

Life Under Milk Wood

Women Workers in Rubber Plantations An Overview



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women's Education and research Centre

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Foreword

Women workers on rubber plantations still remain almost unrecognised in Sri Lanka's working class history. Despite a strong Left movement in Kalutara and Galle districts where much of the rubber plantations are concentrated, rubber plantation workers have not received the attention they deserve even from groups sympathetic to the workers' cause. While the public is not informed of the plight of rubber workers, tea workers have been very much in the news for a long time. When we planned this research project, we presumed that there would be very specific working class problems in the rubber estates. We also thought that there would be some similarities to the tea plantation labour in the patterns of labour recruitment and the labour control systems. For example, in both tea and rubber plantations employment patterns and labour processes were known to have lowered the relative cost of labour in the production process.

Interestingly, the rubber sector was not politicised, as was the tea sector, in the wake of the disenfranchisement of its workers and the subsequent discriminatory policies towards plantation labour. Tea was also a favoured subject for the economists as well as the state because of its relatively high foreign exchange earning capacity. Hence rubber plantation labour remained insignificant in national politics and therefore largely unresearched. A unique aspects of the rubber sector is the diversity of ethnic composition of workers. Sinhala village labour and South Indian Tamil labour co-existed in the rubber plantation areas without the usual ethnic tension which characterised the larger political process in the country.

Against such a backdrop, we consider the present research important, within the broad perspective of labour since it focuses attention on hitherto neglected community of working class men and women. The research also seeks to identify gender specific conditions of work that are specific to women plantation workers. In fact what makes this research even more important is the fact that this is one of the few studies carried out on women workers in rubber plantations.

Prior to publishing this research, WERC arranged a seminar where Dr. Uyangoda presented his findings. There were many enthusiasts despite the fact that it failed to attract decisions makers at the level of the state and funding agencies. As is the practice of WERC, this research was carried out primarily with a view to launch an action oriented programme towards alleviating at least some of the problems faced by the women and men workers in rubber plantations. We hope to alert the state and invite the attention of policy makers towards some imancipatory policy and legislation.

One of the first principles in any collective work is the cooperation and coordination among intellectual workers in a spirit of commitment. Dr. Uyangoda, the main researcher, and the two research assistants, Padma Dassanayake and Padma Kodituwakku, have done their utmost towards successfully completing this research. Delay there had been, but that was unavoidable. We take this opportunity to thank them all and Miss Malkanthi Liyanage who helped Dr. Uyangoda to tabulate the data.

Dr. Selvy Thiruchandran

Director WERC

The Setting

The field survey for this study was carried out in March -October, 1992 in seven locations in the Kalutara district.

The objective of the study was to identify the working conditions and problems of women workers in the rubber plantations.

Although there is an extensive body of literature on the plantation economy of Sri Lanka as well as on the plantation labour in general, studies on the status of women workers on the plantations are comparatively new (SLFI: 1979; Kurien: 1982 and 1989)¹. Meanwhile, almost all such studies are concentrated on the tea plantation sector.

The relative neglect by researchers of the female labour in rubber plantations is perhaps due to the fact that Sri Lanka's plantation sector is readily identified with the up country tea economy. Rubber has been a progressively declining plantation crop. Even in the trade union and political spheres, tea plantation sector continues to maintain a dominant presence.

Introduced as a plantation crop in 1876, rubber in Sri Lanka is presently grown in five districts in the Wet Zone: Kalutara, Galle, Ratnapura, Kegalle and Matara.

Rubber Plantation Labour

The employment of both male and female labour is a practice present in the rubber plantations too. Similarly, rubber plantation labour consists of both Sinhala and Tamil workers.

The history of employing Tamil workers in rubber plantations goes as far back as the beginning of rubber industry in Sri Lanka. When rubber was introduced as a plantation crop in the first decade of this century, Tamil labour, brought from South India, had already been employed in tea plantations. When tea planters turned to rubber after the decline of tea prices at the turn of the century, they already had a reserve of Tamil plantation labour. Once the Tamil workers were

¹ Among the literature on the plantation labour are D. Wesumperuma, W. Gooneratne and N.L. Fernando (ed.), (1985), *Labour Absorption in the Plantation Sector*, Colombo: Sri Lanka Foundation; W. Gooneratne and D. Wesumperuma (ed.), (1984), *Plantation Agriculture in Sri Lanka, Issues in Employment and Development*, Bangkok: ILO; Rachel Kurian, 1982, *women workers inn the Sri Lankan Plantation Sector, An Historical and contemporary Analysis*; Geneva: ILO.

shifted to newly established rubber estates, the same labour regimes as in the tea plantations were replicated. Provision of accommodation in the estates in 'line rooms', the *kangani* system of labour recruitment and control, low wages, the absence of mobility, and the isolation of workers from the village Sinhalese community--all these elements of maintaining low-cost labour were present in the rubber plantation regime too from the very inception of the industry.

If the tea plantations primarily relied on resident Tamil labour, the employment of Sinhalese village labour too on a somewhat extensive scale is a feature specific to rubber and coconut plantations. In the case of rubber, this is due to a number of reasons. Firstly, demand for seasonal and irregular labour is a feature in rubber, although rubber is also a labour intensive plantation crop. While tapping is not always regular particularly in rainy months, other manual work as weeding, fertilizing and draining is also not as rigorous and frequent as in tea. Therefore, rubber planters opted for a small resident work force, who would function as the core of the plantation labour and be supplemented by irregular or seasonal labour recruited during peak months.

Secondly, the location of rubber plantations in the low country districts, near Sinhalese villages, enabled the planters to recruit the supplementary labour from among the rural peasantry.² Seasonal employment in rubber plantations also provided a supplementary source of income to landless or poor peasants. Although many poor rural peasants living in proximity to rubber plantations have now become regular workers--mostly as tappers--in estates, thereby becoming a rural proletariat, the initial impetus for peasants to turn to seasonal wage labour was the need for a secondary source of monetary income.

Thirdly, a factor that has a bearing on much recent tendency for village labour--both male and female--to opt for employment in rubber plantations is the prevalence of rubber small holdings amidst agrarian village economies. As Snodgrass observes, "from the early days of the industry in Ceylon, smallholders played a significant role", constituting 21 percent of the island's rubber acreage (Snodgrass, 1966:42)¹. By the 1980s, their share of total acreage under rubber went up to 72 percent, reducing the estate sector to a mere 28 percent. The labour employed in smallholder rubber is almost totally recruited from among the Sinhalese villagers, with the result that the practice of rubber

² Snodgrass (1966:42) also notes the "location of good rubber land closer to the bulk of the peasant population than tea."

tapping became prevalent among the village peasantry. These peasants are in a way a trained reserve army of labour for the bigger plantations to employ side by side with small contingents of resident Tamil workers.

There is a fourth reason for the progressive increase of Sinhalese village labour in the rubber estate sector. The resident labour entails cost of maintenance on the part of the owners, because of the need to provide housing. With the uncertainty of prices and profits in the recent past, capital expenditure on the maintenance of labour in the form of providing housing has been minimal, with the result that either the existing houses--line rooms--are not repaired at all, or no new houses built. The employment of village labour does not entail this particular item of production cost.

At the early stages of rubber, South Indian workers were largely employed as resident workers. Subsequently, however, village labour too began to be recruited, primarily for tapping work. In the low country districts where the rural economy remained rather underdeveloped, the landless and poor peasants constituted a reserve army for labour for the rubber plantations.

There are two categories of labour employed in these plantations. The first is the labour resident in the estates, who are primarily of Tamil in ethnic origin. The other is Sinhalese workers, recruited from the nearby villages. This is a general tendency prevailing in the labour process of all rubber plantations in Sri Lanka.

A feature in the composition of rubber plantation labour in the recent past has been the increase in the recruitment of village labour and gradual decrease in the numbers of resident Tamil workers. The expansion of the small-holder rubber cultivation, the government policy to recruit more village labour after the nationalization of large estates, and relatively low cost in maintaining village-based labour as opposed to resident labour are main reasons for this tendency.

Samples

For the present study, seven rubber estates were selected from the Kalutara district. These were medium sized plantations.

The names of the estates and the numbers of household samples surveyed in each plantation unit are given in the following table.

Location	Estate resident	Village resident
Pimbura	15 households	19 households
Mohamadiya	27	16
Kallumale	9	-
Daniston	9	-
Kallumale	-	6
Kumbaduwa	-	9
Katukelle	-	11

Village-Based Female Workers.

Pimbura estate.

Pimbura estate has a non-resident segment of its work force; these workers are recruited from nearby villages. In this study, a sample of 19 non-resident worker households was surveyed.

The workers live in the village Kekulandala which comes under the Grama Niladari Division of 829 B Kekulandala. This village is situated about one and a half kilometers from Agalawatta town. The worker community in the village is mostly Sinhalese with a few Tamil and Muslim families. Some families have been living in the village for quite some time while some others have been recently settled under various settlement schemes. There are a few families who had settled down in Kekulandala after they lost their houses due to natural calamities like earthslips.

Kekulandala is an ethnically mixed-village. The ethnic composition of its population is as follows:

Sinhalese	739
Tamils	360
Muslims	08
Total	1107

Source: Grama Niladari Report, 1972.

Socio-Economic Background of the Village: Land Ownership and Occupation

The majority of the population in Kekulandala consists of small-holder villagers, which is a general characteristic of the entire rural interior of the Kalutara District. In the village, most of the households own or occupy small plots of land of below 1/2 acre in size. An important characteristic of the land ownership/occupation pattern in this village is the absolute landlessness of all Tamil worker families

resident in the village. The following table provides data on land occupation among Sinhalese village households in Kekulandala.

Occupation of Land (in the village)

Extent	No of families
1/4 acre	120
1/2 acre	70
1 acre	20
2 acres	16
3 acres	02
no land	03

Occupation of Land (in the sample)

No land	02	
Less than 1/4 acre	10	
Between 1/4 - 1/2 acre		05
Between 1/2 - 1 acre	02	

The fact that the villagers occupy small plots of land does not mean that the land is a regular source of income. The land provides only occasional food as the trees grown are mostly jack-fruit, banana and coconut. No commercial crops are grown in these small plots of land which are primarily used to build dwelling houses.

The Sinhalese plantation workers resident in the village are not small farmer peasants, but landless peasants of the category of the rural poor. Paddy cultivation is not their occupation; only a few of them cultivate paddy land on a share-cropping basis. In the sample, only two families reported to cultivating paddy land. The husband in one family, who is also a worker in the estate, share-crops 12 *kurunis* of paddy land. In the other family, the extent of paddy land is 10 *kurunis*. There was another family which cultivates vegetables on a small plot of land, also on the share-cropping basis. Judging by the sample, we may even say that these village-based workers are the rural proletariat, who do not own economically viable means of production in the village. Thus, the villagers who are recruited as plantation workers as a rule come from the poorest of the rural poor, and it is the employment in the plantation, not the village economy, that constitutes their primary source of income.

It is often the rural poverty that characterizes the socio-economic background of estate workers, who come from near by villages. Those who have education or other avenues for better employment always tend to shun rubber tapping work. In the social ideology of rural Sinhalese culture, rubber tapping is not an employment that attaches any self-esteem to life. When rubber estates began to recruit village labour, it has often been the case that the poorest of the poor in the rural society first opted for such employment.

The fact that 7 households in the sample were *Janasaviya* recipients and 17 were food stamp holders testify to the very poor economic status of these worker families resident in the village.

Housing and Land

One redeeming feature observed in Kekulandala, however, was the relatively improved status of housing among the villagers. It was also noticed that in Kekulandala, conditions of housing were comparatively better than in all other samples surveyed in this study.

Types of housing on the village could be categorised as follows:

Permanent	344
Semi permanent	09
Worker housing	60
Temporary	01

In the sample of 19 households, the status of housing is indicated in the following table:

Permanent	09
Semi-permanent	06
Worker housing	03
Temporary	01

The reason for better housing conditions in this village is the provision of state support to the villagers to build or improve their houses. Most of the permanent houses have been recently constructed with the monetary and material assistance of the state. Under the village re-awakening programme of the government, this housing support was provided in the form of Rs 7,500.00 and 1000 roof-tiles for each

household. The village built under this programme is known as the 'Swarnarekha gama re-awakened village.' These new houses usually consist of 2 rooms, a veranda and a kitchen area. Most households had access to tap water and electricity facilities. Many had even acquired a few household electrical goods.

In contrast, the conditions in the worker housing are, poor and the buildings are in a state of dilapidation. These worker houses are very much of the nature of estate line rooms, although they are not designated as line rooms.

Employment Pattern in the Households

In the sample, all women worked as rubber tappers in the estate while most men were engaged in other activities outside the estate. Only two men, husbands of working women, reported to work in the estate. The following table provides data on employment pattern among working men and women in the sample.

Employment Pattern

Employment	Women	Men
Estate labour	19	02
Casual Labour	-	06
Building worker	-	04
Garment factory worker	02	01
Carpenter	-	01
Share-cropper	-	03
Driver	-	01
Govt. employee	-	01

The two women employed as garment factory workers are young women whose mothers are estate labourers.

Household Income

The income of these worker families is primarily dependent on the women's employment as labourers in the estate. While all men are also employed, their jobs as well as income earning capacity are irregular and uncertain. This makes working woman's earnings the key source of family income and it also places her at the center of family survival.

Even then, the woman's monthly earning capacity is dependent on the number of days she would work. Since these worker-women are paid on a daily basis, their monthly earnings are subject to regular variations. Their daily wage rate was Rs.59/32 at the time of this survey. On some days, rubber tappers can work two sessions and for such days they were paid Rs 7. 00 for each extra kilo of latex they tapped.

Data was collected on the income of each household in the sample for the month May-June 1992. The following table contains income figures generated by all working members of the households. In computing monthly earnings of workers employed in the estate, only the take home income--that is, earnings minus deductions for EPF, union membership, salary particulars sheet and the stamp--is indicated in the table.¹

Household	Wife	Husband	Children	Total
01	1390. 32	1500. 00	---	2890. 32
02	745. 16	---	---	745. 16
03	805. 60	---	525. 00	320. 60
04	598. 52	---	---	598. 52
05	700. 40	900. 00	---	1600. 40
06	1263. 11	750. 00	1000. 00	3013. 11
07	1508. 36	3125. 00	---	4633. 36
08	1324. 96	1000. 00	---	2324. 96
09	777. 46	---	---	777. 76
10	708. 10	---	---	708. 10

¹ There is always a difference between the monthly gross salary and the take-home salary. Ten percent of the month's earnings of the worker is deducted for the EPF. The trade union membership fee is usually Rs. 15.00 and in some instances Rs. 10.00. A further Rs. 10.00 is deducted for the welfare fund. A deduction of Rs. 2.00 from each worker is made for the salary particulars sheet and the stamp.

11	753. 60	---	---	753. 60
12	1324. 30	1413. 78		2737. 78
13	833. 00	---	---	833. 00
14	975. 80	764. 84	---	1740. 64
15	1150. 46	2000. 00	500. 00	3650. 46
16	564. 00	750. 00	750. 00	1064. 00
17	721. 00	1000. 00	1500. 00	3221. 00
18	1286. 50	750. 00	---	2036. 50
19	1061. 60	1500. 00	---	2561. 60

As this table indicates, women are the consistent and regular income earners in the families surveyed. Income of husbands is either non-existent or irregular. The round figures of monthly income reported by husbands are approximate income, earned as casual workers (the actual income may vary from the figures given).

In six households in the table, women are the only income earners and the survival of the entire family depends on the working and earning capacity of the woman.

Compared with other samples, however, this sample indicates a slightly better income status for the families. Similarly, the variation of income levels in the sample is also more pronounced than in other samples.

Income levels and variations in the Sample

Level of income	No. of families
0 - 500	-
501 - 1000	6
1001 - 1500	2
1501 - 2000	2
2001 - 2500	2
over 2500	7

The presence of seven families with a monthly income of over Rs. 2,500. 00 is explained by two factors. Firstly, if husband's income exceeds Rs. 1500. 00 a month, the total income of the family can go up, provided that the husbands are skilled workers, like carpenters or construction workers, whose earning capacity is relatively higher. Secondly, if grown up children bring an income to the family, the total income of the household can positively rise only if these children are employed outside the estate, in regular or semi-regular employment. In

the two households where children have reported an income of Rs. 1,500. 00 and Rs. 1, 000. 00, they are employed in garment factories.

The implication of the above observation is an economic indictment against the plantation labour regime. If rubber plantation worker families were to enjoy a relatively better income generating capacity, at least one member of the family should escape from the estate and work elsewhere in a skilled labour or any other category.

Female-Headed Households

In this sample, there are three female-headed households. The survey has revealed that they represent the poorest of the poor in the entire sample. A brief account of their conditions of life is given below.

