

# Women Workers & Industrial Relations in Tea Estates of Assam

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*Women account for more than fifty percent of the total workforce of the tea plantation industry in Assam. Yet they remain marginalized in many aspects of the tea industry. This study attempts to analyze the current state of tea industry in Assam against the backdrop of sexual division of labor, role of patriarchy, trade unions, sexual abuses and subordination of women in tea estates. It examines the intersectionality of gender and class and workplace inequalities and the industrial relations scenario in the tea estates. Negligible role of the State and low social welfare activities can be identified as one of the major causes of pathetic work conditions, especially of the health hazards of women workers.*

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## Introduction

Tea plantation industry is a labor intensive one which employs lakhs of workers in almost all facets of tea production: planting, plucking leaves, pruning, spraying pesticides, functioning of machines in the factories, feeding the leaves into machines, up to transferring, packaging and others (Awasthi, 1975). Employment patterns of most women workers clearly reflect a sexual division of labor that gives men and women different roles in relation to the family and domestic organization.

Since the time of migration of the *Adivasi* workers into the region, the plantation workers have been made to settle in the tea estates in the state (Bhowmik, 1981). The process of migration of the *Adivasi* community that has been taking place since the colonial era into the plantations was based on factors of pull and push. They were lured into the region with false assurances of good pay and better living conditions. To understand class in the tea industry in Assam, it is important to understand the gender relations existing in this sector of work and also in their domestic front.

**Patriarchal dominance is seen in the plantation industry.**

This paper attempts to analyze the gender relations existing in the tea estates in Assam, rigid sexual division of labor at work place as well as home, efficiency of the trade unions in dealing with women's issues, lack of welfare and health provisions and legislation for women workers. Women form more than fifty percent of the total workforce of the tea plantation industry in Assam. They are mostly entrusted with particular set of work mostly plucking and pruning which are tagged as requiring feminine attributes and skills; thus establishing gendered division of work in the tea plantation sector. Patriarchal dominance is seen in the plantation industry. The 'planter- manager- *sahib*' symbol is clearly visible among the plantation workers. Discrimination in pay between the male and the female tea plantation workers was prevalent for a long duration of time. Women face various kinds of harassment at work and in the labor lines. Their issues are hardly dealt with by the members of the trade unions or the 'line supervisors'. The unions play a less significant role in seeking justice for the women workers when there is violation of their rights or in cases of abuses. Generations of oppression have almost brought about an acceptance of the gendered injustices prevalent in the plantation industry. There are huge numbers of casual and permanent women workers in this sector.

Table 1 shows the number of women workers interviewed for the study from

each district. The total number of women workers is 37 of the total 95 respondents interviewed for the study. Women who are temporary as well as permanent workers in the tea estates or the factory and hold no membership of the trade unions are 28. There are a total number of 9 women respondents who are members of the trade unions in the estates.

**Table 1 Number of Women Workers Interviewed**

Serial Number	Districts	Number of women workers interviewed
1	Dibrugarh	13
2	Sibsagar	5
3	Jorhat	4
4	Golaghat	6
5	Sonitpur	4
6	Cachar	3
7	Kamrup	2
	Total	37

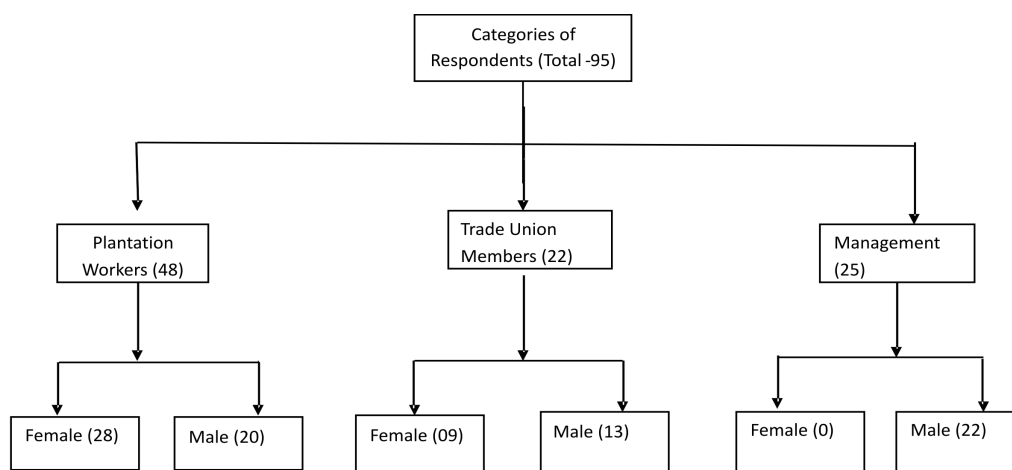
The tea industry employs both skilled and unskilled workers. According to Munro (1999), the concept of 'skill' is a socially defined one. It has been historically witnessed that even in sectors where men's and women's jobs were technically on the same skill level, women's jobs were ranked lower on grading structures. Male workers and employees have a vested interest in maintaining superiority over women in a system where they are already subjected to domination by owners of the estates. It is unacceptable for a male worker to be answerable to a woman supervisor.

