Bangladesh

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In 2018, Bangladesh made a moderate advancement in efforts to eliminate the worst forms of child labor. The government launched a $35 million, 3-year project to eliminate hazardous child labor by identifying and rehabilitating 100,000 child laborers. In addition, the Bangladesh Army and Rapid Action Battalion were deployed to assist in the identification and investigation of trafficking and smuggling cases among Rohingya refugees. The government also adopted a five-year National Plan of Action for the Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking. However, children in Bangladesh engage in the worst forms of child labor, including forced child labor in the production of dried fish and bricks. Children also perform dangerous tasks in the production of garments and leather goods. Laws do not cover children working in the informal sector, and hazardous work prohibitions are not comprehensive. Moreover, the number of labor inspectors is insufficient for the size of Bangladesh's workforce, and fines are too low to deter child labor law violations.

I. PREVALENCE AND SECTORAL DISTRIBUTION OF CHILD LABOR

Children in Bangladesh engage in the worst forms of child labor, including forced child labor in the production of dried fish and bricks. (1,2) Children also perform dangerous tasks in the production of garments and leather goods. (3-7) Table 1 provides key indicators on children's work and education in Bangladesh.

Table 1. Statistics on Children's Work and Education

Children	Age	Percent
Working (% and population)	5 to 14	4.3 (1,326,411)
Attending School (%)	5 to 14	89.4
Combining Work and School (%)	7 to 14	1.9
Primary Completion Rate (%)		118.6

Source for primary completion rate: Data from 2017, published by UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2019. (8)
Source for all other data: International Labor Organization's analysis of statistics from Labour Force Survey, 2013. (9)

Figure 1. Working Children by Sector, Ages 5-14

Agriculture 39.7%
Services 30.9%
Industry 29.4%
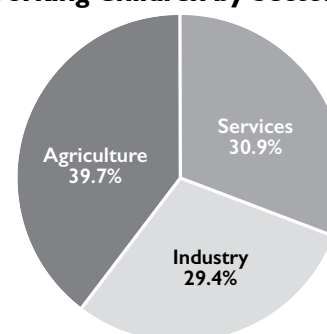
Based on a review of available information, Table 2 provides an overview of children's work by sector and activity.

Table 2. Overview of Children's Work by Sector and Activity

Sector/Industry	Activity
Agriculture	Harvesting and processing crops, including tobacco, raising poultry, grazing cattle, and harvesting tea leaves (10-14)
	Fishing and drying and processing fish (1,10,12,13,15)
	Harvesting and processing shrimp (13,16)
Industry	Quarrying and mining, including salt (10,17)
	Producing garments, textiles, and jute textiles (7,18-23)
	Producing leather,† leather goods, and footwear† (4-6,24-30)
	Manufacturing bricks,† glass,† hand-rolled cigarettes (bidis),† matches,† soap,† furniture (steel),† aluminum products,† and metal products (2,10,13,31-35)

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Table 2. Overview of Children's Work by Sector and Activity (Cont.)

Sector/Industry	Activity
Industry	Ship breaking and battery recycling† (34,36-38)
	Construction† and breaking bricks† and stones† (10,12,13,39)
Services	Domestic work (3,12,13,40,41)
	Working in transportation, including pulling rickshaws and repairing automobiles† (10,12,26,42,43)
	Working in tea shops and retail shops (10,12)
Categorical Worst Forms of Child Labor‡	Forced labor in the drying of fish and the production of bricks (1,15,39,44,45)
	Commercial sexual exploitation, sometimes as a result of human trafficking (44,46,47)
	Forced domestic work, sometimes as a result of human trafficking (12,13,44,48-51)
	Use in illicit activities, including smuggling and selling drugs (13,50,52)
	Forced begging (44,50)

† 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.

