

LABOUR MARKET PROFILE

Bangladesh

2024/2025

This profile provides a comprehensive overview of the labour market situation in the country.



PREFACE

The Danish Trade Union Development Agency (DTDA) is the development organisation of the Danish trade union movement.

The work of DTDA is in line with the International Labour Organization's global Decent Work Agenda (DWA) based on its four pillars: creating decent jobs, guaranteeing rights at work, extending social protection, and promoting social dialogue. The overall development objective is to eradicate poverty and support the development of just and democratic societies by promoting the DWA.

DTDA collaborates with trade union organisations in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East. The programmes' immediate objective is to assist the partner organisations in becoming change agents in their own national and regional labour market context, capable of achieving tangible improvements in the national DWA conditions and the labour-related Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The Labour Market Profile (LMP) model provides a comprehensive overview of the labour market structure, development, and challenges. It applies several central indicators addressing labour market aspects, including unionism, social dialogue, bi-/tri-partite mechanisms, policy development, and legal reforms status' compliance with international standards, just transition, 4IR, among others.

As part of programme implementation and monitoring, national partner organisations provide annual narrative progress reports, including information on labour market developments. Furthermore, specific data and information relating

to central indicators are collected using a unique data collection tool.

National statistical institutions and international databanks are used as a source of general (statistical) data and information, such as ILOSTAT and NATLEX, World Bank Open Data, ITUC Survey of Violations of Trade Union Rights, the U.S. Department of State, and other internationally recognised labour-related global indexes.

Academia and media sources (e.g., national news) are used in research on labour market issues.

The profile is regularly updated; the current version covers 2024 to 2025. Labour Market Profiles for more than 20 countries are available on DTDA's website: <https://www.dtda.dk/>.

DTDA prepared the Labour Market Profile in collaboration with the Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies. If any comments arise to the profile, please contact Mr Kasper Andersen (kan@dtda.dk) from DTDA.

The frontpage's picture is taken by Tina Møller Kristensen, displaying ship breaking activity in Bangladesh.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Bangladesh's economic development is in progress and getting closer to leaving the Least Developed Countries (LDC) list, which will limit its access to foreign aid. At the beginning of the 2020s, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic brought waves of downturn in industrial employment, thwarting the pace of an otherwise impressive poverty reduction track record. The complex sectoral minimum wages are low but have reached noteworthy real hikes during the last decade.

Steps are taken to improve specific labour regulations like inspections, safety, and security conditions, but measures' compliance with fundamental labour rights has deteriorated. It is still one of the worst countries to work in and not easy to do business in. It is also among the most climate-vulnerable countries, putting pressure on a Just Transition agenda where the regulatory framework fell short of combining climate change, internal displacement, and their impact on labour migration.

Central and ad-hoc tripartite social dialogue mechanisms function at the policy level but with an underdeveloped bipartite stage at the enterprise level. For instance, the collective bargaining coverage rate was down to 1.6% in 2020. Apart from the economic rupture in 2020, unionism is opposed by several regulatory hurdles and a lack of awareness or incentives. This situation has stalled the trade union density of employees' advancement, which fell even in recent years due to the industry sector's downturn, reaching 10% in 2023.

The country's employment structure has experienced an upsurge of employees, but the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) challenges job creation for central sectors. The expansion of micro and small enterprises has been staggering, gradually becoming one of the key sources of job generation for women. The country's laws and regulations around the life cycle of a working woman are weak. The unemployment rate is low and concentrated among

youth in both urban and rural areas. The drop in youth unemployment at the beginning of the 2020s was linked with a remarkable upsurge in youth employment in rural areas, supported by returned Bangladeshi workers abroad. The youth group classified as not in education, employment, or training (NEET) fell significantly during the last decade.

Bangladesh's migration flow is changing due to structural shifts in employment status and internal human mobility triggered by climate changes. These factors are mirrored in the dwindling personnel remittance volume during the last decade. The fast urbanisation rate growth is unsustainable, bringing pressure on urban job creation, facing scarcity of social and environmental services, and shadowed by the widespread informal economy.

The country has made remarkable educational achievements for mass basic education, backing a drop in child labour. But it runs out when raising education quality standards while transforming its education programmes and skills development infrastructure to march towards upper-income status. The private sector dominates the technical and vocational education and training system, sidelined for mainstream education until it recently reached a harmonised quality-assured system. Few Bangladeshi formal firms offer formal training programmes, landing significantly lower than the regional average.

Although the social protection system in Bangladesh has demonstrated progress in social safety net interventions and healthcare services, social and health insurance scheme coverage is still very meagre. Coverage for persons above retirement age has grown fast in recent years, but compared with other countries, Bangladesh has one of the lowest non-contributory old-age pensions. Unemployed receiving unemployment benefits have been voided, but an insurance scheme for formal economy workers entered an initial phase in 2022.

FACT SHEET

Significant developments

- Bangladesh has demonstrated a remarkably high poverty reduction linking with structural employment shifts and a relatively high social safety net coverage.
- Bangladesh is establishing a comprehensive labour-related policy framework at the national level.
- Workers in the industry sector are gaining more awareness about their rights and welfare.
- Coverage for persons above retirement age receiving a pension is expanding, and the new Universal Pension Scheme is a pathway to self-sustained retirement for citizens.
- More younger women are gaining participation in waged work and self-employment.

Social dialogue

- Employees are facing a low collective bargaining coverage rate of 1.6%.
- Social partners struggle with uneven bargaining power.
- Factory collapses brining pressure from trade agreements led to an upsurge in ad-hoc labour tripartite institutions.

Main challenges

- The vulnerabilities of the Bangladeshi working-age population are growing due to demographic shifts, including a fast-ageing population that puts pressure on the social protection system.
- Climate-related shocks are changing the migration flow, making the Just Transition agenda implementation an emergency.
- Around 60% of Bangladeshi workers employed in industries are at a high risk of automation.
- The poor ranking at the level of national compliance with labour rights thwarts the development of unionism and social dialogue.

- Effective technology implementation into TVET sectors requires massive investments to tackle changes in labour market demand.

Unionism

- Trade union density of 10% for employees.
- Violations of trade union rights rank 5 of 5+.
- Facing high informality, absence of decent work, and rigid labour and business regulations.

According to Bangladesh's trade union movement, the risks that are most likely to pose a threat to the labour market in the next two years are:

- Implementing the National Action Plan (2021-2026) is tested, appearing to be an exercise of ticking boxes instead of working towards upholding the spirit of the roadmap.
- Reaching the first National Wage Policy to set standards for determining all workers' wages face complicated tripartite negotiations.
- The pending Essential Services Bill could end prohibiting strikes in any essential service, reducing workers' rights to strike.
- The emerging and gradually expanding platform/gig economy is haunted by low pay, long working hours, and extensive control.

Workforce

- Employed population of 71 million.
- The relatively low unemployment rate of 5%.
- High employment by the informality of 85%.
- Child labour rate of 4.4%.
- Labour share of national income is 42%.
- Men's and women's employee rates are 49% and 18%, respectively.
- The education, employment, or training (NEET) rate of 22%.

COUNTRY MAP



Source: National Online Project.

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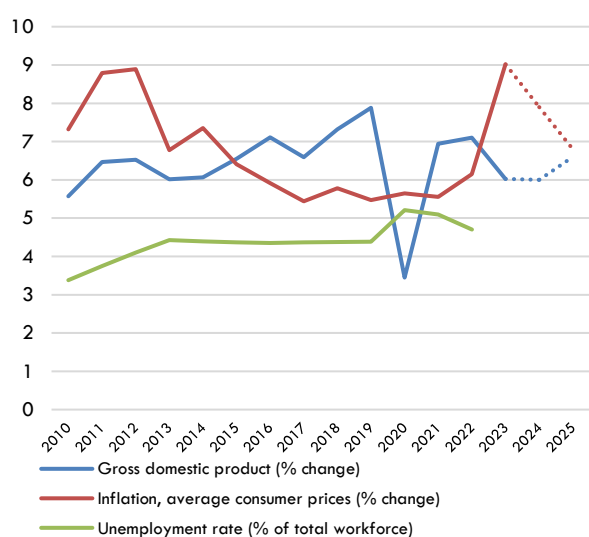
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ECONOMIC PERFORMANCE

Bangladesh has demonstrated remarkable economic developments during the last three decades. It reached lower-middle-income status in 2015, much earlier than the targeted date of 2021. It is on track to graduate from the United Nations' Least Developed Countries (LDC) list in 2026, which will limit its access to foreign aid. The development model is integrated into the current Five-Year Plan (2020-2025), linked with Vision 2041 and the associated Perspective Plan 2041. These instruments set the roadmap to become an upper-middle-income country, eliminate extreme poverty by 2031, and achieve a high-income country status by 2041.¹

A steady high economic growth faced some ruptures at the beginning of the 2020s. Firstly, the wave of the global Covid-19 pandemic cut down the record-high growth in 2019, triggering an upsurge in unemployment. The growth has rebounded fast since 2021 and is projected to stay at about 6% in 2024, not to mention harnessing the unemployment. Secondly, the inflation in consumer prices accelerated in 2023, hollowing out workers' income purchasing power. The country faces energy shortages and a mounting debt (see more in Figure 1 and Appendix Table 5).

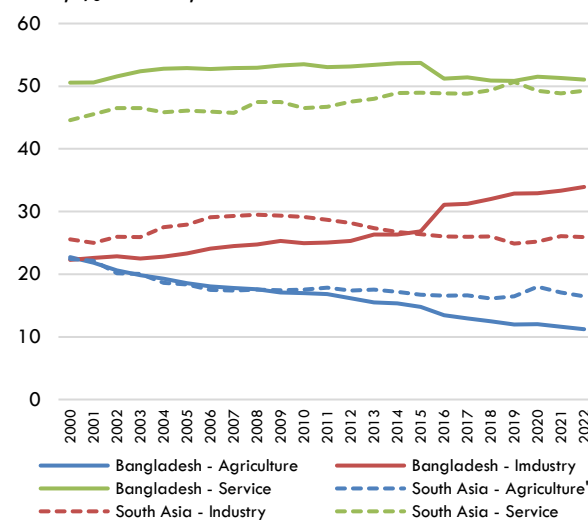
Figure 1: Gross domestic product, inflation, and unemployment trends in Bangladesh, 2010-2025



Source: International Monetary Fund, World Economic Outlook Database, October 2023; The World Bank, World Development Indicators.

Figure 2 visualises Bangladesh's economic transformation scope during the last two decades: Progress in the industry sector, superseding the regional average since 2015. The country became the third global manufacturing powerhouse for ready-made garments. The increased labour costs in China have led textile production to move south to countries like Bangladesh, which keeps labour costs low. In contrast, the agricultural sector fell while the service sector continued above the regional average.

Figure 2: Aggregate sectoral economic changes, sum of value-added per sector in Bangladesh and South Asia, % of GDP, 2000-2022



Source: The World Bank, World Development Indicators.

Foreign direct investment (FDI) has been low compared to regional peers. One of the main issues is linked to cumbersome business regulations: The Doing Business Index ranked Bangladesh 168 out of 190 countries (1st is best) (see more details in Appendix Table 9).

Economic development bringing structural employment shifts and social protection transfer schemes have trickled down into a remarkable poverty reduction: The poverty rate dropped from 49% in 2000 to 19% in 2022, a similar trend among Asian countries. At the beginning of the 2020s, the poverty reduction stalled due to the Covid-19 pandemic's economic impact, high inflation stymieing income value, and weather-related shocks with negative implications on business.

Just Transition

Bangladesh is one of the world's most climate-vulnerable countries, with at least half the population in high climate exposure areas, triggering changes across key economic sectors. Some of the leading climate crisis factors are due to its geographic location and topography:

- The rising sea level brings land loss and salinisation that infiltrates agricultural land, hindering crop growth.
- More substantial downpours combined with rising temperatures melting the Himalayan glaciers that feed rivers around Bangladesh lead to devastating floods, bringing massive climate refugees and unmanageable urbanisation (see more in the Migration sub-section).
- Powerful cyclones are becoming more intense, combined with the fact that most of the country's territory is low, flat terrain, which can make storms devastating.
- High population density, poverty, and reliance on climate-sensitive sectors for water and food security – particularly water resources, agriculture, fisheries, and livestock – increase its vulnerability to climate change.

