THIRST

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Behind the Brew

What has changed for women in the tea sector since the sexual assault exposés of 2023?



Image: Gwenael Piaser, 2009. Flikr

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About THIRST

THIRST is an independent NGO working collaboratively with industry stakeholders to transform the tea industry. Our vision is of a resilient tea industry in which workers and farmers are empowered and their human rights are realised. To achieve this, we bring all tea sector actors together to listen and learn from one another and to find practical, realistic solutions that will tackle the root causes of tea workers' and farmers' hardships at a systemic level. We generate inclusive and constructive dialogue, share knowledge, insights and expertise, collaborate to find solutions and call on decision and policy makers to put these solutions into practice. For more information, visit our website at www.thirst-tea.org.

About Women Working Worldwide

Women Working Worldwide (WWW) is an international NGO working collaboratively with companies, trade unions, women's rights organisations and other stakeholders to advance gender equality and improve conditions for women workers in global supply chains. Our vision is of a world where gender equality is a lived reality for every woman worker. To achieve this, we combine research, training, advocacy and consultancy to amplify women's voices, strengthen local organisations and support practical changes that tackle the root causes of discrimination and inequality. We bring together experience and expertise to promote decent work, strengthen women's rights and build more equitable and responsible supply chains. For more information, visit our website at www.women-ww.org.

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Acronym key

BHRC: Business and Human Rights Centre
EPK: Eastern Produce Kenya
EPM: Eastern Produce Malawi
ETI: Ethical Trading Initiative
ETP: Ethical Tea Partnership
GAIA: the Ethical Trading Initiative's Gender Action In Agriculture principles
GBVH: Gender-based violence and harassment*
HREDD: Human Rights and Environmental Due Diligence
mHREDD: Mandatory Human Rights and Environmental Due Diligence
CSDDD: the EU Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive
ILO: International Labour Organisation
INGO: International Non-Governmental Organisation

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*GBVH refers to violence & harassment directed at persons because of their sex or gender, or affecting persons of a particular sex or gender disproportionately, including physical, sexual, psychological, or economic abuse. We use the term GBVH, instead of other existing terms such as *Sexual Exploitation, Abuse, and Harassment* (SEAH) or *Gender-Based Violence* (GBV), as we feel it better covers all forms of violence and harassment. For further definitions and explanation see Women's Empowerment Principles: Gender-Based Violence And Harassment At Work.

Executive Summary

In 2023, THIRST and Women Working Worldwide published ***"Consent. Just Consent. Then you can come to work": Risk factors for gender-based violence in the tea sector*** (hereafter – the ***Consent*** report). It followed the BBC Panorama and Africa Eye investigation *Sex for Work: The True Cost of Our Tea*, which exposed widespread sexual abuse of women workers on plantations supplying popular UK tea brands. The revelations were not new: in the preceding years, lawsuits against other tea producers had also detailed systemic abuse against women tea workers, including rape, assault and discrimination.

Three years on, how much has the risk to women tea workers actually been reduced? How have stakeholders across the supply chain - from producers to suppliers to retailers - responded, and what systems, structures and procedures have they put in place to tackle abuse? Are individual efforts creating systemic change, or is progress piecemeal? What have we learned, and what remains to be done?

Methodology

Using the Ethical Trading Initiative's (ETI) Gender Action in Agriculture (GAIA) principles as a framework, this report illustrates the progress made towards ending GBVH in the global tea sector over the last three to five years, as well as where gaps remain. It draws on interviews, focus groups and questionnaires with tea stakeholders completed in 2026, which were structured to gather company feedback on progress against the respective GAIA principles. This was supplemented by desk research into corporate policies and industry developments. Producers, suppliers, trade unions, and major tea brands and retailers were selected on the basis of their role in the UK tea supply chain and membership of the ETI, although outreach later extended beyond this platform.

Key research findings

The tea sector is beginning to respond to GBVH in ways that go beyond acknowledging the problem. There are examples of positive leadership, growing awareness and practical initiatives to improve women's safety and dignity at work. However, progress is uneven and should not be mistaken for transformation: the deeply embedded inequalities, patriarchal attitudes and power imbalances endemic to the tea sector continue to enable GBVH and make tangible change slow and piecemeal. Where accountability, resources and sustained leadership are lacking, progress is especially fragile. The tea industry has an opportunity now to learn from the mistakes of the past, to build on the progress made in the last few years, to sustain good practice and so ensure that a job in the tea sector does not automatically come with the risk of sexual abuse.

Progress made by stakeholders

The BBC exposé catalysed action from companies, building on earlier court cases and the advocacy of women's rights organisations, trade unions, INGOs and certain companies, which together have driven wider recognition of GBVH as a salient human rights risk in the tea sector. Several major UK brands and retailers now recognise tea as a high-risk commodity, and buyers and certification bodies appear to be moving from a compliance model towards one of shared responsibility, which enables them to better support partners to identify and manage human rights risks. This has been reinforced by mandatory human rights and environmental due diligence (mHREDD) legislation.

Tea buyers are exhibiting early signs of responsible purchasing, with examples including longer-term partnerships with fewer suppliers and joint initiatives to close the living wage gap for tea workers, although the industry has a long way to go before this can be fully achieved. Board-level oversight of GBVH data is becoming more common and supply chain disclosure has improved among leading brands. Programmes tackling the underlying power dynamics and socio-economic norms that drive GBVH are emerging, including through engaging men as allies, and grievance mechanisms built on trusted community channels are encouraging reporting.

Gaps in progress made

Some producers remain reluctant to accept that GBVH exists in their own operations or smallholder supply chains. There continues to be an over-reliance on certification by their customers, with companies wrongly treating it as a substitute for their own due diligence. Policies are widely adopted, but evidence of implementation, follow-through and impact is weaker. Grievance mechanisms exist on paper but are often ineffective, with a lack of trust and understanding from workers. There is not enough discussion on how buyers can adjust their purchasing practices to better support producers in addressing GBVH. Many buyers also run separate initiatives, sometimes with the same producers, which duplicates efforts and creates additional burdens.

Perpetrator accountability and verified remedy for survivors are the least developed elements of the tea sector's GBVH response, with survivors of the abuses exposed in 2023 still waiting for justice. Workers are not being paid a living wage (which increases their risk of abuse), and women remain under-represented in supervisory and management roles. Data on GBVH in supply chains is rare, fragmented and underused. Smallholders (and their hired labour), who produce the majority of the world's tea in many countries, remain largely invisible to monitoring, reporting and research.

Looking ahead

One producer reflected that before the launch of its new grievance mechanism, he would have said "either we didn't have GBVH in the company, or it wasn't in the magnitude that was being portrayed… but now I know better." Companies should not wait for another crisis to reach the same conclusion. They should assume GBVH is present and treat any monitoring result showing none as a sign the system is failing.

> ***"either we didn't have GBVH in the company, or it wasn't in the magnitude that was being portrayed… but now I know better."***

Progress depends on more than a company's stated commitments or the publication of a sustainability report. Where strong leadership provides clear direction, resources and accountability, gender equity and GBVH are more likely to be addressed systematically. Where leadership is dispersed, or where progress depends on a single person or a time-limited project, this work risks being eroded. Responsibility must also be embedded within local operations, supported by appropriate expertise and training, and reinforced through effective oversight. Decentralising responsibility without these conditions risks letting gender and workers' rights issues become secondary to commercial priorities.

Tackling GBVH in the tea sector is a complex challenge, and companies have demonstrated some impressive examples of progress. The challenge now is to ensure that the progress made is not only maintained but becomes embedded in the culture and everyday practices across the tea sector. This requires sustained vigilance, genuine accountability and collective responsibility. Men, particularly those in positions of power and influence, must move beyond passive support to become active allies in challenging the attitudes, behaviours and structures that perpetuate inequality and abuse.

Programmes must do more than respond to individual incidents; they must tackle the underlying causes, redistribute power, strengthen women's voices and create workplaces where discrimination, coercion and harassment are neither tolerated nor normalised. As long as stakeholders act in isolation, the change they can achieve will be limited.

Buyers and retailers should use their influence not simply to demand compliance and information, but to support their suppliers and producers, provide resources for preventative action defined and shaped by local women, and hold themselves accountable for lasting change. Interventions should be built on genuine engagement with workers, whose voices are essential if those interventions are to be transformative. This shared responsibility will only be met if all stakeholders pool their resources and influence and collaborate across the sector, so that momentum continues once the external spotlight wanes. Specialist organisations like THIRST and WWW are well positioned to convene actors and support solutions that drive systemic change.

Equally, the sector must be prepared to scrutinise and challenge its own success stories. As our original ***Consent*** report demonstrated, what is presented as good practice can prove far removed from women's lived experiences. No company or initiative should be beyond scrutiny.

Ultimately, success should not be measured by the policies introduced, training delivered or commitments made, but by whether women are safer, have greater agency and can exercise their rights without fear of reprisal.

Further cases of GBVH are inevitable, making the message to retailers clear: responsibility does not end with commissioning a programme, receiving supplier assurances or celebrating an initiative. They must stay engaged, ask difficult questions and act when new evidence emerges.

The most recent revelations of abuse by celebrities in the British entertainment industry reinforce how power imbalances drive these crimes. As British politician Lisa Nandy said, "a decade and a half on from the revelations about Jimmy Savile, and 10 years on from the #MeToo movement, we must finally take meaningful steps to end abuse and harassment in sectors where the power imbalances are huge and careers are built on contacts and reputation."

> ***"a decade and a half on from the revelations about Jimmy Savile, and 10 years on from the #MeToo movement, we must finally take meaningful steps to end abuse and harassment in sectors where the power imbalances are huge and careers are built on contacts and reputation."***

Tea is such a sector. When new reports of GBVH emerge, what matters is how companies respond: by investigating promptly and independently, protecting those who speak out, and acting on what they learn.

"I think the iron is hot now. If we really want to hammer and push in this agenda, we can. Having said all of this… unless an issue comes up, becomes public, and either some woman or her peer actually takes an effort with sheer courage to report it, there is an eerie silence."

– Industry body member

Recommendations

Our recommendations call on tea stakeholders to:

- Acknowledge GBVH in their own supply chains as a foundation for action, and use certification as just one tool among several
- Act before a crisis by establishing effective grievance mechanisms
- Engage in responsible purchasing through two-way conversations with tea suppliers, by pooling influence with other buyers, and by managing supplier consolidation responsibly so that smallholders are not excluded
- Address root causes of GBVH, with men included as active agents of change, and secure long-term resources and leadership continuity
- Protect and strengthen the voices of women workers, build partnerships with local women's rights organisations, and subject claims of good corporate practice to independent scrutiny
- Proactively publish data on GBVH to make hidden risks visible and enable peer-learning
- Turn research into action through joint interventions with other stakeholders, particularly with other buyers sourcing from the same producers
- Close the smallholder visibility gap, and press for the ratification of ILO C190

Context

Foreword

As human rights and gender equity practitioners with a combined experience of 70 years, we have seen countless iterations of attempts to tackle one of the most persistent and pernicious human rights abuses - gender-based violence and harassment (GBVH). We have seen it in multiple sectors, across multiple countries and have tried to support multiple companies - including tea companies - to help prevent and mitigate it. The 2023 BBC exposé of sexual exploitation of women was in one of the very tea plantations who had championed gender work many years before. This, coming hot on the heels of similar cases exposed in Malawi, was not only disturbing, but deeply disappointing.

Our ***Consent*** report that followed the exposé sought to hold up an honest and clear mirror to the tea sector about its role in creating risk and its potential for reducing it. We have been heartened to see in this follow up report the significant actions that many companies and organisations in the sector have taken over the last three years - it demonstrates a growing understanding that ensuring the safety and dignity of the women who produce our tea can never be swept under the carpet. We will keep shining a light on good practice, highlighting gaps in progress and supporting solutions so that, hopefully, it will not take another media exposé to keep the tea industry focused on working to eliminate violence against the women that sustain it.

Caroline Downey
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Introduction

In 2023, THIRST and Women Working Worldwide, together with tea sustainability expert Michael Pennant-Jones, published a report outlining the risk factors for gender-based violence across the tea sector.[1] The report, entitled *"Consent. Just Consent. Then you can come to work": Risk factors for gender based violence in the tea sector* (hereafter referred to as 'the ***Consent*** report') followed the BBC Panorama and Africa Eye documentary *Sex for Work: The True Cost of Our Tea*, which exposed widespread sexual abuse on plantations supplying popular UK tea brands.[2] Its footage showed an undercover reporter facing attempted coercion into sex in exchange for a job on a tea plantation, and revealed that more than 70 of the 100 women tea workers interviewed had been abused by managers or employment contractors at plantations run for decades by two then British-owned companies, Unilever and James Finlay Kenya (JFK).

The revelations were not new: in the preceding years, lawsuits against other tea producers had also detailed systemic abuse against women tea workers, including rape, assault and discrimination.

So now, three years on from the publication of the ***Consent*** report and the BBC investigation that shook the global tea sector, how much has the risk to women tea workers actually been reduced? How have stakeholders across the tea supply chain responded - from producers to suppliers to retailers - and what systems, structures and procedures have been implemented? What impact have they achieved? Are individual efforts creating systemic change or are examples of progress piecemeal? Have attitudes changed, and if so, how? What lessons have we learned, and what remains to be done?

Using the Ethical Trade Initiative (ETI) Gender Action In Agriculture (GAIA) principles as a framework, this paper aims to answer these questions. It aims to illustrate the progress made towards ending GBVH in the global tea sector over the last three to five years and to highlight areas where momentum may have stalled or where there are gaps, so that leadership can be celebrated, good practice replicated, and the industry held to account for its commitments.



The GAIA principles

Co-developed by civil society, businesses, governments, and multilateral institutions in 2025, the GAIA principles are a framework for aligning and coordinating action to prevent and respond to GBVH in commercial agriculture and fisheries. They describe the outcomes businesses should strive for in their operations and supply chain, and are rooted in freedom of association, align with international gender and human rights standards, and emphasise collective action. In summary:[3]

1. **All forms of gender-based violence and harassment are prohibited.**
2. **Businesses commit to prevent GBVH and ensure their business partners do the same.**
3. **Senior leadership considers the GBVH risk implications of all decisions to ensure workplaces are equal, respectful and free from GBVH.**
4. **Policies and procedures are created and implemented to prevent GBVH in the workplace.**
5. **Responsible purchasing practices enable action on root causes of GBVH and support sustainable production.**
6. **Workers are employed in decent work through transparent decision making.**
7. **Businesses enable workers to exercise their rights to and responsibilities in a GBVH-free workplace.**
8. **All workers trust they can report GBVH confidentially or anonymously, without fear of retaliation.**
9. **Businesses provide remedy of GBVH and hold perpetrators accountable.**
10. **Businesses are accountable for GBVH and learn from GBVH risks and reports.**

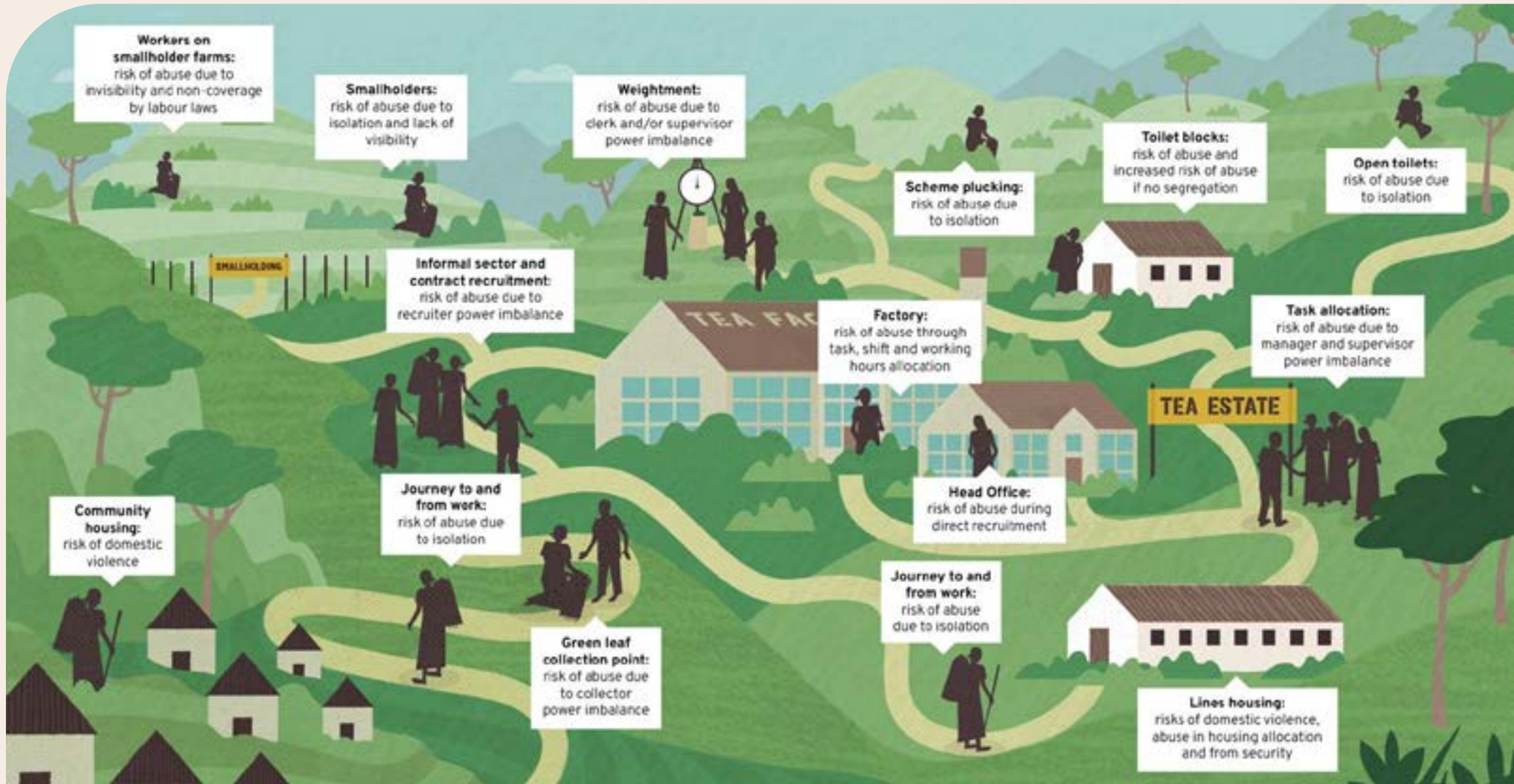
Why are we focusing on the tea sector?

