



Women in Assam

Factsheet

Overview

Gender inequality is a significant issue in India, with women and girls being the most disadvantaged. India ranks 123 out of 189 countries in the United Nations Gender Inequality Index, indicating that major work needs to be done to reduce the gender gap across the country.¹

Assam, one of eight states in Northeast India, has a growing population of over 31 million, with the majority living and working in rural communities² More than half of India's tea is produced in Assam, and the state alone is responsible for one-seventh of global tea production.³ The tea plantation sector employs around one million women in Assam across more than 800 tea estates.⁴

The World Bank reports that around a third of the state's population lives below the poverty line.⁵ Women and children are most likely to suffer from poverty and its impacts, such as violence, poor health, and a lack of access to education and employment.

While there has recently been an increased awareness of gender issues in Assam, inequality remains high. Maternal mortality and anaemia rates are the highest in India, and issues such as illiteracy, malnutrition and gender-based violence remain a major concern.

This factsheet highlights the extent of some of these issues, using references and key data points from third party sources.

Tea

Under the Plantation Labour Act, tea estates are required to provide a range of welfare services to tea workers and their families, including housing, education, healthcare, drinking water, maternity benefits and childcare facilities.⁶

However, these services are not always provided at a decent quality, and government schemes are yet to reach all tea communities.⁷ This tends to impact women the most as they fare worse in social and economic indicators than their male counterparts.

Women working on estates typically pluck the tea – the lowest paid and most labour-intensive job. Their time outside of work is mainly spent carrying out domestic tasks such as housework, childcare, and looking after elderly family members.⁸

Education

Improving access to education is vital when addressing gender inequality. Education leads to a number of benefits for women, from better health outcomes and employment opportunities to higher incomes and improved economic stability.⁹



The educational status of women in Assam lags behind other states in India. Less than a third (29.6%) of women have completed ten or more years of schooling, and female enrolment in primary and secondary education is 50% and 45%, respectively.¹⁰

75% of women in Assam are literate, compared to 82% of men.¹¹ Literacy rates on tea estates are lower, and on some estates, just 22% of female workers are literate.¹²

The average number of school years that girls complete is significantly higher in urban areas (8.1) than in rural areas (4.8).¹³ While most tea estates have primary school facilities on site, secondary schools can be located far away from communities, and school bus services are often not available.¹⁴

For many young women without an education, employment on tea gardens can be the only option. Given the levels of poverty, school fees often act as a barrier for families.¹⁵

Women's Economic Status

In Assam, a higher percentage of women (60%) are actively involved in household decision-making compared to the national average in India, which

stands at 37%.¹⁶ Despite this, only 29% of women in Assam have access to money that they can decide how to spend. This figure is even lower among rural women, at just 27%.¹⁷

Assam has one of India's lowest female workforce participation rates. From 2019 to 2021, just 21% of women were employed, compared with 83% of men.¹⁸ Tea-growing areas have the highest employment levels for women.¹⁹ However, women are often hired as temporary workers and are more vulnerable due to not being eligible for welfare entitlements under the Plantation Labour Act.²⁰

Child Marriage

The consequences of child marriage are far-reaching and particularly harmful for women, their children, and their communities.²¹ These include poorer health outcomes for young mothers and their children, lower levels of educational attainment, and continued poverty amongst women.²²

Child marriage in Assam is among the highest in India. It impacts an estimated 5 million girls in Assam, with a third of women aged 20-24 being married before reaching the legal minimum age of 18.²³

Girls living in rural areas with limited access to education are at the highest risk.²⁴ In 2019, 56% of women who lived in poor rural areas and had little or no education were married before 18.²⁵ Education empowers girls to challenge discriminatory norms, while schools offer a secure environment to prevent early marriages.²⁶ Poverty plays an important role as marriage can be seen to bring financial security to both the girl and her family.²⁷

Gender-Based Violence

Violence against women is both a cause and consequence of gender inequality and unequal



power relations in families, marriage, and society more broadly.²⁸

Over a third (34%) of women in Assam have experienced gender-based violence (GBV), and spousal violence is higher in rural areas (35%) than in urban areas (28%).²⁹ Women living in Assam are especially vulnerable as the state has the highest rate of crime against women in India.³⁰