The country is often hailed for its climate adaptation actions and branded as the 'adaptation leader' of the world. The government has promoted landmark policies, programmes, and regulatory frameworks for enabling climate-resilient sustainable development. However, the regulatory frameworks have fallen short of combining climate change, internal displacement, and their impact on labour migration.² Besides, the widespread informal economy creates loopholes in climate-related regulations, often due to a lack of awareness or incentives. The new National Adaptation Plan (2023-2050) is focusing on eight distinct sectors: water resources; disaster, social safety, and security; agriculture; fisheries, aquaculture, and livestock; urban areas; ecosystems, wetlands, and biodiversity; policies and institutions; capacity development, research, and innovation.³

The adverse impacts of climate change worsen each year with high economic and labour costs; for example, projections suggest that climate variability and extreme events in Bangladesh could cause a loss of one-third of agricultural GDP and seven billion working hours annually due to excessive heat exposure caused by global warming.⁴ These factors have prompted to push a Just Transition agenda, referring to transitioning to a low-carbon economy that ensures social justice, environmental sustainability, and decent work for all. Trade unions' voice and demands regarding climate change issues have recently gained media attention, and the government has started to include trade unions to tackle climate change factors. For instance, forming sector-level trade union working groups linked to the national working group on Just Transition and an avenue to bridge the gap between labour and environmental movements.⁵

Bangladesh invests about 7% of its annual budget in enhancing climate resilience through adaptation initiatives. It remains challenged by strengthening mitigation actions to contribute to staying within the Paris Agreement's average temperature of the planet threshold via decarbonisation, greening their economies, and building resilience to control greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. In the Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) 2021 report, Bangladesh targets reducing GHG emissions by 6.7% without external support and 22% with external backing by 2030.

Special Economic Zones

In Bangladesh, the industrialisation boost is linked with the Export Processing Zones (EPZ) development model. This system was initially managed by the Bangladesh Export Processing Zone Authority (BEPZA), which entered the scene in 1980.

Factories in the EPZs are export-oriented industries, benefitting fiscal incentives, such as tax holidays for ten years and duty-free import of construction materials, machinery, office equipment, spare parts, vehicles, and raw materials.

There are eight EPZs in the country.⁶ The BEPZA registered a steady growth in employment and export from EPZs during the last decade, except for a downturn in 2020/2021 due to the Covid-19 pandemic. These EPZs contribute 17% to the national export and 13% to the FDI concentrated in these eight geographically small zones. The employment enrolment rebounded in FY 2021/2022, reaching at least 502,000 workers but still below its peak in FY 2018/2019; two-thirds are women.⁷ EPZ workers represent a relatively minor group of employees of 1.8% in 2022.

Institutional capacities were expanded to strengthen the mechanisms to promote industrial growth, introducing the Bangladesh Economic Zone Authority (BEZA) and the Bangladesh High-Tech Park Authority (BHTPA).⁸ Firstly, the BEZA, which emerged by the Bangladesh Economic Zones Act of 2010, aims to establish around 100 Economic Zones (EZs) in 2030 to create desperately needed jobs. Site selections for 97 EZs have been completed so far; 10 private EZs are operational, and 30 are under construction. While EPZs accommodate exporting companies only, EZs are open for export and domestic-oriented companies. Secondly, the BHTPA is responsible for attracting and facilitating investments in the high-tech parks Bangladesh is establishing nationwide.

Safety had become a high policy priority in EPZs after a series of factory disasters, including large fire and building collapses in 2012 and 2013, killing at least a thousand workers and others injured or displaced. Central trade agreements brought some weight to improving the EPZs' working conditions.

In 2019, the EPZ Labour Act was amended to improve freedom of association for workers in the zones. This act functions in a separate legal framework from the Labour Act under the authority of the BEPZA, governing the labour rights in the EPZs. In October 2022, a comprehensive EPZ Labour Rules were published. A large part of these rules is driven mainly by global actors and are not adequately localised (see more on in the Social Dialogue section).⁹

The Social and Environmental Counsellor institution is an inspector of BEPZA, overseeing the social and environmental compliance in EPZs. BEPZA has so far appointed 60 social counsellors, two environmental specialists, and 30 environment counsellors.

LABOUR LEGISLATION

During the last decade, the fast industrialization process and aftermath of the factory collapse at the start of the 2010s gained a focus on compliance with fundamental labour rights (see Appendix Table 4). It brought leverage of central trade agreements to introduce improvements in the labour-related legal framework.

The Bangladesh authorities launched a roadmap, the National Action Plan (NAP) on the Labour Sector (2021-2026). It sets timelines for reforms to improve labour rights, notably the alignment of the Bangladesh Labour Act and the Export Processing Zone (EPZ) Labour Act, to become in line with ILO's fundamental conventions.¹⁰ The country has reached some of the plan's objectives – especially in inspections, safety, and security conditions for employees. In 2023, hurdles emerged concerning approving the Labour (amended) Bill and the Essential Services Bill. Both were sent back from the President to Parliament for examination and recommendation. The latter was considered a step back for labour rights to prohibit lockout and layoff at any establishment and has demanded immediate withdrawal by the trade union movement.

An overview of the status of central labour laws is outlined below.

Constitution

The constitution of Bangladesh was established in 1972 and has been amended 16 times since then. It protects all citizens and guarantees equal treatment before the law. The constitution prohibits forced labour and gives the right to form associations or unions, reasonable wages, social security, and equal employment opportunities. Work is a right and duty, and local governments are encouraged to institute the representation of workers.

Labour Act

The Bangladesh Labour Act of 2006 is the leading statute for labour-related aspects: employment relations, working hours, wages, industrial relations, maternity benefits, compensations for injury and accidents, Occupational Safety and Health Standards, the labour inspectorate, and prohibits child labour. It also establishes various tripartite social dialogue mechanisms and procedures for industrial disputes, including strikes and lockouts. (see more in the Social Dialogue section). This act is not fully applicable to factories operating inside EPZs (see ahead).

As a part of the NPA, the revised Labour (Amendment) Bill was passed in the Parliament in November 2023. The bill has not been appropriately reflected to align with the international standards of Freedom of Association and collective bargaining. The President did not sign it and sent it back to Parliament for revision.

Labour Rules

In the aftermath of factory collapses in 2012/2013, the Bangladesh Labour Rules were formed and enacted in 2015. The statute improved the legal framework for labour and laid down detailed labour-related guidelines and regulations. For example, ocean-going vessel workers fully benefited from their rights, guarantees of financial benefits to new mothers after they give birth; lunchrooms with adequate facilities were required to be provided for large workplaces (>25 employed); upon a worker's death, the financial compensation must be given directly to a nominee of the deceased worker or their legal heir, or for a foundation's beneficiaries.

EPZ Labour Act

Export processing zones' industrial relations and labour rights fall under the EPZ Labour Act of 2019. In 2023, a Tripartite Standing Committee was formed to amend the EPZ Labour Rules and the EPZ Labour Act. The amendment process has already started by analysing the impact of the EPZ Labour Rules. It is envisaged that the whole exercise will be completed by June 2025.

Universal Pension Management Act

The Universal Pension Management Act of 2023 creates a lifetime retirement pension benefit for Bangladesh citizens working in the private sector who voluntarily participate and meet the eligibility conditions. Previously, only public-sector workers had access to a state pension arrangement.

Observations on labour legislation

The International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) listed a series of observations of the labour-related legal framework in Bangladesh regarding the international standards in the right to freedom of association, the right to collective bargaining, and the right to strike (see details in Appendix Table 7).¹¹

Reports found that the government did not effectively enforce workers' rights laws. Penalties for unfair labour practices and anti-union discrimination were not commensurate with penalties for other laws involving denials of civil rights. Penalties were sometimes applied against violators, more often against workers than employers.¹²

It is important to realise that around eight of ten workers operate in the informal economy, leading to loopholes in labour and business regulations, often due to a lack of awareness or incentives.

Ratified ILO Conventions

The International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions enumerate international principles and rights at work. Bangladesh has ratified 36 conventions. Appendix Table 6 shows that eight of ten fundamental conventions and two of four Governance Conventions are approved, and six of 176 Technical Conventions are Up-To-Date and actively promoted. The latest ratified conventions were the Minimum Age Convention (C138) and the Protocol of 2014 to the Forced Labour Convention (P029), both from 2022.

The independent ILO body, the Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations (CEACR), lists observations and direct requests for several conventions. For instance,

in 2022, CEACR had observations about the Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise Convention (C087). The government implements the roadmap of actions to address all outstanding issues in this constitution. Nevertheless, the trade union movement raised concerns regarding new cases of violence and repression by police, as well as continued retaliation against workers in connection with trade union activities and surveillance of trade unionists by the authorities.¹³

The Sustainable Development Goals indicator 8.8.2 measures compliance with fundamental labour rights. Bangladesh's scoring deteriorated from a peak of 5.0 in 2015 down to 7.5 in 2021 (0 out of 10; 0 is best), landing worse than India and the ASEAN average (see Table 1). This worrisome trend suggests that the country is not going in the right direction to reach this SDG.

Table 1: Level of national compliance with labour rights among Bangladesh and neighbouring countries, 2021

Country	Value
ASEAN	4.3
Bangladesh	7.5
India	3.3

Note: The value ranges from 0 to 10, with 0 being the best possible score (indicating higher levels of compliance with freedom of association and collective bargaining (FACB) rights) and 10 the worst (indicating lower levels of compliance with FACB rights based on ILO textual sources and national legislation).

Sources: International Labour Organization, Key Indicators of the Labour Market (KILM).

Trade Agreements

Bangladesh is a World Trade Organisation (WTO) member and is linked with five regional trade agreements (RTAs), which are registered with no labour provisions.¹⁴

The country instead has central bilateral trade agreements (TAs) with labour provisions, giving some leverage to improving employees' working conditions. For instance, in response to several collapses of factory complexes killing scores of workers in 2012 and 2013, worker rights and worker safety issues led the United States to suspend the country's Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) trade benefits in June 2013. In

July 2013, a joint Sustainability Compact for Bangladesh was launched in collaboration with the European Union, the United States, and Canada. This initiative aims to improve labour rights and factory safety in the main markets for the Bangladeshi ready-made garment industry. It is worth mentioning that GSP suspension has had only a minimal immediate impact on bilateral trade since Bangladesh's primary exports to the United States – textiles and apparel – were not covered under GSP. The Sustainability Compact promotes labour rights, structural integrity of buildings, occupational safety and health, and responsible business conduct.

Bangladesh ratified the Hong Kong Convention Ship recycling rules in August 2023, making it illegal for non-compliant shipyards to operate. This agreement could lead to the closure of small shipyards and job loss in Bangladesh.

SOCIAL PARTNERS

Social partners are central to promoting the realisation of core labour rights and social justice for workers by protecting freedom of association and collective bargaining. These organisations are usually represented as the government, trade unions, and employers' organisations.

Government

The central ministries involved in the labour market development are:

The Ministry of Labour and Employment (MoLE) is responsible for industrial relations. This ministry comprises two departments: the Department of Labour and the Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments. The former department is responsible for maintaining harmonious labour relations. Its functions include addressing industrial disputes and union registrations, facilitating the establishment of participation committees, and overseeing collective bargaining processes. The latter department is primarily responsible for occupational health and safety and resolving individual disputes. The MoLE has also established Technical Training Centres

(TTCs) to train semi-skilled and skilled workers and enhance factory productivity, among other things.

The Ministry of Education is a central player in the education section, including two divisions: i) Secondary and Higher Education, and ii) Technical and Madrasah Education.

The Ministry of Social Welfare is responsible for social security for the poor and vulnerable people, being charged with key programmes, including Old Age Allowances, Widow Allowances, Allowances for Persons with Disabilities, grants and aid to acid burnt victims.

Trade Unions

In recent years, amendments to the labour act, formulation of the labour rule, and adoption of national occupational health, safety, and industrial policies have widened the scope for unions' activities in Bangladesh.

