

Strengthening Social Safety Nets for Child Labour Elimination in Bangladesh

Coverage, Gaps, and Policy Directions

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Abstract

Despite ratifying key international conventions on child labour and enacting a comprehensive domestic legal framework, Bangladesh has seen child labour rise in recent years, from an estimated 1.70 million in 2013 to 1.77 million in 2022, according to the National Child Labour Survey (NCLS) 2022 conducted by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS). This report critically examines the extent to which Bangladesh's 99 Social Safety Net Programmes (SSNPs) are aligned with the objective of eliminating child labour. Drawing on secondary data from the NCLS 2022 and primary data collected through 9 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with teachers, employers, child labourers, household members, and government officials, the report reviews Bangladesh's legal and institutional framework for child labour, assesses the coverage and design of existing safety net and non-governmental programmes, and situates Bangladesh's experience against comparative international practice from India, Pakistan, and the Philippines. The analysis finds that the current safety net architecture has not been designed around the specific dimensions along which child labour varies, namely location, age, family background, and employment, resulting in limited direct coverage of working children, particularly older adolescents and children without family support. The report proposes a multi-dimensional targeting framework and a set of recommendations for better coordinating legal, safety-net, and non-governmental interventions to accelerate progress towards Bangladesh's revised 2030 target for eliminating hazardous child labour.

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The study team remains responsible for any errors or omissions that may remain in the report. The views expressed here are those of the author(s) alone and do not necessarily reflect the views of the CPD or Educo Bangladesh.

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Acronyms

ACD	Association for Community Development
BBS	Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics
BDT	Bangladeshi Taka
BILS	Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies
BISP	Benazir Income Support Programme (Pakistan)
BLA	Bangladesh Labour Act
CCT	Conditional Cash Transfer
CEACR	Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations (ILO)
CPD	Centre for Policy Dialogue
CSPB	Child-Sensitive Social Protection in Bangladesh
DAM	Dhaka Ahsania Mission
DCLWC	Divisional Child Labour Welfare Council
DCN	Development Communication Network
DCRMF	District Child Rights Monitoring Forum
DIFE	Department of Inspection of Factories and Establishments
DSR	Dynamic Social Registry
DSS	Department of Social Services
DSWD	Department of Social Welfare and Development (Philippines)
ESDO	Eco-Social Development Organisation
GED	General Economics Division
ICPS	Integrated Child Protection Scheme (India)
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
ILO	International Labour Organization
ISPMIS	Integrated Social Protection Management Information System
KII	Key Informant Interview
MIS	Management Information System
MoF	Ministry of Finance
MoLE	Ministry of Labour and Employment
MoSW	Ministry of Social Welfare
MoWCA	Ministry of Women and Children Affairs
MPO	Monthly Pay Order
MSS	Manabik Shahajya Sangstha
NCLEP	National Child Labour Elimination Policy
NCLP	National Child Labour Project (India)
NCLS	National Child Labour Survey

NCLWC	National Child Labour Welfare Council
NCTB	National Curriculum and Textbook Board
NFE	Non-Formal Education
NFPE	Non-Formal Primary Education
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NGOAB	NGO Affairs Bureau
NID	National Identity (Card)
NPA	National Plan of Action
NSSS	National Social Security Strategy
OMS	Open Market Sale
PBM	Pakistan Bait-ul-Mal
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SRCL	Schools for Rehabilitation of Child Labour (Pakistan)
SSN	Social Safety Net
SSNP	Social Safety Net Programme
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
UCLMC	Upazila Child Labour Monitoring Committee
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
VGd	Vulnerable Group Development
VGf	Vulnerable Group Feeding
VWB	Vulnerable Women Benefit (Programme)
WASH	Water, Sanitation and Hygiene

1. Background and Objectives of the Study

Bangladesh missed its initial target of achieving Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 8.7, ending child labour by 2025 and has renewed a moderate target of eliminating hazardous forms of child labour and extending social protection for child labour by 2030. Despite significant progress in poverty reduction, expansion of education, and social protection coverage over the years, child labour remains a persistent socio-economic challenge in Bangladesh. According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS, 2022a), there are approximately 3.5 million working children, of whom around 1.77 million are identified as child labourers and nearly 1.07 million children are exposed to hazardous work, which adversely affects their health, safety, education, and overall future development. More strikingly, child labour, especially the hazardous form of child labour, has increased in recent years, indicating the failure of different policy initiatives and institutional and operational measures undertaken over the years.

Bangladesh's recent record in adopting various child-supportive UN and ILO conventions is commendable and Bangladesh has ratified the key international conventions, including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989), ILO Convention No. 138 on Minimum Age (1973), and ILO Convention No. 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour (1999), which shows the country's commitment to the prevention of child labour and protection of children's rights. Several policy and legal frameworks have been adopted at the national level as well, such as the Bangladesh Labour Act (2006, amended in 2018), the National Child Labour Elimination Policy (2010), the Children Act (2013), and the National Plan of Action on the Elimination of Child Labour (2012-2025). Although these policies emphasise child protection, education, and social safety, there are many significant gaps, and the implementation of the policies is also weak and inconsistent (Bhuiyan, 2021).

The potential of Social Safety Net Programmes (SSNPs) to contribute to reducing child labour could not be utilised because child labour is not technically endorsed as a category for social protection under the SSNPs. Under the life-cycle approach, SSNPs cover school-aged children (5-18 years), which are not designed to prevent child labour. Insufficient coverage of child-sensitive SSNPs continues to undermine the efforts to eliminate child labour. Overall, persistent gaps in policies, institutional and operational measures keep child labour widespread in Bangladesh.

Against this backdrop, the study aims to develop an evidence-based policy proposal to assess the extent to which existing SSNPs are aligned with child labour elimination objectives and to identify actionable reforms to strengthen social protection for families with child labourers. The specific objectives of the study are:

- a) To review existing SSNPs and identify gaps in coverage, targeting, financing, and delivery;
- b) To propose recommendations to expand or improve safety nets to reduce household dependence on child labour; and
- c) To ensure alignment with national frameworks (NSSS 2015, Child Labour National Plan 2021-2025) and international commitments (ILO Conventions 138 & 182, CRC, SDGs 1.3 & 8.7).

2. Data and Methodology

2.1 Data Sources

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, using secondary quantitative data with primary qualitative insights to assess the alignment of existing SSNPs with the objectives of eliminating child labour in Bangladesh.

Secondary data were collected from nationally representative survey data and their reports. The principal quantitative dataset is drawn from the *Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) 2022* published by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS, 2022b) and the National Child Labour Survey (NCLS) 2022. HIES provides nationally representative information on children's economic activities, household characteristics, poverty status, education, and access to social protection, which are essential for analysing the socio-economic drivers of child labour and household vulnerability, whereas NCLS provide trends in the number of child labourers by age and gender. In addition, administrative and institutional data were reviewed from the *Annual Reports (2014-2024)* of the Department of Inspection of Factories and Establishments (DIFE), which provide insights into trends in child labour inspection, enforcement efforts, and sectoral risks, particularly in formal and semi-formal work settings.

Relevant policy documents, laws, strategies, and programme guidelines related to SSNPs, child labour, and child protection were also reviewed to contextualise the quantitative findings and identify policy and implementation gaps.

Primary data were collected through a series of Key Informant Interviews (KIIs). The KIIs were conducted with a diverse group of stakeholders, including teachers, employers, programme implementers, child labourers, household members of child labourers, and senior government officials from relevant ministries and departments. These interviews provided qualitative insights into household decision-making, working conditions of child labourers, access to and exclusion from SSNPs, and institutional challenges in addressing child labour.

2.2 Sampling and Scope of Key Informant Interviews

A total of 9 KIIs were conducted, covering the following categories: (a) teachers from ESDO School (Bridge 3); (b) employers and owners in the informal sector (scrap shop and leguna (human hauler) transport sector); (c) ESDO programme staff working directly with child labourers; (d) a child labourer engaged as a leguna (human hauler) driver; (e) a household member of a child labourer; officials from key government institutions, including: (f) DIFE, (g) Ministry of Labour and Employment; (h) Department of Social Services, (i) Ministry of Social Welfare; (j) Ministry of Planning. The KIIs followed semi-structured guidelines focusing on pathways into child labour, household vulnerability, working conditions, social protection access, programme limitations, and policy coordination challenges.

3. Structural Characteristics and Trends of Child Labour in Bangladesh

This section describes how child labour has changed over time and how it differs by age, gender, location, education, and type of work, based on data from the BBS. Such an analysis will help to understand structural features of child labour, especially its multi-dimensional aspects, which are often over-generalised by describing it as an outcome of 'poverty'. A multi-dimensional analysis of child labour enables the identification of areas of effective intervention to address the cause of child labour.

The tables that follow are organised around four such dimensions: location, age, family background, and employment. These same four dimensions are used later in this report, in Section 8, to set out how legal provisions, Safety Net Programmes, and NGO-led interventions should be targeted; the descriptive patterns established here therefore provide the evidence base for that later discussion.

3.1 Trends in Child Labour Population: Who Is Working, and How Many

Distinction between working children and child labour: According to the BBS, working children are all children aged 5-17 who do any kind of economic work, whether paid or unpaid. This can include light

work or helping family members, as long as it does not harm the child's health, safety, or education. Child labour, however, is a smaller group within working children and refers to work that is harmful or illegal for children. A child is considered a child labourer if they are too young to work, work for long hours, or are involved in dangerous or hazardous jobs that affect their health, safety, or schooling. In short, all child labourers are working children, but not all working children are child labourers.

Share of Children and Share of Total Population: As shown in Table 1 Child labour has increased over the last decade, both in the number of children as well as the share of total population. Between 2013 and 2022, the total number of working children aged 5 to 17 years increased from 3.4 million to 3.5 million, while the share of total children rose from 8.7 per cent to 8.9 per cent. However, the share of working children in terms of the total population has decreased during the same comparable period, from 2.2 per cent to 2.08 per cent, because of the slow growth of children (0.1 per cent per year) compared to the overall growth of the total population (1.1 per cent). In other words, a lower share of working children in the total population is more likely to be influenced by having a lower number of children in the family.

Categories of Working Children: Working children are equally distributed into two broad categories, (a) Children not in child labour who usually work with families; and (b) Children in child labour who usually work outside their families' work. Strikingly, children involved in child labour (b) have grown faster over the last decade (2013-2022), indicating that children's engagement within their families as workers would not be sufficient to meet their families' or personal needs in other ways; families were unable to keep their children out of work because of family needs.

Children working as child labour are labelled in two categories: (a) hazardous child labour and (b) non-hazardous child labour. Over 60 per cent of child labour in 2022 is termed as the 'hazardous' category, while the remaining 40 per cent are called 'non-hazardous'. One positive note over the last decade, both the number and share of hazardous child labour have declined. Despite the fact that the majority of child labour still belongs to the hazardous category, which portrays both a demand-side pressure of earning relatively more and a supply-side pressure of employing children at much below the market wage rate. Shifting child labour towards the non-hazardous category does not portray a positive development either, as such engagement keeps children out of school and normal childhood activities. Since engagement in non-hazardous work usually does not happen because of families' or

Table 1 Comparison of Child Labour Indicators Between 2013 and 2022

Indicators	2013	2022	Average Annual Growth Rate
Total population	154,145,734	169,828,911	1.1
Children aged 5-17 years	39,652,384	39,964,005	0.1
A. Not working children	36,202,015	37,026,443	0.3
B. Working children	3,450,369	3,536,927	0.3
a) Not in child labour	1,751,475	1,760,830	0.1
b) Child labour	1,698,894	1,776,097	0.5
i) Hazardous Child labour	1,280,195	1,068,212	-1.8
ii) Non-hazardous child labour	418,699	707,885	7.7
Proportion of Working children	8.70 per cent	8.90 per cent	-
Proportion of Child labour	4.30 per cent	4.40 per cent	-
Proportion of Hazardous Child Labour	3.20 per cent	2.70 per cent	-

Source: (BBS, 2022).

employers' interest, rather than changing the socio-economic context, interventions addressing child labour should get equal importance.