In Fig. 1, it is seen that there are only male respondents in the Management category interviewed for the study. There are no female employees at the manage-

ment level and the tea industry is a male dominated sector of work. Very few women workers hold membership in the trade unions though they form a major workforce in this sector and thus their

issues are hardly represented in the meetings of the trade unions. Women workers are engaged in the plantation work both as permanent and casual workers.

**Fig 1 Number of Interviewed Respondents in Each Category**



**Sexual Division of Labor**

The plantation industry in general is one which has structured division of labor based on gender. The tea industry in Assam is also no exception to this. Scott and Marshall (2009) define sexual division of labor as a term referring to the specialized gender roles of male breadwinner and female housewife. The work in plantations had very neatly spelt out gender-specific domains where the crucial labor-intensive task of plucking tea leaves was said to be ‘quintessentially feminine, requiring nimble fingers.’ This particular division of labor by sex is usually associated with the separation of workplace from home which followed industrialization in the West. Research

shows that most pre-industrial societies also distinguish men’s tasks from women’s tasks. Moore’s (1995) study on occupational sex segregation highlights two major issues in connection with this. Firstly, the sex-based division of labor prohibits women’s participation in certain work sectors that are considered ‘stereotypically male jobs.’ These jobs are usually highly paid compared to other jobs. Secondly, women’s work usually goes unrecognized and unrewarded. Again within Marxist feminism, domes-

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tic labor is sometimes referred to as 're-productive labor.' Such division of labor is considered an important basis for inequality between sexes, entailing some degree of exploitation of women by men. Feminists assert that sex roles are essentially a way of keeping women subservient to men and are the result of a patriarchal society in which men preserve their own self-interest by maintaining a status-quo. In the plantation industry too there has been and still exists sex-based division of labor.

### **Patriarchy & Oppression**

Patriarchy in general refers to the power relations by which men dominate women (Munro, 1999). The tea plantation industry in general employs more than fifty percent of women workers for its production process. The terminology commonly used by the *Coolie* is *maai-baap* meaning mother and father to refer to the planters, owners or the managers of the tea estates (Chatterjee, 2001). Socialist feminism postulates that women are exploited by the capitalist system both at workplace and at home (Smith, 1977). The intersectionality of gender and class is clearly evident in the tea estates as across class, women have been placed at a subordinate position in the tea estates. It can be assessed that in the matters of gendered division of work, there is the female workers' "Glass- Ceiling" effect on the vertical immobility, marginalization in the trade union activities and non-implementation of the basic social security measures for women workers' welfare in the tea estates.

Family recruitment policies were adopted by the colonial British Government which initiated migration of *Adivasi* women and children into northeastern India. However, it was found that most of the single women, unidentified by any relative were viewed to have come through separate ways from family ties due to various issues. Gradually a patriarchal system of recruitment of women was adopted whereby only married women or relative of men group were recruited and if the relative did not approve, the woman worker would not be allowed to get into contract of work at the tea estates. This policy reflected a paternalistic control over the *Adivasi* women workers and at the *Coolie* depots, only married women were to be registered that allowed entry to the tea estates in Assam. Even the Tea District Labor Association (TDLA) was instructed to enquire about single women who wanted to work in the tea estates. They were immigrants who were unaccompanied by any relatives (Chatterjee, 2001).

