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Migrant Labour, Precarious Employment and Marginalised Communities in Tea

ETP Blog

Background

Labour vulnerability in the tea sector is shaped by historical marginalisation, migration status, and ethnic identity. While human rights risks vary significantly by context and important progress has been made in many countries, women, ethnic minorities, indigenous peoples, and migrant workers may face overlapping barriers that increase risks of human rights violations including labour exploitation, discrimination, and sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment (SEAH). Understanding how these factors interact is important for effective human rights due diligence (HRDD).

The global tea sector has historically relied on migrant labour. In India and Sri Lanka, plantation labour systems developed during the colonial period involved large-scale migration, including forms of indentured labour characterised by highly restrictive and exploitative conditions, to establish and sustain tea plantations. The social and economic legacies of these systems continue to influence the conditions experienced by some plantation communities today, including marginalisation linked to ethnicity, caste and historical labour structures. In Malawi, colonial labour recruitment also played a role, and its legacies continue to shape patterns of internal migration to tea-growing districts and economic insecurity within the Malawian tea industry today.

In other tea-producing countries, such as Kenya, Rwanda and Indonesia, whilst colonial recruitment patterns were less pronounced, contemporary tea production increasingly relies on temporary, casual and migrant workers. These workers may face higher risks of labour rights violations due to insecure employment arrangements, limited access to benefits, and reduced bargaining power compared to permanent workers. Recognising these risks is essential for strengthening responsible supply chains and improving working conditions across the sector.

ETP takes a rights-based and intersectional approach, working with partners to uphold and advance the rights of tea-growing communities in all their diversity, including migrant workers and people from historically marginalised communities. This factsheet draws on available evidence to highlight key risks and dynamics affecting these groups in the tea sector and outlines ETP's approach to supporting more inclusive and equitable tea supply chains.

Box 1: Relevant international legal and policy frameworks

- The International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (1990) sets out comprehensive protections across the migration cycle, including non-discrimination and fair working conditions.
- Key ILO Conventions include Convention No. 97 (Migration for Employment), Convention No. 143 (Migrant Workers), the Forced Labour Conventions (C29 and C105) and the 2014 Forced Labour Protocol, which establish standards on equal treatment, protection from abusive recruitment and freedom from forced labour.
- The UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs) and the OECD-FAO Guidance for Responsible Agricultural Supply Chains explicitly recognise migrant workers as a group facing heightened human rights risks within global supply chains, and require companies to conduct risk-based due diligence.
- **Human Rights and Environmental Due Diligence (HRDD):** Reflecting the UNGPs and emerging regulatory due diligence frameworks, HRDD requires companies to identify, prevent, mitigate, and address potential and actual adverse human rights impacts in their operations and supply chains.

- **Gender-responsive HRDD:** Companies should integrate a gender lens into HRDD processes to identify and address how risks affect women and men differently, including where gender intersects with migration status, ethnicity or employment precarity, often increasing risks related to discrimination, sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment (SEAH), and barriers to accessing remedy.

Historically marginalised communities in tea

In India and Sri Lanka, the tea sector was historically shaped by colonial-era labour systems that relied on large-scale, often forced or semi-forced, migration to establish and sustain tea plantations. The social and economic effects of these systems continue to influence many plantation communities today. Many workers are descendants of these earlier migrant populations and continue to live in estate regions where tea remains central to local economies. While conditions have improved through government services, industry initiatives and civil society activities, estate areas may still experience challenges linked to geographic isolation, limited livelihood diversification, and longstanding social hierarchies. In Malawi, colonial labour systems also influenced the development of the tea sector, with labour migration from poorer regions of the country and neighbouring Mozambique shaping workforce patterns that continue to be reflected in tea-growing districts today.