This report is focused on tea in light of the egregious abuses that have been exposed once again in recent years and the clear risks created by structural and cultural norms within the tea sector. While sexual exploitation is endemic in many industries, the tea sector has certain specific characteristics that enable the perpetration of sexual crimes against women workers with impunity. These include:

- The prevailing dependency model of the patriarchal plantation system established by European colonists, where workers live on the plantations on which they work, restricting access to safety for those - primarily women - at risk of sexual exploitation and abuse.
- Power imbalances within the system - between workers and supervisors, supervisors and managers, and producers and buyers, which overlap with the power imbalances between women (primarily concentrated in the lowest paid weeding and plucking roles) and men (primarily concentrated in supervisor and management roles).[4]
- Low wages and precarious employment that trap women tea workers in severe economic vulnerability, making them targets for exploitation and warranting risky survival strategies such as transactional sex.
- The long hours worked by tea pluckers to achieve their target weight before dropping the tea at buying centres or having long waits into the night to have their tea collected, leaving children unsupervised and exposed to the risk of sexual abuse.
- Insecure and overcrowded accommodation on plantations.
- The isolation of women tea pluckers travelling to and from remote areas, increasing the opportunity for harassment and/or attack.
- Weak avenues for complaint or redress.

In the ***Consent*** report, we argued that more needs to be done at a leadership level to empower women workers, reduce their risk of GBVH, and ensure that when it does occur, they are protected, have access to remedy, and their abusers are punished and prevented from continuing their crimes. To achieve this, we recommended that:

- GBVH should be acknowledged by all companies in the tea value chain as a salient human rights issue, beyond just a gender or women's rights issue.
- Companies should assume GBVH is present, and if monitoring systems indicate it does not exist, it is more likely that the monitoring system isn't working than that there really is no GBVH.
- Companies should observe the 'Do No Harm principle' in GBVH and take a focused approach involving all stakeholders on remediation counselling, health services and action against perpetrators.
- The development of local solutions needs to be defined and shaped by local women – and involve local men.
- All solutions need to be constantly and effectively monitored ideally by independent, local women-led rights organisations. If there isn't one, help to set one up and support it.
- The industry needs to do more research into the root causes of GBVH – not just at community level, but in the way that the industry itself is structured and operates.
- Tea companies, certification bodies and other tea stakeholders should be more transparent, considering how to make relevant data on risk factors and levels of exploitation more visible so that they can be more effectively tackled.
- Collaboration across the tea industry is necessary to sustain the fight against GBVH.
- Tea-producing and buying countries should ratify ILO's Convention 190 against violence and harassment in the world of work.
- Retailers sourcing hundreds of products should continue to treat tea as a high risk supply chain for GBVH, learn from it and implement policies and practices that reduce the risk across all their supply chains.



Key research findings

The tea sector is beginning to move beyond just acknowledging GBVH, with examples of strong leadership, growing awareness and practical initiatives to improve women's safety and dignity at work. But progress is uneven and should not be mistaken for transformation.

Entrenched inequalities, patriarchal attitudes and power imbalances endemic to the tea sector continue to enable GBVH and make change slow and piecemeal, particularly where accountability, resources and sustained leadership are lacking.

The industry now has a chance to learn from past mistakes, build on recent progress and sustain good practice, so that a job in tea does not automatically come with the risk of sexual abuse.

The tables in this section outline the themes that emerged from stakeholder feedback and desk research, and summarise the key areas of progress and gaps in progress under each one. These are elaborated in the subsequent pages. Each theme is mapped to the relevant GAIA principle.

Progress made by stakeholders

☆ Key cross-cutting theme: Collaboration

Collaboration across the tea sector is growing, including among NGOs and ETI members, as well as between supply chain actors through joint platforms and initiatives.

Summary of emerging themes

Emerging themes	Progress made
Strengthening legislation **Relevant GAIA Principles:** All	mHREDD created requirements for businesses to identify, prevent and address adverse human rights and environmental impacts across their value chains. ILO C190 ratification has accelerated sharply in tea-producing countries, with national legislative change largely driven by civil society and worker organising. READ MORE ON PAGE 18 →
Recognising GBVH risk in tea supply chains **Relevant GAIA Principle:** 1. All forms of gender-based violence and harassment are prohibited	The BBC exposé catalysed action from companies, building on earlier court cases and the advocacy of women's rights organisations, trade unions, INGOs and companies, which have driven wider recognition of GBVH as a salient human rights risk in the sector. READ MORE ON PAGE 19 →
The role of certification bodies **Relevant GAIA Principle:** 2. Businesses commit to prevent GBVH and ensure their business partners do the same	Certification bodies and buyers are adopting continuous human rights due diligence that enables them to better support partners to identify and manage human rights risks. READ MORE ON PAGE 20 →
Leadership commitment to tackling GBVH **Relevant GAIA Principle:** 3. Senior leadership considers the GBVH risk implications of all decisions to ensure workplaces are equal, respectful and free from GBVH	Stronger accountability for GBVH is being demonstrated through clearer policies and board-level oversight of GBVH monitoring data. READ MORE ON PAGE 21 →
Industry commitment **Relevant GAIA Principle:** 4. Policies and procedures are created and implemented to prevent GBVH in the workplace	Along with earlier court cases in the region, the BBC exposé galvanised the establishment of policies and procedures to prevent GBVH across the tea sector. Our research indicated more gaps than progress under this theme, which you can read about on PAGE 21 →
Responsible purchasing practices **Relevant GAIA Principle:** 5. Responsible purchasing practices enable action on root causes of GBVH & support sustainable production	Companies and NGOs have promoted responsible purchasing and contracting practices. Some leading brands and retailers are changing their sourcing models towards fewer suppliers and longer-term partnerships. READ MORE ON PAGE 22 →
Securing decent work **Relevant GAIA Principle:** 6. Workers are employed in decent work through transparent decision making	Initial progress has been made through buyers embedding decent work expectations in supplier codes of conduct. READ MORE ON PAGE 23 →
Women's representation in management roles **Relevant GAIA Principle:** 6. Workers are employed in decent work through transparent decision making	Tea producers and their buyers are making efforts to improve women's representation in male-dominated management and supervisory roles. READ MORE ON PAGE 23 →
Addressing root causes **Relevant GAIA Principle:** 7. Businesses enable workers to exercise their rights to and responsibilities in a GBVH-free workplace	There has been a shift from initiatives that were primarily about mitigating reputational risk towards programmes tackling the power dynamics and socio-economic norms that drive GBVH. READ MORE ON PAGE 24 →
Grievance mechanisms **Relevant GAIA Principle:** 8. All workers trust they can report GBVH confidentially or anonymously, without fear of retaliation	Safe, confidential reporting mechanisms built on trusted community channels have encouraged GBVH reporting. READ MORE ON PAGE 26 →
Remedy and accountability **Relevant GAIA Principle:** 9. Businesses provide remedy of GBVH and hold perpetrators accountable	Producers report providing remedy or access to it, brands and retailers expect them to do so. Certification bodies are building remediation into frameworks. Our research indicated more gaps than progress under this theme, which you can read about on PAGE 38 →
Transparency on supply chain data **Relevant GAIA Principle:** 10. Businesses are accountable for GBVH and learn from GBVH risks and reports	Public supply chain disclosure and plantation-level mapping (not including GBVH) have improved among leading tea brands and retailers, enabling greater human rights accountability. READ MORE ON PAGE 27 →
Visibility of smallholders **Relevant GAIA Principle:** 10. Businesses are accountable for GBVH and learn from GBVH risks and reports	Some audit standards now check if employers uphold their obligation to temporary and casual workers, which could help surface GBVH risks in the smallholder sector. Our research indicated more gaps than progress under this theme, which you can read about on PAGE 21 →

Strengthened legislation

National business and human rights-related legislation in tea producing and importing countries has undergone significant changes since 2023.[5] mHREDD has created new requirements for agricultural supply chain actors. One of the most significant is the EU's Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD), which entered into force in July 2024. CSDDD requires large companies operating in the EU to identify, prevent and address adverse human rights and environmental impacts across their own operations, those of their subsidiaries, and their global value chains.

While lauded as a landmark step towards protecting people and the environment from corporate harm, CSDDD has also been criticised for being substantially narrowed: the EU's Omnibus I simplification package raised the threshold to companies with 5,000 employees (from an initial 1,000) and at least €1.5 billion in turnover (from an initial €450 million), which reportedly only covers 0.05% of EU corporations.[6] EU member states have until July 2028 to transpose the Directive into national law, with company compliance not required until 2029, meaning it could be some years before the Directive's impact on sourcing practices in the tea sector is felt.

In November 2026, the UK announced that it would introduce mandatory human rights due diligence (mHRDD) legislation aligned with the OECD Guidelines for Responsible Business Conduct and the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, applicable to all UK and international businesses operating in the UK that meet the £350 million turnover threshold. This followed calls for mHREDD legislation from 20 businesses - including seven major UK supermarkets - as well as trade unions and civil society organisations.[7] The new legislation would bring the UK closer to countries like Germany, which introduced its Supply Chain Due Diligence Act in January 2023, although unlike Germany the UK's legislation excludes coverage of environmental harms.

Ratification of ILO C190 has accelerated sharply among tea-producing countries since 2023, including Uganda (2023), Rwanda (2023), Bangladesh (2025), Mozambique (2025) and Sri Lanka (2026). This marks progress against our recommendation in the ***Consent*** report for increased ratification among tea-producing and buying countries. Ratification is not a reliable proxy for actual protection, however. China, India, Indonesia, Kenya and Malawi have not ratified but have introduced strong domestic policies to prevent GBVH in the workplace, demonstrating that domestic reform and ILO C190 ratification are not always closely coupled.

Civil society and worker organising have been key drivers of national legislative change to protect workers from GBVH, with notable advances in Kenya, Malawi and Bangladesh tied to sustained pressure from trade unions and civil society groups.

Labour reforms are still leaving informal workers unprotected. This is significant given the role of smallholders in tea production, accounting for 80% in China and Vietnam, 60% in Kenya, and over 50% in India, Indonesia and Sri Lanka.[8] Revised laws and labour acts in China and Bangladesh cover only formally registered establishments, excluding 85% of Bangladesh's workforce.[9] Kenya's Employment Act also exempts smallholdings relying on family labour. In contrast, legal reforms in Indonesia, Uganda and India have sought to extend labour protections to informal workers, signalling progress towards more inclusive coverage.

Relevant GAIA Principles: All

Recognising GBVH risk in tea supply chains

The 2023 BBC exposé and earlier media coverage of lawsuits prompted tea companies and industry bodies to review their approaches to preventing sexual abuse and exploitation, leading to increased recognition of GBVH as a salient human rights risk in the tea sector. This built on the advocacy of women's rights organisations, trade unions, NGOs and certain companies, and intersected with the rise of mHREDD. The latter places on retailers and brands expectations of enabling GBVH prevention by the producers and suppliers from which they source.

Public statements prohibiting GBVH have been widely adopted by tea stakeholders, most prominently through the ETI Base Code. Its clauses prohibit discrimination and "physical abuse or discipline, the threat of physical abuse, sexual or other harassment and verbal abuse or other forms of intimidation". ETI members are required both to adopt the Base Code and "commit to making sure their suppliers work towards it over time."[10]

Several major UK tea brands and retailers have explicitly acknowledged tea as a high-risk supply chain, and GBVH as a human rights risk. These include Co-op, which cites the "exploitation" of "low skilled, uneducated, often female workers" in the Kenyan agricultural sector as a "salient human rights risk", to which it has responded with investigations and a detailed action plan addressing systemic GBVH.[11] Twinings too states that GBVH is a "high-risk issue" in agricultural supply chains, which it is addressing through its dedicated GBVH policy and providing training and other support to suppliers.[12] This demonstrates positive progress against our recommendation in the ***Consent*** report for companies to acknowledge GBVH as a salient human rights issue, beyond just a gender or women's rights issue.

Relevant GAIA Principle:
1: All forms of GBVH are prohibited



Shared responsibility with supply chain partners

The sector shows signs of a shift away from compliance-based models to continuous human rights due diligence, remediation, and risk-based methods. Since 2023, there has been a wave of revisions among the major certification standards towards more collaborative approaches that are better suited to detecting and resolving sensitive, complex abuses like GBVH. Fairtrade and Rainforest Alliance, for example, have made substantial progress in supporting partners to better identify and manage human rights risks.

This can also be seen in Sedex's updated Members Ethical Trade Audit (SMETA) methodology, which introduced a focussed collection of gender data as well as introducing Collaborative Action Required in 2024 for particularly complex non-conformances that are difficult to close through usual processes. As resolving these issues can take a long time and require input from a range of parties - including buyers, suppliers, workers and trade unions - Sedex encourages these actors to work together, guided by due diligence and prioritising the most salient risks. This approach improves opportunities for collaboration and the capture of gender-disaggregated data, helping companies better understand gender gaps in their supply chains and develop impactful interventions.

Buyers are increasingly sharing responsibility with their suppliers, countering the expectation that producers carry the responsibility for preventing and mitigating GBVH risks to women tea pluckers. This is demonstrated by retailers like Sainsbury's, which worked with its suppliers and other retailers to develop a collaborative action plan addressing GBVH risks in its East African tea supply chain.[13] Similarly, in response to the recommendations of a joint Human Rights Impact Assessment of the Kenyan smallholder tea supply chain conducted in January 2023, M&S and Waitrose committed to supporting the Kenya Tea Development Agency (KTDA) to address GBVH risks.[14]

Although it is too early to determine whether this represents a broader industry trend, these developments provide examples of a shift from a compliance model, in which responsibility for GBVH rests largely with producers, towards one of shared responsibility. This aligns with our recommendation from the ***Consent*** report for improved collaboration. While these developments have been driven primarily by forthcoming mHREDD regulation, the exposure of systemic GBVH in the Kenyan and Malawian tea sectors between 2019 and 2023 can be read as an accelerator or catalyst.

Relevant GAIA Principle:
2: Businesses commit to prevent GBVH and ensure their business partners do the same

Leadership commitment to tackling GBVH

Leadership commitment to tackling GBVH has strengthened. This is evident in companies' gender and human rights policies, their GBVH prevention and remediation procedures, and board-level oversight of monitoring data.

Clear policies setting expectations for worker and partner conduct, and outlining steps for preventing and addressing GBVH, are prominent among the tea stakeholders we reviewed. However some of the publicly available policies define GBVH in vague terms - with one tea brand referring to "sexual or other harassment". This contrasts to the highly detailed definitions in the anti-sexual harassment policies of Eastern Produce Kenya (EPK) and Eastern Produce Malawi (EPM), each of which sets out nine sub-categories of GBVH with specific definitions under each.[15] Given the often nebulous understanding of GBVH (particularly in contexts that are informed by patriarchal norms), developing and communicating granular definitions of the behaviours that constitute GBVH and engaging with workers to ensure they are clearly understood is important for ensuring worker safety and corporate accountability.

Our engagement with tea stakeholders also pointed to board-level oversight of monitoring data, with a recent shift particularly evident among producers. Monitoring of GBVH incidents tends to take place through grievance mechanisms reported monthly and quarterly to their boards, and some publish grievance information on their websites. It was encouraging to learn from EPM that Women's Welfare Committees and Gender Committees at the plantation level support this reporting, which is coordinated by corporate management.

Where monitoring results are reported to company boards, they are more likely to support the accountability needed for continuous improvement in addressing GBVH. This practice also connects worker voices to management, preventing workers - who face the most risk of pressure or retaliation - from carrying the sole burden of escalating GBVH concerns. It also demonstrates firm commitment from leadership, which sets the tone for the company by sending a clear signal to all workers and contractors that GBVH is prioritised as a serious human rights and business risk. Where leadership fails to establish and implement these commitments, risks may remain unaddressed or become further entrenched.

Relevant GAIA Principle:
3: Senior leadership considers the GBVH risk implications of all decisions to ensure workplaces are equal, respectful and free from GBVH





Responsible purchasing practices

Efforts are underway to promote responsible purchasing and contracting practices in the tea sector. In 2024, ETP and the Responsible Contracting Project (RCP) published a set of Tea Sector Model Clauses aimed at supporting companies to embed shared responsibility for HREDD within their supplier contracts. The clauses encourage a departure from traditional contracting in the tea sector, where responsibility for human rights has typically sat with the producer alone. The Tea Sector Model Clauses instead cover joint obligations for HREDD, including buyer commitments on purchasing practices and a shared approach to remediation. Drafted with the support of tea companies Ahmad Tea, DAVIDsTEA, Ostfriesische Tee Gesellschaft GmbH & Co. KG (OTG), Ringtons Limited and Taylors of Harrogate - and with input from THIRST - the clauses are freely available to use. This joint initiative exemplifies how private sector and non-profit actors can pool their resources and use their influence to improve practices for GBVH prevention.

Some leading brands and retailers are also changing their sourcing models towards fewer, trusted suppliers and longer-term partnerships. Tesco and Sainsbury's are among the supermarkets pursuing longer-term partnerships with a smaller number of strategic producers. Under this model, producers are better positioned to offer workers greater job security through longer contracts.

Consolidating supplier bases must be managed carefully, however, so that smallholders are not excluded from the supply chains of large retailers. Tea buyers could address this by sourcing through cooperative or other collective structures, which allow smallholders to be part of a consolidated supplier base while retaining their access to the market. In Kenya, the KTDA - through which 60% of the country's smallholders are organised as shareholders - already works in this way.

