

# TEA LEAVES A MARK

The voice of survivors of sexual and gender-based violence in Kenya's tea estates



**\*TRIGGER WARNING: GENDER-BASED AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE, OFFENSIVE LANGUAGE & SUICIDE IDEATION.**



Female labourers in Kenya's tea estates face sexual and gender-based violence, precarious employment and systemic inequality. Grounded in personal testimonies, this case study highlights the resilience of women navigating exploitative conditions and intergenerational poverty. Based on the women's words, it advocates for actionable reforms, including strengthening reporting mechanisms, enhancing mental health resources, ensuring fair wages, promoting gender equity in leadership and facilitating unionization. It also calls for gender-responsive due diligence by international buyers and community-led initiatives to address stigma.

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Front cover: Tea plantation in Kericho county, Kenya.

Photo in page 3: hand of a Kenyan tea woman plucker.

Photo in page 5: Housing within a tea estate.

Photo in page 7: The payslip of an elderly worker. Her net earnings of KES 7,055 (about US\$53) are shared with another woman who assists her in meeting her daily quota. The payment rate is KES 12 [US\$0.09] per kilo. Based on this payslip, with an estimated six-day work week, they jointly harvest about 28.5kg per day—falling 4kg short of the expected daily average.

Photo in page 8: A tea estate worker early in the morning.

Photo in page 9: A town near the tea estates where most casual workers live. This is also where those who leave the estates come to find alternative work.

Photo in page 20: A woman worker carrying a weighted tea bucket.

# 1 INTRODUCTION

Women working in Kenya's tea industry face numerous individual and institutional obstacles. These stem from unstable employment structures, hazardous conditions, sexual and gender-based violence, and the undervaluation of women's work.

This case study, commissioned by WKF – a local partner of Oxfam in Kenya, is based on the accounts of five women who have lived and worked on Kenya's tea estates in Kericho county. Some still live on the tea estates; others have left after enduring sexual and gender-based violations. Their stories offer a glimpse into their lives: their motivations for working there, the adversities they have faced and the reasons some chose to leave.

These women's stories are also a call to action. Companies, executives and consumers must all acknowledge the violence in the system if we are to eradicate exploitative practices, champion fair compensation and advance gender equality throughout the tea supply chain.

The women's testimonies documented in this case study elucidate not only the magnitude of the challenges they encounter, but also their resilience and pursuit of dignity. The Wangu Kanja Foundation, Oxfam and other women rights organizations, as allies in women's search for justice and accountability, play a crucial role in advocating for change. In collaboration with international buyers, tea estates and local advocacy groups, progress can be made towards a vision of the tea sector that values women's labour, respects their rights and establishes a workplace free from violence and exploitation.

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## 2 METHODOLOGY

The interviews in this study were conducted with 201 women from various tea estates in Kericho county, where thousands of women workers are working. Out of which, 194 cases were documented; 11 cases were identified for the in-depth case study interviews, of which 5 cases were demonstrated in this case study. Those are the stories of Grace, Jackie, Cecilia, Scholastica and Mercy. These names are pseudonymous, not their real names, in order to protect their identities.

Individual in-depth interviews lasted for an average of one hour and were conducted in Swahili to ensure clarity and accuracy in communication. Transcripts were translated into English for the purposes of research and campaigning work.

Informed consent was confirmed at both the start and end of each in-depth interview, including assurances to each woman of confidentiality. Consent forms are kept confidentially by WKF as agreed with and following Oxfam's safeguarding and GDPR principles and Data Protection Act of 2019 of the Government of Kenya.





## 3 EMERGING THEMES

### 3.1 FACTORS LEADING TO WOMEN'S ARRIVAL

The women employed in Kenya's tea plantations are often driven towards them by personal hardships and systemic inequities. Tea estates are a last resort, a place offering income, shelter and means to care for their children:

- A number of the women interviewed recounted how early pregnancies and financial constraints preventing further education led them to seek employment on tea farms;
- The need to earn money to pay for childcare was a common theme across interviews, both for single mothers and those married; while
- Grace followed in her family's footsteps by working on a tea estate like her parents, continuing an intergenerational cycle of poverty.

For those seeking work in the tea industry, obtaining a position often involves a randomized balloting system, which is open to abuse. Both Grace and Jackie describe having to engage in transactional relationships to secure employment. Scholastica was sexually coerced in exchange for her husband's safety at work. Such mistreatment reflects a system in which power disparities are manipulated, forcing women to compromise their dignity, safety and sexual health to obtain basic employment.

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## 3.2 CHALLENGING WORK ENVIRONMENTS

### 3.2.1 SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND VIOLENCE

As they enter the workforce, women discover that sexual exploitation and harassment are deeply embedded in the culture of tea estates, often viewed as an unspoken but tolerated practice.

Supervisors occupy key roles in the daily lives of workers. While a government-issued Certificate of Good Conduct is required for anyone joining a tea estate as a permanent employee, these are generated by running fingerprints through the criminal records system. As most cases of sexual and gender-based violence go unreported, tea estates are likely to recruit perpetrators of violence, even at senior levels of management.

Scholastica described how those in supervisory roles misuse their authority to coerce women into exploitative relationships, presenting these interactions as either 'favours' for job opportunities (as mentioned in [Section 3.1](#)) or to avoid negative consequences. This normalization of abuse is exacerbated by a culture of silence and fear; women are cautioned against speaking out, knowing it could result in a job loss and industry-wide blacklisting. Cecilia and Mercy both spoke of how supervisors raped them, but they did not feel that they could speak about it, instead considering it a personal shame.

