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Economical Impact on Women Workers in Tea Gardens

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ABSTRACT: Around one million women work in the tea gardens of Assam, producing more than 50% of tea in India, which is the second largest tea producer in the world. As a globally popular beverage and with a geographical indication tag, Assam tea is significant to the state economically and culturally. It provides employment to a large workforce and income to a growing number of small tea growers in the state. The living and working condition of the tea workers, however, have been of concern. Different forms of gender-based discriminations and violence is evident in the high rates of child marriage, trafficking and maternal mortality amongst the tea garden women workers in Assam. Women in the tea gardens make the largest workforce of women in Assam. Despite their indispensable role in the tea production, living and working conditions for the workers in the tea gardens of Assam has been a concern for human rights indicators. For example, Assam, despite considerable improvement in effort and reduction in numbers, still has maternal mortality and informal mortality rates that are amongst the highest in India. The MMR and IMR are higher in the rural areas and amongst the tea garden workers community. Maternal and infant mortality is related to anemia, malnutrition, young pregnancies, and lack of adequate healthcare and is an indicator of gender inequalities present within communities.

KEYWORDS: tea, gardens, economy, women, workers, trafficking, maternal

I. INTRODUCTION

Although a large workforce, within the tea industry women work the lowest-paid jobs of plucking, pruning, hoeing, etc. These are also physically demanding jobs that require standing, walking and carrying loads.¹ There are very few women in the management and decision-making processes within the tea industry. Women workers are also absent from the negotiation and decision-making tables of the workers' unions.² In the year 2018-19, tea worth US\$ 214 million was exported from Assam's tea gardens. Globally, Iran, Russia, UAE, UK, China, USA, Germany and Japan are some of the largest consumers of Assam tea.²² In March 2020, the tea industry in Assam was one of the very few industries to have resumed work despite the nationwide lockdown in India due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The producers have seen a profit as tea prices soared even after some losses in production due to the pandemic. The tea plantations are both workplace and home for the large number of workers who live inside them. The lines between the two are often blurred. Women workers often experience domestic violence and harassment in public places inside and outside the tea gardens.³

A study by UN Women indicates that women experience physical, sexual, and verbal abuse in and off the plantations in Assam. They may also experience sexual harassment and other forms of gender-based violence in workplace settings and public spaces. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development discriminatory social institutions – including violence against women²³ – costs the global economy approximately US\$ 12 trillion a year. The World Bank estimates across five countries that intimate partner violence alone costs countries to be between 1.2 to 3.7% of GDP, which represents what most governments spend on primary education.⁴

Although tea producers are increasingly aware of the implications and recognize the need for gender equality and addressing gender-based violence, a cost-benefit analysis of gender-based violence on the tea industry has not been done.²¹

According to the Assam Human Development Report (2014), the Gender Inequality Index is 0.375, suggesting that the existing gender disparity ensures that the state faces an approximate loss of 37 percent of potential human development, leading to high social and economic costs such as adverse sex ratio, high maternal and infant mortality rate, increased

health problems, unemployment, etc.²⁴ Gender inequality in the spheres of education, health, employment, wage, labor force participation and other development indicators is leading to a growth slowdown in Assam.⁵

In other tea producing countries, such as Kenya, tea producers have been taking steps to address gender and GBV issues in the workplace. To address the complex and sensitive social sustainability issue of gender discrimination and violence, IDH convened producers, technical experts, and civil society organizations under the Gender Empowerment Platform (GEP) in 2017. ²⁶Representing the majority of the companies in the Kenyan tea industry, the GEP has the ambitious goal to significantly reduce the occurrence of GBV, as well as to increase women's empowerment in the Kenyan tea industry.⁶

The Global Women Safety Framework in Rural Places (GWSF) is a framework developed by UN Women and Unilever that provides a pathway for investing in such programs and suggests how tea producers can set up systems suitable for their context to ensure safety of the women workers in the tea estates.⁷

For gender equality and to ensure women's safety, it is imperative that solutions are specific to the local context, workers – both women and men – are part of designing the solutions and that businesses across the supply chain are committed to investing in the solutions.⁸

It is also essential that government, private sector, civil society and expert service providers come together to form a common agenda and commitment to address gender-based violence through policies and law implementation and effective response mechanisms.²⁰

