

Modern slavery in Bangladesh

Global Slavery Index 2023 Country Study



KEY STATS

Population (2021) 164,689,000

GDP per capita, PPP (Current intl \$) \$5,995

7.1

PREVALENCE OF MODERN SLAVERY per 1,000 people

1,162,000

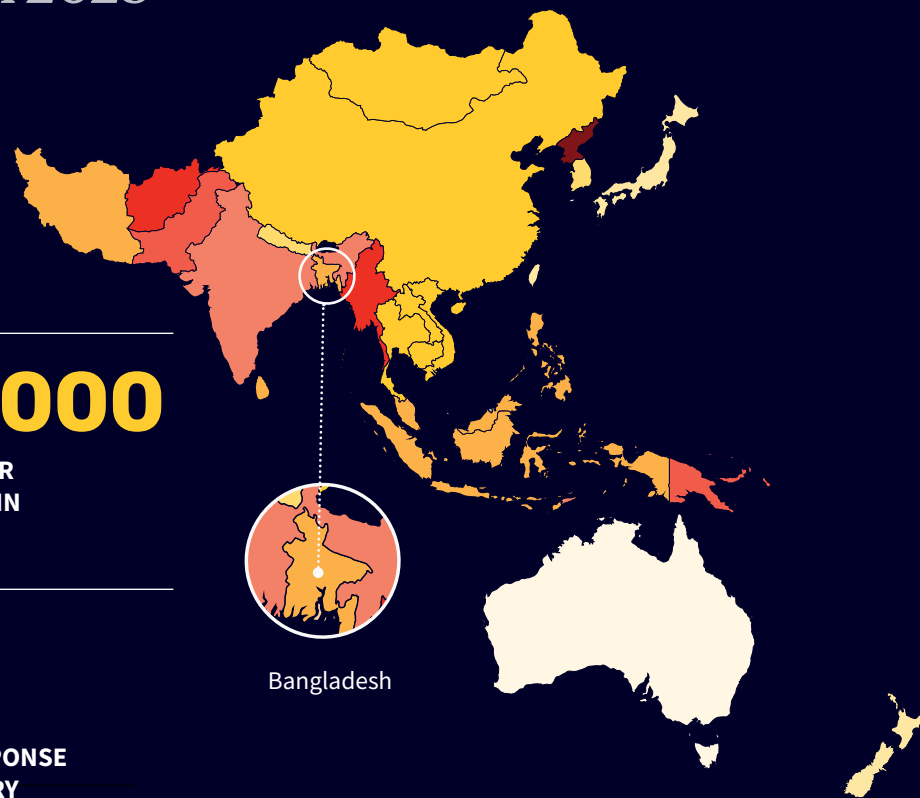
ESTIMATED NUMBER OF PEOPLE LIVING IN MODERN SLAVERY

58/100

VULNERABILITY TO MODERN SLAVERY

49/100

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO MODERN SLAVERY



Bangladesh

Estimated prevalence of modern slavery across Asia and the Pacific



Overview

Bangladesh is outperforming higher-income neighbours in its efforts to address modern slavery.¹ The government has among the strongest responses to modern slavery within Asia and the Pacific, and has taken steps to improve its response since the 2018 Global Slavery Index (GSI), for example, through ratifying the Protocol of 2014 to the Forced Labour Convention, 1930, and launching national action plans to end child marriage² and human trafficking.³ However, significant gaps remain in efforts to identify and support survivors, and to ensure criminal proceedings are trauma-informed and timely. Vulnerability to modern slavery is largely driven by discrimination against minority groups, displacement, violence, and limited monitoring and enforcement of labour laws. The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated vulnerability in high-risk sectors such as garments.

Prevalence

The 2023 GSI estimates that 1.2 million people were in living in modern slavery in Bangladesh on any given day in 2021, a prevalence of 7.1 people in modern slavery per every thousand people in the country. Bangladesh is among countries with the highest prevalence of modern slavery within Asia and the Pacific (nine out of 27), and ranks 56th out of 160 countries globally. In terms of the estimated total number of people in modern slavery, Bangladesh falls within the top 10 countries globally.