### 3.2.2 PRECARIOUS EMPLOYMENT AND FINANCIAL HARDSHIP

Casual employment agreements in the tea estates are often short-term (3 to 10 months) and favour employers' interests:

- The lack of benefits such as paid sick leave or healthcare for casual workers means that illness, pregnancy or other unexpected events can lead to immediate income loss and, consequently, the loss of estate-provided housing;
- For each child placed in formal childcare, women are required to remit approximately KES 100 (US\$0.75) per child per day, which can take up a substantial portion of their income; and
- Some new or aspiring workers make temporary arrangements to 'sub-contract' under an established worker's name. This allows them to acquire some earnings while awaiting official employment. This arrangement allows some established workers on the payroll to meet their daily quotas despite difficulties due to age, disability or sickness.



ATTENDANCE RECEIPT

01 V126	8.0	02 HPC	49.9	03 HPC	11.1	05 HPC	31.3
06 HPC	40.2	07 HPC	22.7	08 HPC	42.2	09 HPC	48.4
10 HPC	30.3	12 HPC	40.7	13 HPC	16.1	14 HPC	21.1
15 HPC	32.2	16 HPC	34.6	17 HPC	11.6	19 HPC	31.2
20 HPC	12.9	21 HPC	29.9	22 HPC	31.3	23 HPC	27.6
24 HPC	21.1	26 HPC	23.2	27 HPC	24.5	28 HPC	34.6
29 HPC	17.1						

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Monthly Salary = 8,238.10 Kgs = 685.8

EARNINGS		DEDUCTIONS	
Basic Salary	8,238.10	Other Donations	50.00
REFUND RT SACCO	60.00	N.S.S.F	420.00
Round Up Wages	0.01	N.S.S.F Tier II	61.05
Other Earning	390.00	NHIF	400.00
		Kilos Deficit	611.68
		Donations	90.00
		Round Up Recovery	0.38
<b>TOTAL EARNINGS</b>	<b>8,688.11</b>	<b>TOTAL DEDUCTIONS</b>	<b>1,633.11</b>
		<b>NET PAY</b>	<b>7,055.00</b>

### 3.2.3 ISOLATION AND DISCRIMINATION

Women in the tea estates report a profound sense of isolation. Casual workers, who constitute a significant portion of the labour force, are ineligible for labour union membership, leaving them to address their grievances independently. Relationships within the estates are transient, as workers arrive and depart each season. For example, Jackie expressed experiencing deep loneliness, with no close confidants or support networks within the estates.

Tribal affiliations and physical abilities often determine one’s experience in the tea estates. Women from certain tribes (e.g., Kisii and Luyha)<sup>2</sup> are often perceived as ‘lower-ranking’ by management and are frequently assigned the most labour-intensive and least desirable tasks. Grace reported that her supervisors made no accommodations for her physical disability.

### 3.3 REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH RIGHTS AND THE HEAVY WORKLOAD OF CHILDCARE

For women in Kenya’s tea estates, sexual and reproductive health and rights and the disproportionate distribution of care present significant challenges exacerbated by structural inequalities and a pervasive culture of exploitation:

1. Women are frequently subjected to pregnancy testing before employment, with those found pregnant disqualified. In many cases, women must continue to suppress or conceal aspects of their reproductive lives to secure work. Jackie, for instance, faced immediate dismissal upon revealing her pregnancy, leaving her without income or support;

“Once you give birth, that’s it – no job, no pay, no home”

2. Casual workers are often denied re-entry to work immediately after childbirth. Grace's contract expired during her (unpaid) maternity leave, effectively barring her from returning: *'Once you give birth, that's it – no job, no pay, no home'*.
3. For mothers on the tea estates, a typical day involves balancing labour-intensive work with childcare. Jackie describes her typical day starting at 4am in order to reach work by 7am: *'we wake up before dawn, prepare the children, and then leave for work. It doesn't matter where you have been assigned to work, sometimes you have to walk like 5km to get there'*;
4. Sexually transmitted diseases are a serious risk, both from sexual assault, and in cases of married supervisors pursuing relationships with casual workers. For example, Scholastica shared her experience of being coerced by a married supervisor, only to later discover she had contracted HIV; and
5. Pregnancies resulting from rape are not uncommon. These mothers are left to care for the resultant children, with little or no recourse for child support, especially if the perpetrators are dead or unreachable.

### 3.4 MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

Women employed on Kenya's tea estates experience long-term mental and emotional harm due to the pervasive climate of fear maintained by supervisors and managers:

1. Stress is a defining aspect of life on the estates. Failure to meet targets results not only in reduced earnings, but the risk of disciplinary action or even termination of employment. As Jackie describes the anxiety, *'every kilogram matters'*;





2. Fear is used as a means of control and manipulation. Supervisors control job assignments, influence daily earnings and determine employment status, creating a climate in which workers feel compelled to yield to their demands, even if unreasonable. This enforces compliance, creating a culture in which women feel isolated, intimidated and deprived of agency. As Grace puts it: *'If you are on their bad side, you might as well pack up'*;
3. Intimidation is used to enforce silence in the face of misconduct, as Mercy spoke about her supervisor threatening her if she spoke out about his sexual assault; and
4. The estates lack effective grievance or counselling mechanisms to help women with their psychological needs in the face of such oppressive conditions and trauma. While some women find solace in informal support networks, such as co-workers or self-help groups, these arrangements are often inadequate for the scale of their challenges (see [Section 3.2.3](#)).