Many children in Bangladesh engage in dangerous work in informal manufacturing sectors and the dried fish industry. (3-6,15) Children working in informal garment production work as many as 16 hours a day and often carry heavy loads, use hazardous machinery, and handle chemicals without protective equipment. (7,29) In addition, due to large workloads, children may eat, shower, and sleep inside the factories where they work, often surrounded by water polluted by the factories. (7) Reports of violence against child workers has also been documented. (22) Children employed in tanneries also lack protective equipment and experience continuous exposure to heavy metals, formaldehyde, and other hazardous substances. (4,5) In the dried fish industry, children work all day without protective gear and are exposed to the insecticide DDT, salt, and the sun. (15) In addition, some children in Bangladesh work under forced labor conditions producing bricks and drying fish. (1,15,44)

Nearly 350,000 Rohingya children are living in refugee camps in Bangladesh following the Burmese military's ethnic cleansing operations in 2017. Children residing in the camps are vulnerable to commercial sexual exploitation and forced labor. (50,53,54) Rohingya girls are trafficked from the refugee camps for commercial sexual exploitation in Bangladesh, India, and Nepal. In some cases, girls are promised jobs in domestic service but are instead forced into commercial sexual exploitation. (44,47) Rohingya children recruited to work outside the refugee camps are reported to be underpaid or unpaid, unable to communicate with their families, and subjected to excessive working hours. (44,50) Girls typically work in domestic service, and boys work in construction, fishing, and shops. (44,51,55) Some girls are forced into domestic service, sometimes as a result of human trafficking, and are abused by their employers. (49-51) There is also a report that Rohingya children are exploited in bonded labor in the fish drying industry, predominantly in the city of Cox's Bazar. (45)

Although the 2010 National Education Policy raised the age of compulsory education from fifth grade (age 10) to eighth grade (age 14), the new compulsory education age is not enforceable until the legal framework is amended to reflect the revised policy. (70) Additionally, several factors contribute to children not attending school, such as inadequate access to water and sanitation facilities and the costs associated with education, including books and uniforms. (10,13) Although Rohingya refugee children are not permitted to attend school in Bangladesh due to their lack of documentation, the government has permitted international organizations, such as UNICEF, UNESCO, and UNHCR, to provide some limited, basic education services to Rohingya children. (13,56,57)

II. LEGAL FRAMEWORK FOR CHILD LABOR

Bangladesh has ratified most key international conventions concerning child labor (Table 3).

Table 3. Ratification of International Conventions on Child Labor

	Convention	Ratification
	ILO C. 138, Minimum Age	
	ILO C. 182, Worst Forms of Child Labor	✓
	UN CRC	✓
	UN CRC Optional Protocol on Armed Conflict	✓
	UN CRC Optional Protocol on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography	✓
	Palermo Protocol on Trafficking in Persons	

The government has established laws and regulations related to child labor (Table 4). However, gaps exist in Bangladesh's legal framework to adequately protect children from the worst forms of child labor, including the minimum age for work.

Table 4. Laws and Regulations on Child Labor

Standard	Meets International Standards	Age	Legislation
Minimum Age for Work	No	14	Section 34 of the Bangladesh Labor Act (58)
Minimum Age for Hazardous Work	Yes	18	Sections 39–42 of the Bangladesh Labor Act (58)
Identification of Hazardous Occupations or Activities Prohibited for Children	Yes		Sections 39–42 of the Bangladesh Labor Act; Statutory Regulatory Order Number 65 (58,59)
Prohibition of Forced Labor	Yes		Sections 370 and 374 of the Penal Code; Sections 3, 6, and 9 of the Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking Act (60,61)
Prohibition of Child Trafficking	Yes		Sections 3 and 6 of the Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking Act; Section 6 of the Suppression of Violence Against Women and Children Act (61,62)
Prohibition of Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children	No		Sections 372–373 of the Penal Code; Sections 78 and 80 of the Children's Act; Sections 3 and 6 of the Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking Act; Section 8 of the Pornography Control Act (60,61,63,64)
Prohibition of Using Children in Illicit Activities	No		Section 79 of the Children's Act (63)
Minimum Age for Voluntary State Military Recruitment	No		
Prohibition of Compulsory Recruitment of Children by (State) Military	N/A*		
Prohibition of Military Recruitment by Non-state Armed Groups	No		
Compulsory Education Age	No	10	Section 2 of the Primary Education (Compulsory) Act (65)
Free Public Education	Yes		Article 17 of the Constitution (66)