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*Dhaka, Bangladesh,
January 2021.*

Labourers unload coal from a cargo ship in Gabtoli on the outskirts of Dhaka. After unloading 30 baskets of coal they earn around US\$1. Kazi Salahuddin Razu/NurPhoto via Getty Images.

Forced labour

Forced labour exploitation

Forced labour is reported in fish processing, ship breaking, and the production of aluminium, bricks, tea, and garments.⁴ Garment sector workers are particularly at risk: while the 2013 Rana Plaza building collapse⁵ led to some reform of labour laws⁶ and improvements in the formal sector,⁷ reports of mistreatment remain widespread.⁸ Female workers in particular continue to face threats, intimidation,⁹ harassment, and sexual violence at work.¹⁰ Conditions worsened during the pandemic with an increase in forced labour reported.¹¹ A 2022 study of workers in the informal ready-made garments sector, where government oversight is severely limited, found that 86 per cent of workers met the criteria for forced labour, with women and internal migrants disproportionately affected.¹²

Children are exploited in the production and transport of drugs, forced begging, and forced labour in brick kilns, domestic work, and fish drying.¹³ In a 2022 study on the worst forms of child labour in eight low-cost settlements across Bangladesh's capital city of Dhaka, over two thirds of 764 children surveyed reported experiencing abuse or exploitation in the workplace, including threats, and verbal, physical, and sexual abuse, indicating a situation of modern slavery.¹⁴

Trafficking for forced labour is widely reported to affect Rohingya refugees who have fled persecution in Myanmar.¹⁵ Rohingya women and girls are particularly at risk of being trafficked from refugee camps into fish processing and domestic labour, often under false offers of work in garment factories.¹⁶ Meanwhile, men are reportedly targeted for forced labour in agriculture and construction,¹⁷ while boys are forced to work as shop-hands, fisherman, construction workers, and rickshaw pullers.¹⁸

Bangladeshi citizens are also trafficked overseas to countries in Asia,¹⁹ Africa,²⁰ and the Gulf.²¹ They are reportedly exploited in debt bondage as a result of loans taken on to pay recruitment fees and travel costs. These loans are owed to both legal recruitment agencies and unlicensed brokers in Bangladesh, who may convey false or misleading information about the job.²²

Forced commercial sexual exploitation of adults

Women and girls are exploited in legal and illegal sex establishments, hotels, and households across Bangladesh, lured with fraudulent promises of work and trapped by fake debts.²³ A 2022 study found that sex traffickers in Bangladesh perpetrated abuse by putting women and girls in situations where they lacked power, and by building trusting relationships to deceive them with false promises.²⁴ Spouses and family members were also found to abuse the trust placed in them to force women into sex work.²⁵

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Women and girls are similarly at risk of being trafficked abroad to India, Pakistan, and Gulf countries for sexual exploitation.²⁶ For example, in mid-2020, Bangladeshi police arrested three men who allegedly trafficked hundreds of women aged between 18 and 25 to Dubai for sexual exploitation, after falsely offering work as housekeepers and dancers in hotels.²⁷

Commercial sexual exploitation of children

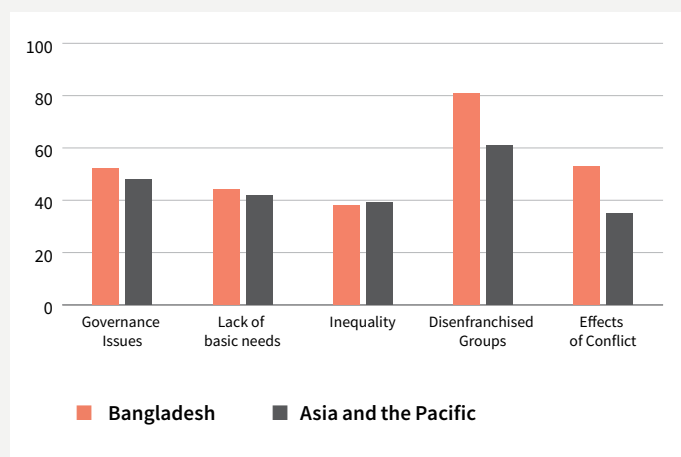
Thousands of girls are reportedly trafficked for sexual exploitation in Bangladeshi sex establishments, often remaining trapped by fake debts imposed upon them by the madams.²⁸ Some girls are raised and exploited in sex establishments after their mothers were also forced into commercial sexual exploitation.²⁹ Corrupt police officers reportedly accept bribes to allow exploitation of, or help obtain false proof-of-age documents for, victims under the age of 18. Traffickers are similarly reported to forge identity documents to transport underage children overseas.³⁰ Under false promises of employment, Bangladeshi and Rohingya girls are trafficked to nearby countries such as India,³¹ Nepal, and Malaysia,³² including by traffickers operating on social media.³³ Civil society organisations report that boys are also trafficked into commercial sexual exploitation in Bangladesh, yet information is scarce.³⁴

