

BANGLADESH

MINIMAL ADVANCEMENT – Efforts Made but Continued Law and Practice that Delayed Advancement

In 2023, Bangladesh made minimal advancement in efforts to eliminate the worst forms of child labor. The Bangladesh Department of Inspections for Factories and Establishments identified 3,459 child labor violations and border guards prevented 75 individuals, including children, from being trafficked into neighboring countries. Moreover, the government supported a project that supported the rehabilitation of children living and working on the street from the Dalit and Bihari minority groups. The government also continued to support UNICEF’s Myanmar Curriculum Pilot, which enrolled 300,000 Rohingya children for the 2023–2024 academic year. The Myanmar Curriculum provides Rohingya students with formal, standardized education based on Burma’s national education system. However, Bangladesh is assessed as having made only minimal advancement because it continues to obstruct unannounced inspections in the Export Processing Zones. Under the Export Processing Zone Labor Rules, the Department of Inspections for Factories and Establishments is required to indirectly provide notice to the Bangladesh Export Processing Zone Authority, which may result in employers being notified of inspections in advance. The lack of routine unannounced inspections may leave potential violations of child labor laws and other labor abuses undetected in the Export Processing Zones. Moreover, the Bangladesh Labor Act does not apply to children working in all sectors in which child labor occurs. The government also did not publicly release information on its criminal law enforcement efforts related to child labor in 2023. In addition, penalties for child labor violations can only be imposed after a lengthy legal process and, when courts do impose them, the fines are too low to deter child labor law violations.



PREVALENCE AND SECTORAL DISTRIBUTION OF CHILD LABOR

Statistics on Children’s Work and Education

Children	Age	Percent of Population
Working	5 to 14	9.2% (Unavailable)
Hazardous Work by Children	7 to 17	Unavailable
Attending School	5 to 14	88.4%
Combining Work and School	7 to 14	8.2%

Children in Bangladesh are subjected to the worst forms of child labor, including commercial sexual exploitation, sometimes as a result of human trafficking, and forced labor in the drying of fish and the production of garments. Children also perform dangerous tasks in the production of garments and leather goods, as well as breaking stones.

Overview of Children’s Work by Sector and Activity



Agriculture

Harvesting and processing crops, including salt;† and raising poultry. Fishing, including drying and processing fish,† including shrimp.†



Industry

Producing textiles, including jute, and garments, including tailoring and working in the informal garment sector.† Producing leather† and leather goods,† including footwear. Manufacturing aluminum,† bricks,† glass,† hand-rolled cigarettes (*bidis*),† matches,† plastic,† soap,† and furniture (steel).† Shipbreaking,† battery recycling,† construction,† and breaking bricks† and stones.†



Services

Domestic work. Garbage collecting, sorting, and recycling.† Working in transportation, including ticket taking,† welding,† pulling rickshaws, driving, working as crew members on fishing boats, and repairing automobiles.† Working in retail shops, including grocery stores, restaurants, weaving, and tailoring shops.



Categorical Worst Forms of Child Labor‡

Use in illicit activities, including smuggling and selling drugs. Forced begging, forced labor in the drying of fish and the production of garments. Commercial sexual exploitation, sometimes as a result of human trafficking. Forced domestic work.

† Determined by national law or regulation as hazardous and, as such, relevant to Article 3(d) of ILO C. 182.

‡ Child labor understood as the worst forms of child labor per se under Article 3(a)–(c) of ILO C. 182.



SUGGESTED GOVERNMENT ACTIONS TO ELIMINATE CHILD LABOR

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

Legal Framework

Extend minimum age for work protections to all children, including those engaged in domestic work and working on vessels and small farms.

Ensure that the types of hazardous work prohibited for children are comprehensive and include domestic service.

Criminally prohibit the use of a child for prostitution; the use, procuring, and offering of children for the production of drugs; and the recruitment of children under age 18 by non-state armed groups.

Legally establish a compulsory education age to align with the minimum age of work of 14.

Enforcement

Empower labor inspectors to recommend or assess penalties for all labor violations, including those that are initial offenses, and increase the penalties for child labor violations to sufficiently deter future violations.

Conduct investigations and prosecutions of public officials who are complicit in the trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation of children, including those who accept bribes.

Increase the number of labor inspectors from 446 to 1,861 to ensure adequate coverage of the labor force of approximately 74.5 million workers.

Permit and conduct unannounced labor inspections, including inspections for child labor, in Export Processing Zones.

Prosecute all criminal child labor violations, as opposed to using mediation and settlement.

Provide adequate training for inspectors and investigators on worst forms of child labor, including commercial sexual exploitation of children, to ensure that such cases are consistently investigated and prosecuted.