**If the relative did not approve, the woman worker would not be allowed to get into contract of work at the tea estates.**

The women workers contribute immensely to the growth of the tea industry. However, their problems remain marginalized and they are mostly unable to voice their grievances. It has been found that the planter-manager- *sahib* symbol firstly denotes the male dominant management of the plantation industry.

Secondly, it has been seen that the exploitation that the workers, especially women folks are considered legitimate most of the times. Chatterjee (2001) defines this as patronage of the workers which is seen to be rolling on for generations. Chaudhuri's study (2014) on witch hunting in the tea estates in Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal clearly indicates that oppression of the *Adivasi* women working in the tea estates is not only by the employers or the management, but also equally by the male co-workers, neighbors in the labor lines, line supervisors, family members, *panchayats* and the legal system. The perpetrators of crime roam about freely in the labor lines even if the victim lodges complaint in the nearby police stations or *panchayats*. Most of the times they are asked to compromise and do not get justice. The perpetrators continue to harass the victims. Witch hunting practices are common among the *Adivasi* workers in the plantations in Jalpaiguri district. It can be assessed that male dominance is even channeled through accusations of witchcraft. Thus, for any illness in the labor lines and other settlements, they usually accuse some woman of practicing witchcraft and attack. There are numerous cases of rape and violence against women. A respondent who is a member of the trade union in a tea estate in the Dibrugarh district says: "Women have always been discriminated in the tea plan-

**Male dominance is even channeled through accusations of witchcraft.**

tations and most of the times they used to be treated as only cheap labor. The managers and the supervisors always have the tendency to exploit and abuse the women workers."

Women are of the opinion that they have complete control over their wages. This is questionable as it has been found that they have to ultimately end up spending most of their hard-earned money on the family's sustenance leaving almost nothing for themselves (Samarasinghe, 1993). The women workers who are mostly employed as pluckers in both permanent and temporary categories can earn incentives from the extra kilos of tea leaves they are able to collect. Earlier the male members of the family exercised direct control over the income of the women workers, i.e. their wives', sisters' and mothers' wages as the female workers did not go to collect their wages due to various social restrictions and taboos. They were usually apprehensive to collect their wages and believed it was the male members' right to control their wages. Their wages were handed over by the management to the male members of the family, i.e. husbands, fathers, brothers of the women workers. Most of the women workers whose husbands, brothers or fathers are alcoholics have to spend their wages in sustaining the family since the male members spend their wages on alcohol and sometimes even snatch away the wages of the women workers. Thus, it is seen that the notion that the women workers have complete right over their wages would be a wrong one. The women worker has to bear double burden of working in the

field as well as in the household. They toil from morning to night as the work load of a tea plucker is heavy and also they have to do all the household chores. The male members do not help them in any of the household work. There is less participation of women workers in the trade union and thus issues relating to grant of flexible timings to tea pluckers, better access to basic needs and living conditions are never put forward in the demands of the trade unions.

**There are a lot of health hazards being faced by the women workers.**

History of oppression of the women workers shows that there is a sense of acceptance of getting exploited (Bhowmik, 1985). The women, even if ailing, were forced to go to work by the *sardars* and sometimes after a few days of delivery. Thus, there are a lot of health hazards being faced by the women workers. The welfare legislations are not efficiently implemented in the tea estates.

Discrimination regarding the rates of daily wages- *haziri* between the men and women workers was practiced till very recent times. The women workers would get their daily wage of 44.80 rupees only if they could collect a minimum of 25 kilos of tea leaf per day. It is an extremely strenuous task in hard weather conditions to collect the said amount and more. Even in the cases of leaf pluckers, the men were paid two rupees higher wage compared to their female counterparts (Chatterjee, 2001).

There is rampant poverty among the tea plantation workers in Assam. As mentioned earlier, the *Adivasi* immigrants were made to settle in the tea estates or the nearby *basti*. In earlier times the women workers were expected to offer sexual favors to the British planters or the managers of the estates. In Chatterjee's study (2001), she mentioned a case where a poor estate worker left his teenage daughter at the steps of the manager's bungalow who wore a flower in her hair. It was a symbol of offering to the manager. Many entertainment media also have clearly indicated intimate relationships between the White managers and the *Adivasi* women in the estates. Women as objects of sex have been exploited by the management since history and this trend still continues to exist. Even in the case where the teenage girl has been 'offered' to the manager, patriarchal dominance cannot be ruled out apart from the exploitation of the working class.