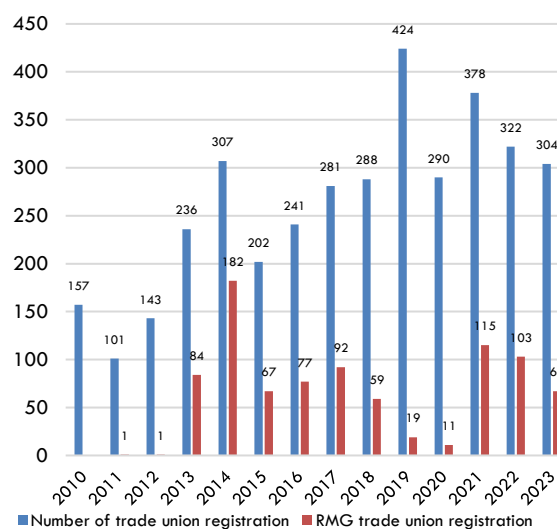
According to the Bangladeshi Labour Department's Register of Trade Unions, there are 37 national-level trade union federations (nine are inactive) in 2023. The total number of registered trade unions is 9,432; most are at a basic level, and 9% are inactive. The number of active trade union members reached 2.8 million. According to official data, the garment sector had 1,156 active trade unions and 650 active participation committees in 2022. However, labour leaders claimed much lower numbers of trade unions due to intimidation, corruption, and violence; only 30-40 of the 80-90 active unions in the sector engaged in genuine negotiations with employers.¹⁵

The trade union density of employees stalled during the 2010s, reaching 12% in 2018. In contrast, the trade union density doubled during the same period for India, catching 20%. Estimations suggest that Bangladesh's trade union density reached 10% in 2023, down by two percentage points from 2018, mainly due to a downturn in the industry sector (see more in the Workforce section). Information suggest that some central trade unions have experienced upturns in membership, others in downturns or status

quo during the last decade (see details in Appendix Table 10). It is worth mentioning that Bangladesh's relatively low trade union density relates to the widespread informal economy, the rigid labour-related legal framework, and rampant trade union rights violations.

The number of registered trade unions rose during the 2010s, peaking at 424 in 2019. It lost its pace at the beginning of the 2020s, which was an impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. Other data suggest that registration in the Ready-Made Garments (RMG) sector entered a downturn at the end of the 2010s. It rebounded at the start of the 2020s with a tailwind of adopting new standard operating procedures to simplify union registrations via the EPZ Labour Act of 2019 (see Figure 3). Generally, the registration success rate reached 90% in 2023. Digitisation of the trade union registration process under DoLE was made active for users in April 2022.

Figure 3: Trade union registration in Bangladesh, 2010-2023



Source: Bangladesh Department of Labour; Solidarity Centre.

Unionism is concentrated in the formal sector, but some have started organising workers from the informal economy, particularly in the construction, rice processing, and shipbreaking sectors.

Although trade unions have rights protected by law, they often face challenges in defending and representing workers' interests in practice. For

instance, there are difficulties in establishing new unions and effectively representing workers' interests due to the need for 30% of a factory's workers to agree before any union is formed. Many workers fear losing their jobs if they join a union. Other factors are that many workers, particularly in the informal economy, often lack awareness of their right to form or join trade unions. Some employers may resist unionisation efforts and engage in anti-union activities, not to mention that creating and registering a trade union can be cumbersome (see more details in Appendix Table 7).

The influence of political parties and corrupt practices complicate unionism in the country: it is normal for a political party to have a union wing, and the relations between unions can be hostile. This situation can complicate trade unions' role as collective bargaining partners and negatively affect industrial relations. Although there have been attempts to unite centres into one confederation, it has not yet succeeded because the trade unions' political and ideological undertones trigger fragmentation between the organisations. Nevertheless, two coordinating bodies are formed as umbrella institutions for campaigning purposes.

Although women and young workers form a large part of the workforce, these two groups have weak representation in union spaces, let alone leadership roles.¹⁶ For example, in the garment sector, only 10% of trade union members are women, despite women making up 66% of those who are employed (see more in the Gender section).¹⁷

Employers' Organisations

Employers – those working on their account or with one or a few partners, hold the type of jobs defined as “self-employment jobs” – represent about 5.4% of the total employment in Bangladesh, pointedly higher than the Southern Asia average of 2.5%. This segment is dominated by men (see more in the Gender sub-section).¹⁸

The Global Competitiveness Index provides Bangladeshi employers' views on various aspects, including labour market efficiency. The index is

based on surveys among employers in the country. The labour market has been somewhat rigid, ranking 121 of 141 countries (1st is the best) (see more in Appendix Table 8). Based on the list of 35 risks in the Global Risks Report 2023, identified by the Bangladeshi Executive Opinion Survey, the five risks that are the most likely to pose the biggest threat to Bangladesh in the next two years are rapid inflation, debt crisis, severe commodity price schools, human-made environment damage, and geopolitical contestation of resources.¹⁹

The central national employers' organisation, Bangladesh Employers' Federation (BEF), represents employers in the private sector in the industry, trade, and services sectors. The main objective of BEF is to provide guidance and assistance to employers in the field of industrial relations and to bring their concerted views on labour matters to the attention of the government. It further represents employers in tripartite social dialogue mechanisms affiliated with the International Organization of Employers. In November 2023, 166 organisations were registered as ordinary BEF members, 20 as group members, and 10 as associate members.

SOCIAL DIALOGUE

The country has ratified central international social dialogue conventions, including ILO's freedom of association (C087), collective bargaining (C098), and tripartite consultation (C144) (Appendix Table 6). At the national legal level, social dialogue is governed by the Labour Act, Labour Rules, and the EPZ Labour Act.

The central partners for social dialogue in Bangladesh are the Ministry of Labour and Employment, the Bangladesh Employers' Federation, the National Coordinating Committee for Workers' Education, and the IndustriALL Bangladesh Council.

Some improvements have been detected during the last decade at the national policy level. There is an upsurge in ad-hoc labour tripartite institutions (see ahead) and improvements in laws and policies; for example, the National Skills Development Policy

and the Universal Pension Scheme emerged via social dialogue with the trade union movement.

At a broader policy level, Bangladesh's government has not effectively involved trade unions and workers' representatives as social partners in a dialogue on implementing Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) at the national level. While the government has taken up some trade unions' inputs, the progress of implementation leaves much to be desired.²⁰

Social dialogue at the enterprise level is still underdeveloped, facing legal hurdles and complexities (see details in Appendix Table 7). This situation is reflected by the fact that not all social dialogue standards provisions are translated to rights provisions in practice through work.²¹ For example, collective bargaining encounters challenges, including uneven bargaining power among social partners; the widespread informal economy sidelining collective bargaining, often due to lack of awareness or incentives. Data show that despite the trade union density rate of about 11%, the total collective bargaining coverage rate was down to 1.6% of employees in 2020, remarkably lower than the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) average of 32%.

Those who reach collective bargaining at the enterprise level are linked with a specific period. It is interesting to observe that several agreements led the parties to establish in-house medical clinics staffed by qualified doctors and nurses to attend to emergencies, sudden illnesses, and workers' other medical concerns. They further set out explicit commitments guaranteeing equality of opportunity and treatment, for instance, by specifying actions to support women when it comes to recruitment and promotion.²²

The EPZs have a special social dialogue model specified by the EPZ Labour Act and the EPZ Labour Rules. This system lowered the threshold for establishing a workers' welfare association (WWA) at an enterprise from 30% of the workforce to 20%. It is worth mentioning that the law prohibits

traditional trade unions within EPZs. The WWA model has raised concerns about workers' rights to associate, collectively bargain and strike freely, sidelining fundamental ILO conventions as well as several trade agreements with labour provisions. Among the 456 operating enterprises in the eight EPZs, WWAs and Participation Committees (PCs), a legal requirement at the factory level and complementary to trade unions, have been formed in 288 EPZ industries. These committees should be elected regularly.²³

Other studies of Bangladesh's Ready-Made Garment (RMG) industry found that employers form PCs, employing 50 or more workers. Currently, there are about 1,614 PCs, and only one-third (32%) of RMG factories have formed these committees.²⁴ The trade unions movement argues that PCs are perceived as a threat due to excessive management influence and motives to use them as a substitute to unions. Although recent amendments mandate PCs only in factories without registered unions, union visibility at the workplace remains low.²⁵ Overall, a large majority of enterprises in Bangladesh are micro and small enterprises with less than 50 workers, not included in the EPZs' PC requirement (see more in the Workforce section).

Central tripartite institutions

Bangladesh has established several tripartite social dialogue mechanisms. The leading regular tripartite institutions at the national level are the following:

- Minimum Wage Board (MWB), which is the only statutory tripartite forum.
- Tripartite Consultative Council (TCC).
- National Industrial Safety and Health Council (NISHC).

Various other ad-hoc tripartite forums emerged in the aftermath of the Rana Plaza collapse in 2013:²⁶

- National Tripartite Committee on International Labour Standards.

- Tripartite Committee on National Tripartite Plan on Action on Building and Fire Safety for the Ready-Made Garment Sector.
- Crisis Management Committee.
- Social Compliance Forum for the RMG sector (SCF).
- Task Force on Labour Welfare in the RMG sector.
- Task Force on Occupational Safety in RMG sector.
- National Tripartite Committee for Fire and Building Safety in the RMG sector.
- Rana Plaza Coordination Cell (RPCC).
- National Industrial Safety and Health Council.
- RMG Tripartite Consultative Council (RMG TCC).
- Tripartite Implementation and Monitoring Committee (TIMC) for implementing and monitoring the progress of the ILO Roadmap / Action Plan in Bangladesh.

Tripartite forums fulfil functions such as regulating and advising on labour policy, occupational safety and health, collective bargaining, and temporary employment. The bodies meet less frequently than envisaged by law. Some trade unions have argued that some committees lacked incentives due to bodies with no authority, weak planning, and insufficient expertise.

Labour dispute resolution system

The Labour Act establishes mechanisms for conciliation, arbitration, and dispute resolution by a labour court. Labour courts have the power to reinstate workers fired for union activities. Civil servants and security forces are covered under different terms and conditions of employment, as well as file cases in specified courts.

The courts have been under tremendous pressure. The conventional legal process for resolving labour disputes suffers from delays, backlogs, and a lack of familiarity with the complexities of labour issues, not to mention an insufficient number of judges. Even though the Labour Act states that cases should be disposed of within 60 days, many cases have been

stuck for years. Most cases are from the RMG industry. In many instances, even a genuine industrial dispute does not receive proper importance. For example, of the 14 legal cases filed over the Rana Plaza collapse in April 2013, 13 have seen little progress over the past decade. Only 45 witnesses out of 594 have testified in court in the last ten years.²⁷

Only seven labour courts have been established to adjudicate the labour cases: three in Dhaka, two in Chittagong, and one in Khulna and Rajshahi. They function in the formal sector. Many employees in labour dispute cases travel far to file a complaint before the labour court, and the case expenses are relatively high. Overall, the labour court system is haunted by high case backlogs. And, at least 43 million workers operating in the informal economy are sidelined by the labour court system, which could mount an even more extensive case backlog. Although reforming the Arbitration Act has been a hot topic for years, it has not reached a new arbitration system to reduce these court backlogs, improve the ease of doing business, and attract more foreign direct investment. An alternative dispute resolution (ADR) system other than courts is relatively new in Bangladesh's labour landscape.

TRADE UNION RIGHTS VIOLATIONS

Bangladesh is among the ten worst countries to work in: According to the Global Rights Index, the country ranked 5 out of 5+ in 2023. It is categorised as “no guarantee of rights”: while the legislation may spell out certain rights, workers cannot access them. They are exposed to unfair labour practices.

This situation concerns workers' rights continuing to be severely curtailed. Many workers and union leaders are subjected to police violence, blacklisting, mass dismissal, and arrest for exercising their right to organise. The EPZs prohibit workers from forming a trade union or freely expressing their rights; for instance, in the garment sector, attempts at forming unions were obstructed, while strikes were met with brutality by the Industrial Police force. In addition, the authorities have frustrated the establishment of unions by

imposing a draconian registration process mirrored in high levels of rejections for union registrations and an overly complicated registration process.²⁸

The International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) listed thirteen specific cases of systematic violations of trade union rights from 2020 to 2023 (see Appendix Table 11). Several other institutions recorded many ongoing violations of labour rights, including the ILO's tripartite Committee on Freedom of Association that listed two freedom of association cases as active, concerning violations of freedom of association rights and the systematic violation of freedom of association.