(i). Dharmawathie (35) separated from her husband ten years ago, because of his excessive drinking habits. Five years later, she started living with another, a watcher in the estate, and now she has separated from him too. Dharmawathie has three children, one daughter (16) and two sons (03 and 05 years). The youngest child is born out of her relationship with the watcher, who occasionally helps Dharmawathie financially. Otherwise, the sole income of the family comes from her employment as a rubber tapper. She has received an *udagama* house in Swarnarekagama. However, her monthly income, which depends on the number of days she works, is very low. For example, in April 1992, she had worked only 13 days. Her gross monthly salary was Rs. 752. 00. However, after deductions for salary advances, loan, EPf contributions etc., her take-home salary was a mere Rs. 298. 52.

This extremely poor economic status of Dharmawathie explains what the field researchers have observed: "Dharmawathie is a very thin person, looking almost sick. She appears to be acutely malnourished and does not seem to be taking adequate food." The researchers have also found that this family does not have a toilet; they use the neighbor's toilet. Although a pit is dug, Dharmawathie does not have money to construct the toilet.

(ii). Karunwathie (45) is living with her two younger children, a daughter (17) and son (12). Two elder daughters are married and live with their husbands. Her husband died in 1985. She began to work in this estate in 1977, and gave up in 1982 due to recurrent illness.

However, after husband's death, she started working again as a rubber tapper in 1986.

Karunawathie's family depends entirely on her earnings. Her total income in April, 1992 was Rs. 869. 00 and the take home salary Rs. 408. 10. She has to spend about Rs. 900. 00 a month for consumption needs. Her survival strategy is to pay in cash to the village shop whatever amount she can, leave the rest on credit. Therefore, her entire life is built on indebtedness.

Karunawathie's food habits are also determined by her family's low capacity to earn. She stated that she would never eat a breakfast; a cup of plain tea is her only morning meal. She would not eat anything else till she takes her lunch at about 3. 00 p.m. Invariably, she is physically weak. She suffers from regular headaches and chest pains.

(iii). Gunawathie (44), separated from her husband a few years ago, lives in an *udagama* house with her three children, two daughters (24 and 23), and son (14). She had earlier lived in another village, Bellana. After an earthslip destroyed her house, she has been helped by the government to obtain the present house. The state support consisted of Rs. 8500. 00 and 100 roof tiles. She is also a *janasaviya* recipient. She has bought a sewing machine for Rs. 6000. 00 with *janasaviya* support. She was till paying the loan for the machine in installments.

Gunawathie does not work more than 15 days a month, because of her heart ailment. Therefore, her total monthly earning would not exceed Rs. 750. 00. In April 1992, her take-home income was as low as Rs. 314. 24. She had worked in that month only 13 days. *Janasaviya* support had helped her a little. But after it ceased, she finds life difficult. In her *janasaviya* savings account, she has Rs. 2673. 00.

Poverty determines her food consumption habits. On the day she was interviewed for this survey, she had eaten bread and sugar for the breakfast; her lunch was boiled jack-fruits and a dry fish *curry*.

In addition to the heart problem, her eye sight is weak. Her eye had been damaged while working; a small piece of the rubber tree's skin had fallen on her eye while tapping. She has not been operated on the eye because of her weak physical condition.

Malnutrition and sickness go together in her life. She complains of regular headaches, dizziness, and pain in her hands. She travels to Colombo general hospital for treatment every month. Each

trip and medicine would cost her Rs. 150.00. Due to economic difficulties, she has not visited the Colombo hospital for two months.

Although with difficulties, Gunawathie has managed to educate her children. The elder daughter has passed her G.C.E. A/L. examination. But she stays at home, unemployed. The other children go to school.

Food and Nutrition

According to the Family Health Officer in the area, the level of nutrition among households in the Kekulandala Grama Niladari Division was ahead of the other Divisions in Agalawatte. In the sample also, as the visits to the houses and discussions with families indicated, their general status of nutrition was not as visibly low as in other samples. As the Family Health Officer, who claimed to monitor nutritional levels among children in the Grama Seva Division, reported, there had been only one child detected in July 1992 to be below the red line nutritional level.

It is however difficult to generalize this positive assessment of nutrition. The visible nutritional standard among elders as well as children in the three female-headed households in the sample was alarmingly low. In all the three households-- numbers 2, 4, 10 in the table above-- woman is the only income earner and the monthly income is low, Rs. 745. 00, 598. 52, and 708. 10 respectively. In fact, the three women in these families reported to skip their morning meal. B. D. Karunawathie of the household no. 10 stated that she would not usually take anything other than a cup of plain tea for her breakfast. All three women looked physically weak and frail.

Even in families where meals are consumed regularly, working women have the habit of taking along their breakfast-- which is usually bread or left-over rice from the previous day--to the rubber estate to have it around 10 a. m. The lunch is usually taken at home, after returning from work. There is no regular lunch time; it can be anytime between 2 .00 and 3. 30 in the afternoon. Generally, the woman cooks the family lunch and some would even cook for the dinner too at the same time to avoid double work. Women with grown up daughters reported that they helped in cooking. The dinner usually consisted of rice with a few curries. Dhal is a frequently prepared dish and green leaves too are often part of their meal; the consumption of

fish, meanwhile, is very irregular, sometimes once a week, and even once in two weeks. The main reason given for the infrequent consumption of fish is the difficulty to afford to buy it. Dry fish, which is eaten in rather small quantities, thus remains the main source of protein.

It was also observed that although these families live in the village, there is very little food available free on a regular basis. Jack-fruit, which is seasonal, and green leaves are the two main items available either free or at a low cost. Rice and vegetables are always bought from the market.

In order to improve the nutritional quality of food, the Women's Bureau has organized a nutrition training programme for women, with the help of the recently formed Women's Association in the village. In this programme, women have been advised to utilize more green leaves in their family meals and to cook in such a way as to preserve the vitamins and other nutrients in food.

State Support and Economic Survival

With regard to the economic survival of low-income families in the village, external help in the form of state welfare intervention has been major a source of support. The state support appears to have specifically halted the further deterioration of food and nutritional standards of the poor. In fact, seven families in the sample had received *janasaviya* support. All *janasaviya* recipient women pointed out that it helped them, to translate into English a commonly used expression, "to eat a little better."

There were also seventeen families in the sample with school-going children, thus being eligible to receive mid-day meal food stamps. Data on food-stamp support reveals that this has been a fairly significant and consistent item of family 'income.' Four families have received more than Rs. 100. 00, while 12 families have received between Rs. 50. 00 to 100. 00 a month.²

² The significance of mid-day meal food stamps in the family income, and its economic role as a 'family income' item is discussed elsewhere in this report.

Indebtedness

The level of indebtedness reported in this sample is not very high. In the case of resident estate workers, indebtedness is a regular feature, particularly because of the practice of obtaining food items and other consumer goods on credit. In this sample, only five families reported to have obtained credit over Rs. 500. 00 from the grocery shop during the month of this survey.

Obtaining loans from private sources at a high interest rate is however most common. For these loans, the usual interest rate is 20% a month. Twelve working women reported to have obtained loans from private money lenders, ranging from Rs. 200. 00 to 3, 000. 00. The most common reason given for obtaining these loans is family emergencies. Of these 12 women, eleven stated that the burden of re-paying the loan is on the woman.

It was observed that women played the key role in the economic management of the household, even in families where men worked. This, however, tends to place the woman in a somewhat precarious position. Family debts and credit are, almost as a rule, settled with the earnings of the woman. One of the first things the working woman would do when she collects her monthly earnings is to settle the dues with the village shop keeper for the credit purchases of food items. The remainder is then spent on re-paying loans. The largest share of the woman's monthly income is by then gone into these two items, and she is left with very little money.

Then, the cycle of credit and debts resumes.

The only hope that all these workers maintain to get out of the debt trap is the EPF, to which they are entitled after retirement.

Savings

A noteworthy feature in this sample, as compared with other samples, is the habit of saving among the majority of working women. There are two types of savings, the *Janasaviya* savings scheme and maintaining savings accounts with banks. Only one woman has a *seettu* saving, with a monthly contribution of Rs. 1000. 00.

Sixteen women maintained savings bank accounts, for which monthly installments are regularly deducted from the wages. Six of them contributed a sum of Rs. 100. 00 each month to the savings account while nine contributed Rs. 50. 00. One woman's monthly bank saving was Rs. 25. 00.

Health Facilities

Workers of the Pimbura estate, who were resident in the village, have access to health and medical facilities provided by the estate. The estate provides the services of a Medical officer, a family health worker, a welfare officer and a creche attendant.

However, these worker families tend to prefer private or government medical facilities, available outside the estate. The hospital closest to the village is the Pimbura Government Hospital. The villagers obtained the services of the Wettewa and Badureliya hospitals too. Maternity clinics were held monthly at the Pimbura hospital while children's clinics were conducted weekly. Programmes aimed at educating the mothers about nutrition, sanitation, family planning etc., too were conducted on clinic days.

Sanitation

A notable feature in the village Kekulandala as well is in the sample is better sanitary and hygienic conditions, maintained by the families. These standards are indeed considerably higher than those observed in the estate line-rooms. Unlike on the estate, the immediate environs of the houses in the village are well kept. Even the inside of the houses was nicely swept and dusted and the people wore clean clothing. The main reason for this visibly high level of sanitary and hygienic conditions is the state support that the villagers had received to build and improve their houses. Perhaps, this sample of the rural proletariat has managed to escape the working class culture of deprivation which characterizes the every-day life of neglected Tamil workers resident in the estate.

The most significant indicator of better sanitary standards observed among these worker households is the availability of

relatively satisfactory toilet facilities. Majority in the sample had permanent and newly built toilets, again demonstrating the importance of state support to improve living conditions. The following table gives data on the types of toilets in the sample.

Toilet facilities

Type of structure	No of families
Water sealed/ permanent	14
Temporary (pits)	02
Neighbour's toilet	03

This picture of toilet facilities in the village stands in sharp contrast to the estate resident labour, who generally have no toilet facilities at all.

One main reason that has contributed to the improvement of toilet facilities in the village is the *Janasaviya* welfare support. All *janasaviya* recipients in the sample have utilised a share of the state economic support to construct new toilets. This again indicates the importance of state intervention, in the form of welfare support, in raising the living standards of the rural poor.

The households surveyed used either tap water or well water and thus the availability of water was satisfactory as compared to that on the estate. Among the households surveyed 2 families had their own well, while 9 other families used their neighbors' well. Five families enjoyed tap water facilities and the other 2 families used the public well.

Why did Women Become Rubber Workers?

When asked the reason for becoming rubber workers in the estate, all women responded with a common answer: economic difficulties in the family. Although this answers itself is self-explanatory, what is nonetheless important is that ten of them had started their careers as workers after the marriage. In the absence of regular employment for men in the family and to assure consistent family income, women thus became wage labourers. The rubber estate

is there to absorb the female labour which the agrarian economy cannot gainfully employ.

Nine women had been working in the estate even before the marriage.

Conditions of Work

Conditions of work of rubber tapping women are generally harsh. Most women start their day around 4. 00 in the morning and leave home for work between 5. 30 to 6. 00. The workers walk every morning to the estate, which is a distance of 2 to 3 1/2 miles. After reporting to work at the muster, they have to walk again to their plots to tap rubber trees, in some instances about a mile. Some areas where they had to tap rubber could be even called as forest cover. There were instances when tappers had succumbed to death as a result of snake bites. Some times they had to walk nearly 2-3 miles carrying the collected latex, which was usually very heavy in aluminum baskets, to the factory. The terrain and topography of rubber estates are usually uneven, hilly and the foot paths being stony and rugged.

Rubber tappers are usually subject to a number of occupational hazards. If a worker fails to tap the required number of trees-- which can be between 200 to 300 trees, wages of half a day would be deducted. Rainy days are not counted as working days at all for the tappers, because they would not get any other alternative work. Even when it started raining while the trees being tapped, that work would not be counted either.

Trade Unions

The workers in this estate are unionised. All women in the sample are members of trade unions, although they are not particularly satisfied with the services available from their unions. Eleven women are members of the All Ceylon Estate Workers' Union while 8 are with the Sri Lanka Independent Estate Workers' Union. The women workers are represented on the union's committee by a female employee.

Voluntary Women's Organisations

Representatives of the Women's Bureau have visited this village to set up voluntary women's groups to encourage village women in saving and to advice them on nutrition. A women's welfare association was formed in November, 1991. Working women from both Sinhala and Tamil communities of the estate joined this association. Its membership is over 30. To raise funds, the association held a fair and collected Rs. 6000. 00. From this, 9 women were given loans of Rs. 500. 00 at a 5% interest, which is a very low rate compared with 20% charged by private money lenders. Every month, an installment of Rs. 100. 00 of the capital and the interest are recovered from the loan recipients.

Women' Bureau has also organised through this association training sessions for women on nutrition. Women were advised to use more green leaves in family meals and not to over-cook green leaves and vegetables.

There is also a Sarvodaya programme to encourage women in self-employment.

The overall impact of these programmes is not quite visible. Given the fact that low nutrition is a major problem among all villagers, and particularly among women, nutritional advice can bear results only if their economic standards are also improved.

The women, on the other hand, did not indicate any particular enthusiasm with these voluntary organizations. G. P. Somawathie, the most active member of trade unions as well as women's organizations commented: "It is very difficult to collect our women for this type of work. They are reluctant to participate. Even after much explaining, they are still ignorant. They do not even come to meetings. How can only a few women sustain an association? We once organised a fair. Women in our village did not know what a fair was. I had to explain to them. After much effort, only ten took part in the fair."

Estate-resident Tamil Workers

Pimbura Estate

Pimbura estate, managed by the State Plantation Corporation at the time of this study, is situated three miles off the Agalawatte town. The estate has two divisions; Pimbura covers 175 hectares of rubber while Dullella has 69 hectares. Sample for this survey was chosen to represent both divisions.

Pimbura plantation has a multi-ethnic work force, Tamil, Sinhalese and Muslim. The ethnic and religious composition of the work force is as follows:

Sinhalese Buddhists	- 20
Tamil Hindus	- 62
Muslims	- 02

Although the number of Sinhalese in the work force is twenty, all positions in the management and the estate office are occupied by the Sinhalese staff. All management and office staff members have passed the G.C.E Advance Level examination, thereby recording the highest educational standards in the entire work force in the estate.

Female Labour

In Pimbura estate, there are altogether 69 female workers employed. The vast majority of them are, engaged in rubber tapping and other physical labour, as indicated in the following table.

Composition of Female Labour

Category	Number
Office Staff	02
Health	03
Labour	64

Pimbura estate does not have resident Sinhalese workers. The Sinhalese labour is drawn from households in the neighboring villages; these workers report to work on a daily basis.

Sample:

In this survey, a sample of 15 households of resident estate workers was studied. Of them, thirteen were Tamil and two Muslim. In eleven households, both husband and wife worked as labourers in the same estate while the other three households were female headed. In the latter three, there were no male working members in the family.

Educational standards of the 15 women are given below:

Grade	No. of Women
No schooling	03
Grade 2	02
3	03
4	01
5	04
6	01
7	01

The educational standards of men in these households are also low. Only one man has studied up to G.C.E. Advance Level, and understandably he has not become a worker in the estate; he is a trader.

Even those workers who have attended school up to grade 3, 4 or 5 are unable to read or write. Many of them could only write their signature. Around 10% of the workers had not received any education at all.

At interviews, the working women generally attributed their status of being workers to their low educational standards. To quote the words of one woman interviewed: "We did not attend school. My parents did not want me to go to a school. That is why I am here tapping rubber." Another woman who had some schooling said: "I attended school only up to grade three. I can just write my name and signature. I was registered by my parents with the estate when I was fifteen years. Ever since I have been tapping rubber."

Economic Status of Plantation Women.

The workers of the estate were daily paid employees and their earnings fluctuated according to the changes in weather conditions. During the rainy season when there was no rubber tapping activity on the estate, they were usually engaged in other activities such as weeding, digging or cleaning the drains, spraying insecticides or weedicides etc.

There was no sex discrimination in engaging labour for this type of work. For work done on *poya* days and Sundays, the workers are paid one and a half times of their regular daily wage.

The number of hours worked varied according to the type of work done. For example, for rubber tapping five and a half hours of work is specified while it is 7 hours for other activities. Watchers required to work 12 hours.

The daily wage rate for a worker, both male and female, was Rs 57.60 and the wages are paid only for the number of days worked during a month. However, the net monthly income of workers is rather low. Even when both husband and wife work in the estate and with their overtime earnings, all households find it difficult to economically survive without falling into debt. Economic difficulties of parents are more pronounced in households where there are children attending school.

The workers are paid their monthly wages during the second week of the month. Before the wages are paid, the employees can obtain a salary advance of Rs 300/= from the following month's salary at the end of each month. Although the advance could be regarded as a concession given to the employees, it in no way helps the workers to find relief from their economic difficulties.

With regard to the workers' actual earnings, a number of factors contribute to their low income levels. The first is the nature of the work regime which does not allow at all any degree of occupational or economic upward mobility for workers. The rubber-tapping and other manual workers are at the lowest bottom of the occupational hierarchy in the estate; they are as a rule drawn from the poorest and uneducated segments of the labour force. The plantation regime is so rigid that these workers begin their career as manual workers and quit, retire or die after long years of service as mere manual workers.