Launched in 2013, Taylors of Harrogate's Taylors Sourcing Approach (TSA), is widely recognised as an example of good practice. TSA uses forward contracts, often of three years, that give suppliers the financial security needed for long-term planning, and it commits to paying prices that, at minimum, match the cost of production, cushioning producers during market dips. Annual reviews with each supplier address their social and environmental challenges, reflect jointly on progress, and set plans for the following year. Notably, Taylors of Harrogate shaped this approach by asking producers how they preferred to do business.[16] Establishing this type of open dialogue is vital for responsible purchasing, in contrast to a set of one-way instructions that may overlook producers' actual needs.

Relevant GAIA Principle:
5: Responsible purchasing practices enable action on root causes of GBVH and support sustainable production

Securing decent work

There are signs of initial progress towards securing decent work for tea workers, despite the unrelenting downward pressure on tea prices that keeps wages for tea workers critically low.[17] The pressure is compounded by thin margins, rising production costs and global market conditions in which supply is growing faster than demand. Women are disproportionately affected due to the gendered division of labour.

Against this background, most buyers have embedded expectations on decent work in their codes of conduct and purchasing agreements. While none of the producers we spoke to are able to pay plantation workers or smallholders a living wage/income, it is promising to see buyers and producers working together to reduce the living wage gap.

Relevant GAIA Principle:
6: Workers are employed in decent work through transparent decision making

Women's representation in management roles

Tea producers and their buyers are making efforts to improve women's representation in male-dominated management and supervisory roles. Certification bodies are also strengthening opportunities for women to take up leadership positions. Fairtrade Africa, for example, has supported Satemwa Tea Estates in Malawi to promote women's empowerment through training and capacity building. Satemwa's factory is now led by female managers, women hold its top three senior management positions, and all five of its main divisions are headed by women.

Engaging trade unions is essential to any initiative to prevent GBVH and provide decent work. However, women workers often feel poorly represented by male-dominated unions whose leadership rarely reflects the predominantly female plucker workforce. This is beginning to change. Women are now the majority in some unions, including Unison, and many have introduced training and leadership programmes for women. These initiatives are still a work in progress: where entrenched patriarchal systems continue to hold women back, those barriers must be actively challenged and dismantled.

Relevant GAIA Principle:
6: Workers are employed in decent work through transparent decision making





Addressing root causes

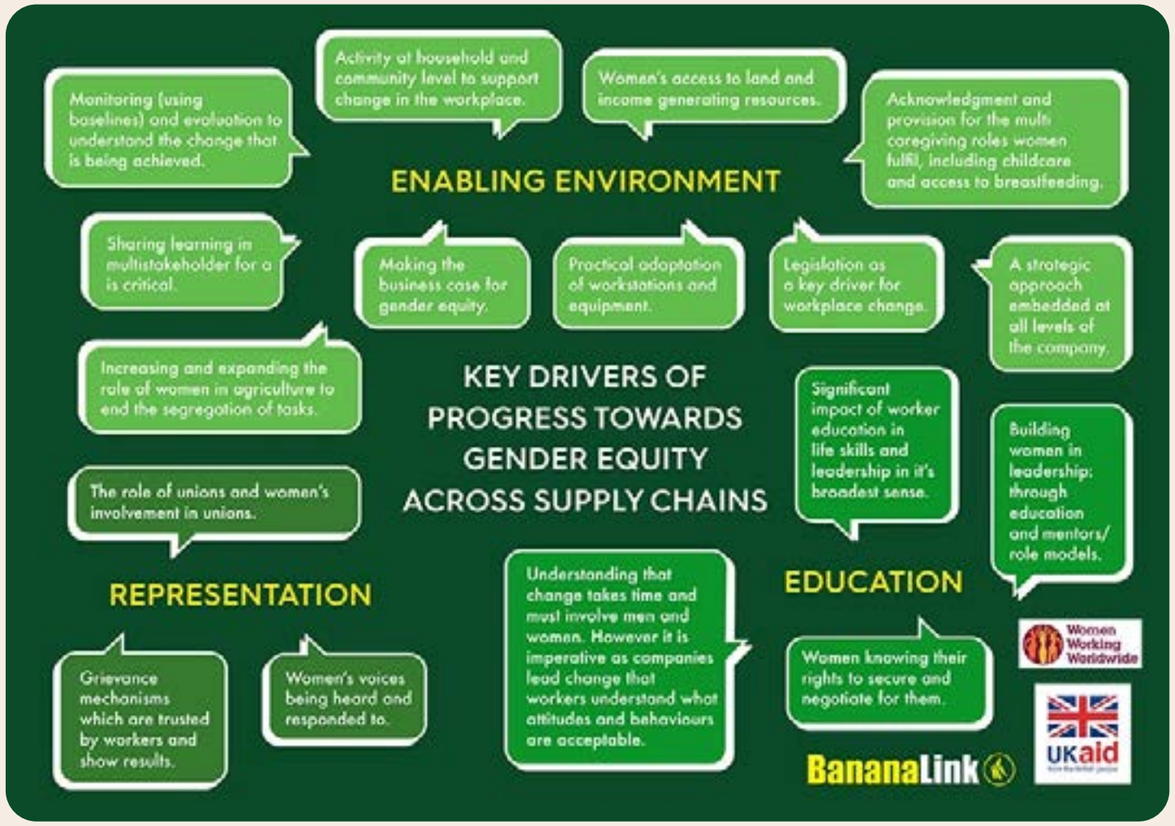
Programmes addressing the root causes of GBVH have emerged as (hopefully) the beginnings of a positive trend. Since 2023, there has been a shift from responses that were primarily about mitigating reputational risk towards programmes that tackle power dynamics and socio-economic norms. Many of these programmes engage male tea workers in awareness initiatives, demonstrating progress against our recommendation in the ***Consent*** report to develop local solutions defined and shaped by local women, and involving local men. Among smallholder households, there is some evidence that this has made a few men more willing to reallocate tea bushes and household income to their wives, which has directly improved family wellbeing, financial management and children's school participation.

> ***"When the woman has access to the bushes and she is paid for them, you'll see an immediate change within the home setting."***
>
> - Industry body member

Addressing these household dynamics is critical because, as tea stakeholders highlight, technical and agricultural training is traditionally restricted to registered plot holders - who are predominantly male - even though women perform the actual field labour. Consequently, income reallocation initiatives like tea-bush sharing have not yet been matched by equal access to the training needed to enhance women's business outcomes. When male registered owners attend training on crops their wives manage, there is a risk that they do not accurately pass on technical knowledge. True structural transformation therefore hinges on women's access to technical training and knowledge-sharing directly, a shift that a tea stakeholder told us remains at a "low level" in practice.

Programmes alone are not enough, as the experience of Finlays shows: its gender policies and programmes were seen as exemplary for the industry, yet they did not prevent the abuses exposed by the BBC documentary. As such, today's gender programmes could become ineffective unless the recommendations in the ***Consent*** report are followed, which call for action at a systemic level to empower women workers and reduce their risk of GBVH. They also call for ensuring that, when GBVH does occur, women are protected and have access to remedy, and that abusers are held accountable and prevented from continuing to offend.

The work done by Women Working Worldwide and Banana Link on gender equality across agricultural supply chains reinforces this approach. The infographic below sets out the key drivers of progress towards gender equity in supply chains that companies can target to address these root causes.



Relevant GAIA Principle:
7: Businesses enable workers to exercise their rights to and responsibilities in a GBVH-free workplace

Safe and confidential reporting mechanisms

Grievance mechanisms built on trusted community channels have encouraged GBVH reporting. Requiring suppliers to implement safe and confidential reporting systems is practiced by brands and retailers, and producers likewise reported having such systems in place. ETP has recently launched a peer-learning group on gender-responsive human rights due diligence for members, with grievance mechanisms emerging as a top priority from member consultation. All ETP programmes currently in design include a grievance-mechanism strengthening component. In Sri Lanka, one exporter revamped its entire grievance policy by establishing anti-sexual harassment committees at all levels, with trained independent board members and female representation.

It is important to embed continuous learning into grievance mechanisms by consistently monitoring, evaluating and improving their effectiveness. Notably, both EPK and EPM demonstrate this awareness by framing their mechanisms as meaningful but incomplete progress, rather than a solved problem.

It is also important that all grievance mechanisms are gender-responsive, taking into account the barriers women face in reporting sexual harassment and abuse and in seeking remediation and justice. These include - but are not limited to - women's fear of retaliation or victimisation, a lack of confidence in confidentiality and protection arrangements, and pressure or intimidation when reporting concerns involving men from their own communities or workplaces.

Possible solutions to challenges in establishing effective grievance mechanisms:

One possible solution is to position trusted, known confidants over external strangers to encourage the disclosure of GBVH. A focus group participant cited a community policing initiative launched by the Kenyan Government in 2013 called Nyumba Kumi ("ten houses"), which assigns one village elder to every ten households. A tea company used this structure as a local channel for reporting domestic violence and GBVH, alongside formal referral pathways.

Grassroots outreach is another approach, demonstrated by Luxmi Tea's "Mother's Clubs" and "Adolescent Girls Clubs" which conduct household visits to identify incidents and encourage reporting. This exemplifies how single-gender group sessions and deeper partnerships with specialist women's rights organisations may help to overcome barriers to reporting, as they can encourage dialogue and surface issues that larger, mixed-group formats may not. These approaches should be complemented by targeted engagement with men and boys to challenge harmful gender norms, address the root causes of GBVH, and promote shared responsibility for preventing violence and supporting survivors.

Relevant GAIA Principle:
8: All workers trust they can report GBVH confidentially or anonymously, without fear of retaliation

Improved transparency on supply chain data (but not GBVH)

Public supply chain disclosure and plantation-level mapping are practiced by leading tea brands and retailers, enabling greater human rights accountability. In 2024, THIRST found that tea companies were beginning to meet calls for transparency made by consumers, governments, investors, retailers and the media, specifically around how they operate, with whom they operate (e.g. their suppliers or buyers) and how the value of their products is distributed. Now, in 2026, publishing supplier lists and, increasingly, sharing data on open mapping platforms, has become prevalent among leading brands and retailers.

Companies are promoting transparency beyond only their direct suppliers. Lidl extends its public disclosure to the estates and bought-leaf factories that supply them.[18] Taylors of Harrogate publishes a downloadable, site-by-site map covering all of its direct tea supplier plantations, factories and smallholder cooperatives across its five producing countries - Kenya, India, Rwanda, Sri Lanka, and Malawi - including plantation names, region, and certification status.[19] Tesco[20] and Sainsbury's[21] publish estate-level disclosures for their own-brand teas.

ETP collects sourcing data from its members annually and publishes it as an interactive map of members' sourcing sites, hosted on the Open Supply Hub platform.[22] Greater transparency makes it possible for stakeholders to raise issues with the buyers connected to a site, and for multiple companies to work together to address them. Because tea sourcing often involves complex supply chains blended across auctions, bought-leaf factories, and multiple countries, this shift toward deeper supply chain visibility is an important step towards improved corporate accountability for human rights abuses.

Platforms such as the Open Supply Hub and the Business and Human Rights Centre's (BHRC)'s Tea Supply Chain Tracker turn individual disclosures into shared, searchable datasets. This enables civil society, trade unions and consumers to cross-reference tea plantations against the buyers that source from them, giving workers and advocates a route to raise concerns up the supply chain. The BHRC's 2023 Boiling Point report used these datasets to link 70 public allegations of human rights abuse to 16 tea buyers at supplier level, showing how transparency makes accountability possible.[23]

Public disclosure of data related to women in supply chains is less practiced, although there are signs of progress. In 2022, Tesco was the only supermarket in Oxfam's Behind the Barcodes scorecard to disclose granular data on women to the farm level for certain supply chains, including tea. In 2026, Co-op published its first supplier gender pay gap analysis, covering over 200 direct and indirect suppliers across its entire supply base.[24]

Public information on GBVH specifically is rare. EPK and EPM are among the few producers that disclose data from their operational grievance mechanisms publicly on their websites and, in EPM's case, in its *Women Empowerment Programme* brochure on an anonymised, aggregated basis. This includes numbers and demographics of beneficiaries, GBV/gender issues addressed by type and district, and gender distribution of supervisors/ managers. This goes further than most buyers' level of disclosure, because it reports what is being done about GBVH and with what resources, not only who works in the supply chain.

The greater transparency practiced by EPM may be explained by the fact that its operational grievance mechanism was established in the context of high-profile GBVH allegations on its plantations. We encourage companies to establish and publicly report GBVH cases proactively, rather than waiting for a crisis to expose gaps.

Relevant GAIA Principle:
10: Businesses are accountable for GBVH and learn from GBVH risks and reports

Gaps in progress made

☆ **Key cross-cutting theme: Collaboration**

Lack of trust and capacity: Some companies are wary of working with NGOs and local women's rights organisations, limiting independent validation of their work while civil society's limited resource capacity makes oversight hard to sustain.

Siloed approaches: Tea brands and retailers run their own, separate initiatives to tackle GBVH, possibly with shared producers, which duplicates efforts and increases producers' burden.

Summary of emerging themes

Emerging themes	Gaps in progress made
Strengthening legislation **Relevant GAIA Principles:** All	Labour reforms are still leaving informal workers unprotected. Our research indicated more progress than gaps under this theme, which you can read on PAGE 18 →
⚠ Recognising GBVH risk in tea supply chains **Relevant GAIA Principle:** 1. All forms of gender-based violence and harassment are prohibited	Some tea producers are reluctant to accept that GBVH is present in their *own* operations or in their smallholder supply chains for fear of how it might affect their sales and reputation. READ MORE ON PAGE 30 →
The role of certification bodies **Relevant GAIA Principle:** 2. Businesses commit to prevent GBVH and ensure their business partners do the same	Over-reliance on certification schemes. Buyers outsource responsibility for preventing and addressing GBVH to certification schemes, which aren't designed to carry the weight of resolving human rights issues this complex and sensitive. READ MORE ON PAGE 31 →
Leadership commitment to tackling GBVH **Relevant GAIA Principle:** 3. Senior leadership considers the GBVH risk implications of all decisions to ensure workplaces are equal, respectful and free from GBVH	Some company policies lack clear definitions of GBVH which can create or exacerbate gaps in workers' understanding of the issue. Not enough gaps were identified in this theme to fill a whole section, read the progress made on PAGE 21 →
Industry commitment **Relevant GAIA Principle:** 4. Policies and procedures are created and implemented to prevent GBVH in the workplace	Gap between policy and practice: Policies and procedures have been adopted but evidence of implementation, follow-through and impact remain weak. READ MORE ON PAGE 32 →
Responsible purchasing practices **Relevant GAIA Principle:** 5. Responsible purchasing practices enable action on root causes of GBVH & support sustainable production	One-way flows of expectations from buyer to producer leave little room for discussion on how buyers can adjust their purchasing practices to better support producers. READ MORE ON PAGE 33 →
Securing decent work **Relevant GAIA Principle:** 6. Workers are employed in decent work through transparent decision making	Producers struggle to pay workers a living wage/income, and buyers cannot guarantee that decent work is delivered. READ MORE ON PAGE 35 →
Women's representation in management roles **Relevant GAIA Principle:** 6. Workers are employed in decent work through transparent decision making	Women remain under-represented in supervisory and management roles. READ MORE ON PAGE 35 →
Addressing root causes **Relevant GAIA Principle:** 7. Businesses enable workers to exercise their rights to and responsibilities in a GBVH-free workplace	Women smallholder farmers have less access to technical training and knowledge-sharing than their male counterparts. Our research indicated more progress than gaps under this theme, which you can read on PAGE 36 →
Grievance mechanisms **Relevant GAIA Principle:** 8. All workers trust they can report GBVH confidentially or anonymously, without fear of retaliation	Grievance mechanisms exist on paper but are often ineffective, with a lack of trust and understanding from workers. READ MORE ON PAGE 37 →
Remedy and accountability **Relevant GAIA Principle:** 9. Businesses provide remedy of GBVH and hold perpetrators accountable	Companies struggle to verify whether remedy is delivered to survivors, leaving them unsupported with uncertain outcomes. READ MORE ON PAGE 38 →
Transparency on supply chain data **Relevant GAIA Principle:** 10. Businesses are accountable for GBVH and learn from GBVH risks and reports	Challenges in measuring and using data: Monitoring and reporting data on gender equity and GBVH is fragmented and generally not publicised. READ MORE ON PAGE 39 →
Visibility of smallholders **Relevant GAIA Principle:** 10. Businesses are accountable for GBVH and learn from GBVH risks and reports	Companies have weak oversight of GBVH in the smallholder sector due to lack of research and inadequate monitoring and reporting systems. READ MORE ON PAGE 18 →



Recognising GBVH risk in tea supply chains

There is still a reluctance among some tea producer companies to accept that GBVH is present in their own plantations or in their smallholder supply chains.

Intense legal and media scrutiny has encouraged a shift from reactive action on GBVH to policies that represent more structural change, however this scrutiny can also limit dialogue and transparency due to companies' fear of losing business, which hinders sector-wide action and peer learning. Other players in the tea value chain including investors, brands and retailers should acknowledge the risk of GBVH exists and should support producers to address it.

Public statements prohibiting GBVH are now well established across the sector, however its recognition as a systemic risk within companies' own supply chains remains uneven. While several major UK tea brands and retailers have explicitly acknowledged tea as a high-risk commodity, there is a general tendency for companies to discuss GBVH risks in the sector generally rather than in relation to their own supply chains or communities. One retailer we spoke to cited a lack of evidence for the "far-reaching" claim that GBVH exists in all supply chains.

This trend was echoed in a focus group discussion where a tea stakeholder described an institutional defensiveness around GBVH on Indian plantations, characterised by an "eerie silence" on the issue, until a case becomes public once the "sheer courage" is taken to report it. We were told of "pushing back" from producers when concerns are raised about GBVH, who tend to demand evidence for isolated incidents - asking those raising concerns to "show us the garden" in question - rather than accepting the issue as systemic.

As the ***Consent*** report recommended, companies should assume GBVH is present. Where monitoring systems indicate otherwise, there is more likely to be a weakness in the system rather than an absence of harm.

Relevant GAIA Principle:
1: All forms of gender-based violence and harassment are prohibited

The role of certification bodies

Over-reliance on certification schemes

Buyers continue to over-rely on certification schemes for preventing and addressing GBVH. Some of the buyers we contacted cited their Fairtrade certification as evidence of meeting standards for GBVH protection and prevention and felt they had little more to add. For example, one retailer said, "As you know, all our tea is Fairtrade certified, so our work in the sector follows them. There is a limit to what more we could add."