A report found that about 592,000 people were living in modern slavery in Bangladesh, ranking as number 9 out of 27 Asian and Pacific countries on the Global Slavery Index 2023 (1 is the worst score).²⁹ This index measures modern slavery, i.e., slavery-like practices (debt, bondage, forced marriage, and sale/exploitation of children), human trafficking and forced labour.

WORKING CONDITIONS

Bangladesh's general minimum wage adjustment was not scheduled, stalled since 2013, catching Bangladeshi taka (BDT) 1,500 per month (US\$14). It is the only country in the region whose minimum wage does not reach even the lowest international poverty line. The country has initiated the development of its first National Wage Policy (NWP), setting standards for determining the wages of all workers, including those in the agriculture sector, domestic service, and for other informal workers. This new NWP has been expected to be finalised in 2024.

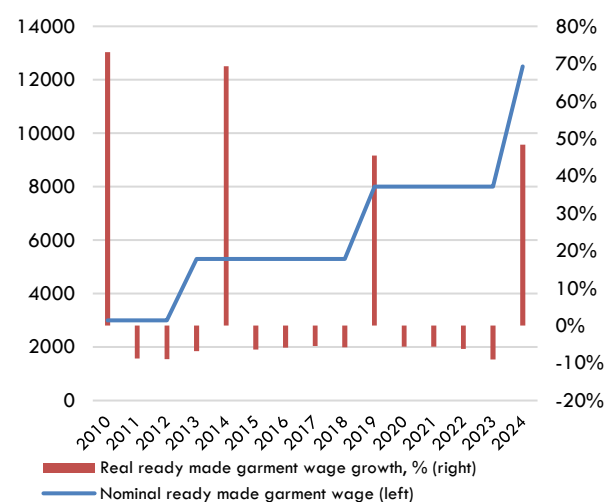
The country is one of the few examples in Asia and the Pacific where minimum wages already are set according to industries. The national Minimum Wage Board (MWB) must meet at least once every five years in a tripartite forum to set wage structures and benefits by industry. Six sectoral minimum wages are functioning with different scales and schedules (see more in Appendix Table 12). The MWB introduced cost-of-living adjustments to

wages in some sectors, not the Ready-Made Garment (RMG) sector. As indicated, these statutory minimum wages exclude agricultural workers, domestic and other informal workers from these minimum wage regulations.

Gender wage gaps are common in most countries, favouring men. However, studies found that the wage differential based on gender is relatively less of a problem in Bangladesh with a minor wage gap.³⁰ Instead, it is the lack of women's education at the higher tertiary level and weak participation of educated women in the labour market that are more of a problem (see more in the Gender sub-section).³¹

The latest sectoral minimum wage hike was from the Ready-Made Garment (RMG) sector in December 2023, representing at least 4.2 million workers. This minimum wage grew by 48%, grasping BDT12,500 (US\$116) monthly. This sector has demonstrated a remarkable aggregated yearly real minimum wage growth of 14% on average in the 2010s but slipped to 4.4% on average from 2020 to 2024 (see more in Figure 4).

Figure 4: Ready Made Garment nominal minimum wage and real growth trends in Bangladesh, 2010-2024



Source: WageIndicator.com; own calculations on real minimum wage growth.

The number of labour inspectors increased significantly in recent years, peaking at 400 in 2022. Nevertheless, the number of labour inspectors remains insufficient: According to the

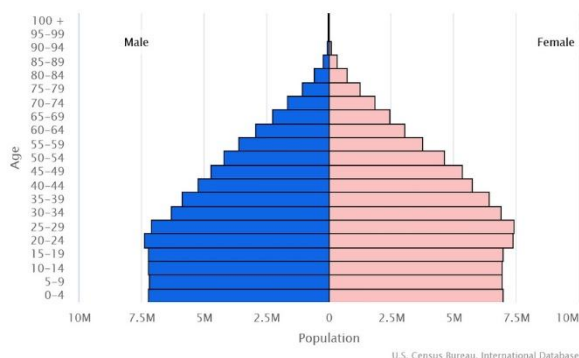
ILO's technical advice of a ratio approaching one inspector for every 20,000 workers in transition economies, Bangladesh would need to employ at least 1,340 labour inspectors among employees. Penalties were generally not sufficient to deter violations.

WORKFORCE

Bangladesh is the World's eighth-most populous country, densely populated, with a population of 167 million in 2023. As a result of declining population growth and consequent changes in age structure, the proportion of the working-age population is increasing, associated with a decline in the dependent age population, known as the 'demographic dividend'.

Figure 5 below visualises that the country entered an initial phase of curbing the youth bulge, transforming the population structure by age with a drop in dependence ratio. Instead, Bangladesh faces an ageing population: The number of persons over 60 years of age is projected to increase from about 9.8 million people today (6.5% of the total population) to 18 million people (or almost 10%) by 2026 and 44 million people (20%) by 2051.³² This situation will bring mounting financial pressure on social protection such as health and eldercare pensions.

Figure 5: Population pyramid based on the Age-Sex structure of the population in Bangladesh



Source: Central Intelligence Agency, the World Factbook, Bangladesh.

Bangladesh faces the annual 2.2 million young workers entering the labour market. The National Employment Policy, launched in 2022, targets 30 million jobs by 2030. The policy aims to develop a

globally competitive, skilled workforce. However, it identifies several factors that complicate the labour market efficiency, such as the absence of public and private measures, hindering job creation for the skilled workforce generation. The policy outlines sector-based agriculture, manufacturing, tourism, ICT, health, port, and maritime strategies.

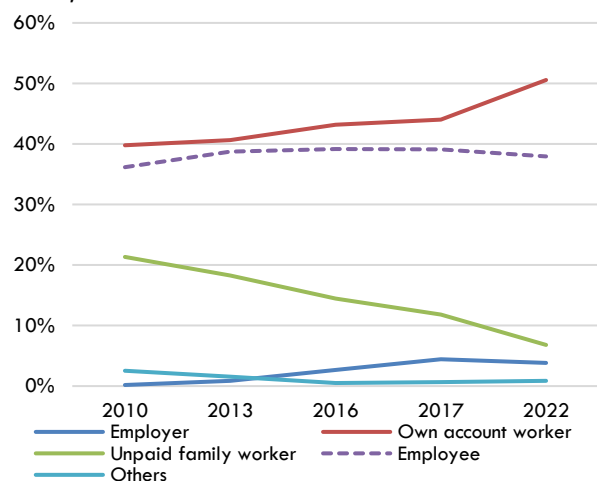
Based on the latest Labour Force Survey from 2022, Bangladesh's employed population represented 71 million workers, dominated by men, with a share of 65% of total employment. Other factors are that one out of four (25%) workers operate in urban areas while three out of four (75%) are in rural areas (see more in Appendix Table 13).

Some of the employment shifts during the last decade are that the labour force participation rate slightly fell for men while it increased for women. It is worth mentioning that for women, this rate fell in urban areas but with a significant upsurge in rural areas. Also, employment share in the agricultural sector experienced a falling trend while the industry and service sectors were on upturns during the 2010s. However, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic brought ruptures at the start of the 2020s: A significant upsurge in the agricultural sector employment share, reaching 45% in 2022. Instead, the industry sector fell by 3.4 percentage points, grasping 17%. The service sector was more saved but still cut by 1.4 percentage points, representing a share of 38%.³³

Status in employment has some developments; for instance, the employers and own account workers segments are on the rise. Instead, unpaid family workers have steadily fallen since 2010 and even during the initial phase of the 2020s, especially for women in rural areas. This shift is mirrored in the expansion of micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs). The growth of MSMEs, especially in the last decade, has been staggering: From the mid-1980s, the number of MSMEs has increased four to five times, gradually becoming one of the critical sources of employment generation for women. The contribution of MSMEs to the country's GDP has reached about 25%. On the other hand, the development of the employees' group share has

been stalled and challenged to break the code of accelerating the process of formalising employment (see Figure 6).

Figure 6: Status in employment in Bangladesh, % share, 2010-2022.



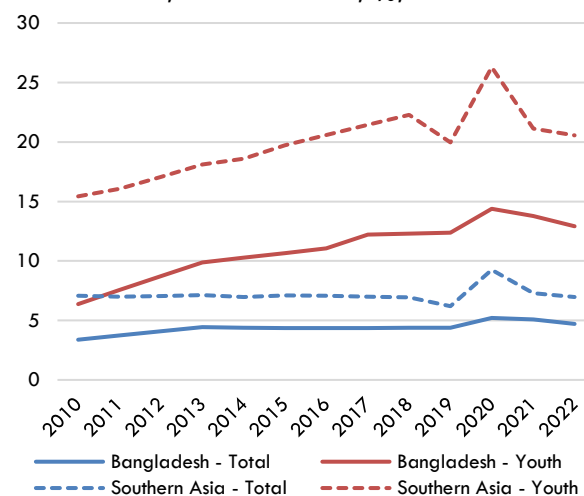
Source: Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, Labour Force Survey 2022, October 2023.

Bangladesh's labour share of national income slowly fell during the last decade, reaching 42% in 2020. This share stands significantly lower than India's at 58%. A transformation involving the rising power of new technology, Just Transition, and the widespread informal economy challenge Bangladesh's capacity to reach the Sustainable Development Goal of dealing with better equality. Around 60% of Bangladesh's workforce is employed in industries at a high risk of automation, not to mention automation in advanced economies will lead to the "onshoring" of manufacturing activities that were offshored to other countries.³⁴

Unemployment

Bangladesh's Labour Force Survey 2022 shows that the unemployment rate has been falling during the last decade, grabbing 3.5% in 2022. Other estimations suggest that the unemployment rate experienced a slight upsurge at the beginning of the 2020s, especially among youth, as an impact of the global Covid-19 pandemic. The country's rate is significantly lower than the Southern Asia average (see more details in Figure 7).

Figure 7: Unemployment trends in Bangladesh and Southern Asia, Total and Youth, %, 2010-2022



Source: International Labour Organization; Statista.

The youth unemployment rate gradually grew during the 2010s, peaking at 14% in 2020, located twelve percentage points lower than the Southern Asia average of 26% (see Figure 7 above). This upward trend parallels the labour market is not generating sufficient new jobs, fuelled by an upsurge in returned Bangladeshi workers from abroad (see more in the Migration sub-section). However, the drop in youth unemployment at the beginning of the 2020s was linked with a remarkable upsurge in youth employment in rural areas triggered by the industry sector's rupture.

Access to unemployment benefit insurance schemes has not been an option in Bangladesh. Instead, most workers are pushed to generate at least some income through causal informal activities, often by lower hours, to survive (see more in the Social Protection section).

Unemployment is an urban and rural phenomenon in Bangladesh, with a comparatively equal level among genders. Subsistence farming is occupied during planting and harvesting but not engaged full-time throughout the year, creating some "disguised unemployment."

It is worth mentioning that unemployment is statistically a part of the employed group, excluding people outside the workforce. Around 37% of the working-age population in Bangladesh

was projected to be economically inactive in 2022, hiding significant potential unemployment.

Migration

Migration is a major push factor for Bangladesh's labour market, reflected in a range of inward and outward human mobility. The country has been recognised for leading migration discourses and often spearheading processes to support migrants via migration laws, policies, and programmes. It is noted that it has not ratified ILO migrant-specific instruments.

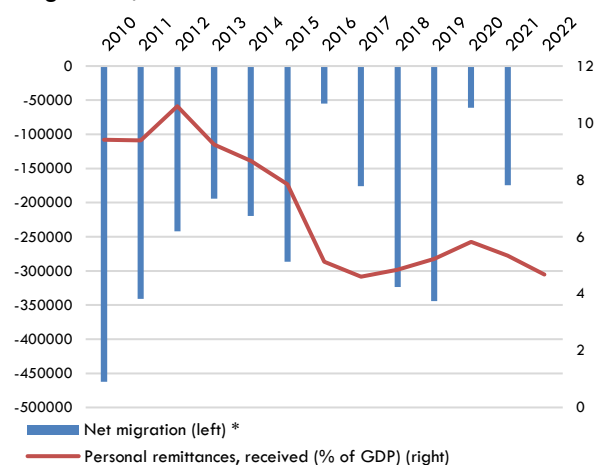
The country is among the most densely populated countries. The adverse impacts of climate change further worsen each year with high economic and labour costs; for example, projections suggest that climate variability and extreme events in Bangladesh could cause one in every seven people to be displaced by climate change by 2050.³⁵ A glimpse of its scope is mirrored by a large segment of internally displaced persons (IDPs) from disasters, particularly during the June-September monsoon season when floods displace an average of a million people each year and cyclones displace an average of 110,000 a year.³⁶ These factors – natural disasters, erosion, landlessness – accelerating migration to cities. Today, around 40% of the population lives in cities. It is projected to reach 56% in 2050, representing at least 100 million persons, not to mention at a faster pace than the Southern Asia average. This mounting urbanisation is growing unsustainable; for instance, the rivers and waterways are gradually shrinking and drying up due to the vast depositions of silt and waste.

