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Global Position on

Creating Empowered, Safe Communities

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Introduction

Gender norms and discriminatory attitudes globally result in the undervaluing of women and girls and their disempowerment in public and private life. This makes them especially vulnerable to violence and harassment in workplaces, communities, and households. Prevailing attitudes towards gender often normalise discrimination and prevent survivors from seeking remediation.

Gender-based violence is especially prevalent in agricultural sectors, including tea.[1] Heightened risks stem from limited infrastructure and services for rural workforces and communities, women disproportionately occupying low-paid and informal jobs, the predominance of men in management and supervisory roles, and systemic and structural challenges, such as poverty, unequal access to resources, and institutional and societal norms and practices.

At ETP, we are committed to creating empowered and safe tea communities. We work towards a tea industry that prioritises the safety and well-being of women and girls, where they are free from gender-based violence, respected, and empowered to report the issues they face without fear or stigmatisation.

This paper outlines ETP's position on creating empowered, safe tea communities. It highlights some of the challenges contributing to violence and harassment in the tea industry and outlines ETP's approach to catalysing change.

[1] https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---inst/documents/publication/wcms_630672.pdf.

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Terms and Definitions

Gender-based violence and harassment (GBVH)

GBVH is an umbrella term that encompasses violence or harassment directed at individuals because of their gender identity, and acts of violence and harassment that disproportionately impact people of a particular gender. GBVH takes many different forms and causes physical, sexual, or phycological harm and suffering to victims. It includes physical violence, financial abuse, rape, sexual harassment, and child marriage.

GBVH is mainly committed towards women and girls. However, it can also affect men and boys, and people with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities.

Sexual Exploitation, Abuse, and Sexual Harassment (SEAH)

Sexual exploitation, abuse, and sexual harassment (SEAH) and GBVH are related terms, with slightly different meanings. Whilst GBVH is used broadly to describe all forms of violence and harassment, SEAH refers specifically to acts of a sexual nature. Examples include unwanted sexual advances, sexual coercion, sexual assault, and forms of sexual misconduct in a work setting. Most perpetrators of SEAH are men, and it typically involves the abuse of hierarchies and power dynamics, where perpetrators exploit their position of authority for sexual gain.[2]

For the purposes of this paper, we use the term GBVH, which includes SEAH.

[2] ILO. 2018, Ending violence and harassment against women and men in the world of work. Report V, Vols. 1 and 2, (Geneva).

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Human Rights and Frameworks

Equality is at the core of all human rights. It is highlighted in Articles 1 and 2 of the United Nations' Universal Declaration, which states: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and in rights" and that everyone is entitled to their rights and freedoms "without distinction of any kind."

GBVH is a major violation of several fundamental human rights, including:

- The right to life, liberty, and security.

- The right to freedom from torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment.

- The right to equality and freedom from discrimination.

People who experience GBVH are also likely to suffer from the infringement of other human rights, such as the right to privacy, justice, physical and psychological integrity, education, and work.

Specific rights relevant to women and girls are enshrined in international human rights instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and various regional agreements.

Recognising GBVH as a human rights issue is important as it underscores the need for states and companies to take vital measures to prevent, address, and eliminate abuses. In addition to protecting human rights, our work on creating safe and empowered communities aligns with the following international conventions and frameworks:

- UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs).

- The United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (SDG5).

- The Women's Empowerment Principles (WEPs).

- ILO Convention No. 190 (C190).

- UN Global Women's Safety Framework in Rural Spaces.

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Challenges

GBVH is a widespread problem that occurs in all sectors and impacts individuals worldwide. However, it is important to note that in agricultural sectors like tea there are often unique characteristics that can contribute to, or increase, the risk of violence and harassment. Whilst we acknowledge that there are many complex challenges standing in the way of achieving empowered, safe tea communities some of the main challenges are highlighted below.

