

Female Tea Workers in Sylhet: A Study on Their Health Condition

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Abstract

Tea industry is one of the most significant industries in Bangladesh which plays a vital role in the progress and prosperity of national economy. It is truly referred that a majority number of workers of tea garden are consisting of women. However, this is an outcome of a systematic study focusing on the health condition of female workers. It is a matter of pity that those hard working women are almost deprived of their fundamental needs. This work is strongly committed to searching for the existing reasons behind their malnutrition and miserable health condition in general. The main objective of this effort is to find out the challenges and obstacles they usually face in the way of their life. It also aims at pointing out relevant, sustainable and adaptable measures which can be the recommendations to their vulnerability. In addition to this paper will reveal the current pattern of living as well as general health condition of those ordinary and under privileged women workers of tea garden.

Key words: Health, Women Workers, Tea Garden.

Introduction

Tea industry is one of the leading industries in Bangladesh and tea is one of the major sources of earning foreign currencies of our country. But most of the workers of tea garden who directly involved with the production process including women are in a marginal position being exploited by their masters. As a developing country the scenario of health condition of women of our country is in a very worst position. But the health condition of women workers in tea garden is more dashed hopes. The women workers of the tea garden are completely deprived of all health care facilities and their beliefs, practices and life-style are not healthy at all. They are often being tortured physically and mentally and provided with a minimum working

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facilities even the plantation labor act violation is a common phenomenon of the authority. Besides, working in the tea garden is as unhygienic as risky. Because sometimes Oxide of Calcium emitted from the lime stone that sprinkle the tea garden in a liquid form. Most of the tea gardens in Sylhet are located on the slope of hills. So, it is risky to ascend and descend the hill for collecting the tea. Ignoring their own interests the women workers work hard to run the national economy smoothly. But the authority never seems them as human being & they are provided contemptible wages and other facilities which are insufficient for their living. This type of exploitation discrimination, and also occupational hazards badly affect their health condition.

About Tea Garden of Bangladesh

Tea gardens are the places where tea grows, processes, and manufactures. Tea garden is also called tea estate. Tea grows in those high areas where rain falls sufficiently. Tea garden is the combination of large and small hills situated mainly in the north eastern and south-eastern part of Bangladesh namely Sylhet and Chittagong. In Bangladesh tea was first cultivated in Sylhet district in 1856. The British authority hired people from different parts of India. The colonial authority spread out a slogan Muslim and Hindu refugees began to migrate to tea estate and started to live there. The condition of the tea workers in Bangladesh has not changed yet. They are still in the marginal position and deprived all human rights and totally isolated from the main stream of the country. Now, there are 158 tea gardens in Bangladesh.

Objectives of the Study

This study brings several objectives. This objectives helped the research to be conducted successfully. The broad objective of the study is to explore the present situation of health condition of women workers in tea garden. There are also some specific objectives like- to know the causes behind the miserable health condition of women in tea garden, to know the medical facilities of women provided by the authority, to know the income, expenditure and savings of women, to know about the sanitation and to know the consciousness about the health of women workers in tea garden. The people lived in a tea garden lead a very harsh life. The women are in a very vulnerable position-though they are the main earning source of the tea industry. Many questions have been raised about their life; are their basic needs being fulfilled? How is their health condition? Are they getting proper nutrition, food, and sanitary facilities? Since tea labor is adding huge amount of foreign currency through their hard work in tea garden, their health condition demands deeply thinking of people as well as government. From this point of view this research has been conducted.

Literature Review

Dr. Sharit K. Bhowmik (1996) in his Doctoral Thesis on "*Tea Plantation Labors in India*" focused on class struggle, relation between labor and authority and prevailing power distance between them. He showed class struggle by analyzing the internal hierarchy of the work environment. Manager is the highest authority in the tea garden and the workers hold the lowest position in tea garden. The highest authority always maintains the luxurious life in tea garden and the labors lead a inhuman life. The labors are always exploited.

