



Research article

Bridging the Policy-Practice Gap: Understanding the Implementation Crisis of Child Labor Policies in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

Child labor constitutes one of the most pressing social issues not only in Bangladesh but across the globe, fundamentally undermining the rights and well-being of children. In Bangladesh, a confluence of socioeconomic conditions, entrenched cultural norms, and systemic exploitation compels millions of children to work in hazardous environments. Although Bangladesh has developed a substantial body of child labor policies aligned with international standards, the persistently high number of child laborers remains virtually unchanged over time. This study seeks to bridge the gap between policy formulation and practical implementation of international child labor policies in addressing the circumstances of working children in Bangladesh. A qualitative research design was employed to collect primary data from Khulna district. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews using a semi-structured interview guideline. A multistage sampling strategy, encompassing expert sampling and respondent-assisted sampling, was utilized to select diverse stakeholders (six key informants), including policymakers, child labor experts, and NGO representatives. The data were analyzed manually using thematic analysis to derive meaningful insights. The findings indicate that several interrelated factors including poverty, lack of awareness, and prevailing social and cultural attitudes serve as the primary drivers of children working in hazardous conditions in Bangladesh. Inadequate monitoring, weak penalties, and a scarcity of resources impede the effective implementation of existing legal regulations, while the absence of meaningful rehabilitation initiatives ensures that these children remain perpetually vulnerable. In light of these challenges, this study recommends the adoption of comprehensive and integrated approaches including stronger enforcement mechanisms, economic support for vulnerable families, effective rehabilitation programs, and cultural transformation to combat child labor in the Bangladeshi context.

ARTICLE INFO

Article timeline:

Date of Submission:

29 June, 2025

Date of Acceptance:

07 June, 2026

Article available online:

14 June, 2026

Keywords:

Child Labor
Vulnerability
Poverty
Social Attitude
Policy
Practices
Rehabilitation

Introduction

Child laborers represent one of the most marginalized and underprivileged groups in society, reflecting the unlawful subjection of children aged 5 to 17 to exploitative and hazardous working conditions (Elsayed, 2020; United Nations Children's Fund, 2020). Child labor constitutes a pervasive global issue that inflicts physical, psychological, social, and educational harm on affected children (Ahad et al., 2023a; Meesha et al., 2021; Radfar et al., 2018), thereby undermining fundamental human rights and social well-being (Johnson Jr et al., 2018; Kaur & Byard, 2021). This deeply entrenched social problem arises from

poverty, insufficient educational opportunities, the treatment of children as sources of subsistence income, and the inadequate enforcement of labor laws worldwide (Elsayed, 2024; Habib et al., 2024). International conventions such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the International Labor Organization (ILO) standards establish legal frameworks designed to promote and protect the fundamental human rights of working children (Erdem Türkelli, 2019; Hoque, 2024a). Despite these concerted efforts, current estimates indicate that approximately 152 million children are

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engaged in child labor globally, with 73 million of them involved in hazardous occupations (Subrahmanian, 2023; United Nations Children's Fund, 2021).

Exploitative working environments significantly exacerbate the vulnerability of these children, exposing them to sexual harassment, psychological distress, physical violence, and wage discrimination (Edmonds & Theoharides, 2020; Keane et al., 2020; Meesha et al., 2021). Moreover, the detrimental consequences of child labor strip children of their childhood, deprive them of regular schooling, limit their social development, and inflict mental, physical, social, and moral harm (Ahad et al., 2023b; Ahmady, 2020; Elsayed et al., 2023), which in turn significantly erodes their basic skills, diminishes their learning capabilities, and curtails their future employability (Tang et al., 2020; Thi et al., 2023). Furthermore, exploitative work environments frequently expose children to hazardous conditions that result in lasting physical impairments, psychological trauma, and stunted growth (Ibrahim et al., 2019; Omorogiuwa, 2020). The persistence of child labor undermines social progress, exacerbates inequality, and compromises fundamental human rights principles, ultimately hindering the overall development of a nation (Edmonds & Theoharides, 2020).

The causes of child labor are complex and multifaceted, rooted in poverty, inadequate access to education, and the societal acceptance of child labor within weak legal framework conditions (Kamruzzaman & Hakim, 2018; Loan et al., 2018). In recognition of these underlying factors, policy attention toward child labor has expanded considerably over recent decades, resulting in more stringent regulations aligned with international frameworks (Hoque, 2021; Yusefri et al., 2024). International instruments such as the UNCRC and the ILO have emerged as powerful mechanisms for combating this issue by establishing global standards and legal frameworks (Erdem Türkelli, 2019; Hennessy, 2023). While the UNCRC delineates the rights of children and provides protection against economic exploitation, ILO Convention 182 specifically targets the prohibition of the worst forms of child labor, including slavery and work that is hazardous to children's health and lives (de Guzman Chorny et al., 2019; Erdem Türkelli, 2019). Nevertheless, child labor continues to be socially and culturally legitimized under prevailing conditions, thereby entrenching exploitative labor practices and diminishing children's social, physical, and educational opportunities (Geovani et al., 2021; Radfar et al., 2018).

