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The Experiences of Children on Sri Lanka's Tea Plantations: Labor and Sexual Exploitation, Violence, and Inadequate Education

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The Experiences of Children on Sri Lanka's Tea Plantations: Labor and Sexual Exploitation, Violence, and Inadequate Education

Abstract

This article explores the difficulties faced by children living in Sri Lanka's tea plantation areas. Data from 150 children reveal high rates of poverty, violence, and school dropout. Children in tea plantation schools report bullying and stigma from teachers and students. Many children do not envision completing school due to inadequate resources, family income pressures, and the need to work. Children who drop out of school face abusive labor conditions and poor pay. Over 30% of all children report experiencing sexual abuse, often in their own homes. Those working face discrimination, physical abuse, and wage theft. Initiatives are needed to improve family incomes, reform schools, provide affordable childcare, enforce child labor laws, and raise awareness of safety and rights. Governmental financial support is required to improve housing, expand agriculture production to generate family income for schooling expenses, and provide training for teachers. Government interventions and creating coordination between agencies, NGOs, and tea industry stakeholders are vital to alleviate the hardships faced by Sri Lanka's tea plantation children and create opportunities for them to realize their full potential.

Keywords

Sri Lanka, child labor, tea plantations, exploitation, violence, education

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**THE EXPERIENCES OF CHILDREN ON SRI LANKA'S
TEA PLANTATIONS: LABOR AND SEXUAL
EXPLOITATION, VIOLENCE, AND INADEQUATE
EDUCATION**

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the difficulties faced by children living in Sri Lanka's tea plantation areas. Data from 150 children reveal high rates of poverty, violence, and school dropout. Children in tea plantation schools report bullying and stigma from teachers and students. Many children do not envision completing school due to inadequate resources, family income pressures, and the need to work. Children who drop out of school face abusive labor conditions and poor pay. Over 30% of all children report experiencing sexual abuse, often in their own homes. Those working face discrimination, physical abuse, and wage theft. Initiatives are needed to improve family incomes, reform schools, provide affordable childcare, enforce child labor laws, and raise awareness of safety and rights. Governmental financial support is required to improve housing, expand agriculture production to generate family income for schooling expenses, and provide training for teachers. Government interventions and creating coordination between agencies, NGOs, and tea industry stakeholders are vital to alleviate the hardships faced by Sri Lanka's tea plantation children and create opportunities for them to realize their full potential.

KEYWORDS

Sri Lanka, child labor, tea plantations, exploitation, violence, education

THE HISTORY OF SRI LANKA has been marked by events that have made children vulnerable to exploitation, particularly those in the tea plantation areas. The war (1983-2009), the tsunami (2004), and the COVID-19 pandemic (2020-present) have all negatively affected the nation. In addition, the lasting effects of Sri

Lanka's colonial history continue to affect the lives of children and families in the country. This research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the difficulties faced by schoolchildren born in tea plantation areas and to explore potential solutions. This includes three groups of children: a) children still in school, b) children who have left school early and are now working in the tea plantations, and c) children who left school early and are now working in the city to earn money. By analysing children's experiences in these three groups and providing recommendations for practice and policy measures, this research aims to improve access to education and the overall well-being of children in Sri Lanka's tea plantation areas.

SRI LANKA'S TEA PLANTATIONS

Sri Lanka was a British colony from 1815 until gaining independence in 1948 (Wickramasinghe, 2014). The British found that the uplands of Sri Lanka were very suitable for coffee, tea, and rubber cultivation. By the mid-19th century, Ceylon tea had become a significant export bringing great wealth to a small number of European tea planters. As a result, the planters imported large numbers of Tamil workers as indentured laborers from south India to work on the tea plantations, who now make up approximately 15% of the island's population. Although colonial rule ended in 1947, the tea plantations and the estates on which they located were owned by British colonial planters until 1972. This control included control over the education and school systems of the estates (Wickramasinghe, 2014).

Since their conception under colonial rule, there is evidence of a consistent influence of the goals of the plantation owners/companies in these schools, their resources, and their curriculum (Little, 2007). Specifically, through a severe lack of resources and adequate education in reading and writing, there is an apparent motive by the tea plantation owners to keep children on the tea plantation from achieving their educational goals and instead staying to work in the tea plantations like their family before them (Herath et al., 2019). When estates were nationalized through an act to amend the land reform law in 1972 (i.e., they were no longer under British colonial owners), the plantation schools were also included in this structure (Land Acquisition Act, 1950). From 1972 onward, as a government policy, all schools in the estates were recognized as belonging to the government school system and taken over by the Ministry of Education. Since then, the Department of Education has administered these schools as Government Estate Schools (Little, 1999; 2007). Although this change occurred nearly 50 years ago, there has been a continuing decline in plantation education, including educational attainment in plantation schools and student dropouts compared to the national school system (Little, 2007).

PLANTATION SCHOOLS COMPARED TO GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS

Currently, the Ministry of Education in Sri Lanka oversees all schools, including plantation and non-plantation schools. Plantation schools are considered a subset of the Ministry of Education's school system. Although both types of schools operate under the policies of the Ministry of Education, there are some key differences between government schools and plantation schools. Specifically, both types of schools are similar in that teachers are employed by the government and have identical school administration structures. Furthermore, the core subjects taught at each grade level use the same methodology outlined for preparing and delivering examinations. These standards and procedures are set by the Ministry of Education in Sri Lanka (Aturupane & Little, 2019).