A. Chowdhury (1998) in his study on "*Tea Plantation Women Workers of Sylhet*" analyzed the socio-economic condition of the tea plantation workers. He mainly focused on education, poverty and malnutrition of workers in tea garden as well as power distance and the relation between authority and the labors of tea garden.

Majumdar Pratima (2000) in her study on "*Working Condition in the Bangladesh Tea Plantation Industry*" delineates the health condition of workers in tea garden. The tea workers were from India tribal areas. 46% never went to Thana Headquarter. They are not concerned about their health. So many pregnancies demand and suffer from various diseases. Habit of taking alcohol among the tea plantation workers is pervasive. Only permanent tea plantation workers get the facilities of latrine, schooling for children, health care and ration.

H. M. Belayeth Hussain in his study on "*Position of Women Workers in Bangladesh and Globalization Affect*" discussed about the effects of globalization on tea plantation workers. From this perspective, he emphasized on three main aspects. These are:

1. Economy
2. Politics
3. Culture

"*Human Right in Bangladesh*" (1998) is a publication of AIN O SALIS KENDRO (ASK) comprises the situation of Human right in Bangladesh. Documenting the situation of human right is now a common practice in many countries, particularly since many state parties have adopted the Vienna Declaration in 1993, and accepted responsibility for promotion and protection of human rights. The book describes the civil and political rights, social economic and cultural rights, women's rights to equality to and non-discrimination, rights of the child, discrimination against minorities and rights of the refugees.

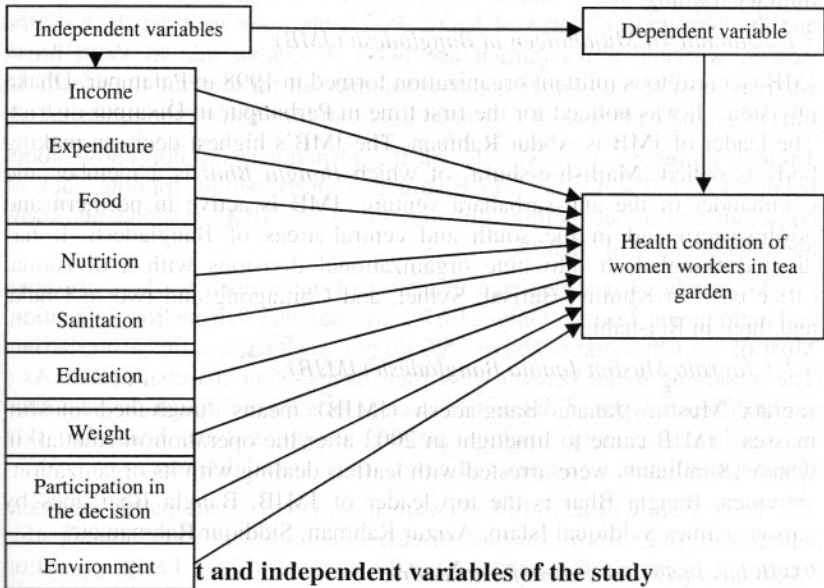
"*Better Days, Better Lives*" have been written by **Kamal Siddique** on some points as his aims of the study. According to him, the studying aims to make a contribution towards a strategy for implementing the convention on the right of children (CRC) in Bangladesh. The writer took the CRC definition of child, through which any person under the age of eighteen is a child. It is also conclude of the basic needs of life. According to this book, two official stances are prominently observed in Bangladesh. First those who matter in Bangladesh repeatedly take the public posture that children are the greatest treasure of the country, and that all efforts would be taken to ensure their protection, participation, welfare and development. Second, since Bangladesh is one of the earliest signatories of the CRC, it demonstrates her commitment to the child right.