"Earlier the Sahibs used to call us by the color of the blouse that we were wearing but we never got offended. Nowadays our people have become very intolerant. I don't approve of such rebellious behavior against our Sahib." These words have been said by an old female worker who has retired from work at a Williamson Magor tea estate in Sonitpur district. This is where a few female casual workers were sexually assaulted by the manager as he tried to stop them from uprooting tea bushes for firewood. A group of workers manhandled the manager as the women complained to the union members. She says that earlier it was fine for the women workers to be

(disrespectfully) called by the color of the blouse they were wearing. However, the old lady refers to it as an inappropriate behavior on the part of the workers while she is attaching no significance to the act of sexual assault on the female workers by the manager. It is seen that due to decades of oppression, it was almost an accepted norm to be treated with no respect by the people from the management and the supervisors at work. Verbal abuse on the women workers is a common phenomenon.

**There is not a single woman who is placed above the supervisors' level in the tea estates.**

The plantation industry in Assam has been a rule of patriarchy both at the workplace as well as in the social front. Data collected from the field study clearly shows that there is not a single woman who is placed above the supervisors' level in the tea estates. Though it is seen that most of the works of tea production is carried out

by women workers, there is hardly any scope for them to move up the ladder. While workers are *Adivasi*, those in the management consist of mainly local Assamese speaking qualified men. At this level also there is no single management personnel who is a woman. The vertical mobility of the male workers is visible in the hierarchy of the tea estates while that of the women workers is rare. The *Adivasi* women get recruited in the work of the estates either as temporary or permanent workers; mostly as pluckers. Some of them are also involved in the pruning and cleaning processes. They have hardly any scope for promotion to upper levels like supervisor or any other. At best a women worker can get to a level of a plucking supervisor in the field whereby she has to supervise the plucking process of the workers engaged in the work. However, it is seen that there is no scope for women workers to supervise or give orders to the male workers engaged either in the field or in the factory. It is against the patriarchal norms ruling the plantation system to work under the orders of a women supervisor or a manager.

**Table 2 Forms of Abuse faced by Women Workers**

Forms of Abuse	From Family Members	From Co-workers and Supervisors
Physical Abuse	47%	5%
Verbal Abuse	40%	83%
Both Verbal and Physical Abuse	13%	12%

Table 2 depicts the percentage of women workers who have faced physical and verbal abuses at work and at home. The table shows the forms of abuses that the women workers have to face almost on a daily basis. 83 per cent of the respondents have said that they have faced verbal abuses like use of slangs, indecent comments about their appearances

and other abusive words at the workplace. While, 47 per cent of the respondents have accepted that they have faced physical abuses in the form of domestic violence from their spouses or other male authoritative figures at home. Most of the women workers are exploited by alcoholic husbands and usually the control over their wages is a primary reason of conflict.

Violence against women is almost an accepted norm in the plantation industry. Women and honor can be used synonymously among the plantation workers and erotic relations between the women workers and the managers/planters have been condemned in general. Historically erotic relationships between the planters and the *Adivasi* women workers have been almost an accepted yet tabooed fact. Power of the *sahibs* over the workers engaged in his estate would penetrate into every sphere of the workers' lives. There were incidences where to escape the lustful gaze and clutches of the *sahibs*, the women were sent to their native villages in Orissa and Jharkhand to get them tattooed. It was believed that tattoos were considered to be scars by the Englishmen and thus it would keep them away from the women workers who were perceived to be objects of sexual desire. It is a norm in the tea plantation industry that the workers are not supposed to meet the gaze of the managers. Eyelid should be downcast and the distance that is to be maintained between the women workers and the *sahibs* connotes the vast disparity of status and power.

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However, there have been incidences whereby plantation workers tried to extract benefits from the managers/planters by offering women as gift or bribe. Certain favors like upgradation of their position at job, other economic benefits were lured through the people in the management by

use of *Adivasi* women as objects of sexual desire. In the pre-colonial era as well as following decades post-independence, the British planters and later the Indian counterparts deemed it their right to demand sexual favors from the *Adivasi* women. In Chatterjee's study (2001), the author has elaborately discussed the stigmatized relationships that existed between the planters and the women workers in the tea estates. There are 'white' children living in the labor lines who had British fathers and *Adivasi* mothers. The women workers were timid and obliging to the instructions of the supervisors and the *Sahibs*. Thus, the planters could claim their sexual rights over them. It was a relation of oppression where the women were objects of desire and exploitation.