The situation of child labor is particularly challenging in the context of Bangladesh, where an estimated 3.54 million children aged 5 to 17 are engaged in various forms of hazardous employment (National Child Labor Survey, 2022). A range of identified contributing factors including poor infrastructure, limited resources, overpopulation, poverty, and parental lack of awareness expose children to exploitative labor conditions (Islam & Hoque, 2022; Kamruzzaman & Hakim, 2018). In response to this crisis, domestic laws have been enacted in alignment with international frameworks to strengthen child protection, such as the Labor Act 2006 and the Children Act 2013; however, these legislative measures have failed to achieve their intended objectives due to governance deficiencies, resource constraints, and institutional inefficiencies

(Boudreau, 2020; Hoque, 2024a; Hossain, 2020). This problem is further compounded when the societal acceptance of child labor converges with inadequate legal frameworks, deficient education systems, and pervasive poverty (Hoque, 2024b; Loan et al., 2018).

Existing literature indicates that insufficient planning measures, weakened enforcement of labor laws, administrative inefficiency, governance corruption, socioeconomic vulnerability, unmonitored policy violations, adverse family conditions, and lack of parental education remain persistent challenges to the implementation of international child rights policies against child labor in Bangladesh (Admaw & Ghosal, 2018; Akhtar et al., 2020; Hoque, 2024a; Ibrahim et al., 2019; Kang, 2021; Magdalena et al., 2021; Maya Jariego, 2021). As a consequence, children are compelled into harrowing labor conditions, where they endure various forms of physical and psychological suffering that led to enduring health ramifications, including chronic illness, organ damage, psychological instability, limited social opportunities, and the deprivation of a normal childhood (Hossain, 2020; Ibrahim et al., 2019; Islam & Hoque, 2022; Monika, 2021).

Despite the government's enactment of national laws aligned with international frameworks to safeguard the fundamental rights of children, the problem of child labor continues to persist in Bangladesh. This research aims to identify the gap between the policy and practice of child labor laws with a view toward reducing the vulnerability of these underprivileged working children while also proposing sustainable intervention strategies aligned with international human rights standards and national frameworks. By identifying significant gaps, this study assists policymakers and practitioners in creating more effective and safer environments for children, thereby protecting them from exploitative labor conditions in the Bangladeshi context.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) and Social Justice Theory (Rawls, 1971) to examine the gap between policies and practices of international child labor policies that intensify the vulnerability of children in Bangladesh. Together, these frameworks provide comprehensive analytical insights suitable for examining the structural and individual factors that shape the lives of working children.

Ecological Systems Theory

Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) offers a framework for analyzing the convergence of diverse environmental factors that influence individual development, encompassing the microsystem (family or school), the mesosystem (interactions between microsystems), the exosystem (broader societal structures), and the macrosystem (culture and law). This theory posits that human development is shaped by several interconnected components: the mesosystem involves interactions among microsystems, such as the connection between family and school (Soyer, 2019). The exosystem encompasses a wider range of social processes that indirectly affect children, including parental employment conditions and municipal policy. The macrosystem

comprises the cultural, economic, and legal frameworks that define societal norms and determine access to opportunities. The chronosystem of the ecological development model incorporates several layers of evolving developmental conditions, including individual life trajectories, societal changes, and environmental factors that alter developmental pathways (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Rosa & Tudge, 2013).

Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2007), Barner et al. (2018) and Ceci (2006) contend that vulnerability originates from the interaction of these systems. Within this context, poverty, family instability, housing insecurity, and limited access to education give rise to structural inequities and social problems that compel children to remain in the labor force. While societies have adopted various policies to mitigate these problems, a lack of coordination among stakeholders undermines policy enforcement and protective measures (Norris et al., 2013). Social systems, through the socio-psychological processes outlined by Belsky (1980), amplify the social and psychological stresses that shape how child labor is perceived and whether policies are respected or resisted. Based on these arguments, this research posits that multiple environmental factors may interact to create a gap between the policy and practice of child labor regulations, thereby rendering children even more vulnerable within society.

Social Justice Theory

Social Justice Theory (Rawls, 1971) focuses on the fair distribution of resources, opportunities, and privileges within society, advocating for equality and the protection of individual rights. According to Abbott (2014) and Follesdal (2022), this theory holds that every individual should have equal access to the rights, resources, and opportunities necessary for a healthy and productive life, irrespective of their social or economic circumstances. It further encompasses the notion that social justice pertains to the mechanisms by which individuals fulfill their societal responsibilities and receive their legitimate rights from society (Connell, 2020; Uhalde, 2013). Economic fairness, social safety nets, and the elimination of obstacles to social mobility have been central tenets of contemporary social justice movements (Kitching, 2010; Lawrence & Churn, 2012).

This theory provides insights into overcoming the injustices and inequalities that disproportionately affect specific groups in society, particularly child laborers (Saleem & Amu, 2017). Social justice seeks to allocate rights and responsibilities within societal institutions, facilitating individuals' access to fundamental advantages and the obligations of collaboration by relevant institutions including taxation, social insurance, public health, public education, public services, labor law, and market regulation (Rawls, 1971). Drawing on the central tenets of this theory, the study examines the power dynamics and structural inequalities responsible for rendering children vulnerable, while critically assessing policies for fairness and inclusivity in the evaluation of rights-based implementation.

The insights derived from Ecological Systems Theory and Social Justice Theory suggest that child labor is exacerbated by inequitable access to rights and resources,

which stems from various influences including family, community, institutions, peer groups, and broader political dynamics. Together, these theories illuminate the diverse layers of factors influencing policy effectiveness and underscore the need for systematic, needs-based interventions that ensure a holistic understanding of child labor rooted in both context and justice.