Forced marriage

Over the last fifty years, the rate of child marriage among girls has fallen in Bangladesh from more than 90 per cent to just over 50 per cent in 2020; yet Bangladesh still has some of the highest rates of child marriage in the world.³⁵ According to a 2020 UNICEF report, there are 38 million women and girls in Bangladesh who were married as children.³⁶ While boys are also affected, recent data are limited.³⁷ Child marriage is often linked to trafficking for sexual exploitation: half of all respondents in a 2019 study of Bangladeshi sex establishments had been married as children, and considered that the marriage led to their experience of sexual exploitation. Girls married as young as 11 were either trafficked after fleeing the marriage or sold directly by their spouse.³⁸ Adult women are also vulnerable to forced marriage: reports indicate that women from ethnic minority groups are targeted for bride trafficking to China,³⁹ while Rohingya women are trafficked from Cox's Bazar to Malaysia for forced marriage.⁴⁰

Vulnerability

Figure 1.
Vulnerability of Bangladesh to modern slavery by dimension, compared to the regional average



Bangladesh is among the most vulnerable countries to modern slavery in the Asia Pacific region. Vulnerability is largely driven by discrimination towards minority groups, displacement, violence, and limited monitoring and enforcement of labour laws.

The near one million Rohingya seeking refuge in the Cox's Bazar region, after fleeing conflict and persecution in Myanmar, are particularly vulnerable.⁴¹ Humanitarian disasters have fuelled further displacement for this population,⁴² while tensions have risen among host communities due to strained resources.⁴³ The government has also limited Rohingyas' access to education,⁴⁴ the Internet,⁴⁵ and other freedoms.⁴⁶ These difficulties contribute to their risk of modern slavery: traffickers reportedly lure Rohingya with false offers of work or marriage.⁴⁷ In addition, the risk of child marriage – practiced in part due to high value placed on female purity – has increased amid displacement and the lack of regulation in refugee camps.⁴⁸

The LGBTQI+ community also face legal and societal discrimination.⁴⁹ Deep-seated patriarchal norms and the criminalisation of same-sex relations⁵⁰ expose LGBTQI+ individuals to risk of “corrective” forced marriages.⁵¹ Patriarchal norms also fuel child marriage among girls, as either a form of protection against pervasive – and often unchecked⁵² – sexual violence,⁵³ or as a means to preserve female purity and family honour.⁵⁴ Families affected by poverty may seek to marry daughters off before their dowry becomes more expensive with age;⁵⁵ child marriage is more common in rural areas and among girls living in poverty without access to secondary education,⁵⁶ and rates have reportedly risen during the pandemic.⁵⁷ Further, parents may view child marriage as a means to reduce household costs during extreme weather events,⁵⁸ which significantly impact Bangladesh.⁵⁹ Climate-induced migration also spurs vulnerability: traffickers have reportedly targeted Bangladeshis migrating to India in search of income, after flooding and cyclones damaged their agricultural land in the Sundarbans.⁶⁰