Collect and publish national-level data on the enforcement of criminal laws relevant to child labor, including information on training for investigators, and the number of prosecutions initiated, convictions attained, and penalties imposed.

Investigate and hold accountable local government officials who hire children for government-funded job programs.

Coordination

Establish a robust referral mechanism between civil and criminal enforcement agencies to promote coordination and cooperation to address child labor and its root causes.

Government Policies

Ensure agencies responsible for implementation of the National Plan of Action on the Elimination of Child Labor are effectively coordinating their efforts and strategies.

Social Programs

Enhance efforts to make education accessible for all children by improving bathroom sanitation and resources, ensuring a well-developed distance-learning mechanism, increasing the number of schools, offsetting costs for transportation and school materials, and permitting all children to enroll in school regardless of whether they have a permanent address or identity documents.

Expand programs to address the scope of the child labor problem, including in the informal garment, leather, and fish-drying industries.



CHILDREN AT HIGHER RISK

Most child laborers in Bangladesh work in the informal sector. Children living in coastal areas are likely to engage in child labor in the fishing sector, including drying and selling fish. Children from the minority Bihari community are forced into work at a young age, and in jobs considered less desirable. Children experiencing homelessness are forced to beg, pickpocket, and sell drugs. In border areas, traffickers force children to produce and transport drugs. Children displaced by natural disasters are also at a higher risk for human trafficking and forced commercial sexual exploitation. Finally, there are reports of Bangladeshi officials taking bribes to provide human traffickers access to refugee camps and facilitate the trafficking of Rohingya children. NGOs allege that some officials allow traffickers to operate at the India-Bangladesh border and checkpoints.



BARRIERS TO EDUCATION ACCESS

More than 40 percent of schools lack basic sanitation facilities and hygiene services, and one in five schools lack safe drinking water. Many schools in Bangladesh are overcrowded and over 80 percent run double shifts of students. The country does not have an adequate number of teachers for an education system of its size. The Primary Teacher Training Institutes cannot keep up with the demand for teachers, particularly in rural areas. Other barriers to education include the high costs for transportation, uniforms, and school supplies. The Urdu-speaking Bihari minority children face education barriers due to having temporary addresses associated with residing in long-term camps. The Dalit and lower-caste Hindu children have lagged behind other groups in accessing education. According to reports, 60 percent of children with disabilities from ages 5 to 17 are not enrolled in formal education. Additionally, children born to mothers who are engaged in commercial sex face barriers in accessing education since they are not permitted to obtain legal birth certificates. Many children from this community do not know their father’s name, which is a legal requirement to gain national identity cards or birth certificates needed for school enrollment. Although previous reporting indicated that the Bangladesh government closed Rohingya-operated schools and threatened to confiscate UN Refugee Agency-issued identity cards from Rohingya teachers and move them to the flood-prone island of Bhasan Char, this did not occur in 2023. Over 300,000 Rohingya students were enrolled for the 2023–2024 school year, setting a new record and marking the first time Rohingya refugee children of all ages will have access to education under the UNICEF Myanmar Curriculum Pilot.









LEGAL FRAMEWORK FOR CHILD LABOR

Bangladesh has ratified all key international conventions concerning child labor. Although the government has established laws and regulations related to child labor, gaps exist in Bangladesh’s legal framework to adequately protect children from the worst forms of child labor, including the lack of criminal provisions comprehensively criminalizing the use of children in prostitution.

Child Labor Laws and Regulations	Meets International Standards	Legislation
Minimum Age for Work, 14 Years		Sections 1–2, 34, and 284 of the Bangladesh Labor Act; Sections 159, 161, and 175 of the Bangladesh Export Processing Zone Labor Act, 2019
Minimum Age for Hazardous Work, 18 Years		Sections 39–42 of the Bangladesh Labor Act
Identification of Hazardous Occupations or Activities Prohibited for Children		Sections 39–42 of the Bangladesh Labor Act; Statutory Regulatory Order Number 65, List of Worst Forms of Work for Children
Prohibition of Slavery, Debt Bondage, and Forced Labor		Sections 370, 371, and 374 of the Penal Code; Sections 2, 3, 6, and 9 of the Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking Act
Prohibition of Child Trafficking		Sections 2, 3, and 6 of the Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking Act; Sections 2 and 6 of the Suppression of Violence Against Women and Children Act

Legal Framework for Child Labor (Cont.)