Discriminatory social norms and beliefs are key drivers of GBV.³¹ Other factors include poverty, a lack of education and opportunities, and inadequate law enforcement.³²

Health

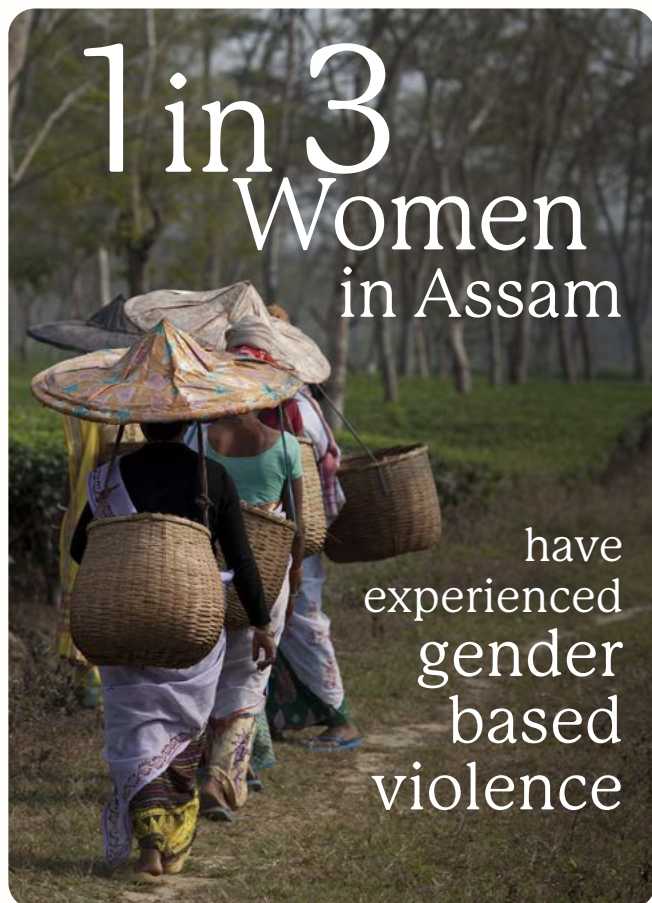
Anaemia is a significant health concern in Assam, with cases among women growing by 20% between 2015-2020.³³ Women that live and work on tea estates are particularly vulnerable; 97% are anaemic, compared with around 66% of women across Assam.³⁴



Iron deficiency and poor nutrition are considered to be the main causes of anaemia. Other causes include malaria and hookworm infections, which are more common when working in tea fields. Anaemia can have many adverse effects on women, including maternal and fetal mortality, diminished physical and mental ability, and an increased vulnerability to infectious diseases.³⁵

Poor nutrition causes other negative health impacts for women in Assam. 18% of women are underweight, and around half of women living on tea estates are stunted.³⁶

While Assam has been reporting a decline in its maternal mortality rate (MMR) in recent years, numbers are still the highest in India at 215 deaths per 100,000 – almost double the national level.³⁷ A lack of access to quality healthcare services and a high prevalence of anaemia are among the key drivers in Assam. MMR rates are significantly higher in tea growing districts of Assam.³⁸





ETP's programmes

Supporting women and children is a priority of our work in India. It is a cross-cutting issue and therefore carefully considered across all our programme activity, as outlined in our [Strategy 2030](#).

To date, our programmes have aimed to reduce child marriage and unsafe migration, help young people stay in education and decrease the risk of GBV, abuse, and exploitation.