3.2 Age and the Lifecycle of Child Labour

Age distribution: Child labour follows an age pattern in the following three categories: (a) *younger children*: between 5-11 years; (b) *early adolescents*: 12-13 years; and (c) *older adolescents*: 14-17 years.

Table 2 Distribution of Child Labour Indicators by Age Group

Indicators	5-11 years	12-13 years	14-17 years	Total
Children aged 5-17 years	22,062,009	6,279,178	11,622,265	39,963,453
Number of working children	660,500	585,592	2,290,835	3,536,927
Number of child labour	609,408	247,444	919,245	1,776,097
Number of hazardous child labour	47,821	101,146	919,245	1,068,212
Work Statistics				
Volunteer work	243,898	141,103	435,047	820,048
Employment work	216,597	324,406	1,703,904	2,244,907
Own-use production work	341,226	256,219	535,964	1,133,409
Apprentice work	102,677	4,967	50,967	158,612
Share				
Proportion of working children	3	9.3	19.7	8.9
Proportion of child labour	2.8	3.9	7.9	4.4
Proportion of hazardous child labour	0.2	1.6	7.9	2.7

Source: (BBS, 2022).

According to Table 2, out of 39.9 million children, 55 per cent are in the age group of 5-11 years; 15.7 per cent are in the age group of 12-13 years, and the remaining 29.1 per cent are in the age group of 14-17 years. Among those categories, the highest number of working children is found in the 14-17 years old age group (19.7 per cent), followed by 12-13 years (9.3 per cent) and 5-11 years (3 per cent). In case of engagement in hazardous child labour, the ratio is the highest among the 14-17 years age group (7.9 per cent). Most of the children are involved in volunteering, own-use production, and employment work. Younger children (5-11 years) primarily engage in own-use and volunteer work, with only 3 per cent working and 0.2 per cent in hazardous tasks. Early adolescents (12-13 years) see a rise in working children (9.3 per cent) and child labour (3.9 per cent), including some hazardous exposure (1.6 per cent). Older adolescents (14-17 years) are the most affected, with 19.7 per cent working, 7.9 per cent in child labour, and 7.9 per cent in hazardous work, mainly in employment and apprenticeship roles. Overall, identification and use of appropriate SSNP instruments are needed to understand children in different age categories.

Gender Gaps in Child Labour and Underreporting: As shown in Table 3, there is a striking dimension regarding the gender and marital status of child labour. According to BBS (2022), male working children are 2.7 million, while female working children are 0.8 million; in other words, over three-fourths of working children are male, while less than one-fourth are female. Among the working children, 'male' child labour is 1.3 million and female child labour is 0.4 million. In case of hazardous child labour, male children are engaged in 0.89 million, while female children are engaged in 0.17 million. Overall, male children are reported to be significantly more involved in different forms of child labour compared to female child labour.

Table 3 Distribution of Child Labour by Gender

Indicators	Male	Female	Total
Population	84,062,404	85,756,752	169,828,911
Children aged 5-17 years	20,698,077	19,265,375	39,964,005
Working Children	2,734,044	802,883	3,536,927
Child Labour	1,374,154	401,943	1,776,097
Hazardous Child Labour	895,195	173,017	1,068,212

Source: (BBS, 2022).

This apparent distinction of fewer female child labourers may falsely imply that females are ‘out of risk’ of being child labour more in number. Such a situation can be explained in a number of ways: (a) boys are more likely to work in physically demanding and risky jobs; (b) girls often do unpaid domestic work that is not properly counted in official statistics; and (c) many girls also leave the labour force early because of child marriage, even though they continue to work inside the house.¹ Within the smaller number of female child labour, about 4.8 per cent are married, while a share are widowed and divorced. The share of married male children is only 0.5 per cent (Table 4).

Table 4 Marital & Locality Status of Child Labour by Gender

Indicators		Female	Male	Total
Marital status	Currently married	4.8	0.5	2.6
	Never married	94.9	99.5	97.3
	Widowed	0.1	0.1	0.1
	Divorced	0.2	0	0.1
	Total	100	100	100
Rural-Urban Status	Rural	48.5	49.3	48.9
	Urban	51.5	50.7	51.1
	Total	100	100	100

Source: (BBS, 2022).

Overall, addressing child labour in the case of female children needs to be approached from a different perspective, considering their marital status as well as engagement outside the formal labour market, particularly in family help, which also keeps them out of school and childhood activities.

Lack of proper age-verification methods and instruments to be applied in the formal labour market may underreport child labour. In many cases girls’ ages are deliberately increased in official records to show them as adults. As a result, married girls are often excluded from child labour statistics, even though they continue to perform heavy domestic or family work. This practice impedes the actual intersection between child labour and child marriage and weakens enforcement and protection efforts.

3.3 Locality: Rural–Urban and District Disparities

Rural-urban divide: Child labour is not a rural phenomenon; as shown in Table 4, it is proportionately high in urban areas (51.1 per cent of total child labour, 2022). A higher number of female child marriage and their underreporting as child labour, mainly in rural areas perhaps be the reasons for the lower share of child labour in rural areas. Urban-based child labour is mainly prevalent in informal service-sector

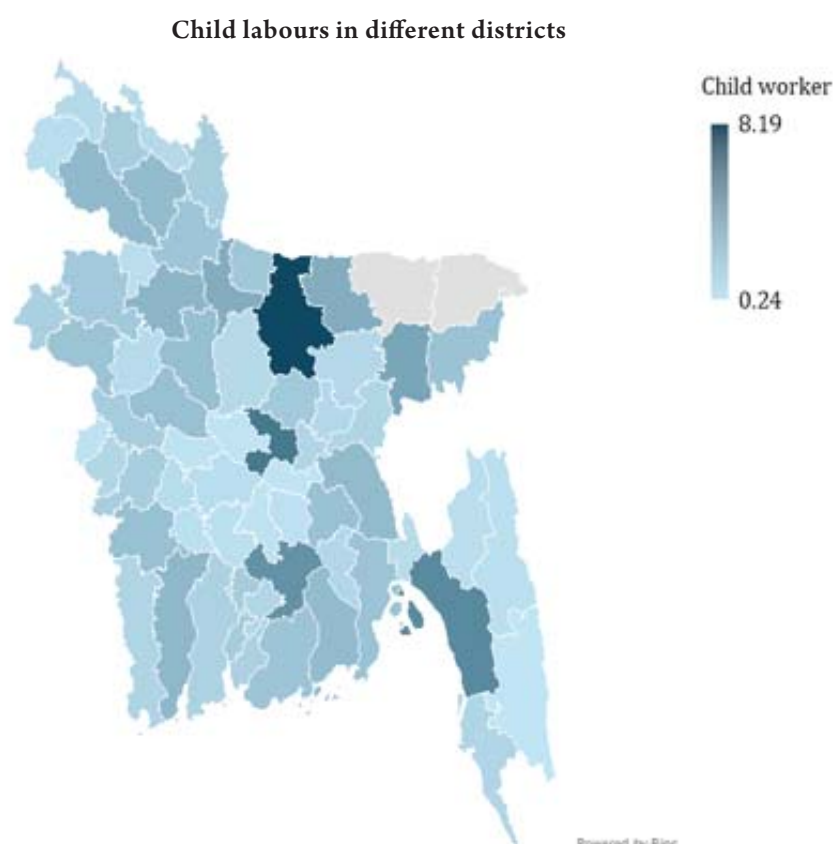
¹ Although the reported percentages are low, this likely indicates a consistent pattern of underreporting, as child marriage remains prevalent in Bangladesh and is often concealed through the falsification of legal documents, particularly by inflating a girl’s age to 18 years.

activities such as domestic work, small workshops, street vending, and scrap collection. These types of works are often hidden and unregulated, making child labour harder to detect. Hence, proper reporting of child labour in both rural and urban areas and their place of stay is very important to undertake effective social protection activities.

Spatial Dimension: There is substantial spatial variation in child labour across Bangladesh. As Figure 1 shows, Mymensingh District records the highest proportion of child workers (8.19 per cent), indicating a particularly acute child labour situation. This is followed by Dhaka District (5.74 per cent) and Chattogram District (4.85 per cent). Several districts in the Mymensingh, Barisal, and Chattogram divisions show elevated levels of child labour, including Barisal (4.41 per cent), Habiganj (3.44 per cent), Jamalpur and Netrokona (3 per cent each). Many districts fall within the moderate range (approximately 1.5-2.5 per cent), such as Bogra, Khulna, Dinajpur, Comilla, Bhola, and Rangpur. Districts with lower prevalence (below 1 per cent), including Narayanganj, Munshiganj, Manikganj, Madaripur, and Bandarban, should not be interpreted as the absence of child labour; rather, they may also reflect under-reporting or the hidden nature of child labour, particularly in domestic work and informal settings. Notably, Sunamganj and Sylhet districts show missing values, which point to potential data gaps or reporting limitations. It is important to review how the government's current SSNPs targeting children and their families are spatially matched with the prevalence of child labour; otherwise, the impact of such intervention would be minimal for the benefit of children.

School Attendance and the Work–Education Trade-off: Working children are largely deprived of attending school (Table 5) compared to the national average of children (39.3 per cent vs. 12.9 per cent). Children

Figure 1 District-wise Percentage Distribution of Child Workers



Source: Prepared by authors based on BBS (2022).

working in hazardous work are significantly deprived of attending school (66.5 per cent). There is a sharp contrast in attendance in terms of the types of work children do—the highest share of children not attending school is those working under an employment contract, 54 per cent, followed by those working under own-use production work (14.4 per cent). Overall, school attendance by working children faces a high barrier because of engagement in work during school time. Given children's legal right to get an education, necessary mechanisms need to be found to ensure access to proper education for working children.

Table 5 Child Labour Indicators at National Levels by School Attendance Status

Indicators	Currently attending school	Currently not attending school	Total
Children aged 5-17 years	34,805,194	5,158,811	39,964,005
Number of working children	2,147,377	1,389,550	3,536,927
Number of child labour	927,048	849,049	1,776,097
Number of hazardous child labour	357,501	710,710	1,068,212
Volunteer work	765,917	54,131	820,048
Employment work	1,032,100	1,212,807	2,244,907
Own-use production work	970,551	162,858	1,133,409
Apprentice work	144,726	13,885	158,612

Source: (BBS, 2022).

3.4 Education and Sectoral Concentration

Sectoral Concentration of Child Work: As shown in Table 6, most child labour in Bangladesh takes place in the industry and service sectors - about 66.6 per cent of industrial and 44.4 per cent of service-sector children are engaged in child labour, compared to 38.8 per cent in agriculture. Although many children also work in agriculture, much of this work involves helping their families. In contrast, children in industry and services are more likely to be formally employed and exposed to hazardous work. Hazardous child labour is most prevalent in industry (54.7 per cent of working children), followed by the service sector (29.9 per cent), while it is relatively rare in agriculture (3.3 per cent). Overall, child labour is widely

Table 6 Distribution of Child Labour Indicators by Broad Economic Sectors

Indicators	Agriculture	Industry	Service	Total
Working children	1,079,559	1,191,806	1,270,431	3,541,796
Number of child labour	418,638	793,653	563,806	1,776,097
Number of hazardous child labour	35,894	652,453	379,865	1,068,212
Share				
Proportion of child labour	38.8	66.6	44.4	50.1
Proportion of hazardous child labour	3.3	54.7	29.9	30.2
Work Statistics				
Volunteer work	-	-	1,576	1,576
Employment work	294,822	983,690	966,394	2,244,907
Own-use production work	752,587	141,375	239,447	1,133,409
Apprentice work	32,150	65,354	61,108	158,612

Source: (BBS, 2022).

dispersed across sectors and is not concentrated in a single sector, though it is more prevalent in the industrial sector.

Unpaid family work: In addition to paid work, millions of children help their families through unpaid household tasks such as collecting water and fuel, preparing food, building houses, and making handicrafts (Table 7). Girls usually spend more time on domestic work, while boys are more involved in fuel collection and similar activities. Although these tasks do not bring income, they take up many hours and reduce children's time for school, rest, and play. These responsibilities also reflect strong gender roles that place heavier burdens on girls from a young age.

