



Exploring the Impact of Gendered Labor Inequalities on the Well-being of Women Workers on Tea Plantations

A case study in the Badulla District, Sri Lanka

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Exploring the Impact of Gendered Labor Inequalities on the Well-being of Women Workers on Tea Plantations: A Case Study in Badulla District, Sri Lanka

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Abstract

This thesis explores gendered labor inequalities and their impact on the well-being of women workers in Sri Lankan tea plantations. Based on Marxist Feminist theory and a multidimensional well-being framework, the study examines how women are subjected to structural inequalities through paid labor, unpaid domestic labor, and patriarchal control and how these inequalities impact women's physical, mental, and social well-being. Using the qualitative methods of semi-structured interviews, participant observations, and thematic analysis, data were collected and analyzed from tea estate communities in Badulla District of Sri Lanka. The findings are organized across five key themes: economic exploitation, the double burden of paid and unpaid labor, patriarchy and power, well-being, and institutional neglect, demonstrating how each theme contributes to overall women workers' physical, mental, and social well-being. The study reveals several underexplored issues in existing literature, such as sexual favoritism where supervisors offer preferential treatment in exchange for sexual compliance, stigma around menstruation and health issues, absence of supportive structures such as accessible child care and health, and alcoholism and widespread production and consumption of illegal alcohol (*kasippu*). Importantly, the study identifies a feedback loop between labor conditions and well-being, where chronic fatigue and mental stress reduce women's ability to meet labor demand, leading to further wage loss and marginalization. These dynamics show that well-being is not only an outcome of gendered inequalities but also a factor that affects women's agency and labor capacity. The study findings further contribute to new insights by examining women's experiences in Badulla district, a major tea-producing region in Sri Lanka, which has received limited scholarly attention. By positioning women's lived experiences within the broader structures of capitalism and patriarchy, this study contributes to the ongoing conversations on labor justice and gender equality. It encourages the recognition of both paid and unpaid labor and urges action to deal with deep-rooted gender inequalities. It also emphasizes the importance of prioritizing well-being and the dignity of estate women in policy making and development efforts.

Keywords: gender labor inequalities, well-being, tea, Marxist feminism, double burden

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Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Description
RPC	Regional Plantation Companies
NGO	Non-Governmental Organizations
WW	Women Worker
MW	Male Worker
EOS	Estate Office Staff
FO	Field Officer
ASD	Assistant Superintendent Division
GO	Government Officer
PHM	Public Health Midwives
IV	Independent Variable
DV	Dependent Variable

1. Introduction

The tea plantation sector in Sri Lanka was initially developed by the British Empire in the 19th century (Dishanka 2020). Today, tea remains a major part of the Sri Lankan economy. It serves as a major foreign exchange earner and a crucial source of employment. It provides employment opportunities to over one million people (Thasfiha et al. 2020). In 2010, tea exports reached 329 million kilograms, generating USD 1.37 billion in export revenue and representing 16.7% of Sri Lanka's total export value (Chandrabose & Sivapragasam 2011). By 2023, Sri Lanka exported 241.9 million kilograms of tea, generating an export revenue of USD 1.31 billion (Sri Lanka Tea Board 2023). Women workers represent an estimated 65% of Sri Lanka's tea estate workforce, serving as the backbone of the tea industry (Ethical Tea Partnership 2023). They perform most of the labor-intensive tasks, including tea plucking, sorting, and processing activities (Chandrabose & Sivapragasam 2011). These women are crucial to the production of high-quality Sri Lankan tea. They help to maintain the global reputation of Sri Lankan tea (Gunetilleke et al. 2008). Despite their vital contributions, these women workers face systemic gender labor inequalities within the workplace. They often receive low wages, work long hours, have limited career opportunities, limited education, and poor health. Some also face sexual harassment and domestic violence (Gunetilleke et al. 2008). Such inequalities severely limit their opportunities (Gunetilleke et al. 2008) and affect their well-being negatively.

The well-being of women workers in tea plantations is deeply linked with the structural inequalities they face in both their workplace and home, an issue widely recognized within the labor and well-being research studies (Artazcoz et al. 2004). According to the previous studies, gendered division of labor often exposes women to double burden of paid and unpaid labor, which significantly impacts their well-being perspectives (International Labour Office 2017). Such conditions are especially prominent in the daily lives of tea plantation women workers. Beyond the physical strain of plantation labour, many women hold entire household responsibilities on their shoulders, such as cooking, cleaning, childcare, and eldercare. Studies of tea estate communities in Sri Lanka have shown that women often work full days in the field and return home to perform unpaid domestic work until late evening, resulting in great exhaustion and physical strain (Wickramasinghe & Cameron 2005; Chandrabose & Sivapragasam 2011). As a result, their physical and mental health, social connections, and well-being are constantly affected by these dual responsibilities. Focusing on these overlapping demands, this study highlights how gendered labour disparities both within and beyond the workplace affect the daily lives and well-being of tea estate women workers.

A comprehensive understanding of these inequalities requires attention to the historical and social context of the plantation sector and its workforce. Most of the estate women in Sri Lanka were immigrants from South India who were recruited by British colonial authorities during the 19th century (Hollup 1994). They are almost exclusive Tamil lower caste Hindus and Christians from southern India, and remain a separate, distinct social group known as the “estate population” who have been marginalized, isolated, confined to estates, and often subjected to systemic discrimination from broader Sri Lankan society (Dishanka 2020). In Sri Lanka, the tea plantation sector follows a traditionally patriarchal structure. Men hold most of the authority and decision-making roles, from managers to supervisors (Banerjee 2014). Women workers are located at the lower end of the hierarchy. They are often marginalized and disadvantaged within the system (Chandrabose & Sivapragasam 2011). These women often receive lower wages, work longer hours. Their career opportunities, education, and health are limited. Further, they face sexual harassment, domestic violence, and have little or no social protection (Gunetilleke et al. 2008; Solotaroff et al. 2020; Liyanage 2023).

Issues of gendered labor inequalities and marginalization of women workers in tea estates go beyond Sri Lanka. The undervaluation of women workers in tea plantations is a global phenomenon. Gendered inequalities have become a major issue in Kerala, India, tea plantations, where women workers of a similar Tamil lower caste background to those in Sri Lanka are subjected to unequal wages, limited opportunities, and exclusion from decision-making processes (Kubendran 2020). Furthermore, many women face harassment and abuse in the workplace, deepening their marginalization within the tea industry (Kubendran 2020). Pinedo (2020) reveals that due to the global expansion of the tea industry, women workers in Indonesia, India, and Vietnam continue to be subjected to various exploitative situations related to wages and job security. As stated, gender wage disparity remains severe, and women often earn significantly less amount than their male counterparts for the same task (Pinedo 2020). Women in Northeast Indian tea plantations face barriers to career advancement, since men dominate most managerial and supervisory roles due to prevailing patriarchal norms within the system (Banerjee 2014). Similar gender dynamics are also reported across plantations and agricultural sectors in other regions of the Global South. In Tanzania, Meru women describe their historical exclusion from the benefits of coffee farming, highlighting patriarchal dominance and marginalized female labour (Williams 2022). In Kenya, reports of sexual violence on tea farms and studies on gendered coffee paradox highlight how women’s labour remains continuously undervalued and unsupported (Specialty Coffee Association 2018; Rainforest Alliance 2023). These cases reflect the same structural exploitation faced by women

workers in Sri Lankan tea estates. Looking at gendered labor inequalities in the Sri Lankan tea sector provides a valuable local perspective. It also contributes to the global conversation on the well-being of women workers across the tea industry. The global inequalities are also deeply embedded in the colonial history and shaped by international supply chains that continue to rely on low-paid, feminized labor in the Global South (Elson & Pearson 1981; Barrientos et al. 2003). Certification schemes and multinational companies often prioritize market standards and productivity while failing to address deeper gender inequalities embedded in the workplace (Barrientos 2001; Lyon et al. 2010). As a result, female workers remain undervalued, unrecognized, and subjected to exploitative labor conditions continuously, even though they play a vital role in sustaining the global industry.

Previous studies have explored various aspects of the Sri Lankan tea plantation sector, focusing on issues such as marginalization of women workers, unequal labor dynamics, and economic exploitation. Showing the long-term existence of these issues, Samarasinghe (1993) discusses key aspects of gendered labor inequalities among women workers in Sri Lankan tea estates. She highlights how economic exploitation and lack of control over financial resources prevent them from achieving true empowerment. Further, she explains how women workers remain in lower positions due to rooted patriarchal norms in both the workplace and household, leading to double exploitation. Gnanapragasam (2020) also examines the discrimination and exploitation faced by tea estate women workers. She highlights how they navigate and resist these challenges through meaningful forms such as building support networks, negotiating with supervisors, and participating in community-based advocacy efforts to achieve better autonomy. These acts of agency reflect the potential for women to assert their rights, contributing to improvements in working and living conditions. Similar strategies have been documented globally. For example, Kabeer (2011) describes how rural women in Bangladesh who worked in agricultural and garment sectors gained autonomy and improved labor conditions through collective engagement in self-help groups, demonstrating how collective action can strengthen women's agency even in gendered jobs. Gnanapragasam (2020) further reveals wage disparities, poor working rights, longer working hours, lack of access to resources, and dual burden like facts, highlighting unrecognized contributions to social reproduction.

This study makes a unique contribution to existing literature by developing a multi-dimensional well-being framework to analyze how persistent gendered labor inequalities in the Sri Lankan tea plantation sector interconnectedly shape the physical, mental, and social dimensions of women's lives. This connection remains underexplored in existing literature. While most of the prior studies have addressed

issues like economic exploitation, wage disparities, and gender based marginalization, well-being is often considered as a secondary concern. This study positions well-being as a central analysis focus, showing how persistent gendered labor inequalities erode women workers' physical, mental, and social well-being.

While previous studies employ qualitative methodologies such as interviews and focus group discussions to explore the experiences of women workers, they often lack comprehensive theoretical frameworks. This gap is further associated with geographical location. Much of the existing studies are concentrated in well-known plantation areas like Nuwara Eliya, Hatton, with limited focus given to Badulla district, despite its importance as a major tea-producing region. As a result, lived experiences, labor practices, and institutional dynamics of tea estates in the Badulla district have received limited academic attention, creating a spatial gap in the literature.

Addressing this gap, I align my research study with ongoing debates on labor exploitation, gendered inequalities, and well-being. I used the Marxist feminism framework, focusing on key concepts such as economic exploitation, unpaid labor, patriarchy, and capitalism. Through this lens, I aim to contribute to existing debates by offering a multidimensional analysis that shows how structural practices in tea plantations shape the lived experiences of women workers. Based on the participant narratives, the study examines how these systemic inequalities impact women's physical, mental, and social dimensions of well-being, contributing to the implications for both gender justice, policy reforms, and social change in the tea plantation sector.

The specific thesis aim and research questions are outlined below.

1.1 Aim and research questions

The overall aim of this study is to explore the impacts of gendered labor inequalities on the well-being of women workers in the Badulla district, Sri Lankan tea plantations. The research questions were:

1. What forms of gendered labor inequalities are faced by women workers in Sri Lankan tea plantations?
2. How do historical, social, and structural factors contribute to the gendered labor inequalities in Sri Lankan tea plantations?
3. How do the gendered labor inequalities and patriarchal power dynamics both in work workplace and broader society affect the social, mental, and physical well-being of women workers in Sri Lankan tea plantations?

In exploring these questions, I hope to offer valuable insights into labor inequalities based on gender and the well-being of tea plantation women workers worldwide.

2. Background

2.1 Tea plantation sector in Sri Lanka

The first recorded tea plant in Sri Lanka was introduced in 1824 (Sushanthi 2023). The British brought it from China and planted it in the Royal Botanical Garden, Peradeniya. It was not used for commercial purposes. After several years, additional tea plants were brought to Sri Lanka from Assam and Calcutta for experimental purposes (Sushanthi 2023). Later in 1867, the commercial tea industry was established by James Taylor, a Scottish planter, on 19 acres of land at Loolecondera estate, Hewaheta, Kandy, after recognizing Sri Lanka's ideal conditions for cultivating high-quality tea (Wickremasinghe 2008). This initiative was motivated by the need for an alternative crop after the coffee industry was destroyed by leaf rust disease (Wijayasiri et al. 2018). The first consignment of Ceylon tea was exported in 1872. Later, by 1884, production had surpassed 1 million pounds (454,000kg), and tea cultivation subsequently expanded to Nuwara Eliya and Badulla districts (Wickremasinghe 2008).

As reported, by the late 19th century, around 120,000 hectares of tea were planted and this increased to 238,000 hectares by 1965. During the British rule period, large tea estates were privately owned and managed until the introduction of land reform in 1972 (Dishanka 2020). With this change, 61.1% of ownership and management of tea lands were held by the People's Estate Development Board and 34.4% by the state plantation corporation. According to Dishanka (2020), due to managerial issues, the tea industry faced a decline in performance over time, leading the government to transfer the ownership and management to private entities. As a result, 23 Regional Plantation Companies (RPCs) were formed in 1992. To encourage long-term investment and efficiency, the government sold the ownership shares of RPCs in 1995 to the private sector, making it fully privatized. By 2022, Sri Lanka had 267,186 hectares producing 251.50 million kilograms of tea (Sri Lanka Tea Board 2022). For over 150 years, tea has remained the main agricultural export commodity in Sri Lanka, playing an important role in economic and cultural development (Wijayasiri et al. 2018).