### 3.5 LEAVING TEA ESTATES THAT LACK REPORTING SYSTEMS

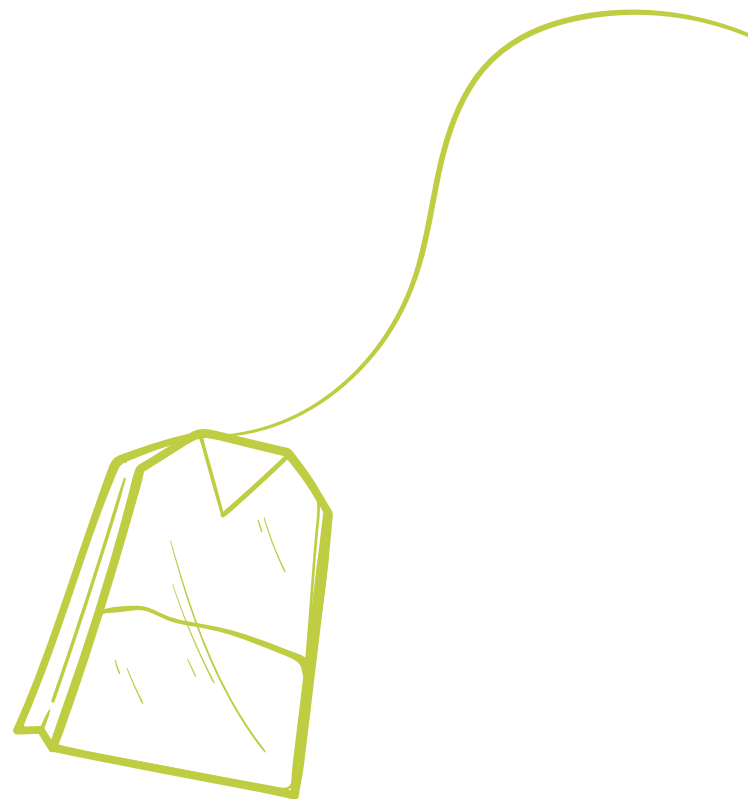
For women in Kenya's tea estates, the process of leaving their employment often reflects the same systemic issues of exploitation and fear as their work did. Given ineffective or absent reporting mechanisms, many survivors of sexual and gender-based violence depart without justice or closure, often bearing the pressure of unresolved trauma and the consequences of their experiences.



Many of the women in the tea estates possess minimal education, constraining their ability to navigate or comprehend their rights. For example, Scholastica's lack of basic literacy rendered her dependent on the estate system and the authority figures within it, increasing her vulnerability to exploitation. She was unaware of the formal grievance procedures.

Reporting systems on the estates, where they exist, are largely inaccessible or ineffective. For example, Cecilia did not report her supervisor's sexual exploitation, believing '*nothing would be done*', informed by the way in which she had seen (male and female) managers working as a "*cartel*" to protect each other, even in the face of evidence. This widespread lack of confidence in reporting mechanisms – and fear of professional and social repercussions from taking on the '*cartels*' – contributes to a culture of non-reporting.

Thus, the exit process for many women is characterized by unaddressed trauma and a sense of injustice. For those who have endured sexual harassment, exploitation or even violence, leaving the estates often represents an escape rather than a resolution. This was the case for all of the interviewees in this case study.



## 4 WOMEN'S STORIES



### GRACE'S STORY

Grace was born and raised on the tea plantation in Kericho County, Kenya. She watched her parents labour there for over 25 years: *'my parents worked their whole lives in the estates. When they left, it felt like my only option was to continue where they stopped'*.

When her parents eventually returned to their half-acre plot in the reserve (village), Grace stayed behind to work on the estate. Her sibling works on another tea estate. *'My parents retired to a small piece of land in the reserve, but they didn't have much'*.

This underscores her family's persistent financial struggles and intergenerational dependency on tea labour. As the eldest of eight siblings, Grace bore the weight of supporting her family, a responsibility that shaped her path from a young age.

### DROPPING OUT OF SCHOOL AND ENTERING WORK

Grace had her first child when she was under 20. Determined to complete her education, she briefly returned to finish primary school, but ultimately had to drop out. Struggling under the weight of childcare, and feeling like a pressure to her family, Grace sought a way to support herself. A friend suggested that she use her mother's ID to secure work – a move that would change the course of her life. *'I didn't have an ID of my own, so I used my mother's ID to get the job. She supported me'*.

With her mother's support, Grace borrowed 200 KES (currently about US\$1.5) to obtain National Social Security Fund (NSSF) and National Hospital Insurance Fund (NHIF) numbers, both required for formal employment on the estates.

In her early 20s, she started working as a casual labourer, hoping to achieve some stability. However, employment was sporadic, often dependent on a ballot for casual workers. When her name was not chosen, a friend advised her to seek help from a supervisor directly: *'Someone told me, "Go to the supervisors and give them something small. ...They'll take you to the office and get you hired"'*.

### EXPLOITATION AND VULNERABILITY

Lacking the money to offer a bribe, Grace offered a vague promise to the supervisor: *'one day when I get a salary, I will take care of you'*. The supervisor proposed a different arrangement: *'if you don't have money, then you have to accept that I will be sleeping with you'*.

Desperate for a job, Grace entered a year-long covert relationship with him, sneaking out of her parents' home each night at 10pm and returning by dawn. *'I didn't have money, so sex became the alternative'* she recalled. *'I would go to his house at night and leave early in the morning'*.



Someone told me, "Go to the supervisors and give them something small. ...They'll take you to the office and get you hired"



## DISABILITY AND PHYSICAL CHALLENGES

Grace's work as a tea plucker was physically demanding, especially given a disability. *'Tea plucking is hard. We start at 7 am, weigh the tea at 9 am, and work until 3 pm or later. We bend, pick, and carry baskets all day ... I couldn't meet the required kilos because of my [disability] ... So, I asked the supervisor to try to move me somewhere else – maybe to a lighter role – so I could at least keep working. But I waited, and time just passed'.*

More recently, she has been assigned to pick tea using a solar-powered machine. While these machines have eased her workload, they were not introduced as a disability accommodation but as a broader technological advancement.