On average, children spend modest hours on tasks such as food preparation (around 3 hours), house construction (3.1 hours), and the collection of fuel and water (approximately 2.8-3.3 hours). Although this work is not income-generating, it is essential for the functioning and survival of many families. At the same time, such responsibilities can limit children's time for schooling, learning, and recreation, and reflect a gendered division of household labour that places greater domestic burdens on girls from a young age. These patterns highlight the need to consider household contributions when addressing child labour and designing interventions to protect children's rights and education. Considering the importance of childhood development, it is important to find out ways and means for children to have free time by

Table 7 Distribution of Number of Children Engaged in Additional Own-use Work in the Last 7 Days (not economically significant)

Indicators	Male	Female	Total
Collection of forest food [mushrooms, berries, herbs, etc.]	235,259	210,078	445,338
Hunting or related task for own consumption	315,610	141,098	456,708
Helping to prepare and preserve food or beverages	852,794	738,854	1,591,649
Participate/assist in house construction, renovation, or expansion	1,051,919	547,325	1,599,245
Spend some time making products like mats, baskets, furniture, clothes, etc.	275,232	872,634	1,147,866
Collecting water from any natural or public sources	612,301	1,003,707	1,616,008
Collection of any fuel wood/other natural materials of fuel to use as fuel	2,304,434	1,310,990	3,615,424
Other activities	439,451	375,583	815,035
Total	6,087,000	5,200,269	11,287,273
Average hours worked in the last 7 days			
Collection of forest food [mushrooms, berries, herbs, etc.]	2.5	2.8	2.6
Hunting or related task for own consumption	2.1	2.2	2.1
Helping to prepare and preserve food or beverages	3.3	2.7	3
Participate/assist in house construction, renovation, or expansion	3.3	2.7	3.1
Spend some time making products like mats, baskets, Furniture, clothes, etc.	2.7	3.2	3.1
Collecting water from any natural or public sources	2.6	2.9	2.8
Collection of any fuel wood/other natural materials of fuel to use as fuel	3.5	2.9	3.3
Other activities	5.9	9.9	7.2

Source: (BBS, 2022).

reducing working hours.

4. Legal and Institutional Framework for Child Labour Elimination

Bangladesh has introduced several laws, policies, and action plans to protect children from labour and to ensure their safety, education, and well-being. On paper, these legal and policy commitments show a strong intention. However, many children, especially those working in informal sectors, remain outside the protection of these policies and laws (Hoque, 2024). This section reviews existing legal rules related to child labour and compares them with what is happening on the ground.

Bangladesh's treaty commitments are more recent than the national legal framework alone suggests. While Convention No. 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour was ratified in 2001, Bangladesh ratified ILO Convention No. 138 on Minimum Age only on 22 March 2022, becoming the 174th ILO member state to do so (ILO, 2022b). The International Labour Organization's Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations (CEACR), an independent supervisory body drawn from legal experts across all regions, has separately compiled its observations and direct requests on Bangladesh's implementation of Conventions No. 138 and No. 182, offering an external and comparatively neutral benchmark against which the national measures reviewed below can be assessed (ILO, 2024). Placed in global context, the International Labour Organization and UNICEF estimated that some 160 million children worldwide were in child labour as of 2020, meaning Bangladesh's approximately 1.77 million child labourers represent a small but persistent share of a global problem that has itself proven resistant to elimination targets (ILO & UNICEF, 2021).

4.1 For Protection of Children Under 10

Primary Education (Compulsory) Act, 1990: Bangladesh has adopted several laws and policies to protect very young children—including children under 10—from labour. The Primary Education (Compulsory) Act, 1990, makes primary education mandatory for children aged 6-10 years and prohibits any work that interferes with school attendance. The law also includes penalties for parents or committee members who fail to ensure children attend school.

Bangladesh Labour Act, 2006 (amended in 2018): The Act clearly bans the employment of children under 14 years of age. This is supported by the National Child Labour Elimination Policy (NCLEP), 2010, which also defines a child as under 14 and aims to eliminate all forms of child labour. To support these commitments, the government adopted the National Plan of Action (NPA), which has recently extended its target timeline to 2025.

Domestic Workers' Welfare and Protection Policy, 2015: The policy states that children under 14 should not be employed as domestic workers. At the international level, Bangladesh has ratified ILO Convention No. 138, which sets the minimum age for employment at 15 years, while allowing developing countries to use 14 years under specific conditions.

Major Gaps: Despite these rules, major gaps remain. The penalties under the Primary Education Act are extremely low, a fine of up to BDT 200, which is not strong enough to stop violations. Enforcement is also weak. The Labour Act mainly applies to the formal sector and does not effectively cover informal or domestic work, where most child labour occurs. At the same time, the Domestic Workers' Policy allows children aged 12 to work under special conditions, which directly contradicts the Labour Act and NCLEP that ban work below 14 years. Another serious gap is the lack of connection between education and labour laws. While the Primary Education Act makes schooling compulsory only up to age 10, children aged 11-14 are not covered by mandatory education. This leaves them highly exposed

to child labour (Bhuiyan, 2021).

According to the National Child Labour Survey (2022), 34 per cent of working children are under 10 years of age. Studies show that children as young as 8 years are working, including in hazardous conditions. Many children under 10 years are employed in domestic work, where they often work long hours for little or no pay (BILS, 2021). Therefore, because of weak enforcement and unclear policies, children under 10 remain largely unprotected by existing laws.

4.2 Provisions on Hazardous Work and Observed Child Involvement

Bangladesh has adopted several legal and policy measures to prohibit children's involvement in hazardous work.

Labour Act, 2006 (amended in 2018): The Act clearly states that adolescents under the age of 18 are not allowed to work in hazardous occupations. To support this, the government has prepared an official list of 43 hazardous activities (GoB, 2022).

National Child Labour Elimination Policy (NCLEP), 2010: The Policy further strengthens this rule by completely banning children from hazardous and worst forms of labour. These commitments are also reflected in the National Plan of Action (NPA) 2021-2025, which includes specific measures to remove children from dangerous and harmful work.

ILO Convention No. 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour (1999): At the international level, Bangladesh has ratified two important conventions. Through these conventions, Bangladesh has committed to eliminating hazardous child labour for all persons under 18 years of age. The convention defines the worst forms of child labour to include slavery, forced labour, child trafficking, prostitution, involvement in illegal activities such as drug-related work, and any work that harms a child's health, safety, or morals.

Major gaps: Despite these strong legal commitments, enforcement remains weak and is mostly limited to the formal sector. As a result, many children working in informal sectors are not protected by these laws. Field-level evidence shows that children are engaged in risky work such as leguna (human hauler) driving, domestic work, and scrap collection, often in unsafe and unhealthy conditions. In scrap shops, children usually work two to three hours a day, earn much less than adults, and frequently suffer from injuries, skin diseases, and other health problems. Children working in the transport sector also face serious safety risks due to the lack of supervision, training, and licensing.

Another major gap is that the official list of 43 hazardous activities does not include several high-risk sectors such as domestic work, shrimp farming, and brick kilns, even though many children are known to work in these areas (Bhuiyan, 2021). As a result, many working children remain outside the legal protection framework.

4.3 Minimum Age Provisions and Observed Labour Market Participation

Labour Act, 2006 (amended in 2018): According to the Act, children under 14 years are not allowed to work in any occupation. Adolescents aged 14 to under 18 are allowed to work only in non-hazardous jobs, and any form of hazardous work is strictly prohibited for anyone under 18. Adolescents may engage in 'light work' only if they have a health certificate issued by an authorised doctor.

National Child Labour Elimination Policy (NCLEP), 2010: The policy follows a similar approach. It defines children as those under 14 years and adolescents as those aged 14 to under 18. The policy bans all work for children under 14 and prohibits adolescents from working in hazardous jobs. However,

this definition differs from the Children Act, 2013, which considers anyone under 18 to be a child, creating some inconsistency across laws.

ILO Convention No. 138 (Minimum Age Convention, 1973): At the international level, Bangladesh has ratified the Minimum Age Convention. This convention requires the minimum age for employment to be at least 15 years and sets 18 years as the minimum age for hazardous work.

Gaps: Although these laws and policies clearly define the minimum working age and types of work allowed, enforcement remains weak. As a result, many adolescents continue to work in risky and dangerous jobs, particularly in informal and high-risk sectors where monitoring is limited.

4.4 Minimum Wage Provisions, Restrictions on Nightshift Work and Observed Compliance

The Bangladesh Labour Act mandates employers to pay wages to all workers, including adolescents aged 14 to 18. The Wage Board can set minimum wages for different industries. The Bangladesh Labour Act also bans children under 18 from working night shifts, which are considered to be between 10:00 PM and 6:00 AM. This rule applies to all types of work, both formal and informal.

However, these rules are often not properly enforced, especially in informal sectors where most adolescents work. Because of this, many adolescents earn less than the legal minimum or sometimes receive no pay at all. This problem is especially common in informal industries, domestic work, and small workshops, where adolescents often work long hours for very low wages. Nevertheless, enforcement is weak, and many children still work at night. Night work is particularly common in domestic work, transport jobs like leguna or auto driving, and small informal industries.

4.5 Enforcement Practice of Child Labour Laws

As discussed in a report by Development Communication Network (2025), several institutions in Bangladesh are officially responsible for enforcing laws and coordinating actions to prevent child labour.

National Child Labour Welfare Council (NCLWC): At the national level, the National Child Labour Welfare Council (NCLWC), under the Ministry of Labour and Employment (MoLE), leads the fight against child labour. It coordinates the implementation of the National Plan of Action (NPA) and tracks progress across ministries and stakeholders.

Department of Inspection of Factories and Establishments (DIFE) and other enforcement agencies: DIFE, labour courts, and the police are responsible for ensuring that employers follow child labour-related laws and act when rules are not complied with.

Divisional Child Labour Welfare Council (DCLWC): At the divisional level, the Divisional Child Labour Welfare Council (DCLWC) supports the NPA by coordinating activities in divisions and monitoring progress in districts.

District Child Rights Monitoring Forum (DCRMF): Meanwhile, the District Child Rights Monitoring Forum (DCRMF), under the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs (MoWCA), monitors child rights and child labour at the district level. It brings together government agencies, NGOs, employers, and workers to support reporting and referral systems.

Upazila Child Labour Monitoring Committee (UCLMC): At the local level, the Upazila Child Labour Monitoring Committee (UCLMC) tracks child labour in upazilas, reports violations, and connects local efforts with district and national bodies. DIFE is primarily responsible for enforcing the labour law,

which inspects workplaces and identifies child labour in formal workplaces and some hazardous sectors. The Bangladesh Police also enforce penal laws related to child protection, such as cases of forced labour, trafficking, and exploitation.

Gaps: Despite having these institutions, their effectiveness is limited. Many officials lack awareness of child labour laws and policies, and there is little regular training, clear guidance, or accountability. This creates confusion about roles and responsibilities, particularly at the local level (Khan, 2021).

Data from inspections and criminal cases provide insight into how enforcement works and the challenges faced. Information on case settlements is available only from FY2022 onward, and the results show very limited progress. As shown in Table 8, in FY2022, only 24 child labour cases were settled. This number fell to 7 cases in FY2023 and dropped further to just 3 cases in FY2024. This large gap between cases filed and cases resolved shows serious weaknesses in legal enforcement and questions the effectiveness of laws as a deterrent.

Table 8 Criminal Cases and Labour Law Violations Detected

Fiscal Year	Filing Criminal Cases for violations				Labour law violations detected through inspections	
	Child Labour Number	Total Labour Cases Filed	Child Labour Case Settlement	Total Labour Settled Cases	Employment of Children & Adolescents	Total
FY2016	90	1304	-	-	849	79,212
FY2017	62	1,273	-	-	2,058	100,336
FY2018	34	1,689	-	-	1,234	116,618
FY2019	41	1,370	-	-	-	-
FY2020	40	1667	-	-	-	-
FY2021	98	1421	-	-	-	-
FY2022	50	1,426	24	682	-	-
FY2023	25	1148	7	495	-	-
FY2024	36	1403	3	551	-	-

Source: (DIFE, n.d.).