* No conscription (67)

In 2018, the Bangladesh Labor Act was amended, banning all child labor in factories, and only allowing children age 14-18 to engage in light work. The former provision permitted children as young as 12 to perform light work. (57,58,68) Minimum age protections in the Bangladesh Labor Act do not cover children working in the informal sector. Child labor in Bangladesh is most prevalent in the informal sector, which includes domestic work, street

work, and work on small agricultural farms. (57,58) In addition, the types of hazardous work prohibited for children do not cover garment production and drying fish; both are areas of work in which there is evidence that children work in unsafe and unhealthy environments for long periods of time. (1,6,15,59)

Bangladesh has also not criminally prohibited the use of children in pornographic performances and in the production of drugs. (61,63,68) In addition, there are no published laws setting the minimum age of voluntary recruitment by the state armed forces at age 16 and setting safeguards to ensure that children under age 18 who join do so voluntarily. Moreover, the legal framework does not prohibit the recruitment of children by non-state armed groups. (69)

III. ENFORCEMENT OF LAWS ON CHILD LABOR

The government has established institutional mechanisms for the enforcement of laws and regulations on child labor (Table 5). However, gaps exist within the operations of the Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments (DIFE) that may hinder adequate enforcement of their child labor laws.

Table 5. Agencies Responsible for Child Labor Law Enforcement

Organization/Agency	Role
Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments	Enforces labor laws, including those relating to child labor and hazardous work. (71)
Bangladesh Police	Enforces Penal Code provisions protecting children from forced labor and commercial sexual exploitation. (72) In the case of the Trafficking in Persons Monitoring Cell, investigates cases of human trafficking and enforces the Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking Act's anti-trafficking provisions. (73)
Bangladesh Labor Court	Prosecutes labor law violations, including those related to child labor, and imposes fines or sanctions against employers. (74)
Child Protection Networks	Responds to violations against children, including child labor. Comprises officials from various agencies with mandates to protect children, prosecute violations, monitor interventions, and develop referral mechanisms at the district and sub-district levels between law enforcement and social welfare services. (75)

Labor Law Enforcement

In 2018, labor law enforcement agencies in Bangladesh took actions to combat child labor (Table 6). However, gaps exist within the operations of DIFE that may hinder adequate labor law enforcement, including human resource allocation.

Table 6. Labor Law Enforcement Efforts Related to Child Labor

Overview of Labor Law Enforcement	2017	2018
Labor Inspectorate Funding	Unknown (13)	Unknown (57)
Number of Labor Inspectors	317 (13)	300 (57)
Inspectorate Authorized to Assess Penalties	No (74)	No (74)
Initial Training for New Labor Inspectors	Yes (13)	Yes (57)
Training on New Laws Related to Child Labor	N/A	Yes (76)
Refresher Courses Provided	Yes (13)	Unknown (57)
Number of Labor Inspections Conducted	32,924† (13)	Unknown (57)
Number Conducted at Worksite	Unknown (13)	Unknown (57)
Number of Child Labor Violations Found	100 (13)	1,234 (76)
Number of Child Labor Violations for Which Penalties Were Imposed	Unknown (13)	Unknown (57)
Number of Child Labor Penalties Imposed that Were Collected	Unknown (13)	Unknown (57)
Routine Inspections Conducted	Yes (13)	Unknown (57)
Routine Inspections Targeted	Yes (13)	Yes (57)

Table 6. Labor Law Enforcement Efforts Related to Child Labor (Cont.)