Methodology

This study has been conducted following social survey method. Exploratory- descriptive research design has been employed in this study to get in depth analysis. To conduct the research work it incorporated mixed approach which includes qualitative and quantitative method. Qualitative method is used to observe felling attitude of women workers and quantitative method is used to classify women workers on the basis of their opinion which was collected from the field. In order to get calculative findings, the primary data collected through a set of structured questionnaire (open and close ended questions) and a guided case study schedule is also followed. Sixty mandatory selected women workers working at different tea gardens in Sylhet are interviewed to conduct the research work. One woman from each hour was selected to cover a wide range of participation generally. Data were collected during February 2009 and processed and analyzed through tabulation and classification. The secondary data collected from logical books, journals, research works, written documents daily newspapers, e-Books and website are used for the better understandings of the term. Internet surfing is continuously done to update the study paper.

Conceptual Framework:

Conceptual framework is such a matter which discloses the summary of the research. Through this framework cause effect relationship between independent and dependent variables are specified. Health condition of women workers can be explained by the terms food, education, nutrition, sanitation, as well as physical and mental conditions of them. Different influential factors are independent variables and health condition of women workers is the dependent variable. It is shown through the following figure:



Data Analysis

The study explored health condition of women tea workers in Bangladesh. So, the term 'Health' needs to be analyzed as a theoretical base of the study. Health is wealth. Nobody can attempt his job if health is not sound. Health does not refer only physical fitness but mental freshness also. Health is a comparative subject including physical and mental fitness. Health also deserves sound environment. The hard working tea workers (women) health condition should be considered. Because, they are playing a constructive role to strengthen our national economy. So, they should be provided balanced diet, nutrition, sanitation, education and medical facilities, including sound working environment in the tea garden.

From table-1 it is clear that 81.67% of women workers health condition is miserable. 13.33% women workers mentioned that their health condition is not very well. Only 5% of women tea workers are satisfied with their health facilities. Most of the women workers of tea garden spend their days with poverty, worked hard both in the garden and home, we open latrine, suffer from malnutrition, live in unhygienic environment. There are the causes of poor health of women tea workers although they are not conscious about it.

Table-2 shows that only 73.33% women workers use tube well water for drinking. But respectively 18.33% and 8.33% women tea workers use

ponds and Kuwa for getting necessary water. In conducting this study it is seen that the process of their collecting and preserving water is not hygienic and the surrounding places of Kuwa, Ponds and tube well are dirty. Some women workers of tea garden use twigs of Guava tree as tooth brush whereas most of the women use charcoal and salt for clearing their teeth. In time of taking bath only 4% women use Soap for washing themselves.

Table-3 represents that 81.67% of the respondent do not know about balanced diet. The factors which adjudged guilty behind training, lack of consciousness about dieting, illiteracy etc. Only 18.33 respondents know about balanced diet slightly.

From table-4 it is depicted that most of the women workers use open and unhygienic latrine. Only 21.67% use sanitary latrine for defecation. Most of women workers above 75% do not wash hands after using latrine. The remaining minor percent wash their hands using charcoal or ash. As a result different types of disease are seen among them through the year such as diarrhea, dysentery, cholera, malaria, cough, asthma, headache, skin disease, small pox, water pox and gastro instructional diseases.

Table-5 shows that only 15% women workers take allopathic treatment when suffering from various diseases. And 10% take homeopathic treatment because of poverty. Actually poverty affects health condition through malnutrition, environmental degradation, illiteracy, social exclusion and lack of access to health care. Above 70% of them believe and receive Jhar-fuk and Kabirazi herbal treatment instead of scientific medicine.

Table-6 represents that only 43.33% women tea workers use mosquito net and rests (56.67%) do not, to protect them from mosquito bite. About 90% women workers live in hilly areas finding no other alternatives. There are lot of element, like tin, jar, pot, where mosquito can live and procreate comfortably. So women workers should conscious to protect themselves as well as their children from dengue, malaria, and filarial fever. The respective authority should take proper step about it.