Workplace inspections reveal a broader picture of the problem. In FY2016, inspections revealed over 79,000 cases of child and adolescent employment, increasing to over 116,000 in FY2018. Even though later years' data are incomplete, these numbers indicate that child labour remains widespread, especially in informal and high-risk sectors.

The enforcement process happens as follows: (a) the DIFE receives complaints or identifies violations during inspections; (b) when a violation is found, DIFE issues a notice to the employer, directing them to comply with labour standards; (c) if the employer ignores the notice, the case is referred to labour courts or other judicial authorities for formal prosecution. While inspections detect many violations, only a small portion moves into the legal system.

DIFE has also targeted high-risk sectors to reduce child labour, identifying industries like workshops, jute mills, bakeries, and hotels, and declaring some, such as tanneries, shrimp, and garments, child labour-free (Table 9). Despite this progress, child labour still exists in many areas, highlighting the need for stronger enforcement, regular monitoring, and follow-up.

Table 9 Child Labour Interventions by Sector

Time Period	Purpose of Mention	Sectors
2014-2018	Sectors surveyed for identification and withdrawal of child labour under Bangladesh Labour Act 2006	Engineering workshop; Automobile workshop/lathe machine; Jute mill; Gold, imitation jewellery and bangle factories; vulcanising
2019 (FY 2020 initiation)	Priority sectors selected for targeted eradication of child labour	Engineering workshop; Bakery; Plastic; Hotel and restaurant
2020	Sectors proposed for inclusion in the list of hazardous work for children	Dry fish processing; Street-based work; Stone collection, carrying and crushing; Informal tailoring and clothing; Garbage picking and waste disposal; Child domestic work
2021	Sectors officially declared child labour-free	Tannery; Glass; Ceramic; Ship recycling; Export-oriented leather goods and footwear; Silk; Shrimp; Garment
2021 (Proposal stage)	Sectors proposed to be declared child labour-free	Pharmaceuticals; Cold storage; Power generation (power station); Cement; Fish hatchery and poultry hatchery

Source: (DIFE, n.d.).

5. Critical Review of Social Safety Net Programmes

5.1 National Social Security Strategy (NSSS) of Bangladesh

The National Social Security Strategy (NSSS) of Bangladesh provides the framework for the country's social protection programmes, including measures that indirectly impact children and child labour.

The 2015 NSSS identified that child labour is closely linked to poverty and school dropout. Economic hardship was recognised as a major reason why children leave school and enter the workforce. At that time, about 17.5 per cent of children aged 5-17 were engaged in child labour. A higher prevalence of child labour was among boys and older children, indicating that vulnerability increases with age. There was a significant impact of education incentives like the Female Secondary Stipend Programme in reducing child labour among girls (GED, 2015).

The policy focus of NSSS 2015 was largely education- and child-centred, aiming to strengthen school stipends, school meal programmes, and support for abandoned children. However, child labour was treated indirectly, as a consequence of poverty, rather than through programmes specifically designed to prevent or address it.

The NSSS therefore sits alongside, rather than inside, the legal and regulatory framework reviewed in Section 4. Where the Labour Act 2006, the hazardous work list, and the National Child Labour Elimination Policy set out what is prohibited and who is protected, successive NSSS Action Plans have determined how social protection resources are actually allocated. The extent to which these two pillars, legal prohibition and social protection financing, have been designed together is examined further in Sections 5.6 and 8.

2016-2021 Action Plan: Moving forward, the Action Plan mainly focused on scaling up existing child-focused programmes. The key interventions included primary and secondary school stipends, immunisation, nutrition, and school feeding programmes. The plan also proposed a Child Benefit Scheme and maintenance support for abandoned children (GED, 2022).

During this period, public investment increased stipend coverage, helping more children remain in school. While these efforts were important, the focus remained largely on education-linked support, and child labour reduction was still being addressed indirectly through improving household income and school access.

2021-2026 Action Plan: Focused on strengthening systems and improving efficiency within social protection programmes. Key initiatives included the establishment of a Single Registry MIS to better track beneficiaries, the expansion of G2P cash transfers and education-linked interventions such as school stipends and school meals, and the strengthening of grievance redress mechanisms to address complaints and errors. Despite these efforts, monitoring continued to focus mainly on outputs, like coverage and disbursement, rather than on actual child labour outcomes. Additionally, conditionalities such as attendance and academic performance were weakly enforced, limiting the programmes' effectiveness in keeping vulnerable children in school and preventing them from entering work.

Action Plan 2026: Discussions at the National Conference on Social Protection 2025 indicate that the upcoming plan will place greater emphasis on strengthening institutional arrangements and expanding the social allowance system. Key priorities include the consolidation and digitisation of benefits to improve targeting and reduce duplication, the expansion of the Child Benefit Programme for children aged 0-18 years with gradually increasing benefits, and the consolidation of elderly, widow, and disability allowances to streamline support. The plan also emphasises investments in digital systems, such as the Dynamic Social Registry (DSR) and ISPMIS, to enhance eligibility verification and coordination across ministries, including MoSW, MoWCA, MoLE, and the Ministry of Health.

Over the years, the NSSS has made good progress in strengthening social protection, expanding education-related support, and improving monitoring and coordination. However, child labour is still only addressed indirectly, and many of the most vulnerable children are left out, especially those who are out of school, working in informal urban jobs, or from migrant families.

5.2 Structure and Composition of Safety Net Programmes

The Social Safety Net system in Bangladesh is designed using a life-cycle approach, providing support to people at different stages of their lives. The system recognises that people face different risks and

needs during childhood, working age, and old age. During childhood, social safety net programmes focus on reducing child poverty, improving nutrition, and supporting education. For the working-age population, the system aims to protect people from risks such as unemployment, low income, illness, disability, and economic shocks. And, in old age, social safety net programmes provide financial assistance and basic support to elderly people who often have limited income and savings (Cabinet Division, 2022).

According to the Ministry of Finance (2024), currently, there are 99 Social Safety Net Programmes (SSNPs) of government ministries and agencies. However, most of the programmes are cash-based, and a substantial

Table 10 Implementing Ministries of SSNP Programmes

Implementing Ministries	Freq.
Local Government Division	10
Ministry of Labor and Employment	2
Ministry of Land	1
Ministry of Primary and Mass Education	3
Ministry of Social welfare	22
Ministry of Women and Children Affairs	6
Secondary and Higher Education Division	2
Technical and Madrasah Education Division	2
Other Ministries/Departments	51
Total	99

Source: (MoF, 2024).

proportion lack a clearly defined intervention type, which makes it difficult to understand their objectives, target groups, and expected outcomes. Moreover, safety net coverage is heavily concentrated on working-age individuals, with very limited focus on school-aged children, early childhood, and persons with disabilities.

The implementation of the programmes is fragmented across multiple ministries, but most of the programmes are managed by the Ministry of Social Welfare, Local Government, Ministry of Women and Children Affairs, and the Education ministries. Table 10 shows the distribution of SSNPs by implementing ministries. While the Ministry of Social Welfare plays a central role, a substantial number of programmes are implemented by other ministries and departments with limited coordination (Annex Table A).

The functional categorisation shows a strong emphasis on social assistance, which constitutes 42.42 per cent of all programmes, indicating a predominance of transfer-based support. Labour market programmes (18.18 per cent) and community development initiatives (16.16 per cent) form a secondary layer, reflecting some focus on employment and local development (Table 11). Nearly two-fifths of programmes lack a clearly specified intervention, limiting their effectiveness in explicitly targeting child labour or vulnerable families. Cash and one-off cash transfers dominate among defined interventions, providing short-term relief but offering limited incentives for school retention or withdrawal from work (Table 12).

Table 11 Functional Distribution of SSNPs of GoB

Function (Category)	Freq.	Per cent
Community Development	16	16.16
General Subsidies	3	3.03
Labour Market Programme	18	18.18
Social Assistance	42	42.42
Social Care Service	15	15.15
Social Insurance	2	2.02
Technical Assistance	3	3.03
Total	99	100

Source: (MoF, 2024).

Table 12 Types of Interventions of SSNPs of GoB

Function Intervention	Freq.	Per cent
Cash	12	12.12
Cash (One-off)	9	9.09
Economic Inclusion	7	7.07
Entrepreneurship support	9	9.09
Food	5	5.05
Kind and/or food	7	7.07
No Specific Intervention	39	39.39
Public Workforce (cash)	3	3.03
Public Workforce (food)	2	2.02
Stipend	3	3.03
Vocational Skill Development	3	3.03
Total	99	100

Source: (MoF, 2024).

5.3 Overview of Social Safety Net Programmes Relevant to Children

The Social Safety Net Programmes (SSNP) for children in Bangladesh mainly aim to support children's education, nutrition, protection, and overall well-being. These programmes are implemented by various government ministries. The ministries often partner with development organisations to implement these programmes more efficiently, targeting different groups of vulnerable children. The support provided includes cash transfers, stipends, free textbooks, school meals, residential care, vocational training, and counselling services. While some programmes have nationwide coverage, many are limited in scale or targeted to selected areas, reflecting both the strengths and gaps in child-focused social protection in the country.

A brief overview of the 9 SSNPs for school-aged children is provided below, highlighting their objectives, target groups, services, and coverage.

Combined Training and Rehabilitation Centre for Children: This programme is implemented by the Department of Social Services (DSS), under the Ministry of Social Welfare (MoSW). It targets the children who are in conflict with the law, at risk, or destitute/abandoned. Under this programme, residential care, education, vocational training, and counselling are provided according to the needs of the target children. However, the coverage of this programme is very limited as it focuses mainly on urban and semi-urban areas.

Grants to Non-Government Orphanages: This programme is also implemented by the DSS, under the Ministry of Social Welfare (MoSW). Under this programme, grants are provided to government orphanages for food, shelter, education, and basic healthcare for children. It has nationwide coverage, but only registered orphanages are eligible to receive the grant.

Child-Sensitive Social Protection in Bangladesh (CSPB): The Ministry of Social Welfare (MoSW), in partnership with UNICEF and other development organisation implement this programme. CSPB targets vulnerable children and families at risk. The programme provides cash transfers, case management, and referrals to social services. Currently, it operates only in pilot or selected areas, so its coverage is limited in scale.

Stipend for Primary School Students: This programme is implemented by the Directorate of Primary Education, under the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education (MoPME). It targets students from eligible households enrolled in government primary schools. Under this programme, monthly stipends are provided to support educational expenses, amounting to BDT 75 for pre-primary students, BDT 150 for students in Class I-IV, and BDT 200 for students in Class V-VIII. A maximum of two children per household are eligible for support, and the stipend is disbursed digitally every six months.

Printing and Distribution of Free Textbooks: This programme is implemented by the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) under the Ministry of Education (MoE). It covers all students enrolled in public and MPO-enlisted institutions. Under this programme, free textbooks are provided at the beginning of each academic year and are distributed directly through schools to ensure timely access to learning materials.

School Feeding Programme (Government Primary Schools): This programme is implemented by the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education (MoPME) in collaboration with development partners. It targets students in selected poverty-prone areas. Under this programme, meals or snacks are provided to improve children's nutrition, school attendance, and learning outcomes. However, the coverage of the programme is limited to selected schools only.

Free Textbook Distribution (Primary & Secondary): This programme is implemented by the Ministry of Education (MoE) in collaboration with the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB). It

covers primary and secondary level students enrolled in public and MPO-affiliated institutions. The programme supports students' education by ensuring free access to basic learning materials, helping to reduce the financial burden on families.

Improving Access and Retention Through Harmonised Stipend Programme: This programme is implemented by the Ministry of Education. It targets poor and disadvantaged secondary-level students. Under this programme, monthly stipends ranging from BDT 200 to BDT 400 are provided. The support is conditional on regular school attendance, satisfactory academic performance, and delayed marriage, aiming to improve retention and completion of secondary education.