Rationale and Implications of the Study

Despite the growing body of literature on child labor in Bangladesh, there remains a conspicuous absence of studies that systematically examine the gap between the formulation and the practical implementation of international child labor policies at the grassroots level. While existing studies have largely focused on the prevalence, causes, and socioeconomic determinants of child labor (Ahad et al., 2023b; Kamruzzaman & Hakim, 2018), very few have investigated the specific institutional, cultural, and governance-related barriers that impede the translation of ratified international conventions into tangible protective measures for children. This study addresses this critical gap by providing an empirically grounded analysis of the implementation crisis confronting child labor policies in Bangladesh, drawing on the perspectives of key stakeholders directly involved in policy enforcement and child welfare.

The findings of this study carry significant implications for multiple stakeholders. For policymakers, the research offers evidence-based insights into the structural weaknesses of current enforcement mechanisms, thereby informing the design of more effective and context-sensitive policy interventions. For NGOs and international development organizations, the study highlights the urgent need for integrated rehabilitation frameworks and family-centered economic support programs that address the root causes of child labor rather than merely its symptoms. For the academic community, this research contributes to theoretical literature by employing Ecological Systems Theory and Social Justice Theory as dual analytical lenses, demonstrating how multi-layered systemic interactions and structural inequalities jointly perpetuate the policy-practice gap. Furthermore, by focusing on the Khulna district a region with distinctive socioeconomic and industrial characteristics this study provides localized insights that can inform region-specific policy adaptations across Bangladesh and comparable developing country contexts.

Materials and Methods

Study Design

This study was conducted using a qualitative methodology, which facilitates a deeper understanding of the factors that shape individuals' behavior, perceptions, and values by exploring their personal experiences and perspectives (Marvasti, 2004). The qualitative approach enabled the researchers to comprehend the meaningful and logical explanations underlying the effectiveness of international child rights policies in reducing and eliminating child labor practices in Bangladesh. It also facilitated the identification of the barriers that hinder the successful implementation of these policies. Qualitative methods are particularly well suited for gathering real-life experiences and understanding the complex sentiments

individuals hold in social situations shaped by economic and cultural factors (Lune & Berg, 2017; Maxwell, 2012; Ohab & Shovo, 2026). Accordingly, qualitative methods were employed to examine the significant gap between the policy and practice of international child rights policies concerning child labor in Bangladesh.

Study Area

This study was conducted in Khulna district, which is located in the southwestern region of Bangladesh and serves as the administrative headquarters of Khulna Division. Khulna was purposively selected as the study site for several compelling reasons. First, Khulna is the third-largest city in Bangladesh and functions as a major industrial and commercial hub, particularly in the shrimp processing, shipbreaking, and manufacturing sectors all of which are widely documented as industries with a high prevalence of child labor (National Child Labor Survey, 2022; Quattri & Watkins, 2019). Second, the district exhibits a complex socioeconomic profile characterized by high poverty rates, significant rural-to-urban migration, and limited access to quality education, all of which are recognized as structural drivers of child labor (Islam & Hoque, 2022; Kamruzzaman & Hakim, 2018). Third, Khulna houses several governmental labor inspection offices, NGO regional offices, and academic institutions specializing in child welfare, which provided access to a diverse pool of knowledgeable stakeholders essential for this qualitative inquiry. The selection of Khulna thus ensures both contextual relevance and the availability of information-rich participants, thereby enhancing the transferability of the study's findings to similar urban-industrial settings across Bangladesh (Patton, 2014).

Participant Recruitment

This study employed a purposive sampling strategy, combining expert sampling and respondent-assisted sampling, to select participants with specialized knowledge and direct professional engagement in child labor policy and enforcement. Expert sampling was employed in the initial phase because it enables the selection of individuals from the target population based on their demonstrated expertise and established professional competence in the subject area (Daniel, 2012; Patton, 2014). Subsequently, respondent-assisted sampling was utilized, whereby initially recruited

participants identified and referred additional experts from their professional networks, thereby facilitating access to senior policymakers and specialized practitioners who might otherwise be difficult to identify through conventional sampling approaches (Daniel, 2012).

Through these sampling methods, six key informants were selected, each possessing a minimum of seven years of professional experience in fields directly related to child labor policy, enforcement, or child welfare. The participants included government labor inspectors responsible for monitoring compliance with child labor laws, and an academic child welfare expert engaged in policy research and advocacy. This criterion of substantial professional experience ensured that all informants possessed the depth of knowledge and practical insight necessary to provide rich, authoritative, and nuanced accounts of the policy-practice gap under investigation.