2.1.1 Tea plantation sector in Badulla district

In Sri Lanka, mainly tea is cultivated in six provinces: Western, Central, Southern, Uva, North Western, and Sabaragamuwa. Among them, Uva province plays a crucial role in the Sri Lankan tea industry (Dharmadasa et al. 2018). According to Dharmadasa et al. (2018), in Uva province, 31,561 hectares were cultivated with tea, contributing 14.8% of the country's total tea extent. As mentioned within the

Uva province, most tea estates are concentrated in the Badulla district, making it a key area for tea production. The district is bordered by the Baduluoya river., It is known not only for tea, but also for other cash crops such as paddy, rubber, banana, and vegetables (Ruwangika et al. 2019). Badulla district consists of 15 divisional secretariats, with tea remaining the dominant crop managed by the large number of estates (Thayaparan & Muhandiram 2022). In 2023, 29,668 hectares of land in Badulla district were used for tea cultivation. It represents 10.37% of total land use (Performance Report of the District Secretariat of Badulla 2023).

2.2 Women workers in Sri Lankan tea plantations

Since the plantations are highly labor and land-intensive, they require vast cultivable land and a large workforce (Dishanka 2020). According to the author, areas in Sri Lanka that were suited for plantations were mostly less populated since hilly, resulting in an acute labor shortage. From the beginning, these estates faced the issue of labor shortage and had to depend on migrant labor. The migration trend was induced by the plantations (Sarkar & Bhowmik 1998). In the Sri Lankan context, migration of Tamil laborers began under British management in the 19th century (Kurian & Jayawardena 2017). This migration was driven by several factors, such as poor domestic conditions in South India, economic stress, caste issues, and unfair land revenue policies, while monetary advances and an organized recruitment process through kanganis¹ acted as key pull factors (Farzana 2020, Senevirathne et al. 2025). In the tea plantation sector in Sri Lanka, it endures a solid cultural identity around the Indian Tamil community, commonly name as Up Country Tamils, Indian Tamils or Malaiyaha² Tamil (Thankappan 2023). These people mainly concentrated in the central hill country areas, where 90% of the tea estates are located (Samarasinghe 1993). According to the Thankappan (2023), tea sector is the main livelihood source for these estate workers, and the majority of tea pluckers are women in Sri Lanka.

Historically, estate workers, particularly women, endured many challenges and extremely harsh living conditions. They faced several problems after the independence of Sri Lanka in 1948 due to the loss of their citizenship (Dishanka 2020). They had to remain stateless and without citizenship for a long period of time, living with a great insecurity that affected their health and well-being (Dishanka 2020). According to the author, in 1988, after a series of negotiations between the Sri Lankan and Indian governments, along with trade unions

¹ Kangani is a supervisory role in Sri Lankan tea estates, mostly held by male workers who supervise field workers and act as an intermediary between field workers and estate management.

² Malaiyaha refers to hill country Tamils of Indian origin, descended from South Indian labourers brought to work on plantations during colonial rule

established by Indian Tamil plantation workers to advocate for their rights, these immigrants were granted Sri Lankan citizenship.

Estate women represented a very small proportion of the migrant workforce initially, but gradually their numbers increased, and now they represent half of the permanent workforce (Kurian & Jayawardena 2017). Currently, tea estates in Regional Plantation Companies (RPCs) employ approximately 259,149 estate workers, including women (Dishanka 2020). Due to the lack of education and skills, estate women have to struggle to find other job opportunities outside the plantation, to provide their household necessities. Although these structural barriers persist, it is important to note the significant improvements in education and public health in Sri Lanka since independence. By 2023, life expectancy has increased from 54 years in 1950 to 77 years, and the average number of years of schooling have also increased (Central Bank of Sri Lanka 2023). However, estate communities continue to face a wide range of systemic exclusions that prevent them from accessing those benefits. From generation to generation, they remain in the same labor cycle, struggling with poverty (Thankappan 2023).

2.2.1 Well-being of estate women workers

A sustainable and productive workforce largely depends on the well-being of its employees (Virajini et al. 2024). The concerns of physical, mental, and social well-being are becoming increasingly significant within the Sri Lankan tea plantation sector. It is important because the tea industry plays a central role in the national economy, and it largely depends on manual labor (Virajini et al. 2024).

Health and physical well-being can be analyzed qualitatively by listening to their personal experiences in the tea fields and observing their daily lives (Sushanthi 2023). Such methods provide insights into how women cope with physical stresses, how they contribute to mental stresses, and how workplace conditions affect their overall well-being. Sushanthi (2023) reveals a range of health issues faced by tea estate women workers in Nanu Oya, Sri Lanka, as a result of their working conditions. These include fever, back pain, skin issues, and respiratory issues, all of which have a direct impact on their daily lives and well-being.

Public Health Midwives (PHMs) play a vital role in addressing physical and mental health challenges faced by women workers in tea estate communities in Sri Lanka during their pregnancy and beyond (Infanti et al. 2015). According to the author, PHMs frequently encounter different forms of domestic violence reports through direct disclosures or from neighbours, such as verbal abuse and physical assault like slapping and hitting, but they are often normalized within the estates. Accepting

abuses has a negative impact on the well-being of women workers and contributes to unequal power dynamics between genders. Since women often tend to stay silent out of fear, shame, and lack of institutional support, many cases of violence probably remain unreported. This suggests that this issue is more widespread than observed. As mentioned, the ability of PHMs to address such issues is affected by structural factors prevailing in the plantation system and the limited availability of health services.

In the context of economic well-being, interviews can explore women's experience with wage gaps, their placement in low-paid jobs, and undervaluation of their work, allowing to understand the impacts of low wages and wage gaps on the family dynamics and social status (Pannilage 2017). The study reveals how prevailing farming wage gaps in the dry zone of southern Sri Lanka negatively affect the standards of living in labor households economically, restricting opportunities for improved quality of life.

Rajbangshi & Nambiar (2020) discuss several circumstances revealed through interviews with women workers in Indian tea plantations, highlighting the aspects of social relations. The author stated that women have issues with a lack of social support from both their communities and families, coupled with experiences of domestic violence, which contribute to a sense of isolation. The author emphasizes that this inability to intervene or address these issues reflects systemic social constraints that significantly diminish their social well-being. Furthermore, the article highlights the strong bonds and mutual support prevailing among women workers in these fields as a critical source of well-being and emphasizes that this shared time together with laughter in the field enhances social resilience as well as mental well-being.

The daily routine of women workers of Indian tea estates shows significant difficulties they face in balancing work and domestic responsibilities (Rajbangshi & Nambiar 2020). Every day from early morning to late night, they manage both paid labor in estates and unpaid domestic work at home. As stated, this relentless schedule affects physical well-being, resulting in fatigue and body pain. Mentally, this constant workload contributes to great stress. According to the author, a lack of a healthy work-life balance undermines the well-being of women.

In Sri Lankan tea plantations, estate women face a dual burden of labor, consisting of both their waged roles in the estates and unpaid domestic roles at home (Chandrabose & Sivapragasam 2011). They struggle to balance these roles with their daily routines packed with mentally and physically exhausting tasks. They begin the day early morning, cook meals for their kids and husbands, do all other

household chores, send kids to school, and then leave to work in the estate with countless tiredness. Through interviews, the author highlights the significant challenges they face in achieving work-life balance, noting the health issues caused by restless schedules.

Therefore, understanding and exploring the physical, mental and work-life social dimensions of well-being in the lives of women workers is not only essential to create a productive and sustainable workforce in tea plantations, but also necessary to fill the gap in existing research. While previous studies have focused on well-being aspects separately, this study contributes to multiple domains of well-being together, particularly physical, mental, and social aspects.

2.3 Gendered labor inequalities

Gendered labor inequalities are unfair treatments that people face within the labor market based on their gender (International Labour Office 2020). These inequalities are still prevalent globally in various forms, including the gender pay gap, limited career advancement, and occupational segregation. Gender wage disparity in the Sri Lankan plantation sector has been studied in several studies over time. According to Premarathna (2018), it is the difference in the average wages between men and women. It often highlights the systemic inequalities in earnings for similar work. A study conducted in the dry zone of Southern Sri Lanka reveals that there was a significant wage gap in Southern Sri Lanka among men and women workers, which negatively impacts the living standards of households (Pannilage 2017). According to Kotikula & Solotaroff (2006), women workers in Sri Lankan estates engage in the majority of labour tasks, which are physically demanding and undervalued, and they receive wages significantly lower than their male counterparts. Cultural norms further deepen these inequalities. As stated, traditions like *walame*, allow men to work fewer hours in the field than female workers while receiving equal pay (Niroshini 2024, Ranasinghe 2017).

Previous studies examine how women are systemically positioned in subordinate roles within the estates. Women workers in tea estates experience both plantation hierarchy and household patriarchy in their multiple roles, such as workers, mothers, wives, and daughters (Philips 2003). They are subjected to gendered ideologies that depict them as dependent, ignorant, sexually weak, emotional, and irrational. Their work is often dismissed by men colleagues as monotonous and unskilled. As mentioned, there is a notable absence of women in leadership positions such as kanganies, with male kanganies claiming that women lack responsibility, initiative, brain, and ambition.

Women in Sri Lanka often navigate towards traditionally feminine and low-paid occupations, while positioned at the lower end of the hierarchy, while men hold high-ranking roles (Gunawardane 2016). In Sri Lanka, men make up two-thirds of the workforce, dominating executive and decision-making roles. Chandrabose & Sivapragasam (2011) highlight that men predominantly hold the majority of managerial positions in most Sri Lankan tea estates, whether in public, private and smallholder settings, including roles such as estate managers, superintendents, factory officers, and field supervisors. According to the author, women do not gain any opportunity to hold positions of power and authority in decision-making roles even within the unions, as men control these power structures. While these studies provide important insights into gendered labor inequalities, they often overlook how such inequalities shape the daily lives of women workers in relation to their physical, mental, and social well-being. Addressing this gap, this study explores how these inequalities are experienced by plantation women workers, focusing on physical, mental, and social well-being aspects as the main analytical lens.

3. Theories and concepts

This chapter describes theories and concepts which I use to draw insights from my findings about the gendered labor inequalities and their impact on the well-being of women workers in the tea plantations of Badulla district, Sri Lanka.

3.1 Marxist Feminist Theory

To broadly theorize the case of tea estate women workers, Marxist Feminist theory is highly applicable. It provides a clear framework for analyzing the structural economic exploitation of their lives. This theory is particularly relevant in understanding how capitalism not only depends on the undervaluation of paid labor of women workers, but also relies on the underrecognition and devaluation of their unpaid labor, especially in the context of agrarian societies like tea plantations.

Marxist Feminist theory is a subsection of feminist theory. It combines Marxist analysis with feminist perspectives on gender oppression (Armstrong 2020). It focuses on how the capitalist system exploits women's labor, both paid and unpaid, and how this exploitation is essential for the functioning of capitalism. Federici (2004) also emphasized that women were the first victims of capitalist development as the prevailing system initially targeted their bodies, time, and labor power to support capitalist accumulation. This process involves the enclosure of communal lands, restricting women's rights over reproductive choices, and the normalization of unpaid domestic work, which were essential in maintaining the labor force and capitalist accumulation. Economic exploitation, unpaid labor, patriarchy, and capitalism are critical components of Marxist Feminist theory (Lomire 1989). In this context, I explore how tea estate women workers are exploited and how their work is undervalued in comparison to their male counterparts. Further, my study assesses the multidimensional impacts of these inequalities on women's physical, mental, and social well-being, extending the existing analyses. By drawing on women's lived experiences in Marxist feminist framework, this study provides a more holistic and localized insight into how gendered labor inequalities result and are lived in plantation systems.

3.1.1 Economic Exploitation

Based on Marxist feminists, women's labor plays a crucial role in the capitalist economy, helping to reduce the overall cost of production (Federici 2020). According to the author, women hold low-paying positions and poor working conditions, reflecting their marginalization within the particular workforce. In this context, women workers are a clear example of exploitation as they engage in both paid and unpaid labor, while facing limited access to leadership and support

facilities, demonstrating how capitalism relies on their economic and social exclusion.

Women workers engaged in labor-intensive tasks such as tea plucking and tea sorting, which are physically demanding and undervalued. But they receive wages significantly lower than their male counterparts (Kotikula & Solotaroff (2006). They need to stay away from home at least eight hours per day, sometimes work more extended hours in the field than men. They need a faster speed to earn better wages (Niroshini 2024). If women fail to meet the daily plucking norm, their wages for the day are either reduced or cut completely (Gnanapragasam 2020). According to Mathavan (2023), estate women normally work from 8.00 am to 5.00 pm, including lunch hours. Sometimes they work 8.00 am to 2.00 pm continuously without having a lunch break to cover targets. But male workers work from 8.00 am to 1.00 pm and get the same wages as female workers. It reveals pure gender discrimination and higher labor exploitation prevailing in the tea estate settings. These practices emphasise women's economic dependency and marginalization, reflecting broader societal norms that devalue their labor.

3.1.1.1 Unpaid labor

In patriarchal societies, there is a sexual division of labor when men are typically given roles in economic production (paid and recognized work) while women are assigned roles in social reproduction, which includes raising children, caring family, and doing household chores (Engels et al. 1972; as cited in Moore 1994). Since women's work does not produce material goods or any domestic value, their work is unpaid and unrecognized. Based on Marxist feminists, capitalism significantly relies on this unpaid social labor in the reproduction of workers (Cottais 2020). According to the author, this system benefits men who have more time for paid work and a capitalist system that does not have to pay wages for these essential tasks.

In the context of tea plantations, beyond their role, estate women engaged in the additional burden of unpaid domestic labor, unlike the fathers of the children. They struggle to maintain their dual roles in their lives, both waged roles at the estates and unpaid roles at home (Gnanapragasam 2020). According to Chandrabose & Sivapragasam (2011), estate women wake up early morning, cook meals for breakfast and lunch, do all household chores, send kids to school, and then leave to work. In the evening, after returning home, they have to cook meals for dinner, clean, look after their children, and do every other work. These women dedicate their whole day to the estate works and daily domestic chores, with continuous

exhaustion and physical strain resulting in countless tiredness (Chandrabose & Sivapragasam 2011).