Child Labor Laws and Regulations	Meets International Standards	Legislation
Prohibition of Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children		Sections 372 and 373 of the Penal Code; Sections 78 and 80 of the Children’s Act; Sections 2, 3, 6, and 11 of the Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking Act; Sections 2 and 8 of the Pornography Control Act
Prohibition of Using Children in Illicit Activities		Section 79 of the Children’s Act
Minimum Age for Voluntary State Military Recruitment, 16 Years		Army, Air Force, and Navy Regulations (titles unknown)
Prohibition of Compulsory Recruitment of Children by (State) Military	N/A*	
Prohibition of Military Recruitment by Non-state Armed Groups		Article 79 of the Children’s Act; Anti-Terrorism Act of 2009
Compulsory Education Age		
Free Public Education		Article 17 of the Constitution

* Country has no conscription

Although the Bangladesh government maintains a list of hazardous work prohibited for children, the list does not cover domestic work, in which children are known to work long hours and are exposed to violence and sexual assault. Additionally, the Bangladesh Labor Act does not meet international standards for minimum age for work because a number of sectors are excluded from its application, including seamen, ocean-going vessels, agriculture farms with fewer than 10 workers, and domestic work. Bangladesh does not criminalize the use of children for prostitution unless the child is under guardianship or a third-party has involved them in prostitution. Bangladesh criminalizes the use of children in the transport of drugs but does not criminalize the use of children in the production of drugs. The Bangladesh Constitution also does not criminally prohibit the recruitment of children by non-state armed groups. The government’s Primary Education Act stipulates a separate compulsory education age at 10, but this law is not binding as it has not been published in the national gazette. Even if the law were in effect, children between the ages of 10 and 14 would still remain particularly vulnerable to child labor as they are not required to attend school and are not able to legally work without restriction.



ENFORCEMENT OF LAWS ON CHILD LABOR

In 2023, criminal and labor law enforcement agencies in Bangladesh took actions to address child labor. However, the lack of unannounced inspections in Export Processing Zones and the lack of publicly released enforcement information hindered enforcement efforts.

Agencies Responsible for Child Labor Law Enforcement

Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments (DIFE): Located within the Ministry of Labor and Employment (MOLE). Enforces labor laws, including those related to child labor and hazardous work. During the reporting period, DIFE implemented a 2022–2023 action plan for the Elimination of Child Labor from the Keraniganj sub-district in Dhaka and extended the program to 2025. According to DIFE, the agency removed 12,400 children through project intervention. Furthermore, DIFE organized awareness-building programs and meetings with Dhaka’s District Child Labor Welfare Committee and District Child Labor Monitoring Committee.

Bangladesh Police: Enforce Penal Code provisions by protecting children from forced labor and commercial sexual exploitation. Through its Trafficking in Persons Monitoring Cell, the Bangladesh Police investigate cases of human trafficking and enforce the Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking Act’s anti-trafficking provisions. Operate victim support centers for trafficked women and children through partnership with 11 NGOs.

Enforcement Mechanisms and Efforts

Has a Labor Inspectorate	Yes	Has a Complaint Mechanism	Yes
Able to Assess Civil Penalties	Yes	Imposed Penalties for Child Labor Violations	Yes
Routinely Conducted Worksite Inspections	Yes	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

Between June 2022 and July 2023, **446** labor inspectors conducted **47,826** worksite inspections, finding **3,459** child labor violations. It is **unknown** whether investigations into suspected cases of the worst forms of child labor were conducted, prosecutions were initiated, or perpetrators were convicted.

The Bangladesh Export Processing Zone Authority (BEPZA) is the official body of the government to promote, attract, and facilitate foreign investment in the Export Processing Zones, and is also responsible for ensuring business compliance with social, environmental, safety, and security regulations in these zones. Although the Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments (DIFE) has authority to conduct inspections in the Export Processing Zones, it is required to notify the BEPZA’s chairman in advance. Since some employers receive notification ahead of labor inspections, child labor violations may go undetected in the Export Processing Zones.



