



Child labor and child laws in Bangladesh: A critical analysis

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Abstract

Child labor remains a pervasive issue in Bangladesh, despite significant legislative efforts and international commitments. This article provides a critical analysis of the current state of child labor in the country, examining its prevalence, causes, and impacts, alongside an evaluation of the existing legal framework aimed at its eradication. Drawing on recent statistics, data tables, and scholarly sources, it examines the gaps between laws and reality, offering recommendations for improvement. Despite legislative progress, such as the Bangladesh Labour Act 2006 and ratification of key International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions, significant gaps in enforcement and coverage persist, particularly in informal sectors like agriculture and garments. The normalization of child labor through sociocultural norms, poverty, and policy failures exacerbates the problem, as evidenced by qualitative studies in urban slums and rural areas. This analysis critiques the effectiveness of current laws, pointing to weak implementation, low penalties, and exclusion of vulnerable sectors, which hinder Bangladesh's goal of eliminating child labor by 2025.

Keywords: Child labor, Bangladesh Labor Act, ILO conventions, critical analysis, statistics

Introduction

Bangladesh, a densely populated South Asian nation with over 170 million people, has made remarkable strides in economic development, particularly in the ready-made garment (RMG) sector, which contributes significantly to its GDP. However, this growth has been marred by persistent social issues, chief among them being child labor. Defined by the International Labour Organization (ILO) as work that deprives children of their childhood, potential, and dignity, and is harmful to their physical and mental development, child labor in Bangladesh affects millions of children, trapping them in cycles of poverty and exploitation.

Child labor is a global scourge that deprives millions of children of their childhood, education, and future opportunities. In Bangladesh, a densely populated South Asian nation with a population exceeding 170 million, child labor is deeply entrenched due to poverty, cultural norms, and economic necessities. According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), approximately 1.78 million children aged 5-17 are engaged in child labor, with many in hazardous conditions. This figure represents a slight decline from previous years but underscores the persistent challenge despite legal prohibitions.

Historically, child labor in Bangladesh dates back to colonial times, when children were employed in agriculture, factories, and domestic work under British rule. Post-independence in 1971, rapid industrialization, particularly in the ready-made garment (RMG) sector, exacerbated the problem. The RMG industry, which accounts for over 80% of Bangladesh's exports, has been notorious for employing underage workers in subcontracted factories. International pressure, such as the Harkin Bill in the 1990s, led to initial reforms, but enforcement remains weak.

The legal framework in Bangladesh includes the Bangladesh Labor Act of 2006 (amended in 2013 and 2018), which sets the minimum working age at 14 and prohibits hazardous work for those under 18. Bangladesh has ratified key international conventions, including ILO Convention No.

138 on Minimum Age and No. 182 on Worst Forms of Child Labor. However, a critical analysis reveals significant gaps: laws do not cover informal sectors where most child labor occurs, penalties are insufficient, and corruption hinders implementation.

This article critically analyzes child labor and related laws in Bangladesh, arguing that while the legal framework has evolved, it remains inadequate due to enforcement gaps, sectoral exclusions, and failure to address underlying sociocultural and economic drivers. It argues that while laws exist on paper, socio-economic realities normalize child labor, necessitating holistic reforms. By drawing on diverse sources, including government reports, NGO studies, and academic analyses, this article aims to contribute to the discourse on child rights protection in developing contexts.

Literature Review

The literature on child labor in Bangladesh is extensive, spanning economic, sociological, and legal perspectives. Early studies, such as those by Rahman *et al.* (1999) [16], critiqued international interventions like Harkin's Bill, arguing they displaced children from formal employment into more hazardous informal work without addressing poverty roots. This view is echoed in later works, which highlight how global trade pressures led to superficial compliance in export sectors while ignoring domestic industries.

Sociological analyses emphasize normalization through cultural norms. Hoque's (2024) [10] PhD thesis argues that child labor is embedded in societal beliefs, such as "work builds character," particularly in urban slums where migration and poverty intersect. Gender dimensions are prominent; girls often engage in unpaid domestic labor, underestimated in official statistics, while boys dominate paid hazardous roles. Studies like Ahad *et al.* (2021) [13, 14] on urban child labor identify determinants such as family income and education access, linking them to health and educational impacts.

Legal critiques focus on framework inadequacies. Akther (2022) provides a critical overview, noting that while laws like the Labour Act 2006 align with ILO standards, they exclude agriculture and informal sectors where most child labor occurs. The U.S. Department of Labor's annual reports consistently highlight minimal advancements due to weak enforcement and low penalties. UNICEF and ILO joint studies underscore the interplay between child labor and schooling, showing a 50% reduction in prevalence from 2003-2013 but stagnation thereafter, attributed to policy gaps.