Economic vulnerability

Women and girls in poor rural communities are vulnerable to multiple forms of gender-based violence, from domestic abuse to child marriage and trafficking. Having a low income and a lack of financial resources to purchase food or find alternative accommodation means they are often unable to leave violent relationships or abusive situations, while spending time on self-protective measures, such as seeking remediation or relocating, can mean missing out on work or opportunities and losing their source of income.

Moreover, women in tea communities often find themselves with limited or no alternative job opportunities, which leaves them with little choice but to accept work that is low-paid, exploitative, or potentially dangerous.

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Unequal power relations

The risk of GBVH in the tea sector is greater due to power imbalances between men and women, caused by the occupational segregation of women in lower-paid, precarious jobs like tea plucking, and men in management or supervisory positions. This gender division in roles contributes to an environment where men can misuse their power and control to exploit women's economic vulnerability, leading to incidents of sexual violence and harassment.

Many women tea workers are also hired as temporary or casual labourers and are sometimes paid on a piece-rate basis, which causes job insecurity and further heightens women's vulnerability. These unequal power relations can deter women from reporting incidents of GBV and prevent perpetrators from being held accountable.

Lack of legal accountability

Despite there being legal provisions in many tea producing countries that target domestic and workplace violence, they are not always known about or enforced. Insufficient resources allocated to enforcement, a lack of awareness of legal rights, and a reluctance to investigate offences due to social norms and attitudes towards gender can result in little accountability for compliance, undermining the effectiveness of legal measures in reducing GBVH.

Absence of effective policies and procedures

While many companies have implemented policies and procedures to address GBVH, not all companies have such measures in place. When communicated and enforced properly across all levels of an organisation, policies and codes of conduct can be an effective way of informing employees of unacceptable workplace behaviour.

Additionally, if a company does not have effective grievance and complaints procedures, or if reports are not taken seriously and addressed quickly, women are less likely to come forward due to fears of losing their job or being exposed to further violence.

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Social norms

Social norms are the shared expectations of acceptable attitudes and behaviours within society. Globally, harmful norms such as blaming women and girls for the abuse they experience or justifying a man's use of violence against women or children, significantly increase the likelihood of GBVH within workplaces and households. These collective beliefs often convey that GBV is acceptable and, in some cases, even normalised. Such norms can deter women from coming forward to report cases due to shame and stigmatisation and contribute to a lack of understanding of what constitutes GBVH.

Remoteness

Much of the work carried out by women in the tea industry takes place in fields that can span for miles, where women are often isolated from others and must use remote paths and roads to travel to work. This makes it easier for men to perpetrate sexual assault and harassment and puts women working at a greater risk.

Additionally, many tea estates and farms are in remote locations, far from built-up areas, with poor access to basic services and infrastructure such as healthcare facilities, police stations, and transportation links. This makes it challenging for women to access support services and formal structures for redress.

External shocks

External shocks, such as conflicts, economic downturns, health crises and pandemics, and extreme weather events – which are increasing in frequency due to climate change – exacerbate pre-existing vulnerabilities and intensify the prevalence of GBV.[3]

These shocks often lead to financial pressures that increase the risk of specific forms of GBV, including domestic violence and child marriage. Additionally, breakdowns in infrastructure, weakened law enforcement and disrupted support services caused by external shocks heighten the level of risk and can make it even more challenging for victims to access help.

[3] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/from-risks-to-rewards-overcoming-the-impacts-of-climate-change-on-women-in-agricultural-supply-chains/from-risks-to-rewards-overcoming-the-impacts-of-climate-change-on-women-in-agricultural-supply-chains#foreword-by-primark-waitrose-and-the-ethical-tea-partnership.

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Our Approach

All forms of exploitation and violence are unacceptable and can have lifelong impacts on victims. GBVH is not only a major human rights violation and public health concern, but it also undermines autonomy and agency, restricts choices and opportunities, and impacts individuals' ability to participate equally in society.

The problem goes beyond individual actions; it relates to a system that facilitates physical and economic exploitation and abuse through processes and practices. To tackle GBVH it is essential to establish alternative processes that prioritise the needs of women farmers and workers.