Secondly, the contribution of children to the household income is either non-existent or negligible. The children of most of these

labourers are either unemployed or they have no other option but to become low-paid labourers themselves.

Thirdly, the monthly earnings of each household is determined by the number of days the workers actually work during a month. Particularly, rubber tapping is an occupation which is largely dependent on the mercy of the weather. In the rainy days as well as during periods of drought, rubber tapping activities are halted. Manual work other than rubber tapping—for example, weeding, factory work, applying fertilizer etc.—is given to a small number of workers. Even there too favoritism and manipulation by the labour overseers (*kankanis*) and the management plays a role in determining who should get preference.¹

Monthly Household Income

In order to draw a picture of the household income in the sample, the earnings of each household for the month March-April 1992 are recorded below. The figures indicate gross earnings, before deductions are made for salary advances, EPF contributions, trade union and other membership fees and deductions for festival advances.²

The following table indicates the gross monthly income (before deductions) of each household for the month March-April, 1992.

	Husband	Wife	Total
1	1541.40	1547.50	3088.90
2	1462.25	1583.29	3045.54
3	No husband	1816.44	1816.44
4	1569.66	1245.40	2815.06
5	No husband	1536.58	1536.58
6	No work	1286.84	1286.84
7	Unemployed	1730.99	1730.99
8	No husband	1706.30	1706.30
9	1500.00(trader)	930.60	2430.66

¹ These observations are generally applicable to all the samples of workers, both estate-resident and village-based, surveyed in this study.

² After these deductions are made, the actual take-home salary of each worker is reduced at least by Rs. 400-450 a month.

12	No contribution	759.00	
10	No contribution	924.60	924.60
11	No work	1372.04	
13	No contribution	926.60	
14	No contribution	979.20	2479.60
15	1553.00	926.60	

Note: The female workers of households 10 and 12 reported that their husbands make no contribution at all to the family income, since they use all their earnings for alcohol. Husbands of households 11 and 14 are casual workers whose meager earnings were spent on their own needs.

The above table indicates that women play a crucial economic role in the family. In 11 households, women are either the sole income earners, or their contribution is higher than that of men. Similarly, in all households, all women, unlike men, have worked and earned during the month. Has this situation enabled women to acquire a major economic decision-making role in the household? This question will be discussed later in this chapter.

Means of Extra Income

Households also have means of making extra earnings, although their contribution to the ultimate family income is not very significant.

For rubber-tapping workers, collection of scrap rubber (*ottapalu*, the latex dried up in the tree) gives a few additional rupees. When workers collect and hand over the scrap rubber to the factory, they are paid according to the quantity. And this earning is added up to their monthly wages. In the sample, 12 women reported to have made earnings, although very little, from scrap rubber. The following figures give an indication of the meagerness of this 'extra earning.'

Monthly Earnings from Scrap Rubber, March 1992

Household	Income (Rs.)	Household	Income
1	3.00		
2	7.00	8	10.00
3	10.00	9	8.00
5	1.00	10	3.00
6	1.00	11	3.00
7	16.00	12	1.00

The highest monthly income earned from scrap rubber is just Rs. 16.00.

Overtime : Working overtime on Sundays and public holidays is another means of earning extra income. If they work on Sundays, the wage for that day is 1 1/2 times of the normal wage. Six women in the sample reported to have worked overtime in March 1992, and their extra earnings are given below.

Overtime Earnings, March 1992

Household	Earning (Rs.)
1	108.00
5	89.00
6	70.20
7	100.80
8	120.00
11	108.00

Working overtime is the only fruitful means of earning an extra income. Even there, the amount that can be earned is not very significant.

Production Incentives

In the rubber tapping sector there are virtually no production incentives that can provide an extra income for workers. The only available incentive--if it can be called an 'incentive' at all--is the payment which the workers can receive if their daily production of latex exceeds the specified quantity, which is usually 4 or 5 kgs. a day, depending on the productivity of the rubber trees. This is called *vedi kiri deemanawa*, 'excess latex allowance.' Only three women in the sample reported to have received this 'incentive' for March 1992, and the amounts thus earned are Rs. 10.50, 14.43 and 3.50!

Animal Husbandry

Some families in the sample raise goats, pigs and poultry, but in a small scale. Goat milk and eggs are usually sold in the neighborhood and pigs sold to meat traders. Income received from this source is also not significant. In fact, raising animals has worsened the already bad health and hygienic conditions among these households who live in sub-human conditions in the line rooms, provided by the estate.

Earnings, Consumption and Household Budgets

Against the backdrop of low income earning, how do households manage their budgets? Consumption patterns and daily consumption expenditure of three households were monitored for a week and the results of the data suggest that there are two main survival strategies. First is the continuously low household budgetary allocation for food consumption, which, in turn, effects adversely on the nutritional standards of family members. The second is the resorting to credit for food and other consumer needs. In fact, food consumption is confined to the minimum. The regularly purchased food items are bread, rice, flour, coconut, spices, sugar, tea leaves and a few

vegetables. None of these families reported any expenditure on entertainment, indicating that this particular working class culture does not permit entertainment incurring expenditure.

Indebtedness

Low income compels households to obtain loans and credit, mostly from informal sources. As the interviews with the working women in the sample repeatedly revealed, indebtedness is the most readily available survival strategy for households whose monthly income falls far below their expenditure.

The majority of the women in the sample stated that due to severe economic hardships faced by them, they were forced to borrow money from private money lenders at high interest rates (usually 20 per cent a month) and very often they were forced to obtain their consumer goods on credit. Some have obtained loans from friends or relatives and pawned their jewellery.

Women and Decision Making

A notable feature in this sample is that women have a considerable degree of decision making power in the household. In instances where both husband and wife work in the estate, women go to the estate office to collect their wages. When questioned, they insisted that they would not hand over their earnings to the husband. They also emphasized that it is they who decide what to do with the money they have earned, and not the husband or any other male member of the family.

However, this decision making power of working women is fraught with a set of other problems. In a number of families, income earned by males is less than women's income. In four families, men do not contribute any money at all to the family income, and two of them just waste all their earnings on alcohol and gambling. Even in other instances, men contribute less than the women to the actual family budget. Thus, the decision making power of the woman operates in extremely harsh economic conditions. And often that power can be exercised not to enhance the quality of life, but to make decisions

regarding how to cut down on consumption expenditure and so on. In fact, many women would forego their own meals in order to feed children and male members of the family. Thus, the decision making power acquired by women in extremely poor conditions can make very little contribution to the general welfare of the family and to women's status of relative independence

Savings

The employees of the estate were contributors to the Employees Provident Fund. Their contribution was 10% while the employer's contribution was 15%. This, perhaps was the only saving that many workers can even dream of.

Apart from the EPF, a bank savings scheme is operated by the Plantations Corporation. A monthly sum of Rs. 25. 00 is deducted from the wages of each contributor for this scheme. Since this is a voluntary scheme, not all workers contributed to it. In the sample, seven families were members of this savings scheme.

Nutritional Level of the Families on the Estate.

The level of nutrition among the households is extremely poor. The survey revealed that the major portion of income of a household was utilized for consumption. One family confessed that they could not afford to have more than one meal a day and this seemed to be the pattern in many households. Most households had *rotti* or bread with or without a curry for breakfast. Most female workers who went for rubber tapping in the morning could not spare time to have breakfast since they had to report for work by 6.15. They worked in the field till 12.30 pm. When they returned home afterwards, they prepared their lunch. Thirteen women in the sample reported that they skipped lunch and drank only a cup of plain tea. Very often, the only meal the majority of the workers partook was dinner. Many female workers stated that since they do not eat anything substantial during the whole day, they would eagerly wait for the dinner.

The general pattern of the food habits of these families is that their meals are of very poor nutritional value. They usually buy the cheapest possible vegetables from the market. There again, they would prefer partially perished goods so as to save an extra cent. Green leafy vegetables could be found in abundance in the estate or surroundings. However, due to the lack of nutritional knowledge, they do not make use of these freely available and nutritional items.

The survey revealed that around 75% of the households did not consume a balanced breakfast or any breakfast at all. The dietary pattern of growing up children too was similar. A household would usually consume only one full meal a day and that too is mainly carbohydrate with no sources of protein or vitamins. The consumption of fish and meat was almost non-existent. Fish is brought home very occasionally, whenever mother or father in the family visit the town. Only two families reported to eat eggs, as they raised a few poultry.

Many women surveyed stated that their families would enjoy a 'good meal' at least twice a month, on the pay day and the salary advance day. It was observed in this sample that both husband and wife tend to consume liquor when they had money in hand.

Cooking habits too contribute to the low nutritional quality of their food. For example green leaves are cooked in hot fire and then fried in oil.

Housing

The workers resident in the estate live in line rooms provided by the estate. Usually they are twin houses, each unit having only one or two rooms and a half walled veranda. There is no kitchen unit attached to the house. The space inside the house is very limited and often families are too large to be accommodated in these tiny dwelling units.³

The houses are generally built with bricks. Although the roof is tiled and the floor cemented, these old and long-unrepaired buildings are in utterly dilapidated conditions. The walls, which are stained and not colour-washed for many years, are often cracked and the roofs leak during rain. Even doors, windows and the door and window frames are

3. These conditions of housing compares with the classical model of labour housing in the tea plantations

breaking apart. The general impression one gets is that the management has not bothered itself, for years, at all to look into the housing conditions of its resident workers. Houses are simply neglected and allowed to decay. The workers' houses are in fact the most neglected set of buildings in the entire estate.

Hygiene, Health, Water and Sanitation

The appallingly poor conditions of estate housing run parallel with the exceedingly poor hygienic conditions of the resident households. Either there are no drains for dirty water to flow, or even where there are drains, they are blocked, with stagnant water accumulating. This situation can be still worse with households that raise pigs, poultry and other animals. Many households are involved in animal husbandry and they rear goats, pigs and poultry. Since rearing of animals meant an additional cost by way of constructing a shed, they have often allowed animals inside their houses. The space that was woefully inadequate for the family members had to be shared with the animals. In those households, animal refuse can be seen lying in the compound as well as near the kitchen, attracting hordes of flies. The culture of absolute poverty and squalor does not seem to allow these working class families to be conscious of personal hygiene. Nor does the management appear to be concerned with the plight of their own workers.

This extremely unhygienic status of living of these rubber workers is re-inforced by the very nature of their occupation. When tapping rubber, the latex (milk) oozes out from the skin of the tree, and invariably it is sprinkled on the body and clothes of the tapper. Clothes sprayed with latex have a strong stench and both male and female workers, even when not working, could be seen wearing the same clothes they wear to work.

These workers are not trained in either personal hygiene or family health. The households do not appear to make much effort at keeping their environs clean. The garbage is as a habit dumped just outside the living quarters and thus the immediate surroundings of the house are totally polluted. The drains around the line rooms are blocked and they are free breeding grounds for mosquitoes and flies. The stench from the blocked drains is a very common and 'normal' feature in this

environment. Health officials of the estate appear to have turned a totally blind eye to this situation.⁴

Eight households (out of the 15 surveyed) did not enjoy proper sanitary facilities. Adults resorted to going to the nearby woods for lavatory purposes while the children used the garden. Almost all the households were ignorant of proper sanitary practices. For example, no one reported washing hands after going to the toilet.

The availability of tap water facilities is very limited on the estate. Only a very few households have access to tap water. Others used well water or water from a nearby canal. Their drinking water is never boiled and thus, they were extremely susceptible to water borne diseases.

Around 95% of the labourers chewed betel leaves while majority of the male labourers were addicted to alcohol-- *kasippu* or *toddy*-- and they were incurable smokers of *beedi*. It was a daily habit among the women too to consume alcohol in the evenings after work. The reason given for this practice was the fatigue due to hard work. This in a way is a part of the working class habits among these extremely poor and isolated plantation families.

A visit to the children's creche revealed that of the 19 children under the age of 5, many suffered from phlegm related respiratory disorders, cough and skin diseases. The creche attendant does not educate the children on proper health and sanitary habits and their conditions are very poor. This poor status of health can be observed to prevail among all worker families resident in the estate. The condition of pregnant mothers too, was very unsatisfactory. Most of them appeared to suffer from acute mal-nutrition and the number of still births has been very high.

There is a team of health officials to provide medical care to the estate employees-- a Medical Officer, a Family Health Worker, a Family Welfare Officer and a Maternity Worker. The medical officer is not on regular duty on the estate. Although he is to make himself available for four days a month, he visits the estate only once a month. The dispensary was for most part closed and the workers had great difficulty in obtaining medicines and drugs and they often had to travel to the nearby town or hospital to obtain medical treatment.

4. The official apathy to health, hygienic and living conditions of resident plantation worker families has been a regular feature throughout the history of plantation labour. Only a massive re-capitalization programme in the plantations, along with a general thrust towards raising welfare standards among worker families, could conceivably address this problem.

The Welfare Officer is a permanent and regular employee of the estate and her duties involved monitoring the status of health of the employees and supervising the line rooms to ensure that they are properly maintained. However, all visible evidence indicates that she has failed in performing her duty as a welfare officer.

The Family Health Officer visited the estate four or five times a month to inspect the pregnant mothers and conducted a clinic. Pregnant mothers were able to obtain *Triplosha*, vitamins and get themselves immunized. She educated and advised the sick on proper health habits. According to workers, this clinic was the only health unit that discharged a satisfactory service.

Creche Attendant

The creche had a total enrollment of 19 children. The creche attendant was educated up to G.C.E. Ordinary Level and has had an exposure to child care, participating in training programmes conducted by Sarvodaya. Of the 19 children enlisted at the creche, 18 were Tamil. Working mothers did not seem to be keen to make use of the creche facility. Only 3-4 children a day were sent to the creche by the mothers. The children who were brought to the creche were given 50 grams of *Triplosha* and vitamins. No meals were given to the children at the creche. The UNICEF has provided the creche with kitchen utensils although they were not made use of.

Workers' Organisations

Two trade unions are somewhat active in Pimbura estate. The more prominent of the two is the union connected to the United National Party which had a membership of around 75% of the labour force. The employee's monthly contribution to the union was Rs 15/=. Interviews with workers revealed that the union was not effective in solving the problems of its members and that the members had lost faith in the union.

The other union is affiliated to the Sri Lanka Freedom Party. It had a membership of around 25% of the work force. According to workers, this union too, had failed to redress the injustices faced by

them or obtain relief for their grievances. Many dissatisfied members stated that they would leave the union altogether.

Other Associations

The workers have formed a Funeral Assistance Society on the estate. The monthly contribution to the society was Rs 10/= and a household received Rs 500/= to conduct the funeral rites of a family member. Besides this, on the day of a funeral the employees had to work only half a day. Therefore, they were able to help the household of the deceased with the funeral and other arrangements. Some workers stated, with a sense of irony, that the only organisation that was making a useful contribution towards the welfare of its members was the Funeral Assistance Society.

The female workers of the estate have formed a Women's Association with a monthly membership contribution of Rs 2.50. This society was formed around 3 months prior to this study and thus the progress of the society could not be evaluated. This society has taken a decision to grant loans to members in need of immediate financial relief.

Besides these societies, there was also a religious society, which organised religious activities. They too collected contributions from workers. Many were devout Hindus, who believed in performing *poojas* and obtaining blessings of gods prior to undertaking any important task.

When asked their views regarding the privatisation of estates, most workers stated that their socio-economic standing might remain unaffected as a result. However, a few employees expressed fear that they might have to work harder.

Religious Beliefs

The Tamil workers in the sample were Hindus. They worship Pattini, Kali, Shiva and Skanda, the first two being female deities. The worship of dead ancestors is also widespread among these worker families

All Hindu workers in Pimbura participate in a mass religious festival on January 1, every year. The ceremony is held at the Kali temple. As stated by women interviewed, the primary objective of this ceremony is to obtain blessings of Goddess Kali so that they could "work through the year without any trouble."

The cult of Goddess Kali is also extended to the belief that the rubber factory of the state is inhabited by her. An annual festival, accompanied by an animal sacrificial ritual, is held at the factory premises to entreat Kali for workers' safety. The belief among workers is that if this ceremony is not held and Kali's blessings not obtained, accidents injuring workers inside the factory could not be avoided.

A specific religious practice among Hindu working women in the estate is the worship of fire god. Women decorate the fire-place in the kitchen to please the deity. The presence of the deity near the fire-place is represented symbolically by leaving the imprint of three fingers on the clay surface of the hearth.

Marriage

One notable feature of marriage practices among Tamil working families is that women are given in marriage by parents before they reach 20 years. Caste consideration are important in deciding marriage partners. The majority of women interviewed stated that their husbands were chosen by the parents. In these marriages, the husband is often the first cousin of the woman.

While endogamy persists, so does the dowry system. The dowry often consists of the gold necklace (*thella*) and other jewellery, clothes, kitchen-ware, and a few items of furniture.