However, several distinct and key differences exist between the provision of education at plantation schools and other government schools. Firstly, a lack of resources is required to train instructors at plantation schools, which creates wide knowledge gaps among teachers and students (Udayanga, 2022). Instructors are unable to develop the skills required to teach subjects such as science, mathematics, information technology, and English. Consequently, students display incompetence in the aforementioned domains, leading to increased frustration, lack of motivation, and contributing to the high dropout rate compared to government schools (Herath et al., 2019). Similarly, tea plantation schools offer limited opportunities for innovation due to inaccessibility to required resources, such as laboratories and technological facilities. The barriers to these resources create vast obstacles that limit the ability of students at plantation schools to compete in the local workplace and global industries that require refined skills in technology and communication (Herath et al., 2019; Peiris et al., 2015).

Thirdly, there are significant language limitations in plantation schools compared to government schools. These schools provide instruction almost exclusively in Tamil and little in English, which could otherwise provide additional vocational opportunities (Peiris et al., 2015). This, coupled with the lack of foreign language learning centers in the schools, limits the opportunities for children to work or move to areas where Tamil is not commonly spoken. Finally, the student body of plantation schools is composed of children from families facing significant financial and social burdens (Herath et al., 2019; Udayanga, 2022). These burdens often mean that parents are preoccupied with the struggle to meet the basic needs of their families and cannot dedicate additional time to ensure that their children achieve educational milestones. Furthermore, parents in the plantation community may have had limited access to education, making it difficult to navigate their children's educational needs and help them in academic circumstances (Udayanga, 2022; Wanasundera, 2006).

BROADER POLITICAL AND SOCIOECONOMIC CONTEXT

Although this is not true for all people on the tea plantations, the tea plantation community in Sri Lanka largely consists of Tamil people who were brought to Sri Lanka from South India for slave labor during the colonial period (“Indian Tamils”; Hussein, 2009). According to the World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples, Tamil people who came to Sri Lanka this way and chose to stay in the country were granted Sri Lankan citizenship in 1972 and received suffrage rights shortly after (Minority Rights Group International, 2020). However, ongoing violent persecution and discrimination against the minority Tamil people were one of the reasons for the civil war fought in Sri Lanka from 1982 to 2009, and economic and societal inequity still largely exists among the Tamil community in Sri Lanka today (Ganguly, 2018). In particular, Sri Lanka's Malayalam Tamil workers, who arrived as colonial-era wage laborers, continue to work on tea plantations and often live in inhumane and degrading conditions (Srinivasan, 2019). Although the civil war ostensibly ended in 2009, after 25 years tensions between the two sides remain and the government's resources are limited (Ganguly, 2018; Srinivasan, 2019).

The lack of basic human rights for Tamils stems from severe economic inequities. Tamil people struggle to access adequate housing, healthcare, political involvement, and education (Piyarathne, 2008). Despite the contributions these families have made to the national economy through participation in the labor system, there continue to be structural barriers that often prevent their children from accessing secure educational opportunities that lead to improvements in their financial conditions

(Srinivasan, 2021). Previous legislative and educational policies in Sri Lanka have recognized the importance of education (Little, 2011); however, the quality of education at plantation schools continues to be poor compared to educational opportunities in other parts of the nation. This is exemplified, in part, by the lack of resources required to support the enrichment of instructors and students (Jayaweera, 2007).

STATUS OF RESEARCH ON INEQUITIES FOR CHILDREN

- 1) Despite the known discrepancy, little research has been conducted regarding the impact of these inequities on children who grew up in and/or currently live on tea plantations. Therefore, the current study seeks to understand these experiences from the perspectives of the children currently and previously in tea plantation schools and how their trajectories in education and life are affected. Specifically, the objectives of the current study are: 1) To analyze and compare the experiences of children who:
 - a. Live in the plantation areas and are still at school,
 - b. Live in the plantation areas but work in the tea plantations and factories, or
 - c. Have moved away to cities of Sri Lanka to seek labor.
- 2) To recommend appropriate practical and policy measures to be taken by the government, education, the tea industry, local administrative authority, and NGOs to reduce the dropout rate among plantation school children and improve safeguarding for children and young people.

METHODS

PARTICIPANTS

This study gathered data from 150 young individuals aged between 15 and 18 who reside in Sri Lanka. The sample was separated into three smaller groups of 50 participants, who participated in one of three surveys conducted in the study. The first group consisted of 33 male and 17 female participants who were currently enrolled in a plantation school and residing within the tea plantation area. The second group consisted of 50 male participants engaged in various forms of child labor within the tea plantation and tea factories but were not attending any form of education. To understand the experiences of children who left the tea plantation area to seek work, the third group consisted of 41 male and nine female participants who had relocated to either Colombo or Kandy and were currently involved in child labor.

SURVEY TOOLS

Data were collected in three different scenarios: during school, after leaving school, and in the working environment as children under 18 years. Three surveys were conducted to compare the barriers and obstacles experienced by participants in these three scenarios. The surveys consisted of open-ended questions that were similar but differed slightly based on the circumstances of the participants. For instance, Survey 1 included questions about the home environment and education, while Surveys 2 and 3 included questions about their working environment as children under 18 years.

PROCEDURES AND ETHICS

All participants were interviewed by a staff member from *The Youth Voice International*, a local non-profit organization that provides social care services to children

on tea plantation estates. The guardians of the participants were informed about the study and provided signed consent for their children to participate. In cases where participants lived apart from their parents, they provided informed consent after providing their agreement to participate in the interview. All research procedures followed standardized research procedures and ethical guidelines of sociological research (Little, 2014), which included ensuring that the participants were not obligated to take the survey and had the choice to refuse to answer questions if they desired. Researchers monitored the participants for any signs of discomfort and asked if they did or didn't want to continue if necessary.

