

In 2022, Sri Lanka made moderate advancement in efforts to eliminate the worst forms of child labor. The government amended the Children and Young Persons Ordinance to raise the age of majority from 16 to 18 to align this law with international standards. The government worked with the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund to implement a \$34 million campaign to support children's school attendance, nutrition, and safety in response to the economic crisis. The Sri Lankan Police also made criminal law enforcement data related to the worst forms of child labor publicly available for the first time. However, children in Sri Lanka are subjected to the worst forms of child labor, including in commercial sexual exploitation, sometimes as a result of human trafficking, and forced domestic work. Research indicates that some children in rural areas face barriers to accessing education, including difficulties in traveling to school, an inadequate number of teachers, and challenges with registration. Furthermore, the labor inspectorate lacked sufficient staffing and funding to carry out an adequate number of inspections, including in factories in the northern and eastern provinces.



I. PREVALENCE AND SECTORAL DISTRIBUTION OF CHILD LABOR

Table 1 provides key indicators on children's work and education in Sri Lanka.

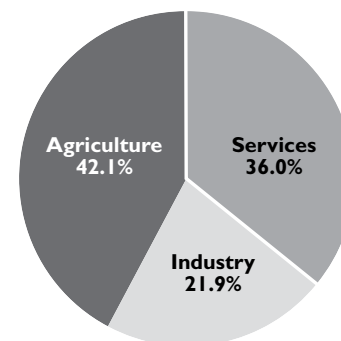
Table 1. Statistics on Children's Work and Education

Children	Age	Percent
Working (% and population)	5 to 14	0.8 (28,515)
Attending School (%)	5 to 14	98.0
Combining Work and School (%)	7 to 14	0.9
Primary Completion Rate (%)		98.2

Source for primary completion rate: Data from 2020, published by UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2023. (1)

Source for all other data: International Labor Organization's analysis of statistics from Child Activity Survey (CAS), 2016. (2)

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



Based on a review of available information, Table 2 provides an overview of children's work by sector and activity.

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

Sector/Industry	Activity
Agriculture	Farming, including raising livestock (3-7)
	Fishing, including deep-sea fishing,† processing fish, and selling fish (3,4,6-10)
Industry	Manufacturing, including textiles and garments, and food processing (3,4,6,7,11)
	Mining† and construction† (3,4,6-9,11)
Services	Domestic work (3,4,6,7,9,12)
	Vending, in stores and on the streets, and begging (3,4,6-9)
	Working in hotels, restaurants, and offices (6)
	Providing security for people and property (8)
	Transportation (4)
	Painting and washing of buildings (8)

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

Sector/Industry	Activity
Categorical Worst Forms of Child Labor†	Commercial sexual exploitation, sometimes as a result of human trafficking (5,9,12-15)
	Forced domestic work (5,12)
	Use in illicit activities, including drug trafficking (5,12,16,17)

† Determined by national law or regulation as hazardous and, as such, relevant to Article 3(d) of ILO C. 182.

‡ Child labor understood as the worst forms of child labor *per se* under Article 3(a)–(c) of ILO C. 182.

During the reporting period, a severe economic crisis and an associated food emergency led to increased reports of children engaging in child labor and decreased school attendance. (8,18-21) According to the Sri Lankan Department of Labor, children living in coastal and agricultural areas, mining areas, and firewood-producing areas were vulnerable to child labor. (9,22) Cases of debt distress for housing and accommodation expenses were documented among workers, many of whom also faced ethnic discrimination, at private, smallholding tea estates, which increased the risk of child labor in the tea sector. (4,9,23) Smallholder farmers faced increased labor and production costs and labor shortages during harvest times, and often relied on children under the age of 12 to help during the harvest period. (24)







There are reports of children subjected to child trafficking internally, including from tea estates, to perform domestic work in Colombo. In addition, child domestic workers are subjected to sexual, physical, and psychological abuse, non-payment of wages, and restrictions of movement. (5,9) Children, predominantly boys, are also forced into commercial sexual exploitation, sometimes as a result of human trafficking, in tourist areas as part of the sex tourism industry. (4,8,9,13,15,25) Mobile apps with GPS are increasingly being used to indicate availability of minors for commercial sexual exploitation. (4,26) There are also reports of sexual exploitation of children at state-run orphanages. (12)