"There are many women workers in our estate who try to lure the supervisors to escape work. Many casual workers do illicit favors to the supervisors and other *sahibs* to get permanent jobs at the estate". This quote is given by a women worker from Sivsagar district who is currently engaged as a casual worker. She has been striving to get into the permanent payroll of the estate. According to her, there are various politics of work in the estate. It is an inherent belief among the plantation workers and the personnel from the management that the women workers are available or open to get into erotic relationships in exchange of certain benefits from the workplace. Thus, the *Adivasi* women were considered objects of sexual desire of the planter/ manager as well as male workers' objects to gain favor from the management. There have been instances in other studies and media

(movies) where such stigmatized relationships between the planters and the women workers have been showcased. In an Assamese movie named '*Chamelim-ensaab*' this is clearly evident. This was an accepted practice in the earlier times though it was stigmatized.

### **Work Hazards & the Dormant State**

The plantation workers have to work under hazardous conditions and there is dearth of safety and health protection amenities in general in the tea industry at large. Women and children face health problems due to rigorous manual labor that they are involved in under hazardous conditions. As mentioned earlier, women workers are mainly employed as pluckers of tea leaves. Thus, they have to be in the field from dawn to dusk. A respondent commented: "We have to work in the field under the sun from 7 to 11 a.m. and then again from 1 to 4 p.m. carrying huge baskets of tea leaves with its strands resting on the head and weighing on the back. We carry a minimum of 22 kgs of leaves every day".

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It is evident that the women workers are involved in hard manual labor. Such workload takes its toll over their health and therefore most of them face health issues like back problem, weakness due to anemia, malnutrition and others. They develop back and joint pains which gradually take

the toll over their health. Compared to the amount of work they have to perform on a daily basis, consumption of food is almost next to nothing. Most of the times they survive on starch of rice prepared by less quantity of rice boiled in higher proportion of water. The subsidized ration that is ideally to be provided to the workers is usually insufficient to feed the family for an entire week. Thus, the *Adivasi* workers working in the plantations face acute problem of malnutrition and anemia.

The Maternity Benefit Act passed in 1961 ensures that women get a minimum of three months of leave prior to post delivery of child. This rule is hardly followed in the tea estates and mostly workers are ignorant of their rights. There are no proper medical facilities and staff in the hospitals of the estates. The workers claim that in times of urgency, there are no doctors available in the hospitals. Even cases of delivery are referred to civil hospitals outside the estate premises and in such times of emergency it becomes extremely difficult and financially burdensome to arrange for transportation of patients to the towns which are usually far away from the estates.

However, there were instances where women workers were given full pay and a bonus of one rupee per month just before the period of childbirth to pregnant women. Miscarriages were and are still common among the women tea plantation workers.

Health and welfare facilities are the basic rights of the workers which are to be provided by the management or the

owners of the estates. However, it has been seen that the management has been completely ignoring their responsibilities of providing the workers with the basic facilities and health care. One of the primary reasons for non-availability of the welfare facilities for the workers is to cut down on the cost of production of tea. The workers are mostly uneducated and are unaware of their basic rights. Thus, they are vulnerable to exploitation in the hands of the management.

The women workers face great problems at workplace due to non-availability of separate washroom within the estate premises, there are no restrooms or shades for them and no drinking water provision for the plantation workers in almost any of the estates where field study has been conducted. Most of the women plantation workers are anemic and there is high percentage of malnutrition among all the family members of the workers. The estates' management along with the medical staff takes no initiative to provide for health supplements like vitamins and iron tablets. There is this underlying belief among the estate owners and the management that if the workers suffer ill health and gradually become unable to perform their duties, there are others available who would take their place (Misra, 2003). The casual or temporary women workers are the most exploited group. Casual workers in the estates are not provided with any facilities or even the basic medical necessities. There is no provision for housing, firewood and other basic amenities. This indicates a clear sense of lack of responsibility on part of the estate owners and the Government.

### **Marginalization of Women Workers**

According to Munro (1999), trade union is an important social institution and performs significant social, economic and political functions. It constructed a body of rights for the working class using different methods of action such as political, legal and social action. Karl Marx believed that trade unions are perceived as a weapon through which working class revolution can be brought about.