LIMITATIONS AND CHALLENGES

Three separate surveys were conducted with similar but different considerations and limitations. First, the consent of guardians was required for participation in Survey 1. This meant that children whose guardians did not consent could not participate in the surveys, eliminating these perspectives. Parental presence created barriers in data collection, particularly for female participants who were hesitant to share their views, resulting in a disproportionate number of male participants in all three surveys. These limitations may, in part, be due to the interviewers from *The Youth Voice International* being exclusively male and understandable discomfort in sharing experiences with someone of the opposite sex. Of note, Survey 2 includes data from exclusively male participants working in tea plantations and/or in factories. Though this remains a limitation, it reflects the larger norm in which fewer opportunities exist for girls and where many girls have the role of caretaker and stay within the household environment. Second, as children were not always able to speak freely about their experiences at work (particularly among those who completed Survey 2 working on tea plantations and/or in factories), responses may have been influenced by fear of retribution by their employers.

DATA ANALYSIS

Following data collection, data from the three surveys were cleaned and translated into English for analysis by all current study's authors. Descriptive and comparative data analysis was conducted by examining the characteristics of the responses across the three surveys. Graphics detailed below were created to visualize the results of the current study, and results from across all three surveys were compared, and themes were discussed.

RESULTS

The data revealed several themes within and across the children's experiences in each of the surveys. Table 1 outlines the main themes across the surveys that are discussed in more detail in the results section below.

SURVEY 1: CHILDREN STILL STUDYING IN THE PLANTATION SCHOOLS

The first survey aimed to understand the experiences of children who were currently enrolled in plantation schools on plantation estates throughout Sri Lanka.

Demographics

The first survey is based on children currently in school at plantation schools. Fifty children between the ages of 14-18 years participated in Survey 1, with an

average age of 16. This includes 17 girls (34%) and 33 boys (66%). Grade levels were split, with approximately one-third of children in grades 8 (30%), 9 (38%), or 10 (30%).

Table 1:
Physical, Emotional, and Sexual Abuse Across All Surveys

| Survey | Survey 1 | | Survey 2 | | Survey 3 | |
|---|----------|----|----------|----|----------|----|
| | n | % | n | % | n | % |
| Inhumane Treatment /Stigma/Discrimination | 10 | 20 | 21 | 42 | 18 | 36 |
| Physical Abuse/ Harassment | 8 | 16 | 14 | 28 | 18 | 36 |
| Sexual Abuse | 15 | 30 | 14 | 28 | 16 | 32 |

Education and Schooling

In Survey 1, education-related questions focused on children's school experiences and the likelihood of them completing school or dropping out. Although 40% (n=20) of the children reported enjoying school, 48% (n=24) did not foresee continuing their education in the future due to various obstacles. Eight children (16%) were uncertain about their future schooling. Several barriers were identified that prevented some children from attending school and contributed to their belief that they would not continue their education. Over half, 54% (n=22), of out-of-school children cited a shortage of essential school books and supplies as a major obstacle.

Additionally, 42% (n=21) of children mentioned living in overcrowded line rooms (housing provided to plantation workers and their families), which made it difficult for them to concentrate and complete their homework, particularly due to social issues such as domestic violence and alcoholic parents. Over a quarter (28%, n=14) of the children had to stay home to care for younger siblings when their parents worked at the tea plantation, causing them to miss school. Moreover, a quarter (24%, n=12) reported difficulty attending school because their parents could not afford extracurricular activities, union membership, and transportation fees.

Participants were also asked about their potential plans if they dropped out of school. Among those who responded (68%, n=34), the most frequently mentioned option was finding a job near their residence (16%, n=8), followed by meeting friends in the city to search for a job (12%, n=6), training as a mechanic's helper at a garage (10%, n=5), seeking employment in Colombo as a house boy/girl (10%, n=5), and looking for work in the tea plantation (6%, n=3).

Drug and Alcohol Use

Participants in Survey 1 were asked one question regarding whether they regularly drank alcohol. 30% (n=15) reported "yes," they regularly drank alcohol.

Physical and Emotional Violence

This survey's findings reveal that most participants had experienced physical and emotional violence in the classroom environment during schooling and in the living social environment. Sixteen per cent (n=8) of children surveyed in Survey 1 reported being a victim of physical violence, and 20% (n=10) reported experiencing stigma and/or discrimination against them in their lives. These numbers were consistent with reports of violence and harassment happening at school, with 14% (n=7) reporting being bullied at school, 14% (n=7%) saying they had been harassed, and 20% (n=10) saying they had been humiliated at school by other students.

Children's Awareness of Sexual Behavior and Sexual Abuse

Participants were also asked about their awareness of sex and the sources of their knowledge about sexual behavior. When asked who they learned about sex from, the responses were as follows: approximately 32% (n=16) learned through social media, nearly half (48%, n=24) learned from peers or older friends, and 8% (n=4) said they learned by watching pornographic films. Only 4% (n=2) of participants learned about sex from school teachers, and 2% (n=1) of children learned about sex from family members and/or parents.

Although discussing sexual abuse can be difficult, some children still provided information on their experiences. Despite initial hesitation from older children, some were willing to discuss their experiences with interviewers. Specifically, children were asked if they had been sexually abused 1) in the village/line rooms where they lived and 2) in the city. The results revealed that 30% (n=15) of children had been subjected to sexual abuse by various individuals within the line room environment. No one reported sexual abuse in a city setting or outside their village. Among those who were sexually abused in the village, 12% (n=6) of children had been sexually abused by gang members/peers, 10% (n=5) by strangers, 2% (n=1) by a teacher, and 4% (n=2) by family members.

