

Study on Factors Influencing Child Abuse in Plantation Sector in Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

Child abuse is neither a recent phenomenon nor confined to specific historical periods or cultures. It encompasses the physical and emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect, and exploitation that harm a child's health, survival, development, or dignity. This study focuses on the prevalence and contributing factors of child abuse in Sri Lanka, with a particular emphasis on the plantation sector. Sri Lanka is divided into urban, rural, and estate sectors, each with a distinct socio-economic status. The estate sector is more vulnerable and it faces particularly severe hardships, including inadequate resources, low literacy, economic poverty, and social marginalization. The Malayaha community has a tragic history of discrimination, exploitation and violence. Alcohol consumption is a habitual practice within this community and it leads to create domestic violence and exacerbating the vulnerabilities of children. Based on that, the study aims to identify the factors influencing child abuse in the plantation sector. This study employed qualitative methods for data collection. The tools used included direct observation, key informant interviews, FGD, and a review of secondary data. Data was gathered through open-ended individual interviews and the findings were analyzed thematically. The data collection took place in the Pupuressa Division, located in the Central Province of the Kandy District. A total of 20 key informant interviews were conducted with key professionals and conducted focus group discussions. The study revealed that the physical and social environment of the estate sector was conducive to committing child abuse. Moreover, economic difficulties within families have resulted family dysfunction, neglect of children's basic needs, poor parenting, parental migration, emotional distress, muted voices of children, and obstacles in accessing education, healthcare, and safety. The economic structure of the estate sector has a profound influence on child protection. Mothers leave their children alone at home during working hours, unintentionally exposing them to the risk of sexual abuse. Substance abuse among estate workers further exacerbates the prevalence of child abuse. Additionally, limited access to government services in the estate sector and weak engagement with relevant agencies contribute to significant service delivery gaps. These factors increase parental economic involvement and increase the risks of children. This study recommends increased awareness among parents, particularly regarding children's rights and the necessary protections for their well-being. Address harmful parental behaviors such as alcoholism and domestic violence and improve child protection measures. In addition, economic empowerment of families, schools, and communities is strongly recommended. Strengthening community-based child protection mechanisms is also vital. Also, enhancing law enforcement efforts and establishing strong structures to support these initiatives are recommended.

Keywords: Child abuse, Plantation Sector, Influencing factor

INTRODUCTION

In Sri Lanka, the estate sector is comprised of tea or rubber plantations managed or owned by the state, regional plantation companies and individuals or families. The British introduced South Indian Tamils to Sri Lanka in the 1830s to work in the plantation industry, which was managed by British companies. In 1975,

the plantations were nationalized and transferred to the Sri Lankan State Plantations Corporation and the Janatha Estate Development Board. With the establishment of the plantation sector, Sri Lanka's social structure evolved into three distinct sectors, urban, rural, and plantation. The poverty levels are higher in rural than in urban areas, they are highest in estate areas. The headcount ratio is 4.4% in urban areas, 16.6% in rural areas, and 51.3% in estate areas. The intensity is also highest in estate areas (46.1%), compared to rural areas (40.9%) and urban areas (40.6%). The National MPI is 0.018 in urban areas, 0.068 in rural areas, and 0.236 in estate areas (National multidimensional poverty statistics, 2019).

It illustrates that estate areas as pockets of poverty. Due to a lack of resource distribution, the plantation sector remains predominantly marginalized from mainstream society, posing substantial challenges for its residents. Moreover, child labor is on the rise in the sector due to the poverty and economic hardship in the plantation sector. Child Activity Surveys conducted by the Department of Census and Statistics in 2016, found that 1% of children (43,343) between 5 to 17 years of age are engaged in child labor with 90% of this population (39,007) being engaged in hazardous forms of child labor. Child labor incensement is very high in the plantation sector (Journal of Child Health G Hendra de Silva1 Sri Lanka Journal of Child Health, 2000).

Most of the children are involved in agricultural work within the estates. It violates the rights of education to the estate-living children. On the other hand, a significant portion of the population lacks critical identification documents, including national identity cards and birth certificates, which limits their voting rights and prevents proper recognition of citizenship. Consequently, these communities often face restricted access to essential services, reinforcing economic disadvantages and giving rise to social issues such as substance abuse, and caste-based conflicts. This systemic neglect has resulted in widespread disempowerment within the population, further aggravating these challenges.