Women workers in Sri Lankan tea estates endure a heavy workload, both in the field and at home (Wickramasinghe & Cameron 2005). Working on steep terrains, moving up and down the slopes multiple times a day while carrying heavy tea baskets secured around their forehead, they finish work around 5.30 pm. But their labor does not end there. They continue their unpaid domestic labor in the household until midnight. Philips (2003) denoted that women in Sri Lankan tea estates hold a triple burden of work, including wage work, housework work and religious duties, often related to Hindu traditions such as *kovil* (meaning temple in Tamil) visits and rituals. In addition to their longer working hours in the field, they are responsible for household chores such as cooking, cleaning, caring for children and elders, and collecting firewood and water. Based on the fieldwork conducted across six tea plantations in Sri Lanka, Philips (2003) emphasizes that poor water supply, sanitary facilities, and toilet facilities in homes result in additional burdens for women. They need to accompany their pubescent daughters to bathing places, even after returning from work, further straining their time, health, and energy.

Federici (2020) presents an idea of primitive accumulation, highlighting the facts such as the creation of a new sexual division of labor that subjugated women's labor and reproductive functions to maintaining the workforce, the establishment of a new patriarchal order that excluded women from paid work and subordinated them to men, transformation of women's bodies into machines for producing new workers. This argument aligns well with the situation of typical estate women performing unpaid labor throughout their whole lifetime.

3.1.2 Patriarchy

Patriarchy is a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women (Walby 1989). According to the Marxist feminists, patriarchy is also intricately connected with capitalism. Just as capitalism builds both economy and society, patriarchy influences various aspects such as political, economic, social, and cultural institutions, as well as everyday discourses and practices of life (Cottais 2020). In the context of tea plantations, the term patriarchy is often used, particularly concerning the relationship between plantation owners and workers (Ranasinghe 2017). Jayawardena & Kurian (2015) have explored the concept of "plantation patriarchy" and argued that women working in the plantation sector face multiple and overlapping patriarchies. The author emphasized how various forms of male dominance which affect women's lives due to the organization of work and structure of social relationships within the estates.

Building on this concept, the study explores how this patriarchy acts as a key factor contributing to persistent gender inequalities prevailing in the tea estates with detrimental well-being outcomes.

Sri Lankan tea plantation societies are traditionally patriarchal, and male dominance is rooted at various levels, including managers, superintendents, factory officers, and field supervisors (Chandrabose & Sivapragasam 2011). According to the author, women do not gain any opportunity to hold positions of power and authority in decision-making roles even within the unions, as men control these power structures, reflecting power imbalances within the plantation management system. According to Rieck (2024), male workers in the field held higher positions, such as operating machinery and managing administrative tasks. In contrast, women workers were largely assigned to manual field work and tea plucking. Within the estate, women's labor is strictly supervised by primarily male supervisors, enhancing their secondary status. Meanwhile, men enjoy greater freedom in tea plantation labor. This situation reflects the broader system of patriarchy where women's labor is continuously regulated and advancement opportunities are limited. As a result, their mental health, personal freedom, and decision-making power in social settings are often affected.

In Sri Lankan tea estates, Men dominate most of the powerful positions within trade unions while leaving female leadership mostly symbolic (Ranasinghe & Wickramasinghe 2021). When women are assigned to such positions, their roles are largely visible but lack influence and voice. They hold titles, but they are rarely involved in decision-making. It reflects the deep-rooted gendered hierarchy where patriarchal norms continue to marginalize female workers, maintaining their subordinate status. Under the traditional concept of “*walame*”, male workers who complete their labor tasks by 1.30 p.m. still receive a full day's wage. In contrast, female workers are required to complete 8-10 hour shifts and still face wage deductions if they fail to achieve their daily quota. This situation further reflects the deeply rooted patriarchal norms in Sri Lankan tea estates, which sustain gendered labor segregation (Ranasinghe & Wickramasinghe 2021). This practice illustrates how systemic inequalities are intensified through cultural traditions, allowing male privilege to persist in labor systems. As a result, women's efforts are undervalued and further contribute to broader gendered labor disparities.

The study conducted in the tea estates of Badulla district also reveals that Public Health Midwives (PHMs) working in these patriarchal societies often face limitations. Their lack of empowerment often limits their ability to provide appropriate care and intervention for women who are experiencing domestic violence (Infanti et al. 2015).

3.2 Well-being and Gendered Labor

The World Health Organization (1948) defines health as “a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being,” illustrating that well-being is more than the absence of illness. In the lens of labor studies, well-being refers to the capacity to lead healthy, self-directed, and socially connected lives (Gough & McGregor 2007). According to the authors, well-being is a multidimensional aspect and is shaped by both material sources and social relationships.

Dodge et al. (2012) presents a conception of well-being as a dynamic balance between resources and challenges and divides the broader concept of well-being into three interrelated dimensions, including physical, mental, and social. Physical well-being encompasses fatigue and poor health conditions due to long and exhausting work. Mental well-being includes anxiety resulting from stressful working conditions and social well-being concerns, limited recognition, and restricted mobility conditions. According to Dodge et al. (2012), these dimensions are closely interconnected as physical fatigue results in mental stress, while limited access to society and support reduces women’s capacity to recover and resist.

In addition to Dodge et al.'s (2012) multidimensional framework, alternative approaches such as Sen’s Capability Approach (Sen 1999) and Fraser’s Theory of Recognition (Fraser 2005) provide valuable insights to the study. According to Sen (1999), well-being is achieved through freedom to make meaningful choices, focusing on people’s needs rather than just access to resources. Fraser (2005) meanwhile emphasizes the importance of social recognition and equal participation as central to achieving justice and well-being.

This study incorporates both three-dimensional lenses of well-being by Dodge et al. (2012) and Marxist Feminist theory (Lomire 1989) to analyse how gendered labor conditions affect women workers in Sri Lankan tea plantations. It illustrates how prevailing exploitation is experienced in everyday lives. In this scenario, low wages and heavy duties erode women’s physical health, while strict gender roles and patriarchal authority increase their stress and limit social support. In return, physical illness results in low productivity, mental fatigue affects labor focus, and social isolation limits women’s ability to resist and organize. In this context, empowerment of women, which involves increased agency, voice, and control over resources, can act as a potential pathway to strengthen social well-being and way of disrupt this cycle (Kabeer 1999). Understanding these dynamics is essential in addressing research question three and indicates that improving well-being requires meaningful changes in both work workplace and the household.

3.3 Conceptual Framework

The Conceptual Framework diagram below in Figure 1 illustrates the relationship between gendered labor inequalities and their effect on the well-being of women workers in Sri Lankan tea plantations. Based on the Marxist Feminist theory, this conceptual framework explores how the capitalist economic structure and patriarchy intersect to exploit women's labor.

Gendered labor inequalities are identified as an independent variable. It includes wage gaps, double labor burden, occupational segregation due to patriarchy, and exploitative working conditions (Lomire 1989). Historical, social, and structural factors deepen these inequalities. Historically, line room type housing structures from the colonial period, and traditional norms such as *walame* laid the foundation for enduring gendered roles (Niroshini 2024, Ranasinghe & Wickramasinghe 2021). Socially, patriarchal attitudes, deeply rooted ideologies such as gendered roles, lead to such inequalities (Kurian & Jayawardena 2017). Structurally, the lack of institutional support and inequality in labor allocation, limited leadership opportunities result in such inequalities within the tea estates (Chandrabose & Sivapragasam 2011).

The study conceptualizes the well-being of women workers as a multidimensional outcome shaped by gendered labor inequalities in tea plantations. It is based on the three-dimensional well-being aspects, namely, physical, mental, and social. Their physical health is impacted by chronic health issues. As reported, poor working conditions result in skin issues, back pain, persistent cough, neck and shoulder pain, etc. (Sushanthi 2023). Mentally, these poor working conditions lead to anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and burnout, which result in persistent fatigue and mental disturbance. (Rajbangshi & Nambiar 2020). Socially, these inequalities influence the standards of living conditions of women workers, causing social isolation and limited agency (Pannilage 2017). Based on the Marxist Feminist theory, this framework demonstrates how different forms of well-being aspects are influenced by gendered labor inequalities and how they are interconnected. It highlights how capitalism and patriarchy reproduce labor inequalities in the estate system. By integrating localized insights from Badulla district tea estates, it contributes to the broader global discourse on gendered labor inequalities.

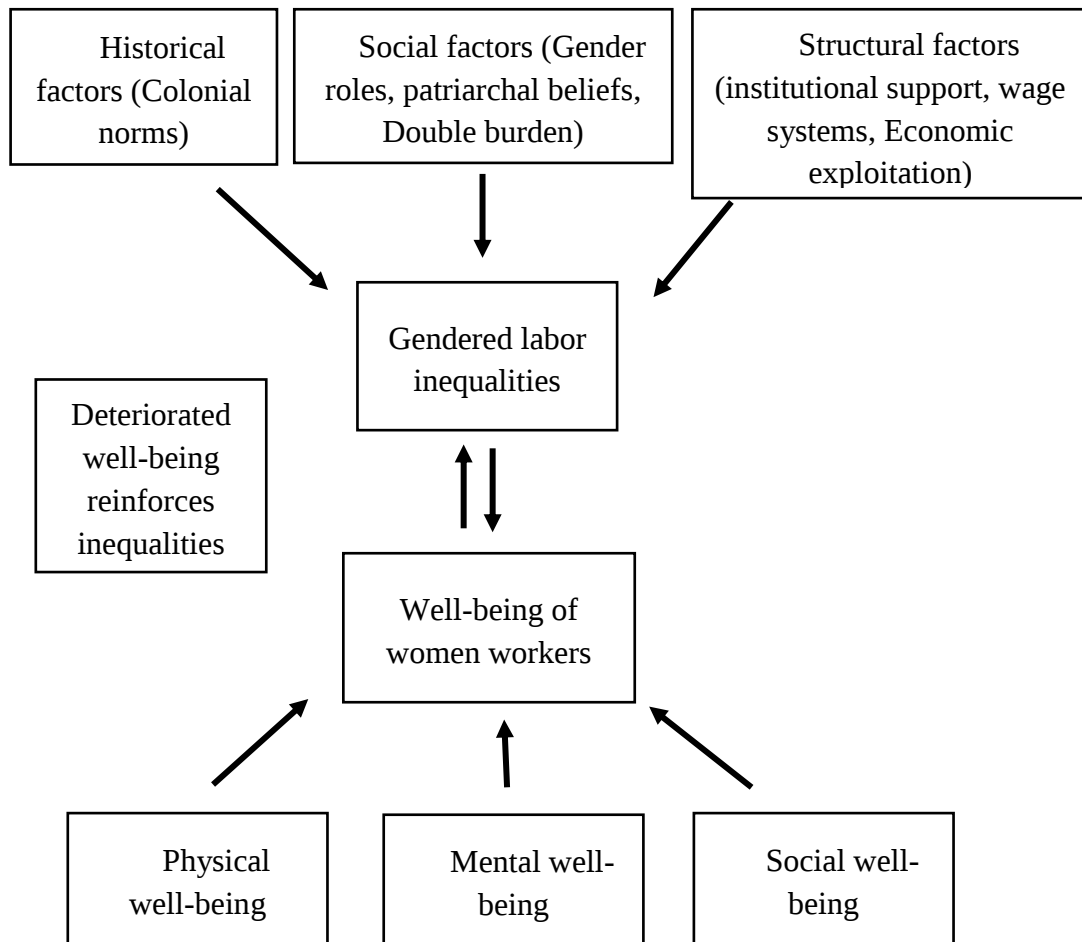


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework Diagram

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

The thesis adopted a qualitative case study design focusing on the experiences and narratives of women workers and other key actors related to the tea plantations in Badulla district, Sri Lanka. The social, emotional, and personal dimensions of individuals' experience can be thoroughly explored through a qualitative approach, since it allows for investigation of how specific individuals or groups interpret and assign meaning to the issue (Creswell & Creswell 2018). A qualitative approach is selected due to its flexibility and adaptability (Creswell & Creswell 2018). Research design needs to be flexible to adapt to the unexpected findings and results that emerge during the investigation.

Within the qualitative approach, research employed a case study method as it examines contemporary phenomena within their real-life context using multiple methods of data collection (Robson & McCartan 2016). According to the Creswell & Creswell (2018), case studies are a widely used research design, particularly in evaluation, where researchers conduct in-depth analysis of specific cases, such as events, programmes, activities, processes, or individuals. These cases have distinct time and scope limitations, and data is collected over some time. The study adopts the case study approach to explore a specific labor category within a defined geographical location and social setting. By positioning the study in real-life situations and utilizing multiple data sources made it possible to gain a comprehensive understanding of the issues involved. Semi-structured interviews and field observations were conducted to collect data over five weeks to examine how existing gendered inequalities shape the well-being of women workers.

4.1.1 The Study Area

The study was conducted in the Badulla district, Uva province, in Sri Lanka, which has a high concentration of tea estates and a large estate worker population. The location was selected as it offers a clear and concentrated context to examine gendered labor inequalities and their impact on women's well-being. From four different villages in the Badulla district, Kandegedara, Haputale, Thelbedde, and Passara, four tea estates were selected. Selection was based on the accessibility, estate size, and management structures to capture variations in labor conditions. I lived in the Badulla district of Sri Lanka for 6 years, first as an undergraduate student and later while working at a local university. During this time, I gained fieldwork experience with several plantation crops, especially tea. This background helped me build local connections, which made it easier to reach primary stakeholders for the study. Although many estate workers primarily speak Tamil,

being a native Sinhala speaker still helped me to communicate more effectively with officials and build trust in mixed language environments, especially with the help of an interpreter when needed and particularly through shared cultural understanding.

Uva and Central provinces consist of the highest concentration of tea estates among the different tea cultivation provinces in Sri Lanka. Badulla district in Uva province represents 29,668 hectares of tea cultivated lands (Dharmadasa et al. 2018). Administratively, Badulla consists of 15 Divisional Secretariats and 567 Grama Niladhari divisions, with a population of 837,000 (Kaleel & Reeza 2017). The district extends 2861 km² with an annual average rainfall of 2000 mm and temperatures ranging between 20-25 °C.