Overview of Labor Law Enforcement	2017	2018
Unannounced Inspections Permitted	Yes (13)	Yes (57)
Unannounced Inspections Conducted	Yes (13)	Yes (57)
Complaint Mechanism Exists	Yes (13)	Yes (57)
Reciprocal Referral Mechanism Exists Between Labor Authorities and Social Services	No (71)	No (57)

† Data are from June 2016 to July 2017.

The number of labor inspectors is likely insufficient for the size of Bangladesh's workforce, which includes more than 66 million workers. According to the ILO's technical advice of a ratio approaching 1 inspector for every 40,000 workers in less developed economies, Bangladesh would employ about 1,666 labor inspectors. (77-79) Reports indicate that DIFE rarely inspects unregistered factories and establishments, in which children are more likely to be employed. (16,57,80,81) In addition, the current penalty for a child labor law violation, a $63 fine, is an inadequate deterrent. (75,81)

Criminal Law Enforcement

In 2018, criminal law enforcement agencies in Bangladesh took actions to combat child labor (Table 7). However, gaps exist within the operations of the Bangladesh Police that may hinder adequate criminal law enforcement, including financial resources.

Table 7. Criminal Law Enforcement Efforts Related to Child Labor

Overview of Criminal Law Enforcement	2017	2018
Initial Training for New Criminal Investigators	Unknown (13)	Yes (57)
Training on New Laws Related to the Worst Forms of Child Labor	N/A	N/A
Refresher Courses Provided	Yes (82)	Yes (57)
Number of Investigations	Unknown (13)	Unknown (57)
Number of Violations Found	Unknown (13)	Unknown (57)
Number of Prosecutions Initiated	Unknown (13)	Unknown (57)
Number of Convictions	Unknown (13)	Unknown (57)
Imposed Penalties for Violations Related to The Worst Forms of Child Labor	Unknown (83)	Unknown (76,83)
Reciprocal Referral Mechanism Exists Between Criminal Authorities and Social Services	Yes (13)	Unknown (57)

In 2018, the Bangladesh Police reported that 80 children were victims of human trafficking. (84) The Bangladesh Army and Rapid Action Battalion were also reported to have been deployed to assist in the identification and investigation of possible trafficking of Rohingya refugees, a population with children vulnerable to child labor and commercial sexual exploitation. (44,83) However, the Trafficking in Persons Monitoring Cell reportedly lacks the necessary funds and staff to adequately address cases of child trafficking. (85) Reporting also indicates that Child Protection Networks, intended to be a referral mechanism between law enforcement and social services, are not operating due to a lack of funds. (86)

IV. COORDINATION OF GOVERNMENT EFFORTS ON CHILD LABOR

The government has established mechanisms to coordinate its efforts to address child labor (Table 8). However, gaps exist that hinder the effective coordination of efforts to address child labor, including coordination among agencies.

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Table 8. Key Mechanisms to Coordinate Government Efforts on Child Labor

Coordinating Body	Role & Description
National Child Labor Welfare Council	Coordinates efforts undertaken by the government to guide, coordinate, and monitor the implementation of the National Plan of Action on the Elimination of Child Labor. (87) Chaired by the Ministry of Labor and Employment, comprises officials representing relevant government ministries, international organizations, child advocacy groups, and employer and worker organizations. (88) Met in 2018 to discuss upcoming programs to eliminate child labor. (89)
Counter-Trafficking National Coordination Committee, Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA)	Coordinates the work of government agencies and international and local NGOs on international and domestic human trafficking, including child trafficking, through bimonthly meetings. (73) Oversees district counter-trafficking committees, which manage counter-trafficking committees for sub-districts and smaller administrative units. (73,90) Some district and sub-district committees allocated funding for coordination activities and victim support in 2018. (44)
Rescue, Recovery, Repatriation, and Integration Task Force, MHA	Coordinates efforts of Bangladesh and India to rescue, recover, repatriate, and reintegrate victims of human trafficking, particularly children, between the two countries. Liaises with various ministries, government departments, NGOs, and international organizations that assist trafficked children. (90,91) During the reporting period, implemented and monitored the Memorandum of Understanding and the Standard Operating Procedures between Bangladesh and India on the repatriation of human trafficking victims between the two countries. (44,92)

