

# CAMBODIA

## MINIMAL ADVANCEMENT – Efforts Made but Continued Practice that Delayed Advancement

In 2023, Cambodia made minimal advancement in efforts to eliminate the worst forms of child labor. The government rescued 123 children from commercial sexual exploitation and human trafficking and released guidelines on child safety online in the face of increasing instances of online sexual exploitation of children. However, despite these new initiatives to address child labor, Cambodia is assessed as having made only minimal advancement because the government failed to take active measures to investigate, prosecute, convict, and sentence public officials who participate in or facilitate the worst forms of child labor, including commercial sexual exploitation of children and debt-based forced labor in brick kilns. In addition, judges, police, and labor inspectors were reported to have accepted bribes to overlook child labor offenses in the country, especially when the perpetrator had alleged ties with the government. Lastly, the laws prohibiting commercial sexual exploitation of children are insufficient because the use or offering of a child for pornographic performances is not criminally prohibited.

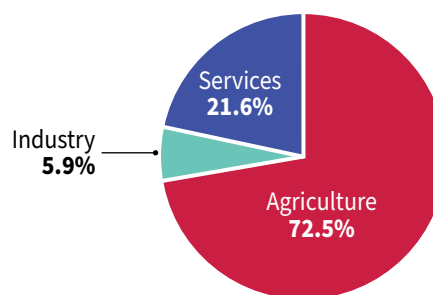


## PREVALENCE AND SECTORAL DISTRIBUTION OF CHILD LABOR

### Statistics on Children’s Work and Education

| Children                   | Age      | Percent of Population |
|----------------------------|----------|-----------------------|
| Working                    | 5 to 14  | 8.9% (285,499)        |
| Boys                       |          | 9.3%                  |
| Girls                      |          | 8.6%                  |
| Urban                      |          | 5.4%                  |
| Rural                      |          | 10.6%                 |
| Hazardous Work by Children | 15 to 17 | 43.1% (422,161)       |
| Boys                       |          | 46.9%                 |
| Girls                      |          | 39.3%                 |
| Urban                      |          | 33.8%                 |
| Rural                      |          | 49.5%                 |
| Attending School           | 5 to 14  | 87.3%                 |
| Combining Work and School  | 7 to 14  | 9.0%                  |

### Working Children by Sector, Ages 5-14



Children in Cambodia are subjected to the worst forms of child labor, including in commercial sexual exploitation, sometimes as a result of human trafficking, and in forced child labor in brickmaking. Children also engage in child labor in the agriculture sector, including in the production of rubber and cassava.

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



#### Agriculture

Fishing, including deep-sea† and night fishing;† peeling shrimp; logging† for the production of timber; herding bovines; producing tobacco, cassava, rubber, and sugarcane.



#### Industry

Making bricks,† including feeding clay into brickmaking machines, removing wood fuel from trucks and feeding to brickmaking machines, drying bricks, transporting bricks to the oven,† and loading bricks onto and off of trucks. Working in construction† and in slaughterhouses for meat production.† Producing alcoholic beverages† and textiles. Manufacturing wood and metal† products.



#### Services

Domestic work and street work, including car washing, begging, vending, garbage scavenging, and collecting garbage. Also working as security guards† and in entertainment† as bartenders,† masseurs,† dancers,† and waiters.†



#### Categorical Worst Forms of Child Labor‡

Commercial sexual exploitation, sometimes as a result of human trafficking; forced begging and street begging; producing bricks; and fishing.

† 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 Cambodia’s implementation of its international commitments to eliminate the worst forms of child labor.

### **Legal Framework**

Apply the minimum age for work to all children, including those engaged in informal work in domestic work and employed by their relatives.

Establish a law that criminally prohibits the use of a child for pornographic performances in not only public spaces, but also private spaces or through the use of communication and information technologies.

Establish a law that criminally prohibits the recruitment of children by non-state armed groups.

Ensure free education is guaranteed for all children, regardless of citizenship.

Establish by law a compulsory education age of 15 years old such that it aligns with the minimum age for work.

### **Enforcement**

Build the capacity of labor law enforcement authorities to enforce child labor and forced labor regulations by providing more technical training opportunities on how to properly identify child labor during inspections.

Provide inspectors of construction sites training on identifying child labor violations and ensure that such training is coordinated with the Ministry of Labor and Vocational Training’s labor inspectorate to ensure inspectors’ safety.

Increase the number of labor inspectors to 628 to ensure adequate coverage of Cambodia’s workforce of 9,418,600, including in the informal sector.

Conduct unannounced inspections in all sectors in which child labor is reported to occur, including in the informal, construction, and entertainment sectors, and impose penalties when child labor violations are found.

