

# Sri Lanka

## MODERATE ADVANCEMENT

In 2024, Sri Lanka made moderate advancement in efforts to eliminate the worst forms of child labor. The Sri Lanka Department of Labor conducted a study in Colombo on children ages 5 to 18 years to evaluate the effectiveness of existing child labor elimination programs and assess the extent and prevalence of child labor. The Ministry of Education also expanded the School Meal Program to provide free school breakfasts to all primary school children nationwide. Previously, the program had only provided free meals to students primarily in remote provinces. Finally, the National Child Protection Authority launched the International Reporting Portal for Child Sexual Abuse Material, which allows the public to report any such material they encounter online. The reports are reviewed to identify information about the perpetrators, which is sent to the Sri Lanka Police for action. Although the government made meaningful efforts in all relevant areas, the government did not initiate prosecutions or convict public officials complicit in child sex trafficking. Additionally, some children in rural areas face barriers to accessing education, including long distances to school, and an inadequate number of teachers. Finally, the labor inspectorate continues to lack sufficient staffing and funding to identify child labor violations.

## PREVALENCE AND SECTORAL DISTRIBUTION OF CHILD LABOR

Statistics on Children’s Work and Education			Working Children by Sector, Ages 5-14	
Children	Age	Percent and Population	Sector/Industry	Percent of Population
Working	5 to 14	0.8% (28,515)	Agriculture	42.1%
Hazardous Work by Children	15 to 17	Unavailable	Industry	21.9%
Attending School	5 to 14	98.0%	Services	36.0%
Combining Work and School	7 to 14	0.9%		

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. Children also engage in child labor in mining and construction.

Overview of Children’s Work by Sector and Activity	
Agriculture	Farming, including raising livestock, and deep-sea fishing.†
Industry	Manufacturing and food processing. Mining† and construction.†
Services	Vending, in stores and on the streets, and begging. Working in hotels, restaurants, and offices. Providing security for people and property. Domestic work, transportation, and painting and washing buildings.
Categorical Worst Forms of Child Labor‡	Commercial sexual exploitation, sometimes as a result of human trafficking, and forced domestic work. Use in illicit activities, including drug trafficking.

† 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.

## SUGGESTED GOVERNMENT ACTIONS TO ELIMINATE CHILD LABOR

The suggested government actions below would close gaps USDOL has identified in Sri Lanka's implementation of its international commitments to eliminate the worst forms of child labor.

Area	Suggested Action
Enforcement	Provide criminal law enforcement investigators with adequate funding and resources—including personnel, transportation, fuel, and computers—to adequately investigate the worst forms of child labor.
	Increase budget for the labor inspectorate to employ at least 569 inspectors to ensure adequate coverage of the labor force of approximately 8.5 million people, and provide adequate funding for training, transportation, fuel, and other materials—especially in the northern and eastern provinces where there are insufficient labor inspectors to perform inspections of factories.

Area	Suggested Action
	<p>Authorize inspection of private residences for violations against child workers if there is reasonable suspicion of child labor violations occurring, regardless of whether an official complaint is received.</p> <p>Strengthen coordination between government agencies responsible for addressing and preventing child labor—including the National Child Protection Agency, the Sri Lanka Police, and the Department of Labor—by adopting case referral procedures and by coordinating case data sharing related to child labor investigations and interventions.</p> <p>Investigate and prosecute as appropriate public officials allegedly complicit in child sex trafficking.</p>
<b>Social Programs</b>	<p>Align the definition of child labor used to calculate child labor statistics in national child labor surveys with international standards so that the estimated population of children in child labor is accurate.</p> <p>Improve access to education by increasing programs to offset educational costs, improve transportation to schools, address teacher shortages, increase secondary schools in rural areas, and ensure accessibility for children with disabilities.</p> <p>Make free basic public education accessible to all children residing in Sri Lanka, including refugees and asylum seekers.</p> <p>Institute programs to address vulnerabilities to child labor, particularly for populations on tea estates and in coastal, agricultural, mining, and firework-producing areas.</p>

## CHILDREN AT HIGHER RISK

Children living in coastal, agricultural, and mining areas are at higher risk of child labor. Extremely low pay for workers—many of whom are ethnic minorities and experience discrimination—on private and smallholding tea estates increases the probability of these workers' children becoming involved in child labor. Parents on these tea estates are often unable to pay the cost of transportation to education facilities, forcing their children to drop out of school at an early age and rendering them vulnerable to child labor on the plantations. Smallholder farmers face increased labor and production costs, as well as labor shortages during harvest times, often relying on children under the age of 12 to help during the harvest period. 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.

