

Reforms in Workers' Livelihood, Workplace Safety and Rights related Issues *An Agenda for the Interim Government*

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1. Background

On November 18, 2024, the interim government of Bangladesh established the 'Labour Reform Commission', tasked with proposing reforms to improve labour rights and workers' welfare. The commission is formed as part of addressing various structural, institutional, operational, weaknesses concerning workers' life and livelihood. Initially, the commission comprised of 10 members who are experienced in workers' issues. Later, the number of members extended to 19. Although forming the commission happened as part of a process of setting the different commissions by the interim government, the decision of forming such a commission follows years of advocacy by labour rights activists, trade unions, and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) who have long called for the creation of a dedicated entity to address gaps in labour laws and the institutional and operational challenges in ensuring workers' rights.

According to the terms of reference, the commission will propose necessary reforms, taking into account existing labour laws and related policies, international labour rights conventions—particularly those of the ILO—best practices from other countries, and the perspectives of different stakeholders in different areas.

The Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) has long been engaged in evidence-based research and policy-influencing activities in the areas of decent jobs, occupational safety and health (OSH), workers' rights, etc. Over the last two decades, it has produced over 60 evidence-based research on assessing the overall progress and thereby putting forward key recommendations for necessary improvement. CPD's recommendations have been duly acknowledged by the policy makers in adjustment/amendment of necessary policy, regulatory, and operational decisions towards further improvement of workers' livelihood. Despite those positive attempts, there is still room for further improvement in workers' overall livelihood and well-being.

Since the Labour Reform Commission is actively engaging in discussion and consultation with different stakeholders, CPD's proposed reform agenda could significantly contribute to achieving the commission's overarching goal in preparing the short-medium-and Long-term doable for the interim government as well as the upcoming elected government for improvement of workers' livelihood and well-being in the country.

Against this backdrop, CPD prepared this discussion paper to reform agenda for the interim government for the betterment of workers' well-being and workers' rights. This paper will be placed to the labour reform commission for necessary consideration.

2. Methodological Approach

The report, prepared in collaboration with Christian Aid (CA), draws on CPD's studies conducted over the years with partners including CA, ILO, UNDP, GIZ, FES, BWB, TAF, among others. Other than CPD's studies, insights were also taken from several national and international research.

All the findings and recommendations of this paper have been categorised into eight sections. Those are:

- Wage and appropriate remuneration;
- Occupational health and safety;
- Right to organise, participation, collective bargaining;
- Social safety net and insurance;
- Industrial disputes, dispute settlement and justice;
- Child, adolescent and forced labour;
- Equality, non-discrimination, and unique community; and
- Right to work, employment opportunities, assurance, inclusion, and others.

3. Wage and Appropriate Remuneration

3.1 Context

Overall, Bangladesh has been unable to maintain a fair wage for its workers. The coverage of the minimum wage board (MWB) in Bangladesh has not extended significantly for a long period and remains stagnant at 42 industries (another four industries are claimed to be under the process of coverage; however, no visible signs of progress can be observed (CPD, 2023). Despite the stipulation in labour law to revise the minimum wage (for covered industries) every five years, minimum wages in several sectors have remained stagnant for an extended period (CPD, 2023). As a result, some sectors still have minimum wages as low as BDT 521 and BDT 792 in the type-foundry and petrol pump industries, respectively. Informal sector, where 85 per cent of the total workers are estimated to be employed, does not have any fixed wages, set work hours, or written contracts (CPD, 2023). Specially, Bangladesh do not have any fixed minimum wages for its agricultural workers, or domestic workers (ILO, 2021).

While a large share of industries is still to be covered under minimum wage regulations, the minimum wage set for the industries is significantly low. According to ILO (2021), Bangladesh was the only country in Asia and the Pacific whose minimum wage was lower than the lowest international poverty line. Despite having a lower minimum wage for a certain number of industries, the implementation of the stipulated minimum wage remains poor in most industries (Moazzem et al, 2023; Ahmed et al, 2024). (There is a lack of necessary responsible business conduct among global brands and buyers as well (Moazzem, Ahmed, & Kabir, 2023, Moazzem & Ahmed, 2021). The effective implementation of minimum wages largely depends on proper inspections by the Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments (DIFE); however, due to limitations in intent and capacity, the department's inspections remain insufficient (Moazzem, Ahmed & Saraf, 2023). The penalty for violating the minimum wage is also not strong enough to create pressure on the employee to maintain minimum wage: non-compliance to minimum wage is punishable with imprisonment for up to one year, or a fine of up to around BDT 5,000 (DTDA, 2024). Employers allegedly often require workers, including pregnant women workers, to work excessively long hours to meet quotas and export deadlines but do not always properly compensate them for overtime (CPD, 2023). In many cases, employers delay workers' pay or deny them full leave benefits (CPD, 2023). The labour law does not specify any penalties for forced overtime or non-payment of overtime wages (CPD, 2023). Due to prolonged delays in resolving cases in labour courts, workers are often discouraged from filing cases even when they are denied the minimum wage (Moazzem and Khandker, 2021).

The MWB suffers from a lack of evidence-based discussions, leading to suboptimal wage-setting processes (Moazzem & Arfanuzzaman, 2018). A national wage policy was to be prepared within 2024 (DTDA, 2024); however, it does not appear to happen any sooner. On the other hand, the minimum wage set by the MWB does

not apply to EPZ workers (Moazzem & Khandker, 2021). Wage of this worker is set by a Wage Committee composed of representatives of the Ministry of Labour and Employment, the Prime Minister's Office and investors (Moazzem, Khandker, Ahmed, n.d).