> ***"As you know, all our tea is Fairtrade certified, so our work in the sector follows them. There is a limit to what more we could add."***

The responsibility for due diligence cannot be outsourced, however: as established by global frameworks such as the UN Guiding Principles and the OECD Principles for Due Diligence, every supply chain actor is responsible for their own mHREDD.[25]

Certification has delivered an array of benefits to farmers and workers alike, however it is designed to work alongside other tools, not carry the full weight of resolving human rights issues, and is particularly limited when it comes to identifying and resolving crimes as complex and sensitive as GBVH. The Kenyan plantations implicated in the BBC investigation relied on certification to detect and address human rights and labour rights abuses, including GBVH, which exposed a critical blind spot in these tools.[26]

Other limitations of certification systems include the disproportionate burden on producers to deliver compliance, bringing increased workloads and costs with uncertain returns on investment, which are unmatched by the demand for tea at low prices. Responsibility for resolving 'non-conformances' is typically placed on the producer and supplier, who are incentivised to do so by the threat of losing business, although the root causes of the non-compliance could lie beyond their control - for example with government policy or with the purchasing practices of the very company that has required the audit. This demonstrates a clear need for partnerships that spread the responsibility for GBVH prevention among supply chain actors.

These limitations are increasingly being recognised within the certification sector, with a shift towards models that place greater emphasis on shared responsibility through HREDD.

Relevant GAIA Principle:
2: Businesses commit to prevent GBVH and ensure their business partners do the same



Industry commitment

Gap between policy and practice

Evidence of implementation and follow-through of GBVH prevention policies and procedures is less clear than evidence of their adoption. This points to a disconnect between formal policy and measurable, survivor-centred outcomes.

The BBC exposé was yet another wake-up call that galvanised the establishment of policies and procedures to prevent GBVH across the tea sector. Evidence of implementation, monitoring and follow-through is much weaker, with one focus group participant flagging the tendency for companies to "have something written" and "think it is done", without the necessary follow through to implementation.

The gap is visible at national level too. In Bangladesh, the sexual harassment prevention committees that are legally mandated for every organisation are reportedly largely absent from tea plantations. In India, a focus group participant said that implementation of the POSH requirements was "perfunctory" until the BBC exposé reached the tea sector, after which producers visibly "rolled their sleeves up". Another said progress remains partial, with gaps in producers' understanding of what constitutes GBVH and in community awareness of redress systems.

Stakeholders suggested several reasons for weak implementation, including reputational fear: producers reportedly "acknowledge challenges but lack solutions" and fear legal and media scrutiny, which may explain why engagement remains superficial. Another reason was short-term funding: one tea brand funded a gender champions initiative that lasted only five months, which is far too short to make meaningful changes in attitudes and behaviours around GBVH.

Ensuring the effective implementation of GBVH interventions relies on building worker ownership by involving them in design and delivery. Progress can also be made by companies dedicating sustained resources to long-term interventions, as well as locally-led monitoring, evaluation, and learning systems. Treating transparency as a sign of responsible governance rather than a liability that obstructs meaningful action can also create the conditions for meaningful change.

Relevant GAIA Principle:
4: Policies and procedures are created and implemented to prevent GBVH in the workplace

Responsible purchasing practices

While efforts are being made to promote responsible purchasing practice in the tea sector, producers are still calling for two-way conversations with buyers about how they can better support producers' GBVH commitments. One producer we spoke to described being "constantly bombarded with codes of conduct," something they emphasised is "fairly typical across sectors." One-way flows of expectations from buyer to producer leave little room for discussion on how buyers can adjust their purchasing practices to better support producers. This exposes the tension, which exists in many global supply chains, between sustainability teams and buying teams and highlights the need to merge the two so that they are working to a common set of key performance indicators (KPIs).

One producer we spoke to, whose buyers co-fund gender empowerment initiatives on a cost-sharing basis, noted the lack of direct conversation about longer-term contracts or better prices that would sustain this work. This may reflect buyers' sense that they lack influence as a small percentage purchaser. Twinings successfully piloted a living wage premium in Kenya and Sri Lanka but it was not scalable, because Twinings often sources only 1% or less of a producer's output.[27] An NGO representative reflected that brands sourcing less than 2% of their tea from Sri Lanka see little financial incentive to fund interventions there. This points to a structural tension: for producers to benefit meaningfully, responsible purchasing practices need to be deployed collectively, with buyers pooling their influence rather than acting alone.

Relevant GAIA Principle:
5: Responsible purchasing practices enable action on root causes of GBVH and support sustainable production



Image: Tea plucker's bag, Munnar. THIRST, 2023

Securing decent work for tea workers

Retailers expect suppliers to provide decent work, but none of the producers we spoke to pay a living wage or enable a living income, and buyers cannot always ensure that decent work is delivered. Buyers set out these expectations through policies including their Supplier Codes of Conduct, ETI-aligned standards, purchasing practices, and certification and audit processes. However one tea brand noted that it is not its role to "dictate the make-up of [producers'] workforce", instead encouraging permanent contracts, where possible, and monitoring workers' incomes and livelihoods.

None of the producers we spoke to pay plantation workers a living wage or smallholders a living income, although some reported paying plantation workers at least the statutory minimum wage. Even wages that meet the minimum threshold and are agreed through collective bargaining often fall below international poverty lines. In-kind benefits make up some of the shortfall, but these often do not meet international standards due to the rising costs of production and stagnating tea prices. The position of smallholders is still less stable: according to the producers we spoke to, their incomes are set by market prices, which often fail to cover the cost of production.

HREDD is a shared responsibility, so buyers have an important part to play in supporting and complementing the efforts of their supply chain partners to implement and monitor decent work initiatives. This includes supporting efforts to collect gender-disaggregated data on workers (including management) and on the ratio of temporary to permanent staff. It also includes collaborating on plans to address the challenge of securing a living income for workers, in part through responsible purchasing practices.

Relevant GAIA Principle:
6: Workers are employed in decent work through transparent decision making

Women's representation in management roles

Women remain under-represented in management and supervisory roles at plantations, despite efforts to address these gaps, which amplifies risk for women workers. A tea producer we spoke to was candid about the difficulty of changing this structure, pointing to the long professional pipeline between traditionally female roles such as plucking and becoming a supervisor. An NGO representative echoed this in Bangladesh, where 95% of tea pluckers are women but few hold management positions or seats on the *Panchayat* (workers' rights committees). The few female managers that exist in the sector also tend to be educated women from outside the plantation region rather than being trained and promoted from plucker level. This underlines the need for corporate-level training and professional support for women's career progression, and potentially for new ways of supporting progression beyond the traditional route.

To be effective, any policy promoting women's leadership must account for the structural barriers women face. These include domestic and childcare duties, the expectation to move with their husbands' jobs (in the case of women managers from outside the region), security and cultural restrictions to the remote travel required for estate managers, and the specific needs of pregnant women. Without this, even well-intentioned advancement programmes risk stalling by leaving systemic gender imbalances intact.

Relevant GAIA Principle:
6: Workers are employed in decent work through transparent decision making

Grievance mechanisms

The gap between policy and practice also applies to grievance mechanisms, whereby systems exist on paper but workers don't necessarily understand them, committee members rotate without retraining, documentation is inconsistently maintained, and fear of retaliation persists. According to an NGO representative, companies are largely disengaged, defensive, or funding only marginal interventions, while survivors continue to face financial abandonment, stigma, and delays to justice. Patriarchal bias is also common, where committee members may side with perpetrators due to community ties, and stigma leads survivors to withdraw their cases.

Buyers and producers acknowledge this gap. One retailer acknowledged that, while its producers have done some great work on grievance mechanisms in tea, "much more progress [is] needed," which was echoed by another tea brand acknowledging that "there is some way to go for some suppliers" despite requirements being in place. A producer pointed to workers' lack of trust in mechanisms and understanding of how they work, lack of understanding of their rights, or what even counts as GBVH, which indicates a need for greater awareness raising and communication on these topics.

These reflections point to the need for continued collaboration between buyers and producers to establish gender-responsive grievance mechanisms that are trusted by women workers, safe to use without fear of retaliation, and capable of delivering outcomes that protect survivors. Achieving this requires a workplace culture that sees organisations taking complaints seriously with meaningful investigations, rather than treating grievance mechanisms as a box-ticking exercise. They should be established proactively rather than in response to crises, as companies should be working on the assumption that GBVH exists throughout their supply chains.

As one producer reflected, prior to the improvement of the grievance mechanism prompted by litigation, he would have said "either we didn't have GBVH in the company, or it wasn't in the magnitude that was being portrayed… but now I know better."

Companies have also faced challenges in verifying complaints. EPM, for example, detected false medical certificates among the claims that followed the introduction of its operational grievance mechanism, which replaced its old reporting system. In response, EPM collaborated with the Ministry of Gender and the police to work closely with One Stop Centres in each operating district, where clinicians, a police officer, and a social welfare or gender officer from the Ministries of Gender and Health are co-located to provide services, as well as carry out monthly case management reviews to check that referral pathways are working as intended. Some cases have gone through the Malawi Human Rights Commission and on to court, with EPM's full cooperation.

If not carefully managed, treating complainants' claims as suspect by default could discourage genuine reporting and create a culture of scepticism towards survivors. EPM's advice was to build strong multi-stakeholder relationships with the police, the judiciary, the ombudsman and the human rights commission. That way, bottlenecks in any one channel can be navigated and issues escalated externally, since relying solely on an internal system makes it much harder to triangulate disputed claims.

GBVH reporting has been hampered in the past by fears of false claims. But there has been a rise in GBVH reporting worldwide, due to movements such as #MeToo and Time's Up. Evidence from other countries suggests that false claims are a small share of reports. US research puts false reports of sexual assault at 2–10%, including 8 of 136 reports (5.9%) at one university over ten years.[28] Organisations that publish workplace data report that many harassment complaints are upheld: Mayo Clinic substantiated 88 of 153 sexual harassment allegations over two years.[29]

Relevant GAIA Principle:
8: All workers trust they can report GBVH confidentially or anonymously, without fear of retaliation

Remedy and accountability

Holding perpetrators accountable regardless of seniority and supporting survivors who seek judicial redress appear to be the least developed elements of GBVH response in the tea sector. They are also arguably the most demanding. The sector has made progress on the foundations, but few companies verify whether remedy is actually delivered, leaving survivors unsupported and their outcomes uncertain.

Producers report providing remedy or access to it, brands and retailers expect them to do so, and certification bodies are building remediation into their frameworks. All the producers we spoke to provide remedy, or access to remedy, for GBVH survivors. According to one producer, remedy support is "almost routine", covering medical expenses and psychosocial support and ensuring that survivors retain their jobs. However, the fact that the survivors of the abuse exposed in the BBC documentary are still waiting for justice and adequate compensation demonstrates that remedy is patchy at best. The producer explained that criminal prosecutions are handled by the state, so the company does not fund legal representation directly. Instead, it supports the process by reporting to the police and following up to ensure continuity.

Verifying outcomes for survivors is a key gap. As mentioned above, more than three years after the BBC investigation aired, women connected to the cases are still awaiting justice, with some afraid to return to work on the plantation and needing alternative sources of income. Tea buyers therefore need systems to verify whether access to remedy is delivered throughout their supply chains, so that they share responsibility for supporting survivors with producers. Producers, for their part, should ensure that remedy support goes beyond the routine and does as much as possible to achieve justice for survivors.

Relevant GAIA Principle:
9: Businesses provide remedy of GBVH and hold perpetrators accountable



Transparency on supply chain data

Challenges in measuring and using data

Monitoring and reporting on gender equity and GBVH data remain fragmented, and the main barrier appears to be less a lack of data than a lack of resources and structure for using it meaningfully. More work needs to be done by tea companies, certification bodies and other tea stakeholders to be more transparent, as we recommended in the ***Consent*** report, by considering how to make relevant data on risk factors and levels of exploitation more visible so that they can be effectively tackled.

Cost

Tea buyers described cost as a key constraint on programme monitoring. One retailer uses third-party monitoring only for its largest programmes and relies on self-reporting for smaller bilateral projects, regarding too much measurement as a drain on limited budgets and a distraction from addressing the issues. Existing data is also underused. One interviewee admitted:

> *"We've got masses of data that we just don't use as effectively as we should."*

Internal monitoring is valuable for a number of reasons: communities are likely to feel safer sharing sensitive information more freely with trusted, long-term programme staff than with unfamiliar external evaluators. Internal teams can also possess nuanced local knowledge of cultural sensitivities, and building on their data collection and analysis skills can strengthen institutional learning for human rights.

However, internal monitoring should complement rather than replace the independent, women-led oversight we recommended in the ***Consent*** report, for reasons including the risk of internal bias and the pressure to meet donor metrics in order to secure future funding cycles. Separate monitoring initiatives from different buyers also puts additional pressure on suppliers, which could be eased by sharing data or having a single study providing all the required evidence. Fairtrade demonstrates an example of progress in this area through its Standards Evolution Project, which has, as one of its objectives, making the Fairtrade Standards consistent and user-friendly for everyone, reducing the number of Standards, streamlining requirements and reducing duplication.

Measuring change

A retailer described the difficulty of measuring qualitative change. Strict logframes capture it poorly, and outcome harvesting is better suited but harder to turn into a business case, with quantitative data usually more persuasive to decision-makers than case studies. They emphasised the risk that due diligence legislation such as the CSDDD could encourage box-ticking over actually doing the work of addressing GBVH, particularly for international non-vertically-integrated supply chains.

Metrics

Tracking women and GBVH is not standard practice across the supply chains we reviewed. One tea brand measures it only in response to specific issues, and one retailer tracks only the number of incidents reported. While tracking the overall number of women in tea supply chains may have limited value given the scale of women's participation in the sector, collecting data on women's representation at supervisor and manager levels (especially if they are recruited from the local population) would provide more meaningful insights into gender equality and women's access to leadership positions.

These findings show that progress is still needed to advance the ***Consent*** report's recommendation that all GBVH interventions need to be constantly and effectively monitored, ideally by independent, local women-led rights organisations, and that if there isn't one, companies should help to set one up and support it.

Relevant GAIA Principle:
10: Businesses are accountable for GBVH and learn from GBVH risks and reports

Visibility of smallholders

There is a serious lack of visibility into hired and family labour in the smallholder sector

Monitoring

Monitoring systems on plantations are more advanced than those for smallholders, with companies that source from smallholders struggling to track data on women and GBVH risks. Describing its Kenyan and Sri Lankan supply chains, one brand told us that "where the tea workers are unidentified, such as the case with smallholder gardens, we do not have any visibility on the work force - which makes them more vulnerable to abuse." Another tea brand, who cited strong board-level oversight of GBVH monitoring, admitted that coverage is not universal across its supply chain. This has critical implications for smallholder farmers, whose exemption from labour laws renders women, children and seasonal workers effectively invisible and powerless, exposing them to a heightened risk of human rights abuses.

Encouragingly, Sedex requires SMETA auditors to examine different categories of workers, including permanent, casual, and temporary. Where temporary or casual workers are employed, auditors are advised to hold at least one group interview with that worker type alone, which in theory would provide a safe space for concerns to be raised and reflected in company audits. SMETA's measurement criteria also includes whether employers uphold their legal obligations to these workers.

While these steps mark a significant improvement, the persisting visibility gap for smallholders signals the need for a holistic, multi-stakeholder approach to upholding their rights, including through stronger legal protections.

Grievance mechanisms

Safe and confidential GBVH reporting is another area that has seen uneven progress between the plantation and smallholder sectors. One participant flagged the substantial progress made in Kenya's tea plantations, where almost all have some form of mechanism for reporting and responding to cases of GBVH. In contrast, this is reportedly "not as prioritised" in the smallholder sector. Against this background, important work is being done by EPK and EPM, which extend their grievance mechanisms beyond direct employees to smallholder farmers and the wider community, as well as just direct employees. KTDA also has a grievance mechanism for Kenyan smallholder farms to report GBVH confidentially and safely, although it notes gaps in its procedures.

Research

In the ***Consent*** report, we urged tea stakeholders to invest in research into the root causes of GBVH, including how structural industry practices drive these abuses. While we have seen strong progress in this area at the plantation level, there is a lack of research on the smallholder sector which perpetuates their invisibility and insecurity.[30] We therefore have a limited understanding about the risks to women and girls on smallholder farms, or to men and boys who may also be at risk, and about the most effective ways of protecting them.

Closing the visibility gap would involve working with smallholders to build stronger monitoring systems that respond to their specific challenges and realities, and funding research on their risks. KTDA, which organises over 600,000 smallholder farmers into groups that elect their factory directors, also offers a model for addressing this lack of oversight.

Relevant GAIA Principle:
8: All workers trust they can report GBVH confidentially or anonymously, without fear of retaliation
10: Businesses are accountable for GBVH and learn from GBVH risks and reports

Case studies

The following case studies show how different actors in the tea supply chain are responding to GBVH, drawing on interviews, focus groups, questionnaires and on publicly available information.

They cover producers, trade unions and labour associations, suppliers, brands and retailers, certification bodies and multi-stakeholder partnerships. We selected organisations that have made visible progress, so they illustrate good practice and the lessons it offers. Each example is mapped to the relevant GAIA principles.