The adequacy of this sample size is grounded in the principle of data saturation, which holds that data collection should continue until no new themes, categories, or insights emerge from additional interviews (Guest et al., 2006; Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). In the present study, thematic saturation was observed after the fourth interview, at which point the recurring patterns and themes had been fully articulated by the participants. Two additional interviews were conducted to confirm and validate this saturation, and no substantive new themes emerged, thereby affirming that the point of informational redundancy had been reached (Fusch Ph D & Ness, 2015). Methodological scholars have established that in qualitative research involving homogeneous samples of knowledgeable experts, a sample of six to twelve participants is typically sufficient to achieve saturation (Guest et al., 2006; Morse, 2000). Furthermore, Malterud et al. (2016) argue that when participants possess high 'information power' characterized by their relevant experience, specialized knowledge, and direct engagement with the research topic a smaller sample can yield findings of substantial depth and analytical rigor. Given that all six informants in this study were seasoned professionals working within closely related domains of child labor governance and welfare, the sample size is both methodologically justified and consistent with established qualitative research standards. The detailed profile of all participants is presented in Table 1:

Table 1: Participants Profile

Sl.	Name of Key Informant (Pseudonym)	Designation	Experience (Years)
KII 1	Mr. Rahim	Government Official (Labor Inspector)	12
KII 2	Fuli Sarker	Government Official (Labor Inspector)	9
KII 3	Ehsan Islam	Government Official (Labor Inspector)	15
KII 4	Ranzu Ahmed	Government Official (Labor Inspector)	8
KII 5	Tazmul Haque	Government Official (Labor Inspector)	7
KII 6	Mst. Seuli Akter	Academician (Child Expert)	19

Interview Outline

Following a thorough review of the relevant literature and consultation with experts, semi-structured interview guidelines were designed for this research. The thematic questions were as follows: (i) How effective are international child rights policies, such as the UNCRC and ILO conventions, in reducing child labor practices in Bangladesh? (ii) What are the primary barriers to the successful implementation of child rights policies in Bangladesh? (iii) What sociocultural and economic barriers hinder the implementation of international child rights policies?

Ethical Issues

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Ethics Committee of Khulna University, Bangladesh (Approval No. KUECC-2024-10-83). Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participants were explicitly assured of confidentiality, anonymity, and their unconditional right to withdraw from the study at any stage without consequence. Pseudonyms were assigned to all participants to safeguard their identities throughout the research process. Given the professionally sensitive nature of the discussions, all interviews were conducted in an empathetic and non-judgmental manner. All analyses were based exclusively on authentic participant narratives, which were used solely for academic purposes; no fabricated data were employed at any stage of the research.

Data Collection

Data were collected through a semi-structured interview guideline containing open-ended questions designed to elicit naturalistic inquiry, involving the study of participants in their real-life settings. In-depth interviewing facilitated a deeper understanding of individuals' perspectives and experiences (Creswell & Báez, 2021; Guest et al., 2012; Legard et al., 2003). Interviews were conducted in Bangla and lasted approximately 40 to 45 minutes each. Before each interview, the researcher discussed the study's aims and objectives with the participants. The interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent, and verbatim transcripts were subsequently generated. Throughout the data collection process, the researcher-maintained neutrality and a supportive demeanor, fostering an environment in which participants felt secure in sharing their experiences. Participants were also guaranteed the ability to withdraw from the interview process at any time.

Data Analysis

Data analysis for this study was conducted using a rigorous and systematic procedure to ensure precision, comprehensiveness, and trustworthiness in interpreting the collected data. Thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) and further elaborated by Braun et al. (2019) was employed as the primary analytical method. This approach was selected because of its theoretical flexibility and its capacity to identify, analyze, and report patterns of meaning within qualitative data in a manner that is both accessible and methodologically rigorous (Nowell et al., 2017).

The analysis followed the six-phase framework proposed by (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In the first phase, the researcher engaged in repeated and immersive reading of the verbatim transcripts to achieve familiarization with the data, noting initial observations and preliminary ideas. In the second phase, systematic initial coding was conducted, wherein meaningful segments of text were assigned descriptive codes that captured the essence of each data excerpt. Codes were generated inductively from the data while simultaneously being informed by the theoretical lenses of Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) and Social Justice Theory (Rawls, 1971), thereby ensuring that the analysis remained both data-driven and theoretically anchored. In the third phase, the initial codes were collated and organized into potential themes by identifying patterns and conceptual relationships among the codes. The fourth phase involved reviewing and refining the candidate themes to ensure internal coherence and external distinctiveness, verifying that each theme accurately represented the coded data and was clearly differentiated from other themes. In the fifth phase, themes were defined and named, with each theme assigned a concise and analytically informative label. The sixth and final phase involved the production of the analytical narrative, wherein each theme was elaborated through illustrative participant quotations and interpreted through the dual theoretical framework guiding this study.

To ensure the trustworthiness and rigor of the findings, several validation strategies were employed in accordance with the criteria proposed by Lincoln (1985). Credibility was enhanced through member checking, whereby preliminary findings and thematic interpretations were shared with a subset of participants to verify the accuracy and resonance of the analysis with their lived experiences. Dependability was ensured through the maintenance of a detailed audit trail documenting all analytical decisions, including the progression from initial codes to final themes. Furthermore, the researchers engaged in reflexive practice throughout the analytical process, critically examining their own assumptions, positionality, and potential biases to minimize the influence of researcher subjectivity on the interpretation of data (Nowell et al., 2017). Confirmability was strengthened by grounding all thematic interpretations in direct participant quotations, ensuring that the findings were firmly rooted in the empirical data rather than the researchers' preconceptions. Finally, transferability was addressed through the provision of thick descriptions of the research context, participants, and analytical procedures, enabling readers to assess the applicability of the findings to other comparable settings (Lincoln, 1985).