3.2 Recommendations

Issue	Recommendation	Type	Implementing agencies
Legal	• Cover all industries under the MWB coverage prioritising sectors that have a lower presence of trade unions.	Long-term	MWB
	• On a national level, gradually move towards announcing a national minimum wage that will be applicable to all industries including those of the informal sector and are still to be covered under MWB regulations.	Short-term	MWB
	• Provide authority to MWB to regulate wage settings for EPZs	Medium-term	MoLE
	• Incorporate provisions for children's education into the minimum wage structure.	Short-term	MWB
	• Make a major revision to all the sectoral minimum wages set more than 5 years ago within the next 1 year, prioritising the oldest one first.	Medium-term	MWB
	• Guarantee the minimum wages for all types of contract-based workers – including those temporarily hired through third parties – through Legal provisions.	Short-term	MoLE
	• Set all minimum wage structures allowances—such as the 'housing allowance'—as a percentage of the basic salary rather than a fixed amount.	Short-term	MWB
	• Make alternative dispute resolution mechanisms mandatory, allowing labour courts to direct parties to mediation, similar to the provisions under the Family Court Ordinance.	Short-term	MoLJPA
	• Introduce a new legal provision requiring an additional amount to pay for each day's delay in wage payment.	Short-term	MWB
	• Make not paying overtime a punishable offence by law	Short-term	MoLE
• Substantially raise the penalty for not paying the minimum wage, especially deliberately, repeatedly	Short-term	MoLE	
Institutional	• Introduce a transparent and democratic procedure for selecting employers and workers' representatives on the wage board.	Short-term	MWB
	• Make special arrangements for taking views from experts, academia, and CSO representatives in the process of minimum wage formulation.	Short-term	MWB, CSOs
	• Ensure use of publicly accessible data/information on all the indicators included under the minimum wage.	Short-term	MWB
	• Make the minutes of all the tripartite meetings held by minimum wage board publicly accessible mandatorily.	Short-term	MoLE
	• Increase promotion opportunities, introduce inspection risk allowances, and incorporate performance bonuses for DIFE inspectors.	Medium-term	MoLE
	• Make it mandatory for DIFE to publish a wage implementation assessment report within four months of setting a new minimum wage, publicly disclosing non-compliant establishments' names.	Medium-term	MoLE

3.2 Recommendations (contd.)

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Issue	Recommendation	Type	Implementing agencies
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enable public and private sector joint inspections modality 	Medium-term	DIFE, Private Sector
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Announce a national minimum wage day officially and celebrate every year intending to increase awareness. 	Long-term	MoLE
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make brands/buyers accountable in comply with national rules and regulations including those related with minimum wage and wage related payments. 	Medium-term	MoFA, MoC, CSOs
Operational	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make it mandatory to wage and other financial benefits payment through formal and banking channel and/or MFS/DFS. 	Medium-term	MoLE
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enable night banking services for workers near industrial zones. 	Medium-term	BB
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Banks/MFS/DFS should facilitate to reduce MFS and DFS transection without any costs as part of their CSR. 	Short-term	BB, MoF
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduce a wage guarantee insurance scheme with employers' contribution which would ensure wage payment of the workers in case of failure to do so. 	Long-term	MoF
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a sector wise guideline how a worker will be promoted against a certain grade. 	Short-term	MoLE, BGMEA

Source: Prepared by authors.

4. Occupational Safety and Health

4.1 Context

One of the key challenges in ensuring industrial safety in Bangladesh is weak role played by the monitoring agencies (Moazzem & Ahmed, 2023). Despite the recent increase in recruitment, the Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments (DIFE) still has a limited number of labour inspectors compared to what is needed; in fact, many newly created posts remain yet vacant (Moazzem & Ahmed, 2023; CPD, 2023). In order to ease the inspection burden and other responsibilities, LIMA – a digital inspection module, has been established with the support of development partners. However, its functionality remains limited, and many industry stakeholders are not aware of such a module (Moazzem et al, 2022). As such, despite its introduction, the total number of inspections by DIFE could not be increased (Moazzem & Ahmed, 2023). The DIFE inspectors are alleged to lack willingness and sometimes ask for bribes to conduct inspections (Moazzem & Ahmed, 2022). Moreover, the DIFE does not have the authority to make unannounced inspections in establishments of the EPZs and is not allowed to file cases in the labour courts for violations in the EPZ (CPD, 2023). The resources allocated for DIFE by the governments have also been inadequate (CPD, 2023). There has been a tendency for DIFE to not disclose inspections and accident-related information (Moazzem & Ahmed, 2023). Another concern for DIFE has been underreporting of accidents and injured and killed workers, which mismatches with reported data of other public and private entities (Moazzem & Ahmed, 2023).

There is concern over other public safety monitoring agencies as well including Bangladesh Fire Service and Civil Defence (BFSCD), Public Works Department (PWD), Rajdhani Unnayan Kartripakkha (RAJUK), Office of The Chief Inspector of Boilers, Bangladesh Standards and Testing Institution (BSTI), Department of Environment (DoE). There are missing of appropriate coordination among these agencies. The one joint

inspection programme under the leadership of Bangladesh Investment Authority (BIDA) after the disastrous fire incident at Hashem Foods in 2022 inspected 5206 factories and found at least 106 risky factories including 17 most vulnerable ones (The Daily Star, 2023). It was also found that plastic and chemical industries have no fire safety and environmental protection at all and remain as highly accident-prone (The Daily Star, 2023). However, no follow-up activities on these joint inspections could be traced and also the detailed findings were not disclosed publicly.

Following the Rana Plaza disaster in 2013, occupational safety in the RMG industry gained substantial attention. Over the years, numerous initiatives, supported by both global and local partners, have been implemented to enhance industrial safety within the sector. These efforts have led to notable progress, which various stakeholders have recognised. However, despite these advancements, the industry continues to face several underlying challenges (Moazzem & Ahmed, 2023). Moreover, the limited progress in improving industrial safety in non-RMG sectors remains a significant concern and led to the occurrence of continuous industrial accidents and deaths.

The safety standards are relatively weak in small and medium-sized factories (Moazzem & Ahmed, 2022). The presence of a safety committee largely missing in non-RMG industries (Moazzem & Jebunessa, 2022; 2023; 2023a; Moazzem & Mostofa, 2021). Although there is a relatively higher presence of safety committees in the RMG industry, there are allegations about their limited functionality (Moazzem & Ahmed, 2022). One of the major challenges remains a higher presence of the informal sector in Bangladesh's economy. In many cases, these informal sector entities do not have any formal documentation making it difficult for inspection bodies to trace and inspect them (CPD, 2023).

Along with occupational safety, the issue of occupational health is also a big concern. Workers from several industries (for example, shipbreaking, tannery, plastic, chemical, textile, etc.) work in more highly polluted environments without any necessary protective equipment making them exposed to Long-term health hazards (Moazzem & Ahmed, 2022; Moazzem & Ahmed 2023a, Moazzem & Jebunessa, 2022; Moazzem & Jebunessa 2023; Moazzem & Jebunessa, 2023a).