Moreover, the following table presents grave crimes committed against children under 15 categories. Under this,

Offence	Report 2021	Report 2022	Report 2023
Homicide	27	18	16
Rape (less than 16 years) with the consent of the victim	1376	1369	1262
Rape (less than 16 years) without the consent of the victim	281	324	320
Incest	73	54	63
Grievous hurt	24	34	54
Grave sexual abuse	580	535	605

Source: Annual Performance report, 2023 Sri Lanka police

The above mentioned table illustrates, that the level of child related issues increasement during the recent years of 2021, 2022 and 2023. It is noteworthy that, the child related issues gradually increase by the year. More than 50 incest cases filed yearly and grave sexual abuse cases gradually increase from 2021 to 2023. According to the table, child rape without concern of the victim is also raised yearly. It is noteworthy that children under 16 years are immature as we are aware. But rape with the consent are high than the other mentioned offenses, but in 2023 it had been decreasing. Most abuses are happening by family members or others close to the family (defining comprehending child abuse in present times– an appraisal- S.T. Kudagammana, 2010). According to the presented data, child abuse cases are inevitable in society and children are at risk in the development period.

Furthermore, the National Child Protection Authority (NCPA) of Sri Lanka reported 8,548 cases of child abuse in the year of 2017. The authority has received 1298 complaints of depriving compulsory education, 481 cases of sexual molestation, 248 cases of sexual abuse, 322 rapes of minors under 18, Neglect of child under the child and youth ordinance have been reported in 358 cases and 246 cases of child labor has been

reported to the National Child Protection Authority in the same year. In this context, minimizing child abuse necessitates identifying and addressing the underlying factors contributing to its prevalence, particularly in marginalised community in Sri Lanka. The prevalence of child abuse cannot be dismissed as a minor social issue, as such incidents constitute a grave violation of fundamental social norms and laws designed to protect children.

Research Objective: To identify the factors influencing child abuse in plantation sector, Sri Lanka

Specific Objectives:

- To analyze the socio-economic and educational backgrounds of the plantation sector.
- To identify the most contributing factors to child abuse in plantation sector.
- To assess the existing service delivery vacuum in the particular division, Special focus on Pupuresa division.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In reviewing the literature on the factors contributing to child abuse, drug and alcohol abuse emerges as a significant issue. Drug and alcohol abuse is a widespread social concern that has been consistently documented across various subjects in existing literature regarding its detrimental effects. Notably, drug and alcohol abuse are recognized as a prominent risk factor for child abuse within family households (Onigu-Otite and Belcher, 2012). Further, Drug and alcohol abuse often begins during adolescence, influenced by factors such as peer pressure, attempts to cope with emotional distress, or observation of family members engaging in similar behaviors (Vilhena-Churchill & Goldstein, 2014). It means that the estate people's thoughts of drinking alcohol is seems to be the solution for their problem and it seems as stress release machanism.

In adulthood, individuals may develop substance abuse behaviors as a coping mechanism for financial stress or to navigate traumatic life events, including experiences of child maltreatment, the challenges associated with becoming a parent, or the loss of a loved one (Douglas, 2013). The said statement illustrates, that consumption of alcohol led to create lack of family attachment to the children and it is one of the major factor to contribute to form child related issues. Moreover, it is noteworthy that individuals from the estate sector tend to consume alcohol more frequently than those from other regions. Substance abuse, including drug and alcohol misuse, is a pervasive social issue that has been consistently documented across various studies, highlighting its detrimental effects on individuals and communities.

Moreover, the people in the estate sector have no adequate recreation facilities for themselves or their family stated by Ratnam Nadarajah in his article “Plantation sector quagmire: Is the light at the end of the tunnel” (2015). It is true that the community is marginalized from the main city and enjoys inadequate resources. Further, he states that low socioeconomic status is a frequently identified risk factor for child abuse within the home (Nadarajah, 2015). Low socioeconomic status affects children, adults, and teens because of the financial strain that is displayed within the household.

