

A photograph of a tea plantation with several workers in the background and one woman in the foreground. The woman in the foreground is wearing a pink shirt and a headscarf, and is looking down at the tea plants. The background shows other workers in various colored shirts and headscarves, some carrying baskets, working in the tea field. The scene is set in a lush green tea plantation with trees in the distance.

WUR Studium Generale
Labour unfreedoms
in the tea supply chains

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Women tea plantation workers' protests – Munnar, South India 2015

*"We work / You exploit
We carry bags of tea / You hoard bags of money
Old stables for us / AC bungalows for you
Tamil medium for us / English medium for you
Chicken and dosa for you / stale rice water for us"
(slogan used during women workers' protests,
Munnar South India 2015)*

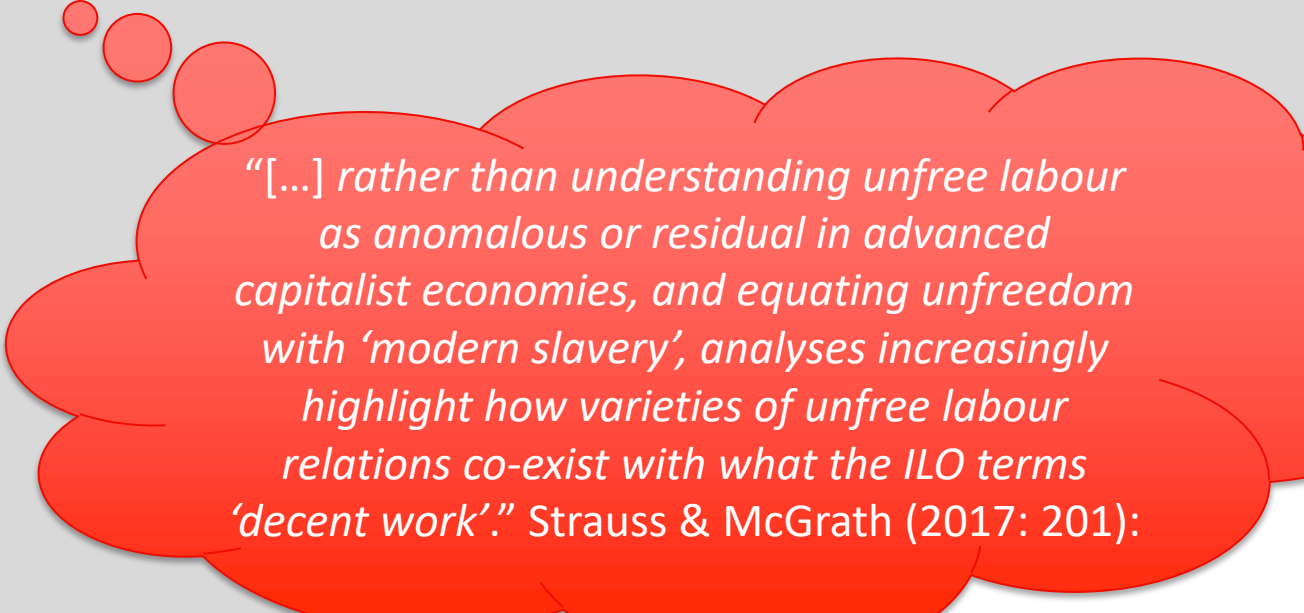


‘Modern slavery’ – what are we talking about?

- Official policy discourse (ILO & Walk Free Foundation 2017):
modern slavery = forced labour & forced marriage
forced labour = exploitation + involuntariness + menace of penalty
- Kempadoo (2017):
 - term ‘modern slavery’ stirs emotion
 - ← yet, actually refers to persons legally defined as property, chattel, or non-human

Starting from labour unfreedoms rather than stirring emotions

- Binary terms ‘modern slavery’ or forced labour deflect attention away from ‘ordinary’ forms of indecent work (Strauss & McGrath 2017, Yea 2015)
 - to be replaced by notion of continuum of labour unfreedoms (Lerche 2011, Heumann & Siegmann 2016)



“[...] rather than understanding unfree labour as anomalous or residual in advanced capitalist economies, and equating unfreedom with ‘modern slavery’, analyses increasingly highlight how varieties of unfree labour relations co-exist with what the ILO terms ‘decent work’.” Strauss & McGrath (2017: 201):

Paradox of tea plantation labour

→ Tea plantation labour in post-Independence South Asia has witnessed more protective labour legislation, trade unionism & collective bargaining covering

← Yet, generations of tea workers have been kept in systematic poverty:

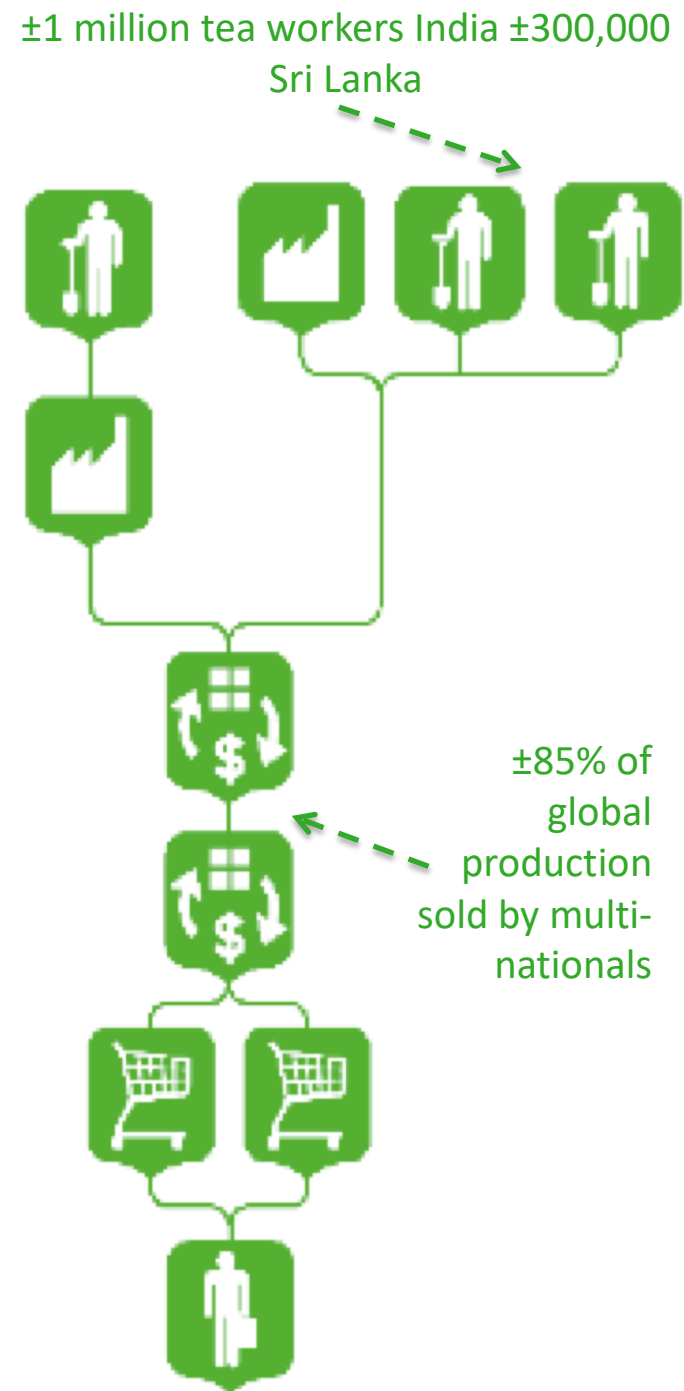
- **Indian** tea estate workers' wages are lowest among formal labour force & their living conditions appalling (Bhowmik 2015)
- Poverty among **Sri Lankan** tea plantation workers has been significantly higher than in other sectors, including ethnic & gender-based discrimination (Romeshun & Fernando 2015, Jayawardena & Kurian 2015)

Shaping labour unfreedoms in South Asian tea plantations

- plantation as **geographical enclave** → distance/lack of infrastructure reduces alternative employment options
- workers on tea estates are often **socially marginalised** on the basis of their migratory status, ethnicity, caste & gender → lower bargaining power through ‘othering’
- use of **market power** → entailing threat of hunger & denial of employment in conditions of endemic unemployment (Gupta 1992)

Workers' marginalisation in the tea commodity chain

- Tea chain characterized by strong vertical integration → buyers & retailers capture significant proportion of value → hindrance to improving working conditions through redistribution of profit margins
- Hierarchical capital-labour relations historically allowed price-taking estates to pass on pressure to workers
- Segmentation of labour force along gender hierarchies → tea harvest as most labour-intensive undertaken by women workers



Mixed methods research in India & Sri Lanka

- key informant interviews
- fe/male focus group discussions (FGDs)
- worker survey

Assam

- 2 certified (75 worker interviews, 59% female)
- 1 non-certified (41 worker interviews, 51% female)

Tamil Nadu/Kerala

- 3 certified (104 worker interviews, 65% female)
- 2 non-certified (39 worker interviews, 74% female)