4.2 Recommendations

Issue	Recommendation	Type	Tentative implementing agencies
Legal	• Make it legally mandatory to have an official responsible for safety/compliance issue in every industrial establishment.	Short-term	MoLE
	• Include a definition of workplace accident, covering incidents that occur anywhere while serving the purpose of the employer.	Short-term	MoLE
	• Devise sector-specific OSH guidelines (including for chemical management) segregated on gender and considering the impact of climate change.	Short-term	MoLE
	• Include OSH compliance requirement in every trade association membership criterion.	Short-term	MoC
	• Make visual evidence mandatory as part of OSHE inspection by DIFE official.	Medium-term	MoLE
	• DIFE inspectors should be allowed to conduct inspections within EPZ.	Short-term	MoLE
	• Provide magistracy power to DIFE to take specific actions against non-compliant practices.	Short-term	MoLE

4.2 Recommendations (contd.)

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Issue	Recommendation	Type	Tentative implementing agencies
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ratify and implement ILO Convention No 155 and 187 and align the National Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) Policy of 2013 and the provisions of Chapter VI of the Bangladesh Labour Act 2006 with the conventions. 	Short-term	MoLE, MoLJPA and MoFA
Institutional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Introduce private sector-based monitoring assessment of factories under the overall supervision of industrial safety coordination committee. Mainstream LIMA for a higher number of inspections, data collection, document verifications and complaint submission. Establish a dedicated, specialised medical facility near top OSH vulnerable industries (including the tannery estate, shipbreaking industry, chemical industry, plastic industry). Increase budgets for all the monitoring agencies, especially DIFE, BFSCD and DoE. Form a dedicated central body to coordinate inter-ministerial efforts, ensure compliance, and enhance safety across factories. Dedicate specially trained inspectors to inspect higher-risk industries including shipbreaking, chemical, tannery, plastic, textile, etc. Develop an industrial safety framework where the roles and responsibilities for different public agencies will be outlined clearly. 	Mid term	MoLE
		Short-term	MoLE
		Long term	MoLE
		Short-term	MoF
		Short-term	Office of CA
		Medium-term	MoLE
		Short-term	Office of CA
Operational	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Integrate safety-related courses into the academic curriculum Make tripartite committee active in monitoring of safety and compliance issues through regular inspection against time-based commitment. Form and distribute a comprehensive framework covering the production, transportation, storage, shipment, and delivery of all hazardous substances. Relocate all factories, especially chemical and plastic factories, from residential areas to industrial zones to reduce safety risks. A proper time-based plan considering social impact is necessary. Design a five-year inspection and remediation plan for the non-RMG industry similar to the plan adopted for the RMG industry in the post-Rana Plaza period. Develop a national database dedicated to only workplace safety statistics. Introduce safety-related courses in primary and secondary academic curricula. Make it mandatory for DIFE, BFSCD, PWD, RAJUK, BSTI, OTCB, and DOE to publish joint annual safety inspection reports. 	Short-term	MoE
		Medium-term	MoLE, Private Sector, CSOs
		Short-term	BSTI, MoLE
		Medium-term	DSCC, DNCC, MoI, BSCIC
		Long-term	MoLE, ILO
		Short-term	MoLE
		Mid-Term	MoE
		Medium-term	MoLE, BFSCD, PWD, RAJUK, BSTI, OTCB, DoE
Operational	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A dedicated sector-specific OSH guideline should be made for the informal sector. Reduce duties and tariffs on safety equipment and provide low-cost and accessible loans to small and medium-sized factories. Extend employment injury insurance scheme to the most vulnerable workers specific sector including RMG. 	Short-term	MoLE, ILO
		Medium-term	MoF
		Medium-term	MoLE, MoSW

4.2 Recommendations (contd.)

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Issue	Recommendation	Type	Tentative implementing agencies
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish a dedicated not-for-profit fund scheme where small and medium-sized factories will receive zero-interest loans for investing in OSH. 	Short-term	MoF
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Introduce an emergency street lane in the nearby roads of all industrial clusters from the nearby fire station. 	Medium-term	RBD

Source: Prepared by authors.

5. Right to Organise, Participation, Collective Bargaining

5.1 Context

At present two labour laws are operational in the country – Bangladesh Labour Act 2015 and EPZ Labour Act 2019. Presence of two labour acts caused confusion with regard to workers’ rights. Over the past decade, the scope of freedom of association and collective bargaining deteriorated in Bangladesh (CPD, 2023). Much of this deterioration can be attributed to the weakness that persists within labour law as well as institutional and operational weaknesses. The labour law in Bangladesh permits workers to join and form unions with government approval but excludes those in the informal sector and workers in managerial, supervisory, and administrative roles. Civil servants, firefighters, security guards, and employers’ confidential assistants are also prohibited from forming unions. Furthermore, unions are not allowed in Export Processing Zones (EPZs), where workers can only form Worker Welfare Associations (WWAs) under the control of the Bangladesh Export Processing Zones Authority (BEPZA). The law allows union members to strike if a settlement is not reached but imposes significant restrictions, requiring at least 75 per cent of union members’ support for a strike to be valid. Strikes can also be terminated by the government if deemed to cause ‘serious hardship to the community’ or if they continue beyond 30 days. Additionally, strikes are prohibited during the first three years of commercial production in factories built with foreign investment (CPD, 2023).

The law mandates factories with more than 50 workers to establish participation committees (PC), but this requirement is often undermined as employers allegedly appoint pre-selected members instead of holding elections. EPZ workers are denied the right to organise and bargain collectively, and BEPZA retains the authority to ban strikes that may affect public interest. Although the law outlines the establishment of EPZ-specific labour tribunals, these institutions have not been created, and EPZ cases are managed by existing labour courts. Federations in EPZs require approval from over 50 per cent of WWAs and are barred from associating with political parties, unions, or NGOs (CPD, 2023). Penalties for unfair labour practices and anti-union discrimination are disproportionately lenient, often targeting workers rather than employers (CPD, 2023). Workers cannot directly lodge complaints regarding such practices with labour courts; they must first approach the Department of Labour (DoL). Moreover, union formation requires the consent of at least 20 per cent of the workforce before the DoL can approve registration, further restricting unionisation efforts. Police allegedly intimidated unions in the RMG sector by repeatedly visiting their meetings and offices, photographing or recording meetings, and monitoring NGOs supporting trade unions (CPD, 2023).

