

EXPLORING THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC PROFILE OF THE WOMEN LABOURERS IN THE TEA GARDEN OF SONITPUR DISTRICT IN ASSAM

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Abstract: Tea industry is one of the oldest industries in India and also one of the biggest industries in the country. The state which has the highest area under tea cultivation and is also the largest producer of tea in India is Assam. This industry employs a large number of labour forces, and women comprise almost half of the working force. Women are an integral part of this plantation industry that comprises half of the labour force. The tea garden labourers are an important aspect of the tea plantation industry. The very existence of the industry itself is because of the labourers. Thus, it is very much crucial in paying heed to the requirements of the workers by providing them with good working conditions. This paper intends to look into the socio-economic status of tea garden workers in the sample gardens of Sonitpur.

Index Terms: Tea garden, Labourers, Women, Socio-economic status, Tea industry.

I. INTRODUCTION:

The story of the tea plantation labourers is a less talked topic. Much less discussed is the role of the women tea labourers who constitutes a large working force. Even after having social, historical and anthropological importance, research work on the role and contribution of women tea labourers of Sonitpur District is a rarely found topic and also not much work has been carried out about the tea labourers of Sonitpur District and has not gained much significance in the field of research. Women's position in the tea plantation has always remained a disadvantaged one and their labour never got recognized as the planters were much more interested in using women as a reproducer of labour which would help them in generating a stable work force in the long run. It is important to look into the socio-economic profile of the workers as a whole so as to understand the position of women workers in the tea gardens. From the field visits it is noticed that a long way has to go for the progress of the workers because welfare in true sense is still a distant dream for the tea garden labourers of Assam. The long and continuous demands of the tea garden labourers because of constant deprivation by the management manifests that the different government schemes and programmes are only functional in paper and a lot has to be done for it to reach the ground level. Thus, looking into the socio-economic aspect of the tea plantation labourers will help in getting an insight into the position of the tea garden workers as a whole in terms of development and looking into the gendered dimension of tea garden will help in understanding the position of women workers in particular.

Field survey was made in six tea gardens of Sonitpur district namely Tezpore & Gogra tea estate, Harchura tea estate, Sonabheel tea estate, Belsiri tea estate, Singri tea estate and Narayanpur tea estate. Data were collected during the field visit in the sample tea gardens through interview and interview schedule. These are the information furnished by the 162 respondents from the 6 tea gardens of Sonitpur district.

A. AGE OF THE RESPONDENTS:

The respondent's age group for my study, out of the total 162 respondents, comprises of 3 female adolescents between 14-18 years of age, 110 respondent labourers between 18-30 years of age while the remaining falls under the age group of 31 and above. As my study mainly targets the women labourers, the number of female respondents is more than the male respondents.

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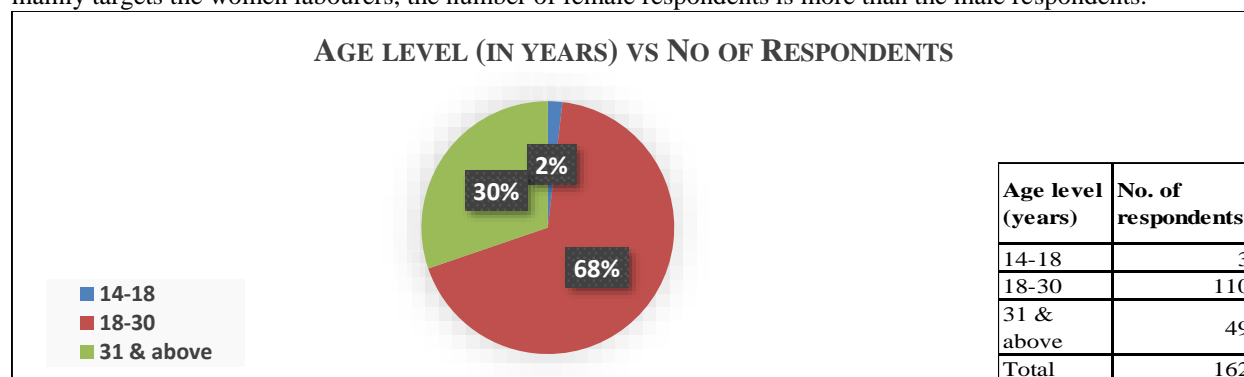