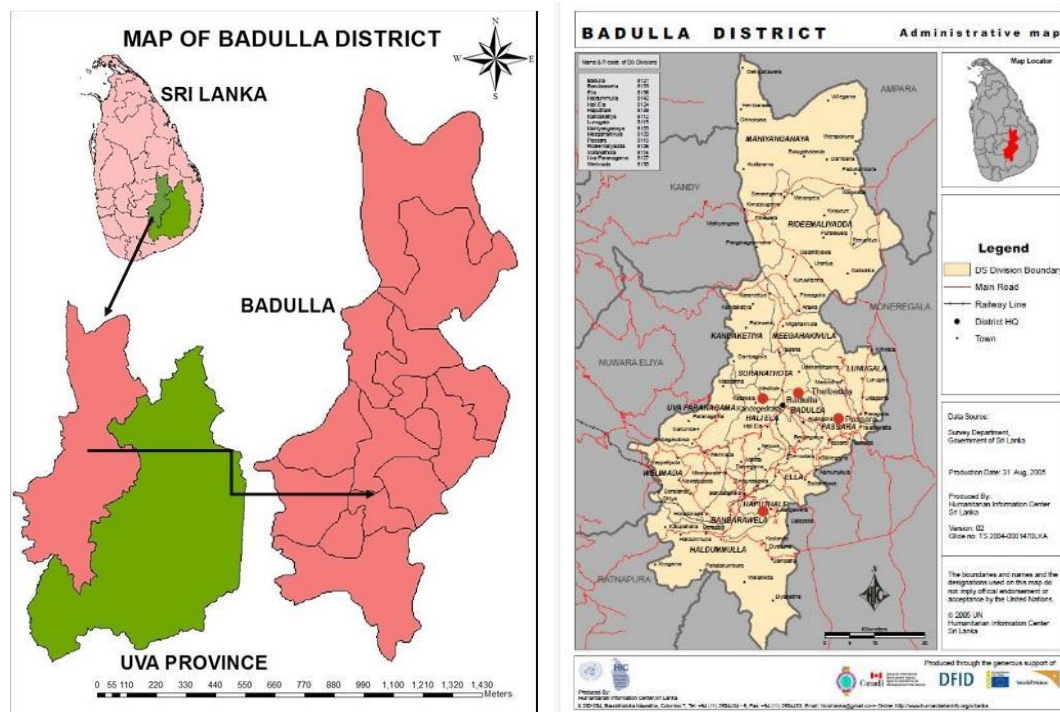


Figure 2. Map of Badulla District with locations of the selected tea estates (Survey Department, Sri Lanka, 2005)

4.2 Data Collection

Data collection was carried out in four different tea estates in the Badulla district, including Haputale, Kandegedara, Thelbedda, and Passara. Fieldwork was carried out over five weeks from February to April 2025. As data collection methods, semi-structured interviews and participant observations were employed to obtain an in-depth understanding of the research. Using two data sources was important to validate findings and minimize biases. This approach, known as “Triangulation”, is

an important and common approach that utilizes multiple data sources to enhance the accuracy of the research (Robson & McCartan 2016).

4.2.1 Sampling and Access to the Field

The purposive sampling method was used to purposefully select participants. These individuals were chosen for their ability to provide valuable insights and lived experiences related to gender labor dynamics in Sri Lankan tea estates. Participants were identified through a variety of channels, including existing contacts with local contact persons, referrals from former university batchmates employed in the tea industry, and direct contacts to key informants such as estate officials, government officials, and NGO representatives with whom I had developed professional connections. This ensured that a diverse range of perspectives were captured, particularly from women workers, estate management, and other relevant parties.

Snowball sampling was employed to enhance the number of interview participants. Following initial interviews with several key participants, I requested their recommendations for more participants who fulfilled the study requirements. It was particularly effective in reaching more relevant participants who were difficult to contact without reliable contact referrals. By combining these two approaches, a thorough and inclusive sample was obtained, capturing a wide range of lived experiences and narratives from the tea plantation industry.

4.2.2 Recruitment of participants

To ensure an in-depth understanding of the research, a variety of participants were interviewed (Table 1). The primary participants were women tea pluckers, as they were directly experiencing the gender disparities within the estates. Interviews were conducted with seven female employees, employing open-ended questions, thereby encouraging them to share their individual experiences in their own words. Two male workers were interviewed to get their views on gender roles, discrimination practices, and division of labor. Inclusion of both female and male perspectives was significant for this study. It helped to provide a clearer and balanced view of how gendered behaviours are perceived and maintained by all workers, not just women.

To capture insights from a management-level perspective, four interviews were conducted with supervisory and management-level workers, a female assistant estate manager, one of the pioneering women who entered estate management in Sri Lanka, a male supervisor (kangani), a male field officer, and a research and management assistant officer. Their ideas and experiences provided valuable insights into how gender roles and labor conditions, and disparities influence the well-being of women workers. Further, an interview was conducted with and Non-

Governmental Organization representative, specifically a director of the organization based in Badulla, which is directly involved in labor rights advocacy for the tea estate community. This interview assisted in triangulating data from worker narratives and provided more comprehensive insights into labor rights and gender based obstacles in eliminating inequalities. Finally, I interviewed with a state representative who is presently a member of the Parliament of Sri Lanka. Born into a tea plucking family, raised in tea estate surroundings, this individual now represents the hill country tea community in national policy discussions. Her perspective provided a political dimension to this study, highlighting issues of gender roles, inequalities within the tea estates, and the position of women workers within tea estates. In addition, I had several informal conversations during my visits to estates, offices, and local organizations. These discussions also provided insightful knowledge related to the gender labor inequalities and women's well-being in the tea industry.

Table 1 Overview of the interview participants

Participant Group	No.of Participants		Estate/ Organization
	Female	Male	
Tea pluckers	7	0	Haputale (3), Kadegeedara (2), Thelbedda (1), Passara (1)
Field workers	0	2	Haputale(1), Thelbedda(1)
Supervisory & Management staff	1	3	Kadegeedara (2), Passara (2)
State Representative	1	0	Diyathalawa (1)
NGO Director	0	1	Badulla (1)
Total	9	6	

4.2.3 Semi-structured face-to-face interviews

The primary data collection method was semi-structured face-to-face interviews. The interview method is often employed in flexible and multi-strategy research designs, allowing the interviewer great freedom (Robson & McCartan 2016). The interview guide was developed to facilitate the interviews, determining key topics and including open-ended questions, allowing interviewees to freely convey their views (Flick 2014). During the conversations, the interview questions evolved continuously, sometimes generating new questions.

Based on the developed questionnaire, fifteen semi-structured interviews were conducted (see Appendix 1). The interviews covered the themes of economic exploitation, patriarchy, double burden, and well-being experienced by women workers within the estate system. According to the language preference of participants, interviews were carried out in Sinhala and Tamil. I collaborated with Thileepan, a fourth-year agriculture research student from Uva Wellassa University in Badulla, who also working as a research assistant for several ongoing studies in rural areas in Sri Lanka, as a translator for Tamil interviews. Based on his familiarity with conducting interviews and surveys with marginalized rural communities, a colleague in the university staff recommended him. Before the interviews, we discussed the research topic, research objectives, and interview guide to ensure clarity. I encouraged him to go through the interview questions in advance and ask for clarification if required. We discussed interview techniques, including noticing complex questions and adjusting them accordingly to maintain participant trust and comfort. Working with a male assistant raised sensitivity concerns, particularly discussing issues related to women labor and well-being. To mitigate potential discomfort, I took ethical precautions such as obtaining consent and allowing participants to skip questions or stop at any time.

At the interview site, consent was obtained from the interviewee to participate in the study, either verbally or in written form. The objectives of the study, interview duration, risks and benefits, and confidentiality were explained, and importantly, consent was obtained for audio recording (Creswell & Poth 2018). To establish a rapport and trust with the participants, a responsive interviewing technique was adopted. This developed an informal type of conversation that allowed for a deeper exploration of their experiences. The tone of questioning was friendly and non-confrontational, fostering a comfortable space for open discussion (Flick 2014). The same technique was followed by the translator, whose support was crucial in establishing relationships with interviewees and prompting effective discussions.

During the interview, I concentrated on the questions and expected to complete the interview within a definite time. Additionally, as a good interviewer, I asked fewer questions, and, being a good listener, listened thoughtfully instead of being a frequent speaker (Creswell & Poth 2018). On the same day, I listened to audio recordings and made thorough notes. All Sinhala language interviews were fully transcribed by me, and transcription was done manually to ensure the accuracy in capturing the narratives of interviewees. Thileepan assisted in the translations of Tamil interviews.

4.2.4 Field observations

During the data collection, a field diary was maintained to document the observations, notably the behaviours and interactions of the participants. These field notes were not completely documented, but maintained a semi-structured approach with detailed information and my reflections. Depending on the setting and the circumstances, my role as an observer shifted from a non-participant to a more interactive role, allowing me to gain a thorough understanding of the gendered labor dynamics in the tea industry (Creswell & Creswell 2018).

I visited a total of four estates for observation sessions, which were spread across different periods (Table 2). The study followed the three phases of participant observation (Spradley 1980 as cited in; Flick 2009). Initially, I simply observed the field, recorded the general details, then became more familiar with the field, narrowed my focus to the issues more relevant to the research questions, and finally, I looked for concrete evidence and examples directly answering my research questions. I focused on key areas of the estate where employees spent a significant amount of time, including the fields where the workers were engaged in their daily tasks, the line rooms where they resided, the child care centers where workers' kids were cared for, and the estate offices.

I paid close attention to the dynamics, the way women and men workers interact, how the tasks are assigned, environmental conditions, emotional and physical conditions they worked and organizational structures in the setting, and how these influence their well-being. I also took photographs when necessary to document the spaces and interactions I was observing, helping to visualize the data. In some places, I engaged in informal conversations with workers, estate staff, and other relevant people in the field to gather additional insights into the study.

Table 2 Overview of field observations conducted in tea estates

Estate	Dates	Focus of observations
Haputale	1 st & 2 nd weeks of February 2025	Daily routines in the field, Daycare center
Kandegedara	2 nd & 3 rd weeks of February 2025	Daily routines in the field, Restroom
Thelbedda	3 rd & 4 th weeks of February 2025	Daily routines in the field, Line rooms, Estate office
Passara	1 st week of March 2025	Daily routines in the field, Line rooms



Figure 3 Informal discussions with estate workers during field visits, Thelbedda. 2025/02/26, Photograph by Oshadhee Kumara

4.3 Ethical consideration

The study was guided by strong ethical concerns protecting the anonymity, privacy, and integrity of the participants. According to Robson & McCartan (2016), names and other personal information of the participants were considered confidential, and information that could lead to the identification of individuals was not disclosed. Informed consent was obtained from all the interview participants before the interviews, either in written or oral form, for the participation, audio recording, and in some cases, photographs. Before obtaining the consent, every participant was informed about research objectives, how the data would be used and shared, and their right to withdraw from the participation at any time. Due to the language barrier, a reliable translator was employed in several in-person interviews. The translator was carefully selected and informed about the study and interview process. During the interviews, topics considered sensitive, such as domestic violence, harassment at work, and financial hardships, were not pursued in depth unless the participant voluntarily chose to describe.

4.4 Data Analysis

I employed thematic coding analysis since it is a widely recognized, flexible, and accessible method for organizing and analyzing qualitative data (Robson & McCartan 2016). This approach is particularly suitable for researchers like me, who may have limited prior experience with qualitative methodologies but come from a

natural science background. According to Robson & McCartan (2016), thematic analysis is considered a central method in qualitative research and offers a systematic approach to identifying patterns and ideas within the data. Based on Gibbs (2007), Robson & McCartan (2016) emphasize that coding is how the researcher defines which aspects of the data are being analyzed, often referred to as codes, segments, or incidents.

Analysis followed five key steps presented by Robson & McCartan (2016). After transcribing the interviews in full, I familiarized myself with the data by carefully reading and rereading full interview transcripts to identify preliminary patterns. I conducted the analysis manually using an Excel sheet, without using software, since the number of interviews was manageable. I identified and tagged the data with initial codes, assigning different colors. I did the coding in two rounds to further identify the different and repetitive codes. After finalizing the list of codes, I grouped the codes into main themes. Themes were critically interpreted concerning my research questions. Identified themes reflect the answers to research questions. To further enhance the analytical depth and transparency of the study, I incorporated direct quotes from different participant categories, allowing their voices to shape the interpretation and give depth to the findings.

Notes taken during field observations were transcribed, organized, and analyzed using the same thematic coding analysis process which applied to interview transcripts. Although the analysis was guided by Marxist Feminist Theory, which informed the research design and interview questions, the primary focus remained on the themes that originally emerged from narratives of participants. Given the richness of the data, analysis remained grounded in the empirical material to ensure an accurate and deep understanding of participants' lived experiences.

5. Findings and Analysis

During thematic coding analysis, five main themes were identified, including experiences in economic exploitation, double burden, patriarchy and power structures, wellbeing and health, institutional neglect, policies, and empowerment. The following section will explore each theme in detail, demonstrating how participants express their experiences on these interconnected aspects.