The membership threshold for union registration has been reduced to 20 per cent, but this remains challenging for large factories where gathering necessary documents and signatures is difficult (Moazzem & Khandker, 2021). Currently, union leaders must be selected from within the establishment, enabling employers to dismiss them under vague grounds like ‘unruly behaviour’, which is undefined in the law (Moazzem & Khandker, 2021).

Additionally, participatory committees lack a clear role and are not granted the authority to bargain collectively, limiting their effectiveness in representing worker interests (Moazzem & Khandker, 2021). Section 23-3 of the Labour Act 2006 stipulates that a worker will not be entitled for compensation (excluding other lawful dues) if dismissed for misconduct under sub-sections 4(b) and 4(g). Sub-section 4(g) includes grounds such as ‘disorderliness, riot, arson, or breakage in the establishment’; however, the law does not provide a clear definition of ‘disorderliness’ or ‘disorderly behaviour’ (Moazzem & Khandker, 2021). Several provisions in Bangladesh's Labour Act restrict freedom of association in various sectors, including government workers, university teachers, and domestic workers (sections 1(4), 2(49), 65, and 175). These include issues such as interference in trade union activities (sections 192, 196(2)(b), 190(1)(c), (e), (g), 229, 291(2)-(3), and 299), excessive restrictions on the right to strike (sections 211(3)-(4), (8), and 227(c)), and preferential rights for collective bargaining agents (sections 202(24)(b), (c), (e), and 204), along with insufficient protections for trade union activists (Moazzem & Khandker, 2021).

5.2 Recommendations

Issue	Recommendation	Type	Implementing Agency
Legal	• Abolish EPZ Labour Act 2019 and enforce Bangladesh Labour Act 2015 at the EPZ areas.	Short-term	MoLE
	• Include workers in the informal sector, managerial, supervisory, and administrative roles, as well as civil servants, firefighters, and security guards in unionisation rights.	Short-term	MoLE
	• Allow workers in EPZs to form trade unions and engage in collective bargaining, replacing Worker Welfare Associations (WWAs) with autonomous and democratically elected unions.	Short-term	MoLE
	• Reduce the threshold for strike approval from 75% to a more feasible level	Short-term	MoLE
	• Provide explicit definitions of vague terms like ‘unruly behaviour,’ “disorderliness,” and “serious hardship to the community” to prevent misuse.	Short-term	MoLE
	• Withdraw the membership requirement for union registration	Short-term	MoLE
	• Permit union leaders to be selected from outside the establishment to enhance impartiality and reduce employer influence.	Short-term	MoLE
Operational	• Redesign the online trade union registration system to make the process for workers to gather and submit documents for union registration simpler.	Short-term	MoLE
	• Enable the practice of clearly informing the applicant of the reason of any rejected application of a trade union.	Short-term	MoLE
	• Ensure participation committee members are elected by workers rather than appointed by employers.	Short-term	MoLE
	• Maintain a digital database for trade union-related statistics	Short-term	MoLE
	• Revise (sections 1(4), 2(8a), 2(23), 2(25), 2(40), 2(49), 2(49), 65, and 175); sections 192, 196(2)(b), 190(1)(c), (e), (g), 229, 291(2)-(3), and 299); (sections 211(3)-(4), (8), and 227(c)), (sections 202(24)(b), (c), (e), and 204, and other problematic clauses of the labour law to resolve to aforementioned issues (in the context section).	Short-term	MoLE

Source: Prepared by authors.

6. Social Safety Net and Insurance

6.1 Context

Social protection is essential for development, serving as a mean to reduce social exclusion, empower workers, and support the gradual formalisation of employment (ILO, 2012). A comprehensive and organised approach to social security remains absent in Bangladesh, leaving many informal sector workers excluded from social protection schemes. Including these workers in such programs poses significant administrative challenges (Fahmida et al., 2024).

6.2 Recommendations

Issue	Recommendation	Type	Implementing agencies
Legal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ratify ILO Convention No 102 and align the national laws and policies to ensure comprehensive social security for workers in Bangladesh, covering medical care, sickness benefits, unemployment benefits, old-age benefits, employment injury benefits, family benefits, maternity benefits, invalidity benefits, and survivors' benefits. 	Short-term	MoLE, MoFA and MoLJPA
Operational	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a digital database for all the industrial workers 	Short-term	MoLE
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Redesign the disbursement approach for BLWF in order to provide the services to the really affected workers. 	Short-term	MoLE, Private Sector
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage stricter enforcement and monitoring mechanisms to ensure compliance by all eligible companies, including informal businesses, to increase contributions and expand the BLWF fund's coverage. 	Short-term	MoLE
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allocate a portion of the fund to create awareness programmes targeting workers informing them about the fund's benefits, application processes, and eligibility criteria. 	Short-term	MoLE
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expand the CLF to cover additional social protection measures, such as providing healthcare benefits for workers' families (including wives of male workers) and unemployment support during industry downturns. 	Short-term	MoLE
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduce a transparent digital platform to streamline the application process, reduce processing time, and improve accountability. This platform could also include grievance mechanisms to address workers' challenges in accessing funds 	Short-term	MoLE
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on achieving tax justice in the industrial sector by implementing differential corporate tax rates, ensuring a progressive structure for corporations. 	Medium-term	NBR, MoLE
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The additional funds generated should be allocated to initiatives that improve workers' and their communities' welfare, such as providing subsidised access to schools, specialised hospitals, and housing. 	Medium-term	NBR, MoLE
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthen measures to reduce tax evasion and avoidance, ensuring that the additional revenue is directed towards enhancing workers' rights, welfare, and access to essential services 		

Source: Prepared by authors.

6.3 Context

Social insurance provides security to the workers against risks such as illness, disability, maternity, unemployment, old age, etc. The National Social Security Strategy (NSSS) of 2015 highlights social insurance as an important policy document for addressing the lack of protections for formal workers, including sickness, unemployment, and injury insurance, alongside pensions (Cabinet Division, 2021). The National Social Insurance Scheme (NSIS) under the NSSS seeks to mitigate risks, complement social assistance, and reduce government fiscal pressures by introducing employer-employee contributions.