Figure 1: Age Level vs Nos. of Respondents. Source: Field Survey

B. Sex-ratio of respondents:

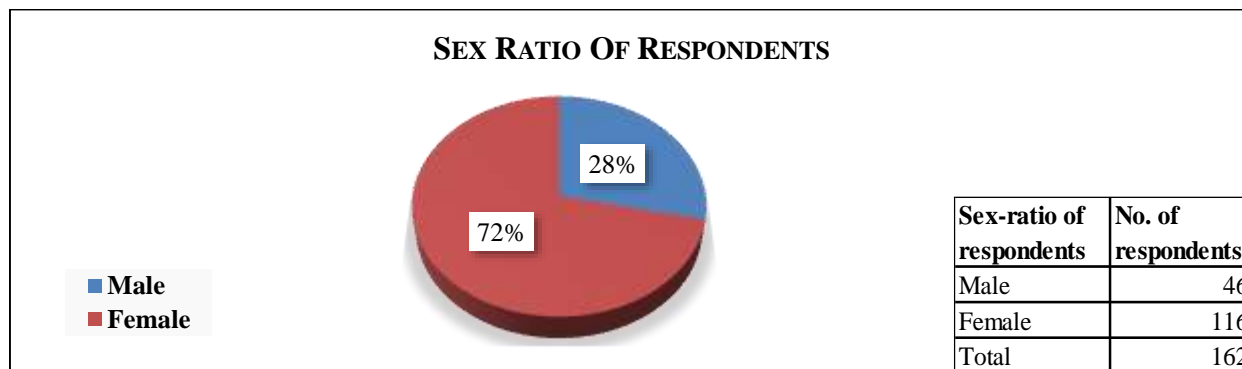


Figure 2:Sex Ratio of Respondents. Source: Field Survey.

Among the total respondents, 46 were male and 116 were female (Refer Fig 2). This implies 28.3% of the total number of respondents is male while 71.7% are female. Among the 46 male there were 35 respondents between the age group of 18-30 and 11 respondents from the age group of 31 and above, while there are no respondents amongst adolescents. On the other hand, amongst 116 females, there were 3 adolescents, 75 respondents between the age group of 18-30 and 38 respondents between the age group of 31 and above.

C. Nature of employment of respondents:

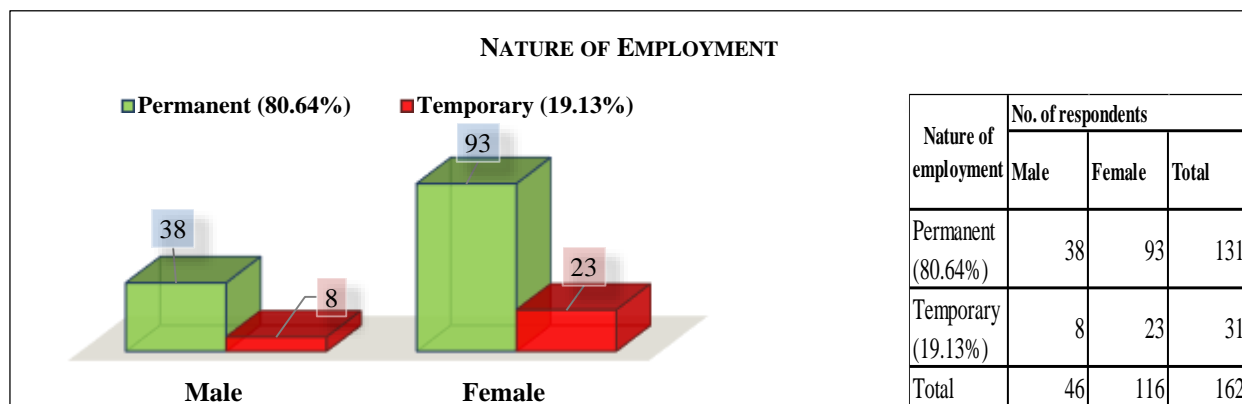


Figure 3: Nature of employment of respondents. Source: Field Survey

From the Fig 3 it can be seen that the respondents are a combination of both permanent and temporary male and female workers. Out of the total 162 respondents, 38 are male permanent workers while 93 are female permanent workers. On the other hand, 8 and 23 are male and female temporary workers respectively. Permanent workers accounts for 80.64% of the total respondents while temporary workers accounts for 19.13% of the total respondents.