## BARRIERS TO EDUCATION ACCESS

Although the government provides free, compulsory education, this is not available to refugee and asylum seeker children residing in Sri Lanka. Additionally, some children face barriers to accessing education due to a lack of transportation and an inadequate number of teachers. There is a lack of high schools in some rural areas and plantations, and children in these areas are particularly susceptible to child labor. There have also 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. Reports indicate that accessing education is disproportionately difficult for children with disabilities, who attend school at lower rates than children without disabilities, due to families' lack of understanding of disabilities and stigma around hiring youth with disabilities.

## LEGAL FRAMEWORK FOR CHILD LABOR

Sri Lanka has ratified all key international conventions concerning child labor. In addition, Sri Lanka's laws and regulations are in line with relevant international standards.

Laws and Regulations on Child Labor			
Standard	Age	Meets International Standards	Legislation
Minimum Age for Work	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
Minimum Age for Hazardous Work	18	✓	Section 20A of the Employment of Women, Young Persons, and Children Act
Identification of Hazardous Occupations or Activities Prohibited for Children		✓	Hazardous Occupations Regulations No. 01; Section 20A of the Employment of Women, Young Persons, and Children Act
Prohibition of Slavery, Debt Bondage, and Forced Labor		✓	Sections 358A and 360C of the Penal Code
Prohibition of Child Trafficking		✓	Sections 360C, 360A(2), and 360A(4) of the Penal Code
Prohibition of Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children		✓	Sections 286A, 360B, 360A(2), 360A(4), and 360E of the Penal Code
Prohibition of Using Children in Illicit Activities		✓	Sections 288, 288A, 288B, and 360C of the Penal Code
Minimum Age for Voluntary State Military Recruitment	18	✓	Sections 20A and 31 of the Employment of Women, Young Persons, and Children Act
Prohibition of Compulsory Recruitment of Children by (State) Military		N/A	
Prohibition of Military Recruitment by Non-state Armed Groups		✓	Section 358(1)(d) of the Penal Code; Sections 20A and 31 of the Employment of Women, Young Persons, and Children Act
Compulsory Education Age	16	✓	Section 43 of the Education Ordinance; Compulsory Attendance of Children at Schools Regulation No. 1 of 2015
Free Public Education		✓	Section 47 of the Education Ordinance

## ENFORCEMENT OF LAWS ON CHILD LABOR

In 2024, labor and criminal law enforcement agencies in Sri Lanka took actions to address child labor. However, insufficient resource allocation for the labor inspectorate hindered enforcement efforts.

Agencies Responsible for Child Labor Law Enforcement
<p><b>Department of Labor (DOL), in the Ministry of Labor and Foreign Employment (MOLFE):</b> 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. 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. During the reporting period, labor officers participated in trainings related to collective bargaining, social dialogue, grievance handling, and good governance and integrity. All new labor inspectors received trainings on labor laws, and all labor inspectors received training on the proposed new Employment Act. Through collaboration with the Sri Lankan Police, DOL started an initiative that uses village-level Civil Security Committees to spread child labor awareness at a grassroots level. Additionally, DOL conducted a child activity study in the Colombo District during the reporting period to assess the effectiveness of existing child labor elimination programs.</p>

### Agencies Responsible for Child Labor Law Enforcement

**Sri Lankan Police:** Supervise 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. The National Child Protection Authority also works with the National Anti-Human Trafficking Taskforce to address human trafficking issues, including commercial sexual exploitation and forced labor. The Sri Lankan Police have approximately 300 child protection officers based in the districts who are tasked with preventing child exploitation and protecting survivors. The Criminal Investigations Department investigates cases, prepares indictments, and forwards cases to the relevant High Court, while the Attorney General's Office is responsible for prosecutions in the High Court. In addition, the Children and Women's Bureau enforces laws related to the worst forms of child labor. In 2024, the National Child Protection Authority launched the International Reporting Portal for Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM), in which the public can report CSAM they encounter online. These reports are investigated and traced for identifying perpetrator information, which is then sent to the Sri Lankan police for action. Also in 2024, the Sri Lankan Police participated in trainings focused on crimes against children, as well as a training on child victim-centered forensic interview skills.