The socio-economic improvements in the country have resulted in the reduction of family size and the significant shift to a more nuclear structure where an increasing number of married men and women work outside the home, some moving to distant places within and outside the country. These changes have brought about emerging issues, such as the shortage of caregivers for children, the elderly and the disabled at home, due to the imbalance in sharing of domestic work between males and females and due to lack of protection child abuse is happening (Draft Family Policy for Sri Lanka, 2010). Also, poverty and gender-based violence are widespread in Sri Lanka’s tea estate, and the estate population lags behind national figures on the majority of key health indicators (Centre for Poverty Analysis, 2005, wijayathlake). Gender-based violence covers a range of events directed at women and girls of their sex. For instance, human trafficking, female infanticide and intimate partner violence are some of the most pervasive forms of GBV.

Child Activity Surveys conducted by the Department of Census and Statistics in 2016, found that 1% of children (43,343) between 5 to 17 years of age are engaged in child labor with 90% of this population (39,007) being engaged in hazardous forms of child labor. Child labor incensement is very high in the plantation sector (Journal of Child Health G Hendra de Silva¹ Sri Lanka Journal of Child Health, 2000). Most of the children are involved in agricultural work within the estates. Because the children need to register in the estate when they are born. It provides a safe zone for the children in the estate sector. It's because estate work is confirmed for the children if they registered at the beginning of the birth. On the other hand, it stops their moment to enhance their life. On that basis, child related issues are high due to influencing various contributing factors. Especially, study attention to plantation sector in Sri Lanka.

METHODOLOGY

The study explored the main factors influencing child abuse in the plantation sector in Sri Lanka and identified the service accessibility and availability for children to empower and protect them in the estate sector. In order to that, the data collection took place in the Pupuressa division, located in the Central Province of the Kandy District in Sri Lanka. In this study, the qualitative method was adopted to find the data. The major factors contributing to child abuse in the plantation sector in Sri Lanka were identified by using the semistructured interview with 20 samples of key professionals who are working with the children. For instance: probation officer, police officer, child rights promoting officer, law reporter for child issues, teacher at school and other relevant officers. Secondly, identified the availability and accessible service of the children in the plantation sector by using direct observation and focus group discussions with the community leaders, government duty bearers at particular division and estate workers union members. Moreover, the gathered information was analyzed by thematic analysis.

FINDINGS

This research paper examines the factors influencing child abuse within the plantation sector of Sri Lanka. The particular table illustrates specific child abuse cases in the research area in 2019.

Victim	Victim's Age	Perpetrator's Age	Type of abuse	Place of abuse
A	15	42	Sexual abuse	Behind Public well
B	14	37	Sexual abuse	Tea estate
C	12	22	Sexual abuse	Victim's house by drunker
D	17	16	Sexual abuse	Victim's house
E	15	22	Sexual abuse	Rape at perpetrator's house
F	14	37	Sexual abuse	Incest at home

Source: From field study

According to the presented data, the study revealed that the child abuse in plantation sector is mostly consist of different age gaps. Basedon that, the above case table indicates that the victims' ages range from 12 to 17, while the perpetrators' ages exhibit significant variation, with some perpetrators being considerably older than the victims.

Notably, there are substantial age discrepancies between victims and offenders, particularly in cases A (42 years) and B (37 years) when compared to the younger victims (ages 14-17). In contrast, case D reflects a peer relationship, where the offender (16 years old) is closely matched in age to the victim (17 years old). Moreover, the finding explore that, the child sexual abuse at estate sector mostly happening at home. Also, the locations of abuse are diverse, occurring in both public spaces (e.g., behind a public well) and private settings (including the victims' homes and offenders' residences), as well as specific establishments such as tea estates. The reference to "used alcohol" in case C raises concerns regarding a potential pattern of

substance use associated with abusive incidents in the plantation area. In particular, the child sexual abuses in plantation sector is occurring in unsafe areas and substance abuse is highly incooperate to the incidents.