Collect, properly store, and publicly release disaggregated data on labor and criminal law enforcement efforts, including labor inspectorate funding, initial training for new criminal investigators, the number of prosecutions initiated, the number of convictions, and the number of penalties imposed for violations related to the worst forms of child labor.

Address malfeasance in all law enforcement agencies, including by prohibiting the acceptance of bribes to influence the outcome of cases or providing tip offs in advance of raids, and investigating and prosecuting individuals and government officials who are complicit in facilitating and profiting from the worst forms of child labor.

Train all criminal law enforcement officials on trafficking indicators and how to conduct investigations into trafficking crimes, and ensure that funding is sufficient to cover expenses, including transportation costs.

Develop standard judicial procedures to monitor human trafficking perpetrators pending trial to prevent criminals from fleeing and to enable victims to receive restitution.

### **Coordination**

Improve interministerial coordination to address child labor, including but not limited to reporting efforts made by the National Committee on Countering Child Labor to implement the National Plan of Action on Combating the Worst Forms of Child Labor.

Publish activities undertaken by the National Committee on Countering Child Labor on an annual basis.

### **Government Policies**

Publish activities undertaken to implement the Action Plan to Prevent and Respond to Violence Against Children (2017–2023) on an annual basis.

### **Social Programs**

Increase regulation of microfinance and lending institutions to reduce borrowers’ vulnerability to debt-based coercion and provide support to children whose families are victims of predatory microfinance institutions.

Publish the results of the 2019 nationwide child labor survey.

Increase access to free basic education by eliminating unofficial school-related fees; addressing issues related to limited transportation and inadequate school infrastructure, including the unsafe “floating schools” on or near fishing communities; eliminating barriers to school for ethnic minority children, indigenous children, children with disabilities, girls, and children from rural and disadvantaged communities; and providing safe, sanitary schools with access to water and latrines.

Provide sufficient funding for social programs so that they can fully address the extent of child labor in Cambodia, particularly the online sexual exploitation of children.



## CHILDREN AT HIGHER RISK

Children continue to be at an increased risk of working in brick kilns and factories, though operational brick factories have experienced a slowdown in business recently. Moreover, failed harvests from droughts have compounded farmers’ debts, forcing them to sell their harvests to brick kiln owners and subsequently placing farmers’ families into debt bondage. In recent years, the microfinance industry in the country has grown rapidly with inadequate regulation, leading to an increasing number of overburdened debtors. Cambodian human rights organizations cite cases of extrajudicial land sales, child labor, and debt bondage linked to the microfinance crisis. Children are forced to work because their parents have incurred debts to landowners or employers, sometimes resulting in forced land sales to pay back debts owed. Research also showed that children were taken out of school so they could work to help with debt repayment. Additionally, since 2016, there has been an increase in the number of women and girls travelling from Cambodia to China for forced or arranged marriages, with a further spike since the pandemic.



## BARRIERS TO EDUCATION ACCESS

The Education Law establishes free basic education for citizens only, and unofficial school-related fees, such as for extra classes or school uniforms, are prohibitive for some families. Other barriers to education include denied enrollment for children without birth certificates, limited transportation to schools in remote areas, a lack of drinking water, a severe shortage of teachers, language barriers, and a lack of safe sanitation conditions in some schools. Sanitation conditions are particularly unsafe in Cambodia’s “floating schools” on or near fishing communities, to which children as young as age 6 row themselves by boat each day. These barriers disproportionately affect ethnic minority children, indigenous children, children with disabilities, and children from rural and disadvantaged communities.








## LEGAL FRAMEWORK FOR CHILD LABOR

Cambodia has ratified all key international conventions concerning child labor. However, gaps exist in Cambodia’s legal framework to adequately protect children from the worst forms of child labor, including the lack of criminal prohibitions for the use of a child for pornographic performances in private spaces or through communication and information technologies.

| Child Labor Laws and Regulations  | Meets International Standards | Legislation  |
|---|-------------------------------|--|
| Minimum Age for Work, <b>15 Years</b>   |                               | Article 177 of the Labor Law   |
| Minimum Age for Hazardous Work, <b>18 Years</b>                               |                               | Articles 173 and 177 of the Labor Law; Regulation on the Prohibition of Hazardous Child Labor; Articles 339 and 340 of the Penal Code  |
| Identification of Hazardous Occupations or Activities Prohibited for Children |                               | Article 2 of the Regulation on the Prohibition of Hazardous Child Labor  |
| Prohibition of Slavery, Debt Bondage, and Forced Labor                        |                               | Articles 15, 16, 369, and 370 of the Labor Law; Articles 7, 8, 10, 12, 13, 15–17, and 19 of the Law on Suppression of Human Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation                  |
| Prohibition of Child Trafficking  |                               | Articles 2, 3, 7, 8, 10–20 and 22 of the Law on Suppression of Human Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation   |
| Prohibition of Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children                     |                               | Articles 7-8, 10, 12, 15, 19, 23, 25, 28, 30–37, 40, and 41 of the Law on Suppression of Human Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation; Articles 284, 289, and 346 of the Penal Code |
| Prohibition of Using Children in Illicit Activities                           |                               | Article 345 of the Penal Code; Articles 3 and 47 of the Law on Control of Drugs  |