Although the government provides free, compulsory education, some children face barriers to accessing education due to a lack of transportation and an inadequate number of teachers. There are a lack of high schools in some rural areas, and children are particularly vulnerable to leaving school early. (8,9) Additionally, there have been reports that children who are unable to provide birth certificates, such as children born abroad to Sri Lankan mothers and non-Sri Lankan fathers, are denied access to education. (8) The 2016 Child Activity Survey’s definition of child labor does not align with international standards because children ages 5 to 11 working less than 15 hours per week and children ages 12 to 14 working less than 25 hours per week in agriculture are not counted as child laborers. These issues may have led to an underestimation of the population of children in child labor in the Child Activity Survey. (6) In 2022, government officials began discussion of the questionnaire for the next Child Activity Survey. (8)

II. LEGAL FRAMEWORK FOR CHILD LABOR

Sri Lanka has ratified all key international conventions concerning child labor (Table 3).

Table 3. Ratification of International Conventions on Child Labor

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

The government's laws and regulations are in line with relevant international standards (Table 4).

Table 4. Laws and Regulations on Child Labor

Standard	Meets International Standards	Age	Legislation
Minimum Age for Work	Yes	16	Sections 7, 9, 13, and 34 of the Employment of Women, Young Persons, and Children Act; Section 6 of the Employment of Women, Young Persons and Children Amendment Act; Section 2 of the Shop and Office Employees (Regulation of Employment and Remuneration) (Amendment) Act; Sections 2–7 of the Factories (Amendment) Act; Sections 2–4 of the Minimum Wages (Indian Labor) (Amendment) Act (27-31)
Minimum Age for Hazardous Work	Yes	18	Section 20A of the Employment of Women, Young Persons, and Children Act (27)
Identification of Hazardous Occupations or Activities Prohibited for Children	Yes		Hazardous Occupations Regulations No. 01; Section 20A of the Employment of Women, Young Persons, and Children Act (27,32)
Prohibition of Forced Labor	Yes		Sections 358A, 360C, 360A(2), and 360A(4) of the Penal Code (33)
Prohibition of Child Trafficking	Yes		Sections 360C, 360A(2), and 360A(4) of the Penal Code (33)
Prohibition of Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children	Yes		Sections 286A, 360B, 360A(2), and 360A(4) of the Penal Code (33)
Prohibition of Using Children in Illicit Activities	Yes		Sections 288, 288A, 288B, and 360C of the Penal Code (33)
Minimum Age for Voluntary State Military Recruitment	Yes	18	Sections 20A and 31 of the Employment of Women, Young Persons, and Children Act (27)
Prohibition of Compulsory Recruitment of Children by (State) Military	N/A*		
Prohibition of Military Recruitment by Non-state Armed Groups	Yes		358(1)(d) of the Penal Code; Sections 20A and 31 of the Employment of Women, Young Persons, and Children Act (27,33)
Compulsory Education Age	Yes	16	Section 43 of the Education Ordinance; Compulsory Attendance of Children at Schools Regulation No. 1 of 2015 (34,35)
Free Public Education	Yes		Section 47 of the Education Ordinance (34)

* Country has no conscription (36)

During the reporting period, the government amended the Children and Young Persons Ordinance to define individuals under 18 years old as children in line with international standards. (37) This change enables children under age 18, previously age 16, to be treated as minors in the criminal justice system and be eligible for government services designated for children. (38-41)

III. ENFORCEMENT OF LAWS ON CHILD LABOR

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

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Table 5. Agencies Responsible for Child Labor Law Enforcement