Research indicates that housing patterns/social structure are a significant factor contributing to the prevalence of child abuse in plantation sectors. In particular, the tea plantation sector faces challenges related to inadequate housing conditions, limited living space, and absence of children's privacy. It is common for up to three families to share a single, small house. For instance, in a case involving 'D,' both the victim and the perpetrator were under the age of 18 and neighbours. Service providers revealed during the interview, such incidents often go unreported due to fear of social stigma, high costs of legal proceedings, and take lengthy period to get judicial processes. In that sense, Social learning theory explains that behavior is acquired through two primary methods: (1) instrumental learning, where individuals are rewarded for specific actions, and (2) modeling, where behavior is learned by observing and imitating others. On that basis, the estate sector is characterized by line housing structures that offer very limited space. Typically, these houses consist of a single room and a small kitchen, providing minimal privacy for both parents and children. Consequently, children are often exposed to adult behaviors, such as alcohol consumption, physical altercations, verbal abuse, and even sexual activities. Through observation, children may internalize and later replicate these behaviors, creating a cycle of abuse perpetrated by the constraints and environment of plantation housing.

Secondly, substance abuse among men and women has been identified as a prevalent factor in child abuse within the plantation sector, as highlighted in focus group discussions. Alcohol consumption by parents and caregivers can impair their sense of responsibility, reducing both the time and financial resources and it reduces the dedication of the parents to their children.

As a result, children's basic needs have been neglected. The World Health Organization states that harmful alcohol use can impair physical and cognitive functions, diminish self-control, and increase the likelihood of violent behavior, including violence toward children. In this context, a lack of self-control due to alcohol abuse has been increasing in incest cases. Estate workers make more efforts to earn money and dedicate themselves as well. Therefore, they declared that alcohol consumption is the solution to their physical and emotional pains. On that basis, Ratnam Nadarajah states on his article "Plantation sector quagmire: Is the light at the end of the tunnel" (2015) The result for the majority of the adult is drinking alcohol seems to be the solution. The prevalent use of alcohol as a coping mechanism for stress and adverse living conditions correlates with weak parental attachment, contributing to potential neglect and abuse of children. The research employs Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological theory, which posits that a child's development is significantly shaped by their environment and social interactions. The findings indicate that adverse conditions within the plantation sector perpetuate a cycle of stress and dysfunction, negatively impacting children and increasing the likelihood of abuse. The study underscores the critical role of socio-economic and environmental factors in contributing to child abuse in plantation communities. It emphasizes the urgent need for improved infrastructure and support systems to enhance child safety and development.

The research further identifies the economic working structure in the tea plantations are significant contributor to the increase in child abuse within the sector. Workers heavily rely on daily wages from tea plucking and limited domestic planting. Both men and women engage in various roles: men typically perform tasks such as fertilizing and pesticide spraying, while women spend long hours plucking tea from morning until evening. Female working hours are more than the men. Men will be at home at home in the day times in the estate sector. Due to that child losing mother's attachedment at home. Absence of mother attachment led to reducing the security protection of the children from parents.

Because most of the abuses happened in the plantation at home and happened in the daytime while their mothers at work in the estate. Case 'A' is 15-year-old girl abused by a 42-year-old married man in the daytime. The particular incident occurred at victim's home while mother is not at home. Attachment theory posits that the nature of the bond formed between a child and their caregiver significantly influences the child's future relationships.

There are four primary attachment styles: secure, preoccupied, dismissive, and fearful. Secure Attachment states children with a secure attachment feel safe exploring their environment and can be easily comforted by their caregivers. This type of attachment fosters healthy emotional and social development. However, in the plantation sector, a critical issue arises concerning security and attachment. Many parents prioritize economic stability over their children's emotional well-being. As a result, instances of abuse often occur during the hours when parents are at work, leaving children vulnerable. This lack of parental availability and support can hinder the development of secure attachments and negatively impact children's long-term relationships.

The research revealed by the FGD that, mother migration is one of the major factors contributing to child abuse in the plantation sector. According to that, that families within the plantation community experience significant financial instability, often relying on loans to survive. Defaulting on microloans frequently forces individuals to seek employment abroad to repay their debts. Mother migration is a prevalent phenomenon in the plantation sector, which has been linked to increased incidents of child sexual abuse and the perpetuation of child labor. Child labor is prevalent, with children often missing school to work and support their families, thereby perpetuating a cycle of poverty and lack of education. The research findings suggest that the economic and social model of the plantation community is characterized by deep-rooted dependency. Without self-determination or alternative income streams, individuals remain trapped in cycles of poverty, debt, and traditional labor practices. The study underscores the critical need to break this cycle of dependency through education, financial literacy, and self-employment opportunities, which are essential for improving living standards and reducing child labor.