Marriage outside the ethnic or caste community is a strict taboo among Tamil families. A few women have done so, yet with serious social consequences. M. Rasamma described her predicament, after marrying a man of lower caste status:

I got married on my own. My husband is from a low caste. My parents did not like it. So I married the man despite their objections. As a result, my parents refused to accept me. They won't even allow me to visit them. I am not permitted to visit them even when there is a wedding or a funeral. I am going

through a lot of hardships; but what else can I do? I have to look after my children without my parents' help.

M. Pushparani, who married the first cousin according to her parents' choice, had a different story to tell:

I was the only girl in the family. Therefore, my parents did not like me marrying an outsider. They got me married to my first cousin. Besides, they had promised my mother-in-law when I was very young that I would be given away to her son. After all, my parents had to fulfill their promise.

Among the few Muslim families too, inter-marriage is strictly tabooed. Basheer Umma, a Muslim working woman resident in the estate, had a romantic liaison with a Sinhalese youth. Her experience, in her own words, is as follows:

I was in love with a Sinhalese boy. But I couldn't marry him, because my parents objected. My boy friend had promised me that he would come to Islam after marrying me. But, my parents continued to oppose my choice. They began to harass me, as I was in love with this Sinhalese boy. Ultimately, he abandoned me, after making me pregnant. Now I have a child, without a father. What to do? Now I have no idea of getting married. I want only to look after my child. If I married the Sinhalese boy, my parents could have expelled me from my religion.

Mohamadiya Estate

Sample

Mohamadiya State Plantation is situated in Baduraliya, in the Agalawatte AGA Division and consists of three sub sectors, Mohamadiya North, Mohamadiya South and Pelanda. Mohamadiya estate has both rubber and tea plantations, the extent of rubber cultivation being 234 hectares and tea 211 hectares. Earlier, this estate had two factories to process tea and rubber; they were destroyed during political violence in 1989. Now, the processing of rubber is done at Pimbura estate, and therefore latex is daily transported to Pimbura.

Mohamadiya estate is a fairly large plantation, as compared to the other estates surveyed in this study. It has 350 resident households on Mohamadiya South, 500 on Mohamadiya North and another 500 on Mohamadiya Pelanda. For this study, 27 households were surveyed.

General Profile

The labour force of Mohamadiya estate is multi-ethnic and multi-religious, the majority being Tamil Hindus. There were very few Sinhala Buddhist and Muslim workers resident on the estate.

The majority of the labour population was engaged in rubber tapping and field activities, called *sillara weda*, which include weeding and other manual work. They worked on the basis of being paid according to the number of days worked. Many labourers stated that during the rainy season, there was no rubber tapping activity and therefore their monthly earnings fell sharply. As in other rubber plantations studied, in this estate too, monthly earnings of workers indicated seasonal variations, which as a rule disadvantaged the worker.

The daily wage paid to a worker was Rs 60.88 which was higher than at Pimbura estate, where it was Rs. 57. 00; in Daniston and Kallumale estates, the daily wage was still lower (Rs. 50/=). A worker was allowed to put in a maximum number of 25 days per month and for the work done on Sundays and holidays workers were paid one and a half day's wage. There was no sex discrimination in allocating work except for watchers. The number of hours a day specified for rubber tapping was 6 while for other activities it was 8.

For this survey, 27 women workers and their households were surveyed. All of them are ethnically Tamil and of South Indian origin. Living in Sinhalese areas for many years, most of them speak Sinhalese too. A slight Sinhalization process can be observed among women workers in the sense that many of them, in their casual dress, wear the attire of the Sinhalese women.

All the workers in the sample live in the estate, in line rooms. The estate does not levy a rent on housing. Houses are built in a row. These workers have no private property or land at all, except the jewellery of women. Only one household has a black and white television monitor, and naturally this particular family indicates a status of 'relative prosperity' amidst absolute poverty. Needless to say, employment in the estate as labourers is the only source of income of these households. If employment is sought outside the estate by men, they can become only casual labourers, often without regular work and therefore with uncertain income. For grown up children of these households too, the available employment opportunities are severely restricted. In the estate, they can obtain jobs as labourers, and outside as casual or temporary workers. This of course is not a situation specific to the workers in the Mohamadiya estate, but the common experience of all Tamil rubber plantation workers.

Employment Pattern

In the sample of 27 households, all women work in the estate, while men in some work outside or are unemployed. In a few families, children also work. The following table provides information on the employment of members of the households in the sample.

Both Husband and Wife employed in the estate	18
Wife in estate, husband elsewhere	03
Husband Unemployed	03
Female-headed family	03
Children employed	02

In the eighteen families of which both husband and wife work in the estate, women work as rubber tappers and men in other categories of labour (weeding, factory work, watcher etc.) In the three instances of husband working outside the estate, two work as domestic servants and one as a casual labourer. Of the three non-working husbands, two are ill and one is an alcoholic.

In the two households where grown-up children work, one child, a boy of eighteen years, works as a domestic servant. In the other family, two sons (24 and 20) work as tailoring assistants.

Monthly income of the elders in all households in the sample recorded a low earning capacity for workers. In the following table, monthly income of 15 households in the sample is given. These figures are not adjusted for usual deductions for salary and festival advances, trade union membership fee etc. The income figures include over-time and other extra earnings as well. After all deductions are made, the take home income is usually about 60% of the figures given in the table.

Household Income- June 1992

Household	Wife	Husband	Days (W)	(H)
01	961. 41	500. 00	17	
02	535. 08	----	13	
03	851. 97	----	20	
04	532. 03	1172. 11	10	23
05	816. 48	----	14	
06	834. 64	----	13	
07	269. 88	1021. 73	06	22
08	449. 84	n.a.	12	
09	895. 26	1104. 39	19	24
10	849. 40	500. 00	21	
11	851. 09	1429. 77	16	28
12	588. 90	----	10	
13	583. 88	----		10
14	897. 28	933. 81	14	14
15	1093.65	----	17	

* Note : W= Wife, H = Husband

The above data tell us an all too familiar story in rubber plantation families. Only one woman has obtained a monthly income exceeding one thousand rupees and only one woman has worked more

than 20 days a month. The average number of working days of men always exceeds that of women. In the two instances where husbands are casual workers outside the estate, their monthly contribution to family income is insignificant (In households no. 01 and 10, the husband's monthly income is given as Rs. 500. 00, and this is only an approximate figure. It can vary depending on the availability of work as casual labourers).

The low number of working days for this particular month (June) is primarily due to rainy weather, since rubber tapping is not done when it rains. The men have, however, worked more days than women, because in rainy days they are given other manual work, like work in the factory or weeding and yard work. Most rubber tapping women find no work at all during the rainy season. Only a very few would be given other manual work. In this particular instance, weather too works against women workers in rubber plantations!

The monthly income figures given above can be disaggregated to account for what may be termed as 'extra-income.' Let us disaggregate the income of two women (the income details of these two examples can be generalized to all others in the sample).

Household No. 03, K. Theyipani

Wages	Rs. 739.00	
Over-time	100. 00	
Scrap rubber	3. 00	
Extra	3. 75	
From last month	6. 22	Total Rs. 851. 97

Household No. 09, R. Apeli.

Wages	Rs. 650. 32	
Allowance	108. 00	
Excess latex	60. 00	
Scrap rubber	9. 00	
Over-time	59. 12	
From last month	8. 82	Total Rs. 895. 26

The experience of Theyipani and Apeli is not unique, but shared by all other women. Even if they work over-time, it does not add much to their monthly income. The collection of scrap rubber, an

opportunity available to rubber tapping workers, brings only a few rupees a month. Apeli has been able to collect more latex than the amount required from her, and that has added only Rs. 60. 00 to her monthly income. All this means that extra-earning opportunities for rubber workers are extremely limited and even when opportunities are available, their contribution to family income is insignificant. Hence the crucial importance of the number of regular working days a month and wages earned from it for the survival of these workers.

Children as Indirect Income Earners

Another notable facet of the economic status of workers observed in this survey is the contribution made by school-attending children to family income. School children are given a mid-day meal allowance by the government, and this welfare support is perhaps not a 'family earning' in the strict sense of the term. However, given the share of contribution it makes to the family's monthly monetary income, the school mid-day meal allowance can certainly be considered as 'income.' The following four examples illustrate the point.

(i). **N. Theivanni** (48 years) works as a rubber tapper. Her husband is a domestic servant, employed outside the estate, and he earns Rs. 500. 00 a month. Although her total earnings for June was Rs. 849. 40, her take-home salary, after deductions are made (and inclusive of a salary advance of Rs. 200. 00 which she had already received at the beginning of the month) is Rs. 570. 06. She has a 13 year old daughter who attends school. She has brought home Rs. Rs. 57. 00 of mid-day meal stamps. Then, the daughter's contribution to family income, as a school food-stamp receiver is almost 10% of Theivanni's take-home income of the month.

(ii). **R. Thangamma** (36) has five children. Three of them attend school. The elder child, a son of 14 years. has dropped out from school. Thangamma's take-home income in June was Rs. 593. 00. The value of food stamps, brought home by the three children, was Rs. 120. 00, which accounted for almost 20% of the contribution made by the mother.

(iii). **S. Malathi** (32) is the only working member of the family, as her husband has stopped going to work due to illness. She has three children, and the elder child, age 9, goes

to school. While her earnings for the month were Rs. 834. 64, the little daughter has brought home food stamps worth Rs. 48. 00.

(iv). **K. Kamala Devi** (37) and her husband work in the estate. Both of them had earned nearly Rs. 1800. 00 for June. Her 12 year old son has brought home from school food stamps worth of Rs. 60. 00.

What is significant in all these instances is the fact that the value of children's food stamp contribution far exceeds other avenues available to parents to make an extra-income. For example, a comparison of Kamala Devi's extra earnings from the estate with the child's contribution is startling.

Kamala Devi's extra earnings:

Scrap rubber	Rs. 9.00
Collecting latex in the afternoon	18.00
Over-time	17. 96
Total	34. 96
Child's contribution	60. 00

Income and Survival through Indebtedness

One of the most intriguing aspects of the life of low income families is their economic survival. As this survey indicated, in extremely poor conditions, with low and generally fixed monthly income, indebtedness is the greatest asset that assures survival of households. All households in the sample reported that every month, they obtained consumer goods on credit and credit had accumulated over time. When asked about the actual value of goods they obtained on credit for the previous month, the women gave approximate figures that either equalled or exceeded income levels. When the shop-keeper put pressure on them to pay off the credit, many of them obtained loans from private money lenders at a rather high interest rate of 20% a month. To pay back these loans, it is women, almost as a rule, who take the initiative; they simply pawn their jewellery.

The following table gives data on indebtedness among the 15 households whose monthly income figures are already given above.

Indebtedness, June 1992

Household	Credit to shop	Outstanding loan (from money lender)
01	1000.00	----
02	400.00	500.00
03	510.00	----
04	1800.00	1000.00
05	not recorded	
06	1500.00	3000.00
07	1500.00	600.00
08	1500.00	3000.00
09	1000.00	5000.00
10	800.00	900.00
11	1200.00	4700.00
12	900.00	----
13	500.00	500.00
14	1000.00	2000.00
15	1500.00	----

Women and Family Survival

A general observation made in this survey too is that women play the leading role in family survival. She is the key economic decision maker in the family due to a variety of reasons.

Firstly, in families where husband does not have regular employment or work, family survival revolves around the woman's earnings. This is particularly evident in families where men work outside the estate as casual or irregular labourers.

Secondly, even in instances where men work, their contribution to the family budget is irregular and uncertain, since the culture of extreme poverty prevalent among these working class communities has made most of these men gamblers and alcoholics.

Thirdly, women are the only members in the family who have some fixed assets, particularly jewellery. At times of family emergencies, pawning of women's jewellery provides the easiest way out. The experience of Thavamani, a 37 year old woman with three children, illustrates this point. She fell ill and therefore she could not work. To buy provisions from the shop and to pay for her medicine, she obtained Rs. 3000. 00 by pawning her jewellery. There are 12 women in the sample whose jewellery had been pawned at the time of this survey.

Level Of Education

As a rule, plantation workers are not educated. If they have received any school education, it is in most cases only up to grade five. Among the parents of this sample, 32 have had schooling up to grade five and 10 had no schooling at all.

Children and thier Education

What is still alarming among these families is the inability of children to receive education, despite the fact that all mothers expressed the desire to educate their children. Even with state support for text books of school children and for their mid-day meals, parents often find it difficult and sometimes economically impractical to enable children to receive a continuous education. What usually happens is that children, both male and female, are registered as labourers-in-waiting, when they are 12 - 15 years of age. Hoping to strengthen the family's income capacity, parents quit grown up children from school and send them to work, in all instances as labourers in the estate or elsewhere. A few young boys are working in Agalawatte and Matugama town as labourers in shops. Those who do not get employment in the estate are sent out as domestic servants.¹ If they are not sent to work, they are asked to stay at home, looking after younger children. Not a single family in this sample had a child educated up to grade eight.

¹ Tamil estate worker families have in the past and even now been the main source of domestic child labour among middle class families. They are usually sent to work as domestic servants at the age of ten.

The very high school drop out rate among estate children has a long-term implication, as far as the future of these worker families is concerned; it totally denies them any opportunity for social mobility. In the normal logic of upward social mobility of poor families, education has played a key role, as evidenced among some sections of Tamil plantation workers in the tea sector. But in the case of families whose children are compelled by circumstances to give up school education, all subsequent generations are condemned to follow their parent's occupational footsteps-- to become a labourer, to marry a labourer and to beget another generation of labourers.

Estate School

On November 30, 1992, the research team visited the estate school. Both Sinhala and Tamil children in the nearby villages as well as in the estate attend this school. Originally an estate school, it was taken over by the government in the 1970s. Instruction in this school is available in both Sinhala and Tamil media. There were 115 Sinhalese medium students and nearly 150 Tamil medium students. The teaching staff was nine, six for the Sinhalese stream and three for the Tamil stream. Classes were available only up to grade seven.

A unique feature of this school was that it actually operated as two separate schools, one for Sinhalese students and the other for Tamil students, although two sections are located in the same building. The two sections have two different principals. Discussions with teachers and students revealed that there was very little interaction among students of two ethnic communities. Interestingly, many Tamil students could speak Sinhalese and not the other way round.

In the Tamil section, all three teachers were Muslim males.

Discussions with teachers in the Sinhalese section also revealed that they did not encourage ethnic interaction in the school. In fact, they were ethnically prejudiced against Tamil students. These Sinhalese teachers, who had come from outside, did not appear to have had opportunities for ethnic interaction.

Savings

Given the low standard of earning among these workers, saving was not prevalent. The most common form of saving was the contribution to the Employee's Provident Fund. The share of employee contribution to the EPF was 10% of the gross monthly salary while the employer's share was 15%.

Although nearly half of the households interviewed reported to having bank savings accounts, in most cases their savings did not exceed two thousand rupees. In one rare and exceptional case, one household had a bank savings account with Rs 20,000.00. And this is also the household to possess the rare luxury item of a TV monitor.

Thirteen households reported to be having savings accounts with banks. Data on these savings accounts is indicated in the following table.

Savings in bank accounts

Household	Amounts (Rs.)
03	2,500.00
04	424.00
07	250.00
12	4,000.00
13	100.00
14	20,000.00
16	500.00
17	2,000.00
20	3,000.00
22	700.00
24	50.00
26	800.00
27	1,300.00

The informal arrangement of *seettu* is another mechanism of saving. Only eight women responded to be maintaining *seettu* accounts. Their monthly contribution to *seettu* was usually Rs. 100. 00, and in some cases Rs. 200. 00

Extra Income - Animal Husbandry

There were a few households that engaged in raising animals as an extra income generating activity. Goats and poultry were raised by ten households in the sample. These are minor economic activities, in all instances the number of animals raised being not more than four or five. Goats gave milk and they were also sold for meat. Income from this activity was irregular and limited. Income earned from selling goats would usually be utilized to settle debts.

Housing

The living quarters of these worker families are line rooms with one room and a half-walled veranda. Since there is no separate kitchen, many use a part of the veranda as the kitchen. The floor is spread with a thin layer of cow dung, which is in accordance with Hindu agrarian practices of household hygiene. Only very few houses have cemented floors. The doors and windows are not strong, often fragile due to dilapidation. While some houses were asbestos-roofed, a few had tiled roofs.

A readily observable feature of all these 'line rooms' is their state of decay, due to neglect. Repairs do not seem to have been effected on these houses for years, which demonstrates the disregard of the management for the housing of their workers.

The condition of squalor seen in these living quarters are similar to general misery shared by resident workers in other estates. The limited space on these line rooms --in most cases just one room and a veranda--is the only living accomodation for usually large families. The already existing squalid conditions are only aggravated by the rearing of animals close to the living quarters. Due to lack of space for animals, goats can be seen roaming and sleeping inside the houses, bringing in dirt and flies. The immediate environment is seldom cleaned up and the garden is generally littered with waste and animal refuse. The blocked drains and clogged water around the houses are veritable breeding grounds for mosquitoes and flies.