Table 3 Definitions and illustrative examples of key themes derived from thematic analysis

Theme	Definition/ sub themes	Example illustrative quote
Experiences of Economic Exploitation	Limited employment options, Daily work norms, waru payment, insufficient salary, wage disparities, and financial struggles	<i>“We receive wages according to the number of kilos we pluck. Our target is 20 kg. But if we cannot reach the target, we receive a waru payment.” (Interviewee 3 WW)</i>
Double Burden: paid and unpaid labor	Unpaid labor and social reproduction, lack of support for domestic work, lack of rest, and extensive working hours	<i>“No time to rest. I have been working continuously for more than 35 years.” (Interviewee 4 WW)</i>
Patriarchy and power structures	Gendered task allocation, male-dominated leadership and intermediation, working norms favoring men, violence, and sexual favoritism	<i>“Estate unions are there...in these unions, women are not in the main leadership roles. They may be members as representatives or something. But not in the main leadership roles such as president, secretary, or bursar.” (Interviewee 15 NGO)</i>
Well-being and health	Physical health, mental stress, lack of health facilities, childcare, common facilities, and social life	<i>“Always has leg pains and back pains. It is difficult to hold a tea leaves sack on the back for the whole day.” (Interviewee 3 WW)</i>

Institutional neglect, policies, and empowerment	Empowerment, Institutional recognition, and policy reforms	<i>“If women workers start to do a self-employment, small home business in the estate, we connect with government organizations, district secretarial officers, and help to obtain a trade license.” (Interviewee 15 NGO explaining support for estate-based self-employment)</i>
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5.1 Experiences of Economic Exploitation

Economic exploitation is identified as one of the main themes in this study. It highlights the complex financial vulnerabilities and economic constraints experienced by tea estate women workers. Limited availability of employment opportunities is one key factor in economic exploitation. Most of the participants, particularly women workers, highlighted that their work in the tea estate is not driven by choice but by necessity. According to Interviewee 1:

“[...] I do not have any other option to earn some money to maintain my family. Because of that, my family, my husband, and I work here. It is very difficult to find a job outside for us” (Interviewee 1 WW).

Most of the workers highlighted that their involvement in tea plucking was shaped by family ties and early exposure to estate work, which contributed to a feeling of being trapped in this occupation.

“[...] After marriage, I came to this estate. Before that, I stayed with my parents in another estate, plucking tea leaves with them. It is the job I know. So, I do not have other choices.” (Interviewee 6 WW)

These citations directly highlight the limited availability of alternative employment opportunities, particularly for estate women. It confines them to labor-intensive, physically demanding and less paid estate work. The exploitation is further intensified through the existing wage system, namely the “*Waru*” payment procedure. To earn a full day’s wage, workers are expected to pluck a certain quantity of tea leaves, typically 20 kilograms. This target is referred to as the plucking norm. If this amount is not reached, a half-day amount is paid. As one interviewee stated, going beyond the plucking norm results in extra wages, but failing to meet the target results in a considerable wage reduction.

“[...] We receive wages according to the number of kilos we pluck. Our target is 20 kg. If we pluck more than our target, we receive more money per each kilo. It is calculated according to the number of kilos. But if we

cannot reach the target, we receive a waru payment. It is practiced from the past.” (Interviewee 3 WW)

Moreover, the capacity to meet this target may not solely depend on the worker’s effort. Environmental factors such as the maturity of the field can also play a key role in harvest weight.

“[...] Sometimes, according to the area they pluck, weight may vary. For example, when the assigned nera is mature, it is difficult to reach that plucking norm. So, they need to put extra effort these days.” (Interviewee 13 EOS)

As stated, this results in a structural disadvantage for workers who bear the consequences of field conditions that lie beyond their control, thereby increasing instability and uncertainty of their daily earnings.

Another key fact revealed through the narratives is inadequate wage rates. While some workers acknowledge the recent salary increment, many of them emphasized that such modifications are insufficient in terms of growing inflation and daily living costs.

“[...] We received a salary increase recently, but with our expenses, it is difficult to manage it.” (Interviewee 3 WW)

Further, seasonal changes also aggravate the wage uncertainty since the plucking yield declines significantly during the dry season, leading to a considerable drop in individual income.

“[...] In the dry season, the tea leaves are less for plucking. So, our income is getting low.” (Interviewee 1 WW)

Narratives of several participants revealed their reliance on loans and advance payments from estate management to deal with this loss, which further deepened their financial insecurity.

“[...] amount is not enough for our expenses. We get some advance payments in the middle, when we need money. Our earnings are not enough to maintain our family. I have a lot of debts.” (Interviewee 2 WW)

Observations done in the field further supported these voices. During field visits, women workers were observed in oversized old clothes. They wore them as layers to protect themselves from the cold and rain. Their shirts were faded with sunburn, maybe due to prolonged exposure in the field. Some of them walked with torn rubber slippers, and others were barefoot. They used old polythene sheets to cover

their skirts and legs from the rain and moisture (Observation, 2/11). These signs of lack of basic necessities reveal the insufficiency of wages and broader economic exploitation experienced by the tea estate women workers.



Figure 4 Women workers leaving the field wearing layered, faded old clothes, with and without slippers, and carrying a sack of tea leaves on their backs at Kandegedara. 11/02/25, Photograph by author

In contrast to the exploitative labor conditions, many participants expressed appreciation that the wage disparity between men and women in tea plucking has been resolved through government interventions. Several respondents acknowledged that, although a gender pay gap existed in the past, it was addressed through agreements and negotiations between plantation companies, trade unions, and the government and thereby introduced an equal wage structure. These efforts played a key role in ensuring that both men and women now receive equal pay for the same task. tasks. As one respondent noted,

“[...] In earlier times, I cannot remember the exact year, there was a wage gap between women and men. Women received less amount of money in those days. But after involving a previous government, that wage gap was removed. So that now men and women receive the same salary for similar work. No wage gaps.” (Interviewee 8 WW)

The prevailing gender pay gap in Sri Lanka was first addressed in 1984 through legislation. It mandated equal pay in the plantation sector. This was later supported by Gazette No.2213/32 in February 2021, reaffirming the commitment to gender pay equality in all sectors, including plantations. Even though this change is a positive move, the amount of payment remains generally low and unstable,

reflecting that the equality in pay does not lessen the prevailing financial hardships of the female estate workers. While formal provisions for equal pay exist in Sri Lanka, implementation gaps may still persist in several sectors, such as agriculture and domestic services, where women often work informally and are vulnerable to wage disparities.

Collectively, the theme of economic exploitation directly addresses the research question 1, which seeks to identify various forms of gender labor inequalities by illustrating lack of alternative employment opportunities, exploitative wage systems, and inadequate wages. Revealing social, historical, and structural factors that contribute to these inequalities, such as the historically rooted “*Waru*” payment system, inherited labor roles and family ties, and dependency on debts, this theme responds to the research question 2 which aims to uncover these underlying causes.

5.2 Double Burden: Managing paid and unpaid labor

The theme double burden was identified as another significant theme in the study. It captures the complex and continuous nature of women’s labor in Sri Lankan tea estates. They engage in physically demanding estate work while also managing a wide range of unpaid domestic responsibilities. This creates a continuous cycle of labor with less rest and support.

Unpaid labor and social reproduction are key dimensions of the double burden. Interviews revealed how women’s labor extends far beyond the boundaries of their paid employment. Most of the women workers wake up before sunrise to engage in household chores, cooking, cleaning, raising kids for school, and caring for sick parents before attending a full day of tea plucking. Upon returning home, their labor continues until late at night. One participant described:

“[...] I have to do all household work like a machine, even after estate work. I normally wake up at 4.30 am, cook for my husband and children, do other cleaning and washing, and help kids to get ready for school. ... After I go home, I need to do the children’s work. I need to clean them, have to cook dinner for them and my husband, clean the home, wash clothes, bring water, everything. Sometimes I need to go find firewood for cooking in the evening. All the works finish around 11.30 pm. That is my normal daily routine.” (Interviewee 1 WW)

This response presents an inclusive illustration of the double burden experienced by women labor. According to the participant, she cooks for the family, maintains and cleans the home, and ensures the management of the family without formal acknowledgement or compensation. The phrase “like a machine” clearly indicates

the exhausting nature and relentlessness of her workload. Tasks like bringing water, finding firewood are not only unpaid labor but also physically demanding. The deep interconnection between productive and reproductive roles in the daily lives of estate women is reflected in another participant's narrative.

“[...] wake up at 5.00 am, then start with cooking for the family. One child goes to school. He needs to be prepared by 7.00. Another one goes to the daycare center in the estate. ... do the cleaning a little bit and leave the home for tea plucking around 7.45 am. I go home again to do the household work without any break. I need to cook dinner for my family, wash clothes, and clean etc. Until near midnight, I am working without any rest.” (Interviewee 2 WW)

This voice further echoes the first interview, and reveals how her day starts from early morning, even before sunrise, and continues until midnight, engaging in continuous labor consuming her entire day, with no time for rest. It shows the persistent neglect of women's unpaid labor within both the household and the estate.

This continuity of labor is further evidenced by field observations. In an evening, a woman was observed returning home from the tea field carrying bundles of firewood on her head, likely for cooking. Despite completing an entire day in the field plucking tea leaves to earn money, these women are still responsible for supplying domestic necessities. (Observation 3/5). This illustrates the never-ending cycle of paid and unpaid work, the double burden many women face.

Lack of support for domestic work is another key dimension of the double burden. Many participants revealed that they received little or no help at home.

“[...] I do not have anyone to help at home. Even though my mother is sick, she helped me a little to look after the kids in the daytime, especially my elder son, who has a mental disease. I do not have my husband to help me. He left me with another woman a few years ago. Therefore, I do not have anyone to support me. My sick mother is the only one I have with my kids.” (Interviewee 6 WW)

This response highlights both the emotional and physical isolation experienced by a single mother who is continuously carrying a full burden of both caregiving for her mentally unstable son and domestic work, even in the absence of a support system. She reflects the structural challenges faced by female-headed households which left without familial assistance. The limited support from her sick mother and absence of her spouse emphasize the burden of unpaid labor that women need to hold alone. It further perpetuates their vulnerability and reinforces gender inequality within the estate communities. As another participant noted:

“[...] I have a lot of work at home, especially looking after my sick mom at home. My elder sister, who lives with me, helps with that and also helps with cooking and other chores.... But we both work in the estate. So, it is tiring to do all the work after going home.” (Interviewee 5 WW)

It reveals the gendered nature of the domestic division of labor within the estate households. Assistance at home is often provided by another woman in the family who also engages in full-time estate labor, or by elderly women. In such cases, rather than alleviating the burden, this arrangement leads to a shared exhaustion where both women return home with great tiredness and resume unpaid work at home. This condition enhances the gendered dynamics of hierarchy where domestic responsibilities are expected to be managed by women alone, regardless of their economic contribution and physical fatigue.

One male participant acknowledged that their involvement in domestic work is often minimal.

“[...] Even if I help her, she does things more than me.” (Interviewee 9 MW)

That reveals how household responsibilities are still widely seen as the sole responsibility of women, regardless of whether they work a full day or how physically demanding their day is. These unequal labor practices are systemic but are shaped by deep-rooted gender norms. It reflects the persistent gender favoritism in the division of household responsibilities.

Lack of rest and personal time is a physically and emotionally exhausting outcome of the double burden. The continuous engagement in both paid and unpaid labor results in no opportunity for physical recovery. An elderly woman who was waiting for her retirement stated that:

“[...] No time to rest. I have been working continuously for more than 35 years. I am waiting to get a rest after my retirement.” (Interviewee 4 WW)

It reflects the lifelong nature of exhaustion in the lives of estate women workers. For her, rest is not a daily or weekly or periodical event, but rather a distant future event, postponed until retirement at the age of 60. Her statement reveals how elderly estate women hold countless fatigue for years while working in tea estates. They have been performing physically demanding labor for decades without a proper support system. This physical fatigue due to the continuous absence of rest and support is a common reality for estate women. This situation clearly reflects the structural neglect of women's well-being in the Sri Lankan tea plantation sector.

“[...] I do not have time to rest. The rest I get is during tea time, lunch time, and the time I sleep at night.” (Interviewee 6 WW)

Further, this participant reveals how rest in their lives is confined to brief intervals and limited nighttime sleep, providing no opportunity for physical recovery. The domestic environment and labor system within the tea estate system are not designed to accommodate and support the well-being of women. This constant exhaustion and restless routine affects not only their physical and mental well-being but also erodes social well-being through isolating them from community life, reducing the chance for social interactions and collective activities.

Another key concern in the theme of dual burden is extensive working hours and continuous workload experienced by women workers. The experience below clearly indicates the work routine of women workers with no time for adequate rest, meals, or recovery. Even allocated breaks are occupied with additional operational tasks such as weighing tea leaves.

“[...] start work in the field at 7.45 am, and I work until 10.00 am and have a break to have my breakfast. It is around 30 minutes. I bring my food daily and eat in the field. I do not have time to go back home and have my breakfast within 30 minutes. Within these 30 minutes, we have to weigh our plucked leaves also. Then again, start work until evening. I do not get lunchtime. What I need is to complete my daily target of 20 kg of tea leaves. Around 4 or 4.30, sometimes 5, we finish plucking.” (Interviewee 2 WW)

Women workers often survive without a proper lunch break and work under continuous pressure to meet daily plucking targets. This leads to physical and mental stress, which directly affects their well-being. Her daily schedule, which extends from early morning to late evening, demonstrates how she remains exhausted throughout the day. It weakens not only her physical health but also her emotional well-being.

“[...] After tea break or lunch, spending 30 minutes they have to start work. They have to measure the tea leaves also within these 30 minutes. Not enough time to even have the food in peace. If they waited for more time, Kanganis yelled at them with harsh words. ... how difficult to them to walk and stand the whole day with a larger bag of tea leaves in the rain or under the sun. they have to tolerate these hardships anyway. Still indirectly, estates have slavery this way.” (Interviewee 14 GO)

A participant who represents the government also highlighted how women workers are expected to resume their work during the day, immediately after short tea breaks and lunch, when they must also weigh their plucked tea leaves, leaving no time to

rest or eat freely. If any delays happen, they are often scolded by supervisors with harsh words, resulting in a hostile working environment. Her phrase “still indirectly estate have slavery” reflects the exploitative labor conditions of tea estates, where overwork and strict supervision are treated as routine, and less concern about women’s dignity, well-being, and health. Although the government has established several laws to protect worker rights, particularly regarding working hours, health, and harassment, these regulations are poorly enforced within the estate system.