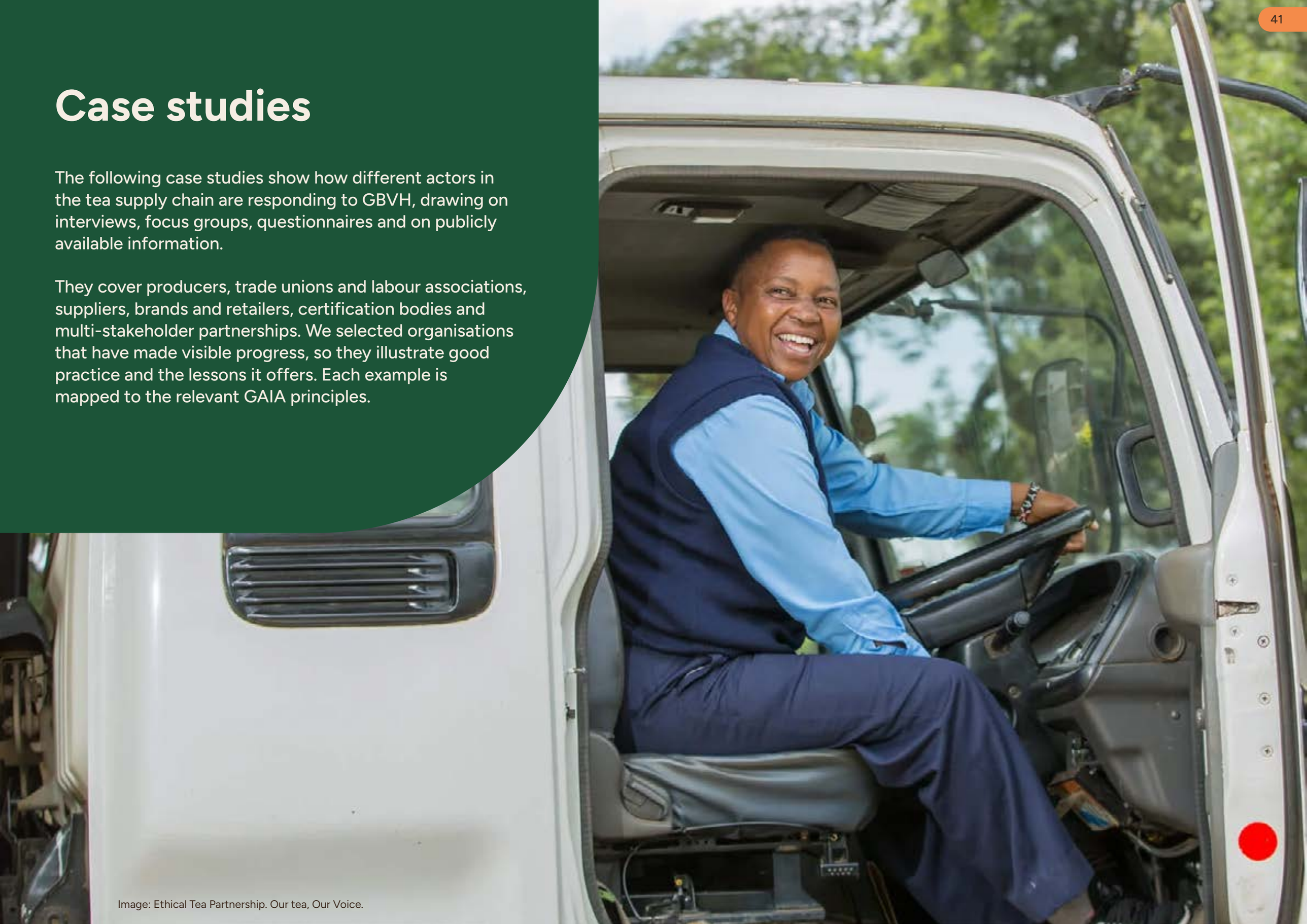


Image: Ethical Tea Partnership. Our tea, Our Voice.

Mapping gender initiatives in tea

THIRST and Women Working Worldwide have begun to map initiatives around the world that seek to increase the empowerment of women working in tea and reduce their risk of abuse. This is a living document. It provides a snapshot of the initiatives that we are aware of and we will continue to add to it as other initiatives come to light or as new initiatives emerge. Please contact us to let us know of any initiatives that are missing or of any new initiatives you are planning to implement.



Producers

EASTERN PRODUCE MALAWI (EPM)

Eastern Produce Malawi (EPM) has made significant progress in establishing systems and processes to tackle gender-based violence. In response to multiple allegations of sexual abuse of women workers in 2019, the producer funded a Women's Empowerment Initiative (WEI) and a community education programme as part of its settlement. Under the WEI (2021-2024), EPM established a leadership training programme to support women's progression into more senior roles, education programmes on Sexual Harassment and Gender Equality for the local community; and Victim Support Units at local police stations. Two years after its completion, the WEI has met or exceeded its targets across all components:

- Women's representation rose from 16% to 23% in supervisory roles and from 9% to 18% in management since 2020.
- A review observed that the WEI catalysed collaboration between EPM and a range of stakeholders - including workers, managers, community members, NGO partners, police officers and government representatives - and positioned EPM as a leader on gender equality in Malawi, beyond just the tea sector.[31]
- EPM has made two of three planned Victim Support Units operational. They served 1,368 people in 2023 - 2024, and the third unit was under way as of 2026.

The ongoing Civic Education Programme has reached over 29,000 community members (69% female) across 72 villages and 18 estates since 2021. Delivered with ArtGlo and WOLREC, the programme uses participatory "theatre for development" to help workers and communities identify root causes of GBVH and develop local solutions. It addresses intimate partner violence, sexual harassment, rape, early marriage, and the role of traditional chiefs and police in GBVH cases. Each performance produces a Community Action Plan, with over 90 to date, and more than 600 individual GBV and gender cases have been tracked and resolved locally or referred to the police or Magistrate's Court.

The widespread participation that EPM's WEI drew from community, civil society and government actors speaks to the importance of multi-stakeholder support in tackling a problem as complex as GBVH. Both programmes also directly name and address issues such as intimate partner violence, rape, sexual harassment, early child marriage and economic violence occurring in and around EPM's tea estates. A company cannot manage a risk that it does not accept is present, so acknowledging its existence signals to workers and their communities that the issue is legitimate and will be taken seriously, bolstering efforts to encourage reporting.

Relevant GAIA principles:

1: All forms of gender-based violence and harassment are prohibited

7: Businesses enable workers to exercise their rights to and responsibilities in a GBVH-free workplace

9: Businesses provide remedy of GBVH and hold perpetrators accountable

EASTERN PRODUCE MALAWI (EPM) AND EASTERN PRODUCE KENYA (EPK)

As a complementary measure to its gender empowerment programmes, EPM launched an operational grievance mechanism called TIKUMVENI - a two-tier, non-judicial, confidential model designed against the effectiveness criteria of UNGP Principle 31 (legitimacy, accessibility, predictability, equitability, transparency, rights-compatibility, continuous learning, and engagement/dialogue), which mandates confidential informal mediation and formal complaint routes with anti-retaliation protections:

- **Tier 1:** internal, for non-severe labour issues.
- **Tier 2:** an independent, senior-lawyer-led mechanism for severe human rights impacts (e.g. rape, "sex for work", retaliation), following a structured process of informed consent, registration, assessment, independent investigation, adjudication, remedy, appeal and follow-up, with safeguards for vulnerable people and anonymous reporting accepted. Managers have no say over Tier 2 outcomes. The mechanism extends beyond direct employees to smallholder farmers and the wider community, with grievance origins tracked and reported to the board.

EPM's Kenyan counterpart, Eastern Produce Kenya (EPK), introduced an equivalent mechanism, Tweguu Akase ("talk to me, I'm listening"), which was developed through stakeholder consultations and was launched in phases - Tier 1 in 2022 and Tier 2 in 2023. EPK goes one step further to build GBVH into a worker's first contact with the company: new-recruit induction videos state that GBVH is not condoned and sexual favours are never a condition of employment, and provide grievance-mechanism contacts before the worker starts. Supervisors, who administer the video, face consequences for non-compliance. Peer-elected Human Rights Champions support colleagues with reporting and trade unions offer an anonymous reporting route, relaying resolutions without disclosing complainants' identities.

EPM and EPK have embedded GBVH prevention and response in company structures, with senior oversight and resources behind them. Where strong leadership and clear company direction are in place, gender and GBVH are addressed. However, where leadership is dispersed, or where progress depends on a single person or a time-limited project, there is a risk that this work will be eroded. Decentralisation, redundancies and changes of ownership can increase the risks to both workers and the company, so continuity should be built in deliberately.

Relevant GAIA principles:

3: Senior leadership considers the GBVH risk implications of all decisions to ensure workplaces are equal, respectful and free from GBVH

8: All workers trust they can report GBVH confidentially or anonymously, without fear of retaliation

9: Businesses provide remedy of GBVH and hold perpetrators accountable

KENYA TEA DEVELOPMENT AGENCY (KTDA)

In Kenya, over 600,000 smallholder farmers produce around half the country's tea, and 60% of them are women. Most are organised under KTDA. Because smallholders fall outside much labour protection, KTDA's approach matters for a large share of the women working in the sector.

Leadership and institutional change

Gender and sustainability were not on the agenda eight years ago, whereas they are now standing items regularly reported to the board, reflecting an institutional shift in priorities. KTDA is also reviewing its own gender and social inclusion policies in partnership with a university research team, which adds external scrutiny to its self-reported progress.

KTDA has made great strides in improving women's representation in different levels of its organisation, although progress at the level of its own board is markedly slower, with no female members. It is now addressing this gap, informed by a government directive requiring one-third women's representation and provisions under the Kenyan Tea Act, with its gender programmes intended to encourage more women to stand for election and receive support among the electorate. While not a silver bullet for systemic change, ensuring women's representation in senior leadership increases the likelihood that diverse perspectives shape top-level strategy, organisational culture and operational delivery.

Women's representation and ownership

KTDA's structure supports women's representation at several levels. While only five out of 69 factory boards are chaired by women, at least 40% of those in charge at each collection centre must be women. KTDA has also worked to change the gendered allocation of roles more broadly, including by supporting women into truck driving. The disproportionate power held by clerks at collection centres is open to abuse, so having women in charge there is a meaningful step towards reducing GBVH at a key point of risk.

35% of women on KTDA farms now own their tea bushes, which gives them access to the profits from the crop. A KTDA representative described an inclusive leadership curriculum that has reportedly had positive outcomes, including examples of men reallocating tea bushes to their wives after training. KTDA has also trained "gender champions" at tea buying centres, who are predominantly male because of the gender makeup of leadership at the centres, as well as working to promote more women to positions of authority within the centres.

To manage potential backlash against women's increased ownership, a KTDA representative told us of gender programmes working with both men and women. Over nine months, families first create a shared vision of the future, with children included. They then explore cultural and societal norms, alongside training in conflict management, financial education and business planning.

Farmer incomes

In Kenya, KTDA is working with Taylors of Harrogate and IDH towards a target of raising farmer incomes by as much as 50%, an ambition it described as a "massive challenge." KTDA is advocating for buyers to commit to fair prices, working to ensure smallholders receive 70% of the green leaf return, and developing diversification programmes that offer supplementary income.

Relevant GAIA principles:

3: Senior leadership considers the GBVH risk implications of all decisions to ensure workplaces are equal, respectful and free from GBVH

6: Workers are employed in decent work through transparent decision making

7: Businesses enable workers to exercise their rights to and responsibilities in a GBVH-free workplace

MALAWIAN TEA PRODUCER

A Malawian producer has emerged as a leader of gender-sensitive operational grievance mechanisms in the tea sector. Following its implication in systemic GBVH allegations in 2020, the company has turned its documented grievance policy into a more accessible, gender-responsive system that presents a strong model for the industry. It includes the following components:

Reporting channels: The company offers direct and anonymous reporting channels, including with Human Resources, supervisors and grievance committee members. There are also suggestion or grievance boxes opened using separate HR and managing-director keys, and a third-party anonymous helpline introduced in 2021. Annual training and reminders explain the available channels and the types of concerns that can be reported.

Female participation: Women are represented in HR and grievance structures, take part in investigations, and receive ongoing training. Female representatives run women-only workshops, support workers through the process, help develop policy, protect confidentiality, and identify barriers that should inform improvements.

Performance indicators: The company monitors women's workforce representation, women's representation on grievance committees, training and awareness, complaints raised by women, and the proportion of complainants receiving feedback.

Relevant GAIA principles:

4: Policies and procedures are created and implemented to prevent GBVH in the workplace

8: All workers trust they can report GBVH confidentially or anonymously, without fear of retaliation



LUXMI TEA

Luxmi Tea offers a credible model for translating legislative requirements to concrete action. Prompted by the BBC exposé in Kenya, Luxmi Tea moved beyond India's statutory minimum for POSH (Prevention of Sexual Harassment) compliance, rolling out an intensive, phased training programme across all 21 of its tea estates with 144 in-person workshops delivered since January 2025. Rather than treating the legally mandated Internal Committee as a paperwork exercise, the programme is deliberately designed around worker ownership: sessions are delivered in local languages, run interactively through role-play and real-life scenario work rather than one-way instruction, and aim to cultivate "POSH champions" from within the workforce itself.

This is reinforced by peer-led household outreach through Mother's Club and Adolescent Girls Club networks, and by independent, unannounced verification, whereby UNICEF and certification body Trustea conduct their own field-based focus group discussions without company staff present. Men are engaged as core participants rather than as add-ons, for example, with reported engagement including some men starting to proactively support colleagues around menstrual health needs.

Early indicators suggest the awareness-building is effective, even if deeper structural change will take longer. Luxmi Tea reports women workers becoming visibly more articulate and confident discussing gender and harassment concepts. However, structural representation of women in supervisory and management roles remains a longer-term goal.

Luxmi Tea also described efforts to build women's awareness of their statutory protections, such as the 90-day window for reporting sexual harassment to legally mandated Internal Committees. The company framed this as empowering, since survivors who understand the law are harder to mislead. However, complaint volumes remain low and largely limited to minor, remark-level issues resolved through conciliation. Given the gendered barriers to disclosure, this is more likely to reflect under-reporting than an absence of harm.

Relevant GAIA principles:

4: Policies and procedures are created and implemented to prevent GBVH in the workplace

7: Businesses enable workers to exercise their rights to and responsibilities in a GBVH-free workplace

8: All workers trust they can report GBVH confidentially or anonymously, without fear of retaliation

BROWNS PLANTATIONS KENYA (BPK)

In the aftermath of the 2023 exposure of GBVH in Kenyan plantations, BPK's support for survivors is a complicated picture.[32] Finlays, who owned the plantations at the time of the allegations, reported commissioning investigations, referring affected workers to support services, and offering employment to workers linked to one of the contractors featured in the documentary. Survivors have also had access to independent, survivor-centred support through the Wangu Kanja Foundation (WKF) and allied civil society organisations, including legal aid, counselling and accompaniment through justice processes. Court filings brought by WKF and others have secured protective directions from the Kericho High Court regarding the handling of survivors' testimonies.

While one of the named perpetrators, John Chebochok, faced legal consequences, these fell short of a criminal conviction. The High Court blocked his swearing-in as a tea factory director in 2024, and in February 2026 the Kericho High Court ruled him unfit to hold public office and barred him from doing so. Kenya's Director of Public Prosecutions reportedly directed police to investigate following the documentary, though no completed criminal case has been publicly reported to date. THIRST and Women Working Worldwide are in contact with Kenyan women's rights organisations to track progress and to try to mobilise ongoing support from brands and retailers.

The evidence thins considerably on individual outcomes. There is no publicly available evidence that the women featured in the investigation received financial compensation from Finlays, Browns, or John Chebochok himself, including in the form of rehabilitation packages, livelihood support, or negotiated settlements. While this does not prove compensation has not occurred, the absence of disclosed figures, settlement agreements, and details of individual remedies delivered reflects a focus on processes - policy reforms, governance changes, and whistleblowing systems - over outcomes for the women affected.

Conversations with NGO representatives verified this sustained gap in support for survivors, with reports of:

- No sustained psychological or financial support through lengthy legal processes, and donor fatigue causing funding to collapse mid-case.
- Companies that had been funding petitioner support went through a transition, and follow-up conversations were lost.
- Funds for survivor support that draw contributions from companies implicated in the violations raise conflict-of-interest concerns.

A UK law firm offered support only to survivors linked to specific companies, which was rejected as discriminatory, given that there are more than 200 survivors employed by different companies.

This case demonstrates that the most significant outcomes were driven by civil society organisations rather than by company processes, which is precisely why companies need to monitor whether survivors are in fact reaching remedy and justice. Remedy for survivors has to last as long as the legal process, which can take years. Survivor-centred remedy therefore needs long-term, independent funding that is open to all survivors - and is often best delivered through resourcing civil society organisations.

Relevant GAIA principles:

4: Policies and procedures are created and implemented to prevent GBVH in the workplace

9: Businesses provide remedy of GBVH and hold perpetrators accountable

Trade unions and labour associations

GLOBAL AGREEMENTS

The BBC investigation prompted a significant response from trade unions. In January 2024, Lipton Teas and Infusions - formerly ekaterra, Unilever's global tea division which it sold to private equity firm CVC Capital Partners while filming was underway - and the IUF[33] signed a global Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on union rights and recognition. Lipton recognised the IUF as the representative body of unionised workers across the company's worldwide operations and made human and trade union rights on tea plantations a standing item at biannual meetings between senior management and the IUF.[34] In September 2024, the two parties added a Joint Commitment on Preventing Sexual Harassment, which sets out a zero-tolerance approach, requiring that the perpetrator rather than the complainant be redeployed, and provides for local implementation through IUF affiliates.[35]

The impact of these agreements on the plantations where the abuse took place was limited by Lipton's sale of all its plantations in Kenya, Rwanda and Tanzania to Browns Investments in the same year that the agreement was signed, which moved the plantation workforce outside the agreements' direct scope. For these plantations, Lipton keeps only a due-diligence obligation to promote equivalent standards among its suppliers, and Browns is not a signatory to either agreement.[36] The case shows the fragility of company-level agreements with global unions on GBVH: unless commitments are written into sale terms or extended to new owners and key suppliers, protections negotiated for plantation workers can be weakened as ownership changes hands.

