

Tea's Bitter Truth: Health, Rights, And Women Workers in Assam's Tea Sector

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ABSTRACT

This article, "Tea's Bitter Truth: Health, Rights, and Women Workers in Assam's Tea Sector," delves into the complex realities faced by women laborers in one of India's most significant agricultural industries. Assam's tea sector, globally renowned and economically vital, relies heavily on women workers who form the backbone of plantation labor. The article begins by contextualizing the historical development and economic relevance of the Assam tea industry, highlighting the predominance of women in its workforce and the gendered division of labor that shapes their roles and experiences. A central focus is placed on the multitude of health challenges confronting women tea workers. These include exposure to occupational hazards, maternal health issues, malnutrition, and the burden of mental health concerns—problems that were further exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted healthcare access, heightened vulnerability to illness, and intensified social and economic insecurities. The article also examines the legal and policy frameworks intended to protect workers' rights, such as the Plantation Labour Act and Minimum Wages Act, while critically assessing the gap between legislation and actual implementation. Furthermore, the article explores persistent gender discrimination, economic exploitation, and barriers to leadership that women face, compounded by intersecting factors such as caste and ethnicity. The roles of the state, corporations, and consumers are scrutinized, culminating in recommendations for policy reform, improved welfare provisions, and gender empowerment. Ultimately, the article calls for urgent and coordinated action to safeguard health and rights in Assam's tea sector, ensuring justice and dignity for its women workers.

Keywords: - Assam tea sector, Women workers, Health challenges, Labour rights, Gender discrimination, COVID-19 impact

INTRODUCTION

There is no tool for development more effective than the empowerment of women."

— Kofi Annan

Assam, the lush northeastern state of India, is globally celebrated for its tea. This beverage has become synonymous with the region's identity and a cornerstone of the country's agricultural

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economy. With sprawling estates that sprawl across rolling hills, Assam's tea gardens produce a significant share of the world's black tea, exporting their rich and robust flavours to markets far beyond India's borders. Beneath the surface of this thriving industry, however, lies a less visible reality: the lives and struggles of the women who form the backbone of Assam's tea sector.

Women constitute the majority of the workforce ¹in Assam's tea plantations, performing labour-intensive tasks such as plucking, sorting, and processing tea leaves. Despite their indispensable contributions, these women often remain confined to the lowest rungs of the industry, facing a complex web of social, economic, and health-related challenges. A gendered division of labour, long working hours, low wages, inadequate access to education and healthcare, and persistent discrimination shape their daily experiences. Many are descendants of tribal communities historically brought to Assam during colonial times, and continue to grapple with intergenerational poverty and marginalisation.

Health is a particularly pressing concern for women tea workers. Exposure to harsh weather, hazardous chemicals, and repetitive physical strain is commonplace, leading to a range of occupational illnesses and injuries. Maternal health issues, malnutrition, and anaemia are widespread, compounded by limited access to quality medical care. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic further intensified these vulnerabilities, disrupting healthcare services, reducing income, and heightening anxieties about health and prospects.²

While labour laws such as the Plantation Labour Act and Minimum Wages Act exist to protect the rights of plantation workers, gaps in implementation and enforcement often leave women exposed to exploitation and neglect. Yet, within these plantations, stories of resilience abound: women organising for better conditions, advocating for their rights, and challenging entrenched social norms. This article aims to shed light on the health, rights, and lived experiences of women workers in Assam's tea sector, and to explore the urgent need for systemic reforms and coordinated action to ensure justice, dignity, and well-being for those who sustain this iconic industry.³

1) THE ASSAM TEA SECTOR: HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT

The history of Assam's tea sector is deeply woven into the colonial and post-colonial fabric of India. Tea cultivation in Assam began in the early 19th century, when British explorers, seeking to break China's monopoly on tea, discovered indigenous tea plants growing wild in the region. The first commercial plantations were established in the 1830s under the auspices of the British East India Company. By the mid-19th century, Assam had become a major site for large-scale tea production. The British brought in large numbers of labourers, primarily from tribal

¹ Ashworth, R., Krøtel, S. M. L., & Villadsen, A. R. (2023). Right time to join? Organizational imprinting and women's careers in public service organizations. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12911>

² (2025). Family Support Experiences of Adult Persons with Intellectual Disability and Challenging Behaviour: A Scoping Review of Qualitative Studies. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 22(6), 911.