Trade unions should ideally uphold the rights of the workers. However, it is seen that politics of unionism tends to work in favor of the interests of only a few powerful individuals. With regard to the participation of women there has always been the apprehension historically as well as in the present to step into public space. Sharma (2011) in her study on the creation of Assam during the colonial and the pre-colonial period has elaborated on the restricted participation of middle and elite class in the Assam movement. During the early twentieth century women's associations (*Mahila Samiti*) women were encouraged to take part in the Nationalist Movement that started to uproar during that time. However, the *Adivasis* women were considered to be outsiders and thus they were not involved in such activism with the other groups residing in the state. Coming from an isolated existence in the state, it is seen that the *Adivasi* community especially the women workers had an apprehensive attitude towards active involvement in the matters of the union which is male dominated. As mentioned earlier, though the women form major part of the workforce employed in the tea industry, their issues

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remain marginalized and are hardly represented in the discussions and meetings of the trade unions. Of the total number of 37 women respondents, there were only nine women who hold membership in the trade unions. Thus, male dominance or rule of patriarchy is seen in the functioning of the trade unions. The growth of trade union movement among the tea workers has broken down the isolation of the worker and helped in organized political action, within and outside the plantation. The workers are better aware of their rights as workers and more conscious of their identity as a class. "Sangha is a very important and strong body to fight for our rights. However, there is hardly any political participation of women workers in this estate. They are apprehensive to come out of their homes and attend meetings after their hard work at the garden", according to one respondent.

Women's issues mainly revolve around inadequate health and welfare facilities at the workplace as well as in the labor lines, non-availability of medical staff during emergencies like delivery, harassment faced at work or labor lines by management, supervisors or any male worker, cases of domestic violence which hardly gets reported, and work hazards. Involvement of women is limited with membership and in some estates, participation in rallies and demonstrations. The factors

behind this can be said to be lack of time of the women workers, their unwillingness to take part in activities outside their homes and place of work, male dominance in such meetings. Women workers who constitute more than 50 per cent of the workforce in the tea estates have limited representation in the trade unions. Sarkar and Bhowmik's study (1998) argues that women workers, remain marginalized in the Trade Union. A permanent women worker who is a member of the trade union in her estate under the Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangha (ACMS) commented: "The women are less active in the affairs of the trade union and only a few come up with their problems in the meetings of the union. Work in the plantation and at home takes away all the time and energy. The women are also discouraged at home to go out and attend the meetings or any other public gatherings".

**Women workers consider approaching the trade unions as their last option when other ways do not work out in solving their issues.**

Women workers consider approaching the trade unions as their last option when other ways do not work out in solving their issues. They prefer to approach the unions only in extreme situations. The trade unions are mostly seen to serve the motives of the political parties, while ideally it should have been the other way round. The unions are dictated by powerful political leaders and the ideologies of the respective parties. Thus, workers' issues are marginalized and given less importance while the primary objective becomes to politicize work-

ers' issues to gain power. The voices of the women workers are few in number and they remain oppressed. And if at all they are recognized, it will be mostly for some political gains.

The issues of the women workers hardly get represented in the meetings and the discussions of the trade unions. An analysis into what restricts the women workers' active participation in the trade union activities shows that the trade unions are male dominated institutions. It is inherently patriarchal in nature. Thus, the women's issues are not given much significance in the trade unions and the women workers have an apprehension in going out to attend union meetings in the public sphere.

### Conclusion

Though the tea industry employs more women workers and the production process can be accredited to them, the female workers remain marginalized. The intersectionality of gender and class exists in the tea estates. This is reflected in the industrial relations scenario in the tea estates. The female workers undergo both verbal and physical abuse both at workplace and at home. The plantation work is gendered and the women workers remain under hazardous conditions. There is rigid sexual division of labor in the tea plantation industry in general. Plucking, planting and pruning are mainly considered to be 'female' jobs. Patriarchal dominance on the women workers is very much visible though women form half the total plantation workforce. Women have been exploited by the management since his-

tory and this trend still continues to exist. Women's issues are not dealt with effectively by the trade unions. Their representation in the trade unions is also limited. Participation of the women workers in the activities of the trade unions is restricted due to domestic and social factors.

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