

Hidden Burdens: Exploring the Economic Impact of Domestic Violence in Sri Lanka's Tea Estate Sector (Nuwara Eliya District)

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Introduction

Domestic violence (DV) is a significant global issue that transcends cultural and economic boundaries, representing a major violation of human rights. It negatively impacts public health, productivity, and economic participation, with women disproportionately affected due to their unpaid work and caregiving roles (UN Women, 2020; Folbre, 2006; Elson, 1999). In Global South nations, where informal economies are common, DV contributes to women's economic disempowerment by limiting their access to paid labour, reducing productivity, and increasing time poverty (Heise et al., 2002). Often, poor women lack access to services and legal protection, which further marginalizes them and perpetuates cycles of violence and exclusion.

The tea estate sector in Sri Lanka is a major trade-driven industry that employs many Tamil-speaking women from marginalized communities. Despite being the backbone of the estate economy, they face underpayment and overwork, often in harsh conditions without legal protection. Domestic violence (DV) in this sector remains largely unaddressed by national policy and estate governance. Furthermore, there is a dearth of studies on the unpaid costs of DV, such as lost income and increased healthcare expenses, which are often overlooked by conventional economic analyses.

Hence, there is a need to address this gap by examining the economic cost of DV. Utilizing a feminist-economics framework, it explores the intersection of DV with labour, care work, and financial survival in Sri Lanka's plantation economy. By highlighting the 'unpaid costs' of DV, the research contributes to gender and economic policy debates, advocating for a re-evaluation of how violence is measured and addressed in labour and development discussions.

Objectives

This study aims to investigate the economic cost of domestic violence on female tea plantation workers in Nuwara Eliya, Sri Lanka. It measures the incidence and types of domestic violence, estimates its direct and indirect economic impacts –such as loss of income, reduced productivity, and health costs –and examines its contribution to increased unpaid care work and time poverty for women.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods approach influenced by feminist economics and care theory. Field research was conducted from March to May 2025 at five tea estates in Nuwara Eliya District, chosen for their diverse labour forces and demographics. Forty estate workers (30 women, 10 men) were purposefully recruited to ensure participant privacy and facilitate discussions on domestic violence (DV).

Purposive sampling helped gather insights from individuals willing to discuss their DV experiences, representing various ages, marital statuses, and caregiving roles among women, while male participants provided context on gender norms. Although the findings might not generalize to all estate workers due to the small sample size, they offer rich, contextual data on DV's impact on economic welfare and caregiving.

Data collection included informal face-to-face in-depth interviews and three focus group discussions. Twelve key informant interviews with estate managers and healthcare professionals enriched the findings. Health records were reviewed for verification.

The research estimated the economic costs of DV using gross cost calculations based on productivity loss, income forgone, and health care costs, verified against daily wage rates and estate register data. A simple formula was used:

(i) Lost Income Estimation

$$\text{Lost Income per Worker} = \text{Days of Work Missed Due to DV} \times \text{Daily Wage Rate}$$

(ii) Productivity Loss

For estate managers' reports and worker self-assessments, we estimated:

Productivity Loss = Decrease in Output per Day × Downtime in Days

(iii) Healthcare and Coping Costs

This included: Out-of-pocket medical expenses and transportation costs to clinics.

Average costs per incident were derived from medical records and participant reports. These estimates are conservative and only reflect immediate economic impacts, excluding long-term effects such as mental health issues, child development, or intergenerational consequences.

Content analysis employed inductive coding to identify themes from transcribed interviews, guided by Braun and Clarke's six-phase procedure. Themes included the forms and incidence of DV, financial effects, time use in unpaid care work, emotional/physical impacts, and barriers to reporting.

Results and Discussions

The paper highlights the severe socioeconomic impacts of DV in the tea estates of Sri Lanka. Out of 30 women interviewed, 70% (21 women) reported experiencing recent domestic violence, including physical abuse (62%), psychological abuse (57%), sexual abuse (19%), and economic abuse (44%). Most of these cases occurred within the context of long-term marriages or cohabitation. Common triggers for domestic violence included alcohol use (68%), financial troubles (54%), and men's insecurities regarding female incomes (41%). These trends were evident across all five estates investigated, confirming the systemic nature of the issue.

It should be noted that 30% of the women (9 out of 30) did not proceed to in-depth interviews. Some participants were not ready to discuss their personal experiences of violence due to emotional distress, fear of stigma from the community, or concerns about confidentiality. Others hesitated to relive traumatic experiences, and some requested that the interview be shorter and focus more on general working conditions rather than domestic violence. To ensure ethical considerations and participant safety, we included their perspectives at a higher level without conducting detailed case analyses.