SURVEY TWO: CHILDREN WORKING IN TEA PLANTATIONS AND FACTORIES

The second survey aimed to find the status of school dropouts (i.e., those children who left school before graduating), establish the leading causes of dropping out, and understand their experiences since dropping out. As evidenced by the results below, the only alternative to school was often to work as a laborer in an area away from their living environment to meet their basic needs. Accordingly, the solution was to enter a job inside the tea estate or factory.

Demographics

Accordingly, 50 child laborers working in the tea plantations/factories and related services were included in responses from Survey 2. All 50 children were boys because girls in the plantation areas were usually involved in the childcare of their siblings rather than working in plantation/factory settings. The ages of Survey 2 children ranged between 16 to 19 years, with a median average age of 17 years old. Children worked in tea factories (44%, n = 22), in the tea gardens (26%, n = 13), and in other related factory support services, etc. (30%, n=15).

Education and Schooling

In Survey 2, questions regarding education and schooling focused on why the children left school and the circumstances surrounding this leave. When asked how far

they made it in school, a wide range of responses existed. Twelve per cent (n=6) of children made it up to grade 7, 34% (n=17) to grade 8, 30% (n=15) to grade 9, 18% (n=9) to grade 10, and 8% (n=4) to up to grade 11 before dropping out.

Children could choose more than one reason when asked why they left school, and the reasons given were similar across Surveys 2 and 3. Among them, 31 (62%) children dropped out of school and became child laborers because “their parents were poor.” Half the children, 26 (52%), were subjected to domestic violence, and these parents’ alcohol use was given as a reason for the domestic violence. There were 20 children (40%) who said the family could not meet their basic needs, including food, education, etc. Eighteen (36%) child laborers were abandoned by their father or mother and were cared for under another guardian, citing this as their reason for leaving school. There were 14 children (28%) who had dropped out of school, saying that they only needed to learn to read or write, and dropped out as they felt no need to learn further. Finally, 13 (26%) children left school due to the long-term closure of schools due to the effect of Covid-19. Figure 1 represents the frequency of reasons visually.

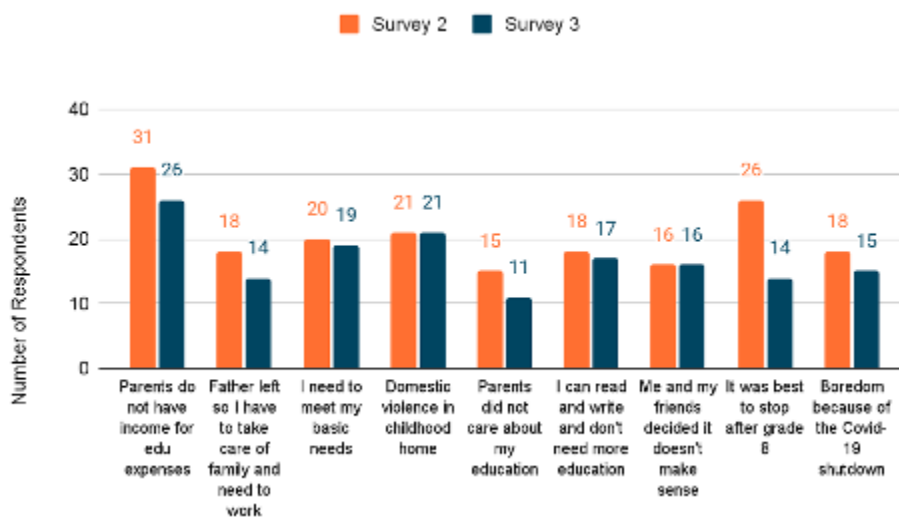


Figure 1: Reasons for Leaving School in Surveys 2 and 3

Workplace, Payment, and Benefits

In Survey 2, the next focus was on the children's jobs and payments and other benefits children receive for working. The children's jobs ranged significantly, and multiple children reported having multiple jobs. Most frequently reported was working in the tea plantations, where 20% (n=10) of children reported their current workplace. The subsequent most frequent jobs were weighing tea leaves in a factory (16%, n=8), factory canteen worker (helping and cleaning in a factory) reported by 14% (n=7) of children, houseboy in the tea estate bungalow (12%, n=6), and working in the factory fire burning shed (10%, n=5) among others.

Twenty-four children (48%) reported working six days a week, 10 (20%) children worked seven days a week, and another six children (12%) had not yet been given a fixed term of service, so it was not yet possible for them to say the exact number of days. Regarding pay, 21 (42%) children were paid less than 600 rupees (1.65 USD) per day. There were 17 (34%), children who received a salary between 3,000-3500 rupees (around 8-10 USD) per week, there were 8 (16%) children who received only

a food allowance, and there were 4 (8%) where their salary was not specified. When asked whether they could live on this wage, only 26% of children (n=13) reported that it was just enough to eat, 40% (n=20) reported that they live on nothing and send most of their money back home, and a third 34% (n=17) stated that even though it is not enough, there is nothing they can do about it.

Drug and Alcohol Use

Children were asked about their awareness and use of drugs and alcohol. The current study found that 48% (n=24) of children reported using alcohol. When asked in what context they drank alcohol, 28% (n=14) of children admitted to using alcohol because they were accustomed to drinking with their peers, 6% (n=3) reported drinking to relieve fatigue, and 18% (n=9) endorsed that other adults in their workplace forced them to drink alcohol. Regarding drug use, 18% (n=9) reported currently having a habit of using drugs, 26% (n=13) denied having this habit, and 42% (n=21) declined to answer the question.