Findings

Following a rigorous analysis of the data, several significant themes emerged. Through the systematic coding process described above, 47 initial codes were generated from the transcribed data. These codes were subsequently organized into clusters based on their conceptual similarities and relationships to the research objectives. Through iterative review and refinement, five major themes were identified that collectively capture the key dimensions of the policy-practice gap in child labor governance in Bangladesh. The derivation of these themes

was guided by both the inductive patterns observed in the data and the deductive lens provided by Ecological Systems Theory and Social Justice Theory Braun and Clarke (2006). The participants' perspectives yielded critical insights that facilitated the attainment of the study's objectives. Five major themes encapsulate the outcomes aligned with the research objectives:

Theme 1: Poverty as a Driver of Violation of Child Labor Laws

Theme 2: Societal Attitudes and Cultural Norms toward Child Labor

Theme 3: Policy Implementation Undermined by Stakeholder Awareness Deficits

Theme 4: Weak Enforcement of Existing Laws

Theme 5: Absence of Structured Rehabilitation

Poverty as a Driver of Violation of Child Labor Laws

Families living in extreme poverty are unable to meet their basic needs, including food, shelter, and healthcare (Zhou et al., 2020), which compels them to rely on their children's earnings as a means of subsistence (Ahad et al., 2023b). Under the crushing weight of poverty, these families are forced to send their children to work without regard for the children's future prospects or the existing legal protections.

In Bangladesh, family priorities shift according to the circumstances confronting them, and survival often takes precedence over a child's overall well-being. Against this backdrop, the participants in this study shared accounts of how parents are compelled to send their children to work due to abject poverty. As quoted by Mr. Ehsan (KI 3), a labor inspector work as a government official:

"Parents do not want their children to work at a young age, but financial distress forces them to send their children to work to support the family. They desire their children's education, but they also require them to make financial contributions"

Such accounts illuminate the lived experiences of most families, particularly those in rural and marginalized communities, where dire circumstances leave parents with no viable alternative but to send their children into the workforce. On this point, another government official (a labor inspector) Mr. Ranjuz Ahmed (KI 4) stated:

"Families without an adult breadwinner, such as widowed or disabled parents, depend on their children's earnings for survival. Despite low wages, these families send children to work to meet basic needs."

Poverty severely curtails developmental opportunities, preventing children from accessing education and adequate health services. Unfortunately, most parents find themselves with no recourse other than depending on their children to generate family income. In this context, the sole academician Mst. Seuli Akter (KI 6) revealed:

"For instance, during a family crisis, parents may have no other choice than sending their children to work. It could be the case for any family whether they are poor or rich, in such case where the only earning member of the family dies, they might have no other option left apart from sending their children to work."

Societal Attitudes and Cultural Norms toward Child Labor

In many communities, child labor is perceived as a conventional means of instilling responsibility and discipline in children's lives (Abdullah et al., 2022). These deeply rooted traditional attitudes and practices, grounded in local beliefs, frequently conflict with international child rights policies (Josefsson & Wall, 2020). In Bangladesh, child labor has historically been regarded as a normal practice intended to teach children responsibility and to serve as an alternative source of household income. On this matter, key informant Mr. Tazmul (KI 5) observed:

"In many cases, child labor is normalized, especially in low-income communities where families view it as a necessary contribution to household income. Some parents believe that engaging children in work teaches them responsibility, disregarding the long-term consequences on education and wellbeing. Additionally, societal acceptance of informal child labor, such as in domestic work or small businesses, undermines efforts to enforce child rights policies effectively."

Conversely, a gradual shift in social norms is underway, driven by awareness campaigns, media engagement, and globalization, all of which increasingly emphasize the importance of education and the long-term detrimental effects of child labor. This emerging trend signifies a slow but positive cultural transformation aligned with contemporary human rights standards for children. As key informant six, Mst. Seuli Akter noted:

"Exposure to global norms through media and international policies has made families more aware of the importance of protecting children and ensuring their education. Parents increasingly view education as essential for their children's future, prioritizing schooling over immediate income."

Awareness Deficits of Stakeholders Undermining Policy Implementation

International conventions such as the UNCRC and the ILO provide robust frameworks for the protection of children's fundamental rights and well-being. However, the effectiveness of these frameworks is largely contingent upon local understanding and commitment (Strohwal, 2021). A pervasive lack of awareness among policymakers, service providers, and the general public in

Bangladesh constitutes a severe barrier to the realization of child rights policies. For instance, key informant number two, Fuli Sarkar stated:

“A lack of awareness is the primary barrier. Many policymakers, service providers, and citizens are unaware of their responsibilities under these policies. As a citizen of the country, we almost have zero idea what we are meant to do, we only know there are policies but only few of us have clear idea about what it is. This gap in knowledge extends to both implementers and beneficiaries, hindering enforcement and compliance.”

Despite the existence of comprehensive policy documents such as the UNCRC and ILO guidelines, the lack of proper knowledge regarding these policies among factory owners and parents’ alike results in significant structural deficiencies. Key Informant number three, Mr. Ehsan further added:

“Most people are unaware of child rights laws, though those who are politically informed may have some knowledge. Factory owners, especially in larger companies, are more aware but still employ child laborers because they are cheaper.”

Weak Enforcement of Existing Laws

Although the legal frameworks governing child labor are robust in their formulation, enforcement remains an enormous challenge due to limited awareness, political instability, traditional beliefs, and the pursuit of economic benefit (Yusefri et al., 2024). This weak enforcement undermines the effectiveness of policies through inadequate monitoring, minimal penalties, and insufficient manpower. As a result, employers exploit these legal loopholes because the cost of paying fines is far less than the cost of hiring adult workers. Additionally, the absence of rigorous monitoring allows child labor to persist, particularly in the informal sectors. On this point, key informant number three, Mr. Ehsan, mentioned:

“Even when fines are imposed, they are often too low, around Tk 2,000 to Tk 5,000, which does not serve as a deterrent. For example, an employer might find it cheaper to pay a small fine and continue using child labor rather than hire an adult worker at a higher wage.”