If the furniture and household belongings are an indication of the standard of living, these families do not have anything that can

properly be called furniture. Furniture are often a few old or make-shift beds, chairs and tables.

The particular architecture of these estate line rooms does not provide a separate kitchen. Therefore, most women are using the front part of the house as the cooking area.

The point, however, is that neither the estate management nor the health authorities appear to have taken any initiative at all to alter the miserable living conditions of these worker families who seem to have resigned to a life of absolute poverty and degradation.

Nutrition

The standard of nutrition among these worker families too appeared to be rather low. The poor nutritional quality of food and the inadequacy of the quantity of food consumed are the two most visible reasons for low nutritional levels among elders as well as children. The breakfast is usually made up of the leftovers from the previous night's dinner; Sometimes, elders in the family would not eat any breakfast at all. Some mothers would prepare a scrap breakfast if there were children in the family. Most households do not consume a proper lunch either. Rice was cooked with 2 curries for dinner and that was often the only meal for the day. High prices of food items and the number of dependents in a family are cited as reasons for being unable to afford more than one meal a day. The only occasion the workers reported to enjoy a full meal is the pay day. Indeed, malnourished children, with obvious health problems, were a common sight in these households.

Cooking habits among women too were observed in this survey. Although many women mentioned that they could freely obtain green leaves from the estate, they did not appear to be particularly aware of the nutritional value of leaves. The excuse given for not regularly adding green leaves to their meals is that the women did not have time to collect them. Even when green leaves were cooked, they are often over-cooked.

The preparation of meals is done with an ethnic orientation, prevalent in the Tamil culture. Gingerly oil is widely used in cooking; *ittly* and *thosai* made of Uludu flour and the gravy-soup known as *rasam* indicate their ethnic culinary culture.

Health

The status of poor health among all workers and their children was similar to that on other estates surveyed. Among children, who are most visible victims of malnutrition, phlegmatic disorders and skin diseases are prevalent. Most parents appear to neglect such diseases among children. Pregnant mothers are also visible victims of malnutrition and poor health.

A Medical Officer, a Welfare Officer and a Family Health Worker comprised a team of officers assigned to provide medical and health facilities to the families living in the estate. The services of the medical officer and the dispensary were to be made available daily and the Doctor was employed on a permanent basis. The workers, however, expressed deep dissatisfaction with the services provided by the medical officer. Many stated that they had to pay for the drugs or otherwise their illnesses were not properly attended to by him.

The survey further revealed that the Welfare Officer was only following the example of the medical officer. She too neglected her duty towards the workers and their families. Workers complained that the health officer did not visit the line rooms to inspect health and sanitary standards. She, according to workers, never inquired about their needs or gave guidance or advice to the sick or pregnant mothers. Neither did she educate the children with proper sanitary practices or ensure the facilities available at the creche.

In contrast, workers are satisfied with the services provided by the Family Health Officer. Although there was no maternity home on the estate, a maternity clinic and a children's clinic were conducted monthly. Distribution of *Tripsha* and vitamins among pregnant mothers and immunization of children were conducted at this clinic.

Water and Sanitation

The absence of toilet facilities for the vast majority of the households is one major feature of the poor sanitary conditions, observable in this estate. Of the 27 households surveyed, only 2 had toilets and those toilets were also constructed by the workers themselves. In the absence of toilets, men, women and children use the garden behind line rooms as open toilets.

The supply of water varied in different sectors of the estate. Residents on Mohamadiya South enjoyed tap water facilities while on Mohamadiya North some had tap water; the others drew water from the canal. On Pelanda, the availability of water was unsatisfactory with one well to meet the total water requirement.

Creche

There are 3 creches on this estate, one for each sector, run by attendants who have not been trained for the job.

When the researchers visited the creche at the Pelanda division of the Mohamadiya estate, there was not a single child in the creche. The creche attendant, a young female worker, was there looking after the building. Inquired as to the absence of children, the attendant's explanation was that the children were taken to the health clinic by their mothers. But, some mothers, spoken to subsequently, gave a different explanation; they do not leave their children at the creche at all. One reason is that these worker-mothers were not properly educated on the need of creche facilities and therefore they did not appreciate the utility of a creche. A second, more practical reason given by some mothers is that the creche is located so far away from their line rooms and the work place that bringing a child to the creche every morning is cumbersome and adds a few more miles of walking to their routine.

Some workers even alleged that the creche attendant and the welfare worker--both were women--misappropriated *triposha* and vitamins sent for children. True or not, this allegation demonstrated their mistrust of health-workers.

The creche in the Pelanda division has a new building, constructed in 1990 with the aid of an NGO called MTIP.² The surroundings, including the kitchen, were quite clean. The UNICEF has provided plastic cups and plates.

In Mohamadiya North division, a line room is turned into a make-shift creche and its conditions were exceedingly poor. The research team visited the creche on November 30, 1992. There were three children, not dressed at all, in the creche that morning. The creche attendant was a 42 year old Tamil working woman, who had no training

2. This information contains in a placque erected in front of the building. But the placque does not describe what the acronym MTIP stood for.

at all on creche attendance. The entire creche--which was actually a line room--was 12' x 8' in size. It had earlier been used to store workers' tools and implements. It is also a part of a row of houses in a state of decay. When the researchers visited the creche, they found it excessively hot inside the tin-roofed and dark room that was the creche. According to workers, because of the heat inside, children disliked to be in the creche. They also stated that the old and unstable roof --this condition of the roof was very obvious --leaked when it rained. The walls of the creche were dark and murky, and the inside was full of smoke coming from adjacent houses. Even elementary facilities for children were absent --there were no mats, no toys, nor furniture. It was just a place where children were kept on the bare floor. The entire 'creche' consisted of four unclean walls and a hot tin roof and nothing else. The UNICEF had provided the creche some toys and plastic cups and plates, but they are not being used. A male worker told the researchers that the welfare officer --a woman--visited the creche every morning, but did not do any thing except shouting at the children!

Trade Unions.

All workers surveyed in this sample were members of unions and every month the membership fee was deducted from their wages. All workers failed to identify the name of their union. Their relationship with the union is just two fold: firstly, they know that the union's membership fee is deducted every month from their earnings; secondly the union representative called *thalavar* occasionally visits them. Workers are thoroughly dissatisfied with trade unions because they feel that unions have not done anything to settle their grievances.

Most households have obtained the membership of a funeral assistance society. There are two such societies in Mohamadiya estate. One society offers its members at a family funeral a financial assistance of Rs. 500. 00 and the other Rs. 1000. 00.

Village-based Working Women in Rubber Plantations:

I. Kallumale. Kumbaduva and Katukelle

Kallumale Estate

Kallumale rubber plantation was earlier a part of the Mohammadiya estate. When the Mohammadiya estate was taken over by the government, the section of the plantation that the original owner was allowed to retain is now known as the Kallumale estate. One hundred and fifty acres in extent, Kallumale has a staff of 35. Majority of workers in this estate are Tamils. There are 6 Sinhalese working women and they reside in the village Maragahadeniya.

Kumbaduva Estate

This estate was previously owned by the Hunani Estates Ltd. Presently it is owned by a private individual. The estate is of 74 acres in extent. Rubber is planted in 70 acres while the remaining 4 acres are paddy land. There is a small factory inside the estate for the processing of rubber sheets. The labour force is 30 of whom 13 are women.

For this study, 9 working women, who reside in Kumbaduwa village were surveyed.

Katukelle Estate

Ninety eight acres in extent, this estate is owned by Nunani Estates Ltd. Rubber is planted in 90 acres and in the rest paddy is grown. Of the ninety acres, 30 are being re-planted. Only 45 acres of rubber are in the productive status. The estate has a rubber sheet processing factory. The labour force is 25, all of whom are Sinhalese. They live in nearby villages. Eleven working women were surveyed for this study.

In the following section, the survey results covering all 26 working women in the three estates are analysed. Although they work

in three separate estates, there are similarities in the context of their work. All three estates are privately owned medium-sized plantations. And all women reside in nearby villages and are from very similar socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. The survey data received from them indicate that their status and problems as working women are almost identical.

The General Background

The age distribution among the 26 women workers is as follows:

Age	No. of Women
26 - 30 yrs.	04
31 - 35	03
36 - 40	05
42 - 45	04
46 - 50	03
51 - 55	06
56 - 60	01

Except one worker who is Sinhalese Catholic, all others are Sinhalese Buddhists.

A common factor among all these working women is that they come from an extremely poor socio-economic background. The fact that 25 of these families received *janasaviya* support is an indication of their status of poverty. Even the only family which did not get *janasaviya* at the time of this survey was earlier receiving it until the support was terminated when one daughter went to the Middle East for employment.

The background of these 26 families also falls within the general pattern among all villagers who work in rubber plantations as workers; they are drawn from the rural poor who have no other means of income or employment opportunities. Even when they have opportunities, they are secondary to the employment on the estate. For example, there are ten families the male members of which engaged themselves in paddy cultivation. These farmers are share-croppers who cultivate small plots of paddy land, generally less than 1/2 acre in size.

Of the 26 households surveyed, 5 are female-headed. Of these five women, one remains unmarried and she looks after her 80 years old father; there are no other female members in her household. Three women are deserted by their husbands and the other is a widow.

Another common feature among these women workers is that they have started working in the rubber estates, after their families faced economic difficulties after marriage. For example, of 11 women surveyed in Katukelle, 9 started working in the estate after marriage. The estate is obviously the only source of employment in a village which remains starkly under-developed.

Land and Housing Conditions

The villagers are generally small-holders; yet the majority of them occupy land which belongs to the government. They are in fact landless villagers who have become squatters. Recently, the government has granted them permits to occupy the land. The following table indicates the extent of land occupied by the 26 families.

Extent (acres)	No. of families
2 1/2	1
1	9
3/4	1
1/2	4
1/4	8
1/8	1
no land	1

Of the 24 families who possess land, only 3 derive some income from the land; they have rubber trees planted in their plots.

Although the 26 working women surveyed reside in the village, they are not necessarily farming families, because they generally do not have paddy land to cultivate. Only 10 families engage in paddy cultivation, even that on a very minor scale. And all 10 farmer-husbands of these working women are share-croppers, who cultivate the paddy land on payment of a rent.

The extent of paddy land cultivated by the 10 share-croppers is given below:

Extent of paddy land	No of families
5 <i>kurunis</i>	3
10 ...	4
12 ...	1
20 ...	2

Housing

The condition of housing among the 26 households is indicative of their status of extreme poverty. The vast majority of their houses are either temporary (wattle and daub) or semi-permanent.

Status of Housing

Temporary (wattle & daub)	12
Semi-permanent	09
Permanent	02
Permanent, being built	02
Estate house	01

Food and Nutrition

One major problem discovered in the survey of these 26 working women is their low nutritional status due to the rather poor quality of food. The survey has revealed a distressing feature of their food habits --the skipping of the breakfast. A vast number of women take only a cup of plain tea, even without milk, as the breakfast. The breakfast data collected from each woman worker on days of the survey are summarised in the following table:

Bread or rice	06
Only plain tea	18
Only milk tea	02

Interviews with women revealed that 18 women preferred plain tea because they could not afford to buy milk for milk tea. Although 20 women reported not eating any breakfast, the other family members, particularly the children, are given food in the morning. Their breakfast usually consists of the left-overs from the previous day's dinner. Women have the cultural habit of feeding children and men first and skipping their own morning meal if enough food is not available.

Another alarming feature of their food habits is that even after skipping the breakfast, they would normally eat the lunch --often poor in nutritional quality --much later in the day, generally after 2. 30 in the afternoon. As reported by many women, this lunch is often bread or boiled jack fruit with just one curry. A full meal with rice and one or two curries is taken, almost as a rule, only once a day, for dinner.

The poor food habits and low nutritional status of these working women exist side by side with inordinately harsh working and living conditions. Their work involves several miles of walking everyday --first about one and half to three miles from home to the estate for the morning muster, from the muster to rubber trees, walking for tapping and collecting latex, carrying latex to the collecting point, and then from the estate to home. All this walking is done without adequate food. And to cap the harshness of the daily routine of these women, many of them start their day at 4. 00 and some at 3. 00 in early morning.

The very low intake of protein is another aspect of their nutritional problems. They hardly eat fish or meat. The survey revealed that fish is eaten in these households generally once a week and in some cases once a month. No household reported regular consumption of fish, meat or even dhal.

W. A. Somawathie, a 48 year old woman of the Kallumale estate, described graphically this general trend among almost all working women in the sample:

Because of the nature of our job, we hardly have time to take regular meals. I wake up at 3. 00 in the morning; then I make tea. After that I cook one or two vegetables for my father's lunch. Cooking is over by 4. 30. I will then eat some rice, if there is enough left-overs from the previous day. Otherwise, I will drink another cup of plain tea. We do not have money to buy milk for milk tea. We eat lot of green leaves since they are freely available in the village. Even to collect green leaves, I hardly have time. We eat fish

very rarely, may be once a month. Only when I come back home after work, I eat my lunch, which is usually at 3-4 in the afternoon. Some days, I would not even eat the lunch. It is only at night I get a chance to eat properly to fill up my stomach.

Labour Organisations

These three estates do not have labour unions. The smallness of the work force is perhaps the main reason. Besides, the workers interviewed did not express any inclination to join unions. Many of them expressed satisfaction with the employer. In privately-owned medium sized estates, there appears to be a patron-client relationship between the owners and workers. And this works both ways. The owner of the estate has not allowed workers to form or join unions; at the same time, workers see it as a risk to join unions, against the wishes of the employer. Only one woman expressed sentiments of working class militancy. She had earlier been active in a LSSP - affiliated trade union.

These women are not involved in any voluntary women organizations either.

Working Conditions in the Three Estates

Field researchers have reported that in Kumbaduwa and Katukelle estates, the workers have not expressed any major grievances against employers.

In Kumbaduwa, the owner has built new houses for seven resident workers' families. The owner has also discouraged the workers from forming a labour union on the undertaking that he would grant them 'all their rights.' Workers have not reported any grievances against the employer regarding their wages. The wages, according to workers, are paid in time. The employer contributes 8% of the monthly wage to the provident fund of each worker. However, nearly 1/2 of the work force are not made permanent.

In Katukelle estate, all, except one, working women are made permanent. Women are employed for rubber tapping. This estate does

not provide housing for its employees. Workers have not reported any malpractice of the employer regarding their wages. They reported satisfaction with the relationship with the employer; however, no labour unions are allowed in this estate, too. The workers are paid wages determined by The Wages Board.

Workers in Kallumale estate have, however, reported unsatisfactory conditions of work. The majority of workers of this estate are resident Tamil labourers. Their houses, provided by the estate, are in a state of dilapidation. Even the superintendent's bungalow is an old, decaying house. The workers' houses have not been renovated for many years. Toilet facilities for resident worker families are non-existent.

Workers have reported that they do not receive from the employer their wage particulars. As a result, they have no way of making it sure that they receive wages correctly, according to the actual number of days they work. Some workers in fact complained that the number of days for which they are paid is less than the actual number of days. There is no fixed date for the payment of wages; the date depends on the availability of money for the owner. When the wages are delayed, the workers are compelled to borrow money from money lenders. The wages in this estate are lower than the government approved wage rates. For example, the daily wage for a woman worker is Rs. 40.00 whereas the government approved rate is Rs. 59.00. Even the overtime payment is lower; Rs. 4.00 an hour, instead of Rs. 7.00.

The resident workers are not provided with health or welfare facilities. There is no maternity home in this estate. The estate has not employed a family health worker or a welfare officer.

The field survey indicates that the conditions of all workers in the Kallumale estate are comparatively unsatisfactory than in other two estates.

Health Problems

A recurring complaint of many rubber-tapping women in these three estates is that they suffer regularly from skin diseases, chest pains and headaches. Under-nutrition, hard work and lack of health care have certainly contributed to their recurrent health problems.

Village Women Working in the Estate

Mohamadiya Estate

In this section, conditions among rubber tapping women who live in the village are further discussed. The families surveyed in this chapter are all Sinhalese who live in the village Maragahadeniya. The women are employed in the Mohamadiya state plantation.

Maragahadeniya Grama Sevaka Division.

Village Profile

Maragahadeniya is in the Agalawatte AGA division and is located 6 miles away from the Agalawatte town. The population in this village consists of Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim families. The ethnic and religious composition of the population in Maragahadeniya is given in the following table:

	Ethnic Group	
	Families	Population
Sinhalese	252	1126
Tamil	207	693
Muslim	01	05
Total	460	1824

Religion	
Buddhist	1118
Hindu	693
Catholic	08
Islamic	05

(Source: Reports of the Grama Niladhari)

Of the total of 460 families in this village, 107 were *Janasaviya* recipients while 77 received food stamps. Another 30 other families were recipients of other poor relief benefits.

Village Economy

This is a predominantly agricultural village, yet with the special feature that most of the cultivated land is under plantations. According to statistics maintained by the Grama Niladhari, 805 acres are under tea, 180 acres under rubber, 7 acres under coffee, another 7 under pepper and 8 under cinnamon. Paddy cultivation is limited to 130 acres. Both tea and rubber land belongs to the Mohamadiya estate.