## ILLNESS AND ISOLATION

After a year on her first tea estate, Grace discovered she was pregnant: *'I went to the clinic because I was pregnant. I got tested, and they told me I was positive for [HIV]'. Terrified by this revelation, Grace was further crushed by betrayal: 'I decided there was no need to fight over him. I left so the child could grow, and I could return later'.*

She left the estate and sought work in privately owned tea farms near her reserve/village, hoping to leave the painful memories behind. *'After that, I didn't deal with [the former supervisor] anymore. I left that job and went home. I stayed and gave birth to that child'.*

The pressure of balancing her work and her health became overwhelming, leading to a sense of isolation. She has kept her HIV status hidden from all of her family except her sibling, fearing the stigma it could bring. *'I don't want my mother to know; she will break down and die fast', she explained. Grace's children, too, were unaware of her health condition.*

The strain of secrecy, compounded by her deteriorating health, affects her mental wellbeing to this day: *'I feel bad. I don't feel myself. I don't have happiness. Even when my child asks for something they need for school, I zone out. I feel like my head is going to explode'.*

## RETURNING TO THE TEA ESTATE AMID NECESSITY

For nearly a decade, she worked as a casual labourer on private tea farms near her reserve: *'You just go to any employer, request work, pluck tea and get paid daily'.* However, the inconsistent pay and lack of security on these farms provided little financial relief, and eventually she was forced to return to the tea estates. This time, she was lucky at the balloting stage, and secured an 11-month contract, earning around KES 17,000 to 18,000 (around US\$130) per month – still barely enough to meet her family's needs.

## REFLECTIONS ON RESILIENCE AND HOPE FOR CHANGE

Despite the many hardships she has endured, Grace's story is one of resilience and newfound strength: *'If I had known early that he was using me, I would have reported him. Now I know that I need to take better care of my health and body. ... I don't have any more fear'.*

Her journey has instilled her with a desire for change in the tea estates, especially regarding the treatment of women. *'If more women were supervisors, maybe the exploitation would be less or none'* she suggests.



If you don't have money, then you have to accept that I will be sleeping with you". [...] I did not have money, so sex became the alternative



## JACKIE'S STORY

Jackie was the youngest of three siblings in a family struggling to make ends meet. Jackie dropped out of secondary school when her family could no longer afford her education. Seeking independence and hoping to support her parents, Jackie ventured into the tea estates. However, instead of stable work, she found a cycle of exploitation, health struggles and financial insecurity.

### SEXUAL EXPLOITATION FROM THE START

Jackie began her search for work about ten years ago. Arriving at the tea estate offices, she met a supervisor responsible for hiring new recruits. She hoped her willingness to work would be enough to secure a position, but the supervisor made it clear that she should pay for her job *'in kind'*.

Jackie recalls, *'I had my ID. I left home and went to the office. When I got there, I met a man who was registering people. He told me to come on a certain day. I went back on that day, and he told me that if I couldn't agree to [have sex] with him, he wouldn't register me'*. Desperate for work, she reluctantly agreed, meeting him in his office in the evenings. *'It wasn't even his house; it was in the office, because he would work late'*.



I was scared when the clinic confirmed my pregnancy. I knew the estate didn't allow pregnant casual workers, but I had no idea what to do



This arrangement continued for over a month. Eventually, he handed her an ID, facilitated her NSSF and NHIF registrations, and even arranged basic housing for her on the estate.

*'He told me, "You're going to such and such a house, and on Monday, you'll start work"'*. This is unusual, as most housing in the tea estate is reserved for permanent employees. *'When he gave me the ID, I thought things would get better, but that was just the beginning of my problems'*, Jackie explains.

### A FALSE SENSE OF SECURITY

The supervisor, who lived in a different house with his family, visited Jackie at night, creating an ongoing coercive relationship under the pretext of employment security: *'He kept coming to my house at night, around 10 or 11pm. He would leave in the morning to go to work'*.

*'One day, a neighbour saw him because he left late. She asked, "Where is this guy coming from? I saw him leaving your place". I couldn't answer her'*, Jackie says. When she confronted the supervisor about the situation, he dismissed her concerns, assuring her that their arrangement was harmless. However, the consequences soon became apparent.

Jackie discovered she was pregnant. *'I was scared when the clinic confirmed my pregnancy. I knew the estate didn't allow pregnant casual workers, but I had no idea what to do'*, she explains. She was handed a letter confirming her pregnancy and instructed to present it to the assistant manager – who worked in the same office as the supervisor.

## PREGNANT, HOMELESS AND UNEMPLOYED

When Jackie approached the assistant manager, a woman, to explain her situation, she hoped for understanding and support. Instead, the manager sided with the supervisor: she claimed Jackie had already been pregnant when she started working. *'I told her, "This pregnancy happened here. You have my clinic records", but she didn't care.'*

Jackie's pleas fell on deaf ears, and the supervisor was instructed to terminate her employment. Within days, safety officers forcibly removed her from her estate-provided housing. *'They came to my house and said, "You need to leave immediately". I had no chance to pack my things. I was three months pregnant and had nowhere to go.'*

Her relationship with the supervisor deteriorated rapidly. Once he received orders to remove her from the system, he began threatening her. Eventually, she cut off all contact with him, removing his number from her phone and never reaching out again. Reflecting on the experience, Jackie says, *'I felt very unsafe, especially when I was being chased out of the [estate]. They worked as a cartel, covering each other's actions and discarding me as soon as I became an inconvenience.'*

## RETURNING HOME AND HEALTH STRUGGLES

Jackie returned to her parents' home, where she would live until she gave birth. Jackie gave her child her father's surname as an acknowledgment of her family's support and the lack of the biological father's involvement. *'My father stepped in where the child's father refused. I gave my child his name because I had no choice, and our culture allows for that to happen.'* Nonetheless, the heavy work of raising the child fell solely on her shoulders.