India

In India, according to the 2011 census, Adivasi[*] tea communities account for approximately 18% of Assam's population,[1] despite originating from other parts of the country. From the 1840s, British tea planters forcibly recruited Adivasi populations from central India (including Jharkhand, Bihar, Chhattisgarh and Odisha) to work on tea estates in Assam and North Bengal. During the colonial period, workers faced severe mobility restrictions, social isolation, and exploitative recruitment and employment conditions that would today be widely recognised as forms of indentured or bonded labour.[2]

Over generations, these populations have formed a distinct plantation-based community that forms a major part of India's tea workforce. Adivasi tea communities comprise diverse ethnic groups and these communities maintain unique cultural traditions, often reflecting a deep connection to nature. Multiple languages are used, including Nagpuri and Sadri, alongside Assamese and Hindi.[2]

Despite their long-standing centrality to tea production in India, many Adivasi estate communities continue to experience socio-economic disadvantage. Workers are concentrated in the lowest-paid and most labour-intensive roles on tea estates and remain under-represented in supervisory and management positions. Most continue to live in estate-provided housing, and rely on employers for housing, food, and access to health and education, which can limit livelihood diversification opportunities and contribute to intergenerational economic vulnerability. A struggle for formal recognition as Scheduled Tribes (ST) for many Adivasi tea communities acts as a barrier to accessing state protections, affirmative action measures, education, healthcare, land rights, and political representation.[3]

Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka's tea plantation sector also developed under British colonial rule, with labour migration from South India playing an important role in the early workforce. Today, many estate communities trace their family heritage to these early plantation workers and are Sri Lankan citizens, having been granted full citizenship in 2004. These

[*] The term 'Adivasi' is commonly translated as 'original inhabitants' or 'indigenous peoples'.

communities are commonly referred to as Malaiyaga Tamil (also known as Up-Country or Hill-Country Tamils). According to 2024 estimates from the Department of Census and Statistics, they represent around 2.8% of the total population, although earlier census data (2012) recorded a higher share of 4.2%, reflecting changes over time linked to migration, urbanisation and self-identification. Approximately 150,000 Malaiyaga Tamils are estimated to work directly on tea estates.

Estate communities remain an important part of the tea sector workforce, alongside a wider labour force that includes smallholder farmers and other workers. Although access to free public education has expanded opportunities for younger generations, plantations often struggle to provide diversified, skilled and dignified career pathways that attract and retain youth. These dynamics are influenced by a range of factors, including the historical development of the plantation system, regional differences, and broader economic and social factors, including those related to ethnicity, caste and minority status.

Malawi

In Malawi, the development of the tea sector was also shaped by colonial-era labour systems, particularly in the Thyolo and Mulanje districts where large tea estates were established under British colonial rule.[4] Labour was historically recruited from poorer regions of the country, as well as from what is now Mozambique, within colonial labour systems characterised by significant power imbalances, in some cases, forms of coercion.[5] Many current workers in tea-growing areas are part of these long-standing labour flows and rely on seasonal or temporary employment on tea estates or smallholder farms. While the sector has evolved, structural challenges remain, including low wages, limited livelihood diversification and reliance on casual labour, driving persistent economic insecurity, which increases vulnerability to SEAH.

Precarious employment and migrant labour in tea today

Migrant workers are among the most vulnerable workers in global supply chains. Migration status can limit bargaining power, create documentation and language barriers, and restrict access to worker representation and leadership roles. These structural disadvantages mean that migrant workers are disproportionately concentrated in precarious employment, including temporary contracts, casual labour, and outsourced roles (see Box 2).

Box 2: Precarious Employment Terminology in the Tea Sector

- **Temporary work:** Fixed-term contracts (e.g. seasonal or 3–6 months), usually involving some form of contractual documentation but without long-term security.
- **Casual work:** Short-term, often day-rate or piece-rate employment, often used during peak plucking seasons and typically without guaranteed hours.
- **Outsourced work:** Labour supplied through third-party contractors rather than directly employed by the tea producer. Often short-term and task-based, and usually involves weaker access to benefits, representation and grievance mechanisms.
- **Informal work:** Employment outside formal legal protections or social security systems, including undeclared or unregistered arrangements.

- **Precarious employment:** An umbrella term describing employment characterised by insecurity, income instability, limited social protection and heightened dependency, which can include casual, temporary, outsourced or informal work.

While some precarious roles in tea are filled by local workers, migrant workers and historically marginalised communities are often overrepresented, increasing their exposure to labour exploitation and other human rights violations.