³ McEwen, B. (2019). Vitamin E Tocotrienols: The next generation antioxidant and anti-inflammatory nutrient. *Journal of the Australian - Traditional Medicine Society*, 25(4), 204-206.

communities in central India, under exploitative contracts that laid the foundation for the workforce composition seen today.

Economically, Assam's tea sector is a powerhouse. The state produces over half of India's total tea output, contributing significantly to the nation's export earnings. Assam's tea is prized for its robust flavour and deep colour, making it a staple in both domestic and international markets. The industry provides direct and indirect employment to millions, supporting not only plantation labourers but also small growers, transporters, packers, and traders⁴. Tea estates, often sprawling over hundreds of hectares, dominate the rural landscape and play a central role in the region's social and economic life.

The structure of the tea industry in Assam is complex and multi-layered. Large plantations, owned by corporate groups and private families, coexist with a growing number of small tea growers who cultivate tea on smaller plots. While large estates have historically set the pace for production and labour practices, the rise of small growers in recent decades has introduced new dynamics, including shifts in bargaining power, wage structures, and market access. However, the majority of workers—especially women—continue to be employed in large, traditional plantations where the division of labour is rigid and hierarchical.

Demographically, women constitute the majority of the labour force in Assam's tea gardens. They are primarily engaged in plucking tea leaves—a task requiring dexterity, speed, and endurance. This gendered division of labour is rooted in both colonial-era stereotypes and practical considerations; women are seen as more adept at delicate tasks, while men are often assigned heavier, less frequent jobs such as pruning or factory work.⁵ The concentration of women in lower-paid and labour-intensive roles has reinforced gender disparities within the sector, both in terms of income and opportunities for advancement.

Socially, tea estates function as semi-enclosed communities, with workers and their families often living within plantation boundaries for generations. While estates provide basic amenities such as housing, schools, and clinics, the quality and accessibility of these services are inconsistent and frequently inadequate. The legacy of isolation from mainstream society, coupled with linguistic and cultural differences, has contributed to the marginalisation of tea garden communities and limited their access to broader economic and social opportunities.

In recent years, the Assam tea sector has faced a range of challenges. Fluctuating global prices, climate change, and increased competition from other tea-producing regions have put pressure on profit margins. At the same time, there is growing scrutiny from national and international actors regarding labour standards, environmental practices, and the rights of workers—especially women.

2) WOMEN IN ASSAM'S TEA GARDENS

Women form the backbone of Assam's tea gardens, constituting not only the majority of the

⁴ Nifadkar, S. S., & Bauer, T. N. (2016). Breach of belongingness: Newcomer relationship conflict, information, and task-related outcomes during organizational socialization. *Journal of Applied Psychology*.

<https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0000035>

⁵ Urban Poverty - UPSC Economy Notes <https://edukemy.com/blog/urban-poverty-upsc-economy-notes/>

workforce but also playing pivotal roles in sustaining both the industry and the communities that depend on it. Their presence and labour have been central since the inception of tea cultivation in the region, yet their contributions often go unrecognised and undervalued.

The daily life of a woman tea worker in Assam is defined by demanding physical labour and a tightly regulated routine. Most women begin their workday at dawn, often juggling household chores before walking to the plantation fields. The principal task assigned to women is plucking tea leaves—a meticulous process requiring dexterity and sustained concentration. Each worker is expected to meet strict daily quotas, and wages are frequently linked to the volume and quality of leaves collected. This system not only intensifies work pressure but also exposes women to scrutiny, penalties, and even wage cuts if targets are not met.

