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Women in Tea Farming

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Women constitute a vital workforce in global tea production-up to 75 per cent in some regions-but continue to face systemic inequities: low wages, unsafe working conditions, limited access to leadership and disproportionate unpaid labour. This article reviews empirical data from India, Tanzania, Malawi, Kenya and Bangladesh, highlighting women's roles, challenges and empowerment initiatives spanning legal aid, cooperative models, safety programs and agribusiness. Notable findings include Tanzanian initiatives boosting women's income *via* local processing (+546%), Malawian legal empowerment enhancing negotiation skills in tea cooperatives and Indian tea estates gaining workplace safety through the Women's Safety Accelerator Fund. Through a gender lens, we assess work allocation, health/safety risks, agency-building and policy tools. We propose recommendations to advance women's inclusion-including leadership training, legal rights education, gender-sensitive workplace reforms and value-chain integration-towards a more equitable and resilient tea sector.

Keywords: Gender Equity in Agriculture, Women Tea Workers, Empowerment in Tea Sector, Tea Plantation Labour Rights, Gender-Based Occupational Challenges and Inclusive Agribusiness Models.

Introduction

Tea farming supports millions of rural livelihoods, with women playing crucial roles in fields and smallholder plots: from Kenya (60-75 per cent) to Bangladesh (75 per cent). Yet, women remain predominantly employed in low-skilled, poorly paid positions, marginalized from leadership and burdened by unpaid domestic labour. Unequal task divisions, entrenched cultural norms and limited resources compound disparities. This paper examines women's roles, prevailing challenges and empowerment strategies through a multi-country analysis, culminating in policy and practical recommendations for transformative change.

Women's Roles in Tea Production

Fieldwork & Value Contribution

In Kenya's smallholder context, women shoulder labour-intensive tasks: plucking, leaf transport and administrative coordination, while men focus on pruning and nursery work. In Tanzania's Tanga region, women perform approximately 70 per cent of leaf plucking, yet derive little value from it because processing and price decisions are male-dominated. In Bangladesh, women represent 75 per cent of tea plantation workers, yet earn some of the lowest wages-just 120 taka/day which highlights demographic scale alongside economic exploitation.

Gendered Task Division

A Kenya study reports 94 per cent of pruning and nursery roles are male (Embu) and up to 66.7 per cent in Murang'a, while women remain confined to plucking and leaf transport.

In India's Darjeeling estates, women pluck and also prune during dormancy, but men dominate factory and managerial roles.

Labour Conditions & Health Risks

Wage Inequality & Insecure Employment

In Assam and West Bengal, women are over 700,000 strong of 50% of workforce-but rarely occupy secure roles, earning 10-20% less than men due to reliance on casual employment. Bangladesh's recent wage protests raised daily wages from 120 to 168-170 taka, yet women remain the worst paid.

Overwork & Unpaid Labour

In India, women begin work at 4 AM and labour until 10 PM, combining plucking quotas with domestic chores-often working a 13-hour day.

"Approximately 700,000 workers ... women form over 60% ... plucking ... earning an illegally low daily wage of 167 rupees ... no sanitation facilities."

Occupational Hazards

Women face injury from long hours, pesticide exposure, slippery terrain, insect bites and lack of protective gear. They also work through rain and thunderstorms, sometimes at fatal risk.

Safety & Harassment

Many estates double as homes, blurring boundaries and exposing women to harassment and violence. Initiatives like WSAF have improved safety infrastructure: over 300,000 people reached, 60,000 frontline women supported and 80 per cent estates now host gender committees.

Constraints on Leadership & Participation

Lack of Decision-Making Roles

Women remain nearly invisible in management: only one female manager in approximately 1,600 Indian tea estates (0.06%). POSH Act committees require women presiding officers-often absent-hindering legal redress.

Cultural and Structural Barriers

Gender audits in Malawi found women perceived leadership as beyond them and were culturally side-lined in negotiations. In India, low literacy and exclusion from unions obstruct women from voicing concerns or accessing benefits, reinforcing labour exploitation.

Empowerment Strategies & Outcomes

Legal Empowerment in Malawi

Malawian women tea farmers, supported by WOLREC, formed women-only forums, learned negotiation, advocacy and legal rights, building agency and reducing norms limiting their engagement.

Tanzania's Value-Chain Integration

In Tanga region, women-led cooperatives and a joint tea processing factory boosted smallholders' incomes by 54-60%, enabling board representation and formal value-chain roles.

Workplace Safety Interventions in India

IDH and WSAF programs tackled gender-based violence in Assam. Establishing Internal Committees, awareness training, and legal support networks resulted in improved workplace safety and empowerment.

Labor Rights Movements in Kerala

The 2015 all-women Munnar plantation strike (Pengal Orumai) secured wage increase, formation of women's union and government negotiations setting a precedent in female labour leadership.

Discussion

Converging Challenges

Despite geographic and cultural differences, women across tea-growing regions face parallel challenges: wage disparities, unsafe conditions, limited authority and unpaid labour.

Effective Interventions

Empowerment hinges on:

- Access to legal and negotiation tools (Malawi)
- Value-chain integration and co-ownership models (Tanzania)
- Safety and legal infrastructure (India)
- Collective action and political mobilization (Kerala)

Policy & Structural Reforms

1. Empowerment requires structural transformation:
2. Enforce equal wages and secure contracts
3. Mandate gender-sensitive committees and leadership quotas
4. Expand legal literacy and union inclusion
5. Support cooperative models and local value capture

Conclusion & Recommendations

Women are indispensable to tea farming, yet labour inequities persist globally. Empowerment is possible, as demonstrated in Malawi, Tanzania and India, through targeted reforms and collective agency. To advance gender parity in tea sectors:

1. Reinforce labour rights: equal pay and job security
2. Build legal and negotiation capacity for women farmers
3. Mandate gender representation in governance and POSH compliance
4. Invest in safety infrastructure and accessible grievance channels
5. Encourage women-led business ownership across the value chain
6. Support literacy, training, and union inclusion to bolster agency

These measures align with women's empowerment frameworks and Sustainable Development Goals. Prioritizing gender equity unlocks productivity, social justice and economic resilience in tea communities.

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