In conclusion, the theme double burden addresses research question 1, by revealing the prevailing dual responsibility women workers bear through estate work and domestic unpaid work, longer working hours, lack of rest, and persistent exhaustion. Further, it demonstrates the embedded estate and household norms, lack of support systems, harsh supervision, and persistent undervaluation of women’s unpaid and paid labor, responding to research question 2. This theme also addresses research question 3 by highlighting the impact of the double burden on women’s physical, mental, and social well-being, and the effects of long-term exhaustion on their quality of life.

5.3 Patriarchy and power structures

The theme of patriarchy and power highlights the gender hierarchies and power disparities that have historically existed within the estate system. These disparities have influenced both the position and autonomy of women workers. Gendered division of labor is an enduring expression of patriarchy. As stated, while women are primarily assigned to tea plucking, which is more intensive and repetitive, men engage in “Sillara Wada” (sundry works) such as pruning, land clearing, fertilizer and pesticide application, and land preparation. According to the narratives, such works are considered physically demanding and prestigious.

“[...] From the past, women worked with tea plucking and males engaged in sillara wada ... they do pruning, Kanu making, pesticide and fertilizer application like work. In the seasons when there is more harvest to pluck, men also engage in tea plucking.” (Interviewee 10 FO)

As stated, this task allocation reflects the perception of male superiority in skill and physical strength, which restricts women’s access to diverse tasks and limits their career advancement. Even when men participate in tea plucking during peak seasons, their involvement is considered temporary and optional.

The “*walame*” norm is a traditional practice rooted in daily estate operations that allows male workers to finish their work by early afternoon while women workers

continue until late evening. Such practices contribute to intensifying the gender inequalities in labor.

“[...] In the estate, almost all the activities take place according to the culture and tradition. One example is the Walame norm. Here, male work from morning until 1 pm while women work from morning until 4.00 or 5.00 pm. Some men leave early at 1 and do some other sundry work also.”
(Interviewee 12 ASD W)

While men's tasks are considered hard labor, the system supports male privilege by allowing them more flexibility and time. But women are expected to work longer hours in roles that are less varied and less respected. These behaviours have been formally embedded throughout the generations within the estate culture, further continuing deeply rooted gender biased norms.

During line room³ visits, males were more visible around midday, while females were mostly absent. Several men seemed to be drunk, were gathered around certain line rooms, and the strong smell of alcohol was evident (Observation, 3/6). The observation demonstrates an obvious difference in gendered daily routines, where men enjoy free time during working hours, while women continue their labor. It reflects how patriarchal norms impact the division of labor, allowing men greater access to leisure and rest time, while women are confined to a constant, intensive workload both at home and in the estate. Later in the day, men often return home intoxicated with alcohol, further limiting their participation in household responsibilities. This inequality reflects the gender bias and its impacts on women's physical and mental well-being.

Leadership within the tea estates is primarily held by males, while women rarely engage in positions. One respondent stated that:

“[...] estate unions are there...in these unions, women are not in the main leadership roles. They may be members as representatives or something. But not in the main leadership roles such as president, secretary, or bursar. Anyone who is not keen on achieving such positions, as well as offering such positions.” (Interviewee 15 NGO)

As revealed, while several women hold positions such as thalaivee (female union representative leader), these positions are mostly symbolic and hold limited decision-making capacity. It highlights the systemic exclusion of women from leadership positions, discourages their motivation, and undermines their political agency and potential. Further, it reveals the marginalization of women in the labor

³ Line room - one-room housing unit in a row of similar structures provided by the estate management, originally built in colonial period, typically lacking basic amenities and shared among family members.

organizations. This situation reflects the institutional failure of the estate setting to promote equitable gender representation. This exclusion not only limits women's voice but also affects their mental well-being by sustaining feelings of powerlessness and lack of recognition.

“[...] We do not have time to do that. We have families to take care of. I am not interested in that because I have more work with my family every day and need to take care of them. Men engage with these activities on behalf of us.” (Interviewee 1 WW)

Women's exclusion from leadership positions is highly systemic and entrenched. According to interviewee 1, lack of time, family responsibilities, and disinterest are often shaped by traditional gender roles in not pursuing leadership positions. Her statement reflects how deeply embedded patriarchal values still exist in the estates. In these settings, the leadership skills of women remain limited by both practical constraints and social standards. As a result, women have limited involvement in organizational structures within the estate community. This enhances the reliance on male leaders and limits women's agency within the tea estates.

Several participants noted that, in the absence of formal authority, women workers often depend on men to express their issues and opinions and negotiate on their behalf.

“[...] In union-like societies, we also discuss our problems through men. They help to do that.” (Interviewee 5 WW)

This reliance demonstrates how institutional norms continue to deny women from direct access to decision making, limiting their agency and affecting their social and by restricting their role in social collective spaces and their mental well-being by restricting their deepening feelings of dependency and frustration.

Such conditions indicate the system of male intermediation that further silences women's direct participation. It deepens their marginalization in the decision-making process. Furthermore, women's reluctance to express themselves regarding sensitive and personal health reflects the emotional boundaries established by patriarchal systems. One participant expressed the difficulty of addressing menstruation and sanitary needs with male supervisors.

“[...] Since most of the kangani and field officers are male, women face a lot of issues in the field. They are unable to express their difficulties to them about their period pains and sanitary needs on such days. In the field, there are no toilets, and they have to go back home... They do not want to talk about these things with males. So,

they often endure discomfort for hours without relief.” (Interviewee 12 ASD W)

This silence regarding bodily needs can lead to serious health consequences like infections, even skin cancers. This condition indicates the lack of supportive mechanisms and female-sensitive infrastructure and policies in estate setting, integrating patriarchal exclusion directly to physical health risks, mental stress, and erosion of women's well-being.

More importantly, several narratives expose deeply rooted forms of gender based violence and harassment experienced by estate women workers in the workplace and at home.

“[...] Most of the men drink alcohol every day after work, come home at night, do physical harassment, hit the women...Because of that, these women get physical wounds, pains all over the body... They need to live with fear...kangani and field staff harassments and casual relationships women workers... In exchange for such favours, kangani or field officers do some unethical practices during tea leaf weighing such as unfairly deducting 3-4 kilos from other women’s sacks and adding that amount to preferred woman’s total to increase her wage.” (Interviewee 12 ASD W)

As reported, alcohol consumption of male partners and women facing physical abuse, is often continues into domestic violence at night. Women returning to work with visible bruises and emotional stress, as a result of violence, reflect the lack of physical and emotional safety in their own homes. While these injuries were not observed by me directly in the field or not directly discussed by women themselves, these experiences were reported by several participants from estate management and government officer. The emotional stress of living with constant fear, along with physical and mental burden at home, reflects a lack of security in these women’s lives. This situation directly affects their physical and mental well-being, further worsening the burdens they already face at work.

Workplace harassment and favoritism situations, further exposed by narratives, where male field supervisors engage in casual relationships with a few women workers, offering favors during tea leaf weighing. This illustrates how male staff manipulate labor practices in exchange for sexual favors, worsening the exploitative power dynamics. Casual relationships between supervisors and female workers are not only unethical, but also create an unfair situation for other women, whose tea leaves quantities are intentionally reduced. This misuse of power reflects how men exploit women’s labor and economic dependence. prevailing unfairness to other women, who work continuously in the field even without proper rest. This

situation further demonstrates the deeply rooted male dominance and usage of power and position to manipulate the earnings of women and work conditions.

Another structural issue affecting estate women, which is closely tied to male dominance, is alcoholism, particularly illegal production, selling, and consumption of *kasippu*⁴. As stated, although *kasippu* is banned in the Sri Lanka Excise Ordinance, enforcement in estate areas remains weak. Producers and sellers have informal connections with police and receive pre-warnings of raids, allowing them to escape. A participant reveals that in some estate communities, especially around line rooms, men have started to produce *kasippu* in daytime and sell them.

“[...] Unlimited drunkenness of men is a main result of this *kasippu* making and selling within the estates. So, children and wives suffer a lot due to this issue. Even inside the home after work, women spend their lives with a lot of issues, and no freedom due to that. In some homes, men sometimes get drunk early in the morning and cause trouble in the house. (Interviewee 14 GO)”

This statement reveals how the consumption of *kasippu* results in patriarchal control within the home, resulting in emotional stress, eroding sense of safety, and loss of autonomy for women. The fact that men get drunk early in the day and cause trouble illustrates how home becomes another place with stress and disruption for women, while also increasing their anxiety over teenage children’s exposure to addiction, together results in a negative impact on women’s mental well-being.

This theme addresses research question 1, revealing how the gendered division of labor, male-dominated leadership, and deeply rooted inequalities within the estate sector. It also addresses research question 2, exposing cultural traditions, institutional structures, and practices such as male intermediation, which limit women’s participation. Moreover, it addresses research question 3, highlighting silencing in health-related needs of women and harassment. These interconnected issues result in serious consequences for women’s physical well-being through poor sanitary facilities and exposure to violence and mental well-being, as women experience long-term stress and loss of dignity in both the workplace and home.

5.4 Well-being and health

Well-being is a main theme that emerged from the narratives of respondents. The narratives reflect the multidimensional nature of women’s well-being, focusing on

⁴ *Kasippu* is a locally distilled illegal alcohol beverage commonly produced with sugar, cheap accessible fruits, yeast and water and consumed in marginalized communities in Sri Lanka. Its production is illegal and consumption results social and health related problems.

physical, mental, and social aspects. Several concerns were revealed during the interviews, including poor living and working conditions, excessive workloads, exposure to domestic violence and harassment, and less recognition which significantly impact the well-being of women workers. The following narrative demonstrates the physical difficulties they experience from tea plucking, including leg and back pain, injuries, and finger numbness. The statement highlights the constant body fatigue associated with physically demanding labor, contributing to long-term deterioration.

“[...] Always has leg pains and back pains. It is difficult to hold a tea leaves sack on the back the whole day. And sometimes my legs get wounds when I walk in the field with tea tree branches. And my fingers also have some wounds/ cuts and finger numbness when I pluck leaves every day.”
(Interviewee 3 WW)

While back pain and leg pain are considered common complaints, several participants revealed other serious health issues, including animal attacks and snake bites.

“[...] They face hardships with back pain mostly. And other severe health issues as well. Most of them ignore these difficulties also due to a lack of money and time. They suffer from various issues, body pains, animal attacks like snake bites, etc.” (Interviewee 8 MW)

Regardless of the severity of these diseases and injuries, most workers tend to ignore them due to financial problems and time constraints. They prioritize daily earnings over personal health. This indicates the structural neglect of well-being prevailing in the estate societies, forcing them to persist through pain to sustain their livelihood.

Field observations demonstrate the physical difficulties they experience during tea plucking in hilly land. Women workers observed climbing steep pathways with a sack of tea leaves placed on their heads. Many of them cover their head with a cloth as a cushion to tolerate the pressure of the sack (Observation, 2/25). The observation demonstrates the repetitive physical stress they face, aligning with interviewees' narratives of physical pains, particularly leg and back pains.

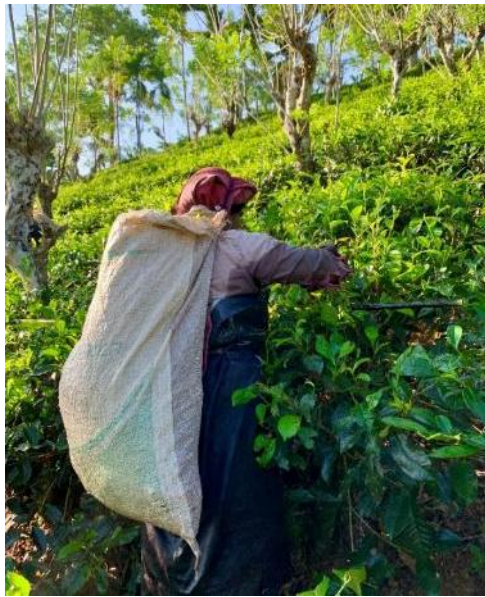


Figure 5 A woman tea worker plucking tea on a steep terrain with a sack on her back, using a head cloth for support. Thelbedda, 25/02/25, photograph by author

The mental stress experienced by the women workers in tea estates is reflected by the following narratives, highlighting the psychological burden caused by economic hardships and continuous debts, poor living conditions, and health issues.

“[...] We are under stress due to a lack of money. It is difficult for the whole family. For my husband’s illness also, we need to spend money monthly.” (Interviewee 4 WW)

“[...] It is a great stress to us...we have a heap of debts that we cannot pay back. Because they need to pay back weekly. And we cannot afford that even if men work outside the estate extra.” (Interviewee 8 MW)

Together, these narratives expose collective struggles within the household that significantly affect the mental well-being of estate women workers.

Although most estates provided a basic medical center with facilities, participants repeatedly emphasized regarding limited healthcare facilities available, especially for severe diseases and injuries. As one participant stated:

“[...] We have a medical center in the estate. But it is helpful for simple diseases and pains. When it comes to the severe issues, we have to go to Kandegedara hospital or Badulla. It is money-consuming and time-consuming.” (Interviewee 5 WW)

This shows how the unaccessibility of healthcare and the unavailability of time and transportation become barriers to their health treatments, which directly impact

their well-being. Another narrative explains the severity of systemic failure in the estate sector, where even in critical health situations, no institutional support is provided. The burden of recovery is entirely left on the affected party.

“[...] I had a snake bite once.... medical center cannot treat such cases. From the hospital, I got medicines and treatments. But I could not attend work for several days. But I did not get any support from the hospital. There were no pay days even if that injury occurred during my working hours.” (Interviewee 6 WW)

This reflects the systemic failure of institutional structures within the estate, where women receive no compensation or assistance for recovery even when the injury occurs during work hours.

Several workers expressed their gratitude for the annual health camps organized by the estate management. As stated, such camps allowed them to access medical check-ups and medications free of charge without going to faraway hospitals.