The Lipton agreements built on the protections in place under an existing relationship: on 26 January 2016, Unilever, the IUF and IndustriALL had signed a Joint Commitment on preventing sexual harassment, which required management and unions to agree specific awareness and training measures where women were mostly supervised by men, with a joint working party to monitor progress.[37] The findings of the BBC investigation exposed the limits of the earlier arrangements: Unilever had introduced a zero-tolerance approach and a reporting system after similar allegations over ten years before, but the exposé demonstrated that cases reported through the company's systems had been ignored.[38]

Relevant GAIA principles:

1: All forms of gender-based violence and harassment are prohibited

THE TEA ASSOCIATION OF MALAWI LIMITED (TAML) AND THE PLANTATION AND AGRICULTURAL WORKERS UNION (PAWU)

TAML launched a gender policy in 2024 aligned with ILO C190 that prohibits gender inequality, harassment and discrimination in the tea industry. The consultations included focus groups with PAWU members. In May 2025, PAWU representatives from tea and macadamia plantations attended ILO training on preventing and addressing GBVH, which focused on building effective grievance mechanisms and continuing the push for Malawi to ratify C190.[39]

ETP provided funding for the recruitment of a dedicated gender coordinator at TAML to support the various plantations to implement the policy, with the ILO reporting that 498 stakeholders (45% women) have been trained on its effective application since its launch, although further data would be needed to measure the effectiveness of the trainings.[40] In parallel, TAML's annual sector gathering has consistently focused on gender and progress-tracking for several years, although it was noted by a focus group participant that this dialogue "has not always translated into concrete action at the pace required."

TAML's experience signals the importance of dedicated resources to ensure follow-through on policies and procedures, and demonstrates that even well-resourced and collaborative efforts take time to deliver concrete change.

This work followed several years of pressure from Malawian unions. In 2020, women workers on tea plantations owned by a Malawian tea producer brought a claim in the High Court in London over alleged rape, sexual assault and harassment by male workers. In the same year, the five Malawian IUF affiliates published a joint statement declaring that gender-based violence would no longer be tolerated, that victims would not be silenced and that male union members must respect women workers, and calling for ratification of C190. PAWU and the IUF national women's committee launched a bilingual leaflet giving union representatives' contact details so that cases could be reported confidentially.[41] With Oxfam's support, PAWU had also set up women's committees in all 150 divisions of its nine plantations, bringing membership to a 6:4 balance of men to women, with reported reductions in sexual harassment.[42]

Relevant GAIA principles:

1: All forms of gender-based violence and harassment are prohibited

4: Policies and procedures are created and implemented to prevent GBVH in the workplace

KENYA PLANTATION AND AGRICULTURAL WORKERS UNION (KPAWU)

Immediately after the BBC Panorama broadcast in February 2023, KPAWU published a statement calling on the government to ratify C190. It asked James Finlay and Unilever to employ outsourced workers directly, end union-busting and compensate survivors, and it promoted three model collective bargaining clauses on GBVH adopted by the Board of the Central Organisation of Trade Unions (COTU (K)), including 'Model Clause 3: Gender-Based Violence and Sexual Harassment.[43] ILO C190 ratification remains outstanding: on 31 October 2026, nine Kenyan public and private sector unions called on the government to set a deadline, noting that President Ruto had directed the Labour Cabinet Secretary to lead the process in May 2025 but that the convention had still not been adopted.[44]

As we know, the allegations shown by the BBC were not new. In 2011, claims of sexual harassment were reported at Unilever's Kericho plantation, with claims that unions on the plantations did not prioritise the issue.[45] In its statement following the 2023 BBC investigation, KPAWU linked the problem to the structure of employment: because so much labour is outsourced through contractors, most of the women working on the tea plantations are denied the opportunity to join a union.

Relevant GAIA principles:

6: Workers are employed in decent work through transparent decision making



Image: Tea plucker's basket and shears. THIRST, 2023

TANZANIA WOMEN LAWYERS ASSOCIATION (TAWLA) AND THE TANZANIA PLANTATION AND AGRICULTURAL WORKERS UNION (TPAWU)

TAWLA and TPAWU have worked with women workers on eight tea and flower farms to address structural gender inequality and labour rights violations. They aimed to improve corporate accountability, strengthen the enforcement of labour standards, and empower women workers to claim and defend their rights. The horticulture sector shares many of the risk factors found in tea, including gendered wage disparities and division of labour, gaps in maternity protection, weak or inaccessible grievance mechanisms, and occupational health and safety risks.

Policy and Institutional Engagement

TAWLA and TPAWU engaged national decision-makers, including Parliament and labour authorities, on legislative and enforcement gaps affecting women workers. They developed and presented legal reform proposals and convened a National Multi-Stakeholder Conference on Labour Standards to promote gender-responsive enforcement.

At farm level, TAWLA and TPAWU supported management to adopt and put into practice gender equity and sexual harassment policies. Some farms have since introduced formal policies, including on sexual harassment, but internal dissemination and implementation by supervisors still need strengthening.

Women's Legal Empowerment

TAWLA and TPAWU produced and distributed labour rights manuals and trained women workers as Trainers of Trainers, who shared this knowledge across all eight farms. It also held follow-up dialogues with women leaders and provided legal representation in selected cases.

Observed impact includes a significant increase in rights awareness and confidence among women workers, more reporting of workplace violations, better structured and more participatory worker-management dialogue, and supervisors proactively asking for further training on employer obligations.

Relevant GAIA principles:

4: Policies and procedures are created and implemented to prevent GBVH in the workplace

6: Workers are employed in decent work through transparent decision making

Suppliers

FINLAYS

Following the BBC investigation, Finlays - who owned the plantations at the time of the allegations - dismissed the implicated contractors, offered direct employment to affected workers, and commissioned an independent Partner Africa review involving over 700 stakeholders. The review uncovered structural issues beyond individual contractors, recommending comprehensive updates to safeguarding, grievance mechanisms, and prevention measures, which new owner, Browns Investments, has been implementing since acquiring James Finlay Kenya in November 2023. The recommendations were turned into Project Kulinda,[46] an action plan led jointly by Finlays and Browns and implemented by the new owner, Browns Plantations Kenya (BPK).

Finlays - now no longer a vertically integrated buyer - has publicly reported on progress and remaining gaps in what is now its supply chain rather than its own operations.[47] Actions include strengthening supplier relationships, supporting human resources teams, incorporating gender as a key risk in human rights and supplier risk assessments, and training procurement teams in human rights due diligence, ethical sourcing and risk assessment. A responsible sourcing code has also been developed, with buying teams briefed to help them identify and raise appropriate questions about human rights and gender risks. Work has continued with the Kenyan business and other suppliers, including engagement with BPK alongside supplier performance reviews and efforts to improve transparency.

BPK has reported an increased use of grievance mechanisms. The high number of complaints may be interpreted as evidence that reporting systems have improved, or it may reflect greater awareness or confidence in reporting, or that there are continuing problems that require investigation and remedy. BPK may be able to provide evidence that clarifies this, but they did not respond to our requests for an interview.

A key outcome of Project Kulinda has been the transition from a compliance-based model to a risk-based mHRDD approach aligned with the UNGPs, which includes integrating mHRDD into management KPIs to improve accountability. BPK also reduced its use of contractors from 287 to under 100, transitioning over 760 to direct employment, thereby reducing a structural risk highlighted in the Partner Africa review. The project has now closed and public attention on the case has eased, so an important question is how this approach will be sustained. Without an external spotlight, GBVH could become harder to keep high on the agenda, alongside other business priorities - as happened in the years running up to the Panorama exposé.

Relevant GAIA principles:

2: Businesses commit to prevent GBVH and ensure their business partners do the same

5: Responsible purchasing practices enable action on root causes of GBVH and support sustainable production

7: Businesses enable workers to exercise their rights to and responsibilities in a GBVH-free workplace

8: All workers trust they can report GBVH confidentially or anonymously, without fear of retaliation



Retailers and brands

AHMAD TEA

Standards and accountability

GBVH is prohibited in Ahmad Tea's Social Responsibility Standards, which form the basis of all its contracts with suppliers and partners. Producers are required to sign the standards and report on progress against each one. Annual visits and social audits, carried out by its in-country team or by social impact partners on the ground, provide a further check.

Ahmad Tea's sourcing standard *Hand Picked Profit* Shared includes a profit share rewarding key suppliers with a bonus to pass on to tea workers when quality standards are met. This scheme contributes to closing the living wage gap, as part of the company's commitment to shared responsibility for a sustainable supply chain. Ahmad Tea has emphasised that this can only be achieved through joint action needed from producers, brands, retailers and consumers.[48]

Community programmes

Ahmad Tea works through local and regional social programme implementers, most of whose managers are women, and whose programmes focus mainly on women's needs and health. They have also started to engage men and boys in their programmes.

In India, Ahmad Tea supports women's committees and adolescent workshops, run by women tea workers, covering health, safety, welfare and empowerment. These operate across most of the major plantations from which it sources. In Kenya, a menstrual health programme across the major plantations from which it buys has become a space where violence and whistleblowing are discussed, so that women feel safe to speak out. In Sri Lanka, Ahmad Tea is improving grievance mechanisms to help women raise issues, and works closely with key suppliers to understand risks and how to address them.

Ahmad Tea also requires suppliers to ensure that all workers have bank accounts and digital access, and in most cases supports financial literacy training alongside this. Economic dependence and indebtedness leave workers more exposed to exploitation and less able to report abuse, so improving women's financial access and skills targets a root cause of GBVH.

Relevant GAIA principles:

6: Workers are employed in decent work through transparent decision making

7: Businesses enable workers to exercise their rights to and responsibilities in a GBVH-free workplace.

LIDL

Supply chain transparency

Lidl identified tea as a high-risk commodity and subsequently conducted its first Human Rights Impact Assessment (HRIA) on its Kenyan tea supply chain in 2020. By 2025 it reported 100% progress against all of its objectives, which include improving supply chain transparency and mitigating risks to smallholder farmers and women farmers generally.[49] Lidl continues to work on the topics linked to the findings and recommendations of the HRIA.[50]

For tea, Lidl publishes the names of plantations and suppliers, tracing back to the farm level where possible. It has also begun disclosing gender-disaggregated worker data at tea sourcing locations, reporting the proportions of male and female workers.[51]

Lidl's HRIA predates the 2023 BBC investigation, which suggests that the media scrutiny accelerated, rather than initiated, a broader shift towards recognising GBVH as a salient risk in tea supply chains.

Purchasing practices

Lidl's Sustainability teams – including human rights specialists - are embedded within the Buying department, and therefore work closely together on key projects. Lidl trains its buyers on responsible purchasing practices and strives to measure the impact of these efforts in its supply chains. The German Supply Chain Act - which entered into force in January 2023 - has also been influential through its focus on reducing risk through requiring annual risk analyses and HRIAs on higher-risk commodities.

In a positive move, Lidl has become the first UK retailer to pay a Fairtrade living income reference price in the Kenyan tea sector through its new Single Origin Kenyan Tea launched in September 2026. While this alone does not guarantee that farmers earn a living income unless all their buyers follow the same model, we hope it will catalyse similar action among other buyers.

Relevant GAIA principles:

1: All forms of gender-based violence and harassment are prohibited

5: Responsible purchasing practices enable action on root causes of GBVH & support sustainable production.

10: Businesses are accountable for GBVH and learn from GBVH risks and reports

MARKS AND SPENCER (M&S)

M&S recognises tea (along with coffee) as a "high-risk ingredient" for climate and human rights risks. Since 2006, 100% of M&S's tea has been Fairtrade certified. Fairtrade's Assam Approach Programme also works with M&S supply chains, Fairtrade and the Network of Asian and Pacific Producers (NAPP), engaging tea workers to identify and address gender-related risks.[52] Activities include participatory risk assessments with workers and management, gender awareness training, training on the POSH Act, and support to strengthen grievance mechanisms and worker committees. This has helped identify barriers to reporting, improve awareness of workers' rights, and ensure that women's perspectives shape actions to address workplace risks and their root causes.

M&S's *Cup of Ambition* programme was launched in October 2023 to mitigate risks in its tea (and coffee) supply chains by providing training and support on climate and financial resilience.[53] 1p from every cup of tea and coffee sold in its cafés is donated to a programme that trains farmers in "mindset change, income diversification, financial literacy, and leadership for life" and supports trainees to "[build] resilience by diversifying their incomes and learning to save." As mentioned elsewhere in this report, financial resilience can reduce a woman's risk of sexual exploitation. The programme acknowledges "that women are often the most vulnerable to the impacts of poverty and climate change across the world, which is why one of the programme's strong objectives is empowering women." One of its expected outcomes is that "88% of women reported greater economic independence, influence in household decisions or leadership opportunities."

M&S's Global Sourcing Principles set out minimum requirements and expectations of suppliers including "uphold[ing] human rights… in their own operations and their supply chains," and commits itself to sustaining "a shared culture of continuous improvement which goes beyond basic legal compliance" with its suppliers and that it will "keep [its] buying practices under review and ensure that [its] behaviour supports supplier partners in complying with [its] Principles." It acknowledges that "women… can be disproportionately impacted by negative human rights abuses" and requires suppliers to "carry out risk assessment" and "ensure heightened protection, and remedy for these vulnerable groups." It also requires suppliers to "commit to a workplace free of harassment and violence… prohibit and […] not tolerate all forms of physical abuse or discipline, the threat of physical abuse, sexual or other harassment and verbal abuse…"

Relevant GAIA principles:

1: All forms of gender-based violence and harassment are prohibited
2: Businesses commit to prevent GBVH and ensure their business partners do the same.
5: Responsible purchasing practices enable action on root causes of GBVH & support sustainable production.
7: Businesses enable workers to exercise their rights to and responsibilities in a GBVH-free workplace.
8: All workers trust they can report GBVH confidentially or anonymously, without fear of retaliation

SAINSBURY'S

Sainsbury's has identified tea as one of its highest risk sourcing supply chains and is actively implementing a risk mitigation strategy. The retailer has worked with its suppliers and other retailers to develop a collaborative action plan addressing GBVH risks in its East African tea supply chain. 97% of Sainsbury's suppliers have a grievance mechanism in place, though this figure is not specific to tea or gender.[54]

Sainsbury's has completed the conversion of its black tea to Fairtrade, having discontinued its own Fairly Traded certification in 2022. It has also made progress in consolidating its supplier base, enabling deeper and more sustained engagement than a more diffuse sourcing model allows. This approach places a strong emphasis on improving supply chain dialogue, elevating producer voices, and aligning with branded partners, which make up over 70% of its tea sales.

Sainsbury's and Fairtrade launched the *Resilience Building Initiative* (RBI) - an innovative approach designed to build resilience and enable greater collaboration across tea, coffee and banana producers. Participatory workshops were conducted with tea producers, workers and management across key sourcing regions, enabling participants to identify and prioritise their most salient human rights and environmental risks, explore their root causes and propose locally relevant solutions to address these risks over time.[55]

Importantly, this process exposed a number of gender-related concerns, including barriers to women's leadership, limited financial literacy opportunities for women, gender-based violence, menstrual health challenges and wider social norms affecting women's participation in decision-making. These findings have subsequently informed Risk Reduction Plans, including proposals for women's empowerment activities, financial literacy programmes and menstrual health training and interventions.

Sainsbury's is also funding programmes on the ground in Malawi, in partnership with Comic Relief and ETP to promote inclusive participation and economic empowerment of women with tea-growing communities.

Relevant GAIA principles:

1: All forms of gender-based violence and harassment are prohibited
5: Responsible purchasing practices enable action on root causes of GBVH & support sustainable production
7: Businesses enable workers to exercise their rights to and responsibilities in a GBVH-free workplace.

TWININGS

Among the buyers surveyed, there was broad evidence of GBVH monitoring being embedded into HREDD frameworks. A leading example of this is *Twinings' Community Needs Assessment* (TCNA) approach, part of its Sourced with Care programme.[56] TCNA is a proprietary, risk-based framework that goes beyond reliance on third-party certification, and it is delivered by Twinings' own Social Impact and Sustainability teams in key sourcing countries. Teams spend three to five days at each producer, engaging and speaking with workers, aiming to build trust so they can raise concerns without fear of retaliation. Feedback is gathered across categories including gender, working conditions, grievance mechanisms, children's rights, housing, health, sanitation and livelihoods, and informs tailored improvement plans with tracked progress and more informed sourcing decisions.

In 2025, Twinings made annual Social Impact and Sustainability visits a minimum supplier requirement, refined its questionnaires to close gaps on grievance mechanisms and health and safety, and moved to a risk-tiered cycle: high-risk sites receive a full assessment annually, while low-risk sites receive one every other year with a follow-up on action plans and context-specific risks in between.

Relevant GAIA principles:

2: Businesses commit to prevent GBVH and ensure their business partners do the same

3: Senior leadership considers the GBVH risk implications of all decisions to ensure workplaces are equal, respectful and free from GBVH

4: Policies and procedures are created and implemented to prevent GBVH in the workplace

8: All workers trust they can report GBVH confidentially or anonymously, without fear of retaliation

10: Businesses are accountable for GBVH and learn from GBVH risks and reports

TYPHOO

In response to the broadcasting of the 2023 BBC documentary, Typhoo radically overhauled its sourcing model with the launch of its 'Fear Free Tea' in 2024. This involved consolidating its supply chain from hundreds of growers to just three plantations.[57] Although this was primarily driven by the company's financial constraints, Typhoo strategically chose to buy only from suppliers with strong grievance mechanisms and GBVH prevention and remediation policies.

Typhoo also launched a bold campaign that raised public attention to GBVH risk in tea supply chains through its tea packaging, and established a 'Fear Free Council', which was very much informed by our ***Consent*** report. THIRST, Women Working Worldwide and ***Consent*** co-author, Michael Pennant-Jones were invited to join the Fear Free Council, in order to independently monitor its performance, provide advice and oversight, and influence the wider industry towards responsible purchasing practices.

This momentum stalled when Typhoo entered administration in November 2024, and it was not resumed after its acquisition by consumer goods company Supreme Ltd in December 2025. Under the new ownership, Typhoo reverted to its traditional sourcing model, did not renew its membership of ETI - a multistakeholder initiative and owner of the ETI Base Code - although it did renew its membership of ETP, an organisation for tea blenders, packers, brands and retailers. Even so, Typhoo's attempted model of supply chain consolidation and the bold advocacy on its packaging remains a credible approach that others would be encouraged to replicate, through careful management to ensure that smallholders are not excluded from the supply chains of large retailers.