Table-7 shows that 80% women workers had one or more complications during pregnancy period. 90% of women workers get married under the age of 18. As a result of early marriage mother face life threatening complication during child birth and pregnancy period. Even they sometimes born dead child. Only 20% respondents reported that they did not face any pregnancy complication.

Discussion:

Most of the women workers of tea garden are illiterate and ignored about the overall health condition of them. They are separated from the modern science and technology. They never give allegation against the authority. They think that this type of deprivation is their fate and the meaning of life

is to serve their master. The most frustrating and alarming thing that has made women workers health vulnerable is lack of nutrition, sanitation, poor diet, illiteracy, unhygienic environment and poverty. The main food item of them is rice, potato, vegetables, etc. They can rare arrange fish, meat and eggs for eating. They are not enough money to buy mango, orange, apple and other costly fruits. Because most of the women workers who are the main earning sources of family earn only 1500-2000 monthly. Their daily food item is depicted by a diagram:

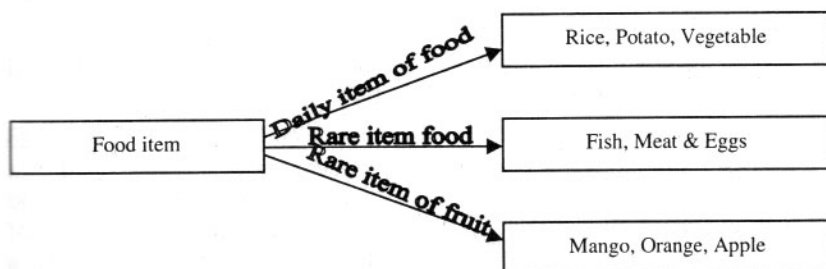


Fig-2: Daily and Rare food item.

Food-borne illness affect thousand of workers each year. The most common symptoms of food poisoning are abdominal cramps and pain, watery diarrhea, vomiting and fever. This is because of polluted water supplies, poor sanitation, unconsciousness about personal hygiene and clean less.

Nutrition is necessary for growth of human being and repair of worn out against tissue. Basic constituents for synthesis of digestive juices enzymes and hormone are derived from food. Most of the women workers (90%) are weak by poor nutrition. This study shows that 73.33% women workers of tea garden get married before 18 years. Majority percent women workers do not wash hands before having food and after using latrine. They wash their teeth everyday in the morning with charcoal. Women workers are not very particular about trimming and clearing their nails. Most of the women workers of tea garden are under weight (below 45 kg). Majority percent of the women workers (44%) stated that they live in a congested room which affects their health. The study also shows that near 70% respondent, drop their house garbage in open place surrounding of their house.

Alcohol addiction is one of the major problems for making women workers health vulnerable. Majority of women workers take alcohol almost every night. They take haria (local alcohol). They also get opportunity of having business of alcohol as an extra income. Sometimes they develop the deadly habit of addiction and hook to infect able drugs and other substances.

The pregnant women perform all routine works for the households as well as outside unless become very sick. During the child birth pregnant women are kept in an isolated room. Normally the older women assist when pregnant women feel labor pain. 78.33% women workers did not check their health during 42 days of their deliveries. There is no special food for pregnant mother. Women workers believe to superstitions, like not letting the pregnant women out of their house after the dusk, not open the back door of the room. They are afraid of several prejudicial effects of evil spirits during their antenatal period. From this believe the pregnant women workers wear an amulet.

They believe that if an amulet is worn by pregnant mother she will provide a well-developed, mentally sound and beautiful child.

Most of the women workers know about family planning but they do not receive any method of it. Only 21.67% women workers received post natal care (PNC) from a trained provider during pregnancy period. It is said that in every tea garden there is a community clinic for the treatment of women workers without any payment. But the reality is different. There is a dispensary in the community of Tarapur tea garden but we did not see any doctor at the time of data collection.