The above pattern of land ownership in the village explains why there is an acute problem of land among the residents in Maragahadeniya. In a context where the land available for peasant agriculture is severely limited, the villagers have no option but to work as laborers in the plantations. The workers who have found employment in the rubber estate are doubly handicapped due to the specificity of the rubber economy and the non-availability of agricultural land. The rubber-tappers do not get work regularly or throughout the year. During the rainy season, they are left unemployed; because of the unavailability of land, they are unable to do home gardening or small-scale agriculture, even as a stop-gap measure of livelihood. The absence of even state waste land in the village has made the economic conditions among the villagers precarious.

The income levels of the villagers is also rather low. The data maintained by the Grama Niladhari gives the following breakdown of income levels among the villagers for the year 1992.

Income (Rs.)	No. of families
Less than 700	103
700 - 1000	132
1000 - 1500	147
1500 - 3000	49
Over 3000	29

Profile of the Sample

Sixteen families of working women in the village were surveyed. The total population of 16 families was 67, and of them 43 were women. Among the working women in the sample, 15 had registered their marriage while one woman had not; three were widows and two had separated from their husbands. The husband of one woman was in jail as an insurgent suspect. Husbands of the two widows were among the disappeared during the JVP insurgency of 1988-89.

Four families in the sample were *janasaviya* recipients while one family received food stamps.

Housing

The extremely poor condition of housing among the residents of this village was readily visible. The following table indicates the ownership pattern and the status of houses in the village.

Ownership (No. of families)

	Village	Sample
Own house	176	13
Houses rented out	06	-
Housing schemes (worker housing)	280	03
Do not own house	70	

Status of houses

	Village	Sample
Permanent	87	01
Semi-permanent	19	03
Temporary	57	09
Worker housing	280	03
Wattle and daub Huts	13	-

The largest number of houses in the entire village as well as in the sample fall into the category of worker housing. These are very

small houses with only one room. The vast majority of them are in a state of decay having no repairs affected for a long time. Because of the smallness of the houses, the residents do not possess much furniture. In fact, in some of the houses where this survey was done, there was not even a chair. The general pattern is to have a bare minimum set of furniture-- a bed, a table and a chair. Not a single household had a television set.

Land Ownership

The pattern of land ownership--that is, the land either owned or possessed by the villagers--indicates the following categories of ownership and possession:

- i. Hereditary land,
- ii. Land received under government licenses, both short- and long-term,
- iii. Land granted under the *Swarnabumi* scheme,
- iv. Middle-class land allotments.

The extent of land ownership among families varies considerably, as indicated in the following table.

Acres	Village	Sample
less 1/4	42	01
1/4 - 1/2	25	06
1/2 - 1	54	02
1 - 5	49	03
5 - 10	02	-
10 - 20	02	-
landless	335	04

Educational Standards

A noticeable feature in the village as well as in the sample is the low standards of education attained by the majority of the village population, even by the youth. The data available with the Grama

Niladhari indicates the following educational profile, based on the level of schooling:

Level of schooling.	Male	Female
No schooling	92	42
Below grade V	56	38
Pass grade V	56	22
Pass grade VIII	20	12
Ordinary level	04	05
Advance level	15	01

The educational standards among the youth between 15 - 24 years of age also indicate a high incidence of the termination of school education both at primary and secondary levels, while non-schooling too remains quite widespread.

Educational Levels among the Youth, 15 -24 years

No schooling	15
Below grade V	20
Pass grade V	10
Pass grade VIII	12
Ordinary level	03
Advance level	12

The educational standards of the population in the sample are reflective of the general trend in the village. Among the elders, seven--six of them are women--have received no education at all. Seventeen have received only primary education, while fifteen have reached the secondary level (grades 6 to 9). Only one person, a woman, has studied up to the G.C.E. ordinary level. Among the youth, only four have reached the ordinary level while no one is receiving G.C.E. advance level education.

The survey also revealed that among the elders, the incidence of no-schooling is higher among women. However, primary education is almost equally distributed among both men and women. The main reason given by women for not continuing beyond primary education is the economic necessity of employment. Lack of educational facilities and the lack of encouragement from their own parents may also have contributed to the low level of education among working women.

In the interviews, a general feeling expressed by the working women is the determination to educate their own children. It was obvious that they consider education the sole means of achieving a better life for their children within a set-up where the plantation economy does not offer the villagers any employment other than becoming rubber tappers or manual workers.

Health

Theoretically, health facilities are available for resident as well as village working women; in practice, however, the services available are limited. In the village, workers should receive the services of the District medical Officer, the Public Health Inspector and the Family Health Worker. Meanwhile, the estate has its own health services, run by a number of medical and health officials. However, the working women in the village find the estate health officials uncooperative and the services poor. Some women said that medical services of estate health officials could be obtained only after making a fee. Therefore, the workers tend to go to private medical practitioners or government hospitals in Agalawatte, Pimbura or Baduraliya.

Pregnant working women continue to receive clinical facilities. However, the maternity home in the estate has been closed down for the past fifteen years. The creche facilities are also very unsatisfactory. Although there are three creches in the estate, two are not adequately equipped. Therefore, working mothers are reluctant to leave their children at the creche.

The toilet facilities in workers' housing clusters are extremely poor. The unhygienic conditions prevalent in the households of these workers are largely due to this factor. The condition of the toilet facilities available are given in the table below.

Type of toilets	Families/Village	Families/Sample
Water-sealed	103	06
Temporary pits	40	06
Common toilets	96	03
No toilets	217	01

Theoretically, the best toilets in the village should have been the water-sealed ones; yet, it appears that there is no habit to keep them clean.

The toilets commonly used by a number of families --there are three of them in the sample--are appallingly unhygienic.

As the above table indicates, almost half of the families in the village have no toilets at all.

Health and Nutrition Among Working Women

The researchers noted that working women constantly complain of ailments and illnesses, particularly of headache and pain. "We have to walk long distances carrying on the head bucket-loads of rubber latex," commented one working woman. "Sometimes, we fall and get injured while climbing down the hill with buckets on our head," responded another. Rubber tapping in fact requires several miles of walking, bending down the body, and walking back to the factory carrying the collected rubber latex. And women carry these heavy loads on the head. And walking in a rubber plantation is always a physically demanding task, because the terrain is mostly rough, uneven and hilly.

A general observation that can be made about the health standards of these working women is that while they are in poor health, the health facilities available to them are very unsatisfactory.

The nutritional levels among them were also observed to be rather low. The work regime of rubber tapping women in general is such that their meals, particularly the breakfast and the lunch, are irregular and this pattern was observed among working women in Maragahadeniya, too. Before coming to work early morning, a woman would usually drink a cup of plain tea. The breakfast is usually taken around 9 a. m., after the first round of work; and the breakfast would consist of either bread or *rotti* (home-made bread) which is always low in nutrition, because the bread is normally eaten with green chili or red onions. There is no fixed time for lunch either; the lunch time may vary from 1.30 to 3 p. m. depending on the work schedule. When the tapping is carried on in the afternoon, the lunch time would always be after 3 p. m. Many women made the observation that the type of their

work in the rubber estate would not enable them to have their meals on a regular basis.

It was observed that protein intake is very low. In certain families, fish is eaten as rarely as once a month. *Dhal* is the easily available, and therefore most popular, source of protein. Yet, the quantity of *dhal* consumed is so small that it is hardly an adequate source of nutrients.

There were four families in the sample who had earlier received the *janasaviya* support. One woman of such a family said that when they were receiving *janasaviya* assistance, "food was not a problem." However, once the *janasaviya* support ended, they were back to the same old problem of scarcity of food.

The low level of income is an obvious reason for the low nutritional quality of the food consumed by the families of these workers. The income distribution among the families in the sample is as follows:

Income (Rs.)	No. of families
Less than 500	-
500 - 1000	3
1000 - 1500	5
1500 - 2000	3
2000 - 2500	3
Over 2500	2

Conditions of Work

It was often observed that these working women are dissatisfied with the working conditions available at the estate; there was also a commonly shared sense of uncertainty about their employment. Comments made by some women, indicating their sense of insecurity and dissatisfaction, are quoted below:

- i. "If the latex tapped is less than the required quantity, our names would not be registered as having worked a full day; that entire work would be counted as half a day."
- ii. "It is so difficult to walk so many miles, carrying the load of latex on the head. We have to do this walking after tapping and collecting the rubber milk."

iii. "One day, I fell down and got myself injured while climbing down the hill with the load of latex on my head."

iv. "My wages for three days were withdrawn once, for the simple offense that I had not collected the latex from just a single rubber tree."

v. "Once a watcher of the estate tried to sexually harass me. After I made a complaint to the police, the gentleman of the estate sacked me."

Circumstances that Made Women Workers in the Estate

As noted elsewhere, the estate constitutes the main source of economic activity and employment for the villagers. Out of 16 women surveyed in this sample, nine had already worked in the estate before the marriage. The other seven women started working after their marriage, primarily due to economic problems in the family. Those who had worked before the marriage had been working in the estate from their early youth.

Family Help in Work

It was observed that some times women will obtain the help of their family members in carrying out their allotted tasks. If the husband is retired, he would come and help the wife to do her work. Many women obtain the assistance of their young daughters. Family help is especially obtained on the days when rubber tapping is done in the afternoons as well.

The Daily Routine of a Working Woman's Life

The daily life of women working in rubber plantations is generally harsh. Women who live in the village and walk to the estate to work are usually wake up very early in the morning. Nine women of the sample reported that they got up at 4 a. m., 4 at 3 a. m. and 3 at 5 a. m. After preparing meals, woman leaves for the estate to start work at 6 a. m. The first round of rubber tapping ends at 9. a. m. The breakfast is usually taken at this interval. The collection of latex starts between 10 and 10.30. The latex is handed over to the collector around 1 p.m. If it is half-day work, the woman will reach home around 2 p.m. If it is full-day work, she will stay back till about 4. 30, without taking the lunch. On such days, the lunch is usually taken after reaching home. In the afternoons and evenings, the time is generally spent on household matters. Dinner is the only proper meal that almost all working women appear to take.

Female-Headed Households

There were seven female-headed households in the sample of 16 families, which is a considerably higher figure, compared with other samples. Among these female heads of households, three were 'widows' (two husbands being in the category of 'diasappeared'), three had separated from husbands while the husband of one woman was in jail. In these families, the entire burden of running the household is on the woman.

Brief profiles of each woman in female-headed households are given below.

i. M. K. Mallika (30), mother of two young children (6 and 2 1/2 years) is living in a cadjan hut. Her husband has deserted her. She started working in the estate four years ago, after she got married. Her husband was unemployed and therefore she had to support the family. She ususally works less than 20 days a month, because of frequent illness of her two children. In July 1992, she had worked only 11 days and her take-home income was Rs. 528. 38. Poverty compells her to forgoe most of her meals, and often she would not eat anything for breakfast. Her mother helps her to feed the children.

ii. **K. A. Leclawathie** (46) is a mother of four children, living in a wattle and daub house. She had started working in the estate since the age of sixteen. Her parents had also been workers in the estate. She has not attended school at all. Her husband had worked as a watcher in the Mohammadia estate. He had 'disappeared' in 1990, during the crackdown against the JVP. To meet economic difficulties after the disappearance of the father, the elder children--son and daughter--also started working, the son as a labourer in the estate and daughter in a garment factory. The monthly income of the son is Rs. 1500.00 and of the daughter, Rs. 1200. 00.

iii. **P. K. Malanee Hemalatha** (42) has been deserted by her husband. She lives with her two grown up children. Her son, aged 24, is unemployed and the daughter (14) is attending school. Hemalatha lives in a semi-permanent wattle and daub house. She has earlier received *janasaviya* support.

iv. **J. D. Magilin's** (40) husband has deserted her. She lives with her 14 year old daughter who is attending school.

v. **G. B. Wimalawathie** (31) is a young mother of three children. Her husband is in jail as a suspected JVP member. Before his arrest, he had worked in Colombo as a labourer. Wimalawathie started working as a rubber tapper in September 1989, after her husband was arrested and sent to jail. She is now the only bread-winner in the family.

vi. Husband of **R. A. Kusumawathie** (39) is also a victim of political terror. He was arrested by the security forces in September 1989, and is now presumed 'dead.' She lives with her children in a small wattle and daub house in a plot of 1/4 acres which she has inherited from parents. She is the only income earner in the family.

vii. **P. D. Nandawathie** (50) is a widow who lives with her 70 year old mother and six children. Only one child is employed, a daughter (22) who works in a garment factory. Nandawathie has been working in the estate since she was 11 years old. During the political terror in 1989, her family's house was destroyed and set on fire by the security forces, as her son was suspected to be a JVP member. Later on she managed to repair the house with *janasaviya* support. Nandawathie is the main income earner in the family.

In this seven households too, the same general pattern among female-headed households can be observed: the woman worker is the main income earner and the entire family depends on her earning. Even in cases where children work, their contribution to family income is insignificant and irregular.

Savings and Indebtedness among Working Women

It is more or less a general trend among households that the responsibility of securing financial means for family needs is with the woman. If the regular income is not adequate, seeking alternative means of support is the woman's task. This leads to high incidence of indebtedness among women.

There were eight families in the sample that have obtained money on credit. The purposes for which credit/loans were obtained:

- i. Day-to-day consumption needs,
- ii. Household needs,
- iii. to purchase property and to invest in self-employment projects.

State banks and private money lenders were the two main sources of credit. One family had obtained bank loans for housing while another for self-employment activities.

Indebtedness due to immediate consumption needs is quite prevalent in the village and 11 families of the sample of 16 reported that they were in debt. In five families, re-paying the loan from their income was the responsibility of women.

Another cause of indebtedness is urgent financial needs of the family. For the loans obtained from money lenders in the village, the interest rate is 20% a month. Eleven families had obtained such loans. In eight of these families, the responsibility of re-paying the debt is exclusively with women. In two families, husband and wife had jointly been re-paying the loan.

Settling the loans and credit is always done on the pay day. Since these working women find it difficult to settle the entire loan at once, the re-payment is always done in installments. What is settled on the pay day is the interest of the loan; the money lenders usually come to collect the interest on the pay day.

The researchers met one of the money-lenders--a woman--who had visited the women workers on the pay day to collect the interest. She said:

A number of women take loans from me. If I fail to come on the pay day, I would not be able to collect the interest, because

these women quickly run out of their money. Therefore, I always make it a point to come on the pay day itself.

What in fact happens here is that the working women first dispose of a share of their monthly earnings to pay the interest for their loans.

Women who obtain consumer goods on credit from the village boutique observed that the boutique keeper did not hesitate to give them goods on credit. The reason, according to the women interviewed, is that the boutique keeper was confident that the women would re-pay the credit when they obtained their provident fund. "The first thing I would do when I get my fund is to settle all my credit to the boutique," said one woman.

One striking feature of the economic life of the working women in the sample is the near absence of savings. The low income levels, combined with monthly re-payment of debts, mitigates any possibility of saving among these women. Of the 16 families, there was only one woman who had a savings account with the bank.

Trade Unions

There are two trade unions active among the workers, the National Estate Workers' Union and Sri Lanka Independent Estate Workers' Union. Most of the female workers are unionized, yet they are dissatisfied with the union leadership. "Our trade union is of no use at all, although it deducts from our salary Rs. 15 a month as the membership fee," commented a number of women.

The National Estate Workers' Union is affiliated with the UNP government. There were no women active at the leadership level of this union. Not a single woman of this estate has been elected to a union office. Most of the working women, although they are members of the union, had no awareness of union activities. The union leaders were also not keen on working towards the welfare of the workers.

The other union, affiliated with the opposition Sri Lanka Freedom Party, was more active. Four women in the sample were members of it. Their monthly membership fee was Rs. 10. This union had on a number of occasions, mobilized its membership to win certain demands of workers. There was a strike at the time of this study protest against the non-inclusion of names of workers, who had actually

worked, in the pay list. Women workers were seen actively participating in this trade union action.

However, it was generally observed that trade unions have not been doing much to improve the working conditions of the workers, both female and male. Women are particularly unaware of their rights under the existing labor laws; yet the unions appear to have done nothing to educate their members.

Although there are union representatives, there are no close links between them and workers. Workers sometimes find no one to turn to for advice and help, when they experience injustices. One woman worker, for example, complained that when she was physically harassed by the security officers of the estate, the union did not take any action to protect women from such harassment.

Women's Organizations

Although there was a women's association in the village, not a single working woman had membership links with it. "There are women's organizations; but what is the purpose of joining them?," asked one woman when questioned about women's organizations. Another woman commented: "although we do feel the need to have women's organizations, we hardly have any time."

Privately Owned Small Plantations

Kallumale and Daniston Estates

These two estates are privately owned, relatively small rubber plantations. The extent of land on Kallumale estate was 150 hectares of rubber and 5 hectares of paddy land while the Daniston estate had a land extent of 250 hectares of highland and 12 hectares of paddy land.