Based on the researcher's findings, educational constraints are a significant influencing factor in child abuse within the plantation sector. Schools in plantation areas have very limited resources compared to those in urban areas. In particular research area, the students need to walk long distance from the home to school and absence of transportation facilities. The high shortage of teachers in these regions poses challenges for existing educators in effectively managing their classrooms. Additionally, the basic infrastructure facilities at the community level are insufficient. Many students must travel long distances to attend secondary schools in town, and numerous families cannot afford hostel fees associated with these institutions.

This also led to an increase in child labor in the plantation sector and on the other hand drop outers will get marry soon. Therefore early marriage is also inevitable in the estate sector. It violate the education rights of children due to unequal resource allocation in the education sector.

Furthermore, economic inequality and caste-based discrimination further limit children's access to quality education, reinforcing cycles of isolation and child labor. Children who do not pass the examinations required for admission to town schools often drop out, leading to early engagement in work or other activities. As a result, girls left at home alone due to a lack of educational opportunities are at an increased risk of abuse, compounded by their limited awareness of and access to legal resource. Many children lack knowledge of sexual education, including the ability to recognize inappropriate behavior, such as distinguishing between "good touch" and "bad touch." This finding suggests that when children's basic needs are unmet, they are more likely to seek alternative paths, which may be illegal or harmful, thereby destabilizing social norms.

Economic hardships are often correlated with various forms of family violence, such as child abuse, neglect, and spousal abuse. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services defines neglect as the failure to meet a child's essential physical, medical, educational, or emotional needs. Furthermore, economic necessity drives many mothers to seek employment abroad, leaving their children in the care of fathers. This situation can lead to fathers engaging in extramarital affairs, neglecting their children, or, in extreme cases, abusing them. Consequently, economic hardship plays a central role in perpetuating cycles of abuse. According to Self-Efficacy theory, parents' belief in their ability to parent effectively significantly influences their behavior and motivation. In this context, heavy work burdens, stress, and prevailing social norms severely hinder parents' ability to provide emotional support to their children. This neglectful behavior, rooted in

ecological and self-efficacy challenges, exacerbates the emotional isolation of children, with serious implications for their social and psychological well-being.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Child abuse is rampant phenomenon in the plantation sector. There are several factors influencing the child abuse in estate sector. According to that one major highlight is, most of the child abuse occurring within the family and by the family members or neighbours. The structure of the infrastructure provides a conducive environment for sexual offenders, but parents have not effectively fulfilled their responsibilities to protect their children. The absence of both parents during the day contribute to the risk of child protection, increasing vulnerability to sexual abuse. Substance abuse among estate workers further exacerbates the prevalence of child abuse. Due to unaware of children's rights and sexual education caused various forms of abuse. Furthermore, the research highlighted a significant gap in the knowledge of estate workers regarding the criminal justice system. Moreover, mothers leave their children alone at home during working hours, unintentionally exposing them to the risk of sexual abuse. Additionally, limited access to government services in the estate sector and weak engagement with relevant agencies contribute to significant service delivery gaps. The research highlights the urgent need for interventions to address alcohol-related harm, including enhanced family support, improved recreational facilities, and preventive measures to safeguard children. Additionally, the study notes that child abuse is prevalent in families grappling with multiple stressors, particularly poverty. In order to reduce the issue,

In order to reduce the child related issue in plantation community, highly recommend to enhance family incomes of tea estate workers, reform educational systems, provide affordable childcare, enforce child labor laws, and raise awareness regarding safety and rights. Government financial support is crucial for improving housing conditions, expanding agricultural production to increase family income for educational expenses, and providing comprehensive training for teachers. Additionally, government interventions and the establishment of coordination between agencies, non-governmental organizations, and stakeholders in the tea industry are vital to alleviating the challenges faced by children in Sri Lanka's tea plantations.

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