The living conditions in the estate line rooms seem as a critical issue within the estates. It affects both the physical and mental well-being of women workers. As one participant described:

“[...] We did not get a house from the new housing scheme. We are still in the old-line room, which was in very poor condition, and no space or privacy. So, I think these conditions need to be improved.” (Interviewee 8 MW)

This statement demonstrates the overcrowding condition of the line rooms, which were originally built during the colonial period. They often lack basic necessities like water, proper ventilation, and private space, especially for women. The following narrative demonstrates the negative consequences of these poor housing conditions, describing:

“[...] In a line room where they live is very dark, not receive sunlight. It is like a prison. So, it is not mentally good for them. About their social life, they do not have a good sexual life or family life. Women do not have a good social life, they live in a prison-like home.” (Interviewee 15 NGO)

The interviewee uses the term “prison” as a metaphor, which directly reflects the isolation and mental stress experienced by women while they living in dark line rooms. The limited space, lack of natural light, and no space for personal freedom lead to stressed familial and sexual relationships, deteriorating the quality of life. The lack of privacy and self-respect in own house further deepens the burden of gendered labor, placing an emotional burden on women workers.

During the field observations, line room conditions were observed: small, dark interiors with damaged walls and floors, small wooden windows without glass, and little ventilation. A participant described the surroundings as “prison”, and observation supported this claim, since rooms lacked natural light and privacy, resulting in stress and discomfort. (Observation, 2/23)



Figure 6 Exterior of a line room in a tea estate where workers live, featuring a small space, shared walls, and small windows, Thelbedda. 23/02/25, photograph by author

Despite these concerns, several participants expressed a positive attitude regarding receiving new houses through estate resettlement schemes. These separate houses are provided as a solution for landslide risk, with more space and privacy. Recipients have experienced great satisfaction upon moving into these better living conditions.

Another concern revealed by narratives was child safety and maternal anxiety.

“[...] Mothers are worrying about kids’ safety.... Some people have separate houses, but some live in combined line rooms. Therefore, these children can easily face harassment and abuse. Such cases are reported in the estate time to time. There is no place to keep these children safely while parents are working in the estate. In day care, they keep children until 5 or 6 years.” (Interviewee 12 ASD W)

The statement reflects the emotional burden held by estate mothers, who work in the field entire day, while constantly worrying about their kids. In overcrowded line rooms where people live with extended families, with less privacy, children are more vulnerable to abuse and harassment. The day care facilities provided by the estate only accommodate children up to 6 years old. It results in a critical problem regarding the safety of school-aged children, worsening the mental stress and anxiety of working mothers. It negatively impacting their mental well-being and ability to focus at work.

The day care center I visited on February 13th 2025, was located in an old building with limited facilities. Only one teacher is there to look after all the children. Some of the children slept on the floor with old blankets due to the lack of beds. The teacher looks friendly and active, but the limited resources raise concerns about child safety, well-being, and maternity anxiety. (Observation 2/13).



Figure 7 Exterior of an estate daycare center with aged walls and basic structure with fewer facilities, Haputale. 13/02/25. photograph by author

Several participants expressed their satisfaction with maternity benefits provided by the estate, which include paid three months' leave and a supplementary food package.

“[...] When I gave birth to my kids, the estate gave me 3 months' leave with salary. And other than that, they sent groceries/food items/rice/ wheat flour/ and some other food bags to the home. It was very useful.”
(Interviewee 6 WW)

It reflects the positive institutional support for maternal and child health recovery, which provides both financial support and essential nutritional assistance during the

postpartum period. Under the Sri Lanka Maternity Benefit Ordinance, estate sector women also entitled to three months (84 working days) of paid maternity leaves, but after this period, they have to leave for work. Accordingly, many women depend on extended family members, older children, or a day care center for child care, holding an additional emotional burden on their minds, which negatively affects their mental well-being. The lack of long-term support for child care is a significant issue impacting both maternal well-being and children's safety.

This theme addresses research question 1, highlighting different gendered discrimination reported, such as field staff favoritism and male control. It addresses research question 2, outlining structural issues such as poor infrastructure and limited health care existing within the estates, and finally research question 3, demonstrating how poor health, lack of childcare, poor infrastructure, and exposure to domestic violence affect the long-term well-being of women workers in Sri Lankan tea estates.

5.5 Institutional neglect, policies, and empowerment

This theme demonstrates the structural marginalization of estate women from institutional frameworks, policy engagements associated with women workers, and empowerment through government and NGO led initiatives. As an NGO representative stated:

“[...] We are in the process of removing the name of “wathukare⁵” from the estate. These women came to Sri Lanka 200 years ago, around 1823. They came to Sri Lanka from South Indian villages. In our country, everyone has an identity separately as communities, but these people do not have it. They are always named as Indian tamil.... They are also voters in Sri Lanka. So, we have been working on their civil identity, political identity, and citizenship.” (Interviewee 15 NGO)

According to the statement, estate women are not recognized as equal citizens within broader political and policy narratives reflecting historical and linguistic marginalization. They are referred to as “estate tamil”, wathukare, and line workers, indicating structural favouritism, exclusion from development opportunities, and recognition.

An interviewee further explains how NGOs play a crucial role in establishing empowerment pathways for estate women, providing them a economic independence, skills, awareness, and access to institutional support.

⁵ *Wathukare refers to estate residents as a whole, reflecting their marginalized status in the society.*

“[...] If they start to do a self-employment, small home business in the estate, such as short eat or snack making, sewing, they need to have business registration, small loans ... We connect with government organizations, district secretarial officers, and help to obtain a trade license.” (Interviewee 15 NGO)

These initiatives directly help women to obtain economic independence through self-employment and support. These initiatives are mostly supported by estate management, especially when they are home-based and do not affect their working hours.

Narratives of the government representative also described the ongoing efforts to address the gaps in child protection, care and education within the estate communities.

“[...] From our national women's organization, currently we discuss this to look after children, women 50% working, and they have the responsibility for children for a better future for children. Currently ongoing discussions are having for estate women about a day care, not 1.30 to 5, here we refer to different age groups, all child categories, with protection, not in a room with four walls, freely educate, and spend freely.” (Interviewee 14 GO)

It reflects the policy level recognition of the need for structural support to ensure children well well-being within the tea estate communities. The officer mentioned a women empowerment initiative designed to take women outside the estate and provide them with legal and mental health awareness called “Kanthawan Sawibala Ganweema”. These projects reflect the ongoing efforts of the government to handle legal and mental vulnerabilities experienced by women workers, which is a significant move toward policy-level recognition and institutional support. Although these programmes have not been implemented yet in any of the four estates included in this study, they remain under discussion. It is a potential move towards more meaningful support for estate women and their children.

Through revealing gendered exclusion of estate women from political and civic recognition, the theme addresses research question 1, and it respond to research question 2, revealing historical and linguistic marginalization.

6. Discussion

Through the lens of Marxist feminism, this thesis explored the dynamics and interactions of gender, labor, structural inequality, and power dynamics shape the lived experiences of women workers in Sri Lankan tea plantations. Findings reveal how four themes, namely economic exploitation, double labour burden, patriarchal norms, and institutional neglect, collectively affect the fifth theme and central concern, the well-being of women workers, based on the experiences of participants and direct field observations. These themes are not isolated; they are interconnected each other through a feedback loop where poor well-being limits women's labor capacity, deepening their marginalization. The concept of plantation patriarchy, deeply entrenched in colonial and capitalist systems, provides a clear lens to understand these overlapping inequalities. The following is a detailed discussion of each theme and how they interact with well-being concerning the broader theoretical framework and existing literature.

Many of the experiences of women demonstrate the economic exploitation rooted in colonial labor settings, which was deepened by capitalist practices. The “waru payment” system provides a clear example of how the plantations normalized unfair wage schemes, resulting in financial insecurity and dependency among workers, particularly women. Even after recent wage increments, employees were quickly affected by inflation. While many women acknowledged the wage equality prevailing within the tea estate system, this wage similarity does not result in any economic autonomy, since it remains exploitative. As stated, with the rising living costs and inflation, they continue to struggle with financial insecurity.

Also the capitalism supports poor labor standards by limiting women to physically demanding, undervalued labor, resulting in economic instability. It is clearly illustrated by their dependence on loans and advance payments. Federici's (2004) Marxist Feminist ideas are closely aligned with this situation, emphasizing that mechanisms such as performance-based salary schemes are crucial features of capitalism. These systems aim to increase labor output while reducing human well-being concerns. Capitalism constantly devalues the workforce, particularly women, by prioritizing productivity rather than human necessities. The theme of exploitative wages in this context has a direct impact on women's well-being by resulting in financial instability, contributing to mental exhaustion, and limiting access to basic necessities and health care.

The double burden indicates the endless cycle of labor experienced by women workers who are fully engaged in both paid labor and unpaid domestic responsibilities. Their day does not end when they leave the tea fields. Instead, it

immediately shifts into household chores, with little or no support. This burden is further worsened by insufficient infrastructure, poverty, and historically embedded norms. These experiences align directly with Marxist feminist views, which suggest that capitalism depends not only on waged labor exploitation but also on systemic undervaluation and invisibility of unpaid domestic duties.

According to Federici (1975), capitalism depends on women's unpaid labor to maintain the labor force, but consistently remains unrecognized. Her statement "they say it is love. We say it is unwaged work" further interprets the lived experiences of women workers. It reflects a clear picture of domestic labor burden, which is often overlooked despite being vital to the functioning of both the family and the economy. The findings of the study closely align with existing research on the double burden. Wickramasinghe & Cameron (2005) explain the experiences of women workers in the tea estates who perform both paid and unpaid labor roles. Chandrabose & Sivapragasam (2011) also emphasize how women workers suffer from the double burden, shaped by patriarchal attitudes, leading to physical fatigue and worsening systemic gender inequalities. The double burden directly affects women's well-being, as a continuous cycle of paid and unpaid duties. It results in persistent body fatigue, emotional stress, and less time for recovery, eroding their physical, mental, and social well-being.

Moreover, the interactions between poor well-being and labor conditions created a feedback loop. Several women workers reveal how the prevailing chronic exhaustion and mental stress make it difficult to meet their daily plucking target, leading to further wage loss. In this scenario, rather than simply being an outcome, well-being shapes their ability to carry out both paid and unpaid labor. Poor physical health, mental distress, social isolation, and unrecognition can diminish their resilience, further deepening their marginalization and dependence. Studies by Kabeer (1999) reveals how prevailing structural labor exploitation, especially in female sectors, directly impacts women's bodily autonomy and health. This pressure is enhanced by the gendered care responsibilities, especially due to motherhood. Even while working, women experience anxiety due to their inability to attend to their kids, a burden which is widely discussed in global literature (Razavi 2007). This mental stress further affects their health as well as their dignity.

The patriarchy and power structures are deeply embedded gendered structures within the tea estates. While the double burden highlights women's dual role in paid and unpaid labor, patriarchy and power centers on structural male dominance that legitimizes gender roles in both the workplace and household. Mostly, leadership and labor remain male-dominated within the estate setting. The gendered labor allocation, which assigns women to labor-demanding and monotonous tasks, while

men are involved in more varied and socially valued roles, clearly reflects the cultural norms established in the plantation system over the years, undervaluing their skills and capabilities. Traditions like “*Walame*” favoring men further reproduce the disparities daily. These dynamics illustrate the operation of plantation patriarchy, a term explored by Jayawardena & Kurian (2015), describing overlapping patriarchies faced by women workers in tea estates. According to the Marxist feminist arguments by Bhattacharya (2017), capitalism not only exploits labor but also places women in subordinate positions while disregarding their agency and visibility. The domestic violence, sexual harassment, and favor-based exploitation reflect a deep patriarchal situation connected with capitalism, where male authority and power over women’s bodies. This exploitative structure reflects Fraser’s (2020) idea that capitalists require the subjugation of women not only through unpaid reproductive duties but also through limiting their civic and bodily autonomy. The women’s silence on gender sensitive facilities and menstruation needs illustrates how their emotional and physical vulnerabilities are embedded as a part of the labor system. These findings indicate that patriarchy within the estate system is a structural feature of capitalism that depends on persistent silence and exploitation of women's labor, rather than simply being a tradition. The women’s well-being is directly impacted by patriarchal norms, particularly limiting their agency, exposing them to harassment and physical harm, deepening their mental stress, and contributing to negative mental and physical well-being.

According to the findings, physical exhaustion, chronic health issues, and mental distress were common issues prevailing among female workers within the tea estates. Diverse factors, such as prisons like dark line rooms, lack of facilities, further reflect the systemic neglect of women’s well-being within society. Poor housing deteriorates the privacy and dignity of women and enhances emotional exhaustion. In this context, motherhood even becomes an anxiety for them due to the lack of a childcare system. These observations clearly align with Mies (1999), who argues that capitalism and patriarchy act together to destroy the livelihoods of women, especially their health and dignity globally, particularly in agricultural and plantation economies. The women workers in this study experience harsh working conditions, poor housing facilities, and continuous emotional burdens, reflecting how these structural systems continue to exploit and marginalize them, affecting their mental and physical well-being. The ideas of Hochschild & Machung (2012) further describe the chronic fatigue and emotional stress of women experience due to the “second shift” of handling both paid and unpaid duties. It reflects the condition of women workers who face the continuous cycle of physical depletion and emotional stress without proper institutional and social support.

The ignorance of political involvement, civic identity, and unrecognition of estate women workers were very common facts within the estate communities. It reflects how the colonial influences still affect the estate communities. Their low representation, limited access to policy making, and dependence on male intermediaries are not only a neglect, but also part of how they continue to be excluded. The NGOs and government initiatives, working on grassroots empowerment programmes within the estate system to empower them. Several other programs are also offered with state and non-state collaborations to equip women with skills and knowledge, and awareness. But according to Marxist feminists, this true change requires not just empowerment within the system but fundamental restructuring of the institutional labor that thrives on the invisibilization of women's contributions (Mohanty 2006). These ideas highlight that real empowerment needs fundamental restructuring of the social system, not the inclusion of marginalized groups within the framework.