Across the tea sector, employment is increasingly casualised or temporary, characterised by insecure contracts, fluctuating income, and limited employment guarantees.[6] Internal migration to tea-producing regions is common, especially during peak harvesting seasons, for seasonal and casual tea plucking work.

In Kenya, most labour mobility within the tea sector takes the form of internal migration rather than cross-border migration. Hundreds of thousands of casual pluckers, often young, landless women, migrate from neighbouring counties or other rural areas to work in tea-growing zones. Employment is largely informal and based on daily or piece-rate work, resulting in fluctuating incomes and limited access to contracts, social protection or worker representation. Where workers move between areas with different languages or ethnic groups, they may face language and cultural barriers that can limit access to information, services and support networks.[11]

Labour dynamics vary across regions in Kenya. In the East of the Rift Valley, tea production is largely smallholder-based, with most farms relying on family labour, although some larger farms hire temporary or seasonal workers. In this region, demand for labour from Western Kenya, often perceived as more efficient tea pluckers, has sustained flows of migrant workers. In the West of the Rift Valley, larger estates dominate, where increasing mechanisation and a shift towards temporary and seasonal contracts to limit long-term financial obligations such as social security, are also contributing to the casualisation of labour. The use of third-party labour contractors is also growing in Kenya, particularly on larger estates, with workers facing unclear terms of employment, irregular or delayed payments, and limited access to grievance mechanisms.

A similar pattern of migration is evident in Rwanda, where tea-growing regions in the Southern, Western, and Northern Provinces serve as key destinations for migrant workers.[7] Migrants comprise 10.6% of Rwanda's population aged 16 and above, with internal migrants showing higher labour force participation (74%) and employment-to-population ratios (62.6%) than the national average. Agriculture, including tea cultivation, is the dominant employer in these regions, engaging 21.4% of internal migrant workers and 22.6% of international migrant workers.[7] Tea-growing districts such as Nyaruguru, Nyamagabe, Huye, Karongi, Nyamasheke, Rusizi, Gicumbi, and Burera have particularly high agricultural employment, with women often outnumbering men in these roles. These dynamics indicate that Rwanda's tea-growing regions are critical hubs for internal migrant labour, highlighting the need to consider gendered and migration-related vulnerabilities in HRDD risk assessments.

In Malawi, there is widespread use of temporary and seasonal labour on tea estates in Mulanje and Thyolo. In early 2025, inspections of tea estates by Malawi's Minister of Labour, Vitumbiko Mumba, reported tea estates repeatedly renewing 11-month contracts.[8] This practice increases economic insecurity for the workers and limits their access to permanent employment benefits such as pensions.

In India, reliance on non-permanent labour is also increasing, driven by cost-reduction pressures. An Oxfam study in 2021 estimated that only 39% of workers in tea plantations in Assam can be considered permanent workers, whilst the remaining 61% are temporary workers.[9] Across tea-producing regions, both smallholder and plantation operations frequently recruit seasonal workers during peak plucking periods to meet

labour demand. Whilst some temporary or seasonal workers may be relatives of permanent workers and are already living in the tea estates, others are internal migrants recruited from further away. For example, in South India (e.g. Tamil Nadu), workers are often recruited from other states via labour providers.[10]

Many of these risks are linked to precarious employment, which increases workers' economic dependency on employers and limits their ability to negotiate conditions or raise concerns. These risks can be further compounded where workers are perceived as "outsiders" due to ethnicity, caste, or historic marginalisation.

In practice, this can result in:[10,11]

- Exclusion from trade unions, worker-management dialogue or collective bargaining structures;
- Limited access to grievance mechanisms and effective remedy;
- Exclusion from non-wage benefits tied to permanent status (e.g. housing, rations, healthcare, education);
- Concentration in lower-paid, lower-status roles, with limited access to leadership positions;
- Greater exposure to wage theft, unsafe conditions, excessive hours and inadequate living conditions;
- Recruitment-related costs, wage advances or deductions (particularly where labour intermediaries are used), which deepen economic dependency.