Relevant GAIA principles:

5: Responsible purchasing practices enable action on root causes of GBVH & support sustainable production



Certification bodies

FAIRTRADE

The Fairtrade Standard for Tea

The Fairtrade Standard for Tea, last revised in 2021, requires certified producer companies to show "no tolerance" of GBVH and other forms of harassment. It clearly lists examples of GBVH, including threats of violence, coercion, economic and sexual exploitation, sexual harassment, trafficking and forced prostitution. Given that understanding of what constitutes GBVH can differ, clear definitions are essential for worker safety and corporate accountability.

Companies must have a written commitment to respect human rights, a gender policy for which senior management is accountable, and GBVH prevention procedures that include a sexual harassment policy. The gender policy must cover management, workers (including temporary and seasonal workers), subcontractors and job brokers, which directly addresses the contractor-based structures implicated in the BBC exposé. Women, including young women aged 18-24, must be involved in the gender policy's implementation and periodic review. Companies must also take a survivor-centred approach that prioritises the rights, needs and wishes of the survivor when responding to reports.

Fairtrade's 2025 *Brew It Fair* campaign called for action from governments, brands, retailers and buyers, and the UK public to make the tea production system fairer. It named the safety of women as one of seven key challenges facing the tea industry, citing the BHRC's finding that 90% of female tea pickers in Kenya have been victims or witnesses of sexual or physical abuse. It also pointed to the risk factors endemic to plantation work that we emphasise in this report.

Human Rights and Environmental Due Diligence (HREDD)

Fairtrade revised its HREDD requirements in January 2025 and supports its partners to meet them through advice, programme-based support and training, including on gender-based violence and workers' rights. Its interactive Risk Map lets industry actors identify risks in their field and location, which helps the whole supply chain, including smaller producers with limited capacity, to identify and address GBVH risks.[58]

Through its Standards Evolution Project (STeP), Fairtrade is evolving its Standards to remain effective, credible and practical in a changing environment. The changes respond to key challenges, including increasing complexity in Fairtrade Standards, rising regulatory demands, growing risks for producer organisations affecting their productivity and livelihoods; higher expectations from the market on how companies address risk in their supply chains. The four key commitments in the evolved Fairtrade Standards are:

1. Fairtrade Standards support Human Rights and the environment;
2. Adopt a risk-based approach to focus on meaningful actions for producer organisations to prioritise resources where it matters the most;
3. Strengthening management systems at the producer level because this is incredibly important to be able to identify and address risks that are continuously changing;
4. Making Fairtrade Standards consistent and user-friendly for everyone, reducing the number of Standards and streamlining requirements and reducing duplication.

Monitoring and transparency

Fairtrade has improved its use of monitoring data for transparency and learning. Regular audits by FLOCERT (a social auditing and certification body and the global certifier for Fairtrade) track compliance and a range of gender-related indicators for certified producer organisations and hired labour organisations, including female participation and women's representation in leadership. Risk assessments and audits identify human rights risks, including GBVH, alongside continuous monitoring of grievance and remediation mechanisms. Disaggregated audit data is shared with producer networks and national Fairtrade organisations, which use it to develop additional support for recurrent issues.

From 2026, Fairtrade will publish an annual summary of complaints handled under its Human Rights Remediation Policy, with anonymised information on the number and types of complaints, case status, remedial measures and lessons learned. Making hidden risks visible in this way is an essential foundation for workers and rightsholders to collaborate on solutions.

Remedy

Fairtrade's Human Rights Remediation Policy identifies gender-based violence as one of five priority areas, with particular emphasis on remediating sexual harassment. Fairtrade describes its role as enabling remedy by using, and where necessary increasing, its leverage over supply chain actors, including by engaging producer organisations, carrying out independent investigations of suspected cases and promoting systemic improvements.



Relevant GAIA principles:

1: All forms of gender-based violence and harassment are prohibited
2: Businesses commit to prevent GBVH and ensure their business partners do the same
3: Senior leadership considers the GBVH risk implications of all decisions to ensure workplaces are equal, respectful and free from GBVH
4: Policies and procedures are created and implemented to prevent GBVH in the workplace
6: Workers are employed in decent work through transparent decision making
7: Businesses enable workers to exercise their rights to and responsibilities in a GBVH-free workplace.
8: All workers trust they can report GBVH confidentially or anonymously, without fear of retaliation
9: Businesses provide remedy of GBVH and hold perpetrators accountable
10: Businesses are accountable for GBVH and learn from GBVH risks and reports

Image: Fairtrade www.fairtrade.net

RAINFOREST ALLIANCE

Rainforest Alliance responded to the BBC investigation by suspending its certification of the Kenyan plantations operated by JFK and Unilever, before lifting both suspensions in July 2023 after the owners had implemented corrective actions. Its Assess-and-Address and grievance system approach, launched in 2020, was applied in Kenya following the exposés.[59] This replaced a zero-tolerance approach of automatic decertification for non-conformities, which Rainforest Alliance says has the counterproductive effect of driving abuses underground.[60]

This approach has drawn criticism from some civil society and labour unions like the IUF, who argue it lets certified brands keep the logo despite documented abuse.[61] This is a legitimate concern that warrants careful consideration; however, the potential risk is arguably outweighed by the benefits of a proactive risk-management approach that seeks to address the underlying drivers of GBVH through sustained support and collaboration, rather than focusing primarily on symptom-level grievance mechanisms for isolated incidents. Under the GAIA framework, disengagement with partners is only recommended once all efforts to support and use leverage with partners have been exhausted.

Rainforest Alliance "requires that each certificate holder sets up an Assess-and-Address Committee or appoints a person… responsible for tackling discrimination, child labor, forced labor, and workplace violence and harassment." Guidance includes a clear definition of sexual harassment as a form of workplace violence or harassment. The approach has been in place for five years and is under review as of November 2026. Early findings indicate that, while there is room for improvement, trust in the system is above the average for such systems globally.

Relevant GAIA principles:

2: Businesses commit to prevent GBVH and ensure their business partners do the same

4: Policies and procedures are created and implemented to prevent GBVH in the workplace.

7: Businesses enable workers to exercise their rights to and responsibilities in a GBVH-free workplace.

8: All workers trust they can report GBVH confidentially or anonymously, without fear of retaliation.

9: Businesses provide remedy of GBVH and hold perpetrators accountable.



Multi-stakeholder partnerships

WOMEN'S SAFETY ACCELERATOR FUND (WSAF)

WSAF functions as a targeted learning programme, bringing together tea producers, international brands, civil society organisations and local implementing partners to improve workplace safety for women. Supported by a consortium of partners - including, in its first phase, IDH (The Sustainable Trade Initiative), ETP, Unilever, Taylors of Harrogate, Tesco and Twinings - WSAF was established to test practical approaches to preventing GBVH in the Indian tea sector.

In its first phase (2021-2024), WSAF reached 302,658 workers (including 242,127 women) across 321 tea estates in Assam, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu and Kerala.[62] Reported impact includes improved awareness of GBVH among workers, increased worker confidence in accessing redressal mechanisms, and enhanced functionality of Internal Committees responsible for addressing workplace safety and harassment issues. In addition, the programme appears to have strengthened relationships between buyers and suppliers around responsible business practices. IDH identifies the variety of organisations involved as a contributing factor to WSAF's achievements.[63] This is particularly relevant in a sector where commercial relationships and competition can create barriers to collaboration.

During the first phase, its design prioritised broad awareness over deeper producer-level capacity-building and system-embedding, while during the second phase (2024-2027) it expanded its focus to issues such as livelihoods and reproductive health, which was seen by some to risk diluting the focus on women's safety. We understand that a third phase is in development, but we have not found publicly available information on this.

WSAF shows how major tea buyers can pool resources and work collectively on women's safety issues rather than pursuing separate, siloed interventions. This matters particularly for stakeholders sourcing from the same producers and factories, as parallel buyer-led initiatives and requirements can duplicate effort and create extra burdens. There were few other publicly available examples of tea buyers jointly supporting interventions in shared supply chains, which could indicate a scarcity of such interventions, or simply a lack of communication and visibility. We encourage tea stakeholders to engage in joint initiatives and also set an example for other actors by communicating these widely.

Relevant GAIA principles:

2: Businesses commit to prevent GBVH and ensure their business partners do the same

7: Businesses enable workers to exercise their rights to and responsibilities in a GBVH-free workplace

KENYAN MULTI-STAKEHOLDER PLATFORM (MSP)

Beyond commercial relationships, broader collaboration with civil society and government actors is also key to creating systemic change. A notable example is Kenya's MSP, which emerged from roundtable discussions following the initial media exposures in the country, with active participation from a wide range of stakeholders including key retailers, producers, Kenyan women's rights groups and international NGOs such as Oxfam, Partner Africa, and THIRST.

Initially seeded through exploratory groundwork and steering group efforts alongside bodies like ETP and ETI, the MSP has evolved into a formalised platform. Still in its formative stages, it aims to bring together tea producers, trade unions, civil society groups, and government actors to share accountability, address deep-rooted GBVH risks, and foster worker-centred solutions in a safe, confidential environment. Rather than forming another individual programme, the MSP aims to enhance existing efforts, streamline duplication, and build long-term collaboration. The initiative was seen by a focus group participant to have a lot of potential to address GBVH in the tea sector.

Relevant GAIA principles:

2: Businesses commit to prevent GBVH and ensure their business partners do the same

ULALO PROJECT (2021-2024)

Taylors of Harrogate and ETP funded the Ulalo Project in Malawi, with an in-kind contribution from a Malawian tea producer, following its implication in allegations of systemic GBVH in 2021. The programme aimed to reduce the economic vulnerability and financial inequality experienced by Malawi's tea workers, many of whom were reliant on informal money lenders and loan sharks, and to promote their financial independence. It created Village Savings and Loan Associations and provided skills training in record-keeping, financial management and business idea generation. The impact is economic, and the link between poverty and the risk of abuse has been evidenced: financial dependence and limited economic choices increase women's vulnerability to exploitation, coercion and abuse. Any economic benefits to women in the tea sector will therefore strengthen their capacity to withstand coercion and abuse.

Relevant GAIA principles:

7: Businesses enable workers to exercise their rights to and responsibilities in a GBVH-free workplace

IDH'S COLLECTION AND DISTRIBUTION MECHANISM

The Collection and Distribution Mechanism initiated by IDH pools additional financial contributions from buyers and distributes these to workers, offering a practical route towards a living wage and a possible answer to buyers' frustration that they cannot scale their interventions alone. Sasini Plc and Nandi Tea in Kenya and Bogawantalawa tea in Sri Lanka took part in 2025, working with four buyers: Taylors of Harrogate, Lipton Teas and Infusions, Ahmad Tea and Superunie. Each buyer committed to closing between 50% and 100% of the living wage gap in proportion to its purchasing volumes, which range from 2.5% to 25.4% of participating producers' output. The group uses a common measurement approach based on the IDH Salary Matrix, together with a shared process for collecting and distributing voluntary contributions.

There are reports of this mechanism delivering tangible benefits to workers, though others feel that it may not be enough. Through Bogawantalawa Tea's living wage commitment in partnership with IDH and its international buyers, three rounds of living wage support have so far reached its estate communities.[64] Bogawantalawa Tea reports that continued cooperation with buyers and partners is strengthening worker wellbeing and turning sustainability commitments into measurable action at community level.

Relevant GAIA principles:

6: Workers are employed in decent work through transparent decision making

ETP'S WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP PROGRAMME (2024-2026)

Through the Women in Leadership Programme ETP, the Republic of Tea and Talawakelle Tea Estates of Hayleys Plantations Group engaged women tea workers to develop their skills and knowledge for leadership roles while engaging men (as part of corporate management and estate management, as well as male staff from factory, field, office and male workers) and young people to understand and promote gender equality.[65] The programme covered 42 estates managed by three Regional Plantation Companies: Talawakelle Tea Estates Ltd, Kelani Valley Plantations Ltd and Horana Plantations Ltd.

183 men and young people took part in awareness-sessions and training on issues affecting women, and 108 management representatives were trained on gender, gender-based violence and gender-sensitive budgeting. A key learning was the importance of framing gender equality as a benefit to whole communities rather than something achieved at men's expense. As one stakeholder put it:

"It's not about uplifting women at the expense of men and boys. It's for the interest of the whole community."

Relevant GAIA principles:

7: Businesses enable workers to exercise their rights to and responsibilities in a GBVH-free workplace

ETP'S OUR TEA OUR VOICE PROGRAMME (2023-2026)

From 2023–2026, ETP's Our Tea Our Voice programme, delivered in partnership with GIZ, Twinings, Ringtons, OTG, women's rights organisations and tea sector stakeholders, is being implemented in Kenya, Rwanda and Indonesia. The programme aims to support a tea sector where leadership is more inclusive, accountable and transformative, enabling women and other marginalised groups to exercise and enjoy their rights through a rights-based, locally led approach.

The programme takes a multi-level approach, working at the individual level, workplace/community level, and the structural level, to strengthen women's leadership, challenge harmful gender norms and create safer, more inclusive workplaces within the tea sector.[66] By the end of 2025, 3,782 people had participated in programme training, with participants reporting increased leadership, decision-making and negotiation skills, and women reporting greater confidence to take on leadership roles. The programme has also strengthened women's and youth networks, and engaged men and boys to promote more supportive attitudes towards women's leadership and shared decision-making.

Alongside prevention efforts, the programme is strengthening workplace systems for addressing gender-related grievances and GBVH risks. In Rwanda, the programme has supported Gender Committees across six tea companies and six cooperatives to develop Gender Action Plans. In Indonesia, the Assess, Address, Grievance and Gender Equality Committee has been revitalised and supported through case handling and response training. In Kenya, Gender Champions have been established at tea-buying centres and the programme has supported Assess-and-Address Committees and Gender Committees at tea factories.

Relevant GAIA principles:

4: Policies and procedures are created and implemented to prevent GBVH in the workplace

7: Businesses enable workers to exercise their rights to and responsibilities in a GBVH-free workplace

8: All workers trust they can report GBVH confidentially or anonymously, without fear of retaliation



Recommendations

The progress in addressing GBVH since our ***Consent*** report is encouraging, and it's thanks to the hard work of the people and organisations who took part in this research. But there is still more to do.

Drawing on our findings, we've pulled together key, practical recommendations to help stakeholders across the tea industry to close the remaining gaps and make lasting improvements in the lives of women tea workers.



Image: Kenyan tea pluckers. THIRST, 2023

For all stakeholders

These recommendations are relevant to all GAIA principles.

- **Treat GBVH prevention as a shared responsibility between all stakeholders**, by collaborating with other actors across the tea sector, pooling influence, and taking part in multi-stakeholder platforms so that data can foster sector-wide learning. Engagement from all ETP members could achieve transformational change across tea supply chains, amplifying their individual impact and setting a stronger standard for the industry.
- **Harness the complementary strengths that local and international organisations bring to different roles**. For example, local women's rights organisations may be best placed to design interventions, lead survivor support, build community trust and deliver independent monitoring. International organisations, brands and platforms can support their efforts through funding, advocacy, and convening power. Companies should resource both and connect them, so that change can be affected at each point of the supply chain.
- **Call for the ratification of ILO C190 in your sourcing and growing countries**, commit to the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, and implement the UN's Women Empowerment Principles.
- **Communicate publicly about your interventions combatting GBVH** as an example for industry learning and (joint) action.

For producers

- **Publicly acknowledge GBVH as a salient human rights issue** in your own supply chain, as a foundation for action and accountability.
  Relevant GAIA Principle: 1
- **Use certification as one tool among several for GBVH prevention and detection**, and engage in your own risk-based human rights due diligence.
  Relevant GAIA Principle: 2
- **Embed leadership and continuity** by appointing a sufficiently senior lead on gender and human rights and provide mentorship and training for staff and management to ensure the work is sustained through staff turnover, restructuring and ownership changes.
  Relevant GAIA Principle: 3
- **Address barriers to reporting GBVH** through equipping interlocutors from local communities to support reporting, offering single-gender group sessions, and designing mechanisms with workers.
  Relevant GAIA Principles: 4 and 7
- **Have two-way conversations with supply chain partners** on pricing, contract length and cost-sharing.
  Relevant GAIA Principle: 5
- **Turn research into action** by designing and implementing interventions through multi-stakeholder platforms and joint funding mechanisms, particularly with other buyers sourcing from the same producers, rather than pursuing siloed interventions.
  Relevant GAIA Principle: 7
- **Address the root causes of GBVH** by moving beyond reactive policies and incident reporting to challenge the patriarchal norms (sectoral as well as cultural), gender discrimination and unequal power relations that create the conditions in which GBVH occurs. Ensure this is integral to wider human rights due diligence and workplace improvement strategies.
  Relevant GAIA Principle: 7
- **Men need to become active agents of change**. Develop sustained programmes that engage men, particularly managers, supervisors, male workers and trade union leaders, as active allies in challenging harmful behaviours, attitudes and power structures. Allyship must be demonstrated through action, not simply expressed through training attendance or statements of support.
  Relevant GAIA Principle: 7
- **Ensure women's leadership programmes address barriers to women's progression** such as childcare and patriarchal norms.
  Relevant GAIA Principle: 7
- **Secure long-term commitment and resources**. GBVH programmes must be adequately resourced, locally owned and supported by sustained leadership. Short-term projects, one-off training and policies without implementation, monitoring and accountability will not deliver lasting change.
  Relevant GAIA Principle: 7
- **Act before a crisis** by establishing grievance mechanisms and publishing GBVH data proactively, assuming GBVH is present. If monitoring shows none, treat it as a sign the system is flawed and requires continuous improvements.
  Relevant GAIA Principle: 8
- **Build deeper partnerships with local and independent women's rights organisations** and involve them in designing grievance mechanisms, supporting survivors and monitoring company efforts to secure remedy for survivors. Internal monitoring carried out by companies in their supply chains should complement rather than replace the independent, women-led oversight we recommended in the ***Consent*** report.
  Relevant GAIA Principles: 8 and 9
- **Publish data on GBVH and gender equity in your supply chains** to make hidden risks visible and provide a foundation for collaboration with other stakeholders.
  Relevant GAIA Principle: 10
- **Address the visibility gap on smallholder farms** by investing in research and monitoring, working with smallholders to design systems that reflect their realities, and onboarding local and/or women-led organisations to monitor company efforts.
  Relevant GAIA Principle: 10
- **Protect and strengthen women's voices**. Ensure women workers can organise, participate in decision-making, access independent support and raise concerns safely, without fear of intimidation, victimisation or loss of employment. Women's organisations and trade unions must be recognised as essential partners in delivering lasting change.
  Relevant GAIA Principles: All
- **Be prepared to challenge perceived good practice through independent scrutiny and accountability**. Ensure that progress on GBVH is regularly reviewed and independently scrutinised, including through confidential engagement with women workers and their representatives. Positive claims and reported achievements must be tested against women's lived experiences.
- **Be willing to revisit and challenge programmes, partnerships and company claims** when evidence suggests that practice does not match the narrative. Transparency, openness to criticism and a willingness to address failures are essential to building trust and achieving meaningful change.
  Relevant GAIA Principles: All