Over time, the stress and trauma she endured began to impact her health. Jackie was diagnosed with high blood pressure triggered by the pregnancy. Her child was later diagnosed with diabetes, requiring daily insulin injections. Without a steady income, Jackie struggles to cover medical expenses for them both. *'I am the one who takes care of all the medical expenses'*, she explains. National health insurance currently provides her little relief.<sup>3</sup>

## ADVICE FOR OTHERS

Looking back on her experiences, Jackie feels disillusioned by the tea estate system, where even women in positions of power failed to support her. Despite this, Jackie has advice for those in leadership roles: *'If you have a position of responsibility, it's your duty to take care of those under you, to help them become better. Exploiting others is not only unfair, it's an offence to God'*. To employers, she urges greater accountability: *'The company should address these concerns when they arise. Frontline workers like us need more care and understanding, as we bear the weight of both the work and the repercussions of managerial failures'*.

## THOUGHTS ON JUSTICE AND REFLECTIONS ON HOPE

As a mother and a survivor of sexual exploitation, Jackie remains uncertain about her future. Her father provides support for her and her child. She is hopeful, however, that her story will lead to reform within the tea estates and inspire change for other women facing similar challenges. She remains resilient and dreams of justice: *'Justice for me looks like getting work, finding the perpetrator and holding him accountable to help with the medical and school fees for my child'*.



The company should address these concerns when they arise. Frontline workers like us need more care and understanding, as we bear the weight of both the work and the repercussions of managerial failures



## CECILIA'S STORY

Cecilia comes from a neighbouring county, embodies the search for independence that draws many women to Kenya's tea estates. In her community, tea estate work is viewed negatively, with many fearing it would bring shame or poor health outcomes.

Coming from a family of many siblings, Cecilia faced immense pressure as a young mother, having had her first child when she was under 20. Family conflicts and the stigma attached to her work pushed her to leave home: *'I was looking for a place where I could be independent and provide for my children. At home, there were many problems; my parents couldn't help me, and I wanted to raise my children properly.'*

### WORK CONDITIONS AND HOUSING

Initially, Cecilia shared cramped quarters. *'I shared with five other people. My children slept with me. Later, after several months, I was given my own house.'* Despite this, the shared amenities and lack of privacy weighed on her, and *'childcare was 100 shillings [US\$0.75] per child daily, and with several young children, it took almost half of my monthly salary.'* Nonetheless, Cecilia says, *'I felt the tea estate was the best option because at least my children had a little security.'*

### RAPE AND SILENCE THROUGH SHAME

After some time, Cecilia's life took a tragic turn: *'The supervisor gave me a lift on a motorbike. On the way, he stopped near a river, dragged me, and raped me. It was far away, and no one could hear.'*

Returning to work the next day, Cecilia grappled with immense shame and guilt, choosing to remain silent about the assault. *'I felt so much shame. I kept quiet, but I remained with pain in my body and soul.'* Over time, she developed severe back pain.

The entire system needs to be changed so that those at the bottom can get justice and protection

### EMPOWERMENT THROUGH EDUCATION AND A VISION FOR CHANGE

Health issues forced her to leave the tea estates, and Cecilia now lives in a city, working as a vendor. Her experiences eventually led her to a profound realization about the cycle of silence and abuse: *'I am now woke... After getting sick, I learned a big lesson. I wish I had known back then.'* This hard-won perspective fuels her drive to educate other women about the importance of reporting abuse instead of bearing it in silence. *'Hiding the shame is what has gotten me here',* she reflects.

Cecilia aspires to become a peer educator, advocating for women's rights in the city's agricultural farms, where she believes similar abuses are widespread. She hopes to help other women recognize and resist the exploitation she once endured. Her story embodies both a warning and a call to action, as she emphasizes the importance of seeking justice: *'Find the courage to pursue justice; even if just for yourself.'*

### A CAUTIONARY OUTLOOK

Cecilia's experiences with management provide a complex view on gendered leadership: *'I don't see how having more women in management will help much. There are some women in high positions, but they still take bribes and don't care about workers' problems.'*

*“It’s not a guarantee that having women in leadership will change things. Some women, when they get positions, still take bribes and let workers’ problems persist. The entire system needs to be changed so that those at the bottom can get justice and protection.”*

Cecilia’s experience in Kenya’s tea estates illustrates the harsh realities faced by women seeking independence in exploitative environments. Her story underscores the need for mental health support, fair labour practices, and systemic accountability in industries where silence allows abuse to proliferate. Cecilia is now determined to help others avoid the path she was forced to walk and envisioning an industry where dignity and justice replace silence and shame.

## SCHOLASTICA’S STORY

Scholastica was living with her siblings in a big family after her parents died. With limited opportunities, she found herself married into a traditional union.

About 20 years ago, she left her home with children, moving to Kericho County to be with her husband, a permanent tea estate worker. For Scholastica, this move was not only about love but about finding a stable life for herself and her children. Her husband provided a modest home – a two-room house where they lived with their children, separated only by a curtain. Scholastica recalls her gratitude for his support: *‘When he accepted me and took me with all my baggage, I loved him deeply... I saw that I could manage’*. Together, they had more children.