**Legal Framework for Child Labor (Cont.)**

| Child Labor Laws and Regulations                                      | Meets International Standards   | Legislation  |
|---|---|--|
| Minimum Age for Voluntary State Military Recruitment, <b>18 Years</b> |  | Article 42 of the Law on General Statutes for the Military Personnel of the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces         |
| Prohibition of Compulsory Recruitment of Children by (State) Military |  | Articles 41 and 42 of the Law on General Statutes for the Military Personnel of the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces |
| Prohibition of Military Recruitment by Non-state Armed Groups         |  |  |
| Compulsory Education Age  |  |  |
| Free Public Education   |  | Article 31 of the Education Law; Article 68 of the Constitution  |

Cambodian laws do not sufficiently prohibit the commercial sexual exploitation of children, as the use of a child for pornographic performances is criminally prohibited in public places but not in private spaces or through the use of communication and information technologies. Although the Labor Code prohibits work by children under age 15, the law does not apply to children outside of formal employment relationships and, therefore, does not conform to international standards that require all children be protected under the law that sets a minimum age for work. Moreover, the Ministry of Labor and Vocational Training’s (MOLVT) regulation on household work extends minimum age protections for domestic workers to age 18 and provides clear definitions of household work, but it does not specify legal protections for domestic workers employed in informal relationships, including when working for their relatives without a contract. Finally, Cambodia lacks compulsory schooling, which makes children under age 15 particularly vulnerable to child labor because they are not required to be in school but are not yet legally permitted to work.

 **ENFORCEMENT OF LAWS ON CHILD LABOR**

In 2023, labor and criminal law enforcement agencies in Cambodia took actions to address child labor. However, a lack of unannounced inspections in the informal, construction, and entertainment sectors may hinder enforcement efforts.

**Agencies Responsible for Child Labor Law Enforcement**

**Ministry of Labor and Vocational Training (MOLVT):** Enforces child-related provisions of the Labor Law and trains Commune Committees for Women and Children that oversee local child labor monitoring systems. Tasked with removing children from child labor, including at brick kilns. Head of the MOLVT’s Child Labor Bureau also serves as the Secretary General of the National Committee on Countering Child Labor (NCCL). Refers cases involving possible criminal violations to the Anti-Human Trafficking and Juvenile Protection Department. During the reporting year, raised awareness about child labor by disseminating labor laws and legal documents about child work. Also provided study materials for children under the age of 15 so they remain in school and vocational training for children over 15. Research indicates that Cambodia does not have an adequate number of labor inspectors to carry out their mandated duties. Reporting also indicates that labor inspectorates at the provincial level are unable to adequately enforce child labor laws due to insufficient funding and resources.

**Ministry of the Interior Cambodian National Police Anti-Human Trafficking and Juvenile Protection Department (AHTJP):** Enforces laws against human trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation of children in collaboration with municipal and provincial anti-human trafficking and juvenile protection offices; reports to the AHTJP Department Director. Provides training to labor inspectors. Fields complaints from the public about human trafficking, which can be filed through the anti-human trafficking hotline. Oversees the Information and Technology Office, which searches for evidence of human trafficking and sexual exploitation of children on the internet, in printed media, and in other sources.

## 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 | Yes |
| Unannounced Inspections Permitted        | Yes | Imposed Penalties for Worst Forms of Child Labor Crimes                 | Yes |

In 2023, **592** labor inspectors conducted **219** worksite inspections, finding **1** child labor violation. The number of criminal investigations into suspected worst forms of child labor crimes, prosecutions initiated, and perpetrators convicted is **unknown**.

Evidence suggests that labor inspectors and other law enforcement personnel are unwilling to investigate child labor allegations involving powerful business owners. In addition, law enforcement officials have requested bribes from employers when child labor violations have been found. Malfeasance within the MOLVT and law enforcement agencies limits the capacity of local authorities to adequately enforce regulations for children related to hazardous work, resulting in penalties related to the worst forms of child labor rarely being imposed in accordance with the law. Additionally, the Government of Cambodia has failed to regularly investigate, prosecute, or convict public officials who participate in or facilitate the worst forms of child labor, including commercial sexual exploitation of children and debt-based forced labor in brick kilns. NGO contacts claim that the government has limited political will to investigate any Cambodian officials complicit in these illegal activities, and there was no evidence of public officials being investigated, prosecuted, or convicted during the reporting period.