D. Educational qualification of respondents:

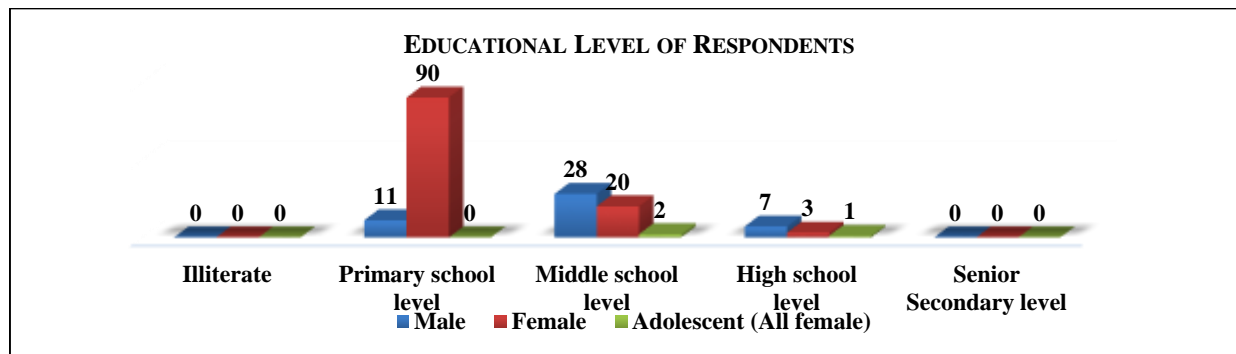


Figure 3:Educational Qualification of Respondents. Source: Field Survey

Fig 4 shows the educational qualification of respondents at different educational levels. The educational qualification of the respondents is divided into five levels- illiterate, studied up to primary level i.e. from class 1 to 5, middle school level i.e. from class 6-8, high school level i.e. class 9-10 and senior secondary level i.e. class 11-12. From the field survey with 162 respondents, it was found that there are no illiterates. They can at least read and write considering them to be just literate. Out of the total 162 respondents, 23.91% of male are primary level educated, 60.86% middle school level and 15.21% high school educated. On the other hand, 79.64% of female respondents are primary level educated, 60.86% middle school and 2.65% up to high school level. From the figure it can be inferred that, most of the women are educated only up to primary level, men on the other hand are educated mostly up to middle school level. Very few from both male and female respondents have completed the high school level. But if compared more men have reached high school than women. Female drop-out rate is mostly seen after the primary school itself while male drop-out rate is more after the middle school level. None of the respondents have acquired education after high school level. It can also be seen that among the younger generation the interest for education is more. But due to many factors their

education comes at halt. Thus, from the above discussion it can be drawn that in term of highest education amongst the respondents, male respondents stand in the top.

Fig 5 below shows the rate of drop-out of respondents at different levels of education. From the fig 5 it can be inferred that the awareness about importance of education is very less among the tea garden workers. The level of drop-out among female is seen to be more than male. During the field visit while interacting with the parents and the Anganawadi workers it was found that the reason for low enrollment and drop out among the children could be the following reasons:

(a) Firstly, the parents themselves are uneducated to understand the value of education. For a child to go to school the pressure and interest has to come from the guardian first. But such attitude is totally absent among the tea garden workers.

(b) Secondly, the work timing in the tea garden is such that the parents have to leave home early. In such a situation the parents hardly know whether their child goes to school or not. Because of lack of proper attention from the parents the child becomes disinterested in attending school. Some even goes out of the house being ready for school but does not reach school as they stop in between playing with friends or chit-chatting

(c) Another common reason found for less enrollment and drop out is the poor economic condition of the workers. Maximum drop out takes place after the middle school level when the parents have to spent money for their education. Because they cannot afford, children have to leave their education in between.

(d) As the employment in the tea gardens is family-based employment, parents believe in using their children in productive purpose so that more earning hands can contribute towards the family income rather than sending them to school and wasting their economically productive time.

(e) Because of lack of sufficient crèche facilities in the tea gardens, working parents in order to look after the younger child, the elder child especially girl, has to stay back at home. In such a way the elder child starts losing interest in school and draws attention towards household chores.

(f) The teacher-student ration is not properly maintained in the school. In such a situation a child is not able to grab the attention of the teacher and the teacher too is not able to manage class with more students. As a result, no quality education happens inside the classroom. When students do not understand anything in the classroom they start losing interest in studies resulting in absentees.

(g) Parents mostly consider girl child as a liability whose ultimate fate becomes to get married. In such a condition, parents do not feel like investing in their education rather makes them prepared for marriage.