Physical and Emotional Violence

Results showed that children (all child laborers working in factories or tea plantations) reported engaging in dangerous jobs with heavy physical exertion and being subject to physical and emotional violence. Thirty-eight per cent (n= 19) reported experiencing physical violence at work, and 22% (n=11) identified as victims of stigmatization and psychological distress while at work. Participants were also asked if they had experienced multiple types of harassment at work, including whether they had been subject to discrimination, wages not coming to them on time, limited time for rest periods, physical harassment, and being required to work even while sick. Table 2 outlines the frequencies of each type of harassment experienced at work.

Sexual Abuse

Twenty-eight per cent (n=14) of children reported sexual abuse in their lifetime. Twenty-six per cent (n=13) denied having experienced sexual abuse, and 34% (n=17) declined to answer the question. Among those that had been sexually abused, two participants (4%) reported being sexually abused in their home, 18% (n=9) in their village, and 18% (n=9) in another place. Children could choose more than one answer regarding where they had been sexually abused. Finally, when asked who perpetrated the sexual abuse against them (again, children could choose more than one answer), 4% (n=2) reported it was a stranger, 16% (n=8) stated it was a gang member, 14% (n=7) reported it was a teacher and 6% (n=3) reported the perpetrator was a family member.

SURVEY THREE: CHILDREN WORKING IN THE CITY AS CHILD LABORERS

Survey 3 aimed to find out what happened to children who left the plantation area and found work as a laborer in an area away from their childhood living environment to meet their survival needs. To do this, they had to look for a job in the second capital of the neighboring area, Kandy, or the main capital Colombo.

Demographics

A sample of 50 selected child laborers were surveyed for Survey 3. According to the survey data, 82% (n = 41) of children were boys. Only 18% (n = 9) were girls. In line with the previous survey, fewer girls were represented here, likely due to their

responsibilities in caring for siblings while their parents work. The participants' ages ranged from 15 to 21 years old, with an average age of 16.

Education and Schooling

Considering the educational status of these individuals, only six (12%) passed below grade 7, only 14 (28%) passed grade 8, and over half (54%, n=27) of this sample passed grades 9 or 10. The reasons why these children left school appear to be similar to those in Survey 2, and notably, children could report more than one reason for leaving school. Over half reported they dropped out because their parents could not afford their schooling (52%, n=26). Forty-two percent (n=21) reported dropping out because of domestic violence in their family home, 38% cited the need to meet their basic survival needs as the reason for dropping out (38%, n=19), and 34% (n=17) reported that they didn't field the need to continue school after they could read and write. Figure 1 represents the full results of reasons for dropping out.

Workplace, Payment, and Benefits

When asked about their current workplace, children reported there were 7 (14%) market porters, 11 (22%) cleaners working in workplaces or hotels, 9 (6%) waiters/cleaners in the restaurant, 7 (14%) people helping with concrete work at construction sites. Another 9 (18%) workers worked as housekeepers in the houses among other jobs. When asked about working hours at these jobs, 62% (n=31) of children worked six days a week. Ten (20%) reported working seven days a week, and 9 (18%) others were not given a fixed schedule of when to work (i.e., they responded that the number of days was not specified). A comparison of surveys 2 and 3 data regarding the number of working days and hours shows similar findings.

Table 2:

Comparison of Reported Number of Hours and Days Worked Weekly

| Survey | Number of Hours Worked | | | Number of Days Worked | | |
|----------|------------------------|-------|-----|-----------------------|--------|--------|
| | >10 | 10-12 | 12+ | 6 days | 7 days | Unsure |
| Survey 2 | 34% | 16% | 0% | 24% | 10% | 16% |
| Survey 3 | 33% | 14% | 0% | 23% | 14% | 15% |

According to the data collected on how much they earn, nearly a third (32%, n=16) of children were paid less than rupees 1000 (2.75 USD) per day. We found 19 (38%) children who receive a salary between 3000 - 5000 rupees (8.20 - 13.72 USD) per week, and 22% (n=11) reported only receiving a food allowance as compensation for work.

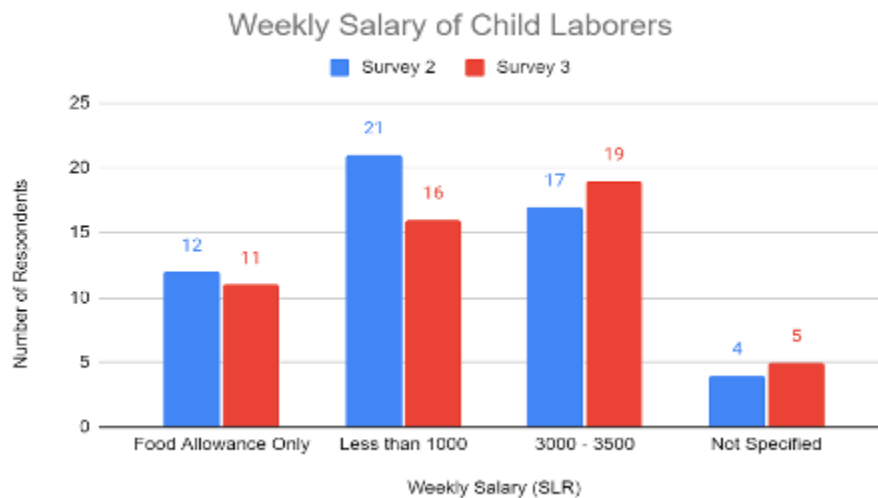


Figure 2. Weekly Salary of Child Laborers Across Surveys 2 and 3

There were 5 (10%) employees whose salaries were not fixed. They reported often having to accept any salary they were given. Comparing the data in surveys 2 and 3, those who worked in the city got paid more than the child laborers in the tea industry. Finally, when analyzing data on whether they send money back home, about 72% (n=36) of children in Survey 3 send 35%-55% of their earnings home through money orders for the benefit of their families.