Conclusion with Recommendation

In order to seize yield profit, colonial government established tea gardens in this region. For this they hired labors from different regions but from the very beginning most of the labors continue to live below the national poverty line (US \$ 1.5/ day). They are suffering from various health problems and especially women labors are in a marginal position. Basic needs of living particularly health & education remain largely urgent. From the study of different sides of women workers it has been proved that, except use of pure drinking water, all other health indicators are below satisfactory level. Ill health, low income, lack of access to health education, proper sanitary system, lack of consciousness, lack of other essential health care services are found predominant in this study. On a positive note significant portion of women workers has adequate access to pure drinking water in the study areas. Present study also shows that women workers rarely consume animal foods and other good sources of micronutrients in this community. Finally through the experience of the study we can say that women tea workers suffer from various general and maternal health complications mainly due to little access to health care facilities, inadequate nutritional status, lack of significant financial activities and lack of proper sanitation systems. Actually tea industry is one of the important industries in our country and this industry has golden prospects in future if it is properly managed. Because, Bangladesh is earning a big amount of foreign

currency by exporting raw tea in abroad. But the heart of tea industry is women workers who are working hard from production to process of tea forgetting their selves. So, the govt. and respective authority should provide immediate attention to the women workers of tea garden that will be resulted positively on the over all development of our country. In view of the present finding and their discussion the following recommendations are made:

1. Training for awareness building of women workers on balanced diet, nutrition, sanitation, family planning, personal hygiene should be arranged by the authority.
2. Simple health care is urgent need and it should be provided women health screening and an effective woman based health scheme should be adopted to protect women workers. Health policy should be aimed at ensuring proper immunization, nutrition, sanitation and health education.
3. Proper guideline and monitoring system have to be introduced for maintaining and improving health condition of workers.
4. Wages have to be increased to tk. 150 for permanent workers and tk. 120 for temporary labors. Because price of essential commodities have been increased rapidly.
5. Women workers should wash hand before having food, drink pure water, wash hand after using latrine, use mosquito net sleeping time, drop their house garbage in a hole far from home, clean their surrounding environment to protect from various diseases.
6. The garden authority should establish a community clinic for women workers and their family members in every tea garden in which two or more doctors and at least two nurses are needed.
7. The women tea workers should check their health regularly and also visit doctors instead of Kabiraz and Jarfuk. They should be introduced with modern world from superstitions.
8. There should be established a good communication between tea workers and management as well as the government should lay down some rules regarding tea workers to be considered them as human being.

List of Tables:

Table-1: Health Condition of Women Tea Workers

Condition of health	No of Respondents	Percentage
Well	3	5.00
Not very well	8	13.33
Very poor	49	81.67
Total	60	100

Table-2: Use of Water for Drinking, Bathing and Washing

Types of water	No of Respondents	Percentage
Tube well	44	73.33
Ponds	11	18.33
Kuwa	5	8.33
Total	60	100

Table-3: Balanced Diet:

Whether Know About Balanced Diet	No of Respondents	Percentage
Yes	11	18.33
No	49	81.67
Total	60	100

Table-4: Use of Latrine

Types of Latrine	No of Respondents	Percentage
Sanitary latrine	13	21.67
Open latrine	47	78.33
Total	60	100

Table-5: Method of Treatment

Method of The Treatment	No of Respondents	Percentage
Allopathic	9	15.00
Homeopathic	6	10.00
Kabirazi chebal	23	38.33
Jar-fuk	22	36.6
Total	60	100

Table-6: Whether Use Mosquito Net

Yes/no	No of Respondents	Percentage
Yes	26	43.33
No	34	56.67
Total	60	100

Table-7: Pregnancy Complication

Pregnancy Complication	No of Respondents	Percentage
Yes	48	80
No	12	20
Total	60	100

Source: Data collected from Malnichara and Tarapur tea garden, Sylhet-February-2009.

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