The gendered division of labour within tea plantations is a legacy of colonial management practices that persist to this day. Women are typically confined to fieldwork, while men are more likely to be found in supervisory roles or in the factories where tea is processed. This has entrenched a hierarchy that limits women's opportunities for skill development, promotion, or participation in decision-making processes within the estate. The result is a cycle where women remain concentrated in the most physically demanding yet lowest-paid positions.

The socio-economic backgrounds of women tea workers add further layers of vulnerability. Many are descendants of Adivasi (indigenous) communities brought to Assam by the British, and have inherited a legacy of marginalisation, poverty, and limited access to education. Early marriage and high fertility rates remain common, partly due to cultural norms and the lack of reproductive health education and services. As a result, women are often responsible for both earning an income and caring for large families, creating a double burden of labour.

Living conditions in the tea estates are closely tied to employment. Most workers reside in basic, estate-provided housing, which is frequently overcrowded and inadequately maintained. Access to clean water, sanitation, healthcare, and educational facilities is inconsistent and often rudimentary. For women, these deficiencies are compounded by their roles as primary caregivers, making daily life a struggle for dignity and well-being.

3) HEALTH ISSUES FACED BY WOMEN TEA WORKERS

The health and well-being of Assam's women tea workers is a subject of immense concern, shaped by a confluence of harsh working conditions, socio-economic disadvantages, and systemic neglect. These women, who labour daily to sustain the region's iconic industry, face a multitude of health challenges that affect not only their bodies but also their families and communities. The situation is compounded by limited access to quality healthcare, persistent poverty, and, more recently, the added pressures of the COVID-19 pandemic.

i. Occupational Health Hazards

Women tea workers are exposed to a variety of occupational hazards in the course of their daily work. The act of plucking tea leaves appears simple, but it requires repetitive motion, standing or walking long distances over uneven terrain, and carrying heavy baskets of leaves. These repetitive and strenuous physical activities frequently result in musculoskeletal problems such as chronic back, shoulder, and joint pain. Prolonged exposure to the sun and rain without

adequate protective gear can also lead to skin issues and heat-related illnesses⁶. A significant health hazard arises from exposure to agrochemicals. Pesticides and fertilisers are often sprayed in fields, sometimes while workers are present or without proper notice. Many women report symptoms such as headaches, dizziness, skin rashes, and respiratory problems after working in recently sprayed areas. Long-term exposure raises the risk of more serious conditions, including chronic respiratory diseases and potential reproductive health issues.

ii. Maternal and Reproductive Health Challenges

Maternal health is a persistent concern among women tea workers. Many experience early pregnancies, high fertility rates, and frequent childbirths, often with limited access to prenatal and postnatal care. The lack of reproductive health education and services leaves women vulnerable to complications during pregnancy and childbirth, contributing to high rates of maternal and infant mortality⁷. Anaemia and malnutrition are widespread due to poor diets, heavy workloads, and insufficient access to healthcare. Women often prioritise feeding their families over themselves, exacerbating nutritional deficits. These conditions are further aggravated during pregnancy, affecting both maternal health and child development⁸.

iii. Mental Health Concerns

The mental health of women tea workers is an often-overlooked aspect of their well-being. The constant pressure to meet work quotas, combined with the stresses of managing household responsibilities and coping with poverty, can lead to chronic anxiety and depression. Many women report feelings of exhaustion, hopelessness, and isolation. The stigma attached to mental health issues, along with the absence of counselling or psychological support in tea estates, means that most suffer in silence⁹. Sexual harassment and gender-based violence are additional sources of psychological distress. Women workers may experience harassment from supervisors or co-workers, with little recourse for justice due to fear of retaliation or loss of employment.

iv. Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic intensified existing health vulnerabilities among women tea workers. Lockdowns and restrictions disrupted access to healthcare services, including routine checkups, maternal care, and immunisations. Many women faced increased risk of infection due to crowded living conditions, lack of personal protective equipment, and inadequate awareness about preventive measures. The pandemic also exacerbated food insecurity and malnutrition, as supply chains were disrupted and household incomes fell. Mental health concerns deepened, with heightened anxiety about illness, job security, and the well-being of