ETP uses a systems change approach across all our activities, including our efforts to create empowered and safe communities. This is reflected in our Strategy2030 and Theory of Change and involves taking a holistic approach to tackle the deep-rooted and systemic causes of GBVH, rather than solely addressing its symptoms.

While efforts focused on supporting individuals are necessary, they are not enough on their own to achieve lasting progress. It is also essential to engage a diverse range of stakeholders and address the systemic and structural challenges that lead to discrimination.

We are committed to the following actions:

Working towards transformative leadership

Encouraging leaders to champion gender equality while also increasing the number of women in leadership and supervisory positions is an effective way to create more respectful and safe workplaces, reduce power imbalances, and promote a culture that actively works to prevent GBVH.

We are committed to working with our partners to make leadership in the tea industry more accountable and more inclusive. This involves improving

workplace policies and addressing the systemic barriers that prevent women and young people from taking on leadership roles, such as negative social norms, discriminatory attitudes, and violence and harassment. We also work directly with communities to support women and young people in gaining the confidence and skills needed to achieve and maintain leadership positions.

Supporting private sector accountability

The UNGPs define the corporate responsibility to protect human rights as a "global standard of expected conduct for all business enterprises, wherever they operate and existing independently of States' abilities and/or willingness to fulfil their own human rights obligations."

Tea companies have a fundamental role in tackling GBVH, as their operations and practices directly impact the rights and safety of workers. We expect our members to be accountable for their operations and carry out gender-responsive supply chain due diligence. This means identifying the adverse impacts of their business activities on women and girls, and collaborating closely with suppliers to implement action plans to mitigate them.

We are working with our members to improve transparency and help them better understand the risks in their supply chains. This enables companies to identify high-risk regions or suppliers, and implement tailored interventions that address specific factors affecting women and girls in a particular context. Crucially, data disclosure drives sector-wide innovation by creating opportunities for collaboration. By openly sharing information about sourcing locations and approaches to addressing risks, companies can pool resources and work together to reduce GBVH.

In addition, we offer support and guidance to companies on how they can make changes to prevent and respond to gender-related risks, including adopting responsible purchasing practices, developing policies and codes of conduct, and establishing effective grievance mechanisms for reporting and investigating incidents of GBVH.

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Strengthening awareness and supporting access to rights

Empowering women and girls with the knowledge and tools to claim their rights and access support services is integral to our approach. When people are aware of their rights and empowered to exercise them, they are more able to challenge discrimination and violence, advocate for better services, and seek remediation when their rights have been violated. We do this through tailored training on rights for farmers and workers, both formal and informal, and by establishing locally led groups to mobile communities and report violations. Our projects also support women and young people on tea estates to have more agency over their lives by ensuring they are directly involved in decision-making processes regarding their rights.

Our flagship Plantation Community Empowerment Programme in Assam, India, is a ground-breaking model that resolves issues and improves the living and working conditions on tea estates by bringing together communities and estate management through community forums. The project supports women's leadership and ensures that marginalised people's voices, including women's and young people's, are listened to and that they are involved in the decisions that affect their lives.

Engaging men and boys

We believe it is critical to work with men and boys to dismantle attitudes that condone GBVH and change behaviour towards women. If men are informed about the causes and consequences of GBVH, they are more likely to recognise discrimination, call out acts of violence, and contribute to safer and more equal communities.

We involve men and boys in our projects to prevent violence, training them to respect and promote the rights of women and girls and supporting them to become agents of change in their communities and workplaces.

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Working with women, communities, and local organisations

Women have a deep understanding of local contexts and social dynamics that shape attitudes towards them. This means they are best positioned to identify the challenges they face and create effective and long-lasting solutions to overcome them. As a result, our work is centred around a community-led, participatory approach.

We collaborate directly with individuals, communities, Women's Rights Organisations (WROs) and other Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) to design and implement activities that tackle GBVH. This includes conducting community consultations, organising participatory project design workshops, and providing resources and information to empower women to exercise their rights.