Stipend under Technical and Madrasa Education Division: This programme is implemented by the Technical and Madrasa Education Division under the Ministry of Education (MoE). It targets low-income students enrolled in technical, vocational, and madrasa education streams. The programme provides financial support to cover education-related costs and promote skills development. The stipend is disbursed digitally and is often linked to students' merit and performance.

Overall, these SSNPs mainly support education and basic welfare, but they do not effectively address child labour. Most programmes focus on school-going children, while working and out-of-school children, especially those in informal work, receive little or no support. In addition, several programmes have limited coverage and are not designed to directly prevent or reduce child labour.

5.4 Coverage of Children and Working Children Under SSNPs

Safety Net programmes mainly cover children through education and nutrition programmes, like primary and secondary school stipends and school feeding and nutrition programmes. The programmes designed for children are mainly for school-going children, aged 5, 18 years, mostly reaching the children who are enrolled in school. According to the Ministry of Finance (2024), the FY2025-26 budget includes 9 programmes targeting school-aged children (5-18 years), with an allocation of BDT 9,790 crore, which accounts for 8.37 per cent of the total Social Safety Net budget.

However, the current SSNPs cover only a small number of working children. Especially those working in informal jobs or who are out of school are largely excluded from these programmes. As Table 13 shows, only a small number of households with child workers are enrolled in the SSNPs. Out of 6,242 children surveyed, 88.5 per cent of their families do not receive any support, while only 11.5 per cent benefit from at least one programme. This shows that social protection reaches very few families affected by child labour, forcing most households to continue relying on children's income to make ends meet.

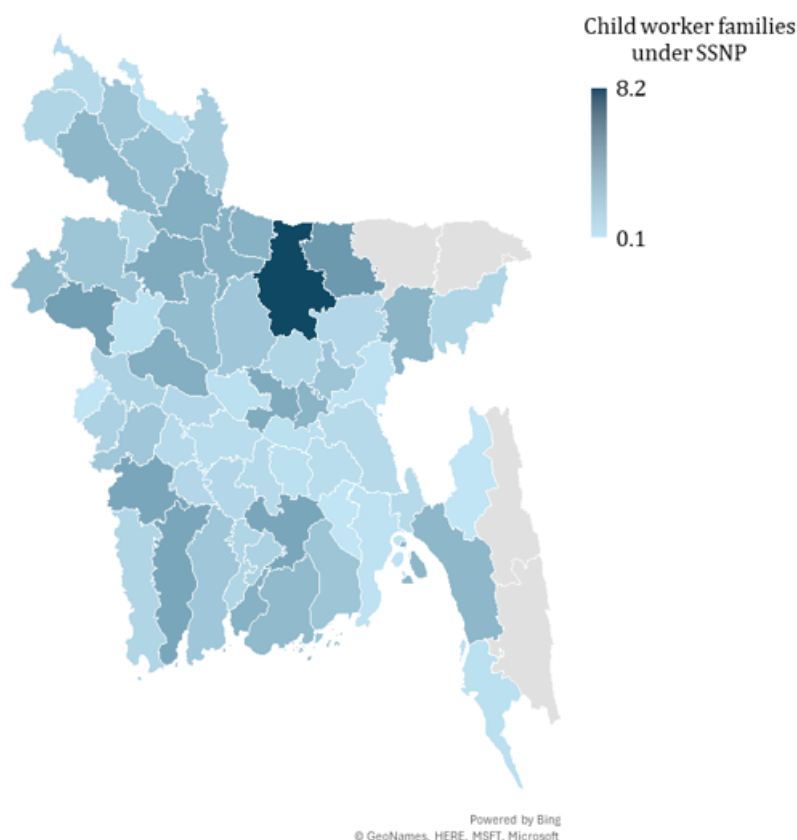
Table 13 Level of Enrolment in SSNPs

Are you enrolled on the SSNPs?	Freq.	Per cent
No	5524	88.5
Yes	718	11.5
Total	6242	100

Source: BBS (2022a).

The coverage of SSNPs for families with child workers is uneven across districts as well. The coverage is the largest in Mymensingh with a share of 8.2 per cent, followed by Netrokona (4.0 per cent) and Rajshahi (3.8 per cent), showing that more child labour-affected households receive support in these areas. Several other districts have moderate coverage, but many show very low enrolment, which indicates gaps in targeting vulnerable families. Missing data in some districts also points to weak reporting and monitoring systems. Therefore, a substantial number of households with working children are excluded from the protection of SSNPs.

Figure 2 District-wise Level of Enrolment at SSNP Programmes



Source: Prepared by authors based on BBS (2022).

Table 14 gives an overview of the families of child workers covered under different SSNPs. As the table shows, the Primary Education Level Student Stipend is the most common form of support, reaching almost 23.8 per cent of child-worker families, followed by stipends for secondary, higher secondary, and madrasa students, which cover 7.7 per cent. This indicates that when SSNPs reach these families, they primarily help children stay in school rather than provide broader financial support to reduce the need for them to work.

Among non-education programmes, the most frequently accessed Programmes are the Elderly Allowance Activities (18.7 per cent) and the Food Friendly Programme (9.1 per cent), which may indicate that indirect support for households is more common than targeted child-focused measures. Programmes aimed at employment generation or emergency relief, such as VGD, VGF, OMS, and other relief work, cover a much smaller share of child worker families.

Table 14 Child Worker Families Covered Under Different SSNPs

SSNPs Name	Freq.	Per cent	SSNPs Name	Freq.	Per cent
Elderly Allowance Activities	134	18.7	OMS	34	4.7
Allowance for widows and destitute women	44	6.1	Food Friendly Programmes	65	9.1
Allowance for indigent disabled	39	5.4	Primary Education Level Student Stipend	171	23.8

(Table 14 contd.)

(Table 14 contd.)

SSNPs Name	Freq.	Per cent	SSNPs Name	Freq.	Per cent
Maternity Allowance for Poor Mother	3	0.4	Stipend for secondary, higher secondary and madrasa education level	55	7.7
Vir Muktijoddha Honorary Allowance	5	0.7	Relief work (flood, drought, cyclone and others)	8	1.1
Medical and honorarium allowance for martyred families and war-wounded freedom fighters	1	0.1	Housing / Home Grants for Homeless People	1	0.1
Retirement and family retirement allowance of government employees	18	2.5	Covid-19: Incentives	22	3.1
VGD1	32	4.5	Agricultural Subsidy	2	0.3
VGF	26	3.6	Financial support for cancer, kidney and liver cirrhosis patients	1	0.1
GR (food)	15	2.1	Grants for families of government employees who die in the line of duty	1	0.1
Food in exchange for work (Kabikha)	2	0.3	Income Support Programme for the Poorest (Care + Dream)	1	0.1
Money for work (Kabita)	1	0.1	Child-Sensitive Social Protection in Bangladesh	1	0.1
TR (cash)	10	1.4	Other (specify)	20	2.8
Employment for the extremely poor	1	0.1	Total	718	100

Source: BBS (2022b).

Overall, very few SSNPs directly address child labour or child-specific vulnerabilities. This shows that child labour is still not a clear priority within the existing social protection system. As a result, children who are already working or at risk of entering child labour are often left out, reducing the system's effectiveness in preventing or addressing child labour. There is a strong need for targeted programmes that focus on working children and ensure that social safety nets reach those who need them most.

5.5 SSNPs with Indirect Impact on Children

In addition to child-focused programmes, there are some SSNPs that may have an indirect impact on children and can help reduce child labour. These programmes mainly support vulnerable households, which can reduce families' dependence on children's income.

During a Key Informant Interview (KII) with an official from the Department of Social Services (DSS), information was shared on the children's case management and referral mechanism operated by the Child Protection Unit (CPU). Under this mechanism, the CPU identifies children who are engaged in or at risk of child labour. Social workers then assess the economic vulnerability and overall situation of the child's household and determine whether the family qualifies for existing Social Safety Net programmes.

Based on the assessment, households are referred to relevant programmes such as old-age allowances for grandparents caring for children, widow allowances for female-headed households, and disability allowances for families with disabled members. These supports help supplement household income, which can indirectly reduce families' reliance on child labour.

A brief overview of these programmes is provided below, highlighting their objectives, target groups, and services.

Old Age Allowance: This programme is implemented by the Department of Social Services (DSS) under the Ministry of Social Welfare (MoSW). It provides a monthly allowance of BDT 650 (paid quarterly) to elderly men aged 65 years and above and women aged 62 years and above (MoF, 2026). The programme prioritises landless and low-income elderly individuals. In FY2025-26, there were 61 lakh beneficiaries, with a total allocation of BDT 4,791 crore. By supporting grandparents and older caregivers, this programme can indirectly benefit children without parents by improving household income and reducing economic pressures.

Allowance for Widows and Deserted Women: Implemented by the Department of Social Services (DSS), MoSW, this programme targets widows and women deserted by their husbands with an annual income of less than BDT 12,000 (MoF, 2026). Beneficiaries receive a monthly allowance of BDT 650 (paid quarterly). In FY2025-26, 29 lakh women benefited from the programme, with a total allocation of BDT 2,278 crore. By increasing household income, it helps reduce the reliance on children for family support.

Women Benefit (VWB) Programme: This programme is implemented by the Department of Women Affairs under the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs (MoWCA). It targets destitute and vulnerable women aged 20-50 years, including female daily labourers and women-headed households. Each beneficiary receives 30 kg of rice per month. In FY2025-26, the programme reached 10.4 lakh beneficiaries, with a total allocation of BDT 2,334 crore (MoF, 2026). Supporting adult women in vulnerable households indirectly improves children's well-being by reducing household food insecurity.

Disability Allowance and Education Stipend Programme: Implemented by the Department of Social Services (DSS), MoSW, this programme supports persons and students with disabilities. Beneficiaries receive a monthly allowance of BDT 900, and students also receive an education stipend ranging from BDT 900 to 1,300 (MoF, 2026). In FY2025-26, there were 35.31 lakh beneficiaries, with a total allocation of BDT 3,845 crore. By supporting children or family members with disabilities, the programme reduces financial pressure on households, which can help prevent children from engaging in work.

Distressed Women and Children Welfare Fund: Implemented by the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs (MoWCA) through the Executive Council, this programme provides a one-time grant of up to BDT 25,000 for households facing emergency financial needs (MoF, 2026). In FY2025-26, 17,000 beneficiaries received support, with a total allocation of BDT 5 crore. These emergency grants can indirectly protect children from being forced into work during household crises.

Despite the potential of Social Safety Net programmes to indirectly support children, their effectiveness in preventing child labour is limited by several challenges. Many families who are eligible for these programmes do not receive the benefits because of low awareness and limited coverage. In addition, the coordination between the Department of Social Services (DSS), other ministries, and local offices is weak, which reduces the ability of these programmes to reach the right households and have a meaningful impact on child labour. Another issue is that linking access to SSNs with child labour is not a sustainable practice. Families are already entitled to receive these benefits, and child labour

should not be the reason for getting support. This reflects a larger problem: the programmes are not effectively reaching all the appropriate beneficiaries.

Moreover, the lack of proper monitoring and follow-up makes it difficult to measure whether receiving Social Safety Net support actually reduces child labour. Without better awareness, coordination, and monitoring, the potential of these programmes to protect children remains limited.

Therefore, the current Social Safety Net system is not sufficient to protect children from child labour.

5.6 Identified Gaps in Safety Net Programme Design and Coverage

There are several gaps and limitations in the current Social Safety Net system, which make it challenging to reach the most vulnerable children and reduce child labour effectively. The key gaps in the Safety Net programmes are outlined and discussed below.

Limited coverage of child-focused programmes: Many child-focused programmes, such as rehabilitation centres, CSPB, and school feeding, have limited geographical coverage and primarily operate in selected urban, semi-urban, or pilot areas. As a result, a large number of working children remain untouched by these programmes. KIIs with ESDO teachers and staff show that a large proportion of working children attend NGO-run schools because government schools are either inaccessible or overcrowded, leaving many working children outside the reach of government safety nets.