## EXPLOITATION IN THE WORKPLACE

In the beginning, Scholastica was a stay-at-home mother. However, her husband requested her help as his work situation worsened. His supervisors frequently harassed him, assigning him arduous tasks and issuing unfair warnings. Scholastica soon realized that his mistreatment was part of a scheme by a supervisor who had a sexual interest in her. This manager would send her husband on distant tasks, creating opportunities to come to their home and make unwanted advances. *‘My husband struggled a lot... the manager would send him far away to weed bluegum trees, creating opportunities to come to our home and try to talk to me about love’*.

Her resistance only seemed to make things worse for her husband, who faced repeated disciplinary actions and reduced wages. The supervisor eventually pressured her to trade her compliance for her husband’s job security and a chance at employment for herself. *‘He told me, “If you agree to be with me, these problems will stop... your husband will have peace, and even you will get a job”’*. Desperate for her husband to keep his job, she gave in to her supervisor’s coercion.

Soon after, she sought help from a friend, who connected her with another tea estate, where she found her work, hopefully without harassment. By then, Scholastica’s husband had been fired, leaving the family without an income.

He told me, “If you agree to be with me, these problems will stop... your husband will have peace, and even you will get a job”



## THE WEIGHT OF DISPLACEMENT AND HEALTH PROBLEMS

The political violence that swept across Kenya in late 2000s brought Scholastica's family a fresh wave of hardship. Their home was ransacked, and they lost everything. *'They attacked the houses, taking everything. One person was killed... they especially targeted the Kisii houses'*. With a young child in her arms, Scholastica and her family fled, seeking refuge in the countryside. But life there was even harsher, forcing them to return to the tea estate, where Scholastica managed to secure casual employment to support her family.

As the family tried to rebuild, Scholastica was devastated to learn that she was HIV-positive. She was certain that she had caught it from her former supervisor. *'I cried a lot... I even asked the doctor, 'How could this happen?'* She struggled with the weight of this knowledge, hiding her diagnosis from her children and managing her health in silence. Her husband, too, later tested positive, but stood by her with unwavering support. *'He didn't blame me; he just said, "We will survive together"'*.

## ECONOMIC HARDSHIPS AND UNPAID WORK

As a casual tea worker paid for the weight of tea plucked, Scholastica's wages were meagre: *'If I worked hard, I could make 4,000 shillings [US\$30]... in good months, maybe 7,000 [US\$52.5]. But after deductions [for NHIF and NSSF], it's always less'*. The earnings barely covered basic needs, let alone her medical expenses. However, the estate provided in-kind benefits like housing, water and education for her children, which kept her tied to the job.

Scholastica recalls the financial strain as her children grew older, the pressure of providing food, school supplies, and occasional healthcare compounding her struggles. Her options for extra income were limited, and even the small vegetable garden she tended on the estate was more of a subsistence activity than a reliable source of cash: *'You might sell vegetables and not make a profit... most of the time you end up being in debt'*.

## COMMUNITY SUPPORT AND A DESIRE FOR CHANGE

Though deeply scarred by her experiences, Scholastica found strength in her community and her family: *'My husband is a great caregiver... even now, he can cook and take care of the children when I'm working'*.

Together, they navigated the challenges of living with HIV, helping each other stay on track with medication and managing daily tasks. Scholastica remains grateful for her husband's patience and support. As she grew older, Scholastica began to see the importance of advocating for herself and others. Her life experiences have fuelled a desire to educate other women about recognizing and resisting exploitation. She speaks candidly to younger women on the estate, warning them of the potential dangers, and encouraging them to seek safer pathways within the employment system. *'Now I know I don't have to keep quiet... I warn the younger women to be cautious and find safer ways to work'*.

## A COMPLICATED RELATIONSHIP WITH WOMEN IN ESTATE MANAGEMENT

Scholastica acknowledges the value of having women in supervisory roles, though she has also seen some female supervisors engage in corrupt practices: *'Just because someone is a woman doesn't mean they will stand with you... we need deeper reforms'*. Scholastica believes that comprehensive reform, beyond gender representation, is necessary to address the structural exploitation embedded within tea estate culture.



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## MERCY'S STORY

Mercy, a woman in Kericho County, married young and soon found herself in a turbulent relationship dominated by her husband's alcoholism and neglect. Struggling to provide for her children, Mercy ultimately left her husband's home and returned to her parents. However, they were struggling themselves and urged her to become self-sufficient. Determined to make a new life, Mercy moved to a nearby tea estate town, in search of work and stability.

### ENTRY INTO TEA WORK AND RAPE

Mercy found work as a plucker on a tea estate. The initial months brought hope – she could support her children, who were old enough to stay at home alone while she worked. Her goal was simple: to provide them with basic needs and education. However, her optimism was short-lived.

In her second year, Mercy began to experience harassment from her supervisor, who would wait for her after work, trying to coerce her into compromising situations. Mercy was uncomfortable and scared, and so avoided him. However, the harassment persisted. *'He used to stop me every day, but I would run away'*. One day, as she was leaving work alone, the supervisor ambushed her by the river. He forcibly restrained her and raped her: *'I screamed, but no one heard me. The sound of the river covered everything'*. He left her with a threat: *'He said, "if I hear my name in the office tomorrow, you'll see fire"'*.

Terrified and ashamed, Mercy returned home, concealing her trauma from her children. The following day, she stayed home, claiming illness, yet the pain – both physical and emotional – was unbearable.



I screamed, but no one heard me. The sound of the river covered everything.[...] He said "if I hear my name in the office tomorrow, you will see fire"



### DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Mercy's silence about the assault led to further pain: *'I began hearing rumours that he was sick [with HIV], and my mind started racing, "Now, will I also suffer?"'*. In her third year, she decided to leave the estate, feeling unsafe, unsupported and anxious. She returned to her estranged husband, hoping to restore some sense of normality for her children.