However, implementation remains limited due to coordination challenges, lack of awareness and conceptual gaps among the ministries. Given the current status of progress, the government plans to develop a new strategy and action plan, as the existing plan will expire in 2026. Thus far, an old-age pension scheme has been introduced as a universal social insurance mechanism, allowing any citizen to register for the service. However, giving the minimum premium makes it difficult for the workers to avail of the services. Other social insurance initiatives, such as sickness, injury, maternity, and unemployment coverage, remain at either the pilot stage (only EIS) or in theories in the action plan (Moazzem et al, 2024a; Moazzem et al, 2024b). In order to expedite the process and to take into account the challenges in the next strategy document, the government need to undertake some of the initiatives considering the short to long term (Moazzem et al, 2024a; Moazzem et al, 2024b).

6.4 Recommendations

Issue	Recommendation	Type	Implementing agencies
Legal	• Initiate a new NSSS along with an action plan targeting new milestones while addressing previous experiences and current socio-economic conditions.	Medium-term	MoF MoLE Cabinet
	• Revise the NSIS in line with NSSS Version 2.0, updating goals and shifting leadership from the Finance Division to the Cabinet Division (if the coverage is universal) or to the MoLE (if it primarily covers formal/informal workers and their families).	Medium-term	Cabinet
Institutional	• Create a separate, dedicated entity for drafting and implementing the National Social Insurance which will focus on social insurance reform, similar to the National Pension Authority for pensions.	Medium-term	Cabinet, MoF, MoLE, FID
	• Introduce disability insurance to protect workers, ensuring coverage for both physical and mental disabilities, including autism, to improve the inclusivity of the NSIS.	Medium-term	MoSW, Cabinet
Operational	• Include ‘tripartite plus’ in the formulation processes to ensure broader stakeholder engagement.	Medium-term	Cabinet CSOs Private Sector
	• Revise the existing central database on social protection to a single registry database in order to reduce duplication.	Medium-term	BBS, MoF, BB
	• Expand the Employment Injury Scheme beyond large industries to gradually include informal sector workers, as it has been in a pilot phase for too long.	Medium-term	MoLE Private Sector MoF
	• Use the Universal Pension Scheme as a platform to raise awareness about other social insurance programmes, building public trust and engagement.	Medium-term	MoIB, MoF, UPS
	• Prioritise the implementation of maternity insurance as a social insurance scheme to prevent health risks for mothers and newborns.	Medium-term	DGH, MoF, FID
	• Involve the private sector in managing social insurance schemes to improve service delivery and foster innovation.	Medium-term	Cabinet, MoF

Source: Prepared by authors.

7. Industrial Disputes, Dispute Settlement and Justice

7.1 Context

The Penal Code of 1860 protects citizens from violence, making any act of violence against or by workers an offence prosecutable under the Criminal Procedure Code (CrPC). At the moment there is lack of laws targeting handling workers' unrest stemming from problematic industrial dispute resolution mechanisms (Moazzem & Khandker, 2021). The workers' unrest is treated as public unrest and actions are taken under the Penal Code of Bangladesh by police (Moazzem & Khandker, 2021). Over the years, this has resulted in the 'violent suppression of several workers' protests and 'filing of false criminal complaints' against unionists and hundreds of 'unnamed persons' (Moazzem & Khandker, 2021).

7.2 Recommendations

Issue	Recommendation	Type	Implementing agencies
Legal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Introduce new provisions in the labour law, to govern industrial disputes properly. 	Short-term	MoLE
Operational	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Make the necessary adjustments in the recruitment process for the highest-ranking official of BEPZA to ensure greater relevance. 	Short-term	Office of CA
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Introduce alternative dispute settlement mechanism guidelines at factory and association level. 	Short-term	MoLE, BGMEA
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Refrain industrial police in mediating or handling strikes, lockouts, or disputes between workers and management which should be handled by elected workers representatives. 	Short-term	MoHA
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Design a training programme for industrial police in handling potential unrest without any violence. 	Medium-term	MoHA
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conduct a rapid review of all the cases filed against workers on the ground of unrest and acquit all the innocent workers from the cases. 	Short-term	MoHA

Source: Prepared by authors.

8. Child, Adolescent and Forced Labour

8.1 Context

Bangladesh made good progress in reducing the involvement of children in hazardous work over the past decade – 16.4 per cent less in 2023 than in 2022 according to a BBS survey. However, there has been a 4.7 per cent increase in the number of children engaged in child labour in 2022 compared to 2013. Children in Bangladesh allegedly continue to suffer from the most severe types of child labour, such as commercial sexual exploitation, often due to human trafficking and forced labour, especially in activities like fish drying and brick production (CPD, 2023). Children are also involved in hazardous work in manufacturing of garments and leather goods industries (CPD, 2023).

Also, several weaknesses in the legal frame persist. The Bangladesh Labour Act does not align with international standards of eliminating child labour as it does recognise certain sectors under the act, such as seamen, ocean-going vessels, agriculture farms with fewer than 10 workers, and domestic work (CPD, 2023). The hazardous work list in the law excludes domestic work, leaving children vulnerable to long hours, violence, and

sexual assault (DoL, 2023). The current law in Bangladesh does not criminalise child involvement in pornographic operations (DoL, 2023). It also does not explicitly prohibit child recruitment by non-state armed groups (DoL, 2023). Although the law addresses children transporting drugs, it does not criminalise children's participation in drug production (CPD, 2023). The current punishment for employing child labour is not adequate as the penalty can be only a maximum of BDT 5,000 (Moazzem & Khandker, 2021). On top of that, even this amount of penalty is subject to the completion of all the procedures of a sluggish legal process DIFE inspectors do not have the authority to take direct action against factories employing child labour (Moazzem & Khandker, 2021).

Similar to child labour, the existing legal and operational framework of the Bangladesh government has a number of loopholes for managing forced labour. Despite of mention in the law, the Bangladesh government do not provide access to shelter and protective services for victims of forced labour (DoL, 2023). Victim identification procedures have not been followed in a consistent manner (Walk Free, 2023). There is absence of government-owned shelters for adult male victims of forced labour (Walk Free, 2023). Kiln operators and their agents often target poverty-prone villages and urban slums to recruit unskilled labourers who are highly vulnerable to forced labour (Walk Free, 2023). Traffickers allegedly exploit workers in forced labour across different industries (CPD, 2023). It is alleged that the border security forces, and local police officials sometimes allow traffickers to recruit and operate at India-Bangladesh border crossings and maritime embarkation points (CPD, 2023).