Low infrastructure of the schools also contributes towards increasing drop-out rate. Especially girls who go through her monthly cycle find it difficult to attend school due to lack of proper and hygienic sanitation facilities. In such a situation, the rate of girl absentees increases and finally because of not being able to cope up with the classroom situation results in drop-out.

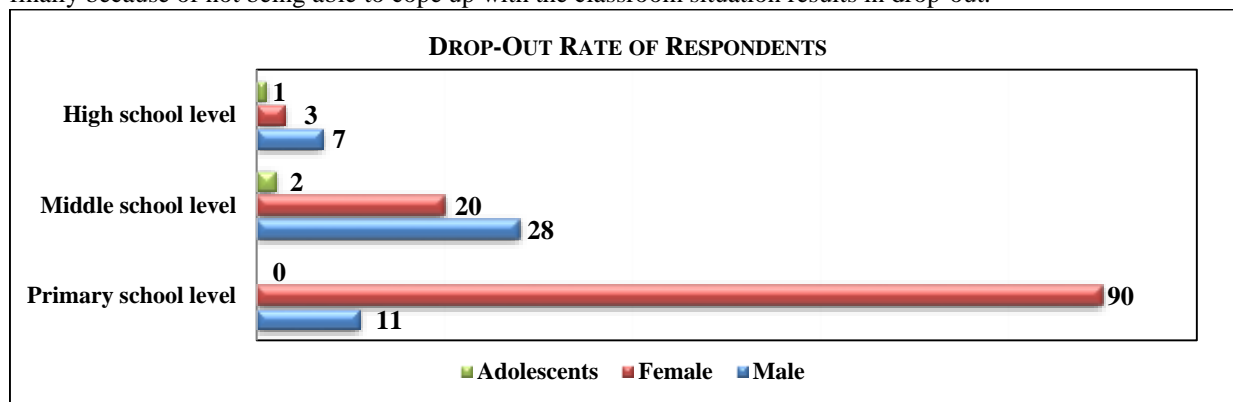


Figure 4: Drop-Out rate of Respondents in various level of Education. Source: Field Study

E. Marital status of respondents

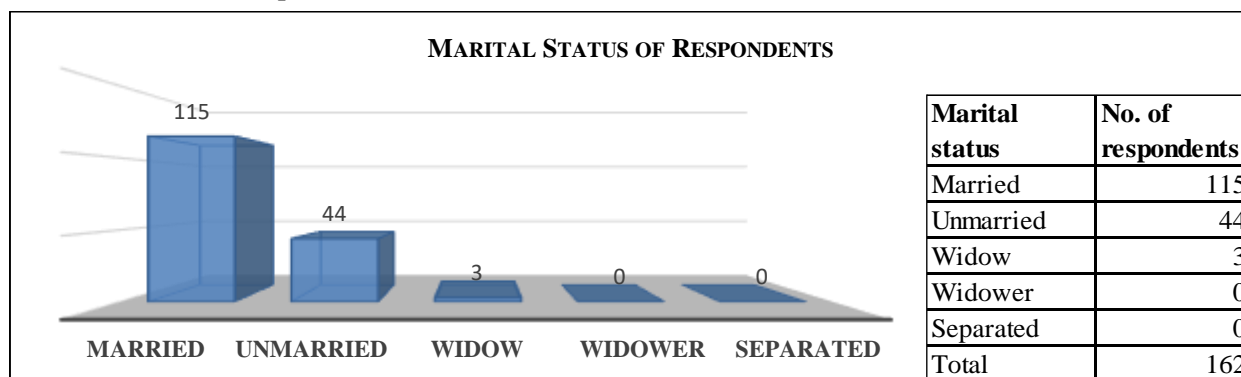


Figure.5: Marital Status of Respondents. Source: Field Survey

Fig 6 depicts the marital status of respondents. Out of the total 162 respondents, 115 are married, 44 unmarried and 3 widowed respondents. Amongst 115 married respondents, 83 are women (including the 3 widows) and 35 are men. Again amidst, 44 unmarried respondents, 33 are female (including the 3 adolescents) and 11 male. Married respondents are more than the unmarried respondents.