Bangladeshis migrate to improve their job opportunities, higher earnings, and social aspirations to follow their family members, marriage, or education. Young people are especially attracted to moving from rural to urban zones, driven to find better jobs in the manufacturing and construction sectors or emigrate.

Bangladesh has delivered a significant emigration stream: About 10 million people of Bangladeshi

origin live abroad, of whom 2.4 million are permanent migrants. According to census data, around 95% of Bangladeshis are men.³⁷ The spot makes Bangladesh the 5th country with the most emigrants. This condition brings an unbalanced net migration flow, supporting more leaving than entering. Figure 8 visualises that the net migration balance was somewhat volatile during the last decade, especially with returnees in 2016 and 2020, respectively.

Figure 8: Net migration and personal remittance in Bangladesh, 2010-2022



* Net migration is the number of immigrants minus the number of emigrants, including citizens and noncitizens.

Source: The World Bank, World Development Indicators.

Personnel remittance has been a central part of poverty reduction in Bangladesh, but its volume has dwindled during the last decade. This situation somewhat propelled the previously mentioned structural shifts in employment status. Remittances mainly come from Saudi Arabia, followed by the United States, the United Arab Emirates, Malaysia, the United Kingdom, and Kuwait. Interestingly, the inflow of remittances was expected to plummet in 2020 as an impact of the Covid-19 pandemic but rebounded instead (see Figure 8 above). Some of the reasons were that the government, since 2019, has been offering a 2% incentive to encourage migrants to send remittances through formal channels. In 2020, homecoming migration was eight times higher than the previous years because of the pandemic, and they returned their savings because there are restrictions on hand-carrying money for more than a certain amount.³⁸

Most of the Bangladeshi labour migrants are unskilled or low-qualified. Men are mainly in the construction, manufacturing, agriculture, and retail sectors, as well as informal business services, such as cleaning, transport, or tailoring. Women often work as domestic workers or cleaners in public buildings and offices. Some recent trends in Bangladeshi migration are related to the growth of temporary short-term contracts increasing vulnerability in employment.

Migrants every so often face several challenges, including high fees for migration charged by recruitment agencies, especially for low-skilled jobs; lack of information on migration opportunities and risks; discrimination, exploitation, and abuse while overseas; and insufficient services to protect the rights of workers.³⁹

Migrant workers in the Persian Gulf have weak formal rights with the Kafala system. Migrant workers depend solely on their “sponsor” – a citizen of the respective Gulf state manages the migrants’ visa process and workplace recruitment and obtains the migrant workers’ passports during the contract period. Despite these controversial employment conditions, Bangladeshi migration workers are frequently willing to endure exploitative labour conditions and pay high recruitment fees since they can generate higher income than they could ever expect to earn at home.

At the end-2000s, a high influx of Rohingya Muslims as refugees from Myanmar became a critical issue for Bangladesh. This number of refugees stood relatively stable at about 230,000 refugees afterwards, until it accelerated again in 2017 via a deadly crackdown by Myanmar’s army on this minority group. The Rohingya are an ethnic minority who have been denied citizenship in Myanmar, making them the world’s largest stateless population. It led to almost one million refugees in Bangladesh, which is the status quo in 2023. These refugees are cramped in camps in Bangladesh, including Kutupalong in Ukhia, Cox’s Bazar, which is one of the largest refugee settlements in the world. Rohingya refugees rely entirely on humanitarian aid and are not permitted to work in Bangladesh.

This stance limits their ability to feed themselves, access goods and services or improve their shelters. While an agreement for the return of refugees was reached in early 2018, none returned. In March 2019, Bangladesh announced it would no longer accept Rohingya fleeing from Myanmar. In 2023, a new repatriation plan, initiated Myanmar seeking to repatriate Rohingya refugees from Bangladesh. However, these refugees are still reluctant to repatriate without guarantees for safety, dignity, and the recovery of their homes.

Informal Economy

Although Bangladesh’s government has been promoting several legal and policy initiatives to harness informality in the labour market, it remains widespread. Employment by informality fell by just three percentage points since 2010, reaching 85% in 2022, representing 60 million employed. Informal employment refers to jobs lacking basic social or legal protection or employment benefits. It is worth mentioning that the employment by informality rate increased in rural areas in recent years while it significantly fell in urban zones, achieving 88% and 75% in 2022, respectively. This trend takes some steps ahead to reach the SDG goal of reducing the proportion of informal employment in non-agriculture employment.

The vulnerable informal circumstances create challenges to improve industrial relations, unionism, and collective bargaining. Informal workers often cannot correctly advocate for themselves. Nevertheless, many sectoral trade union federations affiliate informal workers just as other non-traditional groups have promoted many union initiatives to support informal workers.

Bangladesh's root of the widespread informal economy is linked to complex, interrelated factors. The labour market is not generating sufficient formal jobs. Instead, informal workers are exposed due to no contractual conditions, minimum wages, vacations, maternity/paternity benefits, or social insurance. For example, workers from the informal economy receive at least 35% lower income than those in the formal sector. These informal workers

are more likely to drop out of the labour market than those from the formal sector, not to mention a clear positive correlation between lower education attainment and informal employment.

At the enterprise level, informality is haunted by a rigid business climate, unfair competition, insufficient support for entrepreneurship, lack of ease of registration, and flexibility in labour contracts versus security, sidelined for labour inspection coverage, among others. Informal workers often fail to promote workplace safety. Informality also dodges tax generation, reducing government revenues to deliver public goods and services.

Child Labour

Bangladesh has around 40 million children aged five to 17 years. As illustrated in the Population Pyramid, this segment's growth lost pace (revisit Figure 5).

The country ratified central international conventions on child labour, including ILO's two conventions on effectively abolishing child labour (see Appendix Table 6). Numerous national laws, policies and programmes for children were launched during the last decade. For instance, the Bangladesh Labour Act was amended in 2018 to allow children aged 14-18 to engage in light work. Extending compulsory education to the age of 14 in 2016 was likely to prove more effective than enforcing a ban on child labour through factory and informal sector inspection.

The latest National Child Labour Elimination Policy was launched in 2010. It could benefit from being fully updated to close gaps that exist in the overall framework to protect children from the worst forms of child labour adequately. For example, the Labour Act does not apply to children working in all sectors where child labour occurs. Reports argued that the country made "minimal advancement" in efforts to eliminate the worst forms of child labour, mainly linked with no drop in the child labour rate and continued to hinder educational opportunities for Rohingya children.⁴⁰ Controversy about poor working conditions and child labour has caused

many retailers and clothing companies, especially well-known brands, anxious to ensure that basic labour standards are respected during production.

Social dialogue in efforts to tackle child labour functions, including providing child labour-free places to work. Overall, the scale of programmes targeting child labour is not fully reaching child labour due to the widespread informal economy, including the authorities did not systematically inspect workplaces or enforce sanctions against child labour. Children's safety, health conditions and wages were often substandard.

The root of child labour in Bangladesh is linked with household poverty, low parental education, social norms, lack of access to education or enforcement of compulsory schooling and voided social security.

The high child labour rate of 20% in 2000 fell significantly, reaching 4.3% in 2013. It was mainly due to remarkable gains in ensuring access to education, especially at the primary and secondary levels (see more in the Education section). Bangladesh did not achieve improvements in the child labour indicator during the last decade, though, even moving up on the margin to 4.4% in 2022, an impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.⁴¹ Of these Bangladeshi children engaged in child labour, three out of five (60%) are involved in hazardous child labour. This stance suggests that extending compulsory education has not entirely curbed the child labour rate, not to mention that the government is far behind in reaching its goal set in 2016 to eliminate child labour from all sectors by 2025. It is worth noting that Bangladesh's child labour stood lower than the latest Central and Southern Asia average of 5.5%.⁴²

Most child labour is found in rural areas operating in the informal economy. This group is usually in family settings, linked with cultural heritage, echoed in the tradition of children working alongside adults in the fields. Children in child labour often lack education and weak coverage of government services. In addition, child domestic work is a hidden phenomenon that is difficult to tackle because of its associations with social and cultural patterns.

Gender

Bangladesh has ratified central international gender conventions. The government has further promoted several legal measures to protect women's rights. However, the country's laws and regulations around the life cycle of a working woman still scored relatively low at 49 out of 100 (100 is best) in 2022, lower than the regional average across Southern Asia at 64. The country only gets a perfect score regarding laws affecting women's mobility. Other regulations affecting women have lower scores; for instance, women's work is affected after having children, and low pension coverage (see more details in Appendix Table 14).⁴³

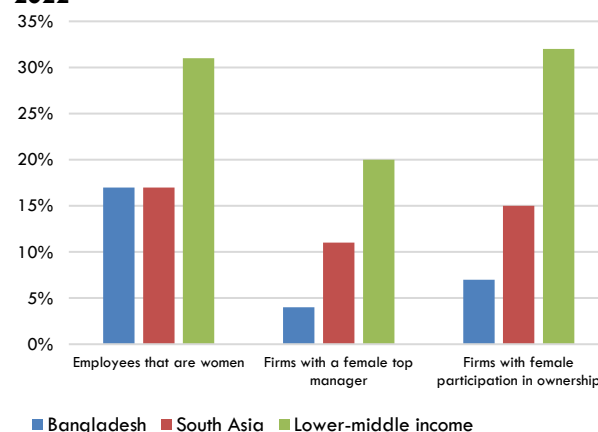
At the policy level, a notable action of Bangladesh's government was the adoption of the National Women Development Policy 2011 and its Action Plan. This strategy has not yet been updated.

The gender policy landscape has moved Bangladesh towards improved gender equality, mainly an upsurge in political empowerment. It has not yet triggered down to the country's company culture, hindering the extent of women's integration and other opportunities. On the positive side, some changes in recent years are linked to rising levels of female education, access to electricity and mobile phones, the evolving garment industry, and the migration flow. These factors have brought more younger women participate in waged work and self-employment outside the home.⁴⁴ Women are still often vulnerable to exploitation and repression, resonated by strong cultural norms regarding men's role as family breadwinners with severe restrictions on women's mobility in the public domain.

Gender division shows that men are almost always in the highest positions of organisational power. Women account for less than their counterparts in the highest decision-making bodies; for example, their participation in the leadership of trade unions is weak. A BILS study reveals that out of 17 national federations, only eight have 10% or more women representation in the executive committee. It shows that about half of the federations violate the law provisions regarding women's involvement in the

executive committee: 10% of total executive committee members must be women if 20% of the workforce in any factory is women. While many women are active in trade unions as leaders in organising workers and carrying out different functions, few women hold high positions in trade unions. The positions occupied by women in trade unions are mostly subordinate to men: women mainly hold the positions of education and secretary functions. The RMG federation, despite being a sector dominated by women, has no women president. These gender-cultural features are further mirrored in results from the latest enterprise survey. Although Bangladesh had a similar rate of female employees compared to Southern Asia, it was significantly lower regarding their participation in ownership and as top managers (see Figure 9).

Figure 9: Status of women participation in employment, top management, and ownership, %, 2022



Source: The World Bank, Bangladesh Enterprise Survey, 2022.

Table 2 below displays the scope of Bangladesh's gender gaps in the employment structure. There are significantly fewer women in employment than men but with remarkable growth. There are differences between urban and rural areas; for example, women in cities have a lower employment share than rural, 23% vs. 40%, respectively. It is interesting to observe that women's participation rate grew rapidly in rural areas in recent years while it plummeted in urban zones, which was an impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. Almost all women are employed informally. There is basically no gender unemployment gap. The agricultural sector remains the leading employer for three out

of four Bangladeshi women. Most women further face a ‘double burden’ pushing many into informal part-time activities linked to time constraints from domestic chores.