### Enforcement Mechanisms and Efforts

Has a Labor Inspectorate	Yes
Able to Assess Civil Penalties	Yes
Routinely Conducted Worksite Inspections	Yes
Unannounced Inspections Permitted	Yes
Has a Complaint Mechanism	Yes
Imposed Penalties for Child Labor Violations	Yes
Conducted Criminal Investigations for Worst Forms of Child Labor Crimes	Yes
Imposed Penalties for Worst Forms of Child Labor Crimes	Yes

Between January and October of 2024, **499** labor inspectors conducted **64,702** worksite inspections, finding **2** child labor violations. Criminal law enforcement initiated **1** prosecution, convicted **2** perpetrators, and conducted **1** investigation for crimes related to the worst forms of child labor. Although there is evidence of some public officials being complicit in child sex trafficking, the government did not investigate or prosecute any public officials allegedly involved in these crimes during the reporting period.

## COORDINATION, POLICIES, AND PROGRAMS

Sri Lanka established a mechanism to coordinate its efforts to address child labor.

### Key Mechanism to Coordinate Government Efforts on Child Labor

**National Steering Committee on Child Labor Elimination (NSCECL):** Coordinates efforts to prevent and eliminate child labor and oversees the National Policy on the Elimination of Child Labor in Sri Lanka. Chaired by the Secretary of MOLFE and includes representatives from 18 key government agencies, employers' and workers' organizations, ILO, UNICEF, and NGOs. During the reporting period, the Committee finalized a roadmap with a primary focus on addressing child labor through prevention, protection, prosecution, and partnerships. NSCECL met in February and October of the reporting period.

Sri Lanka established policies that are consistent with relevant international standards on child labor.

### Key Policies Related to Child Labor

**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. During the reporting period, Sri Lanka's DOL invited private sector employers to sign a pledge that they would not employ children in their business operations, which was signed by 85 companies. Sri Lanka's DOL also signed a memorandum of understanding with the Industrial Development Board to cooperate on the elimination of child labor in Sri Lanka.

### Key Policies Related to Child Labor

**National Policy on Child Protection:** Established by the National Child Protection Authority as a measure to address issues faced by children, including child labor, exploitation, and human trafficking. In 2024, the National Child Protection Authority published its priorities for the effective implementation of the policy, including advocacy and awareness raising, strengthening the legal system for children, and developing and maintaining a national database on child rights violations.

**National Strategic Action Plan to Monitor and Combat Human Trafficking (2021–2025):** Aims to address human trafficking in Sri Lanka through multidisciplinary, coordinated approaches to prevention, protection, prosecution, partnerships, and monitoring and evaluation. Includes specific goals to more effectively address child trafficking. During the reporting period, in accordance with the Plan, the National Child Protection Authority introduced a program to disseminate child rights information to 2,300 stakeholders, including community members, plantation leaders, and school van drivers.

† The government had other policies that may have addressed child labor issues or had an impact on child labor.

Sri Lanka funded and participated in programs that include the goal of eliminating or preventing child labor. However, these social programs are inadequate to address the problem in all sectors in which child labor has been identified, including in mining and agriculture.

### Key Social Programs to Address Child Labor

**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 DOL and with technical and financial support from ILO. During the reporting period, DOL carried out a study to assess the effectiveness of the Model.

**School Meal Programs:‡** Ministry of Education-led program which aims to boost educational outcomes by providing nutritious meals to all students in grades one to five nationally. The 2024 program was set to benefit 1.6 million students with a budget of \$55.5 million. Funding was allocated to the nine provincial councils for program implementation, with additional sponsorship from the World Food Program and the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Save the Children also implements a school meal program funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, focused on addressing short-term hunger in schools and improving educational achievement in vulnerable areas. This program expanded to the Colombo District in 2024.

**Aswesuma:‡** Government social welfare program that aims to alleviate poverty in Sri Lanka by providing financial assistance to families based on their economic status. During the reporting period, the government increased the monthly benefits allocated to each project participant. The government increased benefits for the "general" category of recipients from \$26.78 to \$33.48 and benefits for the "most vulnerable" category of recipients from \$50.22 to \$58.59.

‡ 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.

For references, please visit [dol.gov/ChildLaborReports](https://dol.gov/ChildLaborReports)