Bangladesh and India's Rescue, Recovery, Repatriation, and Integration Task Forces reportedly are not well coordinated between the two countries, database and case management systems have not been developed, and the process to repatriate human trafficking victims takes too long. (92)

V. GOVERNMENT POLICIES ON CHILD LABOR

The government has established policies related to child labor (Table 9). However, policy gaps exist that hinder efforts to address child labor, including mainstreaming child labor issues into relevant policies.

Table 9. Key Policies Related to Child Labor

Policy	Description
Child Labor National Plan of Action (2012–2021)	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. (93) During the reporting period, the government provided stipends to working children to help them return to school through the fourth phase of the Elimination of Hazardous Child Labor program. (89,94)
Domestic Workers Protection and Welfare Policy	Sets the minimum age for domestic work at 14 years; children ages 12 and 13 can work as domestic workers with parental permission. (95) However, the policy is not legally enforceable until the legal framework is amended to reflect the revised policy. (96) During the reporting period, the government sought to ensure the rights and welfare of domestic workers. (94)
National Plan of Action for Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking (2018–2022)†	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. (97,98)
National Education Policy	Specifies the government's education policy, including pre-primary, primary, secondary, vocational and technical, higher, and non-formal education policies. Sets the compulsory age for free education through eighth grade (age 14). (70) During the reporting period, primary education was extended to eighth grade in 609 schools, new secondary schools were constructed, and existing secondary schools were renovated, including the installation of girls' toilets. (94)
Seventh Five Year Plan (2016–2020)	Includes the elimination of the worst forms of child labor, with a focus on child domestic workers and other vulnerable groups. Sets out actions to be taken by the government, including forming a policy for children working in the formal sector, providing assistance to street children to protect them from exploitation, coordinating with the government and other stakeholders for effective rehabilitation, increasing working children's access to formal and non-formal learning, and providing livelihood support to poor households with children. (99) During the reporting period, the government reported that training centers and homes were established for vulnerable children. (94)

† The policy was approved during the reporting period.

In 2018, the government published a budget for the implementation of child-relevant policies. (94) The government has yet to include child labor elimination and prevention strategies into the National Education Policy. (70)

VI. SOCIAL PROGRAMS TO ADDRESS CHILD LABOR

In 2018, the government funded and participated in programs that include the goal of eliminating or preventing child labor (Table 10). However, gaps exist in these social programs, including adequacy of programs to address the full scope of the problem.

Table 10. Key Social Programs to Address Child Labor

Program	Description
Elimination of Hazardous Child Labor, Phase IV (2018–2021)*†	$35 million Government of Bangladesh-funded, 3 year project implemented by the Ministry of Labor and Employment. Seeks to identify 100,000 child laborers, reintegrate these children into vocational schools, and provide livelihood support for their parents. (76,89)
Country Level Engagement and Assistance to Reduce (CLEAR) Child Labor Project	USDOL-funded, capacity-building project implemented by the ILO in 11 countries to build the capacity of local and national governments to address child labor. During the reporting period, 300 children were withdrawn from work and re-enrolled in school with the support of the pilot child labor monitoring system that was launched in 2017. (89) Additional information is available on the USDOL website.
Enabling Environment for Child Rights†	Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs program, supported by UNICEF, which rehabilitates street children engaged in child labor and enrolls them in school. (100,101) During the reporting period, supported vulnerable children with cash transfers. (94)
Child Help Line 1098†	Ministry of Social Work-implemented and UNICEF-supported 24-hour emergency hotline. Connects children vulnerable to violence, abuse, and exploitation with social protection services. (102) The program continued to be implemented during the reporting period. (94)