⁶ Half-Round Cotton Duck Patriotic Vintage Bunting with Embroidery <https://etcycrafts.com/products/bunting-with-embroidery>

⁷ Hungary - GAPD - The Global Abortion Policies Database <https://abortion-policies.srhr.org/country/hungary/>

⁸ Kata Kata African Cartoons <https://katakata.org/news/-1720094520>

⁹ What Do Mental Health Services Look Like Around the World? | Project HOPE | Advancing Global Health & Saving Lives <https://www.projecthope.org/news-stories/story/what-do-mental-health-services-look-like-around-the-world/>

family members. Reports of domestic violence and gender-based abuse also rose during lockdown periods, reflecting the broader social impact of the crisis.

v. Case Studies and Voices from the Field

Stories from the tea gardens highlight both the gravity of these health issues and the resilience of women workers. For instance, Rajani, a tea plucker in Upper Assam, describes chronic back pain that worsened during the pandemic due to increased workloads and lack of medical attention. Maya, a young mother, recounts her struggle with anaemia and the challenges of accessing prenatal care during lockdowns. Their experiences underscore the urgent need for systemic changes in health service delivery and workplace practices.

4) RIGHTS AND ENTITLEMENTS: THE LEGAL AND POLICY FRAMEWORK

The legal and policy framework governing Assam's tea sector is, in theory, designed to protect the rights and welfare of plantation workers. Over the decades, several laws and regulations have been enacted to improve working and living conditions, provide social security, and safeguard the dignity of labourers—particularly women, who constitute the majority of the workforce. However, the gap between legal provisions and their implementation on the ground remains wide, leaving many women workers vulnerable and underserved.

i. Key Legislation and Rights

The cornerstone of labour rights in the tea sector is the Plantation Labour Act (PLA) of 1951. This act mandates that tea estates provide workers with adequate housing, healthcare, education, sanitation, and access to drinking water, in addition to ensuring safe working conditions. The act also stipulates provisions for maternity benefits, paid leave, and welfare amenities such as crèches for children. In principle, the PLA recognises the unique needs of women workers and attempts to address their dual roles as labourers and caregivers.

The Minimum Wages Act of 1948 is another critical statute that guarantees a minimum wage for plantation workers. Assam's state government periodically revises minimum wage rates for tea workers, though these are often the subject of dispute and negotiation. Other laws, such as the Employees' Provident Fund Act and the Maternity Benefit Act, are also applicable, offering social security and protection for women during pregnancy and childbirth.

ii. Implementation Gaps and Administrative Challenges

Despite the comprehensive nature of these laws, implementation is often patchy and inconsistent. Many plantations fail to meet the basic requirements stipulated under the PLA, with substandard housing, poorly equipped clinics, and inadequate sanitation being common issues. Access to education, particularly for girls, remains limited, perpetuating cycles of illiteracy and marginalisation. Delayed payments, arbitrary deductions, and non-compliance with revised wage rates frequently undermine wage-related rights. For women, wage disparities persist, with many earning less than their male counterparts due to the undervaluation of their work or gendered job assignments. Awareness of legal entitlements is often low among workers, preventing them from asserting their rights or seeking redress. Administrative shortcomings also hamper the effectiveness of these protections.

iii. Healthcare and Social Security

The PLA requires that plantations provide free medical treatment and maternity care, but these services are frequently under-resourced. Many estate clinics lack qualified medical staff, essential medicines, or equipment to handle emergencies. Referral systems to government hospitals are weak, and the costs and logistics of travel often fall on the workers themselves. During the COVID-19 pandemic, gaps in healthcare provision and social support were starkly evident, with many workers unable to access relief programs or vaccinations due to bureaucratic obstacles or a lack of information¹⁰.

iv. Role of Trade Unions and Civil Society

Trade unions have historically played an important role in advocating for workers' rights in Assam's tea sector. They negotiate wage settlements, press for better living conditions, and support workers in legal disputes. However, union leadership is often male-dominated, and women's participation in union decision-making remains limited. Some women's groups and NGOs have stepped in to fill this gap, organising awareness campaigns about legal rights, facilitating access to government schemes, and providing legal aid.