These structural vulnerabilities can escalate to labour exploitation, and in more severe cases, to forced labour and SEAH. Whilst there is little evidence on the prevalence of human rights abuses faced by migrant workers in the tea sector specifically, and available data is often fragmented or context-specific, the broader agri-food supply chain is the employment sector most frequently linked to migrant worker abuse globally.[12]

Addressing intersectional risks

Intersectionality refers to how different factors, such as gender, migration status, ethnicity and employment type, interact to shape people's experiences of risk and access to rights. In the tea sector, this means that some workers, such as migrant women or women from historically marginalised communities, may face compounded risks that are not captured when these factors are considered in isolation. For companies, this means that risk assessments need to consider how these factors combine in practice, rather than looking at each risk group separately.

Box 3: Intersecting Factors Increasing SEAH Risks in Kenyan Tea Estates

Women in the tea sector are disproportionately concentrated in lower-paid, labour-intensive and precarious roles, particularly casual plucking. Evidence from Kenyan tea estates indicates that the combination of gender inequality and precarious employment is a key driver of sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment (SEAH).

Recent studies show that women workers in Kenyan tea estates are often employed through casual or seasonal arrangements, with women frequently relocating to access employment and employer-provided housing. These roles are characterised by limited job security, low and variable incomes, and restricted access to formal labour protections, grievance mechanisms and worker representation.[13] High levels of dependency on employers for housing, food and childcare can further constrain workers' ability to refuse or report abusive behaviour. Other factors, such as tribal affiliations and disability can also shape how workers are treated by management.[14]

These overlapping factors can reinforce unequal power dynamics and increase exposure to SEAH.

Beyond SEAH risks, these intersecting dynamics can also increase vulnerability to excessive working hours, withheld wages, unsafe working conditions, poor housing, and limited access to healthcare and social protection. Insecure contracts, combined with unpaid care responsibilities, further constrain many women's ability to assert their rights or seek remedy.

Given the heightened human rights risks faced by migrant workers, particularly women, in the tea supply chain, tea packers and retailers need to prioritise them in their HRDD risk assessments and mitigation measures. Within this, businesses should integrate a gender and intersectional lens to recognise that women, indigenous or ethnic minority workers, and those in precarious employment may face compounded risks.

HRDD processes should explicitly identify how risks differ for migrant and casual workers, including where insecure or short-term contracts discourage workers from reporting abuse due to fear of losing work or income. This structural dependency can significantly limit the effectiveness of grievance mechanisms, even where these are formally available. Businesses should therefore go beyond access-focused measures and ensure that grievance mechanisms are safe to use in practice, including by strengthening protections against retaliation, ensuring confidentiality, and decoupling access to remedy from employment status where possible. Practical measures can also include adopting a migrant worker-centred approach to identify salient risks, providing information in workers' own languages, and responding proactively to allegations of abuse and exploitation, including SEAH. By combining a focus on migration status with gender and broader social inequalities, HRDD can ensure that mitigation measures address the most vulnerable groups effectively and help prevent severe negative human rights impacts across the tea supply chain.[15]

ETP's approach

The structural and intersecting risks outlined above require responses that are both context-specific and inclusive. Migrant workers, workers from indigenous and ethnic minority communities, and historically marginalised plantation communities experience different drivers of risk; however, they can face shared barriers to inclusion in workplace programmes, including language differences, low literacy, precarious employment status, social isolation, and limited access to information.

ETP therefore combines contextual analysis with inclusive programme design, with the aim of ensuring that interventions are accessible to all workers, regardless of ethnicity, migration status, caste, or contract type. In practice, this includes:

- Delivering training and communications in relevant local languages, and adapting materials for varying literacy levels;
- Designing programmes that explicitly include casual, seasonal, and migrant workers, who may otherwise be excluded from standard engagement activities;
- Supporting worker representation and engagement mechanisms that are inclusive of historically marginalised groups, including women and workers from socially excluded communities;
- Working with tea producer partners to identify and address structural barriers that limit participation in programmes, such as working hours, housing location, or reliance on labour intermediaries.

Using an intersectional, human rights-based and systems-change approach, ETP works with partners to address the structural barriers that limit full and effective participation in tea-growing communities. Through programming, collaboration, learning and accountability, ETP aims to support a socially just tea sector that is inclusive, equitable and responsive to the rights and needs of all workers.

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