Sector-specific literature, such as on the RMG industry, reveals persistent child labor in supply chains. A 2025 report by GoodWeave documents 100% of interviewed minors working illegally, facing excessive hours and abuse. Health studies, like Sultana *et al.* (2023), report high maltreatment rates among child laborers, with 22.6% experiencing physical abuse globally, but higher in Bangladesh. Recent works also address emerging issues like climate-induced displacement increasing vulnerability.

Overall, the literature reveals a consensus on the multifaceted nature of child labor, calling for integrated approaches beyond legal reforms. However, gaps remain in participatory research involving children's voices and longitudinal studies on post-pandemic trends.

Historical Background of Child Labor in Bangladesh

Child labor in Bangladesh has roots in pre-colonial agrarian societies, where children assisted in family farms. During British colonial rule (1757-1947), the Industrial Revolution's influence led to child exploitation in jute mills and tea plantations. The Factories Act of 1881 was the first legislation, but it was poorly enforced in the Bengal region. Post-partition in 1947, as part of East Pakistan, child labor intensified with urbanization. Independence in 1971 brought new challenges: war devastation, poverty, and floods displaced families, pushing children into work. The 1980s saw the rise of the RMG sector, employing thousands of children in sweatshops. A 1995 memorandum of understanding (MOU) with UNICEF and ILO removed over 50,000 children from garment factories, but many shifted to informal sectors.

The 1990s marked international scrutiny, with the U.S. Harkin Bill threatening trade sanctions. This led to the National Children Policy of 1994. However, cultural norms viewing child work as apprenticeship persist. Recent events, like the COVID-19 pandemic, reversed progress, forcing 300,000 more children into labor due to school closures and income loss.

Critical analysis shows historical laws focused on formal sectors, ignoring domestic and agricultural work, where 70% of child labor occurs. This legacy continues, with poverty (24% of population below poverty line) as the primary driver.

Current Child Labor Laws in Bangladesh

Child labor in Bangladesh affects a significant portion of the youth population, with recent data indicating persistent challenges despite reduction efforts. The National Child Labour Survey (NCLS) 2022 reports 3.54 million children aged 5-17 working, of which 1.776 million are in child labor, including 1.07 million in hazardous forms. This represents a slight increase from 4.3% prevalence in 2013 to 4.4% in 2022, with males more affected in economic

activities, while females dominate household chores when included in broader definitions. The Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) 2019 estimates a higher 6.8% prevalence when incorporating chores, highlighting underreporting.

Sectors vary by location and gender. Agriculture employs 62% of child laborers, involving hazardous tasks like pesticide use and shrimp processing. In urban areas, children work in manufacturing (garments, bricks, leather), services (domestic work, street vending), and illicit activities. The RMG sector, Bangladesh's economic backbone, harbors child labor in subcontracted factories, where minors work up to 15 hours daily in unsafe conditions. Coastal regions see forced labor in fish drying, while border areas involve drug smuggling. Vulnerable groups include Rohingya refugees, Bihari minorities, and street children, with 36% of the latter never enrolled in school.

Causes are multifaceted: poverty drives 62.5% of cases, with family circumstances compelling entry into work. Migration due to climate disasters and urbanization pushes children into informal economies. The COVID-19 pandemic reversed gains, increasing child labor by forcing school dropouts and household income losses. Impacts include health deterioration—22.6% physical abuse, 36.3% emotional—and educational barriers, with out-of-school children six times more likely to work. Despite progress in schooling, with primary enrollment nearing 100%, learning outcomes remain poor, perpetuating the cycle the cornerstone of Bangladesh's child labor legislation is the Bangladesh Labor Act (BLA) 2006, amended in 2013 and 2018. It defines a child as under 14 and prohibits their employment, allowing "light work" for 14-18-year olds but banning hazardous tasks. Hazardous work includes 38 occupations, such as tanning and shipbreaking. Other laws include the Children Act 2013, focusing on protection from exploitation, and the National Child Labor Elimination Policy 2010, aiming for eradication by 2025. The Ministry of Labor and Employment oversees enforcement through inspectors, with penalties up to BDT 5,000 for violations. However, the BLA excludes informal sectors like agriculture, domestic work, and street vending, where 85% of child laborers are found. The Suppression of Violence against Women and Children Act 2000 addresses trafficking-related child labor. Enforcement is handled by the Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments (DIFE), which identified 3,459 violations in 2023. Yet, only 10% lead to prosecutions due to resource shortages.