F. Marital age of Respondents:

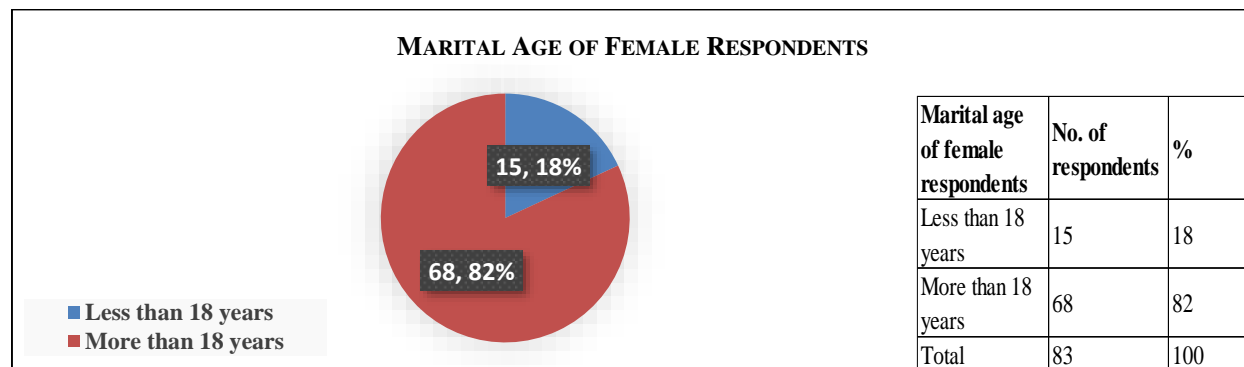


Figure.6: Marital Age of Female Respondents. Source: Field Survey

Fig 7 and Fig 8 shows the marital age of female and male respondents respectively from the 6 sample tea gardens. It is important to find out the marital status of the respondents because this information will support in further analysis in knowing the status of women. Marital age for Indian men and women is set at 21 and 18 years respectively. Marrying before the prescribed age when a girl or boy is not physically and mentally ready is considered to be illegal. But in the sample gardens it was seen that such violations prevailed as girls were seen getting married before attaining 18 years of age while boys before 21 years of age. Getting married at an early has various implications on a woman’s physical body as her body is used for the reproduction process. The elders of the family too are not aware of such implications as their main intention remains in marrying off their daughter and to be free from responsibilities. Similar, situation was seen among the respondents too where 18.07% of women got married before 18 years while 81.92% after attaining 18 years. The table below on the other hand shows the marital age of male respondents where 42.85% got married before attaining 21 years while 57.14% got married after 21 years of age.

While interrogating with the respondents and local NGO workers regarding the reason behind early marriage among boys and girls the following was found:

- Parents of teenagers mostly go out for work leaving them behind at home. Most of them get into love affairs and then physical intimacy which leads to unwanted pregnancy. In such a situation the society ties them in marital knot for social acceptance.
- A family who has more daughters marries them off at an early age to get rid of responsibilities. According to them, with such low income it becomes difficult for them to feed too many mouths. Thus, they start looking for eligible groom and if they find any, they marry off their daughter even before completing her 18 years of age.
- Lack of education among the tea garden workers is also a contributing factor for such early marriage between both male and female. The respondents also mentioned that such early marriage has different kind of implication in their lives:
- Boys who gets married at an early age faces problem of taking up responsibility. In such a tender age, out of excitement they enter the institution of marriage where they do not have any income source in such a situation the boy starts falling for bad habits like drinking alcohol and gambling.
- Family fights begin eventually when the boy is pressurised to earn for the family. Thus, the boy leaves their house leaving their wives behind in search of employment.
- There are also instances of early death of young boys, and girls getting widowed at an early age because of the regular habit of drinking alcohol.
- The female’s health also gets affected as her body gets into the reproduction process from an early age.

Extra-marital affairs are also another noted problem among the tea garden workers.