COORDINATION, POLICIES, AND PROGRAMS

<p>Key Mechanism to Coordinate Government Efforts on Child Labor</p> <p>Bangladesh established a mechanism to coordinate its efforts to address child labor. However, it lacks a referral mechanism to coordinate efforts among government agencies and civil society stakeholders.</p>	<p>National Child Labor Welfare Council (NCLWC): Coordinates government efforts to guide and monitor the implementation of the National Plan of Action on the Elimination of Child Labor. Chaired by the MOLE and comprises officials representing relevant government ministries, international organizations, child advocacy groups, and employer and worker organizations. During the reporting period, NCLWC conducted 11 national coordination meetings, 67 divisional child labor welfare council meetings, and 177 district child rights monitoring committee meetings. In October, the labor secretary met with all the divisional commissioners to intensify child labor monitoring activities by the divisional committees.</p>
<p>Key Policies Related to Child Labor</p> <p>Bangladesh established policies related to child labor. However, lack of coordination of government ministries responsible for implementing the National Plan of Action on the Elimination of Child Labor hindered the policy from fulfilling its mandates.</p> <p><i>‡ The government had other policies that may have addressed child labor issues or had an impact on child labor.</i></p>	<p>National Plan of Action on the Elimination of Child Labor (2021–2025): Identifies strategies for developing institutional capacity, increasing access to education and health services, raising social awareness, strengthening law enforcement, and creating prevention and reintegration programs. In 2023, the MOLE monitored activities of the divisional councils and district- and sub-district level coordination committees to ensure coordinated work to eliminate child labor. The MOLE also conducted a feasibility study on the elimination of child labor and disseminated findings in a workshop. Based on the study, the MOLE initiated an “Elimination and Rehabilitation of Child Labor” project.</p>

Coordination, Policies, and Programs (Cont.)

<p>Key Policies Related to Child Labor</p>	<p>National Plan of Action for Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking (2018–2025): Establishes a plan to build government capacity to address trafficking in persons and provide economic and social safety nets for victims and vulnerable populations, particularly children. Led by the Ministry of Home Affairs (MOHA). The national plan has been extended to 2025 due to the slow progress made during 2020 and 2021 pandemic lockdowns. During the reporting period, the government continued to focus anti-trafficking funding on prevention efforts. Additionally, in 2023, the Bangladesh government identified opportunities for improving data collection and analysis on trafficking in persons after the launch of the 2022 First National Study on Trafficking in Persons in Bangladesh.</p>
<p>Key Social Programs to Address Child Labor Bangladesh funded and participated in programs that include the goal of eliminating or preventing child labor. However, these social programs are inadequate to address the problem in all regions and sectors where child labor has been identified, including in the informal garment, leather, and fish-drying industries.</p> <p><i>† Program is funded by the Government of Bangladesh.</i> <i>‡ The government had other social programs that may have included the goal of eliminating or preventing child labor.</i></p>	<p>Elimination of Hazardous Child Labor–Phase IV (2021–2023):† \$33 million, 3-year project implemented by the MOLE. Removed 90,000 children from hazardous labor in Phases I through III by providing informal and technical education, stipends, and awareness raising for employers and families. The MOLE has signed agreements with 112 selected NGOs to remove 100,000 children from hazardous work in Phase IV. In 2023, the project supported non-formal education and rehabilitation of working children, children from Dalit and Bihari minority groups, and those experiencing homelessness or working in the streets. However, the project was insufficient to cover all geographical locations and all sectors involved in child labor, and irregularities in project implementation and identification of vulnerable children were found.</p> <p>School Programs:‡ Second Chance Education is funded by the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee and provides informal schooling for children ages 8 to 14 who have dropped out of formal schools. The government has expressed a commitment to restart the school meal program with its own funding in 2024. During the reporting period, the World Food Program (WFP) used \$19 million in funding from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to continue school feeding programs at 170 schools in the Cox’s Bazar District to benefit 49,162 students.</p> <p>Child Protection Programs:‡ Child protection programs in Bangladesh include Child Sensitive Social Protection in Bangladesh (CSPB) II, which will end in 2024. The CSPB Project is implemented by the Ministry of Social Welfare’s Department of Social Services, with support from UNICEF, and aims to reduce violence, abuse, and neglect against children. The project offers case management services to identify vulnerable children and provides psychological counseling through the Child Friendly Services hub and conditional cash support to reduce child labor. The government also operates a 24-hour emergency hotline called Child Helpline 1098. In fiscal year 2022–2023, the Helpline received over 10,000 reports related to child abuse. Of the reported cases, over 5,000 children received legal support through the helpline and the program helped stop over 2,000 cases of child marriage through counseling, legal, and financial assistance to parents.</p>

For information about USDOL’s projects to address child labor around the world, visit dol.gov/ILABprojects

 **WORKER RIGHTS SPOTLIGHT**

Although the Bangladesh Labor Act (BLA) allows formal sector workers to form and join trade unions, it excludes some informal workers including laborers, agricultural workers on farms with fewer than 10 workers, and domestic workers, in which large number of children work. The Bangladesh Export Processing Zone Labor Act prohibits trade unions in the export processing zones, which employ more than 502,000 workers. The government does not adequately enforce laws protecting freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining, and labor leaders and organizers face violence, dismissal, blacklisting, and arrest. Since unions play a pivotal role in identifying and combating child labor, these restrictions may allow violations, including in the informal sectors, to go unreported.

For references, please visit dol.gov/ChildLaborReports