However, soon after returning, she fell ill and was hospitalized. *'I was tested and found to have pneumonia, asthma, malaria and [HIV]'*. The news shattered her. Her husband, who initially showed concern, soon turned against her, accusing her of infidelity and blaming her for her illness. *'He said, "It's better I break you; why are you bringing me this disease?"'*.

In a fit of rage, he attacked her with a metal bar, injuring her leg severely. Her neighbours and in-laws took her to hospital, where she spent three months recovering. Mercy could not bring herself to press charges against her husband, fearing the impact on her children. She says, *'I pitied him and feared that if he was arrested, he would suffer in prison'*.

## FINANCIAL HARDSHIP

Upon her discharge from hospital, Mercy returned to the town that she had moved to near the tea estates, her leg permanently injured. She is no longer able to work in the tea fields, where she once earned KES 17,000 [US\$127] per month – already a meagre income for a single mother supporting three children. *'Now I can't even bend... I do light work like washing clothes'*. Her income is inconsistent, but rarely enough to cover her family's basic needs. On a good day, she can earn KES 300 [US\$2.25].

Mercy relies on a nearby clinic, located within a prison, for her HIV medication, as she cannot afford private healthcare. Her children, the eldest now in secondary school, are her driving force, and she hopes to keep them in school despite the financial strain. *'My children told me, "Mama, we will buy our own land. God will help us"'*. They are aware of her injury but not of her HIV status. She keeps this secret to protect them from the stigma and pain that has become a part of her life.

## A CALL FOR ACCOUNTABILITY AND SAFETY

Mercy maintains hope for justice for herself and for other women on the tea estates who are abused by supervisors: *'They should be arrested and jailed for life. They abuse these women'*.

However, for Mercy, justice means more than punishing her abusers; it means creating a safer environment for women across Kenya's tea estates. She calls on tea estate owners to screen supervisors more rigorously and to establish systems that protect vulnerable workers from exploitation and harassment: *'The companies should ensure they don't just hire anyone'*.



They should be arrested  
and jailed for life.  
They abuse these women



The companies should ensure  
they don't just hire anyone





## 5 CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

### CONCLUSION

The challenges that the five women in **Chapter 4** have faced reflect structural inequalities within tea estates that necessitate transformative change:

- 1. Sexual and gender-based violence is normalized – not an exception.**

Supervisors and team leaders, often wielding unchecked authority, exploit women, fostering a pervasive culture of fear. The absence of reliable and accessible reporting systems reinforces this cycle, as many women are silenced, without recourse to justice.
- 2. The precarious nature of women’s jobs traps them in cycles of economic exploitation.**

They frequently occupy casual positions with limited job security, minimal benefits and inadequate remuneration. Piece-rate pay structures tie income to daily output, making them vulnerable to further exploitation.
- 3. The persistence of poverty and replication of trauma across generations in the tea estates reflects limited opportunities for social mobility.**

Many women follow in the footsteps of family members into the tea estates due to scarce alternative employment opportunities and limited access to education.
- 4. Stigmas surrounding sexual and gender-based violence, and social pressures to avoid ‘disgracing’ one’s family, discourage many women from reporting abuse or seeking justice.**

This silence perpetuates victimization and leads to severe mental and physical health repercussions, as well as strained family relationships.

The voice of survivors of sexual and gender-based violence in Kenya’s tea estates

## RECOMMENDATIONS

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### STRENGTHEN REPORTING MECHANISMS AND SUPPORT STRUCTURES

Implementing accessible, confidential reporting systems is essential for addressing sexual and gender-based violence. Companies should collaborate with organizations such as the Wangu Kanja Foundation to develop culturally appropriate and literacy-sensitive reporting channels, ensuring women can report abuses without fear of reprisal. Support services including counselling and legal assistance should be made available to assist survivors in navigating their options for justice.

### PROVIDE FOR WORKERS' MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS

Creating a safe and supportive workplace requires addressing the power imbalances that allow fear to flourish and recognizing mental health as a fundamental component of worker welfare. Systemic changes that prioritize mental health and ensure that workers feel secure to express grievances would transform the tea estates into environments where dignity and well-being are upheld.

### ENFORCE STRONG GENDER AND INTERSECTIONAL DUE DILIGENCE REGULATIONS

International buyers, including UK brands sourcing from Kenya's tea sector, have an obligation to implement gender-responsive due diligence across their supply chains. Regular audits focusing on gender dynamics, fair wages and workplace safety should be standard practice. Buyers must also evaluate their purchasing practices to ensure they do not inadvertently incentivize low wages or poor working conditions.

### GUARANTEE FAIR WAGES AND JOB SECURITY FOR CASUAL LABOURERS

Transitioning casual workers into formal employment – with transparent contracts, fair wages and benefits – is critical. Companies should adopt a minimum wage benchmark that reflects the local cost of living. This shift towards secure employment would acknowledge and appropriately compensate women for their essential contributions to the tea sector.

### FOSTER GENDER EQUITY IN LEADERSHIP POSITIONS

Increasing the representation of women in supervisory and managerial roles might help alter workplace dynamics, providing workers with advocates who may be more attuned to their challenges. Training programmes to develop women leaders would contribute to a more gender-balanced power structure, which in turn could reduce incidents of harassment and exploitation.

### ENCOURAGE AND SUPPORT UNIONIZATION

Ensuring that all workers, especially casual labourers, have access to union representation is essential for addressing grievances collectively. Unions can provide a platform for workers to advocate for fair wages, safer working conditions and greater accountability. International stakeholders should engage with unions and prioritize worker representation in supply chain monitoring practices.