In both these estates, the vast majority of workers are of Tamil ethnic origin and they are resident workers. In Kallumale, there are 30 resident workers and in the Daniston estate 22. Unlike in other estates, in Kallumale and Daniston estates, the resident workers are not employed in the estate for long years. For most part in any year, they live on the estate only for a short period. The reason is that the workers have the habit of leaving these estates frequently due to low wages being paid. As one working woman explained: "I came to Kallumale estate just two months ago. Although we work hard, we are not properly paid here. I will leave this estate as soon as I get work elsewhere for a better pay."

While the majority of the workers in the Kallumale estate were Tamils of Indian origin, there were Sinhalese workers too and they were resident in the village. The management staff was mainly Sinhalese. In Daniston estate there were no Sinhalese labour households. The only Sinhalese employed in there were the Superintendent, one clerk and two *kanganis* (labour supervisors).

All workers were recruited on a daily paid basis and their work involved rubber tapping, weeding and fertilizing.

The number of hours put in by the workers varied according to the type of activity they were engaged in. For rubber tapping, a six-hour working day was specified while for other activities it was eight hours. Although there was no sex discrimination in the daily wage rate, the wages were less than what was paid on the estates under the State Plantation Corporation (SPC). In July 1992, when this survey was carried out, the daily wage for workers paid by both estates was Rs 50.35. In some months this figure can be even lower. For example, women in Kallumale were paid Rs. 48.34 a day for June 1992.

Another feature of these two estates was the relatively low number of days of work given to workers. The maximum number of working days was 14 and this meant that the monthly earning capacity of workers is severely restricted. Therefore, the economic status of workers in these two estates was definitely lower than in the estates under the SPC.

Because of the irregularity of work in the estate, men have the habit of going for casual work as labourers outside the estate. By doing so, they can earn Rs. 75.00 a day.

In Kallumale, workers have the facility of obtaining a salary advance of Rs. 100.00 to 150.00, at the beginning of the month. However, this facility is not available to the workers in Daniston estate.

In Daniston estate, however, workers are given a free monthly ration of 3 kgs. of rice and 2 kgs. of flour. Workers are sometimes given free meals, too.

The standard of education among the workers was very low. Their ability to read and write was limited, although they had attended school up to grades 3 or 4. The literacy level of many workers was confined to the ability to put down the signature on paper. Many women said that since their parents too were rubber tappers, they were not educated; they simply had to stay at home to look after their infant brothers and sisters, or to start work in the estate.

The Sample

For this study, nine families from the Kallumale estate and another nine from the Daniston estate were surveyed. All families live in houses provided by and located in the estate. Their general background, the economic status, the level of education and cultural life resembles with other Tamil rubber plantation workers--extremely poor, with no economic resources or property of their own, and largely neglected as a community. The only difference noticed was that the families in this sample were worse off than the others surveyed.

Monthly Earnings

The low level of monthly income is the most striking feature of the conditions of these workers in the two estates. Two factors contributed to their low income earning capacity. Firstly, the restriction placed on the number of working days a month, the number being 14. Secondly, the low wage rate paid to workers.

These two features are evident in the following table of monthly earnings from daily work.

Monthly Earnings June-July 1992

Kallumale

Household	Days (wife)	Wife	Husband
01	14	569.00	532.00
02	14	570.00	500.00
03	12	600.00	irregular
04	12	570.00	1000.00 (trader)
05	12	680.00	700.00
06	12	520.00	600.00
07	12	440.00	430.00
08	09	200.00	1000.00 (cook)
09	10	472.00	400.00

Daniston

01	14	726.30	724.40
02	08	348.90	420.00
03	13	654.55	755.25
04	13	654.55	604.20
05	13	654.55	-----
06	12	667.15	-----
07	13	654.15	-----
08	12	604.20	704.90
09	14	654.90	-----

Extra Income

In these two estates, opportunities for earning extra income are also limited. Workers do not raise goats, cattle or poultry, the uncertainty of their stay in the estate probably being the primary reason. Engaging in casual labour elsewhere on days when there is no work on the estate is the main opportunity available for men to make an extra income. As a casual labourer, a man can earn Rs. 75. 00 a day, as opposed to a little over Rs. 50. 00 in the estate. When men work in the village, as agricultural workers or in any other capacity, they have the added advantage of the lunch being given free.

The only available means of extra income on the estate is tapping rubber in the afternoons, after the normal working hours. A woman should usually work six hours for tapping activities, and she can work a few extra hours. In the workers' parlance, this is called '*hawasa kiri*' or 'afternoon tapping.' However, this extra work is highly irregular and available only to a very few, the earnings from afternoon tapping is not very high either.

There were three families who have earned extra income from afternoon tapping. The following table provides the relevant data.

Afternoon Tapping - Daniston Estate

Household 1

	Wife	Husband
Week 1	75.00	70.00
Week 2	105.00	105.00
Week 3	70.00	110.00
Week 4	40.00	40.00
Total	290.00	325.00

Household 2

Woman's total	45.00
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Household 3

	Wife	Husband
Week 1	50.00	75.00
Week 2	-----	185.00
Week 3	-----	145.00
Week 4	-----	25.00
Total	50.00	430.00

State Welfare Support

The state welfare support was not generally enjoyed by the households in the sample; only a few families received either *janasaviya* or government food stamps.

In the Kallumale sample, there was one family receiving *janasaviya* support; another family received government food stamps. In Daniston estate, none received *janasaviya* while two families were food stamp recipients.

The family of Kamaladevi in Kallumale estate was receiving *janasaviya* support. Her husband had obtained a *janasaviya* loan of Rs. 10,000. 00 to start a trading business, but his new venture has failed. The family of K. Sittu (45 years) received food stamps worth of Rs. 119. 00 a month.

One family that received food stamps in the Daniston sample was a single member household. Saraswathi, a 20 year old woman, was receiving Rs. 49. 00 worth of food stamps. The other family consists of two young parents and three small children, and their monthly food stamp support was Rs. 189. 00

Children as Domestic Servants

Sending young children for domestic employment is one traditional survival strategy among Tamil plantation workers. In the two

samples, there were three families whose grown up children have been sent out as domestic child labourers.

(i). The 12 year old son of K. Sittu of Kallumale estate has been a domestic servant for two years. He has attended school only up to grade one. His monthly wage, according to the mother, Rs. 200. 00. "I could not give him food, because I am poor. I could not educate him either, because I did not have money to buy him clothes. Everything we earn is not enough even for food. Therefore, I sent him out to work as a domestic servant," explained Sittu.

(ii). Parvathi is a 36 old mother and she works at Daniston estate. She has three children, the youngest being ten years of age. Her two elder daughters, age 14 and 13, are domestic servants. Both children attended school only up to grade four. As domestic servants, each of them earn, according to Parvathi, Rs. 200. month.

(iii) Two of Valli Amma's four children are domestic servants; they are 14 and 12 years old, and none had attended school.

Credit

Low income earning capacity of households in the sample invariably means that credit and loans are essential elements of their survival strategies.

All the households in the sample obtained their consumer goods from the nearby retail shop on credit. Thus, all households were in debt and often they were indebted over and above their monthly earnings. The experience of Kamaladevi (28 years) illustrates this point. The total monthly earnings made by Kamaladevi and her husband, who is also a worker in the estate, was a little over Rs. 1100. 00 for July 1992. She had an accumulated credit of Rs. 2, 800. 00 to the village grocery shop. She paid Rs. 500. 00 and continued to obtain more consumer goods, again on credit. "What we earn is not enough for even our food. What can we do? We eat mostly on credit," Kamaladevi commented.

Savings

The extremely low incidence of saving is another striking feature in these two samples, representing Kallumale and Danistor estates.

The low income earning capacity of the workers mitigates their capacity to save. In the entire sample, there was not a single worker, male or female, with a bank savings account. There were only three women who had contributed to the informal savings scheme of *seettu*, and their monthly contributions were a small sum of Rs. 50. 00, which, nonetheless, is a considerable share of the income, compared with their actual earnings.

In the circumstances of extreme poverty, only women have some means to face economic emergencies, pawning of their jewellery being the solution. All 18 women in the sample have pawned their valuables and not yet redeemed. Asked how they hoped to redeem the pawned jewellery, the women did not have a clear answer.

Food and Nutrition

The level of nutrition among workers on both estates was observed unsatisfactory. Low income is the main reason for the poor nutritional quality of food, although the women stated that almost all of the family income would be spent on food. Due to high prices of food items, regular meals have no variation at all. Some times, there is hardly any breakfast, except drinking a cup of plain tea. Children are given *rotti*, bread or rice left over from the previous dinner.

The midday meal of the elders usually consisted of left-overs from the previous night's meal. When available, jack fruit and bread fruit are cooked for lunch. However, as indicated by many women, the midday meal is not in the priority of their eating habits. R. Angai (40), a mother of four children, of the Kallumale estate, summarised the experience shared by many families when she said: "In our family, we hardly eat lunch. If we can get some jack fruit or bread fruit, that is our lunch. If we don't have anything to eat, we just drink a cup of tea to kill the hunger. What to do? We have to live somehow or other." All women interviewed said that a full meal is eaten by the family only at dinner, and it was also the best prepared meal with rice or *ittly* and

curries. The regular curries are *dhal* and dry fish, while fresh vegetables are consumed occasionally. Fish is eaten very seldom. The researchers observed that women and children were visibly under-nourished.

Although green leaves are freely available in the estate, the women did not appear to prefer them. *Dhal* and dry fish are the two most popular curries with rice and other flour-based food.

Housing and Health

The workers were provided with estate housing (line rooms), of extremely poor conditions. Each house had just one room and a small veranda, irrespective of the size of the families. The houses appeared to be strongly built, yet have been in a state of neglect and dilapidation for many years. Roofs were either tiled or covered with aluminum sheets. Unrepaired for years, most roofs leaked during the rain.

The poor status of housing has obviously contributed to the low standards of health and hygiene among the resident workers. A readily noticeable feature of the housing is the limited space of these living quarters. The improperly ventilated squalid surroundings no doubt affected the health of the children as well as the elders. The immediate environs of the houses were unclean, attracting flies and breeding mosquitos. In many line roofs, the roofs were leaking and on rainy days the living quarters were damp inside.

The lack of toilet facilities was another factor, adversely affecting the health of the workers and their families. Not a single toilet with even minimal health and hygienic standards was found. Toilets were either open pits, or pits covered with make-shift walls. Children used the open space in front of their houses as the toilet.

The workers and their families are constantly exposed to unhygienic surroundings of their environment. The grounds were littered with refuse from the households and there was no proper system for the disposal of garbage. The stench emanating from blocked drains, and toilet pits is a constant fact of life of these worker families. The clothes that the elders and the children were wearing were a veritable symbol of poverty, neglect and of the resignation to a status of self-denial.

The lack of a nutritional quality in food is certainly a contributing factor to their poor health. The low income of families

always guaranteed that their food consumption was poor in quality and irregular in quantity.

The water for their daily use came from the public well. The well water was often contaminated by the effects of the refuse of the surroundings, and the habit of drinking water without boiling made them extremely susceptible to water borne diseases.

The male workers to a large extent were addicted to chewing betel, consuming alcohol (toddy and *kasippu*) and smoking. Women too, consumed alcohol and chewed betel.

Health and Medical Facilities

Unlike in the other estates, there were no medical or health facilities available on these two privately owned estates. Usually, the workers visited the nearby government hospital and their children were taken to the hospital clinic to obtain *Tripasha* and immunization. As a result of the non availability of a dispensary on the estate, the worker families faced a considerable inconvenience. The only consolation was that the owner of the estate provided his vehicle to transport the sick in an emergency.

There were no creche facilities for children on these two estates. Mothers would usually leave the children in the care of an elder child or work close to the line rooms so that they could look after the child while at work.

Workers' Organisations

There are no trade unions or any other voluntary associations among workers in Kallumale and Daniston estates. Since the workers are not permanent or long-term residents on the estate, there is hardly any mutual understanding, interaction or socialisation among the households.

In the absence of trade unions, the workers had to go individually to the owners of the estates with their grievances. Workers who were interviewed stated that the owners always demonstrated a

non-conciliatory and oppressive attitude towards them. The absence of unions also meant the greater possibility of workers being exploited. For example, if they did not report for the morning muster in the morning, they were not given work for the day. They were shouted at and insulted, if they failed to tap the required number of trees. The workers never received a pay slip showing the details of their wages. Some workers stated that they were at times paid for a lesser number of days than they actually worked. If complaints against such injustices were made, their jobs could be easily terminated.

Children

As mentioned earlier, malnutrition appeared to be widespread among children of worker families. The children were also destined to become labourers, as their parents already were, because of the lack of education. Although parents in other estates, had the desire to educate children, not a single parent in this sample indicated hopes of children's education. The drop out rate is quite high among school children.

In the nine families surveyed in Kallumale, only 7 out of 17 children of school going age were actually attending school. The other 10 were either school drop outs or have not attended school at all. On Daniston estate, out of 15 children of school going age, 7 were drop outs while 8 were not attending school.

The main reason as cited by parents for halting the education of their children midway was the severe economic hardships faced by them. Unable to buy clothes and other requirements of children, they were either asked to stay home or sent off to houses outside the estate as domestic servants. In the sample of 18 households of the two estates, there were 5 such children, employed in domestic labour and contributing to family income.

Household Violence

Household violence was widespread among these families. Alcoholism is the most common immediate cause of violence within the family as well as between families. Many male workers were addicted to the consumption of alcohol in the evenings. As a result,

men have fallen into debt. The waste of money by alcoholic husbands has often been a cause of quarrels between husbands and wives. Children are not spared from violence, either. The consumption of alcohol was not confined to the males. Even the women consumed alcohol and this was often the case on the pay day.

In this culture of destitution, disputes tend to be settled by violent means. Arguments and disagreements between family members and relatives are not resolved amicably, but through physical violence directed at each other. Often the victims of such attacks are the female members of the family.

Finally, the living conditions among worker families in Kallumale and Daniston estates could be described as the worst to observe in this entire study. The income earning capacity of workers are rigidly limited by the 14 days of ceiling of working days a month, a limit arbitrarily imposed by the owners of the estates. The majority of workers do not enjoy state welfare benefits either. There are no health or medical facilities available on the estate.

The welfare of workers is left to themselves, who, in any case, have no means of improving the appalling conditions that are their lot.

Labour Process and Female Labour in Rubber Plantations

An important aspect of the rubber plantation labour is the absence, unlike in the tea sector, of a clear sexual division of labour. In tea plantations, the plucking of tea leaves is the specific task of female workers. Rubber tapping is also a highly labour-intensive work, both male and female workers are employed for the task.

The tapping workers represent the lowest place in the employment hierarchy of the rubber plantation's occupational regime. In the village social structure too, rubber tapping is not an employment that accords the villager much social esteem.

Tapping rubber is a specialized occupation which requires skill as well as training. Usually, the estate-resident Tamil workers get themselves trained by the parents in the art of rubber tapping when they are still young. As many women workers stated, they had already received this training by the age of fifteen. Parents sometimes get the assistance of their young children to complete the number of trees to be tapped within a day.

The Question of Village Labour

As this study indicated, almost half of the labour employed in rubber tapping is recruited from nearby villages. Unlike in the tea sector, this tendency is generally present in the entire rubber plantation sector.

While the official work day of a rubber tapping worker starts at 6.15 in the morning, the work-day of the woman worker usually begins at least two hours before. This is the result of the twin-function of the woman, as a housewife and a worker. Before the wage labour process begins, the working woman has to start the household labour process. A female worker usually wakes up around 4.00 in the morning, prepares the 'breakfast', and then sends the children to school. Thus she will leave for work only after the initial household responsibilities for the day are over. As many women stated, very often mothers would not even have time to have anything other than the

morning tea as the morning meal, since they had to report for work by 6.15.

Reaching the factory office before 6.15 and the tapping activity involve several miles of walking. In fact, rubber tapping is a physically demanding form of work, mainly because of the several miles of walking required. To reach the factory office in the morning, workers resident in the village may even walk a distance of 2 to 3 1/2 miles. After presenting themselves at *perettuwa*-muster they walk yet another distance of 1/2 to 1 mile, to reach the section of the plantation (known as *gas kattiya*) where they tap trees.

Women are required to tap around 250 trees a day; therefore, their tapping work continues till 11.30 to 12 noon. On rainy days, they would be asked to put in more hours of work till around 5.00 or 6.00 in the evening.

The tea break is usually around 10.00. Women interviewed indicated a variety of habits with regard to their mid-morning tea. Some said, they eat their breakfast during this time, since there is hardly any time to have breakfast before coming to work, due to the pressure for time in the early morning. The mid-morning breakfast for many women is bread, to be eaten with sugar. Some others reported that they would drink only plain tea--*kahata the*-- tea and sugar taken separately. Tea is brought to the location where the woman is tapping rubber by either grown up children or the unemployed husband. Some workers would share their tea with others.

The tea break is however a quick affair, since tapping should be finished before noon.

