

Addressing gender-based violence in India's tea industry

The Assam tea industry produces more than 500 million kilograms of black tea each year and employs nearly 686,000 daily workers – mostly women. Not only do most of these women have physically demanding jobs with very low wages, but they also face layered vulnerabilities linked to current societal norms, caste structures, poor working conditions and limited access to support systems. Violence against women and girls, whether at home or at work, is a fundamental violation of human rights. Beyond its devastating personal impact, it undermines dignity, equality and safety, values no society or business should ignore. When left unaddressed, these issues reduce not only individual potential but also the overall output and profitability of the sector. Tackling gender-based violence is therefore both a moral imperative and a business necessity.

Deepening our understanding of the issue

To more deeply understand the impact of gender-based violence (GBV) in the Assam tea industry, we joined with partners to commission a study. This aimed to identify and document forms of GBV in the industry, understand social and economic impacts, and calculate its tangible and intangible costs. It assessed the value of interventions like the [Women's Safety Accelerator Fund \(WSAF\)](#) – a collaborative initiative launched by the Sustainable Trade Initiative (IDH) and Unilever that works with civil society, tea estates and government partners to implement the UN Global Women's Safety Framework in Rural Spaces. It aims to empower women and girls in rural tea communities and establish environments free from sexual harassment and violence.

The study was conducted by the [Council for Social Development](#) (CSD), a government institute, and involved 750 women workers from 15 tea estates. It engaged with rightsholders including women workers, management and community stakeholders through surveys, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. Quantitative modelling was used to analyse the link between GBV and productivity.

The impact of violence

The study showed that domestic violence remains a critical barrier to women's empowerment, with 37% of married women in Assam reporting physical or sexual violence. This often begins with verbal abuse before developing into more serious offences. Alcohol use by partners was a significant contributing factor, and intergenerational patterns of violence were also observed. Only 11% of women approached the police for help, with most turning to family or neighbours for support.

Not only does this violence have devastating personal consequences but also tangible costs. The study established a correlation between absenteeism and GBV, with violence contributing to absenteeism, loss of wages, and reduced productivity. Violence-related absenteeism accounted for 10% of total absences, and women experiencing violence

produced around 20% less tea a day (an average of 20kg compared to 26kg by others). Hypothetical scenarios estimate an average annual loss of over 15,000 kg of picked tea per estate, translating into a 1.3% loss (₹1.39 million or c. €15,000) of total annual revenue.

Alongside this are the intangible impacts - for example psychological trauma, fear, loss of self-esteem, and social stigma – which were also found to negatively affect production. Whilst these factors are difficult to quantify, and often underreported, these impacts are crucial to understanding the comprehensive effects of GBV and addressing them is vital for designing effective intervention and support programmes.

The value of GBV interventions

Importantly, the study found that external support – NGOs, company counselling, community support – results in better individual outcomes and productivity, and a 70% reduction in potential economic losses. While family support is still important, the findings highlight the urgent need for accessible, trusted and effective institutional support systems, including confidential helplines. This is in addition to ongoing capability-building, awareness-raising and work to address the underlying causes of GBV.

This study shows that investing in GBV interventions not only improves the safety and dignity of women workers, but it can also strengthen productivity and economic resilience. Learnings from such studies help to inform our approach to addressing GBV, including our capability building and advocacy workstreams.