We also focus on building the capacity of women's rights organisations and other local partners to implement and learn from gender interventions using project data. We facilitate collaboration between women's rights organisations and leading tea industry stakeholders to address GBVH at a national level.

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Applying a gender perspective when designing initiatives

We recognise that GBVH in the tea industry is a complex issue, influenced by wide-ranging and interconnected factors. To target the broader causes of vulnerability, we ensure we consider the concerns and experiences of women and girls in the design of all our activities. Alongside our dedicated projects to enhance women's safety, this includes applying a gender perspective to a number of social, economic, and environmental challenges that we work on; from tackling low incomes and supporting access to finance to boosting resilience to climate change. In doing this, we aim to reduce the barriers to women's empowerment and break cycles of violence.

In a research partnership with the UK Government's Work and Opportunities for Women (WOW) Programme, we explored the link between climate change and gender in the tea sector. We found that increasingly unpredictable incomes as a result of climate change are causing stress within families and putting women at risk of gender-based violence. In response, we're partnering with WOW to support women tea farmers in Malawi to improve their incomes and boost their resilience to climate change.

Building knowledge and influencing change

Creating safer, empowered communities and workplaces requires a collective shift in behaviour from multiple entities and individuals, from governments and tea companies to local community leaders. However, transformation can only be achieved if there is a collective understanding of what needs to change and why.

We are committed to developing evidence-based resources, convening industry stakeholders, and sharing insights and learnings from our activities to influence policies and legislation and increase the adoption of practices that reduce GBVH. This involves amplifying the voices of women and girls and highlighting the practical steps stakeholders can take to catalyse change. We also seek to highlight the positive effects addressing GBVH has for businesses, such as improved productivity and performance, decreased rates of absenteeism and turnover, and overall improvements in the well-being and satisfaction of employees.

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Conclusion

We believe that creating empowered and safe communities requires a holistic approach that goes beyond individual change. This involves a combination of addressing attitudes and behaviours towards women and girls, while also aiming to transform systems, policies, and practices to be more gender sensitive.

ETP is uniquely positioned to bring together diverse stakeholders, including influential tea companies, retailers, governments, and civil society organisations, to create safer and more empowered tea communities. Through our projects, policy work and engagement with the private sector, we will continue to support communities directly, share learning and best practices and increase transparency to drive industry progress in eliminating GBVH.

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Resources

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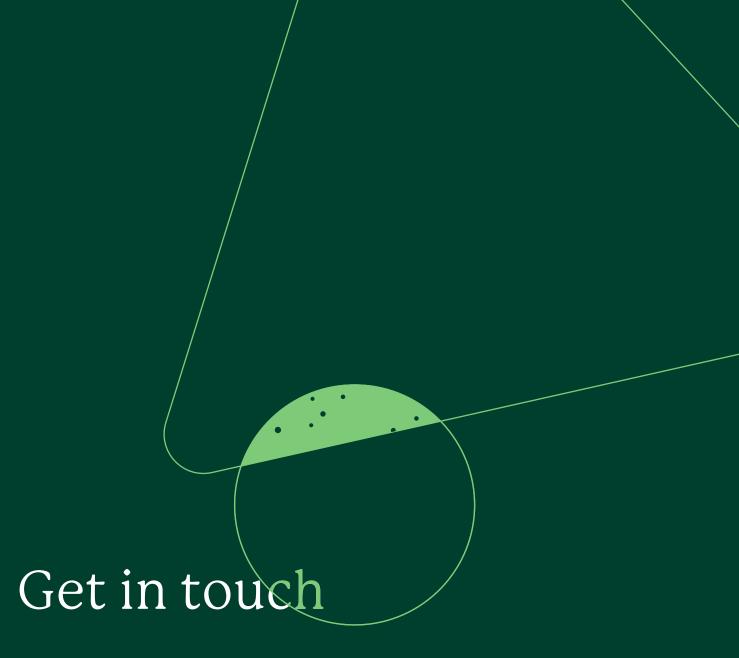
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