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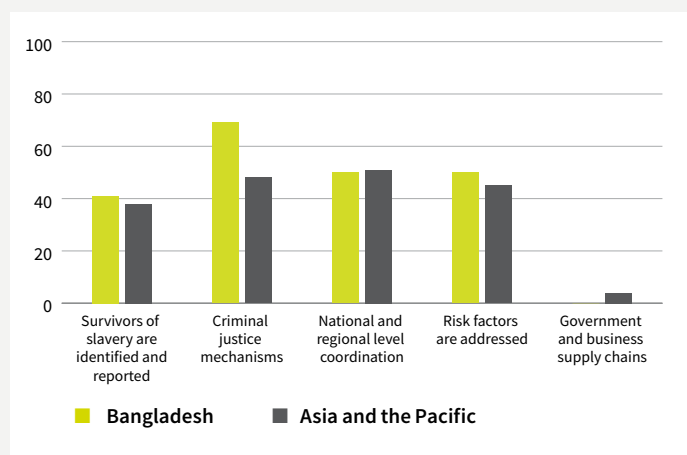
Limited monitoring and enforcement of labour laws exposes workers to labour exploitation, particularly in the informal sector.⁶¹ In the ready-made garments sector, numerous sub-contracting factories operate with minimal oversight, and a culture of impunity enables persistent abuses by management.⁶² In the aftermath of the pandemic, thousands of workers were fired or furloughed,⁶³ and many more experienced wage theft,⁶⁴ causing extreme financial hardship⁶⁵ and increased vulnerability to forced labour, with informal workers, migrants, and women particularly at risk.⁶⁶

Similar risks are documented in tea estates, where piece rates force workers to enlist the help of their families to meet quotas (around 23 kilograms of tea leaves per day) or risk having their pay cut.⁶⁷ Tea workers are subject to low wages, excessive hours, unsanitary accommodation, and fear of punishment.⁶⁸ Exploitation within tea estates often spans generations and is fuelled by persistent poverty, racism, and social inequality.⁶⁹ Women comprise the majority of tea leaf pickers and are further disadvantaged by gender discrimination and lack of access to childcare.⁷⁰

Despite significant progress to reduce poverty in recent decades,⁷¹ over 20 per cent of the nation still lives below the poverty line.⁷² Lack of income opportunities leads many Bangladeshis to migrate abroad where they are vulnerable to exploitation by sub-agents.⁷³ In the wake of COVID-19, migrants who were forced to return were at risk of debt bondage, and often experienced wage withholding.⁷⁴ Children also faced greater risks during the pandemic, with some – particularly boys – taking up hazardous work or moving from already risky to even more dangerous jobs amid an 18-month long school closure.⁷⁵

Government response

Figure 2. Government of Bangladesh's responses to modern slavery by milestone, compared with the regional average



Bangladesh had among the strongest responses to modern slavery in the region, reflecting a range of legislative measures to combat modern slavery. However, efforts to enforce legislation were severely limited, as were efforts to identify and support survivors.

While the government has taken some action to improve victim identification, including through training for police and immigration officials, training is not regular,⁷⁶ and authorities reportedly detained some foreign victims for immigration violations without screening for indicators of trafficking.⁷⁷ While standard operating procedures to identify victims are available for Ministry of Home Affairs officials,⁷⁸ there are no national guidelines for all first responders, and there is no national referral mechanism to ensure victims are referred to services. Further, government-supported services are not accessible for male and foreign victims, and survivors are reportedly held in shelters against their will.⁷⁹

Bangladesh has a relatively strong legislative framework to combat modern slavery. The government acceded to the 2000 UN Trafficking in Persons Protocol in 2019, and ratified the Protocol of 2014 to the Forced Labour Convention, 1930 in early 2022.⁸⁰ Bangladesh also criminalises most forms of modern slavery in line with international standards, including human trafficking under the 2012 Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking Act (PSHTA).⁸¹ However, lack of enforcement undermines the government's criminal justice response. The court system has been overwhelmed, with nearly 5,800 human trafficking cases pending before the courts as of mid-2022.⁸² While the government has established seven special tribunals to accelerate proceedings,⁸³ many survivors reportedly lack a sufficient understanding of the court process and the financial means necessary to pursue legal actions,⁸⁴ limiting access to justice and compensation.