† Program is funded by the Government of Bangladesh.
‡ The government had other social programs that may have included the goal of eliminating or preventing child labor. (104,105)

Although the government has implemented social programs to eliminate hazardous child labor, research found that the scope of these programs is insufficient to fully address the extent of the child labor problem. In addition, research found no evidence that the government has carried out programs specifically designed to assist children working in tanneries, the informal garment sector, and the dried fish industry. (29)

VII. SUGGESTED GOVERNMENT ACTIONS TO ELIMINATE CHILD LABOR

Based on the reporting above, suggested actions are identified that would advance the elimination of child labor in Bangladesh (Table 11).

Table 11. Suggested Government Actions to Eliminate Child Labor

Area	Suggested Action	Year(s) Suggested
Legal Framework	Ratify the Palermo Protocol on Trafficking in Persons.	2013 – 2018
	Amend the national law to reflect the amended Domestic Workers Protection and Welfare policy.	2018
	Extend the law's minimum age protections to children working in the informal sector, including in domestic work, on the streets, and in small-scale agriculture.	2009 – 2018
	Ensure that the types of hazardous work prohibited for children are comprehensive, in particular by including garment production and fish drying.	2016 – 2018
	Criminally prohibit the use of children for pornographic performances.	2015 – 2018
	Criminally prohibit the use of children in illicit activities, particularly in the production of drugs.	2015 – 2018
	Establish age 16 as the minimum age for voluntary recruitment by the state military, with safeguards for voluntariness.	2016 – 2018
	Criminally prohibit the recruitment of children under age 18 by non-state armed groups.	2016 – 2018
	Ensure that education is compulsory through eighth grade and is consistent with the minimum age for work.	2012 – 2018
Enforcement	Publish information related to labor law enforcement, including the amount of labor inspectorate funding, whether inspectors received refresher training, the number of labor inspections conducted, the number of inspections conducted at worksites, the number of child labor violations, the number of child labor violations for which penalties were imposed, the number of penalties imposed for child labor violations that were collected, and whether routine inspections were conducted.	2012 – 2018

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Table 11. Suggested Government Actions to Eliminate Child Labor (Cont.)

Area	Suggested Action	Year(s) Suggested
Enforcement	Ensure enforcement of citations and penalties for labor law violations, including authorizing the inspectorate to assess penalties for child labor law violations and increasing penalties for child labor law violations to be an adequate deterrent.	2014 – 2018
	Create mechanisms for labor law enforcement to refer children involved in child labor to appropriate legal and social services.	2013 – 2018
	Significantly increase the number of labor inspectors to meet the ILO's technical advice.	2009 – 2018
	Ensure that labor inspections are conducted with sufficient frequency at unregistered factories and businesses.	2013 – 2018
	Publish information on the enforcement of laws related to the worst forms of child labor, including the number of investigations, the number of prosecutions, and the number of convictions. In addition, publish information on whether a referral mechanism exists between criminal law enforcement authorities and social services.	2012 – 2018
	Provide police with sufficient resources and training to enforce violations involving human trafficking, forced labor, and the commercial sexual exploitation of children.	2014 – 2018
	Ensure that Child Protection Networks are sufficiently funded to provide a functional referral mechanism between law enforcement and social services.	2016 – 2018
Coordination	Adequately coordinate with India's Rescue, Recovery, Repatriation, and Integration Task Force to ensure the timely repatriation of human trafficking victims.	2018
Government Policies	Integrate child labor elimination and prevention strategies into the National Education Policy.	2014 – 2018
Social Programs	Implement programs that seek to address inadequate access to water and sanitation facilities and prohibitive fees associated with education.	2013 – 2018
	Provide sufficient education services for Rohingya refugee children and remove other barriers to their school attendance.	2017 – 2018
	Expand programs to address the scope of the child labor problem, including developing and implementing programs to address child labor in tanneries and in the informal garment and fish drying industries.	2016 – 2018

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