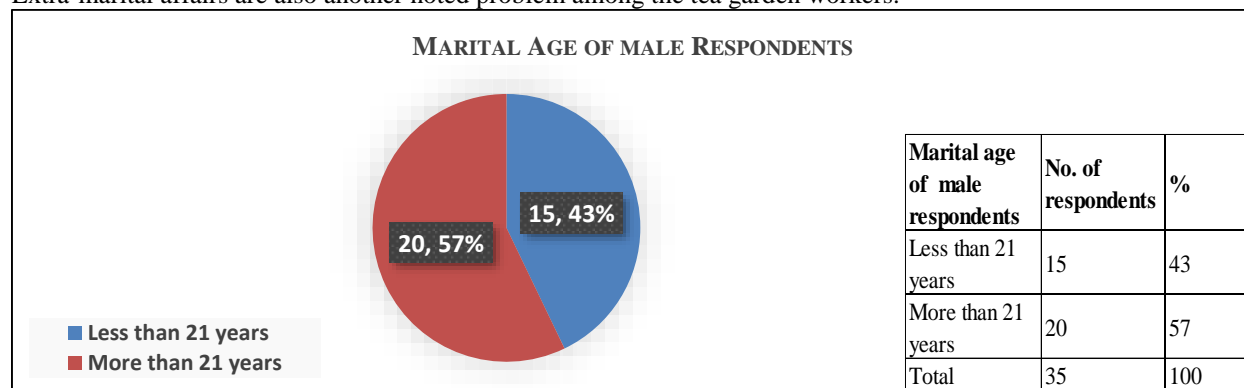


Figure 7: Marital Age of Male Respondents. Source: Field Survey

G. Monthly income of the respondents:

According to the Minimum Wages Act 1948, "wages" means all remuneration, capable of being expressed in terms of money, which would, if the terms of the contract of employment, express or implied, were fulfilled, be payable to a person employed in respect of his employment or of work done in such employment, and includes house rent allowance, but does not include-- (i) the value of-- (a) any house-accommodation, supply of light, water, medical attendance, or (b) any other amenity or any service excluded by general or special order of the appropriate Government; (ii) any contribution paid by the employer to any Pension Fund or Provident Fund or under any scheme of social insurance; (iii) any travelling allowance or the value of any travelling concession; (iv) any sum paid to the person employed to defray special expenses entailed

on him by the nature of his employment; or (v) any gratuity payable on discharge. The plucking period in a tea garden usually begins in early May when the rainfall starts and continues up to the month of November or early December. During the month of heavy rainfall i.e. between July-August, the yield reaches its peak. This period is considered to be the plucking season where payment is made on fulfillment of target-based plucking. Extra payment is also made if a worker is able to pluck more than the given target. In the sample tea gardens, the workers both permanent and temporary are paid full wage i.e. Rs.167 per day on fulfillment of 24 kgs of leaves. Extra amount of Rs.2 per kg is added if any workers exceed the 24 kg of targeted plucking. So, in such a situation during the plucking season where leaves are more, every worker target to pluck as much as they can to cross the required limit. According to the Section 13 (1)(b) of the Minimum Wage Act, 1948 states that, "it provides for a day of rest in every period of seven days which shall be allowed to all employees or to any specified class of employees and for the payment of remuneration in respect of such days of rest."

Thus, the Table 1 below shows the weekly earnings of the respondents during plucking season. This generally makes payment on weekly basis. From the above table following findings are derived:

- 48.76 % of respondents gets weekly wage at the rate of Rs.66.66 (considering to be Rs.67), 33.95 % gets Rs. 100 per day, 8.02% gets at the rate of Rs. 133.33 (considering to be Rs.133), 6.17% receives wage at the rate of Rs.166.66 (considering to be Rs.167) and the remaining 3.08% respondents gets wage at the rate of Rs. 180.83 (considering to be Rs.181)
- This wage that they receive is the net wage after deduction of expenses for accommodation, gratuity, equity, pension benefit, electricity, ration etc. from the gross which is unlawful. Had there been no such deductions made the workers would have earned more than their present income.
- The weekly payment made to the workers are for six days only excluding the one day for weekly rest which is actually to be a paid holiday as per law.
- Unskilled temporary and adolescent workers are not able to earn much. They have earned as low as Rs.67 a day.

Table 1: Monthly income of respondents during plucking season: (Source: Field Survey)

Weekly wage during plucking season	No. of respondents						Maximum daily wage rate (Rupees)
	Male	%	Female	%	Total	%	
Rs.200-400	24	52.17	55	47.41	79	48.76	66.66
Rs.401-600	15	32.60	40	34.48	55	33.95	100.00
Rs.601-800	3	6.52	10	8.62	13	8.02	133.33
Rs.801-1000	3	6.52	7	6.03	10	6.17	166.66
Rs.1000 & above	1	2.17	4	3.44	5	3.08	180.83
Total	46	100	116	100	162	100	