Organization/Agency	Role & Activities
Department of Labor, in the Ministry of Labor and Foreign Employment (MOLFE)	Enforces labor laws related to the employment of children and young persons, including overseeing the labor inspectorate and the Women and Children's Affairs Division. Receives public complaints of child labor lodged in national and district-level offices. (3,8,9,42) Receives complaints from other state organizations, including from the National Child Protection Authority. Conducts special investigations of child labor and hazardous labor, and takes legal action as necessary. (3,9) In 2022, investigated 145 complaints of child labor and hazardous child labor, resulting in 11 confirmed violations. Children were referred for assistance to relevant care organizations, including the Department of Probations and Child Care Services and the respective Divisional Secretariats. (8) During the reporting period, MOLFE incorporated actions from the National Child Protection Authority's action plan into its own operations and began establishing a Forced Labor Task Force, with one meeting held in 2022. Also strengthened the national coordination mechanism for child labor through Alliance 8.7. (8,43) Moreover, conducted a public awareness campaign about the elimination of child labor, including producing a theme song and documentary that was broadcast over the national state channel in both Sinhala and Tamil and shared via social media. Additionally, implemented a SMS messaging campaign on minimum age and hazardous employment and partnered with human resources and management faculties of government and government-approved universities to educate undergraduate students on laws, including child labor laws. (8,43)
Sri Lankan Police	The Children and Women's Bureau of the Sri Lankan Police enforces laws on child labor, child trafficking, commercial sexual exploitation of children, and the use of children in illicit activities. (5) Also supervises the National Child Protection Authority Special Police Investigation Unit, which has approximately 40 police officers who investigate complaints and enforce criminal laws involving children, including complaints of child labor and the worst forms of child labor. (5,8,9,38,44) Has approximately 300 child protection officers based in the districts who are tasked with preventing child exploitation and protecting survivors. (9) The Criminal Investigations Department of the Sri Lanka Police investigates cases and reports outcomes to magistrates. (8) The Criminal Investigations Department also prepares indictments and forwards cases to the relevant High Court. The Attorney General's Office is responsible for prosecution in the High Court. (8) In 2022, the National Child Protection Authority conducted 13 information sessions with hotel owners and personnel to improve awareness of commercial sexual exploitation of children during travel. (38) Also sent some staff to participate in a 2-day training on forensic interviewing and worked with Save the Children to conduct research and develop training materials on child trafficking. (8,38)
National Anti-Human Trafficking Taskforce	Coordinates interagency efforts to address all human trafficking issues, including commercial sexual exploitation and forced labor. Falls under the Ministry of Defense's National Intelligence Division and is chaired by the Chief of National Intelligence. Includes representatives from a range of government agencies, including the Ministry of Social Services, Ministry of Women and Child Affairs, Department of Labor, National Child Protection Authority, Department of Probation and Child Care, Police Criminal Division, and Bureau for the Prevention of Abuse to Women and Children. (38,44)

Labor Law Enforcement

In 2022, labor law enforcement agencies in Sri Lanka took actions to address child labor (Table 6). However, gaps exist within the operations of the Ministry of Labor and Foreign Employment that may hinder adequate labor law enforcement, including insufficient financial resource allocation.

Table 6. Labor Law Enforcement Efforts Related to Child Labor

Overview of Labor Law Enforcement	2021	2022
Labor Inspectorate Funding	\$1,933,333 (4)	\$1,414,103 (8)
Number of Labor Inspectors	570 (4)	587 (8)
Mechanism to Assess Civil Penalties	Yes (28)	Yes (28)
Training for Labor Inspectors Provided	Yes (4)	Yes (8)
Number of Labor Inspections Conducted at Worksite	71,246 (43,45)	70,089 (8)
Number of Child Labor Violations Found	7 (8)	11 (8)
Number of Child Labor Violations for Which Penalties Were Imposed	1 (4)	2 (8)
Number of Child Labor Penalties Imposed that Were Collected	3 (4)	2 (8)
Routine Inspections Conducted	Yes (4)	Yes (8)
Routine Inspections Targeted	Yes (4)	Yes (8)
Unannounced Inspections Permitted	Yes (28)	Yes (28)
Unannounced Inspections Conducted	Yes (4)	Yes (8)
Complaint Mechanism Exists	Yes (4)	Yes (8)
Reciprocal Referral Mechanism Exists Between Labor Authorities and Social Services	Yes (8)	Yes (8,43)

Following amendments in 2021 to increase the minimum age of employment to age 16, in 2022, Department of Labor officers were issued implementing guidance on the minimum age for work. (8) Moreover, 68 labor inspectors from all regional offices participated in a training on the amendments and 28 labor inspectors attended a 2-day workshop on labor laws and court procedures, including those related to child labor. In addition, 90 Department of Labor officers, 45 police officers, and 45 probation officers attended 4 training programs on child labor, hazardous child labor, and child trafficking. (8)