Legal Framework on Child Labor in Bangladesh

Bangladesh's legal framework for child labor is anchored in domestic laws and international commitments. The Constitution indirectly addresses it through Articles 15 and 28, emphasizing state responsibility for basic needs and education. The cornerstone is the Bangladesh Labour Act 2006 (amended 2013 and 2018), defining children under 14 and prohibiting their employment, while allowing adolescents (14-18) in non-hazardous roles with fitness certificates. It lists 38 hazardous occupations, including leather tanning and shipbreaking, and mandates maximum working hours.

The Children Act 2013 complements this by protecting against exploitation, with penalties for violations. Other

laws include the Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking Act 2012, addressing forced labor, and the Penal Code for illicit activities. Bangladesh has ratified key ILO conventions: No. 138 (Minimum Age) in 2022, No. 182 (Worst Forms) in 2001, and the UN CRC in 1990.

Government initiatives include the National Plan of Action for Elimination of Child Labour (2021-2025), aiming for zero child labor, and programs like the Child Labour Elimination Project. The Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments (DIFE) enforces laws, conducting inspections and removing children from work. However, the framework excludes informal sectors, domestic work, and small farms, leaving gaps. Compulsory education ends at age 10, misaligning with the work age of 14 Bangladesh's legal framework on child labor is anchored in domestic laws and international commitments. The Constitution, under Article 15, mandates state provision for basic necessities, implicitly protecting children, while Article 28 prohibits discrimination (Government of Bangladesh, 1972).

The cornerstone is the Bangladesh Labour Act 2006, defining a child as under 14 and an adolescent as 14-18. Section 34 prohibits child employment in any occupation, while adolescents require fitness certificates and are barred from hazardous work listed in the Gazette (Sections 39-42). Adolescents' hours are capped at 5 daily/30 weekly in factories, with no night work (Section 41). Penalties for violations are minimal, up to BDT 5,000, inadequate for deterrence.

The Children Act 2013 aligns with the UNCRC, ratified in 1990, defining children under 18 and penalizing exploitation. The Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking Act 2012 addresses forced child labor. Internationally, ratification of ILO C. 138 (2022) sets minimum age at 14, and C. 182 (2001) targets worst forms like slavery and hazardous work.

Policies include the National Plan of Action (2021-2025), aiming for eradication through education and enforcement, and the Domestic Workers Policy 2015, setting minimum age at 12 for light work, though unenforceable.

However, gaps exist: the Labour Act excludes informal sectors, agriculture, and domestic work, where most child labor occurs. Compulsory education ends at age 10, misaligning with work age. Enforcement relies on DIFE, with only 305 inspectors for millions. This framework, while progressive, requires strengthening for effectiveness.

Extent and Forms of Child Labor

Child labor in Bangladesh is widespread, with 7.9 million children aged 5-17 working, 16.6% of the workforce. The 2022 NCLS reports 1.78 million in child labor, 60% hazardous. Agriculture employs 62%, involving pesticides and heavy loads, leading to health issues like exhaustion (61%).

Urban forms include RMG, where children in subcontracts work 10-15 hours daily, exposed to machinery. Dried fish and brick kilns involve forced labor, with children facing toxins. Domestic work, often girls, involves abuse, with 149,000 in worst forms.

Street children beg or sell, vulnerable to trafficking. Rohingya children in camps face exploitation due to no education. Gender disparities show girls in domestic roles, boys in hazardous ones (Ahmed, 2015).

Poverty drives 69.4% of cases, with education costs and disasters amplifying it. Impacts include maltreatment (22.6% physical abuse globally, similar in Bangladesh) and foregone education.

International Conventions Ratified by Bangladesh

Bangladesh has ratified several international instruments. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1990 commits to protecting children from economic exploitation. ILO Convention No. 182 (Worst Forms of Child Labor) was ratified in 2001, and No. 138 (Minimum Age) in 2022. These align with national laws but require harmonization. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Convention on Child Welfare also applies. Critically, ratification has led to programs like the Country Level Engagement and Assistance to Reduce Child Labor (CLEAR), but implementation lags.

Critical Analysis of Laws and Implementation

While laws are comprehensive, critical gaps exist. First, definitional ambiguities: "light work" is vaguely defined, allowing exploitation. Second, exclusion of informal sectors renders laws ineffective. Implementation challenges include corruption, inadequate inspectors (only 1,000 for 170 million people), and low penalties. Socio-cultural factors normalize child labor, with parents viewing it as necessary. Gender disparities: Girls face domestic labor, often unreported. The RMG sector shows progress in formal factories but persists in subcontracts. Compared to India, Bangladesh's laws are stricter but enforcement weaker. Political will is questioned, as economic growth prioritizes exports over rights. Despite robust laws, child labor persists due to enforcement gaps and normalization. The Labour Act's exclusion of informal sectors leaves 93% unprotected, allowing exploitation in RMG subcontracts where 100% of minors work illegally. Low penalties fail to deter, with DIFE rescuing only 3,990 in 2021.