A fundamental problem with the implementation of child labor laws in Bangladesh is that the prospect of financial gain creates a loophole for employers to exploit the law by hiring children to maximize their profits. This dynamic effectively forces children into the workforce for the benefit of unscrupulous employers. In this context, key informant number six, Mst. Seuli Akter revealed:

“Bangladesh's legal framework is well-drafted, but enforcement is weak due to a lack of adherence and prioritization of profit. Stakeholders responsible for the policy implementation are careless about their duty.”

Absence of Structured Rehabilitation

Although specialized efforts to rescue child laborers have achieved some success, a critical gap persists due to the absence of structured rehabilitation programs within the overall strategy. Unfortunately, after being rescued, most children return to hazardous work because of the lack of viable alternative opportunities (Kilkelly & Liefwaard, 2022). Furthermore, existing rehabilitation institutions are grossly insufficient in scale and capacity. Adding to this challenge, children frequently perceive these centers as punitive rather than supportive environments. As stated by key informant number three, Mr. Ehsan said that:

“Many children, after working for a few years, are disengaged from education, so vocational training or technical education could be a better fit. This would allow them to work, receive government allowance, and earn a certificate for future employment. However, some institutions, like the Sheikh Russel Rehabilitation Center in Khulna, are not effectively addressing the issue on a scale, and children often see these centers as punishment.”

Moreover, informants emphasized the critical importance of providing financial assistance to families, helping them overcome economic hardship and enabling children to continue their education. On this point key informant one, Mr. Rahim stated that:

“A key strategy is providing economic support and rehabilitation for families, ensuring they are not forced to rely on child labor. Families need guaranteed income or aid to prevent children from returning to work. NGOs and government initiatives should focus on holistic family support.”

The absence of comprehensive and well-organized rehabilitation systems remains one of the most formidable challenges in combating child labor. Children removed from hazardous work frequently return to the same conditions because they lack alternative employment opportunities or because their families cannot afford to forgo their earnings. Existing centers, such as the Sheikh Russel Rehabilitation Center, fall short of their objectives and demonstrate limited efficacy, underscoring the urgent need for integrated efforts between NGOs and governmental organizations to establish viable rehabilitation measures for children.

Discussion

Child labor persists as a significant concern in today's interconnected world, with a substantial number of children engaged in diverse forms of hazardous employment that strip them of their childhood, potential, health, and dignity (Ahmady, 2020; Boateng & Dako-Gyeke, 2022; Gatsinzi & Hilson, 2022; Johnson Jr et al., 2018; Kaur & Byard, 2021). Despite the existence of international policies and legal frameworks, child labor remains disproportionately pervasive in the context of Bangladesh (Akhtar et al., 2020; Alam, 2024; Hoque, 2022, 2024a; Kamruzzaman & Hakim, 2018). The present study was designed to investigate the implementation landscape of international child labor policies in Bangladesh. The ensuing discussion interprets the five emergent themes through the dual theoretical lenses of Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) and Social Justice Theory (Rawls, 1971), situating the findings within the broader scholarly literature to elucidate both the theoretical and practical dimensions of the policy-practice gap.

Poverty, Microsystem Dynamics, and Distributive Injustice

The finding illustrates that poverty operates as the primary driver of child labor law violations can be understood through both the microsystem dimension of Ecological Systems Theory and the distributive justice principle of Social Justice Theory. At the microsystem level, the family constitutes the most immediate environment shaping a child's development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). When families are trapped in extreme poverty, the microsystem is fundamentally compromised, parents are unable to prioritize their children's education or long-term development because the imperative of day-to-day survival supersedes all other considerations. As the participants in this study consistently reported, parents do not willingly send their children to work; rather, structural economic deprivation within the family microsystem leaves them with no alternative. These findings align with those reported by Baten et al. (2024) and Bradshaw and Nieuwenhuis (2021) who documented that household economic crises directly undermine parental capacity to invest in children's welfare.

Viewed through the lens of Social Justice Theory, poverty-driven child labor represents a fundamental violation of Rawls (1971) difference principle, which holds that social and economic inequalities are justifiable only insofar as they benefit the least advantaged members of society. In the Bangladeshi context, the existing socioeconomic structure manifestly fails this test, the most vulnerable families bear a disproportionate burden, and their children are denied equitable access to the resource's education, healthcare, nutrition necessary for a dignified life. Many families reluctantly engage their children in hazardous work because they have no alternative means of financial support, thereby hindering the implementation of child labor policies, as documented by Omeje et al. (2020) and Monika (2021). The persistence of poverty as a driver of child labor thus reflects a systemic failure of distributive justice, wherein the state has not fulfilled its obligation to ensure that the basic needs and rights of its most disadvantaged citizens are adequately met.