Table 2: Key indicators for employment gender gaps in Bangladesh, 2022

	Men	Women
Employment share	65%	35%
Unemployment rate	3.5%	3.6%
Employees rate	49%	18%
Informal employment rate	78%	97%
Employment growth *	20%	53%

* Growth from 2010 to 2022.

Source: Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, Labour Force Survey 2022.

Generally, the global Gender Inequality Index (GII) reflects the scope of gender disparities, ranking Bangladesh 131 out of 162 countries (1 is best) in 2021. This low ranking is mainly due to the relatively high maternal mortality ratio, adolescent birth rate, the gender gap in the labour force participation rate, and women score less than men in the population with at least some secondary education.⁴⁵

Youth

In Bangladesh, youth aged 15-24 years represent 15 million (21%) of the workforce in 2022.⁴⁶ This group still outnumbers the older generation, leading to more people who can work than those who do not.

The National Youth Policy launched in 2017 addresses sixteen categories of young people, many of whom live in various excluded and marginalised situations. This policy has been considered a big step towards realising the youth demographic dividend in Bangladesh and bringing them into central development actors. A National Plan of Action supported the policy. The implementation of the policy has ended somewhat disappointing. For instance, various organised youth argue they have not been prioritised in the implementation process, not to mention insufficient budgetary support and poor coordination between the ministerial departments involved.⁴⁷ The latest

Youth Conference 2022 called for policy support, launching the Youth Declaration 2022.

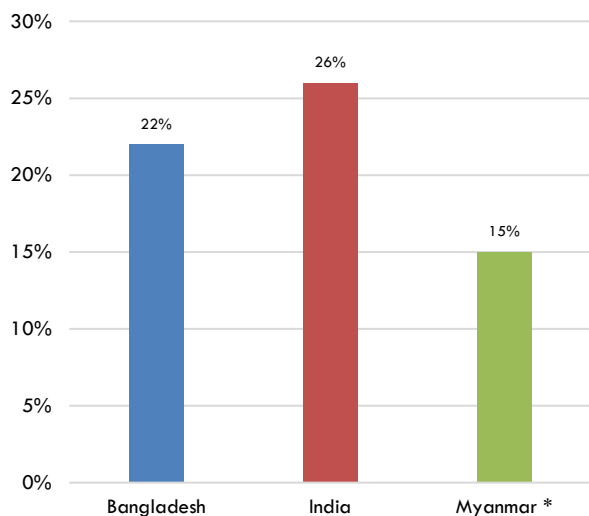
Youth face limitations of the Labour Act with weak rights; for example, in many informal micro and small enterprises, employment benefits, leaves, and other facilities depend on authority. Generally, the employee-unfriendly nature of rules and weak implementation of existing regulations make the private sector less attractive and unreliable to many workers. Besides, cultural aspects discourage many Bangladeshi youths from entering the labour market, especially women, ending up economically inactive in the labour market. It is worth mentioning that the urban youth culture is moving away from the more conservative, traditional patterns, interrelated into Western norms of dress codes, food habits, attitudes, and lifestyles.⁴⁸

Bangladesh’s latest ranking on the Global Youth Development Index was 126 of 181 countries (1 is best) in 2020, in the middle among neighbouring countries, e.g., India ranks 122 and Myanmar 130.

The government promotes several employment programmes, tax incentives, and training of job seekers for young people. But the nature of the job market is changing, and the mounting group of better-educated youth brings pressure on decent job creation, leading to oversupply today. Educated youth face hurdles entering the labour market, including a lack of access to decent jobs. It supports the fact of dwindling emigration outflow, previously considered one of the youth’s solutions to escape unemployment. These waves on the labour market are gradually causing the youth unemployment rate to rise (revisit Figure 7).

The education, employment, or training (NEET) rate fell by ten percentage points during the last decade, faster than in India (see Figure 10). Two out of three (66%) are females, residing mainly in rural areas. An extensive new programme was launched in August 2023 to boost rural youth employability for nearly 900,000 persons in Bangladesh, including supporting vocational training centres offering diverse online and offline skill development avenues.

Figure 10: Status of proportion of youth (aged 15-24 years) not in education, employment, or training (NEET), %, 2022



* Data from 2020.

Source: Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, Labour Force Survey 2022; International Labour Organization, ILOSTAT.

Those young men and women who work often lack job security or benefits. Instead, most have activities in the informal economy with underemployment, temporary or part-time, often under poor working conditions. These groups often need more job training compared to the non-youth groups.

Another weakness for Bangladeshi youth is the mismatch between job requirements and graduates' qualifications, reflected in the relatively low labour productivity compared with the Southern Asia average.

EDUCATION

The “demographic dividend” has created a proportionately substantial working-age cohort in Bangladesh; many are in school, and bringing the educational system on par with a workforce that can support a modernised economy in progress is challenging.

Bangladesh has made some remarkable educational achievements during the last two decades; for instance, an upsurge in school enrolment, a fall in dropout rate at the primary level from 50% in 2008 to 14% in 2022, a fast gain in the completion rate at the secondary level

from 39% to 64% in the same period, improving gender parity, not to mention that upon achieving political independence in 1971, there were just six universities, there are 164 (53 are public, 109 are private, and two are international) in 2022.⁴⁹

By law, education is compulsory for all citizens until the end of grade eight. Primary and secondary education is funded by the state and free of charge in public schools. Bangladesh's Ministry of Primary and Mass Education (MoPME) is responsible for primary education (grades 1 to 5), and the Ministry of Education (MoE) oversees secondary and post-secondary education.

Despite the positive efforts, the education system faces many challenges: The need for basic mass education runs out when it comes to raising education quality standards. The education system is under-resourced facing a fast pace of changes in labour market demand. For example, the share of trained teachers in secondary schools fell from 75% in 2011 to the lowest 64% in 2017, rebounding to 67% in 2022. The younger population transitioning from education to work gets better educated. But, the labour market is not offering sufficiently decent jobs, a fact echoed by the steadily growing youth unemployment rate (revisit Figure 7). Many graduates struggle to find employment due to the mismatch between the skills they learned through the education system and those required by employers. Another critical issue is that government expenditure on education was 1.5% of GDP in FY 2022-2023 and 12% of total public expenditure, which illustrates that Bangladesh spends less on education than all other countries in Southern Asia and far below the international Education 2030 Framework for Action's benchmark for government financing of education, allocating at least 4% to 6% of its GDP.

The National Education Policy (NEP) of 2010 led to a comprehensive new education law to ensure quality education by merging the existing education laws and regulations under one umbrella and facilitating its implementation. Since 2011, the draft education bill has been scrutinised but has yet to reach a new approved law.

Vocational Training

Much has happened in Bangladesh's technical and vocational education and training (TVET) system during the last decade, promoting a series of laws, policies, and institutions (see more in Appendix Table 15). Training providers offer a wide variety of training courses to different target (formal and informal) groups, using different approaches and modes of delivery, assessment processes and certifications that are provided by government and non-governmental institutions.

The latest National Skills Development Policy (NSDP) launched in 2021 is supported by government agencies' collective efforts in TVET and skills training, employers' organisations, trade unions, private training providers, and NGOs. The NSDP is linked with the National Action Plan for Skills Development (NAPSD) (2022-2027). This instrument aims to reach at least 1.7 million trainings annually, and around 8.6 million trainings across 17+ sectors have been envisaged by ministries and external stakeholders from 2022 to 2027. Trainings have been identified across six categories: fresh skilling, up-skilling, re-skilling, entrepreneurship, apprenticeship, and Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL).⁵⁰

Trade unions have representation in the Bangladeshi National Skills Development Council (BNSDC), whose role is to oversee and monitor all activities of public and private training providers related to skills training. Bangladeshi trade unions provide direct training for informal workers.

The public sector represents just 8.8% of TVET institutions and 28% of enrolled TVET students in 2022. Generally, vocational education has been haunted by being separated from mainstream education. On the positive side, the Bangladesh National Qualifications Framework (BNQF) was finally approved in 2021, bringing together general education, technical-vocational education, and higher education into a harmonised quality-assured system. Employed graduates of the ten levels of BNQF will be termed as the classified workforce, following any country's development status and global competitiveness. All TVET

programmes – National Technical and Vocational Qualifications Framework (NTVQF) and non-NTVQF – must now be aligned with various BNQF levels of the TVET and Skills sectors.

Non-formal training has organised learning objectives and duration and provided learning support, but they are not affiliated/accredited by the Bangladesh Technical Education Board (BTEB). These programmes offer flexibility and cater to the capacity-building needs of target groups. This stance explains that after more than ten years of NTVQF implementation, only 6.6% of the total TVET institutes are Registered Training Organisation.⁵¹

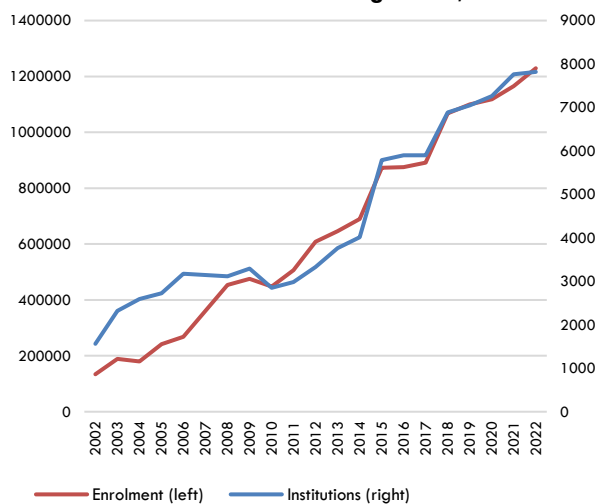
Bangladeshi firms (excluding micro-enterprises) offering formal training programmes fell during the last decade, reaching 6.4% of firms in 2022, significantly lower than the Southeast Asia average at 28%.⁵² Trade unions involvement in policy implementation of skills development is in a pretty limited way at the enterprise level.⁵³ Formal firms continue being a relatively small group compared to the widespread informal micro and small enterprises, left without a voice in TVET.

Studies found that Bangladeshi employers' skill requirements are shifting, pushed by the ongoing economic structural transformation. This situation has increased demand for employees with a broad range of skills that complement their education; for instance, soft skills are becoming more valued by employers. Employment readiness for Bangladeshi youth is derailed by the required skills, which have been underdeveloped by the educational system. It could cost that they are losing out on their demographic dividend mirrored in the growing youth unemployment rate.⁵⁴

The TVET system proliferated, reflecting the upsurge of institutions and enrolment (see Figure 11). Share of all students in secondary education enrolled in vocational programmes accelerated from 1.1% in 2002 to 4.0% in 2019, at least two percentage points higher than the Southern Asia average at 1.8%.⁵⁵ Interestingly, women's proportion of 15–24-year-olds enrolled in vocational education jumped from 0.1% in 2002 to

1.5% in 2019, fuelled by their rise in workforce participation over the last decade.

Figure 11: Number of technical and vocational institutions and enrolment in Bangladesh, 2002-2022



Source: Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics & Ministry of Education, Bangladesh Education Statistics 2022.

Despite the rapid expansion of enrolment in TVET, institutions and organisations' capacities are challenged by the quality of training, keeping pace with the labour market's changing demands. For instance, effective technology implementation into TVET sectors requires massive investments, including Information and Communication Technology (ICT). It has led to insufficient attention to the use of technology in teaching and learning contexts. This situation dares teachers' attitudes and beliefs in teaching, often due to teachers' lack of knowledge and skills to use ICT in TVET education. The attractiveness of TVET education continues to be a concern, considering it to be a 'second-class' education. This situation has raised the quality and attractiveness of the TVET sector, getting more priority from the government.

Fourth Industrial Revolution

The Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) phenomenon is in its early stages, using artificial intelligence (AI), digitalisation, biotechnology, and global connectivity, linked with production systems, management, and governance. The fear factor for AI and automation is replacing many low-skilled and medium-skilled workers. Studies project that

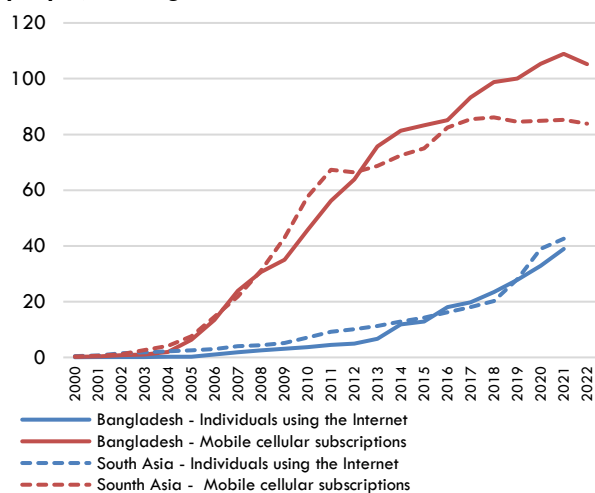
47% of the jobs in Bangladesh may be at risk by 2041 in five sectors, including 60% of employment in readymade garments.⁵⁶ It suggests that Bangladesh's labour market could end struggling with the dual challenge of employing a sizeable young population while coping with the disruptions caused by the 4IR.