8.2 Recommendations

Issue	Recommendation	Type	Implementing Agencies
Legal	• Amend the Bangladesh Labour Act to align with international standards of child labour, explicitly covering sectors currently excluded, such as agriculture, domestic work, and ocean-going vessels.	Short-term	MoLE
	• Expand the child hazardous work list to include domestic work and other risky sectors.	Short-term	MoLE
	• Criminalise children's involvement in pornographic operations and their recruitment by non-state armed groups.	Short-term	MoLE
	• Introduce explicit provisions prohibiting children's participation in drug production activities.	Short-term	MoLE
	• Revise penalties for employing child labour, increase fines, and introduce non-monetary penalties, such as imprisonment for repeat offenders.	Short-term	MoLE
	• Empower DIFE inspectors with authority to take direct punitive actions against factories employing child labour.	Short-term	MoLE
	• Amend laws to criminalise forced labour comprehensively and explicitly include victim protection measures.	Short-term	MoLE
Operational	• Increase penalties for perpetrators, including traffickers and employers exploiting forced labour.	Short-term	MoLE
	• Establish government-owned shelters, including facilities for adult male victims of forced labour.	Medium-term	MoDS
	• Develop consistent and standardised victim identification tools and protocols.	Short-term	MoHA

Source: Prepared by authors.

9. Equality, Non-discrimination, and Unique Community

9.1 Context

The success of gender equality in Bangladesh remains limited primarily to the higher share of female employment in the RMG industry. The continuation of this success is also at stake as different research finds a decreasing trend in the share of female employment (Moazzem & Ahmed, 2022). In fact, within the RMG industry, females have minimal representation in supervisory and managerial positions and often earn less than their male counterparts (Moazzem & Khandker, 2021). Many sectors have little employment for women (such as Tannery) due to the absence of a safe workplace (Ahmed et al., 2024). According to Yousuf (2024), 54 per cent of women see inadequate childcare as a significant obstacle to workforce participation.

Moreover, the issue of workplace harassment has been receiving less priority due to the prevalence of other issues, such as non-payment of wages, industrial disputes, and workplace safety (Moazzem & Khandker, 2021). No law at the moment targets addressing the issues directly related to workplace harassment (Moazzem & Khandker, 2021). The awareness regarding workplace harassment has also been limited (Moazzem & Khandker, 2021).

The legal framework in Bangladesh does not have any provision that penalises acts of discrimination, leaving a significant gap in addressing equality in the workplace (CPD, 2023). Also, labour law does not include any provision for ensuring equal pay for work of equal value (CPD, 2023). Discrimination also allegedly exists in many sectors, including the tea industry (CPD, 2023). For example, male tea workers receive rice rations for their wives, but female tea workers are not provided with similar rations for their husbands, resulting in unequal treatment based on gender (CPD, 2023). The training and employment opportunities to support third-gender integration into the workforce remain at a limited scale (CPD, 2023).

9.2 Recommendations

Issue	Recommendation	Type	Implementing agencies
Legal	• Introduce specific legislation addressing workplace harassment, with clear reporting mechanisms and penalties.	Short-term	MoLE
	• Amend the labour law to include provisions ensuring equal pay for equal work and penalising workplace discrimination.	Short-term	MoLE
	• Enact anti-discrimination laws applicable across all sectors.	Short-term	MoLE
	• Make necessary amendments and increase the maternity leave to six months for workers.	Short-term	MoLE
	• Make it mandatory to have at least one female doctor at workplace.	Short-term	MoLE
	• Rationalise the rest period in the law for female workers.	Short-term	MoLE
	• Make arrangement of menstrual facilities mandatory at workplace.	Medium-term	MoLE
	• Provide definition of the term night the law.	Short-term	MoLE
	• Remove the legal prerequisite number of women workers to ensure facilities like separate restrooms and daycare are accessible without barrier.	Short-term	MoLE
• Ratify the ILO Convention No 190, and reform the Bangladesh Labour Act, Bangladesh Labour Rules, Bangladesh's criminal laws on gender-based violence and strengthen the enforcement of the 2009 High Court guidelines on sexual delinquency in accordance.	Short-term	MoLE, MoFA and MoLJPA	

9.2 Recommendations (contd.)

9.2 Recommendations (contd.)

Issue	Recommendation	Type	Implementing agencies
Operational	• Enforce workplace safety standards with a focus on women to encourage their participation.	Medium-term	MoLE
	• Provide incentives to the private sector to ensure establishment of high-quality childcare services at an affordable cost.	Short-term	MoF
	• Implement mandatory gender diversity quotas in supervisory and managerial roles.	Medium-term	MoLE
	• Regularly publish data on women's participation, pay gaps, and harassment incidents to ensure transparency and accountability.	Short-term	MoLE, MoWCA
	• Introduce guideline on how to treat pregnant workers at workplace.	Short-term	MoWC, MoLE

Source: Prepared by authors.

10. Right to Work, Employment Opportunities, Assurance, Inclusion, and Others

10.1 Context

Labour law of Bangladesh undergone several revisions with latest amendments were made in the year 2018. In the meantime, Bangladesh has also adopted the Bangladesh EPZ Labour Act, 2019 applicable to the workers and employers of all industries in EPZ or zones. Despite these amendments and enactments of new legislation, gap exists in the alignment with many international standards and conventions.

Facilitating overseas worker migration and enhancing the skills of the labour force can significantly boost employment opportunities. Bangladesh still has substantial potential to improve worker skills and generate more job opportunities both locally and internationally. Despite the significant contribution of migrant workers towards the country's economy, the challenges they face are beyond description. Those challenges can be described from a multifaceted approach. Many Bangladeshi migrant workers endure exploitative working conditions, low wages, inadequate access to healthcare and basic services in destination countries, inadequate support from the consulate or embassy, non-payment or underpayment, etc, (Moazzem, Shibly & Moumita, 2023 Moazzem, Shibly & Chowdhury, 2024; Moazzem, Habib, Shibly, 2021). Many experience physical and psychological abuse and job termination. On the other hand, when they return either forcefully or voluntarily, they struggle with high wage expectations, financial problems, trauma from abuse, and negative community reactions, which further complicates their reintegration. Besides, if a worker decides to migrate, the worker needs to overcome an enormous financial burden associated with the high costs of recruitment, visa applications, medical check-ups, travel expenses, costs related to immigration and visa-related documents like passport and work permits, and hidden costs to avail those.