Among the survivors, 21 women experienced severe economic impacts. A significant 83% of women reported missing three to six workdays per month due to injuries or trauma, resulting in a loss of LKR 3,000 to 6,000 in monthly wages per woman. Considering the average daily wage, this equates to an estimated annual loss of LKR 36,000 to 72,000 per worker. Such financial losses exacerbated poverty for families already living below subsistence levels. Notably, 40% of women continued to work despite their injuries to avoid pay cuts, job loss, or forfeiting attendance bonuses, highlighting the exploitative nature of estate-based labour systems.

Healthcare and related expenses put additional pressure on individuals. A total of 61.9% reported spending LKR 1,000–2,500 per incident on treatment, medication, or travel costs. Many felt the consequences of this financial burden through informal borrowing, often at usurious interest rates, which in turn perpetuated cycles of debt. Additionally, about 23% of respondents refrained from seeking medical care due to concerns about gossip, stigma, or retaliation, which could lead to long-term health risks. The burden of unpaid care increased significantly after instances of abuse. Women reported spending an extra 2 to 4 hours per day on childcare, household tasks, or caring for abusive partners, with 71.4% (15 out of 21 survivors) experiencing this "time poverty." This situation resulted in less rest, reduced efficiency, and limited opportunities for income diversification.

Male respondents (n = 10) provided complementary perspectives. Of them, 60% attributed violence to alcohol use, while 40% viewed it as "private" or "disciplinary," reflecting deep-seated patriarchal values. Additionally, 30% admitted to feeling threatened by their wives' incomes, highlighting conflicts arising from shifting gender identities. Only 20% of respondents recognized domestic violence as harmful to family well-being, indicating a slow and limited shift in attitudes.

Focus group discussions (FGDs) revealed that DV is perceived as an "ordinary but secret" issue, influenced by stigma, financial dependence, and inheritance structures. Caregivers and union representatives highlighted the dual responsibilities of paid work and caregiving, noting the lack of time, space, or support for survivors to heal. In-depth interviews with 12 key informants from the estate sector uncovered systemic blind spots. Managers reported high absenteeism rates, particularly after payday and on Mondays,

mostly due to alcohol-related conflicts. However, they stated there was no process in place to account for productivity losses resulting from domestic violence. Women who presented with unexplained injuries often received treatment from health staff who, unfortunately, lacked the necessary tools, training, or authority to act effectively. Local leaders mentioned societal pressures that encourage conflict resolution with abusers rather than seeking official protection, which further perpetuates silence around the issue.

The hidden costs of DV are often overlooked in both household and national economic assessments. These costs disproportionately impact women. Patriarchal attitudes, women's silence, and institutional apathy normalize violence, resulting in diminished economic strength for women and reduced productivity in estates.

The findings highlight DV as both a violation of human rights and a structural economic issue. Addressing this requires gender-responsive estate policies, safe reporting mechanisms, psychosocial support, flexible leave structures, and access to childcare. Without recognition and systemic intervention, domestic violence will continue to deepen the economic marginalization of women and undermine the sustainability of the plantation sector.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

This study highlights that domestic violence is both a social injustice and an economic issue within Sri Lanka's tea estate sector. Data from five estates in Nuwara Eliya District shows that domestic violence significantly hampers women's labour force participation, limits their income, increases healthcare costs, and imposes an unrecognized burden of unpaid care work. These consequences affect individuals, families, and communities while remaining undervalued in national statistics and policies. Decreasing work attendance and productivity due to injuries or psychological distress, often missing work without paid leave or institutional support. Many felt compelled to work through pain due to fears of wage cuts or job loss, with no formal mechanisms for reporting or access to support services. This not only endangers individual health but also threatens workforce stability, as women are vital to estate productivity.

The cost of DV extends limiting their time for paid work and self-care. This “time poverty” exacerbates economic dependence and gender inequality. To address these issues, a comprehensive policy approach is needed. At the estate level, implementing gender-sensitive workplace policies, such as independent reporting mechanisms and accessible trauma care, is crucial. Nationally, domestic violence should be recognized as a factor in labour productivity by relevant ministries, integrating it into workforce and social protection policies. Conducting gender audits and assessments of the care economy can reveal the hidden contributions and costs borne by women. Supporting unions, NGOs, and women’s collectives in providing legal and financial assistance is also essential. Ultimately, DV should be viewed not as an individual issue but as a structural barrier to social justice. Real change begins with listening to women's experiences.

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