The government launched the National Strategy for Artificial Intelligence in 2020, aiming to transform Bangladesh with Vision 2021 into a technologically advanced nation by the following decade and leverage Information and Communication Technology (ICT) as a tool for sustainable development. The country's ICT exports are growing fast, and infrastructure in export zones is being invested in, not to mention the launching of Bangabandhu-1, the country's first satellite, which entered the space arena in 2018.

Bangladesh faces a massive test in transforming its education programmes and skills development infrastructure to deliver the talents needed for an innovative, digitised, and post-agricultural economy marching towards upper-income status. Data show that schools' coverage at the secondary education level with computer facilities increased from 65% in 2011 to 88% in 2022, schools with an internet connection from 30% to 83%, and having multimedia facilities from 10% to 78% for the same period.⁵⁷

Generally, Bangladeshis has experienced a growing application for ICT factors, becoming connected with mobile devices. Figure 12 visualises those individuals using the internet increased, following the regional tempo. The country's mobile cellular subscription demand soared significantly higher than the region's average.

Figure 12: Individuals using the Internet (% of population) and mobile cellular subscriptions (per 100 people) in Bangladesh and Southern Asia, 2000-2022



Source: The World Bank, World Development Indicators.

The ICT industry is mainly driven by its young entrepreneurs and the government's strategic focus on Digital Bangladesh. The country's business process outsourcing (BPO) industry and online freelance labour are growing steadily, creating jobs, and bringing in foreign currencies, not to mention international competitiveness due to low wages. However, the BPO growth has failed to live up to expectations, to some extent, due to a lack of human resources and language skills among graduates: Bangladeshi firms often find it challenging to get new graduates who can speak Bangla properly, let alone other languages. Other complexities are that many employees fear moving out of their comfort zones and learning about new technologies, and employers often do not spend time and resources on re-skilling the employees.⁵⁸

Struggling to survive in a competitive job market of digital automation can bring extra stress for workers in Bangladesh, carrying new challenges for the trade union movement. For example, the effects of "casualisation" and "externalisation" emerged with an increasing number of part-time and contractual workers. These factors could lead to employment vulnerability, making unionisation more difficult. Although Bangladesh's trade union movement has not yet developed a clear strategy to handle the changes coming through 4IR, they have gained focus on a legal framework to protect platform/gig economy workers.

SOCIAL PROTECTION

Social protection was enshrined in Bangladesh's constitution based on a broader policy principle rather than a judicial right. The country has not ratified ILO's two fundamental conventions on occupational safety and health but one of fifteen up-to-date ILO Social Security conventions, i.e., Equality of Treatment (Social Security) Convention (C118) – see more details in Appendix Table 6.

The government launched the National Social Security Strategy (NSSS) in 2015, considered a game-changer for the social security system. It was supported by the first Action Plan 2016-2021 and the current second phase Action Plan 2021-2026. The policy instruments promote the lifecycle approach, covering sickness, maternity pay and protection, old age pensions, workplace accidents and unemployment benefits for workers in the formal economy. The strategy is consistent with the Universal Social Protection (USP) concept. It is worth mentioning that social security programmes for the working-age population were underdeveloped before adopting the NSSS; for instance, coverage of social insurance programmes was low at 1.0% of the population in 2016, concentrated in the richest quintile.

Steady increases in allocations to social protection since the mid-2010s, fuelled by NSSS, have supported poverty reduction. The allocation represents nearly one-tenth of the total government budget and about 2.6% of GDP in 2020.⁵⁹ However, the implementation of NSSS and its action plan have been sluggish, mainly due to limited financial resources and capacity constraints in conceptualising a social protection architecture consistent with USP and implementing it.⁶⁰ Generally, the social protection system has been challenged by fragmentation of at least 114 disparate programmes, primarily centred around food distribution and cash transfers.

Weak tripartite social dialogue institutions among social partners have complicated the development of the social protection system. Nevertheless, new tripartite mechanisms emerged in the aftermath of the factory collapses in 2012/2013, especially in

the garment sector. A new tripartite coordination mechanism was established in 2022, as well as an ad-hoc delivery mechanism for income support for job retention. This support aims to complement the government-led stimulus package to the garment sector, targeting smaller factories that benefited less from the government's package. Cash support for distressed workers who lost their jobs during the Covid-19 pandemic in the RMG sectors has only reached a few due to the difficulties of identifying the real beneficiaries and the rigid rules for distributing the cash support.

Other broader steps ahead happened in recent years, reflected in a breakthrough in 2023 by a new Universal Pension Management Act establishing a framework for universal pensions, supported by the trade union movement. This new law opens the possibility for all Bangladeshi workers to benefit from income security in retirement. Previously, the pension system in Bangladesh was limited only to civil servants. A National Pension Authority (NPA) is set up. A Governing Body was announced, consisting of members of the government and employer representatives; trade unions have not been appointed.

The new Universal Pension Scheme is a pathway to self-sustained retirement for citizens. Even modest-income individuals can prepare for a self-sustained retirement within their financial capabilities. Four distinct pension schemes have been introduced: Progoti, Surokkha, Somota, and Probash. Progoti targets employees of private companies; Surokkha caters to informal sector workers, such as farmers and labourers; Somota focuses on individuals living below the poverty line; Probash encompasses Bangladeshi citizens living abroad. Although informal workers have access to the Universal Pension Scheme, there is still confusion about their enrolment in the scheme despite the released official guidelines on registration. Considering it is a voluntary contribution, the registration rate is low as people think it is a government scheme to collect money.

The country has a long track record of social safety net interventions, and coverage has increased, reaching about 40% of the population. Although it catches the poorest quintile, there are leakages to the richest quintile. Bangladesh's social safety net programme expenditures are more than many other Southern Asia countries.

Subsidies have been a part of Bangladesh's social protection system for decades and contributed to poverty reduction. Recent studies found that energy subsidies improved social wellbeing by mediating effects of energy poverty (i.e., occurs when a household must reduce its energy consumption to a degree that negatively impacts the inhabitants' health and wellbeing).⁶¹

A worrisome trend for the social protection indicators is that Bangladesh's population covered by at least one social protection benefit fell in recent years due to the Covid-19 pandemic. In contrast, the number of children/households receiving child/family cash benefits rose (see more in Appendix Table 16).

Bangladesh has successfully expanded coverage for persons above retirement age receiving a pension from 33% in 2016 to 57% in 2021. This upsurge is supported by several schemes like government employees entitled to draw retirement pension, cash allowance to mainly poor people with virtually no means of support in old age, and the Old Age Allowance. However, compared with other countries, Bangladesh has one of the lowest non-contributory old-age pensions as a percentage of the national poverty line (i.e., the pension is insufficient to prevent old-age poverty). Stated differently, Bangladeshi older people who rely on a social pension for their income are still poor.⁶²

The country has achieved remarkable progress in its healthcare sector during the last two decades, marked by substantial reductions in maternal and child mortality rates, increased life expectancy, and improved immunisation coverage. Significant challenges persist in ensuring equitable access to quality and affordable healthcare services. Limited healthcare coverage remains an obstacle,

especially in rural areas. Only 2.5% of the population possesses health insurance, making the majority vulnerable to healthcare expenditures. To address these challenges, the government has set an ambitious goal of achieving universal health coverage (UHC) by 2030 through expanding services, increasing resources, and improving efficiency. So far, the universal Health Service coverage index has doubled during the last two decades, grasping 52 (on a scale of 0 to 100; 100 is best) in 2021.

The country spends 2.6% of its GDP on current health expenditure, below Southern Asia's average and has not reached the World Health Organization's minimum threshold of 4% of GDP (see more details in Figure 3).

Table 3: Status of expenditure on health in Bangladesh and Southern Asia (SA), 2020

Service	Bangladesh	SA
Total health expenditure, % of GDP	2.6%	3.1%
Current health expenditure per capita	US\$ 51	US\$ 56
Universal Health Service coverage index (2021)	52 *	-

* Coverage index for essential health services (based on tracer interventions that include reproductive, maternal, newborn and child health, infectious diseases, noncommunicable diseases and service capacity and access). It is presented on a scale of 0 to 100.

Source: The World Bank, World Development Indicators; World Health Organization, Data Portal.

Pregnant Bangladeshi employees receive four months of paid leave, eight weeks before delivery and eight weeks post-childbirth. There are

discrepancies in law compliance between sectors; for example, the garment sector does not have an internal maternity policy. Many women workers feel pressured to return to work before eight weeks post-delivery, while some are led to resign 'voluntarily'. Data suggest that Bangladesh has extended maternity protection coverage from 21% in 2016 to 35% in 2021.⁶³ There is no statutory paternity leave policy for the private sector, and the government has not yet introduced any national policy on paternity leave.

Unemployed receiving unemployment benefits have been voided in Bangladesh for many years. However, the trade union movement and employers' organisations brought attention to an unemployment fund to address the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic or any other employment disruptions. A policy and legislative analysis were initiated via social dialogue in 2022 to establish an unemployment insurance scheme for formal economy workers, which was in line with NSSS 2015.

The Employment Injury Insurance scheme was launched as a pilot initiative for the readymade garment (RMG) sector in June 2022. The scheme provides injured workers and dependents, in case of accidents that lead to permanent disability or death, a periodical payment as top-ups for the already existing lump-sum payments of the Central Fund.

APPENDIX: ADDITIONAL DATA

Table 4: List of approved labour related legislations in Bangladesh, 2014-2023

Type of legislation	Legislation
2014	
Education, vocational guidance and training	Non-Formal Education Act, 2014
2015	
Elimination of child labour, protection of children and young persons	Youth Organizations (Registration and Management) Act, 2015
Occupational safety and health	Formalin Control Act, 2015
	Nuclear Power Plant Act, 2015 (No. 19 of 2015).
Specific categories of workers	Public Servants (Marriage with Foreign Nationals) Act, 2015 (Act No. 19 of 2015).
2016	
Elimination of child labour, protection of children and young persons / Employment policy, promotion of employment and employment services	Youth Welfare Fund Act, 2016 (No. 33 of 2016).
Social security (general standards)	Bangladesh Tea Workers Welfare Fund Act, 2016 (No. 1 of 2016).
Specific categories of workers	The Surplus Public Servants Absorption Act, 2016 (No. 1 of 2016).
	Railway Security Force Act, 2016 (No. 2 of 2016)
2017	
Elimination of child labour, protection of children and young persons	Child Marriage Restraint Act (No. 6 of 2017)
2018	
General provisions	Digital Security Act, 2018.
Specific categories of workers	Ship Recycling Act
2019	
Specific categories of workers	EPZ Labour Act
2020	
-	-
2021	
Elimination of child labour, protection of children and young persons	National Anti-Human Trafficking Fund Rules, 2017 (S.R.O. No. 89-Law/2021).
2022	
-	-
2023	
General provisions	Bangladesh Public Service Commission Act, 2023.
Social security (general standards)	Law No. 4 of 2023 on The Universal Pension Management Act.
Specific categories of workers	Law No. 18 of 2023 amending Public Service Act of 2018.
	Bangladesh Supreme Court Judges (Leave, Pension and Privileges) Act, 2023.

Source: International Labour Organization, NATLEX, Bangladesh.

Table 5: Bangladesh's key economic data, projections, 2019-2025

Values	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
GDP (current, US\$)	351bn	374bn	416bn	460bn	446bn	455bn	512bn
GDP per capita (PPP, US\$)	2,154	2,270	2,498	2,731	2,621	2,646	2,946
Total investment (% of GDP)	32%	31%	31%	32%	31%	32%	33%
Gross national savings (% of GDP)	31%	31%	31%	29%	30%	31%	30%
General government expenditure (% of GDP)	14%	13%	13%	13%	13%	13%	14%
Government gross debt (% of GDP)	32%	35%	36%	38%	39%	40%	40%

Source: International Monetary Fund, World Economic Outlook Database, October 2023.