Normalization occurs through sociocultural norms, where work is "good for skills", and structural factors like migration. Policies, imported from ILO, ignore local voices, displacing labor to informal areas. Gender norms exacerbate, with 90% of abused minors female. Case studies show exploitation: 12-year-olds working long hours without contracts. Pandemic worsened it, with school closures increasing labor. Critically, misalignment of education (age 10) and work age (14) creates vulnerability. Global chains perpetuate, with buyers ignoring subcontracts. Overall, laws are symbolic without resources, normalizing exploitation

Data and Statistics on Child Labor

Recent data from the National Child Labour Survey (NCLS) 2022 shows 3.54 million working children, with 1.78 million in child labor. Hazardous labor affects 1.07 million.

Table 1: Prevalence of Child Labor by Sector (2022-2024)

Sector	Number of Children (millions)	Percentage	Hazardous (%)
Agriculture	1.02	57%	40%
Services	0.45	25%	30%
Industry	0.31	17%	60%

Source: BBS and ILO.

Table 2: Trends in Child Labor (2013-2024)

Year	Total Child Labor (millions)	Reduction (%)
2022	1.78	+4.7
2024	1.70 (est.)	-4.5

Source: BBS and ILO. Post-COVID increase noted.

Prevalence and Data of Child Labor

Child labor in Bangladesh affects an estimated 1.78 million children, with 1.07 million in hazardous work. The NCLS 2022 indicates 4.3% of 5-14-year-olds are working, down from 12.8% in 2003, but progress stalled post-COVID. Sectors include RMG (forced labor reported), bricks (hazardous conditions), and dried fish. Urban areas like Dhaka see high rates in informal work, with children working 64 hours weekly.

Gender disparities show boys in heavy labor, girls in domestic. 2024-2025 data from US DOL reports 3,459 violations detected, but many undetected. Rohingya refugees exacerbate issues, with 300,000 children in education programs but many in labor.

Critical Analysis: Effectiveness of Laws, Gaps, Enforcement Issues

While laws exist, their effectiveness is limited. The BLA's sectoral exclusions leave agriculture (42% of child labor) unregulated. Definitions mismatch ILO standards, allowing light work ambiguities. Enforcement is weak; the Department of Labour has insufficient inspectors (only 300 for 170 million population). Penalties are low and delayed. In EPZs, no unannounced inspections allow abuses.

Structural factors like poverty normalize labor; parents and employers lack awareness. Corruption and political interference hinder prosecutions. International pressures, like from US DOL, highlight minimal advancements. The 2025 target seems unrealistic without reforms. Gender vulnerabilities are overlooked; female street laborers face abuse. Health impacts include malnutrition and injuries.

Critically, laws are reactive, not preventive; education integration is poor, with child labor linked to low foundational skills.

Methodology

This study relies on secondary data from academic journals, government reports, international organizations (e.g., ILO, UNICEF), and legal documents. The analysis includes a review of Bangladesh's labor laws, international conventions, and socio-economic data to identify trends, impacts, and gaps in child labor regulations

Findings

Based on the analysis of available data, the following 15 findings highlight the state of child labor and child law in Bangladesh

1. Prevalence of Child Labor: Over 3.45 million children aged 5–17 are engaged in child labour in Bangladesh, with 1.7 million in hazardous work or employment below the minimum age (National Child Labour Survey 2022).

2. Urban vs. Rural Disparity: Poverty is higher in urban areas (43.8%) than rural areas (28.4%), leading to increased child labor in urban slums and informal sectors, according to the National Child Labour Survey 2022.

3. Age Demographics: The majority of child laborers are aged 12–17, but children as young as 5–6 are found working, particularly in domestic work.

4. Economic Necessity: Many families depend on children's income for survival, making child labor socially accepted in some communities.

5. Hazardous Work: Children are involved in dangerous sectors like brick production, fish drying, and garment factories, often facing health risks and exploitation.

6. Domestic Labor: Huge number of children work as domestic laborers, facing high levels of abuse and exploitation.

7. Abuse and Exploitation: A lot of child domestic workers report abuse, including scolding and physical violence, with over half receiving no wages.

8. Gender Disparities: Girls are more likely to work in domestic settings, while boys dominate in industrial and street work, reflecting gender-based labor divisions.