Sri Lanka

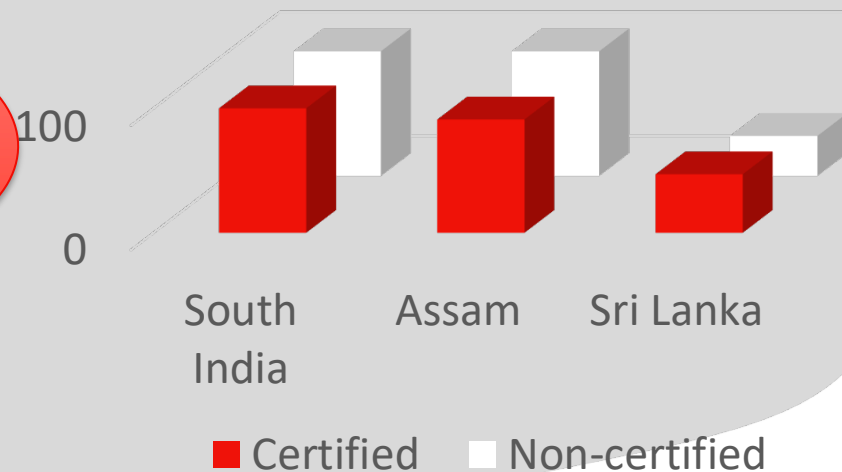
- 3 certified (102 worker interviews, 73% female)
- 1 non-certified (31 worker interviews, 84% female)

Moves towards living wage?

- Stark differences between qualitative & quantitative data on whether wage enables household a decent standard of living:
 - survey respondents on Indian estates satisfied, while only half of them are in Sri Lanka
 - ← in qualitative interviews, many workers across regions express difficulties to make ends meet

"The wages we get are very low and we are unable to manage our day today affairs using this wage. The ration items we get are of substandard quality and we have to buy almost everything from the outside shops by paying higher prices." (female tea plucker, non-certified estate Assam)

Estate guarantees living wage?

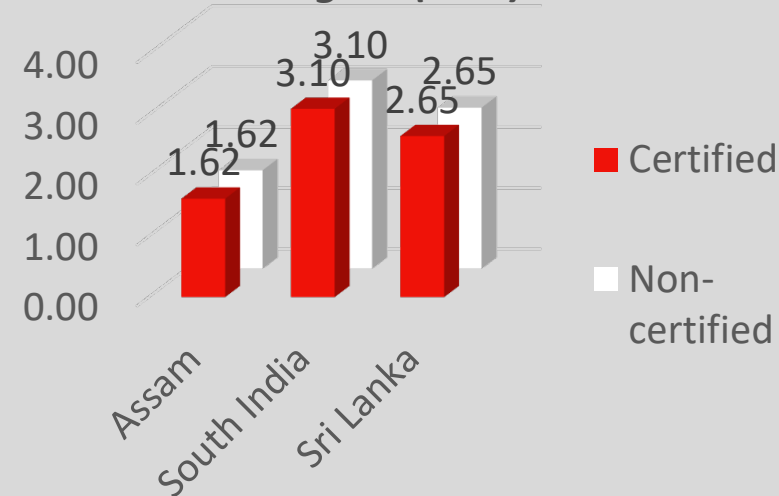


- Indirect indicators speak for themselves:
 - ← South India: tight labour markets lead to more recruitment of migrant workers
 - ← Assam: workers prefer MGNREGS employment as earnings from plantation are far below minimum wage
 - ← Sri Lanka: tea plantation workers face highest poverty risk compared to other sectors

Certification does not influence wage level

- daily base wages comply with CBAs in certified & non-certified estates
- ← compliance masks increasing work pressure through higher harvesting targets & flexibilisation (e.g. Assam: 1994 target = 21kg, 2016 24kg; 'permanent temporary' contractual status common)
- earnings strongly depend on productivity-based incentive payments, leading to gendered income earning opportunities
- ← South India: restriction of overtime work in certified estates stipulated by certification reduces income-earning opportunities

Daily wages by certification and region (EUR)



"If we work very hard, we used to get an incentive along with our wage. But two years ago, one auditor visited our estate and said workers should not work in the field after 4:30 PM. Now, we are not getting that money... our entire income has come down." [Female worker representative, Fairtrade-certified estate South India]

Unions to enhance labour freedoms & improve conditions?

- Freedom of association guaranteed in all estates ← yet, 'union monopoly' in Assam
- high unionisation ← yet, widespread disconnect between union & workers, especially women workers



"The worker union is not very active, as there is only one union. There are no meetings convened by the workers' union to learn and discuss about the problems of workers. Moreover, the workers' union does not care about the problems of women workers. They only listen to the male workers." (female plucker Assam, Fairtrade-certified estate)

- in the context of politicised tea sector unions & union monopoly in Assam, some workers perceive Fairtrade Premium Committee as offering alternative grievance channel in Sri Lanka & Assam

Way forward

- coalitions necessary between government bodies, unions & other civic actors to address power hierarchy between buyers & producers
- worker-driven process of certification would involve a more direct, gender-sensitive relationship of Fairtrade with workers & their representatives

Thank you !