10.2 Recommendations (Alignment with International Practices)

Issue	Recommendation	Type	Implementing Agency
Legal	• Gradually make it mandatory for businesses to publish human rights due diligence (HRDD) reports to assess and address their actual human rights impacts.	Medium-term	MoLE and MoLJPA
	• Revise/include all the grey areas in the labour law and rules and have clear definitions and mechanism (such as definition of sexual harassment, forced labour, harassment & violence, gender based violations, mechanism regarding the calculation of maternity leave, etc.).	Short-term	MoLE
	• Create a special government fund to protect workers from human rights abuses by state-owned or state-controlled business enterprises.	Short-term	MoLE and MoLJPA
	• Encourage international brand buyers to take full responsibility for ensuring HRDD in their supply chains and incentivise their compliance through tax benefits and public recognition.	Medium-term	MoLE and MoLJPA
	• Make it mandatory for every business association to adopt a policy statement that ensures the implementation of HRDD among its members.	Short-term	MoLE and MoLJPA
	• Create more robust laws to make any kinds of discrimination in the workplace based on race, colour, sex, religion, political opinion or social background completely illegal.	Short-term	MoLJPA
Institutional	• Establish a dedicated agency for evaluating the HRDD reports to identify gaps, ensure compliance with international standards, address violations and facilitate the adoption of best practices.	Short-term	MoLE
	• Establish a national platform to provide guidance, mediate disputes, and coordinate efforts among government agencies, workers' organisations, and employers to ensure that businesses adhere to international human rights standards.	Short-term	MoLE
Operational	• Encourage multinational enterprises operating in Bangladesh to provide wages, benefits, and working conditions that are at least as favourable as those offered in their host countries.	Long-term	MoLE
	• Create incentives such as tax benefits, public recognition and preferential access to trade facilities for companies with accurate HRDD reporting.	Medium-term	MoLE, MoF

Source: Prepared by authors.

10.3 Recommendations (Migration)

Issue	Recommendation	Type	Implementing Agency
Legal	• Enact laws and regulations that ensure access to healthcare services for migrant workers, especially female workers, including maternity care, reproductive health, and mental health support.	Short-term	MoEWOE
	• Impose severe penalties on individuals or entities engaged in the sale or trading of visas.	Short-term	MoLE, MoEWOE
Institutional	• Collaborate with other labour exporting countries to negotiate better terms with destination countries that will focus on honouring the employment contract of migrant workers.	Long-term	MoFA, MoEWOE

10.3 Recommendations (Migration) (contd.)

10.3 Recommendations (Migration) (contd.)

Issue	Recommendation	Type	Implementing Agency
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a one-stop service centre for documentation and advisory services, providing guidance on visas, contracts, and legal procedures. • Create special sections in the embassies of Bangladesh in the Middle Eastern countries to assist domestic workers, who are more vulnerable to exploitation. • Create partnerships between the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET) and civil society organisations active in the destination countries to provide shelters, counselling, and legal aid to Bangladeshi workers in distress. • Increase the branches of BOESL in order to reduce the monopoly influence of BAIRA's agencies. • Establish online marketplaces and digital platforms for young women to market their local products. 	<p>Medium-term</p> <p>Medium-term</p> <p>Short-term</p> <p>Medium-term</p> <p>Medium-term</p>	<p>MoLE</p> <p>MoFA, MoEWOE</p> <p>MoEWOE</p> <p>MoLE</p> <p>Joyeeta Foundation, SME Foundation, Private Sector</p>
Operational	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make it mandatory for outgoing migrant workers to receive short training sessions to educate them about their rights, contractual obligations, and the resources available abroad. • Create additional health insurance schemes specifically for female migrant workers to ensure coverage for female-specific healthcare needs. • Set up easily accessible online channels for workers to report exploitative practices without fear of retaliation. • Allocate significant budgetary allocation to 18 related ministries and departments to address migration-related challenges. • Allocate more budgetary resources for better teaching and learning set up for language training and orientation challenges for migrant workers. • Allocate resources to address accommodation, shelter, and food challenges for migrant workers in destination countries. • Establish migration counselling centres, particularly in rural areas, to provide accurate information about overseas employment opportunities. • Improve the digital platform (Ami Probashi) to simplify access to jobs, training, migration tracking, legal information, and overseas support services for migrant workers. • Set up Government-to-Government (G2G) arrangements with destination countries to ensure that the recruitment processes are handled by government agencies who will be proactive in safeguarding labour rights. • Set and enforce maximum limits on recruitment fees and ensure all costs are transparently disclosed to workers. • Expand partnership in all trades of NSDA and BTEB with accredited international training institution (i.e., city guilds) to align technical training with global labour market demands. • Ensure transparent financial governance of migrant welfare funds managed by the Wage Earners' Welfare Board and Probashi Kalyan Bank. 	<p>Medium-term</p> <p>Medium-term</p> <p>Medium-term</p> <p>Short-term</p> <p>Medium-term</p> <p>Medium-term</p> <p>Medium-term</p> <p>Short-term</p> <p>Long-term</p> <p>Short-term</p> <p>Long-term</p> <p>Medium-term</p>	<p>MoEWOE</p> <p>MoLE</p> <p>MoLE MoIB</p> <p>MoF</p> <p>MoF</p> <p>MoF</p> <p>MoLE</p> <p>MoLE</p> <p>MoF, MoEWOE</p> <p>MoLE</p> <p>MoLE, MoEWOE</p> <p>MoF</p>

Source: Prepared by authors.