Drug and Alcohol Use

Another adverse factor is that many individuals are more likely to be addicted to smoking, drugs, and alcohol compared to children in Survey 2. Twenty-one people (42%) admitted that they used alcohol or drugs, 12 (24%) people said they did not use it, and 16 (32%) people didn't want to respond. Greater than a quarter (13 or 26%) workers drank alcohol and smoked with peers, and about 9 (18%) of them were found to be forced to use alcohol or drugs by older workers. A third (33% n=16) stated that they use this alcohol to prevent excessive fatigue caused by work.

Physical and Emotional Violence

Results also found significant physical and emotional violence among city child laborers. Thirty-six per cent (n=18) of children in Survey 3 were physically abused at work, while over one-third (36%, n=18) were discriminated against and stigmatized in the workplace. Comparing these data with the physical abuse data from Survey 2 shows that urban child laborers (Survey 3) are more likely to report physical abuse experiences than those working in rural tea plantations and factories (Survey 2).

Sexual Abuse

Regarding sexual abuse, 16 (32%) of children in Survey 3 said they had experienced it, 12 (24%) said they had not, and 14 (28%) said they couldn't say. When asked where this occurred, two (4%) said it was in the house, five (10%) in the village, and nine (18%) said in the place they stayed in the city. When asked who did this to them, seven (14%) said it was a gang member, six (12%) said it was a teacher, three (6%) a family member, and two (4%) a stranger. This reporting of sexual abuse is higher compared to the data related to responses in Survey 2.

Sexual abuse appears to occur among boys living together of the same age. The survey revealed that sexual abuse between peers and gang members was reported by 43% of the sample (n=22). In addition, it was found that over a third, 38% (n= 19) of male children were sexually abused by older workers. This was higher compared to the data of Survey 2.

DISCUSSION

The data reveals an extremely high incidence of poverty, violence, and abuse among children from tea plantations, both in and outside the schools. Urgent action is needed to support the children and ensure their safety against future exploitation and abuse. Specifically, the current results provide insights into the experiences of abuse and exploitation of children in and outside of the tea plantations in relation to:

- *Schooling and education:* Children face barriers accessing a quality education, leading to a higher risk of dropout, limited future prospects, and vulnerability to exploitation.
- *Work, income generation, and salaries:* Forced into child labor due to poverty, children are often denied fair wages and appropriate working conditions, making them susceptible to further exploitation.
- *Sexual abuse and exploitation:* Children, particularly girls, are sexually harassed, assaulted, and exploited both in and outside the tea plantations, often perpetrated by adults in positions of power.
- *Drug and alcohol use:* Exposed to substance abuse, children may fall victim to addiction or be coerced into using drugs or alcohol as a means of control by their exploiters.

SCHOOLING AND EDUCATION

People understand that education is essential for children to pursue better job opportunities, yet, at the time of Survey 1, children in tea plantation schools reported multiple instances of violence and stigma from both teachers and fellow students. Additionally, 48% of the children in Survey 1 mentioned they didn't envision themselves completing school. They cited various reasons, such as inadequate school resources, insufficient family income to support their education, and the pressure to find a job and start earning money.

Although studies specifically examining Sri Lankan tea plantations are limited, previous research on school dropout rates among children shows that leaving school before completion can significantly affect their job prospects, income generation, and opportunities for further education and employment (Huisman & Smits, 2015). Survey 2 and 3 results indicate that children who didn't finish school faced harsh, often abusive, labor working environments. These findings emphasize the importance of keeping children in school and addressing the discrimination and violence they encounter.

Household and Parental Influence on Staying in School

As some of the most influential figures in their children's lives, parents should be aware of potential vulnerabilities for children who leave school. For instance, parents must be committed to reducing negative peer pressure, as peers greatly affect a child's success or failure by influencing their beliefs and behaviors in and out of school.

Additionally, teachers and police should address and take seriously the bullying of children in and outside of school. Regrettably, many school development committees involving collaboration between teachers and parents have become inactive. Establishing and maintaining an effective mechanism between teachers and estate school parents is crucial to monitor children's educational progress and take necessary actions to encourage and support those who wish to remain in school.

The findings of the current study emphasize the significant role of the home environment in children's lives and their decisions about school, work, and location. For example, many children in Surveys 2 and 3 mentioned a lack of family support as their reason for leaving school. It seems reasonable to assume that providing adults with sufficient income would allow children to avoid work and complete their education. Ensuring children's learning, safety, and security early in life can profoundly impact their ability to finish their education and secure a decent job.

WORK, INCOME GENERATION AND WAGES

Wages and working conditions differed between children in Surveys 2 and 3. The majority of children working in tea plantation areas (Survey 2) earned very little (76% reported earning less than \$10 a day), with some only receiving food as compensation. Children working in cities (Survey 3) earned more than those in tea plantation areas, yet 70% still made less than \$14 a day, which was insufficient to cover living expenses. Although daily salaries can be higher in cities, living expenses are also significantly higher. The study found that most children working in cities sent money back to their families or frequently returned to the tea plantations to care for relatives. These wages are not sustainable for anyone, especially children who often share their income with family members.