9. Legal Inconsistencies: Laws like the Child Marriage Restraint Act (1929) and the Bangladesh Labour Act (2006) define "child" differently, creating enforcement challenges.

10. Minimum Age Variations: The Bangladesh Labour Act (2006) sets the minimum working age at 14, but exceptions allow children aged 12 to work if it does not harm their health or education.

11. International Commitments: Bangladesh has ratified ILO Convention 182 and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, but implementation lags.

12. Education Barriers: Child labor interferes with schooling, with many children working long hours (12–14 hours daily), limiting access to education.

13. Weak Enforcement: Despite legal frameworks, enforcement of child labor laws is inconsistent due to limited resources and corruption.

14. Cultural Norms: Social acceptance of child labor in low-income communities perpetuates its prevalence, undermining legal protections.

Recommendations

Strengthen enforcement by increasing inspectors and penalties. Expand laws to informal sectors. Invest in education and poverty programs. Collaborate with NGOs for monitoring. Align with SDGs for 2025 goal.

To address child labor effectively, the following 15 recommendations are proposed

1. **Harmonize Legal Definitions:** Standardize the definition of a "child" across all laws to align with international standards (under 18, per ILO Convention 182).
2. **Strengthen Enforcement:** Increase funding and training for labor inspectors to ensure compliance with child labor laws.
3. **Raise Minimum Age:** Amend the Bangladesh Labour Act to raise the minimum working age to 15, eliminating exceptions for 12-year-olds.
4. **Access to Education:** Provide free, compulsory education up to age 14, with incentives like stipends to reduce economic dependence on child labor.
5. **Poverty Alleviation Programs:** Implement targeted social safety nets to support low-income families, expand social safety nets, such as cash transfers to reduce families' reliance on child income, reducing the need for child labor.
6. **Regulate Informal Sectors:** Introduce regulations for informal industries like domestic work and agriculture, where child labor is prevalent.
7. **Public Awareness Campaigns:** Launch campaigns to change cultural attitudes toward child labor and promote education.
8. **Strengthen Penalties:** Increase penalties for employers violating child labor laws to deter exploitation.
9. **Monitor Hazardous Work:** Establish a task force to identify and remove children from hazardous sectors like brick kilns and garment factories.
10. **Support for Domestic Workers:** Introduce specific regulations for child domestic workers, including mandatory registration and regular inspections.
11. **Vocational Training:** Offer vocational programs for adolescents (14–18) to transition them into safe, skill-based employment.
12. **International Collaboration:** Partner with ILO and UNICEF to implement best practices for child labor reduction, to access technical and financial support for child labor programs.
13. **Community Engagement:** Involve local communities in monitoring and reporting child labor violations. Establish community child protection committees to monitor and report child labor cases.
14. **Gender-Specific Interventions:** Address the specific vulnerabilities of girl child workers, especially in domestic and informal sectors, providing safe work environments for girls and educational opportunities for both girl/boy child workers.
15. **Support for Orphans and Vulnerable Children:** Provide targeted assistance to orphans and street children to prevent exploitation.

Conclusion

Child labour in Bangladesh is a complex issue rooted in poverty, social norms, and systemic gaps in legal enforcement. While the country has made strides in reducing child labour and enacting protective laws, significant challenges remain, including inconsistent legal definitions, weak enforcement, and socio-economic pressures. The findings highlight the scale of the problem, with millions of children engaged in hazardous work, particularly in urban areas and domestic settings. The legal framework, including the Bangladesh Labour Act (2006), provides a foundation for addressing child labor, but enforcement remains weak. Urgent reforms are needed for a child-labor-free future. To address these issues, Bangladesh should extend laws to informal sectors, increase inspectors, and raise penalties. Integrate child voices in policy, enhance education quality, and provide social safety nets. International collaboration for supply chain transparency is crucial. In conclusion, while laws exist, their critical shortcomings demand urgent reform to eradicate child labor and uphold rights. Socio-economic interventions, harmonized laws, and public awareness are critical to reducing child labor. By implementing the proposed recommendations, Bangladesh can move toward eliminating child labor, ensuring children's rights to education, health, and a safe childhood. Continued collaboration with international organizations and sustained government commitment are essential for long-term success. The proposed recommendations emphasize a multi-faceted approach, combining legal reforms, poverty alleviation, education access, and awareness campaigns to progressively eliminate child labour. By aligning national policies with international standards and fostering collaboration among stakeholders, Bangladesh can move closer to its goal of eliminating child labour by 2025, ensuring a brighter future for its children.

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