The labor inspectorate is not authorized to assess penalties. Penalties for child labor law violations are available under the Employment of Women, Young Persons, and Children Act, instead of under the authority of the labor inspectorate. (8,27) Penalties include a maximum fine of up to \$50 and up to 12 months' imprisonment. The magistrate's court levies any fines, imprisonment, or compensation for the child victim. (4) The fine is collected by the registrar's office of the court, and compensation is given to the guardian of the child or deposited in a bank account under the child's name. (8) While in practice there is coordination and an informal referral mechanism between the National Child Protection Authority and the Department of Labor, there is not a formal coordination system. Moreover, there are gaps and delays in referrals between the police and the Department of Labor. (8,43) During the reporting period, the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) began conducting a mapping of the referral mechanism and an assessment of the complaint mechanism. (8) Additionally, although the hazardous occupations list includes domestic work, labor inspectors only have the authority to inspect private residences for violations against child domestic workers if a complaint was received. (4,12) Routine inspections, especially of factories in the northern and eastern provinces, were limited by insufficient staffing, insufficient budget, and a fuel shortage. (4,8,9,12,46)

Criminal Law Enforcement

In 2022, criminal law enforcement agencies in Sri Lanka took actions to address child labor (Table 7). However, gaps exist within the operations of enforcement agencies that may hinder adequate criminal law enforcement, including a lack of resources to carry out investigations.

Table 7. Criminal Law Enforcement Efforts Related to Child Labor

Overview of Criminal Law Enforcement	2021	2022
Training for Criminal Investigators Provided	Yes (4)	Yes (8)
Number of Investigations	Unknown (4)	19 (8)
Number of Prosecutions Initiated	Unknown (4)	3 (8)
Number of Convictions	Unknown (4)	0 (8)
Imposed Penalties for Violations Related to the Worst Forms of Child Labor	Yes (4)	Yes (8)
Reciprocal Referral Mechanism Exists Between Criminal Authorities and Social Services	Yes (4)	Yes (8)

In 2022, the Children and Women's Bureau of the Sri Lankan Police conducted an exercise to identify children engaged in begging in four locations. Children were removed from their locations and referred to the appropriate social services. (8) During the reporting period, Sri Lankan Police investigated three cases related to forced child labor, seven cases related to child commercial sexual exploitation, and nine cases related to the use of children in illicit activities. The Sri Lankan Police made these disaggregated criminal data available for the first time. (8)

The government arrested 41 people in a high-profile child sex trafficking case in 2021, including 1 Deputy Chairman of a local divisional council, 2 police officers, and a Navy officer; however, the investigation is still paused. (4,43,47,48) There are isolated reports that a lack of awareness and misunderstanding of human trafficking led some local authorities to arrest or detain child sex trafficking survivors for alleged unlawful acts committed as a direct result of trafficking without proper screening; however, the government did not penalize child human trafficking survivors for unlawful acts that traffickers compelled them to commit when survivors were properly identified. (12,25,46) Moreover, research found that investigators did not have adequate facilities to conduct investigations and record evidence, such as computers and transportation, or human resources to carry out investigations. (3,4,8,9,49)

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IV. COORDINATION OF GOVERNMENT EFFORTS ON CHILD LABOR

The government has established a key mechanism to coordinate its efforts to address child labor (Table 8).

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

Coordinating Body	Role & Activities
National Steering Committee on Child Labor Elimination	Coordinates efforts to prevent and eliminate child labor, including the implementation of the National Policy on the Elimination of Child Labor in Sri Lanka. Chaired by the Secretary of MOLFE and includes representatives from key government agencies, employers' and workers' organizations, ILO, UNICEF, and NGOs. (8,9) In 2022, convened one time and discussed consolidating agencies' individual action plans and increasing implementation of the Child Labor-Free Zone model. (8,43)

V. GOVERNMENT POLICIES ON CHILD LABOR

The government has established policies that are consistent with relevant international standards on child labor (Table 9).

Table 9. Key Policies Related to Child Labor

Policy	Description & Activities
National Policy on the Elimination of Child Labor in Sri Lanka	Aims to mainstream child labor issues into national development policies, improve enforcement, and support collaboration with key stakeholders. (50) During the reporting period, the Women and Children's Affairs Division of the Department of Labor implemented awareness raising and training activities as outlined in this policy. (8,43)
National Child Protection Policy	Established by the National Child Protection Authority as a measure to address issues faced by children, including reducing sexual exploitation of children during travel in Sri Lanka. (3,9,43) During the reporting period, conducted an education awareness campaign and began consulting stakeholders on commercial sexual exploitation of children in the tourism sector. (51)
ILO Decent Work Country Program (2018–2022)	Detailed the priorities and outcomes required to make progress towards the goal of decent work for all. Identified key areas of work for the eradication of child labor by 2022, including operationalizing the Child Labor-Free Zone model in additional districts, expanding the inspection system to cover child labor in the informal sector, raising the minimum age for employment to age 16, revising regulations on hazardous child labor, improving the complaints and referral mechanisms, and regularly collecting data on child labor. (52) During 2022, the existing Decent Work Country Program was extended. (8)