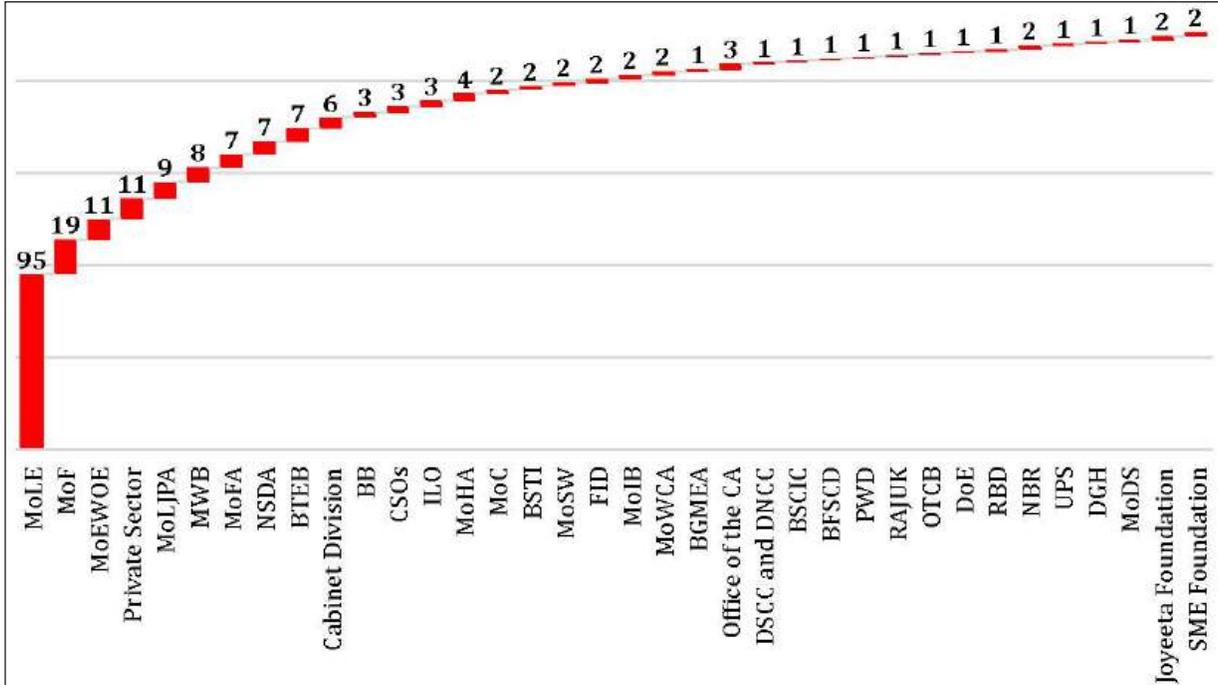
10.4 Recommendations (Skills)

Issue	Recommendation	Type	Implementing Agency
Institutional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish online marketplaces and digital platforms for young women to market their local products. 	Medium-term	Joyeeta Foundation, SME Foundation, Private Sector
Operational	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Form multi-stakeholder forums with training institutions, local government, and private sector representatives for adolescent girls and young women to provide them skill training as per the market needs. 	Medium-term	Private Sector NSDA, BTEB MoEWOE, CSOs
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Introduce foundational skills in non-traditional areas like digital literacy and STEM to expand career awareness among adolescent girls and young women alongside existing skills. 	Medium-term	NSDA BTEB MoEWOE
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop skill courses for emerging sectors that are popular among young women (aged 18-26 years), such as healthcare, freelancing, and computer training, to expose girls to high-demand, skill-intensive roles. 	Medium-term	NSDA Private Sector BTEB
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focus on high-demand technical skills in rural areas among young women (e.g., sewing, computer applications, business operations & management, supply chain management) for employment in the manufacturing and service sector. 	Medium-term	NSDA Private Sector BTEB
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strengthen agricultural training, integrating agribusiness management, eco-farming, food processing like cheese and dried fish processing, and livestock rearing. Additionally, introduce training on market integration to the young women. 	Medium-term	NSDA Private Sector BTEB
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strengthen ties between local training industries and local industries (e.g., shoe, garment, food processing, light engineering, etc.) for youth apprenticeships and direct employment opportunities. 	Medium-term	Private Sector NSDA BTEB MoEWOE
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To offer programmes on freelancing, content creation, and digital marketing to facilitate remote work opportunities through local training institutions (TTC, TVET, etc.), particularly for young women. 	Medium-term	NSDA BTEB
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encourage the destination countries of Bangladeshi migrant workers to ratify the ILO Convention No 97, in collaboration with other labour-exporting countries. 	Long-term	MoFA

Source: Prepared by authors.

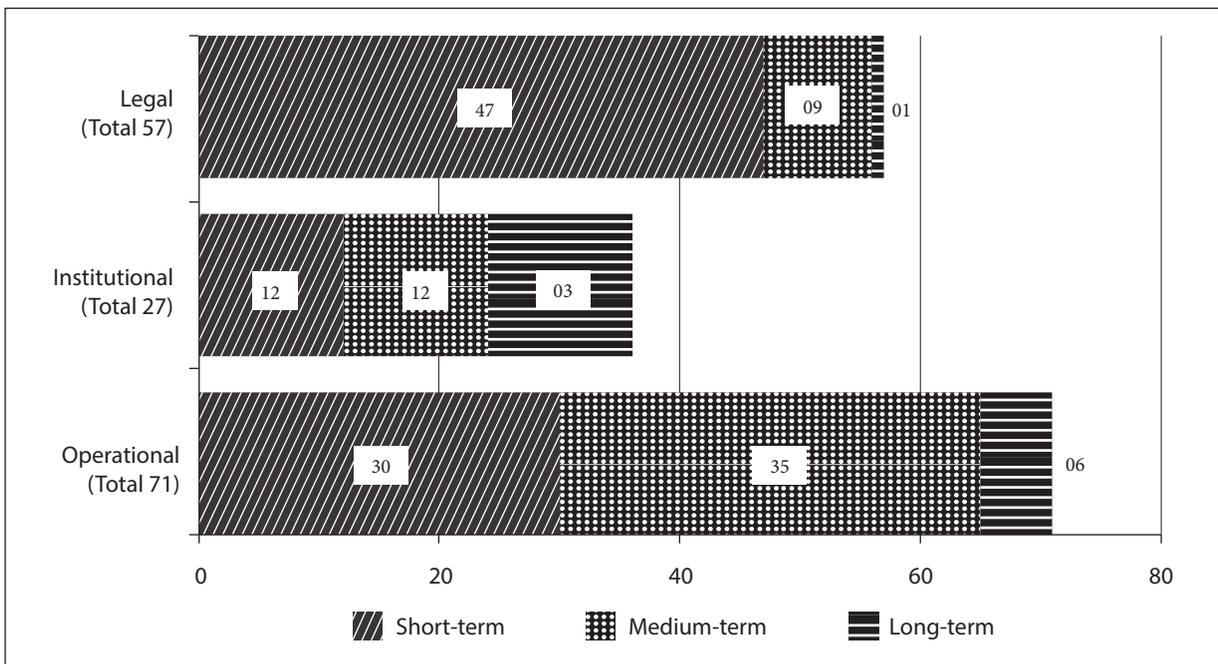
Annexure

Annex 1: Distribution of Responsibilities (Agency-wise)



Source: Prepared by authors.

Annex 2: Classification of Types of Responsibilities



Source: Prepared by authors.

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