Local government, community groups, youth, men and women all play a significant role in successful and sustainable prevention and addressal of gender-based violence.⁹

IDH has been working in the tea sector in Assam through its partners to address gender-based violence and for empowering women and girls in the tea sector in Assam. The 'Improving the lives of women and children in Assam's tea communities' program engages with tea plantations and the broader tea community in Assam to address, promote and integrate human rights and mechanisms to address gender-based violence within the business practices of the tea industry. IDH is partnering with the Ethical Tea Partnership and UNICEF to implement the program in the tea gardens of Assam.¹⁹

In 2020, IDH and Unilever have come together to develop a fund to support tea producers to provide specialized services and set up mechanisms to address gender-based violence, strengthen prevention and ensure women's safety and empowerment in the tea gardens. Launching in Assam, the Fund aims to accelerate the scale of the UN Women 'Global Women's Safety Framework in Rural Spaces' by leveraging the efforts and capacity of local NGOs and suppliers to drive more sustainable, long-term shifts in safety within the tea supply chain.¹⁰

II.DISCUSSION

Innovation and involvement are key to developing successful business practices to ensure gender equality. What required is a commitment to invest in long-term impacts and show models that deliver outcomes. A sectoral commitment from the actors across the supply chain, empowering women workers to take leadership roles, engaging communities to recognize and respond to GBV will surely lead to a safer place for women workers in the tea sector.¹¹

Empowering Women is a prerequisite for creating a good nation, when women are empowered, society with stability is assured. Empowerment of women is essential as their value systems lead to the development of a good family, good society and ultimately good nation” – Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam

The living and working conditions of the plantation workers especially women with low wages is very poor.¹² Most of the workers in Munnar plantation are Tamil-speaking dalit migrants. In North East India, the workers are migrants from poor tribal families. Most of the workers are women. Many of them live in one room line houses with no sanitation and basic facilities like drinking water. Many families are left malnourished and are vulnerable to the communicable diseases. There are no medical facilities available. ¹⁸There are issues related to exposure to the chemicals used in plantation estates which may affect their health. There is little scope for the quality education to their children and in many cases children are employed for work. There is an absence of trade unions to represent their problems to the management. Even if there are any trade unions, they are male-dominated and ignored the issues of women workers.

The absence of trade unions and the state on the one hand, and the exploitative management on the other hand resulted in miserable life for the workers. The plantation managements turned their estates into mini empires. They denied the minimum wages for the workers. In many cases, there are defaults in the worker's payment.¹³

1. Since women workers lack in salary reasonable salary should be provided to them to enhance their skill level.
2. Women workers should be educated and make them aware about their rights and legislative provisions.
3. It is very much essential to create awareness among women workers about the institutional support available to them to protect their rights.¹⁷
4. A comprehensive law is needed to protect the rights of women workers.
5. Any kind of exploitation including sexual harassment of women workers is to be prevented and stringent action needs to be taken against the wrong doer.
6. Mass media should be used to communicate the social message relating to women equality.
7. A separate women grievance cell headed by a woman should be established in every organization sector and in case of unorganized sector women to form self-help groups for their protection.¹⁴
8. Necessary amendments are required to be made in labour laws. There should be proper regulation of unorganized sector industries, which ensure job security, healthy work environment and at least minimum wages, maternity and child care benefits.

III. RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

Tea plantation falls under unorganized sector of an economy. Unorganized laborers refer to those workers who have not been able to organize themselves in pursuit of their common interest owing to certain constraints like casual and uncertain nature of employment, ignorance and illiteracy, small and scattered size of establishment. They are working under unsecured environment or work culture.¹⁶ The scenario only can be changed with the government intervention, by implementing the policies strictly. Strict action has to be taken against all those who harass the employees. It is very necessary to all workers to know about Government Schemes. The status of the women only can be improved when major transition in the society occurs and that can be achieved by mind set transition. More research is required in this area to suggest solutions to existing problems and on issues like social security and positive impact of unions and labour Acts on the workers.¹⁵

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the phonological, morphological and syntactic features of their indigenous languages; in other words, their original mother tongue" (Dey 2011:4)

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