‡ The government had other policies that may have addressed child labor issues or had an impact on child labor. (8,53,54)

VI. SOCIAL PROGRAMS TO ADDRESS CHILD LABOR

In 2022, the government funded and participated in programs that include the goal of eliminating or preventing child labor (Table 10). However, gaps exist in these social programs, including inadequate funding to address child labor in all regions.

Table 10. Key Social Programs to Address Child Labor

Program	Description & Activities
Child Labor-Free Zone Model†	Local government initiatives that seek to eliminate child labor through the identification of children engaged in child labor, a rehabilitation program, assistance to families of children at risk of engaging in child labor, and an awareness-raising campaign. Operated by district secretariats with assistance from the Department of Labor and with technical and financial support from ILO. (9) During the reporting period, existing programming was continued in four districts; however, expansion was paused. (8)
Humanitarian Action for Children*	\$34 million UNICEF-led campaign to support children's school attendance, nutrition, and safety in response to the economic crisis. In 2022, provided educational materials to over 285,000 children, provided cash transfers for 3,000 families, and enabled access to the 1929 Helpline for 2,000 people. (21)
'1929' Childline Sri Lanka‡	National Child Protection Authority-funded and operated 24-hour toll-free emergency telephone service for vulnerable and abused children. Connects children in need of help to direct assistance and rehabilitation services. (3,55) Reported to be active during 2022. (55)

For information about USDOL's projects to address child labor around the world, visit <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/ilab-project-page-search>

* Program was launched during the reporting period.

† Program is funded by the Government of Sri Lanka.

‡ The government had other social programs that may have included the goal of eliminating or preventing child labor. (4,8,9,21,56)

The Provincial Department of Probation and Child Care Services operates 379 childcare institutions that provide services such as access to basic needs, pediatric and psychiatric care, and educational services for children involved in child exploitation cases, including cases related to the worst forms of child labor. (38,43) In 2022, the Department of Labor entered into an MOU with the Malinan Gold Marie Nidahase Ran Daruwo Fund to financially support families of children previously engaging in child labor and families identified as vulnerable to child labor by providing educational scholarships to the child and support to families to start a business. (8)

However, due to the economic crisis and the government's reduction in budgets, some state school meal programs ended. (8)

VII. SUGGESTED GOVERNMENT ACTIONS TO ELIMINATE CHILD LABOR

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

Table 11. Suggested Government Actions to Eliminate Child Labor

Area	Suggested Action	Year(s) Suggested
Enforcement	Provide investigators with additional funding and adequate resources—including transportation, fuel, computers, facilities to record evidence, and human resources—to adequately investigate forced labor, child trafficking, and the commercial sexual exploitation of children.	2011 – 2022
	Provide adequate staffing in the northern and eastern provinces for the labor inspectorate to carry out inspections.	2019 – 2022
	Ensure that labor inspectors have the authority to inspect private residences for violations against child workers if they have reasonable suspicion of child labor violations occurring, regardless of whether an official complaint is received.	2021 – 2022
	Address the delays and gaps in referrals between the Department of Labor, National Child Protection Authority, and Sri Lankan Police.	2022
Social Programs	Ensure that the definition of child labor used in national child labor surveys to calculate child labor statistics aligns with international standards so that the estimated population of children in child labor in the Child Activity Survey is correct.	2017 – 2022
	Improve access to education by addressing difficulties with transportation to schools, teacher shortages, an inadequate number of high schools in rural areas, and barriers related to enrollment documents.	2012 – 2022
	Reinstate school meal programs in order to support school attendance.	2022
	Institute programs to address vulnerabilities to child labor, particularly for ethnic minorities, in tea estates and in coastal, agricultural, mining, and firewood-producing areas.	2019 – 2022
	Ensure the continued implementation and expansion of key social programs to address child labor in line with the Decent Work Country Program, including the Child Labor-Free Zone Model.	2022

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