Trade unions and labour associations

- **Address barriers to reporting GBVH** through equipping interlocutors from local communities to support reporting, offering single-gender group sessions, and designing mechanisms with workers.
  Relevant GAIA Principles: 4 and 7
- **Turn research into action** by designing and implementing interventions through multi-stakeholder platforms and joint funding mechanisms, particularly with other buyers sourcing from the same producers, rather than pursuing siloed interventions.
  Relevant GAIA Principle: 7
- **Address the root causes of GBVH** by moving beyond reactive policies and incident reporting to challenge the patriarchal norms (sectoral as well as cultural), gender discrimination and unequal power relations that create the conditions in which GBVH occurs. Ensure this is integral to wider human rights due diligence and workplace improvement strategies.
  Relevant GAIA Principle: 7
- **Men need to become active agents of change**. Develop sustained programmes that engage men, particularly managers, supervisors, male workers and trade union leaders, as active allies in challenging harmful behaviours, attitudes and power structures. Allyship must be demonstrated through action, not simply expressed through training attendance or statements of support.
  Relevant GAIA Principle: 7
- **Ensure women's leadership programmes address barriers to women's progression** such as childcare and patriarchal norms.
  Relevant GAIA Principle: 7
- **Secure long-term commitment and resources**. GBVH programmes must be adequately resourced, locally owned and supported by sustained leadership. Short-term projects, one-off training and policies without implementation, monitoring and accountability will not deliver lasting change.
  Relevant GAIA Principle: 7
- **Build deeper partnerships with local and independent women's rights organisations** and involve them in designing grievance mechanisms, supporting survivors and monitoring company efforts to secure remedy for survivors. Internal monitoring carried out by companies in their supply chains should complement rather than replace the independent, women-led oversight we recommended in our ***Consent*** report.
  Relevant GAIA Principles: 8 and 9
- **Protect and strengthen women's voices**. Ensure women workers can organise, participate in decision-making, access independent support and raise concerns safely, without fear of intimidation, victimisation or loss of employment. Women's organisations and trade unions must be recognised as essential partners in delivering lasting change.
  Relevant GAIA Principles: All



Image: Kenyan tea factory worker. THIRST, 2023

For suppliers, retailers and brands

- **Publicly acknowledge GBVH as a salient human rights issue** in your own supply chain, as a foundation for action and accountability.
  Relevant GAIA Principle: 1
- **Use certification as one tool among several for GBVH prevention and detection**, and engage in your own risk-based human rights due diligence.
  Relevant GAIA Principle: 2
- **Embed leadership and continuity** by appointing a sufficiently senior lead on gender and human rights and provide mentorship and training for staff and management to ensure the work is sustained through staff turnover, restructuring and ownership changes.
  Relevant GAIA Principle: 3
- **Address barriers to reporting GBVH** through equipping interlocutors from local communities to support reporting, offering single-gender group sessions, and designing mechanisms with workers.
  Relevant GAIA Principles: 4 and 7
- **Have two-way conversations with supply chain partners** on pricing, contract length and cost-sharing, rather than delivering one-way requirements.
  Relevant GAIA Principle: 5
- **Integrate sustainability teams and buying teams** so that they are working to a common set of KPIs.
  Relevant GAIA Principle: 5
- **Manage supply chain consolidation processes carefully** so that smaller producers are not excluded, including through sourcing from cooperatives.
  Relevant GAIA Principle: 5
- **Turn research into action** by designing and implementing interventions through multi-stakeholder platforms and joint funding mechanisms, particularly with other buyers sourcing from the same producers, rather than pursuing siloed interventions.
  Relevant GAIA Principle: 7
- **Address the root causes of GBVH** by moving beyond reactive policies and incident reporting to challenge the patriarchal norms (sectoral as well as cultural), gender discrimination and unequal power relations that create the conditions in which GBVH occurs. Ensure this is integral to wider human rights due diligence and workplace improvement strategies.
  Relevant GAIA Principle: 7
- **Men need to become active agents of change**. Develop sustained programmes that engage men, particularly managers, supervisors, male workers and trade union leaders, as active allies in challenging harmful behaviours, attitudes and power structures. Allyship must be demonstrated through action, not simply expressed through training attendance or statements of support.
  Relevant GAIA Principle: 7
- **Ensure women's leadership programmes address barriers to women's progression** such as childcare and patriarchal norms.
  Relevant GAIA Principle: 7
- **Secure long-term commitment and resources**. GBVH programmes must be adequately resourced, locally owned and supported by sustained leadership. Short-term projects, one-off training and policies without implementation, monitoring and accountability will not deliver lasting change.
  Relevant GAIA Principle: 7
- **Act before a crisis** by establishing grievance mechanisms and publishing GBVH data proactively, assuming GBVH is present. If monitoring shows none, treat it as a sign the system is flawed and requires continuous improvements.
  Relevant GAIA Principle: 8
- **Build deeper partnerships with local and independent women's rights organisations** and involve them in designing grievance mechanisms, supporting survivors and monitoring company efforts to secure remedy for survivors. Internal monitoring carried out by companies in their supply chains should complement rather than replace the independent, women-led oversight we recommended in the ***Consent*** report.*
  Relevant GAIA Principles: 8 and 9
- **Publish data on GBVH and gender equity in your supply chains** to make hidden risks visible and provide a foundation for collaboration with other stakeholders.
  Relevant GAIA Principle: 10
- **Address the visibility gap on smallholder farms** by investing in research and monitoring, working with smallholders to design systems that reflect their realities, and onboarding local and/or women-led organisations to monitor company efforts.
  Relevant GAIA Principle: 10
- **Protect and strengthen women's voices**. Ensure women workers can organise, participate in decision-making, access independent support and raise concerns safely, without fear of intimidation, victimisation or loss of employment. Women's organisations and trade unions must be recognised as essential partners in delivering lasting change.
  Relevant GAIA Principles: All
- **Be prepared to challenge perceived good practice through independent scrutiny and accountability**. Ensure that progress on GBVH is regularly reviewed and independently scrutinised, including through confidential engagement with women workers and their representatives. Positive claims and reported achievements must be tested against women's lived experiences.
- **Be willing to revisit and challenge programmes**, partnerships and company claims when evidence suggests that practice does not match the narrative. Transparency, openness to criticism and a willingness to address failures are essential to building trust and achieving meaningful change.
  Relevant GAIA Principles: All

For certification bodies

- **Embed leadership and continuity** by appointing a sufficiently senior lead on gender and human rights and provide mentorship and training for staff and management to ensure the work is sustained through staff turnover, restructuring and ownership changes.
  Relevant GAIA Principle: 3
- **Ensure women's leadership programmes address barriers to women's progression** such as childcare and patriarchal norms.
  Relevant GAIA Principle: 7
- **Act before a crisis** by establishing grievance mechanisms and publishing GBVH data proactively, assuming GBVH is present. If monitoring shows none, treat it as a sign the system is flawed and requires continuous improvements.
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  Relevant GAIA Principles: All

For international, specialist NGOs

- **Turn research into action** by designing and implementing interventions through multi-stakeholder platforms and joint funding mechanisms, particularly with other buyers sourcing from the same producers, rather than pursuing siloed interventions.
  Relevant GAIA Principle: 7
- **Address the root causes of GBVH** by moving beyond reactive policies and incident reporting to challenge the patriarchal norms (sectoral as well as cultural), gender discrimination and unequal power relations that create the conditions in which GBVH occurs. Ensure this is integral to wider human rights due diligence and workplace improvement strategies.
  Relevant GAIA Principle: 7
- **Men need to become active agents of change**. Develop sustained programmes that engage men, particularly managers, supervisors, male workers and trade union leaders, as active allies in challenging harmful behaviours, attitudes and power structures. Allyship must be demonstrated through action, not simply expressed through training attendance or statements of support.
  Relevant GAIA Principle: 7
- **Secure long-term commitment and resources**. GBVH programmes must be adequately resourced, locally owned and supported by sustained leadership. Short-term projects, one-off training and policies without implementation, monitoring and accountability will not deliver lasting change.
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- **Be prepared to challenge perceived good practice through independent scrutiny and accountability**. Ensure that progress on GBVH is regularly reviewed and independently scrutinised, including through confidential engagement with women workers and their representatives. Positive claims and reported achievements must be tested against women's lived experiences.
- **Be willing to revisit and challenge programmes**, partnerships and company claims when evidence suggests that practice does not match the narrative. Transparency, openness to criticism and a willingness to address failures are essential to building trust and achieving meaningful change.
  Relevant GAIA Principles: All

For local support groups

- **Address barriers to reporting GBVH** through equipping interlocutors from local communities to support reporting, offering single-gender group sessions, and designing mechanisms with workers.
  Relevant GAIA Principles: 4 and 7
- **Turn research into action** by designing and implementing interventions through multi-stakeholder platforms and joint funding mechanisms, particularly with other buyers sourcing from the same producers, rather than pursuing siloed interventions.
  Relevant GAIA Principle: 7
- **Address the root causes of GBVH** by moving beyond reactive policies and incident reporting to challenge the patriarchal norms (sectoral as well as cultural), gender discrimination and unequal power relations that create the conditions in which GBVH occurs. Ensure this is integral to wider human rights due diligence and workplace improvement strategies.
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Image: Kenyan tea factory. THIRST, 2023

For government agencies

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  Relevant GAIA Principles: All

Conclusion

Three years on from the publication of our *Consent* report, there are encouraging signs that the tea sector is beginning to acknowledge the existence of GBVH and to go beyond this by actively responding to it.

Our conversations with retailers, producers and other stakeholders, alongside the round-table discussions and desk research, have identified examples of positive leadership, increased awareness and practical initiatives aimed at improving women's safety and dignity at work. These developments should be recognised and welcomed.



Positive steps in the tea sector

Leadership commitment to tackling the issue has strengthened, with increased recognition of tea as a high-risk commodity for GBVH. There are the beginnings of a broad shift from compliance-based models towards human rights due diligence and risk-based methods, driven largely by regulation such as the EU's CSDDD. Grievance mechanisms are increasingly common, and there are signs of buyers working with their supply chain partners to promote responsible purchasing practices. Tea buyers, producers and certification bodies are also collaborating to develop programmes that address the power dynamics that underpin GBVH. Supply chain transparency is improving, although publicly disclosed data on GBVH itself is still rare.

Progress remains uneven

However, progress must not be mistaken for transformation. The deeply embedded inequalities, patriarchal attitudes and power imbalances endemic to the tea industry that enable GBVH have not disappeared. The tea sector's colonial legacy, entrenched inequalities and low prices make tangible change slow and piecemeal, and the risk to women workers remains high.

Nor can we assume that policies, programmes and commitments will necessarily translate into lasting change on the ground. Experience has shown that good intentions and positive public narratives can bely a very different reality, and that progress can be fragile, particularly where accountability, resources and sustained leadership are lacking.

Producers remain burdened by one-way requirements from buyers, without the prices or contracts needed to meet them. Women remain consigned to low-paid plucking and weeding roles, and smallholder farmers are still largely invisible. Buyers continue to over-rely on certification schemes for preventing and addressing GBVH, and many are still acting in isolation. Systems to monitor the effectiveness of policies and interventions require strengthening.

Embedding change

Progress depends on more than a company's stated commitments or the publication of a sustainability report. Where strong leadership provides clear direction, resources and accountability, gender equity and GBVH are more likely to be addressed systematically.

Where leadership is dispersed, or where progress depends on a single person or a time-limited project, this work risks being eroded. Responsibility must also be embedded within local operations, supported by appropriate expertise and training, and reinforced through effective oversight. Decentralising responsibility without these conditions risks letting gender and workers' rights issues become secondary to commercial priorities.

Tackling GBVH in the tea sector is a complex challenge, and companies have demonstrated some impressive examples of progress. The challenge now is to ensure that the progress made is not only maintained but becomes embedded in the culture and everyday practices across the tea sector. This requires sustained vigilance, genuine accountability and collective responsibility. Men, particularly those in positions of power and influence, must move beyond passive support to become active allies in challenging the attitudes, behaviours and structures that perpetuate inequality and abuse.

Collective action

Programmes must do more than respond to individual incidents; they must tackle the underlying causes, redistribute power, strengthen women's voices and create workplaces where discrimination, coercion and harassment are neither tolerated nor normalised. As long as stakeholders act in isolation, the change they can achieve will be limited.

Buyers and retailers have an important continuing role. They should use their influence not simply to demand compliance and information, but to support their suppliers and producers, resource preventative action defined and shaped by local women, and hold themselves accountable for lasting change. Interventions should be built on genuine engagement with workers, whose voices are essential if those interventions are to be transformative.

This shared responsibility will only be met if all stakeholders pool their resources and influence and collaborate across the sector, so that momentum continues once the external spotlight wanes. Specialist organisations like THIRST and WWW are well positioned to convene actors and support solutions that drive systemic change.

Scrutinising success

Equally, the sector must be prepared to scrutinise and challenge its own success stories. As our original ***Consent*** report demonstrated, what is presented as good practice can prove far removed from women's lived experiences. No company or initiative should be beyond scrutiny. Ultimately, success should not be measured by the policies introduced, training delivered or commitments made, but by whether women are safer, have greater agency and can exercise their rights without fear of reprisal.

Looking ahead

Further cases of GBVH are inevitable, making the message to retailers clear: responsibility does not end with commissioning a programme, receiving supplier assurances or celebrating an initiative. They must stay engaged, ask difficult questions and act when new evidence emerges.

> ***"a decade and a half on from the revelations about Jimmy Savile, and 10 years on from the #MeToo movement, we must finally take meaningful steps to end abuse and harassment in sectors where the power imbalances are huge and careers are built on contacts and reputation."***

The most recent revelations of abuse by celebrities in the British entertainment industry reinforce how power imbalances drive these crimes. As politician Lisa Nandy said, "a decade and a half on from the revelations about Jimmy Savile, and 10 years on from the #MeToo movement, we must finally take meaningful steps to end abuse and harassment in sectors where the power imbalances are huge and careers are built on contacts and reputation."[67]

Tea is such a sector. When new reports of GBVH emerge, what matters is how companies respond: by investigating promptly and independently, protecting those who speak out, and acting on what they learn.

Appendices



Methodology

THIRST and Women Working Worldwide engaged with key tea sector stakeholders in 2026 through online and in-person interviews, focus group discussions and questionnaires tailored to brands and retailers, suppliers and producers, to gather company feedback on progress against the respective GAIA principles. Producers, suppliers, trade unions, and major tea brands and retailers were selected on the basis of their role in the UK tea supply chain and membership of the ETI, although outreach extended beyond this platform. We ensured to include companies that we know have made good progress in tackling GBVH in the tea sector, with qualitative data providing detailed insights into progress and gaps in current policies and practice.

We invited 25 tea stakeholders to take part, including producers, suppliers, brands, retailers, trade unions and certification bodies, along with 12 NGOs. Out of this, 11 tea stakeholders and five NGOs participated. We received no responses from trade unions, although we know many are active on this issue.

Desk research into corporate policies and industry developments supplemented our primary research. When referencing publicly available information, we mention the names of the companies or organisations, while anonymising the primary data and quotes.

The authors built on their previous work on gender and human rights in global tea supply chains, including parts one and two of THIRST's literature review *Human Rights in the Tea Sector - the Big Picture*;[68] a report commissioned by ETI entitled *Safe Spaces: Creating the Enabling Environment to Progress Women Workers' Representation and to Support Women Workers to Organise Collectively and Access Their Rights*,[69] and Women Working Worldwide's *Gender Equity Across Supply Chains: a Comparative Analysis*.[70]

Limitations

This analysis adopted a broad categorisation of women tea workers, and treated GBVH as a single category, to establish a foundational understanding of systemic GBVH risks across the supply chain. In reality, their multiple and intersecting identities - including gender, caste, disability, age and migration status - put some at greater risk than others, and expose them to different kinds of risk.

Similarly, GBVH covers a wide spectrum of behaviours, from verbal harassment and unwelcome comments through to coercion, sexual exploitation and physical or sexual violence. These differ markedly in their severity, prevalence, drivers and impact, and they call for different prevention and remedy responses. Moving forward, a deeper intersectional analysis, alongside a more differentiated examination of the levels and forms of GBVH, would be needed before action planning is done.

We targeted the major tea producing countries where we have the greatest knowledge and expertise, and where public scrutiny has centred - including Bangladesh, India, Kenya, Malawi, Rwanda, and Sri Lanka - although data availability ultimately shaped the final scope. Another factor is the geographic imbalance in public attention and English-language coverage, with a large body of published material existing on the tea sector in India, particularly Assam, and in Africa on the Kenyan tea sector (much of which THIRST referenced in its human rights impact assessment), while very little is published on China, Japan and Indonesia, with varying levels of coverage across the remaining countries. Further research into the differing levels of GBVH and into less-examined countries would therefore be a valuable exercise.

The volume of tea produced by smallholder farmers now dominates the global tea market, however visibility is low and the risk of human rights abuses is high. For this report we focused on companies that had made progress in this area. The fact that few were working with smallholders highlights the need for further research.

Further reading

Gender Equity Across Supply Chains - a comparative analysis. Case Study: James Finlays' Kenya, Gender Equality and Diversity Policy
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ETP, July 2026

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