Addressing research question 1, the study reveals diverse forms of gendered labor inequalities faced by women workers in Badulla district tea estates, including exploitative wage systems, occupational segregation, double burdens, and exclusion from decision-making. Furthermore, the study exposes historical, social, and structural factors which contribute to the above inequalities, addressing research question 2. Historical factors include colonial labor norms such as *walame* and *waru* norms, and line room systems. Social factors include patriarchal practices, gender role expectations around domestic responsibilities, social disgrace around menstruation and health needs, and dependency on males. Structural factors include fewer institutional factors, insufficient protection against harassment and sexual favoritism, alcoholism, and inequitable labor division. Finally addressing research question 3, the study reveals that these inequalities significantly affect women's physical, mental, and social well-being. The challenges reported such as fatigue, physical exhaustion, emotional distress, limited social recognition and support are not only individual experiences but shaped by broader socio-political and institutional neglect including lack of access to health care, inadequate labor protections and underrepresentation of leadership positions. More importantly, poor well-being does not merely result from these pressures, but it also impairs women's ability to sustain labor, deepening cycles of exploitation.

This study looks at how labor inequalities in Sri Lankan tea estates affect the well-being of women workers. From a Marxist feminist view, it explores the experiences of women workers. Employing in-depth interviews and field observations, the study indicates how their working conditions are influenced by existing structural, historical, and social factors. The study provides a multi-dimensional framework of well-being, including physical, mental, and social aspects, to analyse the impacts

of the inequalities, a perspective often underexplored in existing literature. These dimensions are interconnected; for example, mental stress results from continuous physical labor, while social isolation is caused by both physical and mental stress. It further illustrates that well-being is not only a consequence of gendered inequality but also a crucial factor in shaping women's agency and labor capacity. The study offers new perspectives on how persistent gendered labor inequalities undermine women workers' well-being by positioning well-being as a main analytical focus.

6.1 Limitations and Implications

While this study explores the gender based labor inequalities prevailing in tea estates, Sri Lanka, in detail and their impact on female employees' well-being, it also identifies several important limitations.

This study was based in Badulla district, which is situated in the hill country of Sri Lanka. Consequently, study results could not accurately represent the experiences of women employed in other areas, particularly with diverse estate management and cultural practices. Another limitation I encountered was related to language. I realized that some expressions of emotions might not have been adequately captured during Sinhala language interviews compared to Tamil interviews. After some interviews, I noticed participants engaged in more open and informal discussions with the translator. Even though the translator conveyed these additional facts, I believe that certain emotions and factors may have been missed due to the language gap.

The study provides significant implications for future research, policy making, and social change. The findings clearly demonstrate the urgent need for policy reforms that recognize and address both unpaid and paid labor burdens carried out by female workers. In this context, policy interventions need to go beyond the wage reforms, focusing on creating a more inclusive support system that integrates health, well-being, childcare, legal protection, and awareness against workplace and domestic harassment and workplace favoritism, and pathways to women's leadership. Furthermore, the findings indicate that development programmes should be implemented within the tea estates, with the focus on women's physical, mental, and social well-being. In conclusion, this study highlights the necessity for women's voices in conversations related to labor justice and gender equality. To capture an inclusive picture of women's experiences in the tea estates of Sri Lanka, further research is needed, including capturing the different experiences of different social categories, ethnic groups, and castes.

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Appendix 1 – Interview Guide

TITLE:

Exploring the Impact of Gendered Labor Inequalities on the Well-Being of Women Workers in Badulla District, Sri Lankan Tea Plantations

INVESTIGATOR:

Kalani Jayasundara, Department of Urban and Rural Development, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, Uppsala, Sweden

PURPOSE OF RESEARCH:

To identify gendered labor inequalities experienced by women workers in Badulla district tea estates, examine the historical, social, and structural factors contributing to these inequalities and analyze how these inequalities affect women's social, mental, and physical well-being.

METHODOLOGY FOR INTERVIEWS:

I plan to conduct my fieldwork in multiple tea plantations within the Badulla district, representing a diversity of working environments and practices. The participants will include women workers with various demographic profiles (different age groups, ethnic and cultural origins, and family backgrounds), male workers, estate management staff, and state officials.

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Introduction

I am Kalani, a postgraduate student from Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences. I am researching gendered labor inequalities faced by women workers in the Badulla district and how they impact their well-being.

I am particularly interested in understanding the inequalities faced by women workers, how work is divided between men and women, and how this affects their daily lives and wellbeing.

This interview is completely voluntary, and you are free to choose whether or not to participate. Your responses will be kept confidential, and your name will not be mentioned in the final research. If you feel uncomfortable with any question, you can skip it or stop the interview at any time.

The interview will take about 30 - 60 minutes. I will ask you some questions about your work, your experiences, and your thoughts on workplace conditions. There are no right or wrong answers. I am just interested in hearing your perspective.

1 – WOMEN WORKERS

Questions

1. Can you tell me a little about yourself and how long you have worked on this estate?
2. What made you choose this type of work?
3. What do you like most about your work?
4. Can you describe what your typical day looks like on the estate?

Struggles with unequal and low pay

1. Can you describe how your wages are determined? Do you think they reflect the value of your work and are sufficient for your family's needs?
2. Are there differences in pay or rewards between men and women for similar work?
3. What tasks do you perform daily, and how do they compare with tasks assigned to men? Do you feel your tasks are valued equally?
4. How do you think management addresses the economic needs of women workers?

Daily workload beyond the estate work and Invisible responsibilities5. After completing your work on the estate, what responsibilities do you have at home? How do they affect your energy, time, or ability to rest?

6. Do you feel your unpaid domestic work is recognized or supported by your family or the estate?
7. How do you manage both your estate work and household responsibilities? What challenges do you face in balancing these? Have you ever received any support, such as flexible hours or childcare facilities, to manage both your paid and unpaid responsibilities?

Gendered power control and Men dominance in roles

8. Are men and women given the same types of work on the estate? If not, what differences do you notice?
9. Do you think women have the same opportunities as men to take on leadership or decision-making roles on the estate or opportunities to learn new skills? Why or why not?
10. How do you feel about the overall treatment of women workers on the estate compared to men?
11. Have cultural or traditional expectations influenced how women are assigned tasks or treated in the workplace?

12. If you or other women have raised concerns about work conditions or fairness, how were those concerns handled by management?

Health, Social life and Daily pressures

15. How has your work on the estate affected your physical health? Are there specific challenges or conditions that impact your well-being?
16. How does your work impact your mental health, including stress or emotional well-being?
17. What support do you receive from management to address your health or safety needs at work?
18. How does your work affect your relationships with family or friends? Do you feel you have time to maintain social connections? Do you have opportunities to rest, relax, or participate in activities outside work?
19. What changes do you think would improve your overall well-being and work experience on the estate?

2 – MEN WORKERS

Questions

1. Can you tell me a little about yourself and how long you have worked on this estate?
2. What made you choose this type of work?
3. What do you like most about your work?
4. Can you describe what your typical day looks like on the estate?

Struggles with unequal and low pay

1. How are wages determined for men and women? Do you think both are paid fairly for the work they do? Do you think men's and women's work is equally valued by the estate management? Why or why not?
2. Have you observed any differences in career growth opportunities for men and women on the estate?
3. What are the main challenges that prevent women from holding better-paid positions or promotions?

Daily workload beyond the estate work and Invisible responsibilities

6. In your opinion, how do women workers balance their estate work and household responsibilities? Do you think women's unpaid domestic work affects their ability to perform estate work or advance in their jobs?

7. What kind of support do you think women need to manage both their work on the estate and at home?

Gendered power control and Men dominance in roles

9. Are men and women given the same types of work, or are there specific tasks assigned based on gender?
10. Do you think women should have more leadership opportunities on the estate? What challenges do they face in achieving such roles?
11. What cultural or social expectations do you think influence the way men and women are treated in the workplace?
12. How do male workers generally perceive women workers on the estate? Do you think they are respected equally?

Health, Social life and Daily pressures

13. What differences do you notice in the health challenges faced by women workers compared to men?
14. How do work conditions on the estate affect women's physical and mental well-being?
15. How do you think the workload affects women's ability to rest or maintain a work-life balance?

Improving Gender Equality

16. What changes do you think could improve the work environment for everyone, especially women?
17. How can male workers contribute to making the estate a fairer and more supportive workplace for women?

3 – ESTATE STAFF

Questions

1. Can you tell me about your role on the estate and how long you have been working here?
2. What are your main responsibilities in managing the workforce?
3. How has the workforce structure changed over the years in terms of gender roles?
4. What do you think are the biggest challenges faced by workers on the estate?
5. How would you describe the working relationship between male and female workers on the estate?

Struggles with unequal and low pay

1. What is the gender composition of the workforce on this estate? How are tasks and wages allocated between men and women?
2. Are there differences in pay between men and women for similar work? What measures are in place to ensure wage equality?
3. Do you think the work performed by women is valued equally compared to men's work? Why or why not?
4. What career advancement opportunities exist for women on the estate? What challenges prevent them from reaching higher positions?
5. How does the management ensure fair promotion and training opportunities for women workers?

Daily workload beyond the estate work and Invisible responsibilities

6. How do you see the dual burden of estate work and household responsibilities impacting women workers?
7. Are there policies or programs to support women in balancing work and domestic responsibilities, such as childcare, maternity leave, or flexible hours? How does estate management recognize or support women workers' unpaid labor at home?

Gendered power control and Men dominance in roles

8. Are women represented in supervisory or decision-making roles on the estate? If not, what are the main barriers preventing them from holding leadership positions?
9. What steps does the management take to prevent gender discrimination in job roles and workplace decision-making?
10. How do cultural or historical factors influence the gender dynamics on the estate?
11. What kind of training or awareness programs does the estate provide to promote gender equality and address gender biases in the workplace?

Health, Social life and Daily pressures

13. What health risks or challenges do women workers face due to their work on the estate? How does management address these concerns?
14. What specific health services or support systems are provided for women workers?

15. How do you measure and track the overall well-being of workers, particularly women, on the estate?
16. What initiatives have been implemented recently to improve gender equity and the well-being of women workers?
17. What do you see as the biggest challenge in achieving gender equality in the estate?

4 – STATE OFFICIAL

Questions

1. Can you briefly introduce yourself and your role concerning labor policies in tea plantations?
2. How long have you been working on policies or programs related to plantation labor?
3. What are some key responsibilities of the government regarding labor rights in the tea sector?
4. How do you perceive the current status of gender equality in Sri Lankan tea plantations?
5. In your experience, what have been the biggest changes or challenges in improving labor conditions for women in plantations?

Struggles with unequal and low pay

1. How does the government monitor and regulate wage structures in tea plantations to ensure fair pay for women workers?
2. Are there specific laws or policies to eliminate wage gaps and ensure equal pay for equal work in tea plantations?
3. How does the government ensure that women's labor is valued equally compared to men's, particularly in decision-making roles?
4. What challenges exist in enforcing wage equality and preventing the undervaluation of women's work in the estate sector?
5. How does the government ensure that women workers have access to career advancement and leadership opportunities?

Daily workload beyond the estate work and Invisible responsibilities

6. Are there government policies or initiatives to support women workers who balance both paid labor and unpaid domestic responsibilities?
7. What measures exist to provide childcare, maternity leave, or flexible work arrangements for women in tea plantations?

Gendered power control and Men dominance in roles

8. How does the government promote women's representation in leadership roles within tea estates and labor unions?
9. What role do cultural and historical factors play in shaping gender inequalities in tea plantations, and how does the government address them?
10. How does the government ensure that estate management actively works to prevent gender-based discrimination in job assignments and promotions?
11. What challenges does the government face in enforcing gender-equal policies in the estate sector?

Health, Social life and Daily pressures

13. What government programs exist to support the physical and mental health of women plantation workers?
14. How does the government monitor the health risks faced by women workers, and what interventions have been introduced?
15. Are there specific policies addressing workplace safety and healthcare services for women workers?
16. Are there any ongoing research or data collection efforts to track the well-being of women workers in the tea plantation sector?

Gaps in support, recognition and policies

17. What role do labor unions play in advocating for gender equality in tea plantations? How does the government collaborate with them?
18. Are there incentives or regulatory frameworks that encourage estates to promote gender equality and worker well-being?
19. How does the government collaborate with NGOs and international bodies to enhance gender equality in tea plantations?
20. In your view, what is the most urgent policy change needed to improve conditions for women workers in Sri Lankan tea estates?

5 – NGO OFFICIAL

Questions

1. Can you introduce yourself and your role within your organization?

2. How does your NGO engage with plantation workers, particularly women?
3. What are the main issues related to gendered labor inequalities that your organization has observed in the tea plantation sector?

Struggles with unequal and low pay

1. From your experience, how do wage structures impact women workers compared to men?
2. Are there cases where women workers receive lower wages despite performing equal or more work than men?
3. How does your organization support women in gaining better wages and financial independence?
4. What challenges do women workers face in accessing promotions and leadership positions within tea estates?

Daily workload beyond the estate work and Invisible responsibilities

1. How does unpaid domestic work affect women plantation workers?
2. Are there any initiatives your NGO is involved in to support women balancing paid and unpaid work?
3. Do you think estate management and policies recognize the burden of unpaid labor on women?

Gendered power control and Men dominance in roles

1. How does patriarchy influence workplace conditions in tea plantations?
2. What cultural or structural barriers prevent women from advancing in their careers on tea estates?
3. Have you observed resistance from estate management or male workers in improving gender equality?

Health, Social life and Daily pressures

1. How do poor working conditions affect the mental and physical health of women workers?
2. Are there any specific health-related risks women face that are often overlooked?
3. What initiatives has your NGO taken to address the well-being of women workers?

Gaps in support, recognition and policies

1. How does your organization collaborate with state agencies, unions, or other NGOs to address gender inequalities?
2. What are the biggest gaps in government or estate policies when it comes to protecting women workers?
3. What policy changes or interventions do you think are most urgent to improve conditions for women in plantation sector?

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