Moreover, not all children in Surveys 2 and 3 had set wages. For instance, 10% of children working in cities (Survey 3) didn't know their expected salary, weren't paid on a fixed schedule, and had to accept whatever compensation they were offered. Similarly, 8% of children in tea plantation jobs (Survey 2) were unsure of the compensation they would receive. The widespread exploitative child labor and insufficient or nonexistent remuneration underscore a troubling situation that demands immediate action from tea companies and the Sri Lankan government.

SEXUAL ABUSE AND EXPLOITATION

Unlivable wages often exacerbate the existing or ongoing sexual abuse and exploitation of children across all three surveys. Notably, while the average age of children in all surveys was approximately 16 years old, about one-third of participants reported being sexually abused in their lifetime in Surveys 1 (30%), 2 (28%), and 3 (32%). Children from all surveys identified line houses as a persistent setting for sexual abuse. Specifically, among the children in Survey 1 who currently lived on the plantation estates, all those who reported sexual abuse stated that it occurred in the context of line rooms on the estates. Line rooms often simultaneously accommodate multiple families and estate members, increasing the risk of a young child sharing a room with an adult who might harm them.

Sexual Abuse By Teachers

Sexual abuse by teachers, although not constantly the most prevalent, emerged as a notable perpetrator of sexual abuse across all three surveys. This abuse can potentially scare or deter students from completing their education if they feel unsafe in their learning environment. On average, over 9% of children reported being sexually

abused by their teachers during their lifetimes across all three surveys (Survey 1: 2%, Survey 2: 14%, and Survey 3: 12%). It's possible that children in school were more reluctant to share their experiences of abuse. Official detection of sexual abuse by teachers in schools is limited, making it a sensitive issue. In some cases, people only report such types of sexual abuse after a significant period of time (Withana, 2021).

Educational authorities and non-governmental organizations must intervene to update educational and community mobilization programs that educate children about sexual abuse, body rights, sexual exploitation, alcohol and drug abuse, and child rights. However, this effort will only succeed if adults, including teachers and those in NGOs, receive proper training on the importance of protecting children. The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, ratified by the Sri Lankan Government and supported by the National Child Protection Authority, can be a strong foundation for developing and implementing education and prevention programs in school systems.

DRUG AND ALCOHOL USE

Despite having a similar average age of 16 years old, children in Surveys 2 (48%) and 3 (42%) exhibited a significantly higher level of alcohol consumption compared to those in Survey 1 (30%). Besides consuming alcohol with their peers, 18% of children across Surveys 2 and 3 reported older adults in their work environment had forced them to use alcohol and/or drugs. On tea plantations (Survey 2), children may be more likely to drink with older peers at night or be asked to buy alcohol for older workers, putting themselves at greater risk. Urban child laborers (Survey 3) are more likely to drink in groups because they live in an environment with less protection or restrictions. They collect money from peers to buy alcohol and often drink together to relieve the stress from hard labor during the day.

This peer pressure and environment frequently initiate a cycle of alcohol consumption starting from childhood, where individuals use drinking to alleviate mental and emotional discomfort, intense physical exertion, and oppressive social conditions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To help decrease education dropout rates in the tea plantation system, the contributing causes were analyzed separately in the three surveys. The resulting implications and recommendations pertain to three main domains: financial, school system reform, child labor reduction and housing and household functioning initiatives.

FINANCIAL INITIATIVES

Several financial barriers contribute to the rising dropout rate of children in tea plantation school systems. Such challenges make it difficult for children to continue their education, purchase school supplies, and meet their nutritional needs. Planning and implementing additional income generation projects to allocate revenue to ameliorate impoverished conditions must be explored. Currently, landowners have only allotted 20 per cent of the land near the line rooms. The remaining land could be used as a home garden to increase the cultivation of vegetables and allow for initiatives to raise a greater number of livestock. This would provide a partial solution for food shortages and nutritional deficiencies experienced by people living in tea plantation areas. Furthermore, additional income obtained through selling excess produce items can be used to cover children's educational expenses.

INTERNAL SCHOOL SYSTEM REFORM INITIATIVES

The survey findings revealed that girls often miss school because they need to care for younger siblings when both parents are at work. To address this issue, alternative childcare options should be considered. Although kindergarten nurseries have been part of the plantation system since its inception, several problems within the nursery systems, such as finding trained staff and accessing resource materials, prevent them from being reliable childcare options. Ensuring effective kindergarten nurseries could provide a sustainable solution to childcare needs. One possible approach is encouraging tea factories to contribute to the costs associated with building and operating nurseries, enabling children who care for siblings to attend school.

Moreover, monitoring programs should be launched to train parents and teachers to track school attendance and educational activities using standardized tests. To enhance safety in schools and prevent experiences of violence, including bullying and sexual assault, several initiatives should be implemented. For example, introducing and requiring all teachers to sign child safeguarding policies can reduce the risk of sexual abuse. The tea industry should be encouraged to develop child safeguarding policies within factories and plantations, such as appointing safeguarding officers to enforce policies and address complaints about bullying, intimidation, sexual harassment, and abuse.

Education in tea estate schools is characterized by a lack of resources, qualified teachers, and adequate facilities. Underqualified teachers often teach subjects vital for employment in a rapidly developing nation like Sri Lanka, such as English and Information Technology. Training programs aimed at instructing teachers on effectively teaching these subjects would improve the quality of education for children in tea plantation schools. Additionally, full-time involvement of educational policymakers and estate school administration at provincial and national levels is needed to explore suitable measures for retaining plantation teachers and providing necessary teaching equipment and infrastructure.