## COORDINATION, POLICIES, AND PROGRAMS

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

Cambodia established a mechanism to coordinate its efforts to address child labor. However, there is insufficient interministerial coordination, making it difficult to track progress and outcomes of efforts.

**National Committee on Countering Child Labor (NCCL):** Serves as the primary interagency coordinating body for the government’s various ministries on child labor issues. The Minister of Labor serves as its chair and the head of the MOLVT’s Child Labor Bureau serves as the Secretary General. Coordination across relevant ministries remains a challenge. Research was unable to determine whether activities were carried out under this policy during the reporting period.

### Key Policies Related to Child Labor

Cambodia established policies related to child labor. However, there were no reported activities to implement the Action Plan to Prevent and Respond to Violence Against Children.

**National Plan of Action on Combating the Worst Forms of Child Labor (2016–2025):** Overseen by the MOLVT and aims to build the capacity of law enforcement officers, raise public awareness of child labor issues, enhance child labor monitoring systems at the community level, and create a roadmap to eradicate the worst forms of child labor by 2025 in various sectors, including services, agriculture, mining, and energy. In 2023, trained hundreds of national and provincial officials and conducted campaigns in several provinces to raise awareness for factory owners about child labor and consequences of violations.

**Action Plan to Prevent and Respond to Violence Against Children (2017–2023):** Provided Online Child Sexual Exploitation (OSEC)-related interventions in policy and governance, including providing training for teachers and developing curriculum to help children build online safety skills; providing OSEC materials to law enforcement; and developing an online hotline to help identify platforms that perpetuate OSEC. Research was unable to determine whether activities were carried out under this policy during the reporting period.

**Action Plan for Gender Equality Promotion and Child Labor Elimination in Fisheries Sector (2022–2030):** Aims to prevent and withdraw children from child labor and hazardous work in the fisheries sector, and to improve monitoring and evaluation mechanisms on child labor in this sector. During the reporting year, trained 31 officials and held workshops in Takeo, Kandal, and Kampong Speu provinces to promote gender equity and raise awareness of child labor in the fishery sector. Plan was extended from 2026 to 2030.

‡ The government had other policies that may have addressed child labor issues or had an impact on child labor.

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

**Key Social Programs to Address Child Labor**

In 2023, Cambodia funded and participated in programs that include the goal of eliminating or preventing child labor. However, these social programs are inadequate to address all worst forms of child labor, including in the commercial sexual exploitation of children.

† Program is funded by the Government of Cambodia.

‡ The government had other social programs that may have included the goal of eliminating or preventing child labor.

**Cambodia Countering Trafficking in Persons (CCTIP) (2019–2023):** \$10 million, USAID-funded, 5-year (including a 1-year cost extension) program implemented by Winrock International to strengthen the capacity of government and community stakeholders to prevent human trafficking, protect at-risk populations, and increase the number of successful prosecutions of perpetrators. During the reporting period, held public awareness campaigns and signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the National Police to strengthen the capacity of law enforcement personnel to address human trafficking.

**UN WFP Country Program (2020–2024):**† Multi-government and private sector-funded program implemented in collaboration with the Government of Cambodia that includes a school feeding program for children in need. Provided school meals to 186,000 children in 2023.

**Child Protection Programs:**† Family Care First (FCF|REACT) (2015–2023) was led by Ministry of Social Affairs, Veterans and Youth Rehabilitation (MOSAVY). Funded by the European Union, USAID, the GHR Foundation, Save the Children Hong Kong, and UNICEF. Aimed to support more than 7,000 Cambodian children to live in safe, nurturing, family-based care. Activities included supporting the development of Social Service Workforce Training curriculum, the reintegration of children from residential care institutions to family-based care, the closure of residential care institutions, and the provision of social services. During the reporting period, FCF provided cash and livelihood assistance to over 700 recipients, intended to reduce trafficking risks for children in extreme poverty. Cambodia Child Protection Program (2009–2023) was led by UNICEF and MOSAVY and aimed to strengthen the child protection system in Cambodia and to prevent and reduce violence against children and unnecessary family separation. Built capacity of national and sub-national authorities in all 25 provinces to formulate and implement nationally approved institutional and legal frameworks. The government stated that the program was operational but did not report implementation activities conducted during the reporting period.

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



**WORKER RIGHTS SPOTLIGHT**

The government puts restrictions on workers’ ability to form and join unions of their own choosing. Foreigners are only permitted to join unions if they are literate in Khmer, have worked in Cambodia for at least 2 years, and have permission to residence in/have a permanent residency in the country. In addition, the government prevents unions and workers from accessing collective dispute settlement under the Arbitration Council. These restrictions, as well as the Cambodian government’s failure to investigate and prosecute cases of anti-union discrimination and harassment can create a climate of fear that hinders workers’ ability to organize, advocate for their rights, and report labor abuses, including child labor.

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