Low value of education stipends and food support: The value of education stipends and food support is relatively low compared to the opportunity cost of child labour for poor households. KII findings indicate that working children contribute between BDT 1,800-3,000 per month, which is critical for meeting basic household expenses and debt repayment. As a result, small stipend amounts may not be enough to compensate families for the lost income if children stop working to attend school.

Limited coordination among child-related SSN programmes: Child-related SSN programmes are implemented by multiple ministries and agencies with limited coordination. KIIs from DSS and DIFE highlight the absence of a unified beneficiary database and referral mechanism linking child labour identification, child protection case management, and household-level safety nets. Consequently, children identified through inspections, NGO outreach, or child protection services are not automatically prioritised for social assistance, leading to both duplication and exclusion.

Conditions attached to stipend programmes: Conditions attached to stipend programmes, such as regular attendance and academic performance, can unintentionally exclude the most vulnerable children. Teachers from ESDO Bridge School reported during KIIs that many working children miss school due to sibling care responsibilities, irregular work hours, or poor learning outcomes. These realities increase the risk of dropout and disqualification from stipends, especially among children from single-parent, migrant, or highly stressed households.

Limited coverage of technical and madrasa stipends: Although technical and madrasa stipends exist, their coverage is limited, and they are not well aligned with decent work pathways, reducing their effectiveness in supporting children's transition to safe education or employment opportunities.

Insufficient support for older adolescents: There is insufficient support for older adolescents (15-17 years) to transition from school to safe skills training and formal employment, increasing the risk of hazardous child labour. While allowances for elderly, widows, and vulnerable women indirectly support children, these are not linked to children's schooling or protection outcomes.

Exclusion of migrant and urban poor households: Most social safety net programmes require local NID and voter registration, which creates major exclusion barriers for migrant families. KIIs from ESDO

staff and DSS confirm that many urban child labour households cannot access safety nets because they are not registered as local residents. This exclusion disproportionately affects informal workers and urban poor families, reinforcing children's continued engagement in labour.

5.7 Implications for Programme Design

To make Social Safety Net Programmes more effective in preventing child labour, several key changes and improvements are needed, some of which are discussed below.

Expand coverage to urban areas: SSNPs need to reach more urban areas, especially slums and informal settlements, where many children are working. Field interviews show that children are involved in informal jobs like scrap collection, transport, domestic work, and small workshops. Many of these families are excluded from safety nets because they are migrants or do not have proper documents. Special urban-focused programmes are needed to help these children and their families.

Improve coordination across institutions: Better coordination is needed between ministries and agencies responsible for social protection, labour, education, and child protection. Weak coordination and the lack of a shared beneficiary database make it hard to link working children and their families to the right programmes. Stronger coordination would ensure that children at risk can receive support on time and without duplication.

Strengthening integration with education support: Social safety nets should be more effectively linked with education services that are accessible to working children. Field evidence shows that many children face barriers to regular schooling due to work obligations, care responsibilities, poor school quality, and limited access to government schools. Flexible education options, combined with cash transfers, stipends, and school feeding, are necessary to improve school retention and reduce dependence on child labour.

Introduce targeted schemes for older children and hazardous work: Existing safety net programmes do not adequately address the needs of older adolescents or children withdrawn from hazardous work. Interviews highlight limited access to vocational training, uncertainty around post-primary education, and weak pathways to safe employment. Targeted vocational training, transitional financial support, and structured skill development programmes are required to prevent adolescents from returning to hazardous work.

Strengthen monitoring and accountability: Improved monitoring and accountability mechanisms are essential to enhance the effectiveness of SSNs. Key informants reported challenges such as limited inspection capacity, benefit leakage, partial payments, and shortages of trained social workers. Strengthening digital payment systems, beneficiary verification, and outcome-based monitoring would improve transparency and ensure that programmes contribute to child labour prevention.

Address child labour in the informal sector: Most child labour happens in the informal sector, so safety nets must reach families working in small, unregulated jobs. Field evidence shows children are often working because their families cannot meet basic needs. Tailored programmes for these households can help children attend school instead of working.

Increase and better target budget allocation: Although Bangladesh spends a lot on Social Safety Nets, many child-focused programmes are underfunded. Stipends and support are too small to compensate for lost income from child work. Budgets should focus on vulnerable families, working children, and urban poor households, and more investment is needed in awareness, service quality, and coordinated delivery to make the programmes effective in preventing child labour.

6. Beyond the State: NGO-Led Efforts to Address Child Labour

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have played a key role in addressing many social and economic causes, including child labour (Salam & Hossain, 2012). Over the years, NGOs have carried out programmes to raise awareness about child labour, help withdraw children from hazardous work, improve access to education, and support families so that children are less relied on for income. Their work to prevent child labour generally follows a number of core approaches. Several of the organisations referenced in this section were also cited in Section 5 in connection with field-level awareness data and community attitudes towards child labour; this section sets out the scale and design, or in short, the role and limits of NGO programming, in detail. Table 15 provides examples of different NGO programmes aimed at eliminating child labour in Bangladesh.

Table 15 Selected NGO Programmes Targeting Children and Child Labour

Intervention	Purpose	NGOs & Programmes
Bridge/ Alternative Schools	Provide non-formal education for working children to improve literacy, numeracy, and life skills, and also facilitate their gradual transition into formal schools.	• BRAC - Bridge Schools • Manabik Shahajya Sangstha (MSS)- Non-formal Primary Education (NFPE) • Eco Social Development Organization (ESDO) and Educo Bangladesh - Bridge Schools
Rescue and Rehabilitation	Withdraw children from hazardous work and provide shelter, counselling, healthcare, and education.	• Dhaka Ahsania Mission (DAM) - Eradication of Hazardous Child Labour in Bangladesh • Association for Community Development (ACD) - Child Protection and Rehabilitation • World Vision -Child Safety Net Project
Community Mobilisation & Awareness	Engage parents, local leaders, and employers to raise awareness about child labour risks and laws.	• Save the Children Bangladesh - Community-Based Child Protection Programme • Plan International Bangladesh - Awareness campaigns on child rights and education • Aparajeyo Bangladesh - Community Actions for Child Protection from Violence
Conditional Support / Incentives	Provide stipends or in-kind support linked to school attendance to reduce household reliance on child income.	• BRAC - Education Stipend Program • ESDO - Conditional education support for Bridge School students

Source: Authors' compilation from KII & secondary literature.

NGOs in Bangladesh have used education as a key strategy to prevent and reduce child labour, especially through Bridge and non-formal education programmes. These programmes provide working and at-risk children with access to learning, targeting those who have dropped out of formal schools and are at high risk of entering or remaining in child labour. BRAC introduced the Bridge School model in 2013 with 39 schools, and it has now expanded to around 2,100 centres, supporting approximately 59,433 students (Bin Touhid, 2021). Other organisations, such as ESDO and Educo Bangladesh, also provide education to working children. For example, with Educo's support, around 800 children engaged in hazardous work are receiving education in selected areas of Dhaka ('800 children engaged in hazardous works receive education with Educo support', 2023). Manabik Shahajya Sangstha (MSS) runs Non-formal Primary Education (NFPE) through community-based centres called '*Upanusthanik Sikhaloy*', currently supporting 448 children aged 8-14 in low-income and slum areas of Dhaka (Manabik Shahajya Sangstha,

n.d.). These programmes teach basic literacy, numeracy, life skills, and social skills in a flexible, child-friendly way.

Evidence from KIIs with teachers and students at ESDO Bridge Schools shows that these programmes help reduce risks of child labour. Many children have moved from hazardous work to lighter, safer work while continuing their education. Parents' awareness of the negative effects of child labour and the importance of schooling has also increased. However, continuing education remains a challenge due to limited access to government schools, high costs of private schools, and uncertain opportunities for secondary education or vocational training. Strengthening links between Bridge Schools and formal education is therefore essential for sustainable withdrawal from child labour.

Rescue and rehabilitation programmes are another important NGO strategy. These programmes aim to withdraw children from hazardous work and provide education, counselling, healthcare, and family support to prevent them from returning to labour. Dhaka Ahsania Mission (DAM), through the Eradication of Hazardous Child Labour project, supports out-of-school and never-enrolled children by providing flexible Non-Formal Education (NFE) and Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET), helping 893 children aged 8-16+ move from hazardous work to education and decent work (Ahsania Mission Bangladesh, n.d.). World Vision Bangladesh runs the Child Safety Net Project to reduce children's vulnerability to trafficking, abuse, and exploitation, supporting rescue, rehabilitation, and reintegration (World Vision International, n.d.). Many other NGOs implement similar rescue and rehabilitation programmes across the country.

Community mobilisation and awareness programmes are also widely used. Save the Children engages children, parents, and local leaders to identify and respond to child labour and child marriage, consistent with the organisation's broader child protection approach (Save the Children International, n.d.), while Aparajeyo Bangladesh runs programmes to help children protect themselves from violence, including labour risks (Peace Direct, 2016). Plan International Bangladesh conducts campaigns on child rights, education, and labour laws, encouraging school attendance and preventing work. These initiatives show the collective effort of NGOs to raise awareness and protect children from labour.

Conditional support and incentive programmes help reduce household reliance on children's income and encourage school attendance. BRAC provides stipends, while ESDO offers education support and incentives, such as free meals, for Bridge School students.

The government also collaborates with NGOs under the National Plan of Action to Eliminate Child Labour. In a December 2022 workshop, the Project Director of the Hazardous Child Labour Elimination Project reported that child labour elimination activities were ongoing in 14 districts with 112 NGOs involved (GoB, 2022). The Department of Social Services (DSS) is working to build a common platform for NGOs, creating clusters based on location and programme type to improve coordination, reduce duplication, and ensure that interventions effectively reach vulnerable children.

As shown in Table 16, in 2024-25, 0.90 crore Taka was allocated specifically to the child labour sector (NGO Affairs Bureau, 2025) to support the programmes and interventions aimed at preventing child labour. While this allocation indicates that child labour is officially recognised as a priority, it is very small compared to the scale and complexity of the issue in Bangladesh. Table 16 shows sector-wise fund allocations, highlighting that child labour receives one of the lowest allocations among social development priorities.

Table 16 Sector-wise Fund Released Amount (2024-2025)

Name of Sector	Released Amount (BDT crore)	Name of Sector	Released Amount (BDT crore)
Health	2,726.51	Climate Change	186.52
Education	1,269.00	Labour	27.97
Relief & Rehabilitation	711.98	Child Labour	0.9
Water & Sanitation/ WASH	422.41	ICT Development	8.32
Social Development	750.9	Garments	44.18
Agriculture	202.79	Training & Workshop	17.62
Human Rights	61.91	Tobacco Control	3.75
Road Safety	2.91	Awareness Development	2.53
Local Government	231.19	Energy	11.71
Food	59.32	Research	21.94
Fisheries	20.08	Tube well	1.54
Livestock	1.14	Anti Trafficking	43.72
Women Development	302.66	Orphan Development	57.13
Environment	225.71	Livelihood	26.08
Youth Development	85.24	Migrant	45.59
Disable Development	111.39	Nutrition	63.41
Legal Aid	49.94	Journalism	0.76
Child Development	188.64	Violence Prevention	0.69
Disaster Management	544.67	Hizra (Third gender) Development	10
Rural Development	12.13	Others Sector	636.25
Information	29.24	Total	9,220.40

Source: (NGOAB, 2025).

This amount is not sufficient for NGOs to address the deep-rooted issue of child labour in Bangladesh. Even though NGOs have long-term experience and a strong understanding of local culture, with trained personnel and expertise in addressing child labour, they often depend on donor funding, and short-term project cycles, which can create gaps in service continuity and make it difficult to provide continuous support to children and families in need.

7. Comparative International Experience in Child Labour Prevention

Many countries around the world have taken different measures to prevent child labour. This section reviews global experiences in child labour prevention to identify the strategies and policy approaches that were effective in addressing and preventing child labour. Several countries have introduced important initiatives to prevent child labour, offering useful lessons for Bangladesh. Table 17 shows some examples of child labour prevention initiatives in different countries.