### ADDRESS THE ROOT CAUSES OF STIGMA AND SHAME

Community-based initiatives are critical to challenging the stigma surrounding sexual and gender-based violence. Awareness campaigns and peer education programmes within tea estates can facilitate open discussions and support survivors in coming forward, helping to dismantle the culture of silence that enables abuse.

### DEVELOP ALTERNATIVE ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES FOR WORKERS

Diversifying economic opportunities in tea-growing regions is crucial for reducing workers' dependency on exploitative tea estates. NGOs and local organizations should collaborate to establish skill-building and small business programmes that provide viable and sustainable alternatives to tea estate labour.

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## GLOSSARY

**Balloting:** A lottery system in which casual workers' IDs are randomly selected to determine who receives employment for the day or a short-term contract.

**Casual worker:** A worker, often employed as a plucker or weeder, hired on a short-term basis. Unlike permanent employees, casual workers lack access to health, housing and retirement benefits, and are not permitted to join the trade union.

**Justice:** During interviews, survivors were asked to define justice in their own terms. Rather than emphasizing criminal or legal accountability, survivors described justice as whatever is necessary for their healing and closure.

**Marriage:** In many rural areas, informal cohabitation, known as 'come-we-stay', often precedes or substitutes formal marriage ceremonies. This arrangement may persist indefinitely. In some instances, the male partner may depart, leaving the woman without legal proof of marriage and hindering her ability to seek assistance or legal recourse.

**National Hospital Insurance Fund (NHIF):** A social health insurance scheme. Monthly contributions allow for basic health coverage.

**National Social Security Fund (NSSF):** A basic retirement savings plan, ensuring that workers accumulate some form of pension. Contributions to NSSF are mandatory and deducted even from casual workers' wages during periods of employment.

**NHIF and NSSF numbers:** Essential identification numbers for any worker, whether employed casually or permanently. Contributions to both schemes are deducted from wages each month when a worker is actively employed. For casual workers, employment gaps can disrupt their access to these benefits, complicating retirement security and healthcare access.

**Plucker:** The primary person harvesting tea from the shrubs. Pluckers strive to meet a daily target, usually 32kg, which earns about KES 800 (approximately US\$6). This physically demanding job requires bending and carrying a basket for roughly 7–8 hours (7am to 2pm).

**Reserve:** The home village or town from which tea estate workers come. (Historically, reserves were areas where indigenous communities were relocated after being displaced from their ancestral lands to make way for cash crop plantations by colonial powers.)

**Supervisor/team leader:** The individual responsible for daily management of tea pluckers and weeders. Their duties include providing direction, hiring new staff and ensuring task completion. They work in the fields and report to estate management.

**Tea estate:** Plantations where tea shrubs are cultivated across vast tracts of land, sometimes spanning multiple hills. The majority of tea plantations are adjacent to a forest, typically at the lower end or downhill section of the estate, often near a river. Historically, most tea estates have been owned by large corporations, frequently from countries such as the UK, and are situated in Kenya's Kericho region.

**Tea estate house:** Employees frequently live in modest dwellings provided by the company. These homes are basic, consisting of just one or two rooms, i.e., a living area that doubles as the kitchen, and a bedroom. Bathrooms and toilets are located outside and shared among several families. While there are no guards stationed at tea estate houses during the night, full-time security personnel, and occasionally drones, are employed to monitor the tea plantations.

**Tea factory:** Where tea leaves are processed and packaged for distribution worldwide.

**Weeder:** This role focuses on eliminating unwanted vegetation around tea plants. While it still requires prolonged bending, it's generally considered less physically demanding than picking.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Oxfam (2025). *Change the Way You Do Business: Leading with women workers voices*. Oxfam's Briefing for Business on Value Women's Work Issue 2. <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/change-the-way-you-do-business-leading-with-women-workers-voices-621690/>
- 2 Kisii and Luya, ethnic groups who originate from neighbouring regions of the tea-growing areas, are considered as outsiders by the dominant Kalenjin, a local community to the tea plantation regions.
- 3 As at the time of writing, the government had altered this medical scheme, rendering much of the support that was provided for illnesses like diabetes no longer accessible. Business Daily. (2 October 2024). *Chaos, patient suffering persist on shaky SHIF rollout*. Last accessed 4 January 2025 at: <https://www.businessdailyafrica.com/bd/corporate/health/chaos-patient-suffering-persist-on-shaky-shif-rollout-4784114>

## WANGU KANJA FOUNDATION

Wangu Kanja Foundation (WKF) is an experienced-informed, and survivor led feminist nonprofit national organization founded in 2005. The organization is domiciled in Nairobi Kenya but has footprints in all the 47 counties in Kenya.

WKF was founded by Ms. Wangu Kanja, an experienced Human Rights Champion, with 19 years' experience in gender and development. The challenges she faced after a sexual violence ordeal and particularly in the quest for justice in Kenya, were instrumental in the establishment of WKF. The organisation focuses on addressing sexual violence regarding prevention, protection and response. At the core of WKF's work is addressing the needs of survivors of sexual violence in Kenya and beyond by engaging in holistic interventions with an aim of restoring their dignity and that of their families and friends. WKF is the Convener of the Survivors of Sexual Violence in Kenya (SSVKenya) Network, which brings together a unified movement of survivors to amplify their voices to address all forms of sexual violence across the country. WKF also convenes the Coalition against Sexual Violence (CASV), a network that aims to consolidate efforts from a membership drawn from rights-based organizations that address sexual violence in Kenya.

## OXFAM

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