Civil society organisations also play a critical role in monitoring the implementation of labour laws, documenting violations, and advocating for policy reforms. Their interventions have led to incremental improvements in some estates, such as the establishment of crèches, the improvement of sanitation facilities, and the regularisation of wage payments. Nonetheless, systemic change remains elusive without stronger enforcement and government oversight.

5) GENDER DISCRIMINATION AND EXPLOITATION

Despite their essential role in the tea industry, women workers in Assam's tea gardens routinely face entrenched gender discrimination and multifaceted exploitation. This discrimination is not only institutional and economic but also social and cultural, impacting their wages, work environment, safety, and opportunities for personal growth¹¹.

One of the most glaring aspects of gender discrimination in the sector is the persistent wage gap. Although women constitute the majority of the workforce and perform some of the most labour-intensive tasks—such as plucking, which requires dexterity and stamina—they are often paid less than men. This disparity is rooted in historical biases that undervalue women's work and assign different "worth" to tasks perceived as feminine versus masculine. Even when laws mandate equal pay, implementation is weak, and wage negotiations are typically male-dominated, leaving women's voices marginalised.

Beyond pay, economic exploitation also manifests in other forms. Women are frequently consigned to the lowest-paying, most physically demanding, and least secure jobs. They are less likely to be promoted to supervisory or permanent positions, which are often reserved for men. The lack of formal contracts for many women workers further reduces job security and

¹¹Mamta Gurung, Sanchi Mukherjee "Gender women and work in the tea plantation :A case study of Darjeeling" November 2018,

limits access to benefits such as provident funds, paid leave, and maternity entitlements. Seasonal and casual workers—many of whom are women—are especially vulnerable to sudden layoffs without compensation or recourse.

Sexual harassment and workplace safety are additional, deeply troubling issues. Tea gardens are hierarchical spaces in which power dynamics often favour male supervisors and managers. Women may face harassment, unwanted advances, and even assault, with few mechanisms for complaints or redressal. The fear of retaliation or job loss often forces women into silence, perpetuating a culture of impunity. The lack of gender-sensitive training, support systems, and confidential reporting channels exacerbates the problem¹².

Barriers to leadership and representation reinforce gender inequality within the sector. Women's perspectives are rarely included in union leadership, estate management, or decision-making bodies. This exclusion perpetuates policies and practices that fail to address the specific needs and challenges of women workers. Even within the family and community, patriarchal norms dictate women's roles, limiting their mobility and voice both on and off the plantation.

Intersectionality—where gender discrimination overlaps with caste, ethnicity, and class—intensifies the exploitation faced by many women workers. Most hail from Adivasi or marginalised communities, meaning they contend with both gender-based and social discrimination. This double burden makes it even harder for them to access justice, improve their working conditions, or break cycles of poverty.

6) WOMEN WORKERS' STRUGGLES AND RESISTANCE

Despite the daunting challenges of discrimination, exploitation, and marginalisation, women in Assam's tea sector have a long and inspiring tradition of struggle and resistance. Their collective action, resilience, and leadership have sparked meaningful changes in their communities and across the industry, even as systemic barriers persist. Grassroots movements have been at the heart of women workers' resistance. In tea estates across Assam, women have come together to demand better wages, safer working conditions, and improved access to essential services like healthcare, education, and housing.

One notable aspect of these struggles is the emergence of women leaders who galvanise collective action. Although men have traditionally dominated union and estate leadership roles, women are increasingly stepping into these roles. Leaders like Anjana Tamuly and many unsung activists have organised protests for timely payment of wages, access to medical facilities, and implementation of maternity benefits. Their advocacy not only challenges exploitative practices but also shifts the narrative around women's agency and capacity for leadership.

