” *New England Journal of Medicine* 385, no. 11 (2021): 967–69. <https://doi.org/10.1056/nejmp2109160>.



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Environmental justice advocates view Cancer Alley as a microcosm of a broader phenomenon called environmental racism. Environmental racism is “the use of racist practices in determining which communities receive health-protective infrastructure, such as green space, and which receive health-harming highways and industrial complexes.”<sup>7</sup> Hazardous waste disposal sites, landfills, and petrochemical plants tend to be located in proximity to or within low-income Black and Brown communities because these communities often lack the political and economic capital to oppose these decisions. As a result, these toxic facilities are established, and the health of the communities they occupy is compromised. Due to Cancer Alley’s large population of low-income Afri-

can-Americans, experts in sociology, such as Willie Jamaal Wright,<sup>8</sup> argue that government officials are less receptive to their health complaints, and many Cancer Alley residents agree.

One resident, Robert Taylor, whom *The Guardian*<sup>9</sup> interviewed, said, “the petrochemical industry and human beings cannot live and operate side by side, so they have decided they’re OK with just wiping us out, especially because of the fact that this is a poor black population. We were the lowest-hanging fruit.” Robert Taylor’s wife was diagnosed with cancer, and his daughter has a rare intestinal condition called gastroparesis. Both of their health conditions have been linked to their chloroprene exposure. In this interview, Taylor expresses how the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality (LDEQ) and the EPA, two regulatory bodies tasked with regulating emissions to protect public health, have neglected their responsibilities to Cancer Alley residents.

So why does Denka Performance Elastomer have so much power? According to a study conducted by the Louisiana Chemical Association, sales from the chemical sector of Louisiana’s economy bring in nearly \$80 billion in revenue annually.<sup>10</sup> The chemical industry provides 2 out of 7 jobs in the state. As a result, the Louisiana State government enforces minimal regulation and provides the industry with significant tax cuts. Cancer Alley residents lack the financial and political power to fight against this big

corporate power, and thus as resident Mary Hampton explains, “[Cancer Alley residents] just live with it.”

## CONCLUSION

The response, or rather lack of response, to the catastrophic state of public health in Cancer Alley, is arguably one of the most egregious examples of environmental racism in the United States. By failing to regulate chloroprene emissions from the Denka Performance Elastomer plant, the EPA and the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality have manufactured a health crisis that compromised countless lives. Cancer Alley is an example of how marginalized people bear the brunt of humanity’s destruction of the environment. However, with the exacerbation of the climate crisis, the future of everyone’s air quality is at risk if policy-makers fail to protect the human right to breathe clean air. Air pollution,<sup>11</sup> such as chloroprene emitted from Denka’s factories, is linked to climate change, so as petrochemical plants and landfills continue to emit toxins into the air, the threat to everyone’s ability to breathe grows. Cancer Alley is one striking and devastating case of humanity’s mistreatment of Earth, but it may not be too long before those more privileged will also experience the consequences of this mistreatment.

### Writing Reflection:

While issues of the environment have recently come to the fore as the climate crisis has exacerbated, African Americans have for decades been exposed to

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environmental hazards within their communities. I wrote this paper to understand how and why regulatory bodies fail to protect Black communities. Writing this paper, I learned that environmental racism is tied to neglect and gaslighting. Low-income communities of color are not justly protected by the regulatory bodies tasked with doing so. The sources I examined were primarily peer-reviewed journal articles that highlight the dangers of chloroprene exposure and define environmental racism. These articles framed the piece from the Guardian that interviews directly-impacted residents who gave insight into the human impact of the public health crisis in Cancer Alley. This paper is limited by my focus on one chemical, chloroprene, emitted from one petrochemical plant, the Denka Performance Elastomer plant. There are other impacted communities in Cancer Alley beyond St. John the Baptist Parish residents.