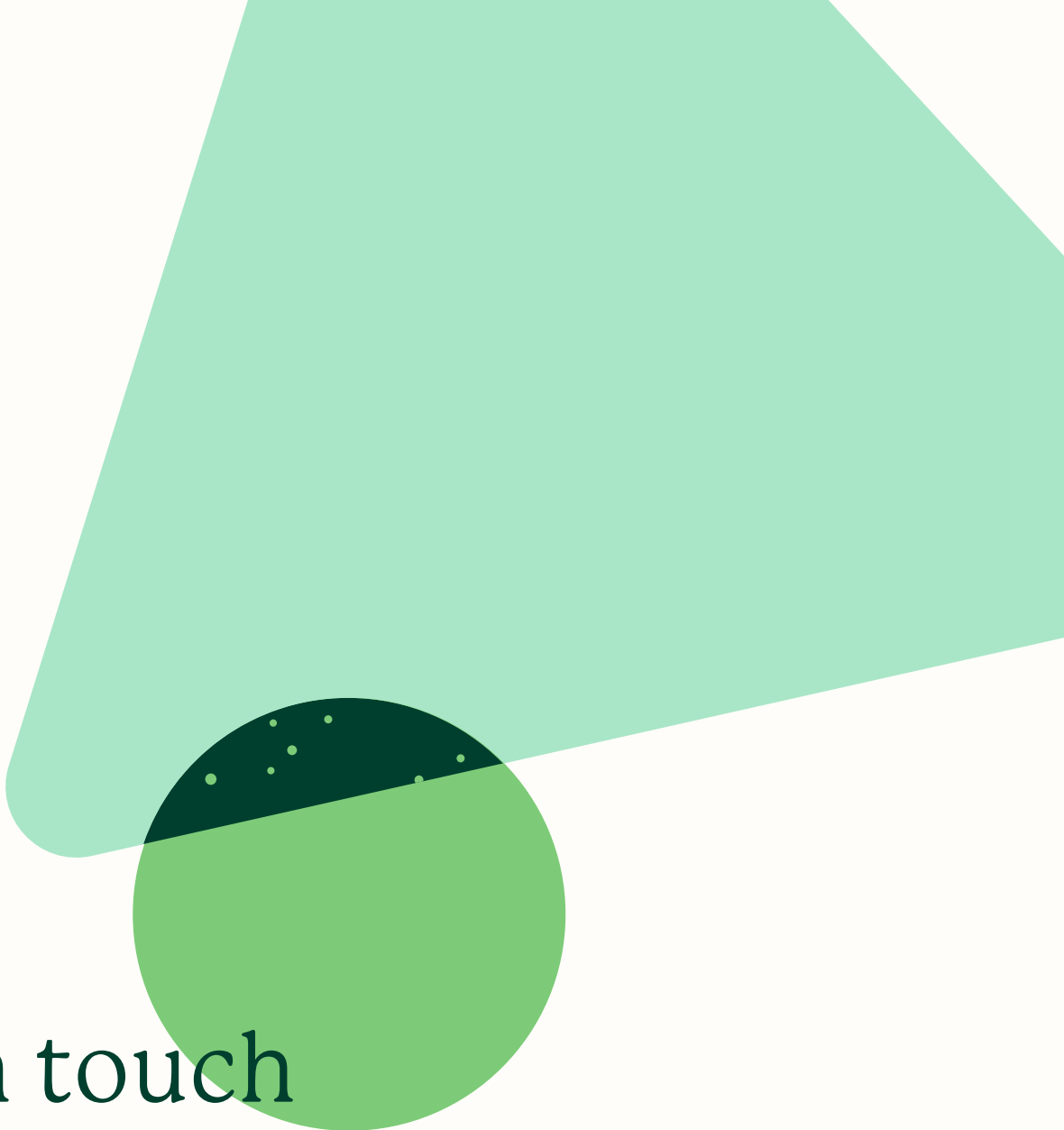
By [working in partnership with UNICEF](#), we have improved the lives of nearly 300,000 women, girls, and boys across 200 tea estates in Assam. We're also supporting women in Assam to have healthier diets, as well as improving their sanitation facilities and the services available for new mothers.

Our Plantation Community Empowerment Project (PCEP) brings together workers, management, estate residents, and the wider community to ensure a shared understanding and ownership of the challenges they face. The initiative has empowered women and young people, giving them a voice in addressing a number of systemic issues, from improving women's safety to tackling alcoholism on tea estates.

Click [here](#) to learn more about our work in India.

Sources

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Published March 2022