During especially difficult times, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, women's solidarity and organisational skills were vital. When lockdowns disrupted work and access to health services, women's groups mobilised to distribute food, share information about health precautions, and advocate for relief measures from the government and estate management. Their actions

¹² <https://forumias.com> sexual harassment of women at workplace: issues and challenges 26th aug 2024

mitigated some of the worst effects of the crisis and demonstrated the power of community-led response.

Women's struggles are not limited to economic rights. They have also raised their voices against sexual harassment and gender-based violence, demanding safer workspaces and mechanisms for redressal. In several cases, collective action has compelled management to implement gender-sensitisation programs and establish complaint committees, though much remains to be done.

7) The Role of the State, Corporations, and Consumers

The well-being and rights of women workers in Assam's tea sector are shaped not only by the immediate environment of the plantations, but also by the actions and responsibilities of three crucial actors: the state (government), corporations (plantation owners and tea companies), and consumers (both domestic and international).

i. The State's Role

The government—both at the state and national level—bears primary responsibility for ensuring that the rights and entitlements of tea workers are protected and enforced. Through laws such as the Plantation Labour Act¹³, the Minimum Wages Act¹⁴, and various welfare schemes, the state sets minimum standards for wages, working conditions, health, and the provision of education. However, the state's role has often fallen short in practice. Insufficient funding, lack of regular inspections, and bureaucratic inertia have resulted in poor enforcement of existing laws. During crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, governmental relief measures were often delayed or inadequately implemented, leaving many women workers without timely support.

ii. Corporate Responsibility

Plantation owners, tea companies, and the broader corporate sector wield significant influence over workers' lives. Some corporations have begun to adopt Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives, claiming to improve worker welfare, promote gender equality, and support community development. While there are examples of genuine improvements—such as the establishment of schools, clinics, and improved housing—many CSR efforts are limited in scope and often serve as branding exercises rather than comprehensive solutions. Furthermore, profit pressures can lead to cost-cutting at the expense of worker welfare, with women workers bearing the brunt of these decisions. True corporate responsibility requires transparent, sustained investment in workers' well-being, strict adherence to labour standards, and meaningful inclusion of women's voices in decision-making processes.

iii. The Power of Consumers

Consumers, both in India and abroad, play an increasingly important role in shaping the tea industry. Global demand for ethically sourced and sustainably produced tea has grown, with many buyers seeking certifications (such as Fair Trade or Rainforest Alliance) that promise

¹³ <https://www.indiacode.nic.in>, THE PLANTATION LABOUR ACT 1951

¹⁴ Chief labour commission, Minimum wages act, 1948, {11 OF 1948}

better working conditions. This has put pressure on companies to improve practices on the ground. However, the effectiveness of such market-driven initiatives depends on rigorous third-party audits, transparency, and accountability. Consumers can drive change by demanding traceability, supporting ethical brands, and staying informed about the realities behind the products they purchase.

iv. Towards Greater Accountability

The interplay between state policies, corporate practices, and consumer choices determines the pace and direction of reform in Assam's tea sector. For meaningful improvement in the lives of women workers, these three actors must move beyond superficial commitments and work in coordination. The state must enforce laws and close loopholes; corporations must prioritise long-term welfare over short-term profits; and consumers must use their purchasing power to reward ethical practices.