H. Size of the Family

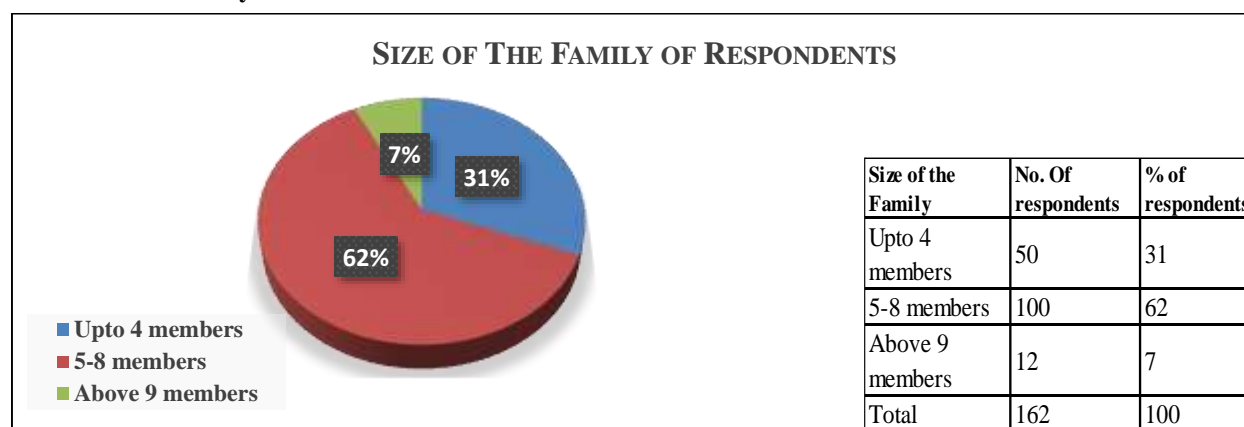


Figure 8: Size of the family of Respondents. Source: Field Survey

Fig 9 shows the family size of respondents. The size of the family is divided into three slabs, first up to 4 members, second between 5-8 members and lastly above 9 members. It was found that 100 of the respondents' families have members ranging between 5-8 members which accounts for 61.72% of the total respondents. On the other hand, 50% of respondents have up to 4 family members accounting for 30.86 % while only 12 respondents have smore than 9 members in their family. With regards to family composition it can be seen that mostly respondents belong to nuclear families and only a few belong to joint families. In an interview with Faguni Guwala of Gogra Tea Estate, who works as a plucker in the tea garden stated that they prefer staying as a nuclear family because facilities like subsidized ration, firewood, quarters etc. are provided by the planters to each family. But if they stay in joint families such facilities come as a whole rather than getting individually. That is why they prefer staying independently as nuclear families. Again, in a conversation with Nirma Nag of Harchura Tea Estate who works as a plucker in the tea garden mentioned that she stays in a joint family with 8 family members. She stated that being a daughter-in-law and staying in a joint family is the biggest disadvantage for her as she has to live up to the expectation of all the family members and follow the command of the elders in the house. The house in which she lives in is small according to the number of family members and thus she finds problem in finding privacy. She said that she wishes to stay in a separate house with her husband. Both the respondents also

added that be it nuclear or joint family, it is the woman who has to bear the burden of all the household chores and responsibilities and also look after the children with minimal help from their male counterpart.

CONCLUSION:

From the above discussions, it can be concluded that if we look into the socio-economic status of women, socially the position of tea garden women labourer is very much inferior to men. Women are the suppressed section both in their 'closed' and 'open' space. Economically too, even after earning equal as the men, their position in workplace, in household and in the society as a whole is subservient. The socio-economic status of tea garden labourers shows that maximum of the workers is still not privileged to be educated and majority of them are illiterate and ignorant. Even after years of independence, not much improvement can be seen in their living condition and their standard of living. The reason behind can be seen as the minimum level of wage that they earn. Their wage is so less that they can hardly afford a good life for themselves. With large number of family members and many mouths to feed on it is nearly impossible for the tea garden workers to afford a better living condition. Their wage can only support their daily survival and can never imagine a life beyond that. Also their social aloofness and their disassociation from the mainstream society make them backward from socio-cultural-economic aspect. The status of women in a tea garden community is determined by their role and position in a social system. Women have always been assigned to perform various roles as a wife, mother, daughter, daughter-in-law and as working women. Such dual role in the work front as well as in the domestic space, the women labourer is always over-burdened. This dual responsibility seems to have been the prime reason for causing mental and physical strain of the labour women. Thus, it can be interpreted that women's lives are not the outcome of individual choices but a creation of the systematic patriarchal oppression.

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