India: In India, the Integrated Child Protection Scheme (ICPS) works to build a strong national system for child protection and rehabilitation. It focuses on rescuing children from harmful work, providing them with care and counselling, and helping them return safely to school or other safe environments. The programme coordinates closely across different levels from national and state to district and community to ensure effective support. The National Child Labour Project (NCLP) complements these efforts by withdrawing children from hazardous work and enrolling them in bridge schools. In

Table 17 Global Examples of Child Labour Prevention Initiatives

Country	Programme	Key Activities
India	National Child Labour Project (NCLP)	Withdraws children from hazardous work, provides education and support, including stipends, mid-day meals, healthcare, vocational training, and helps children transition from bridge schools to formal education
	Integrated Child Protection Scheme (ICPS)	Establishes a national system to protect and rehabilitate children while ensuring coordination at all levels. Provides support services such as rescue, care, counselling, and reintegration of working children
Pakistan	Benazir Income Support Programme	Provide cash support to families to encourage children's schooling
	Pakistan Bait-Ul-Mal (PBM) - Schools for Rehabilitation of Child Labour (SRCL)	Rescue children from hazardous work, provide education, and basic support
	Sialkot Soccer Ball Initiative	Introduced workplace monitoring to prevent child labour and remove children from hazardous work; provided social protection for prevention and rehabilitation; raised awareness and supported school enrolment
	Mazdoor ka Ehsaas ('Compassion for Workers')	Provide cash to families to support children staying in school
	Punjab Crash Programme for Children and Brick Kiln Workers	Supports enrolment of students in school and links families with Punjab Social Protection Authority to receive conditional financial assistance (stipends).
Philippines	Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps)	Provides conditional cash transfers, supports school attendance and health, and improves child and family welfare.

Source: Authors' compilation from desk research.

these schools, children receive education, stipends, midday meals, healthcare, and vocational training, all aimed at helping them eventually join formal schooling (Srivastava and Bharti, 2025).

Pakistan: In Pakistan, several programmes have addressed child labour through both rehabilitation and financial support, though these operate as distinct, loosely coordinated mechanisms rather than a single integrated design. The Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP) is Pakistan's largest cash transfer programme and is primarily an unconditional transfer targeted to poor households through a national poverty scorecard. Its education-linked component, the Benazir Taleemi Wazaif (formerly Waseela-e-Taleem), provides a conditional stipend to households with children, historically aged around 5 to 12, contingent on school enrolment and regular attendance. Channelling payments to the female head of household is intended to strengthen the link between the transfer and children's welfare, including reduced reliance on child labour, though the evidence for this effect is mixed rather than conclusive. The Schools for Rehabilitation of Child Labour (SRCL), run by the Pakistan Bait-ul-Mal, rescue children broadly aged 8 to 14 from hazardous work and provide free education, stipends, medical care, and support for parents to assist reintegration into formal schooling. The Sialkot Soccer Ball Initiative, launched under the 1997 Atlanta Agreement between the ILO, UNICEF, and the Sialkot Chamber of Commerce and Industry, shared workplace monitoring with education, social protection, and awareness campaigns through a public-private-international partnership, and is widely cited as one of the more successful sector-specific interventions (ILO, 2022a).

Two further initiatives show the difficulty of sustaining such programmes. The Punjab Crash Programme for Children and Brick Kiln Workers, run jointly by Punjab's Labour and Human Resource Department, School Education Department, and Social Protection Authority, identified around 80,000 working children and brick kiln workers and sought to enroll them in school while linking families to stipend support; it could not be sustained beyond its initial phase owing to limited and inconsistent government funding and weak inter-departmental coordination. Mazdoor Ka Ehsaas, launched in 2021 under the wider Ehsaas social protection programme, is a labour welfare initiative for informal-sector workers, providing worker registration, health coverage, and financial inclusion support; it is not itself a child-focused conditional cash transfer, but by extending social protection to informal-sector households, including those in brick kilns, it complements programmes such as BISP and SRCL that address children's schooling more directly (ILO, 2022a).

Philippines: In the Philippines, the Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps) is a nationwide conditional cash transfer programme that links financial support to children's school attendance and health check-ups. The programme has shown clear success in keeping children in school and reducing the risk of child labour, demonstrating how financial incentives tied to education and wellbeing can influence family behaviour (DSWD, n.d.).

Lessons for Bangladesh: The key lesson for Bangladesh is that conditional cash transfers work best when they are linked to children's school attendance, healthcare, and participation in skill-building or protection programmes. Programmes such as BISP in Pakistan and 4Ps in the Philippines show that providing financial support to families can reduce the economic pressure that pushes children into work, helping them stay in school, gain skills, and grow in a safe and protected environment.

8. Multi-Dimensional Intervention for Eliminating Child Labour

Detailed analysis of policies, laws and institutions of child labour, its structure and composition, as well as interventions under different governments and NGO-led SSNPs identified four major dimensions where future child-labour-related SSNPs need intervention. These four dimensions are as follows: (a) Locational/Spatial dimension of child labour; (b) Age dimension of child labour; (c) Marital status dimension of child labour; and (d) Employment dimension of child labour. Each of the dimensions has sub-dimensions which are also important to consider while designing targeted social safety net programmes for child labour. A brief discussion on possible areas and nature of intervention under each dimension is given below.

Locational/Spatial dimension of child labour: Locational/spatial dimension covers district/upazila level as well as rural-urban level issues concerning the prevalence of child labour. Existing SSNPs under different ministries and NGOs are found to intervene, targeting different spatial issues. The analysis identified following areas of intervention: (a) addressing the spatial mismatch between current SSNPs and prevalence of child labour in different districts; (b) Addressing the underreported child labour in rural areas; (c) Addressing the un-reported and under-reported child labour in urban informal sector including domestic help, small workshops, street vending and scrap collection, etc. (d) addressing the regulatory gap in attending informal sector child labour (BLA); (e) addressing children's engagement in domestic help; (f) Addressing the complex and difficult process of getting access to SSNPs for working children.

Age dimension of child labour: Three age categories are found in different ways of engagement as child labour: (a) early younger children (5-11 years); (b) early adolescent (12-13 years); and (c) older adolescent (14-17 years). Children in different age groups are engaged in voluntary, apprentice, own

Figure 3 Addressing Child Labour from a Multi-dimensional Perspective

Dimension/ Channel	Legal provisions Labour Act, NCLEP, ILO	Social safety nets 99 SSNPs, life-cycle design	NGO-led programmes Bridge schools, rescue & rehab
Location	Extend Labour Act enforcement to informal urban work	Align new SSNPs with district-level child-labour hotspots	Encourage NGO coverage in underserved rural and urban areas
Age	Enforce the 14-yr minimum age and hazardous-work ban for 14–17 yr olds	Design dedicated schemes for older adolescents (14–17 yr)	Age-tiered schools and vocational training
Family background	Simplify birth registration for orphaned and kinless children	Extend elderly, widow, and disability allowances to caregivers	Community-based care for children without family support
Employment	Formalise informal sectors under the Minimum Wage Board	Link cash transfers to school attendance, not poverty alone	Sector-specific rescue and rehabilitation from hazardous work

Source: Authors' illustration.

use and paid work. Besides, children from different cross-sectional categories need to be considered, such as children of migrant families and children of climate-vulnerable communities. Similarly, their engagement includes hazardous and non-hazardous work. The analysis identified following areas of intervention: (a) addressing unreported and under-reported children under different age categories; (b) addressing engagement in hazardous work by older adolescents; (c) addressing limited SSNPs for older adolescent; (d) addressing early adolescents and younger children's engagement in volunteer and own use production work; (e) addressing early and older adolescents engagement in apprentice works; and (f) addressing policy, regulatory and convention related gaps of different age categories of children concerning their education, working conditions, nature of engagement in work, etc.

Family Background Dimension: Children's engagement in child labour varies significantly depending on their family background and living arrangements. The analysis identifies three broad family background categories: (a) children living with parents or family members (including children of unmarried, divorced, or widowed caregivers); (b) children without parents or family support (such as orphans and kinless children); and (c) children living under other vulnerable arrangements. Children from different family backgrounds are engaged in voluntary, apprentice, own-use, and paid work, often influenced by household poverty, lack of adult caregivers, and social insecurity. The analysis identifies the following areas of intervention: (a) strengthening SSNPs for children living with single parents, widowed, divorced, or economically vulnerable families; (b) expanding NGO-led programmes for orphans, kinless children, and those without parental care; (c) addressing increased exposure to hazardous work among children without family protection; (d) improving access to education, care services, and alternative livelihoods for families at risk of sending children to work; (e) enhancing community-based protection mechanisms for children living without parents or stable family support; and (f) addressing policy, regulatory, and institutional gaps related to child protection, social care, and rehabilitation for children from different family background categories.

Employment dimension: Employment-related dimensions are observed in terms of sectoral (agriculture, manufacturing & services), level of formalisation (formal and informal) and nature of occupations (volunteers, paid, apprentice, unpaid family work). Taking those into account, different SSNPs are currently in operation, and, at the same time, legal issues are applicable for engaging children there.

Present analysis identified following areas of intervention: (a) Addressing not having a comprehensive database of child labour involved in different types of work in different sectors and different locations; (b) Addressing the stringent conditions of working hours for child labour; (c) Addressing the child labour involved in hazardous form of work in different formal and informal sectors; (d) Addressing lower stipend which made difficult for working children to refrain from work; (e) Addressing the unhealthy and indecent working conditions for children; (f) Addressing irregular working hour; (g) Addressing lack of enforcement of conditions for hiring adolescents and children; (h) Addressing the regulatory and institutional weakness in enforcement of laws concerning child labour in the workplace.

9. Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

Taken together, the evidence in this report points to a single underlying problem: Bangladesh's Safety Net Programmes were not designed with the dimensions of child labour set out in Section 8, namely location, age, family background, and employment, in mind. Coverage is concentrated in general social assistance rather than child-labour-specific interventions (Section 5.6); the 14 to 17 age group, which accounts for the bulk of hazardous work, remains largely outside dedicated schemes; children without parental or family links fall outside eligibility criteria built around household headship; and informal, hazardous employment sectors are not thoroughly linked to any single programme. Closing this gap requires the legal, safety-net, and NGO-led channels reviewed in Sections 4 to 6 to be coordinated around these four dimensions, rather than continuing to operate, as they largely do at present, as parallel systems with limited cross-referral.

Bangladesh initially set a target to achieve a child labour-free economy by 2025, but this target was not met, and the deadline has now been extended to 2030. Despite this revised timeline, achieving a child labour-free economy remains under serious threat due to multiple ongoing challenges. These include rising poverty and unemployment caused by COVID-19, the post-COVID economic slowdown, political unrest, and slow economic growth during the transition period.

Although several policies and action plans exist, child labour increased during 2013-2022 (Hoque, 2024), except in hazardous work, indicating that current efforts are insufficient to reduce overall child labour. While institutional mechanisms have been established to identify, implement, and monitor child labour-related issues and social support measures, in practice, these mechanisms are largely less-functional and weak in coordination and follow-up. Targeted programmes under both the public sector and NGOs that specifically address child labour are very limited. *Without customised, child labour-focused interventions, eliminating child labour through broad, general child-based social support measures alone will be difficult.*

One of the key challenges is that a broad definition of child labour as mainly poverty-induced and family-based is unlikely to reach the most vulnerable children or address the root causes. A significant number of children are street children with no family links, while others grow up with relatives instead of their parents. These groups often remain outside family-based interventions and social protection measures. Child labour is considerably higher among male children compared to female children, indicating serious underreporting of female child labour. Additionally, a large section of female children is affected by child marriage through fake age or birth certificates, which further complicates efforts to reach them.

The lack of identification documents, particularly birth registration certificates, makes it difficult to identify and support child labourers. Many children below the age of 10-14 are already engaged in the labour market, mostly in informal sectors where legal protections such as minimum wage, identity cards, or formal monitoring mechanisms are largely absent, leaving them vulnerable and unprotected.