Cultural Legitimization, the Mesosystem, and Normative Injustice

The second theme, the role of societal attitudes and cultural norms in perpetuating child labor is best understood through the mesosystem and macrosystem layers of Ecological Systems Theory, in conjunction with the concept of normative injustice within Social Justice Theory. The mesosystem, which encompasses the interactions between different microsystems such as the family and the community, plays a critical role in either reinforcing or challenging child labor practices (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Soyer, 2019). When both family and community environments normalize child labor as a legitimate means of instilling discipline and generating household income, a mutually reinforcing dynamic emerges that strengthens the cultural legitimization of exploitative practices. Abdullah et al. (2022) and Geovani et al. (2021) similarly noted that many families and communities perceive children as earning assets, engaging them in work without regard for existing child labor frameworks. At the macrosystem level, these attitudes are embedded within broader cultural belief systems and socioeconomic structures that have historically valorized child labor as an expression of familial duty and economic necessity.

From a Social Justice Theory perspective, the cultural normalization of child labor constitutes a form of normative injustice, wherein entrenched social norms operate to deny children their rightful claim to protection, education, and development. Rawls (1971) framework insists on the priority of liberty and equal opportunity; when cultural attitudes systematically undermine children's access to these fundamental entitlements, the society in question fails to uphold the conditions of a just social order. However, the data also reveal a nascent positive trend: globalization and media awareness campaigns have begun to affect a gradual cultural shift, encouraging families to prioritize sending their children to school a trend also observed by Akhtar et al. (2020) and Kilkelly and Liefwaard (2022). This shift represents the chronosystem at work, as evolving societal conditions and exposure to global norms gradually alter the macrosystem's cultural framework, albeit at a pace insufficient to match the urgency of the problem.

Awareness Deficits, the Exosystem, and Procedural Injustice

The third theme, the undermining of policy implementation by stakeholder awareness deficits maps directly onto the exosystem of Bronfenbrenner's model and the principle of procedural justice within Rawls' framework. The exosystem encompasses the broader institutional and policy environments that indirectly affect children's lives, including governmental agencies, regulatory bodies, and the policymaking apparatus (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). When key actors within these exosystem institutions policymakers, labor inspectors, service providers lack adequate knowledge of the very policies they are mandated to implement, the entire protective infrastructure is rendered ineffective. This finding is consistent with the arguments advanced by Quattri and Watkins (2019) and Kazancoglu et al. (2021), who identified awareness gaps as a critical impediment to

child labor policy implementation in developing country contexts.

In terms of Social Justice Theory, the pervasive lack of awareness constitutes a violation of procedural justice the principle that all individuals should have fair and equal access to the processes and institutions designed to protect their rights (Rawls, 1971). When neither the implementers nor the intended beneficiaries of child rights policies understand their rights and responsibilities, the procedural mechanisms necessary for just outcomes are fundamentally compromised. Similar studies, such as that by Adamcheck et al. (2020), have emphasized the need for comprehensive training initiatives to enhance understanding among policymakers and enforcement agencies. The awareness deficit thus creates a cascading failure across ecological systems: exosystem-level ignorance translates into microsystem-level vulnerability, as families remain unaware of the protections available to their children and employers exploit this knowledge asymmetry to perpetuate exploitative practices.

Weak Enforcement, Macrosystem Failures, and Structural Injustice

The fourth theme, weak enforcement of existing laws reflects a fundamental breakdown at the macrosystem level of Ecological Systems Theory and represents the most direct manifestation of structural injustice as conceptualized within Social Justice Theory. The macrosystem comprises the overarching legal, economic, and political frameworks that establish the rules governing societal conduct (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). In Bangladesh, although the legal architecture for child labor protection is well-drafted, the enforcement apparatus is critically weakened by inadequate monitoring, minimal penalties, insufficient manpower, and pervasive institutional apathy. This finding aligns with those of the International Labour Organization (2021) and Kang (2021), who highlighted that low-income countries suffer from inadequate institutional structures and policy frameworks for strengthening enforcement monitoring mechanisms.

Through the lens of Social Justice Theory, weak enforcement embodies structural injustice a condition wherein the very institutions designed to protect the vulnerable systematically failure in their mandate (Rawls, 1971). When fines for child labor violations are negligible and employers find it economically rational to pay penalties rather than comply with the law, the legal framework ceases to function as an instrument of justice and instead becomes complicit in the perpetuation of exploitation. This represents a profound failure of the macrosystem to establish and maintain the conditions necessary for a just society. The interaction between macrosystem-level enforcement failures and exosystem-level governance deficiencies creates a self-reinforcing cycle: weak enforcement signals impunity, which in turn emboldens further violations and deepens the structural disadvantage faced by child laborers.

Rehabilitation Deficits, Systemic Interaction, and Restorative Justice

The fifth theme, the absence of structured rehabilitation represents a failure that cuts across all layers of the ecological system and raises critical questions about

restorative justice within the Social Justice Theory framework. Effective rehabilitation requires coordinated action across the microsystem (family support), the mesosystem (school-community linkages), the exosystem (governmental programs and NGO services), and the macrosystem (policy frameworks and funding allocations). The finding that rescued children frequently return to hazardous work due to the lack of viable alternatives underscores the systemic nature of this failure: no single ecological layer can compensate for deficiencies in the others. This finding is consistent with the work of Zarif (2020) and Antillano and Duno-Gottberg (2021), who documented similar patterns of failed reintegration in other developing country contexts.