8) RECOMMENDATIONS AND THE PATH FORWARD

Addressing the complex challenges faced by women workers in Assam's tea sector requires a holistic, multi-stakeholder approach. While recognising the historical and systemic nature of the issues at hand, a set of actionable recommendations can help pave the way toward a more equitable, healthy, and dignified future for these women and their communities.

i. Strengthening Policy Enforcement and Reform

The legal framework protecting tea workers is often undermined by poor enforcement. Governments—both state and national—must prioritise regular, independent inspections of tea estates and strictly hold plantation owners accountable for violations of labour laws. Streamlining grievance redressal processes and ensuring they are accessible, particularly for women and marginalised communities, is crucial. Policy reforms should also address gaps in the existing laws, such as extending protections and entitlements to casual, seasonal, and contract workers, who are predominantly women and often excluded from benefits.

ii. Improving Healthcare and Social Welfare

A major step forward would be to enhance the healthcare infrastructure within tea estates and surrounding areas. This includes upgrading estate clinics with qualified staff, essential medicines, and maternal health services. Mobile health units and partnerships with local government hospitals can ensure timely access to specialised care. Nutrition programs targeting women and children are essential for combating anaemia and malnutrition. Mental health care, often neglected, should be integrated into primary health services, with counselling and awareness campaigns to reduce stigma. Social welfare schemes—such as subsidised food, access to clean water, and housing improvements—must be implemented efficiently and transparently. The government should ensure that all eligible workers are enrolled in social security programs such as provident funds, pensions, and health insurance, with a special focus on eliminating bureaucratic barriers that often exclude women.

iii. Fostering Empowerment and Leadership

Empowering women workers is key to sustainable change. This involves not just legal and policy reform, but also active efforts to build women's leadership and participation within unions, estate committees, and community organisations. Capacity-building workshops, literacy drives, and vocational training can help women gain confidence and skills necessary for leadership roles. Mechanisms should be established to ensure women's voices are heard in wage negotiations and workplace policy decisions. Efforts to prevent and address gender-based violence, such as establishing confidential complaint mechanisms and providing legal aid, should be strengthened.

iv. Promoting Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration

The challenges in Assam's tea sector are too complex for any one actor to solve alone. Effective change will require coordinated action among government agencies, plantation management, trade unions, NGOs, and international organisations. Regular dialogue platforms should be established to facilitate cooperation, share best practices, and jointly monitor progress. International buyers and certification bodies can play a role by requiring higher labour standards and supporting community development projects¹⁵.

v. Harnessing the Power of Consumers and Ethical Trade

Consumer awareness can be a powerful driver of change. Campaigns to educate consumers about the realities faced by women tea workers can increase demand for ethically sourced tea and motivate companies to adopt fair trade practices. Transparent supply chains and third-party certifications should be promoted, but must be accompanied by rigorous audits and community involvement to ensure genuine impact.

CONCLUSION

The story of Assam's tea sector is as much about economic achievement and global recognition as it is about the lived experiences of the women who make it possible. These women, forming the backbone of tea production, have long endured a complex web of challenges—ranging from gruelling working conditions and health vulnerabilities to persistent gender discrimination and precarious rights. Their struggles have been further magnified by systemic gaps in policy enforcement and the compounding effects of crises like the COVID-19 pandemic.

Yet, within this landscape of adversity, there are also powerful stories of resilience, solidarity, and gradual change. Women workers have organised, advocated, and led grassroots movements that have brought about important improvements in wages, working conditions, and community well-being. Their ability to challenge entrenched hierarchies, demand accountability, and forge new paths of empowerment signals hope for a more equitable future.

For meaningful transformation, however, isolated efforts are not enough. Lasting change demands coordinated action from all stakeholders—government bodies, plantation owners, unions, NGOs, international buyers, and consumers. Legal rights and policy promises must be translated into everyday realities through effective enforcement, robust welfare measures, and genuine inclusion of women's voices in decision-making. The global tea industry and its

¹⁵ International labour organization ,<https://researchrepository.ilo.org>

consumers also bear responsibility, as ethical sourcing and conscious consumption can accelerate positive change on the ground.

Ultimately, ensuring justice, dignity, and well-being for Assam's women tea workers is not only a moral imperative but also essential for the industry's sustainable growth. By centring women's health, rights, and leadership, Assam's tea sector can become a model of social and economic justice—one in which the bitter truths of the past give way to a more just and hopeful future.

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