HOUSING AND HOUSEHOLD FUNCTIONING INITIATIVES

Addressing the issue of creating a peaceful home environment that supports children's educational needs is highly important. To achieve this, parental and child alcohol abuse, as well as domestic sexual violence, must be tackled. Launching safety and care programs to protect school-aged children from violence and abuse can be an effective strategy to address these issues.

Tea estates' living conditions are significantly worse than in other areas in Sri Lanka. Subasinghe's (2018) analysis highlights that people living on tea estates have poorer living standards than urban and rural areas. These individuals are less likely to have access to basic amenities, such as clean drinking water, sanitation facilities, and electricity. The absence of toilets and running water greatly affects women in tea estates, as they are forced to use bushes for bathing and other needs, exposing them to unwanted sexual attention.

The contribution of tea companies towards improving living conditions is currently insufficient. While some estate companies and governmental organizations have initiated efforts to enhance housing conditions in tea plantations, more needs to be done. Non-governmental organizations are also working to address educational and housing issues but face limited resources (World Bank, 2015). Therefore, tea companies should allocate additional funding and resources to address housing concerns and improve the living conditions of those residing in tea estates.

CHILD LABOR REDUCTION INITIATIVES

A key finding of this study is that a significant percentage of school dropouts become child laborers. In 2021, Sri Lanka made moderate progress towards eliminating the worst forms of child labor. The government revised the list of hazardous occupations to include domestic workers. It amended the Minimum Wages Ordinance, the Shop and Office Workers Act, and the Women, Young Persons and Child Employment Act. The minimum employment age was raised from 14 to 16 years (Bureau of International Labor Affairs, 2021).

Initial meetings with relevant authorities to implement labor laws related to the employment of children and youth are under consideration. Additionally, the option of referring children to relevant child welfare agencies, including the Department of Probation and Child Protection Services and regional secretaries, is being explored.

Several ministries, departments, and agencies hold the legal authority to enforce criminal laws against child labor. The National Child Protection Authority, the Criminal Investigation Department of the Sri Lankan Police, and the Attorney General's Department are responsible for enforcing criminal laws against child trafficking and forced child labor. In the future, initiatives to raise awareness in the plantation community about these institutions and their functions should be implemented to strengthen the fight against child labor.

ACTIONS CURRENTLY BEING LAUNCHED IN RESPONSE TO SURVEY FINDINGS

In response to the current study's findings, The Youth Voice International (the organizational partner) discusses the results and plans to use them to inform intervention and prevention efforts. For example, the findings underscore the need for viable educational options and resources for children living in tea plantations, both for their present education and future success. As a result, The Youth Voice International is working to expand services related to educational resources, such as school uniforms and supplies.

Additionally, they are developing a comprehensive social empowerment program for families to raise awareness of the challenges identified in the study. Interventions at the policy level are also necessary. Specifically, we believe that discussions and awareness of the findings should occur among a broad range of education policymakers at the national level.

Lastly, an initiative to improve the relationship between teachers and parents of students is essential. Meetings to discuss finances have taken place, yielding positive outcomes regarding parental participation in education efforts. This collaborative approach between teachers and parents can further enhance the educational outcomes for children living in tea plantations.

GOVERNMENT INTERVENTION

Achieving the goal of 'education for all' is challenging for school children in the plantation sector, despite the government's efforts. Identifying the root causes of school dropout is crucial, as it is a national issue that society should address. Overcoming this situation requires mechanisms beyond traditional approaches and a team effort involving non-traditional students, parents, teachers, administrators, community-based organizations, businesses, and the government, working together towards a common national goal.

It is vital that child labor is not employed in the tea industry or for minor jobs in urban environments. Regulations must be established to prevent the employment of child laborers in the tea industry and other sectors. Child labor trafficking should be prosecuted under the law, and children must be protected from discrimination, and physical, financial, and sexual abuse, often inflicted by adults looking to exploit them for labor.

The Probation and Child Protection Authority of the Government of Sri Lanka should actively work to protect children from traffickers and eliminate these crimes. Additionally, the Ministry of Labor should regularly monitor the situation to ensure that existing laws against the use of child labor are appropriately enforced. The Child Protection Authority must also ensure that appropriate laws and ordinances are effectively implemented to protect children from traffickers. Those involved in the trafficking and exploitation of children for labor in urban areas should be punished and fined adequately. Families of children found to be victims of child labor should be compensated appropriately. Relevant authorities should also act proactively in prosecuting anyone involved in the trafficking and exploiting children for labor in urban areas of the island.

CONCLUSION

The current study found that opportunities and motivation are crucial factors in obtaining an education. Adequate physical and human resources are essential for improving and providing better educational opportunities. Investing in education is vital. A lack of such resources in a family background is significantly associated with school dropouts, especially in the plantation community. Social and economic disadvantages due to low family privileges negatively affect the school experience of the plantation social class.

Children from these families attend schools that lack adequate education facilities. Consequently, they become more vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. On the one hand, no compelling factors motivate children to stay longer in school. On the other hand, the socioeconomic background of these school children drives them to drop out of school and engage in non-educational activities to help their parents with their economic burdens and financial gains, either in the tea industry or the cities. This situation exposes them to abuse, exploitation, and child labor.

To address these challenges, it is essential to promote educational opportunities and improve the lives of children in the plantation community while simultaneously implementing measures to protect them from abuse and exploitation. By creating a safe and supportive educational environment, providing resources, and raising awareness about the dangers of child labor and exploitation, children in the plantation community can better overcome the barriers to their education and enjoy a brighter future.

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