The collection of latex begins soon after the tapping is over. This task would usually take nearly one and half hours. Collecting latex is also a highly labour intensive operation, involving yet another round of walking. The worker has to go back to the each tree tapped, and the latex collected in coconut shells attached to the tree is then poured into an aluminum basket. Then, the collected latex has to be transported to the factory. Women usually carry the latex bucket on the head. Carrying the latex load on the head requires much physical energy, since the terrain and topography of rubber estates are usually uneven and hilly, and the footpaths being stony and rugged.

Rubber tappers are generally subjected to a number of occupational constraints. If a worker fails to tap the required number of trees--which may vary between 200-300 trees--wages of a half day is deducted by the employer. In other words, failure to tap the allocated number of trees means only half a day of work in terms of wages. Rainy

days are not counted as work days, even though the workers are entitled by law to receive a minimum of 25 days of work for a month. When it rains even after tapping is started, that work would not be counted, because the tapping cannot be continued and the rain water is mixed with the fresh latex.

Unlike for the tea plucking women, rubber tapping women do not go back to work after the tapping task is over. Women usually come back home after 2.00 p. m. The lunch is taken at home after work. As many women reported, the lunch is a meager meal, often left-overs from the previous dinner or the lunch cooked before going to work. During the months when jack fruits and bread fruits are available, many prefer to eat for lunch boiled jack or bread fruits.

A regular activity of women in every afternoon is the collection of firewood from rubber trees in the estate. Evenings are spent in preparing the dinner and in other household activities.

Many women workers surveyed stated that towards the end of the day they would feel exhausted. While alcoholism is widespread among male Tamil workers, it is not an uncommon practice among Tamil working women to consume cheap alcohol, *kasippu*, in the evening. However, no woman worker from village-resident samples reported to be in this habit.

Most Tamil women workers complained to have been subjected to constant harassment and battering by their husbands. Children too are generally battered and neglected by fathers. It appeared that almost as a general rule, the older male members tend to neglect the families.

Conclusions

There were two categories of workers, both men and women, in the plantations surveyed in this study: (i) workers resident in the estate, and (ii), workers recruited from nearby villages. The category (i) were mostly Tamils while the category (ii) were Sinhalese.

Socio-Economic Background

i. Village labour is recruited from among the poorest of the poor, the landless villagers who have no other means of livelihood or labour skills. The small plots of land, which they either own or occupy, do not provide an adequate income to support the families. Similarly, those who have occupational skills have found work outside the village, yet not in the rubber plantations. Thus, there is a certain structural relationship between the rubber plantations and the village economy in the sense that the plantations have absorbed the economically weakest sections of the village.

With regard to the female labour, most village women have opted to work in the estate as rubber tappers after marriage. Economic difficulties in the family have made them wage workers.

The resident Tamil labourers have been equally poor for generations, owning no private property except the jewellery of women. In fact, the conditions of resident Tamil labour in the rubber plantations are very similar to those of the resident Tamil labour in up country tea plantations. There is however a difference; unlike in the rubber sector, labour in the tea plantations is better unionised, and they have an effective political leadership and consequently their grievances are readily acknowledged.

ii. The primary employment available for women working in the rubber estates is rubber tapping. This is also a condition parallel to tea plantations where the predominant form of employment obtainable for women is tea-plucking. In rubber plantations, however, men are also employed as rubber-tappers; yet tapping is not the main economic activity of male workers. They are engaged in the factory and also as watchers and manual workers.

Other than tapping, jobs available for women of higher educational standards are extremely limited. Creche attendant and family health worker are the only other categories of female employment, and even that is available for only a very few women in one estate.¹

Earning Capacity of Workers

Rubber plantation workers are generally paid on a daily basis. At the time of this survey, the wage rate varied between Rs. 50.00 to 60.00 a day. Because of the daily wage rate formula, the monthly earnings of workers depend on the number of days they work. While there is a minimum number of days of work entitled to workers, the number of days (25) of work is subject to regular variations. In the rubber sector, weather is an intervening factor in determining the quantum of work for the tappers. During the rainy days, tapping is not carried out and as a result most workers, except the very few who are given work in the field, would not get work. Work other than tapping during rainy days--for example, weeding, fertilizing or work in the factory--is primarily given to male workers, thereby reflecting a disadvantaged status of female workers.

The plantation regime offers workers only a very restricted capacity to earn, and therefore their monthly earnings always remain at a low level. The following observations were made in analysing the field data:

(i) Women are the consistent and regular income earners in the family among both estate-resident and village-based worker families. In the case of men of village worker families, their earnings are either non-existent or irregular, because they are casual workers whereas women employed in the estate have regular work assured.

(ii) Woman's income is central to the family's total monthly earnings as well as to the family's survival, because of the regularity of employment of women in the family.

¹ In Pimbura State Plantation for example, there were 69 women employed; of them two were in the office clerical staff, three were health workers and 64 women were rubber tappers.

(iii) In households which have slightly better monthly income, it is always the case that at least one member of the family has managed to escape the estate in finding employment outside both the village and the estate.

(iv) There is a high incidence of women being the sole income earners in the family. For example, in the Pimbura sample, among Sinhalese worker households living in Kekulandala, six households in the sample of 19 had women as the sole income earners.

Structural Impediments to Income Generating Capacity of Workers

A major feature of the status of rubber plantation labour identified in this study is the fact that the plantation regime offers no possibilities for workers to earn extra income other than the limited income earning space offered by the estate.

These limitations begin with the fact that workers usually do not get work for the entire month. As found in this survey, women workers in medium size estates are not given work for more than 15 days a month, thereby freezing even their legitimate income earning capacity. Secondly, the extremely limited opportunities for over-time work further restrict the total monthly income of the worker. Rubber-tapping workers are particularly disadvantaged on this count too, because there are hardly any opportunities for them to obtain over-time work. As revealed in this survey, even in instances where rubber-tappers secured over-time work, their additional earnings from that work rarely reached Rs. 100.00 a month.

As a means of making extra income, rubber tappers may collect scrap rubber and get paid for the quantities collected. However, the income from scrap rubber is always a negligible sum, often less than Rs. 10.00 a month. Not a single worker interviewed reported any substantial income by collecting scrap rubber.

This picture of extremely low income generating capacity of rubber plantation workers is not unique in the sense that tea plantation workers also suffer a similar condition of poverty. What is, nonetheless, noteworthy is that the rubber plantation labour is confined to a certain structure which, by negating opportunities for better income levels and

living conditions, re-produces, almost as a rule, poverty of its labour. Thus, continuous poverty of workers is not only a result, but also an essential condition of the plantation regime.

Health and Nutrition

This survey revealed that the health and nutritional standards among workers and their families were very low. Although it is a cliché, one cannot resist the observation that low income ensures low nutrition levels in the family. A striking feature of the health and nutritional standards among the households is that the working women are particularly prone to low nutrition, because they, as a habit generated by poverty, tend to skip one or two meals a day. Most of the women surveyed in this study reported to miss the breakfast and even the lunch. Women usually eat only one meal a day. They go to work having only a cup of plain tea, and the lunch taken while working is mostly bread with sugar or with just one curry. Food is generally devoid of protein. A large number of families surveyed reported to consume fish just once or twice a month. Meanwhile, the work of a rubber tapper involves harsh and demanding manual work, walking several miles every day. The vicious combination in the life particularly of a female rubber tapper are low income, low nutrition and physically hard work.

The unavailability of food--rice and/or vegetables--in the estate as well as in the village either at low prices or free of charge is obviously indicative of the changes in the rural economy that are hostile to the rural plantation proletariat. While the rural economy is thoroughly monetised, the workers in the village do not generally own agrarian land. Even in the few instances where some paddy land is cultivated, the extent of the land is so small and the yield so low that the produce is hardly adequate to strengthen the supply of food for the family's consumption. Homestead gardening, which could have provided vegetables and green leaves, is not enthusiastically practiced by the villagers. Of course, this is not a unique feature of the rural agrarian culture of the village-based workers who were surveyed in this study, but a general tendency among the rural poor of the Wet Zone of Sri Lanka. Nevertheless, an observation that can be made with regard to the rural proletariat in this study is that once the rural peasants become wage workers, they tend to lay less and less emphasis on means of livelihood associated with farming.

Sources of free or less expensive food available for the estate-resident workers are not better either. Although some workers do raise pigs and chicken, they sell the animals for extra income which is, in any case, not very high. Raising pigs and poultry farming has meanwhile contributed to the deterioration of hygienic standards of the worker-households, because the workers are not provided with extra space for these activities. Under conditions of extremely limited living space for both human beings and animals, the animals freely intermingle with the human beings, invariably contaminating food and drinking water. This phenomenon occurs notwithstanding the fact that plantations are large areas of space, portions of which could easily be made available to workers to accommodate cattle, pigs and poultry. Perhaps, the land economics of plantation regimes do not allow such utilization of space.

One of the most intriguing questions that arose concerning food and nutrition among resident estate worker families is their reluctance to utilise for consumption the green leaves that are freely grown and available in the rubber estates. When questioned, many women gave the rather evasive answer, "there is hardly any time to go to the field and pick the green leaves." This answer perhaps encapsulates a number of factors. It is plausible that women, after the day's work and with obligatory household chores, find no time or energy to go in search of even freely available food. The gender division of labour in the household, even among the rural peasantry, is such that men would hardly go to the field to gather green leaves (plucking jack-fruits and coconuts is supposed to be the man's work!). Equally important is the lack of nutrition awareness among these workers, both male and female. The culture of extreme poverty is also a culture of disregarding low-cost nutritional possibilities.¹

¹ These observations obviously go against the grain of urban, middle class ideology of rural life, which tends to romanticise the food habits of the rural poor. The rural proletarian women in this study clearly defy the poetic image of smiling "green-leave gatherers." Besides, the penetration of the retail market economy into rural life has, almost as a rule, homogenized consumption patterns and food habits among the poor; dhal and dry-fish with rice, purchased from the village grocery shop are thus the "universal" components of this consumption culture of the poor.

Savings and Indebtedness

As revealed in this study, indebtedness is universally prevalent among all households. As in any culture of extreme poverty, indebtedness is an important survival strategy for the households surveyed.

This study also confirmed the usual pattern that women primarily bear the responsibility of obtaining loans and credit in times of financial difficulties and family emergencies. This can be attributed to the fact that since the women are employed and they largely manage the household affairs, the management of family emergencies is also their responsibility.

The saving habit is also mostly prevalent among women. One noticeable feature of saving among the households is the very low amount of money left for saving. However, the saving habit continues, irrespective of the amount saved. The *seettu* system, which is an informal method of saving popular among rural as well as urban low-income groups, is fairly widespread among the estate-resident as well as village-based families.

It should however be noted that saving is almost exclusively a habit among women. The tendency among men to waste a share of their earnings in gambling or liquor, although it is not unique to the samples studied, was a consistent claim made by the women.

There was, however, a notable exception in the samples studied; In Kallumale and Daniston estates, not a single worker had a savings account in a bank. Only three women had *seettu* savings. This exceptionally low standard of savings is primarily due to the fact that in these two privately owned estates, the monthly income of workers remains low as a result of the fewer number of work days available for the workers.

Children

In almost all families, children's education is adversely effected, because of the parents' poverty. In estate Tamil families, the practice of sending children out as household servants still persists. Worker's children, whether Tamil or Sinhala, have no opportunities of

social mobility, unless they totally escape from the estate and the village.

A tendency noticed particularly among resident Tamil worker families is to send their young children for domestic or casual employment to places outside the estate. This is partly due to the fact that jobs for young children were not available within the estate. However, as indicated by a number of parents at interviews, another compelling reason for the young children being sent out for employment is the parents' hope that at least their children, when they grow up, would manage to move away from the harsh confines of the rubber plantation.

As a general rule, children's welfare remains thoroughly neglected. Even when creche facilities are made available to look after the children of working mothers, the service is badly administered. Neither the plantation management nor the creche workers did appear to give much attention to the proper and satisfactory maintenance of the facility already available. Indeed, the working mothers did not express much confidence in the creche facility either, implying corruption.

An observation made on the question of creche facilities during field visits is that the working mothers need to be educated on the utility of this important service. Creche--in the sense that one's infant children could be looked after by a stranger to the family-- is an entirely new concept, particularly for estate workers, whose social relations with the world outside the estate are extremely limited. The traditional as well as existing practice for looking after young children is two-fold: either to leave the child with a neighboring family where an elderly woman would look after the child or to leave the child at home, if the family has an older girl child. In the latter option, it is almost the rule that the grown up girl-child is compelled to give up her school education in order to look after younger siblings. The popularisation and better provision of creche facilities will therefore remove one major reason for the continuation of school drop out rate among young female children of worker families.

The lack of enthusiasm on the part of estate management and creche attendants to provide a better service to estate workers' children appears to have a subtle ethnic as well as a class dimension, too. If the attendant is a Sinhalese young woman from the village, she is very likely to be de-motivated to look after well poor Tamil children, because of the ethnic and class prejudices against Tamil plantation workers. Malnutrition and poor health among children, particularly in Tamil families resident in estates, was observed to prevail universally.

The health and welfare services available for children are both inadequate and inefficient.

Unionisation

Trade unions are not universally present in the plantations surveyed for this study. In the estates where workers are unionised, the union membership exists merely at a nominal level. The unions are affiliated to the national political parties. Membership fees are deducted monthly from the salaries of workers.

A striking contrast between the tea plantation labour in general and the rubber plantation labour in the Kalutara district is the absence in the latter of a politically assertive union leadership. Some workers interviewed were not even aware of the name of their union or of the union leaders. The union representatives in the estates did not seem to maintain close links with their members, nor have the workers particularly benefitted from their unionisation. Consequently, the membership of trade unions exists merely as a matter of course, the only regular reminder of the existence of the union being the deduction of membership fees from the workers' monthly wages.

The ineffectiveness of trade unions and their total neglect of the members' welfare brings to focus a rather disturbing point: the monthly membership fee deducted from the worker's wage--either Rs. 10. 00 or 15. 00, depending on the union-- is in fact a financial liability to many of these workers who are living under conditions of extreme poverty. As pointed out elsewhere in this study, the monthly union membership fee, although it may be seen as a small amount of money, often exceeds the total of extra income that a worker can earn during a whole month by collecting scrap rubber.

In two instances in the sample, Kumbaduwa and Katukelle, unionisation among workers is discouraged by the employer. In these two estates, the plantation owners maintained a patron-client link with workers, telling them that they would look after the welfare of the workers and therefore the formation of trade unions were not necessary. The workers too expressed the view that their employers were good. It is perhaps the case that when trade unions do not enjoy much esteem among the workers in general and the unions have remained inactive, employers could succeed in putting pressure on their workers not to join

unions. In fact, some workers interviewed said that they feared reprisals from the employer, in case they formed a union in the estate.

Importance of State Intervention

This study revealed that outside intervention, usually state intervention, is crucial for any change for the better of the worker families in rubber plantations. Slightly better housing facilities and food consumption, and even sanitary and health facilities, have been provided not by the plantation owners, but by the state.

The enhancement of family income very significantly by food stamps for school children indicates the necessity of outside intervention in the form of social welfarist measures.

Issues Concerning Labour and Women

i. Rubber plantation labor, both male and female, remains totally neglected. Since the workers come from an already poor background --they are the poorest of the poor in the area--they are relegated to a culture of extreme poverty and backwardness. Poverty perpetuates poverty and backwardness while workers and their children have no way to escape from the existing harsh conditions. Conditions are worse among resident Tamil workers.

ii. Technology of rubber tapping is manual and there is still no possibility of changing the technology so that working conditions can be improved. However, the present practices are harmful to the health and hygienic conditions of the workers. It is a common sight that particularly the female workers continue to wear throughout the day the same clothes --stained with latex -- that they had worn during rubber tapping. Hygienic working habits and conditions are extremely necessary to be introduced to the rubber tapping labour.

iii. In the rubber plantation labor regime, workers have absolutely no avenues for occupational or social upward mobility. To be a rubber -tapper or a worker is an occupational trap, as particularly evident among resident Tamil workers. They work and live as workers,

many workers, beget workers and die as workers. Working women are specifically subject to bearing the burden of continuous poverty.

iv. In the tea plantation sector, there has been state as well as non-state intervention to provide welfare, educational and medical facilities. The low country rubber plantation economy is almost totally neglected by outside agencies. Even when some outside intervention has occurred (UNICEF and Women's Bureau for example), the results are negligible.

v. Worker families live in harsh living conditions. Estate housing, health and sanitary conditions are constantly deteriorating. Nearly sixty years of social welfarism and the rhetoric of worker emancipation have not reached these worker families.

vi. Training programs on nutrition, health and hygiene are absolutely necessary to improve the living conditions of these families.

vii. The problem of poor health and malnutrition among children and working women needs immediate attention of the state as well as non-state agencies.

viii. Unless the children of these workers' families are linked with the mainstream of progress (education, employment, and social mobility) in a conscious policy of rural development, these families will continue to reproduce poverty.

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