Another significant challenge is the mismatch between the spatial distribution of social safety net programmes (SSNPs) and the concentration of child labour. Most SSNPs are urban-based and focus on major cities, while child labour is concentrated in specific districts. This reduces the effectiveness of existing social support measures in reaching the children who need them the most. Furthermore, legal, judicial, and regulatory mechanisms remain insufficient, particularly for children under 14, those engaged in hazardous work, or working during night shifts, highlighting the need for stronger enforcement alongside social protection measures. It is important to address these challenges.

(a) Development of a Comprehensive Child Labour Database

Since a data gap is identified in four dimensions, including age, location, marital status and employment, it is important to develop a comprehensive database in order to undertake an informed policy choice for addressing multi-dimensional aspects of child labour. Such a database will cover major issues including age, gender, marital status, locations (districts, upazila, union), employment (formal, occupation, status) and SSNP coverage-related issues. The database could be dynamically updated. The government, with the support of NGOs, could develop such a database. This database would be linked with birth registration, NID and other official registration processes. District administration could play a major role under the technical support of the Ministry of Social Welfare and the Department of Social Welfare. A time-bound initiative is needed.

(b) Addressing Spatial Mismatch of SSNPs with Prevalence of Child Labour

Spatial mismatch of SSNPs has caused less effectiveness of the programmes to address the causes of poverty and demand. A detailed database could facilitate identifying child labour with different needs. As discussed, working children need customised SSNPs considering the multidimensionality of child labour, which may not necessarily be possible to address considering the poverty dimension. GO-NGO partnership in designing and developing SSNPs and their piloting before going for scaling up is highly important.

(c) Inclusion in SSNPs Needs to be Easy and Flexible

Some of the SSNPs need submission of local-level identities, NIDs, ward commissioners' certificates, etc., which makes it too difficult for children and their families to comply with. The process could be easier if NGOs working in the locality could be used as 'guarantor/identifier/facilitator' which could make the inclusion of working children easier in SSNPs. Different schooling programmes to get a stipend require minimum attendance and academic performance, which could be relaxed.

(d) Stipend and Other Benefits Need to be Increased

The amount of stipend is so low that children and their families show less interest to abstain/refrain from paid work. Raising the amount of the stipend is highly important; the amount should be sufficiently higher than the average amount received by children from their paid work.

(e) Targeting Older Adolescents under SSNPs

Older adolescents (14-17 years) are usually excluded from the SSNPs because of shortages of funds as well as prioritising others who usually have fewer opportunities for work. Hence, there is a tendency among older adolescents to misreport to get jobs in formal and informal sectors. It is important to identify older adolescents working in different formal and informal sectors and their working conditions, working hours and nature of jobs, etc. and take necessary legal and operational actions by district administration as well as DIFE and other regulatory agencies.

(f) Abolishing Child Labour from Hazardous Work

Children, particularly younger and older adolescents, are prevalent in hazardous work across different sectors and activities. There needs to be a strong drive targeting these economic activities and owners/managers/supervisors to stop hiring children for that hazardous work. There is a list of 43 activities which are termed ‘hazardous’ for children; based on that, DIFE, with the support of district administration and law enforcement agencies need to take proper legal actions against owners of those illegal activities (Annex Table B). Besides, the list also needs to be updated, and district administration will identify activities of hazardous work taking place and keep those under their regular inspection and monitoring. Children working in those activities need to be covered through targeted SSNPs, so they do not have to join that work for family needs.

(g) Addressing the gaps in policies, laws and regulations

While ratification of ILO conventions is appreciated, working children are still deprived due to gaps in laws and regulations as well as their weak implementation. It is important to extend the coverage of the Bangladesh Labour Act, which currently applies only to the formal sector. Formalisation of different sectors by including them under the Minimum Wage Board could be the first step, which could be followed by DIFE’s monitoring and inspection of those newly included sectors. The priority would be sectors having a hazardous nature of work which likely have an adverse health impact for children and young workers. The NCLEP 2010 does not allow children below 14 years in the workplace. Hence, district administration should take targeted measures and activities where workers below age 14 years may work.

(h) Announcing Child Labour Free District

It is important to announce child labour-free districts in a targeted manner. District administration, with the support of major stakeholders working in the district and its upazilas and union parishads, will take necessary measures in a time-bound manner towards achieving the target of child-labour free district/ upazilla. The government could encourage local government institutions to undertake those activities.

(i) Extending the Mandatory Schooling Up to 14 Years

The Primary Education Act makes it mandatory to take education up to 10 years, which keeps many children older than 10 years out of school. It is important to make it mandatory to raise the bar to 14 years so that children above that age would get a chance of schooling in educational institutions. The government could take the support of NGOs to identify those children who are in different age groups and take measures for schooling for them.

(j) Special Drive Needed to Stop Child Marriage

Government with the support of NGOs should redesign and undertake measures addressing child marriage. Because of child marriage especially of female, there is serious underreporting of female child labour in the national database. District administration with local government institutions should target announcing ‘child marriage free’ upazila/union through different kinds of awareness raising programme. SSNPs targeting child labour may consider special allowance for families having female children aged 11 years and above to reduce the financial stress of these families which usually drive them for child marriage.

(k) NGO Intervention and GO-NGO Collaboration

NGO intervention targeting child labour is limited, and broad-based child-focused programmes cannot meet the specific needs of the target population. Since working children are among the most left-behind groups, strong GO-NGO collaboration is essential. Last-mile efforts are needed to reach these children, which the government alone cannot achieve. Targeted programmes should be designed with a clear focus on GO-NGO partnership to ensure that no child is left behind.

(l) Programme Design and Long-term Support

Programmes should identify child labour in its different forms across districts, map specialised NGOs working on child labour, assess the specific needs of working children, and trace the labour supply chains in which children are engaged. Based on this information, customised programmes should be developed, and long-term support should be provided for each child until they reach the age of 18, ensuring safe exit from the labour market and access to education or training.

(m) Responsibility of Public Agencies and Enforcement

Elimination of child labour should be the mandatory responsibility of multiple public agencies. Social measures alone are insufficient; strong regulatory enforcement is equally important. Although several public agencies are already responsible for identifying and monitoring child labour, these mechanisms are largely ineffective. Key agencies include the National Child Labour Welfare Council (NCLWC), Divisional Child Labour Welfare Council (DCLWC), District Child Rights Monitoring Forum (DCRMF), Upazila Child Labour Monitoring Committee (UCLMC), Department of Inspection of Factories and Establishments (DIFE), Bangladesh Police, and Labour Courts. Agency-specific responsibilities with yearly targets should be defined, monitored regularly, and supported with adequate budget allocations to ensure effective implementation.

(n) Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) Programmes

A conditional cash transfer programme can be introduced to support the elimination of child labour, particularly for children under 14 and those working in hazardous occupations. The programme can be linked to school enrolment and technical training participation. Cash support should cover monthly allowances, school fees, books, learning materials, and admission-related expenses.

(o) Addressing Family Debt and Financial Vulnerability

Monthly cash support should be equivalent to the family's regular debt, which ranges from BDT 2,000 to BDT 4,000 per month for basic living expenses. A yearly, phase-wise CCT programme can initially target children working in hazardous conditions. The estimated annual cost of such a programme would be approximately BDT 2,563 crore (BDT 2,000 × 12 months × 10,68,000 children).

(p) Monitoring, Identification, and Birth Registration

Child labour must be monitored regularly, with systems to identify, trace, and track children under 18 engaged in work. All children require birth registration, and the current system should be modified to allow registration with limited documentation. A digital birth registration system and child labour database should be introduced to integrate children into government and private programmes using a digital identification number. Districts, upazilas, and pourashavas should report and monitor child labour regularly, with strong GO-NGO collaboration ensuring effective implementation.

(q) Child Labour Supply Chain Monitoring

A child labour supply chain monitoring system should be developed and implemented in all districts. Each supply chain should be monitored to identify agents, payment systems, facilities, and work-related hazards. Major public sector agencies should participate in monitoring and take action against illegal practices. GO-NGO collaboration will be essential to identify, monitor, and ensure accountability within these supply chains.

(r) Inclusion in NSSS Action Plan 2026

The upcoming NSSS Action Plan 2026 should include child labour-related social protection as a priority. Child labour elimination should be a key component of the social protection cluster. The plan should clearly define the roles of public and private agencies, their responsibilities, and the required budget allocations to implement effective interventions.

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Annex Table A Ministry-wise Coverage and Allocation of Social Safety Net Programmes (RFY25-BFY26)

Ministries/ Agency	Beneficiaries (in lakh)		Benefits (in Cr. Tk)	
	RFY25	BFY26	RFY25	BFY26
Chief Adviser's Office	0	0	320	144.5
Finance Division	8	8.5	36946.4	43862.9
Health Services Division	0	0	411.15	437.9
Law and Justice Division	1.5	2	28.12	31.72
Local Government Division	0	0	1669.5	1558.6
Ministry of Agriculture	279.6	312.1	17665.9	27700
Ministry of Chittagong Hill Tracts Affairs	5.8	5.8	538.5	465.6
Ministry of Cultural Affairs	0.03	0.04	35.1	41.9
Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief	239.1	241.2	7960.6	8130.6
Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change	0.72	0.72	100	100
Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment	0	0	29.82	50
Ministry of Fisheries and Livestock	12.7	15.4	663.9	633.2
Ministry of Food	160.7	175.5	6421.8	7964.9
Ministry of Labour and Employment	0.2	0.33	32.5	45.9
Ministry of Land	0	0	22.4	116.6
Ministry of Liberation War Affairs	7.4	7.4	6441	7079.3
Ministry of Primary and Mass Education	329.5	309.1	2229.1	4462.5
Ministry of Public Administration	1.28	1.38	498.2	558.5
Ministry of Social Welfare	140.8	148	11033.9	12614.3
Ministry of Women and Children Affairs	27.1	28.28	4003.1	4333
Ministry of Youth and Sports	0	0	250.0	1241.6
Rural Development and Co-operatives Division	0	0	278.2	165.81
Secondary and Higher Education Division	259.6	293.3	4250.7	4302.5
Technical and Madrasah Education Division	11.42	21.32	350.33	689.1

Source: (MoF, 2024).

Annex Table B List of Hazardous Work

Hazardous Work List (Bangladesh)	
1. Manufacturing of Aluminium products	23. Manufacturing of pesticides
2. Automobile Workshops	24. Iron and steel foundry and casting of iron and steel
3. Battery Recharging	25. Fireworks
4. Manufacturing of Bidi and Cigarette	26. Manufacturing of jewellery and imitation ornaments or bangles factory or goldsmith
5. Brick or Stone breaking	27. Truck or Tempo or Bus Helper
6. Engineering Machine including lathe machine	28. Stainless steel mill, cutlery
7. Manufacturing of glass and glass products	29. Bobbin factory
8. Manufacturing of Matches	30. Weaving worker
9. Manufacturing of plastic or rubber products	31. Electric Mechanic
10. Salt refining	32. Biscuit Factory or bakery
11. Manufacturing of soap or detergent	33. Ceramic factory
12. Steel furniture or car or metal furniture painting	34. Construction
13. Tanning and dressing of leather	35. Chemical factory
14. Welding works or gas worker mechanic	36. Butcher
15. Dyeing or bleaching of textiles	37. Blacksmith
16. Ship breaking	38. Handling of goods in the ports and ships
17. Manufacturing of leather footwear	39. Dry fish processing
18. Vulcanizing	40. Informal street-based work
19. Metal Works	41. Production and collection of bricks and stones
20. Manufacturing of GI Sheet products or limestone or chalk products	42. Informal/local tailoring or garments
21. Rectifying or blending or spirit with alcohol	43. Waste picking and management
22. Manufacturing of Jarda and Quivam	

Source: (MoLE, 2022).

The social safety net programmes of Bangladesh were not designed considering the factors along which child labour actually varies. Based on national survey data, key informant interviews, and regional comparisons, this report identifies where the current system falls short and proposes a targeted framework for closing the gap to eliminate child labour.



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