From a Social Justice Theory perspective, the absence of meaningful rehabilitation constitutes a failure of restorative justice, the obligation of a just society to repair the harms inflicted upon its most vulnerable members and to restore them to a position from which they can exercise their fundamental rights and capabilities (Rawls, 1971). Chudgar et al. (2022) and Kilkelly and Liefgaard (2022) rightly stressed the importance of dedicated efforts to address educational losses resulting from child labor through rehabilitation programs that incorporate technical education and family support. When the state rescues children from exploitative labor but fails to provide meaningful pathways to education, economic stability, and social reintegration, it addresses the symptoms of injustice without remedying its underlying causes, thereby perpetuating the cycle of vulnerability and exploitation.

Theoretical Synthesis and Implications

Taken together, the five themes reveal a deeply interconnected web of ecological and justice-related failures that collectively sustain the policy-practice gap in child labor governance in Bangladesh. Ecological Systems Theory illuminates how poverty at the microsystem level, cultural normalization at the mesosystem level, awareness deficits at the exosystem level, and enforcement failures at the macrosystem level interact in mutually reinforcing ways to perpetuate child labor. Social Justice Theory provides the evaluative framework for understanding these failures as violations of distributive, procedural, structural, and restorative justice, each of which demands distinct but coordinated policy responses. The study's findings thus demonstrate that eliminating child labor in Bangladesh requires a comprehensive approach that simultaneously addresses the country's systemic, economic, and social challenges. Key components including intensified enforcement, increased public awareness, economic assistance, and comprehensive and effective rehabilitation can serve as the foundation for translating international frameworks into tangible practice for children. Policymakers, NGOs, and community leaders must actively cooperate and collaborate to sustain meaningful and lasting change.

Conclusion

Child labor remains highly prevalent in Bangladesh, overshadowed by the interplay of social and economic complexities and structural deficiencies within the governmental system. The findings of this research reveal that existing child protection mechanisms in Bangladesh

are limited in scope and effectiveness, notwithstanding the country's status as a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and International Labor Organization (ILO) standards. While considerable gains are evident at the level of policy formulation, the most critical work remains in translating policy into practice, given that poverty, governance challenges, lack of awareness, and cultural practices are deeply interconnected. Although rehabilitation programs exist, their effectiveness is rarely observed, and they fail to offer comprehensive reintegration, leaving many rescued children at risk of being returned to the labor market. The eradication of child labor requires broad, transformative changes to ensure long-term development. Combating this problem necessitates a collaborative effort involving the government, NGOs, international organizations, and civil society. This study offers practical recommendations to enhance the implementation of child rights policies in Bangladesh. Accordingly, this research serves as a foundation for policy interventions aimed at strengthening the welfare of child laborers in Bangladesh and across the globe, providing guidance for social workers and relevant entities in this domain.

Recommendations

Strengthening Policy Enforcement and Governance

To increase compliance with child labor laws, the government must enhance the capacity of labor inspection authorities and allocate adequate funding to strengthen monitoring capabilities. Necessary steps include increasing the frequency of inspections and improving the systems used to enforce regulations. Imposing substantially higher financial penalties for violations can serve as a meaningful deterrent against employers who exploit child labor.

Economic Empowerment of Vulnerable Families

Targeted conditional cash transfer programs designed to incentivize children's school attendance can help alleviate immediate economic concerns while promoting education. Implementing microfinance programs may enable families to generate income through small business ventures rather than relying on their children's labor. Expanding subsidies for healthcare, food, and educational services would allow families to sustain their children's livelihoods. Additional incentives, such as providing free school supplies, meals, books, and uniforms, can persuade parents to prioritize education over child labor while establishing alternative pathways for impoverished children and their families to achieve economic stability.

Integration of Vocational Training

Vocational training represents a pragmatic solution for children who are unable to return to formal classroom education. Employment prospects can be enhanced by providing relevant training and education aligned with

regional economic sectors, including agriculture, crafts, and information technology. Industry-based apprenticeships facilitate on-the-job training and direct workforce absorption for older learners.

Comprehensive Rehabilitation Programs

Interventions must extend beyond mere rescue operations to encompass services such as psychological counseling, educational support, and family reintegration programs. Establishing centers that provide educational, health, and financial assistance can help prevent children from returning to work. Existing structures should be reorganized to incorporate psychological counseling services, healthcare, and skills development programs. Engaging parents and children in counseling, providing financial guidance, and offering sustained support are essential measures to prevent a return to child labor.

Enhanced Public Policy Awareness Campaigns

Broad public engagement is essential to shifting the cultural norms that normalize child labor. Raising awareness among parents, employers, and community leaders through workshops, community outreach sessions, and related events can contribute significantly to eliminating child labor and promoting school attendance. Amplifying success stories through media campaigns on television, radio, and social media platforms can help advance the cause of children's rights. Integrating children's rights education into school curricula is also an effective strategy for promoting educational rights and safeguarding children's welfare.

Localized Implementation of Policies

Child rights policies should be adapted to account for regional disparities and the sociocultural characteristics of different areas in order to enhance their effectiveness. Policy implementation should be decentralized, with local authorities actively involved in policy decisions, to ensure relevance and sustainability of interventions. A localized strategy ensures that the measures applied are not only appropriate and timely but also feasible for addressing child labor at its source.

Availability of Data and Materials: We declared that the collected data are original, and data were collected by the authors in accordance with the ethical standards. The data and materials used in this study are available upon the responsible request from the corresponding author.

Funding: We declare that we did not receive any funds, grants, or other financial support during the preparation of the manuscript. All expenses related to the study were covered by the authors.

Competing Interests: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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