Limited access to justice is compounded by a lack of systematic training for the prosecution and judiciary,⁸⁵ with judicial punishments for crimes tried by mobile courts reportedly insufficient,⁸⁶ and conviction rates low.⁸⁷ Moreover, there is evidence victims of trafficking have been punished for crimes committed while under the control of criminals,⁸⁸ despite protection from criminalisation being enshrined under article 37 of the PSHTA.⁸⁹ The High Court has not taken on trafficking claims filed by Rohingya,⁹⁰ who are not protected by legislation in Bangladesh, and there are reports of official complicity in modern slavery cases, including among diplomatic staff.⁹¹

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Several other gaps in the legislative framework exist. Forced marriage is not explicitly criminalised within national legislation, although article 366 of the Penal Code prohibits the abduction of a woman knowing she will be forced to marry,⁹² and while the 2017 Child Marriage Restraint Act criminalises child marriage, there are exceptions to the minimum age of 18 in “special circumstances.”⁹³ This may lead to marriage to protect family honour in the case of rape or pregnancy.⁹⁴ Promisingly in 2018, the government launched the National Plan of Action to End Child Marriage 2018-2030⁹⁵ and the National Plan of Action for Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking 2018-2022 (NAP),⁹⁶ which has been extended to 2025.⁹⁷ While 95 per cent of activities under the NAP are reportedly covered by funding for the Sustainable Development Goals,⁹⁸ NGOs cite funding gaps in practice.⁹⁹

Several other risk factors remain unaddressed. No labour inspections are conducted in the informal sector,¹⁰⁰ despite accounting for 85 per cent of the total workforce,¹⁰¹ and while workers covered by the Labour Act have the right to join trade unions and engage in collective bargaining, workers in export processing zones are excluded.¹⁰² Rights to unionise have deteriorated in recent years,¹⁰³ and protests are met with indiscriminate police violence.¹⁰⁴ Further, although charging migrant workers unlawfully high recruitment fees is prohibited,¹⁰⁵ certain fixed rate fees are permitted and, in practice, fees are substantially higher, increasing risk of debt bondage among migrants.¹⁰⁶ The government has committed to addressing these deceptive recruitment practices, though action is yet to be taken.¹⁰⁷ Concerningly, Bangladesh takes no action to address modern slavery in supply chains.



THE GLOBAL SLAVERY INDEX 2023



WALK FREE

For more information on modern slavery, visit the Global Slavery Index 2023 website.



Recommendations

- 1 Survivors identified and supported**
 - Ensure survivor support services, including shelters, crisis support centres, and community-based protection, cover all populations – including males and migrants – and ensure no victims are detained in shelters against their will.
 - Deliver victim identification training at regular intervals for all frontline regulatory workers, implement national guidelines for first responders to identify and screen victims, and establish a national referral mechanism to support referral of victims to services.
- 2 Criminal justice mechanisms**
 - Focus resources on expediting the court process for human trafficking cases, ensuring judicial punishments are proportionate, including via regular training for the judiciary and prosecution.
 - Remove all legal loopholes that allow marriage under the age of 18 to occur, criminalise forced marriage in line with international standards, and provide civil protections that allow survivors to choose which solution best suits their needs.
 - Tackle underlying drivers of forced marriage, including engaging with communities to subvert harmful patriarchal norms and amending gender discriminatory legislation.
- 3 National and regional level coordination**
 - Pursue and strengthen bilateral and multilateral labour agreements with key receiving countries, including the Gulf States, to protect migrant workers and cooperate with other sending countries to advocate for common standards for the protection of workers, in consultation with migrant workers, survivors, and civil society.
- 4 Risk factors are addressed**
 - Work with international organisations such as UNHCR to implement policies and procedures to grant asylum and refugee status to those in need and equip humanitarian practitioners to respond to modern slavery risks in crisis settings by rolling out the Global Protection Cluster’s Introductory Guide to Anti-Trafficking Action in Internal Displacement Contexts.¹⁰⁸
 - Ensure the right to freedom of association and collective bargaining for all, and regularly conduct labour inspections, including in the informal sector. Introduce and enforce laws to prohibit charging of recruitment fees to employees and register and monitor local recruitment agencies for deceptive practices.
 - Ensure all reports of official complicity in modern slavery cases are thoroughly investigated and prosecuted where necessary.
- 5 Government and business supply chains**
 - Introduce mandatory human rights due diligence to stop government and businesses from sourcing goods or services linked to modern slavery.

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