Table 6: Bangladesh's ratification of ILO Conventions

Subject and/or right	Convention	Ratification date
Fundamental Conventions		
Freedom of association and collective bargaining	C087 - Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise, 1948	1972
	C098 - Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining Convention, 1949	1972
Elimination of all forms of forced labour	C029 - Forced Labour Convention, 1930	1972
	C105 - Abolition of Forced Labour Convention, 1957	1972
Effective abolition of child labour	C138 - Minimum Age Convention, 1973	2022
	C182 - Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999	2001
Elimination of discrimination in employment	C100 - Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951	1998
	C111 - Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, 1958	1972
Occupational safety and health	C155 - Occupational Safety and Health Convention, 1981	Not ratified
	C187 - Promotional Framework for Occupational Safety and Health Convention, 2006	Not ratified
Governance Conventions		
Labour inspection	C081 - Labour Inspection Convention, 1947	1972
	C129 - Labour Inspection (Agriculture) Convention, 1969	Not ratified
Employment policy	C122 - Employment Policy Convention, 1964	Not ratified
Tripartism	C144 - Tripartite Consultation (International Labour Standards) Convention, 1976	1979
Up-to-date Conventions		
Working time	C014 - Weekly Rest (Industry) Convention, 1921	1972
	C106 - Weekly Rest (Commerce and Offices) Convention, 1957	1972
Social Security	C118 - Equality of Treatment (Social Security) Convention, 1962	1972
Specific categories of workers	C149 - Nursing Personnel Convention, 1977	1972
Seafarers	C185 - Seafarers' Identity Documents Convention, 2003	2014
	MLC - Maritime Labour Convention, 2006 *	2014

Note: Fundamental Conventions are the eight most important ILO conventions that cover four fundamental principles and rights at work. Equivalent to basic human rights at work. Governance Conventions are four conventions that the ILO has designated as important to building national institutions and capacities that serve to promote employment. In other words, conventions that promotes a well-regulated and well-functioning labour market.

Source: International Labour Organization, NORMLEX, Country Profiles: Bangladesh.

Table 7: Central legal reservations concerning the rights to organise, collective bargaining, and strikes in Bangladesh, 2023

Right to organize
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Bangladesh Labour Law and Rules allow the Director of Labour discretion as to the registration of trade unions, permitting an arbitrary application process. • Formalities or requirements excessively delay or substantially impair the free establishment of organisations. • The 2013 Amendment to the Labour Act increased the number of unions required to form a federation from two to five and required the constituent unions to be from more than one administrative division. There are seven administrative divisions. This would bar a federation of unions in Dhaka (where roughly 1/3 of the population live). The law prohibits federations with broader coverage than one occupation. • Unions can only be formed at the factory/establishment level, however in some exceptional cases (such as private road transport, private inland river transport, tea, jute bailing and bidi production) unions can be based on a geographical area. There can be no more than three registered trade unions in any establishment. • Restrictions on the right to freely draw up their constitutions and rules. • Restrictions on the right to elect representatives and self-administer in full freedom. • Restrictions on the right to freely organise activities and formulate programmes. • Administrative authorities' power to unilaterally dissolve, suspend or de-register trade union organisations. • Rule 350 of the Bangladesh Labour Rules gives the Director of Labour sweeping powers to enter union offices to inspect the premises, all books, and records and to question any person. The rule also allows all such records to be seized for up to 30 days. • Membership of a union is restricted only to workers currently working at an establishment, meaning that loss of employment results in the end of a worker's membership of the union. • Under the Bangladesh Labour Act of 2006 government workers and workers employed in offices under government authority are prohibited from belonging to a trade union except for railway, postal, telecommunications, public works, public health engineering and government printing press workers. Firefighters are denied the right to form unions. On the positive side, new categories of workers, including teachers and NGO workers, are permitted under the act to form unions. • Supervisory officers and persons responsible in managerial work are excluded from the definition of worker in the Labour Law, and therefore the rights with regards to freedom of association. • Farms of less than five workers are excluded from the Bangladesh Labour Act.
Right to collective bargaining
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Labour Rules do not clearly provide a legal basis for collective bargaining at the industry, sector and national levels. • Under the Labour Rules, the Inspector General (IG) is only required to forward to the employer proposals with regards service rules (often the subject of collective bargaining) that the IG deems "reasonable". This gives the IG total discretion to shape the outcome of the Service Rules. • Limitations or ban on collective bargaining in certain sectors: Non-profit educational, training and research institutions Non-profit hospitals, clinics and diagnostic centres Farms of less than five workers Firefighting staff Telex operators Workers in EPZs.
Right to strike
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Obligation to observe an excessive quorum or to obtain an excessive majority in a ballot to call a strike. • The labour law requires that parties to an industrial dispute must initiate legal proceedings within a specific timeframe or the authorities will consider the dispute to be terminated. The Labour Act prohibits the parties from raising the specific issue or subject again for one year after the issuing of a termination order. • At the company level, strikes are not allowed in new establishments for three years from the date they begin commercial operations, where the factory is newly built, owned by foreign investors or established with foreign aid. • Go-slows are punished with a prison sentence under the Bangladesh Labour Rules. • The government can ban any strike if it continues beyond 30 days (in which case it is referred to the Labour Court for adjudication), if it involves a public service covered by the Essential Services Ordinance or if it is considered a threat to the national interest. The government may ban strikes for renewable periods of three months. • If a strike is considered a threat to the national interest, the 1974 Special Powers Act can be used to detain trade unionists without charge. Sentences of up to 14 years' forced labour can be passed for offences such as "obstruction of transport".

Source: International Trade Union Confederation, Survey of Violations of Trade Union Rights, Bangladesh: Legal, September 2023

Table 8: Labour market efficiency in Bangladesh, 2019

Indicator	Rank
Total	121
Redundancy costs (weeks of salary) **	127
Hiring and firing practices *	76
Cooperation in labour-employer relations *	99
Flexibility of wage determination *	89
Active labour market policies *	104
Workers' rights *	109
Ease of hiring foreign labour *	79
Internal labour mobility *	102
Reliance on professional management *	96
Pay and productivity *	80
Ratio of wage and salaried female workers to male workers **	121
Labour tax rate **	1

* Survey data. ** Ranked by per cent.

Note: Rank from 1 to 141 (1 is highest).

Source: The Global Competitiveness Report, 2019, 8th pillar: Labour market efficiency.

Table 9: Ease of Doing Business in Bangladesh, 2020

Topics	Ranking
Overall	168
Starting a Business	131
Dealing with Construction Permits	135
Getting Electricity	176
Registering Property	184
Getting Credit	119
Protecting Minority Investors	72
Paying Taxes	151
Trading Across Borders	176
Enforcing Contracts	189
Resolving Insolvency	154

Note: Doing Business 2019-2020 indicators are ranking from 1 (top) to 190 (bottom) among other countries. The rankings tell much about the business environment, but do not measure all aspects of the business surroundings that matter to firms and investors that affect the competitiveness of the economy. Still, a high ranking does mean that the government has created a regulatory environment conducive to operating a business.

Source: The World Bank & IFC, Ease of Doing Business 2020 in Bangladesh.

Table 10: ITUC list of affiliated organisations - Bangladesh

	2022	Growth, 2012-2022
Bangladesh Free Trade Union Congress (BFTUC)	85000	0%
Bangladesh Jatyatabadi Sramik Dal (BJSD)	220000	22%
Bangladesh Labour Federation (BLF)	102000	0%
Bangladesh Mukto Sramik Federation (BMSF)	147000	-28%
Bangladesh Sanjukta Sramik Federation (BSSF)	89000	-43%
Jatio Sramik League (JSL)	150000	0%
Total	793000	-9%

Source: International Trade Union Confederation.

Table 11: Registered cases of violations of trade union rights in Bangladesh, 2020-2022

2020
Multiple violations of trade union rights confirmed by ITUC mission to Bangladesh.
Anti-union dismissals and union-busting during the pandemic.
34 Bangladeshi shipbreaking workers reinstated.
Violent crackdowns on strikes and retaliation against workers in the garment sector.
Union activists reinstated at Tanzila textile, Bangladesh.
Dragon Group workers assaulted by company thugs.
2021
Persecution of union leaders at steel works.
Five killed as police fire at protesting workers in Bangladesh.
Garment workers shot demanding extended Eid holidays.
Garment worker killed and many injured in protest at Bangladesh EPZ.
Criminal cases filed against 25 trade union members in retaliation for establishing a union.
Police in Bangladesh obstruct union activities.
2022
Protesting garment workers injured in clashes with the police.

Source: International Trade Union Confederation, Survey of violations of trade union rights, Bangladesh, November 2023.

Table 12: Bangladesh sectoral wages range – monthly, year with effect

	With effect	Bangladeshi taka (BDT)	US Dollars (US\$)
Minimum wage	December, 2013	1,500	14
RMG - Dhaka	December, 2023	12,500	116
Leather	September, 2020	9,350-13,520	87-125
Road transport	July, 2020	8,000-20,200	74-187
Rerolling mills	June, 2020	12,300-20,400	114-189
Plastic	June, 2020	8,000-12,900	74-120
Textile	January, 2019	8,000-18,256	74-169

Note: The registered wages include basic wage and house rent, medical and travel and food allowances.

Source: WageIndicator.com.

Table 13: Bangladesh's key workforce data, 2022

Indicator	Value
Working Age Population	119 million
Workforce	73 million
Employed population	71 million
<i>Urban share</i>	25%
<i>Rural share</i>	75%
Employed by sector share	
<i>Agriculture</i>	45%
<i>Industry</i>	17%
<i>Service</i>	38%

Source: Bangladesh Labour Force Survey 2022.

Table 14: Bangladesh - Scores for Women, Business and the Law 2022

Mobility	Workplace	Pay	Marriage	Parenthood	Entrepreneurship	Assets	Pension	Index score
100	50	25	60	20	75	40	25	49

Note: Overall scores are then calculated by taking the average of each indicator, with 100 representing the highest possible score.

Source: The World Bank, Women, Business and the Law 2022.

Table 15: Central TVET Regulatory and Policy Framework in Bangladesh

Central documents
The National Skills Development Policy (NSDP) 2021 was approved. Its implementation is supported by the National Action Plan for Skills Development (2022-2027) for skills development.
8th Five Year Plan (2021-2025) will focus on reforming the education and skills development sectors to reflect the aspiration of its citizens.
Education sector plan (ESP) for Bangladesh Fiscal years 2020/21-2024/25.
Bangladesh Technical Education Board Act of 2018 supporting to design and develop TVET programme and courses, accreditation of TVET institutes and courses, regulating and certification in different levels of TVET and skills sectors under BNQF.
National Skills Development Authority (NSDA) Act of 2018 to register institutes which intend to provide skill development training and award certificates at national level.
Non-Formal Education Act of 2014, setting the Non-Formal Education Department that provides education for the children who are deprived of formal education due to dropouts or older persons who could not get formal education within their age of 14 with vocational training opportunities.
National Skills Development Policy of 2012 provides the vision and direction for skills development over the coming years, setting out the major commitments and key reforms that government will be implementing in partnership with industry, workers, and civil society.
National Education Policy (NEP) of 2010, linked with a strategic approach to building up skilled manpower

Source: UNESCO-UNEVOC International Centre, TVET Country Profiles: Bangladesh, November 2023.

Table 16: Proportion of population covered by social protection systems and health in Bangladesh, %, 2021

Indicator	Coverage
SGD 1.3.1: Population covered by at least one social protection benefit	23%
Persons above retirement age receiving a pension	57%
Persons with severe disabilities collecting disability social protection benefits	44%
Unemployed receiving unemployment benefits	0% *
Mothers with newborns receiving maternity benefits	35%
Employed covered in the event of work injury	13% **
Children/households receiving child/family cash benefits	46%
Poor persons covered by social protection systems	61%
Vulnerable persons covered by social assistance	21%
SGD 3.8.1: Universal health coverage, % of population	48%

* Year: 2020.

** Year: 2019.

Source: International Labour Organisation, Key Indicators of the Labour Market (KILM).

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