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Ministry

Workers collect tea leaves at a plantation in Pussellawa, Sri Lanka. (Thomas Scaria)

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Behind every cup of world-famous Ceylon tea, there is a story of exploitation and bonded labor, says Apostolic Carmel Sr. Maria Amali, whose congregation has worked among Sri Lanka's tea plantation workers for almost 100 years.

Sri Lanka (which was known earlier as Ceylon) ranks third behind China and Kenya as the largest tea exporters in the world.

"Tea brings revenue and fame for Sri Lanka, but the authorities have conveniently ignored the workers who produce it and they remain the most marginalized community in the country," the 60-year-old nun, who has served for 10 years among these workers, told Global Sisters Report.

Besides Amali's congregation, nuns from Salvatorian, Holy Cross, Sisters of Charity of Jesus and Mary and Good Shepherd congregations also serve the workers in education, women's empowerment, health and community-based rehabilitation.

Apostolic Carmel Sr. Maria Amali shares a lighter moment with the father of a kindergarten student at her convent in Pussellawa, Sri Lanka. (Thomas Scaria)

Amali, who still climbs the hills of tea plantations, said British colonists brought the forefathers of the workers from the Tamil Nadu region of neighboring India around 200 years ago.

On Nov. 2, 2023, Catholic and Protestant churches joined various political parties and local and international groups to celebrate the bicentenary of the workers' arrival.

Amali said many bicentenary projects for the workers have not taken off as most do not own land in Sri Lanka.

The nun, who celebrated 40 years of religious life on April 12 while recovering from laser therapy for abdominal cancer, accompanied GSR to a tea plantation close to her convent in Pussellawa, some 90 miles northeast of Colombo.

She said she was still in pain, but would not miss a chance to be with her people.

Sri Lanka's 169,000 plantation workers now live in the 10-square feet rooms the British built two centuries ago. The overcrowded shacks lack basic needs and its occupants have limited access to education and essential services, Amali said.

Apostolic Carmel Sr. Maria Amali visits a tea factory to interact with workers. (Thomas Scaria)

"They are also underpaid and exploited, and even their national identity is not well defined," bemoaned the nun, who said her country calls the workers "Indian Tamils" or "Hill country Tamils," not Sri Lankan citizens.

While traveling in an India-made three-wheeler taxi, locally called a tuk-tuk, through the green plantations, we came across heaps of plastic bags filled with tea leaves on the roadside.

Lourdu Mary, who was plucking tea leaves, said they have no specific work hours, but continue until they collect the required quantity of leaves to earn the wages.

"I have been working for 24 years in the plantation but I am still in debt. My only solace is that I could educate my four children, because of the sisters' support," the

middle-aged Catholic woman told GSR while hurrying to finish her job before the "pickup van" came to carry the bags.

Vijayalakshmi works on a tea plantation in Pussellawa, in Sri Lanka's Central Province. (Thomas Scaria)

Her neighbor Vijayalakshmi, a Hindu, dreams of going to the Middle East to work as a maid. But a loan from her boss for her daughter's marriage holds her back. "They will not let us leave until we pay back," she added.

Sr. Maria Ebisagini, another member of the Pussellawa convent, manages a Montessori school for the workers' children. During Global Sisters Report's visit, she was busy with parents and some youth groups, setting up stalls and decorations, as they planned a festival the next day.

"We conduct such festivals as part of promoting entrepreneurship among children and their parents," Ebisagini said.

The parents who have money, exchange their products with others. "This way we encourage their involvement with the child's education and growth," the nun told GSR.

Apostolic Carmel Sr. Maria Ebisagini coordinates preparations for a trade fair at her preschool in Pussellawa, Sri Lanka. (Thomas Scaria)

Around 60 miles north of Pussellawa lies Badulla, where the Apostolic Carmel nuns have a nearly 100-year-old convent and St. Ursula's Girls Home, which was founded in 1934.

Sr. Maria Pramilda, who manages the home of around 45 children, says her girls study in a government-managed Tamil medium school.

The school was run by the sisters until 1960, when the Sri Lankan government nationalized all schools under private management.

Pramilda says the changes in the government education policies have affected the quality of education. "English medium education was almost fully abolished and young people could not get proper jobs in Sri Lanka or abroad," she told GSR.

The Tamils were further hit when the government enforced Sinhala as the medium of instruction in schools until recently, she said.

After the school nationalization, her congregation focused on preschools and hostels for girls that over the years have served Tamil youth.

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Pramilda says the literacy rate among the plantation workers is much below the national average. Widespread use of alcohol was noticed among these workers, including women. An estimated 31% of women workers use alcohol that has affected their children's upbringing, she explained.

Many women also suffer sexual abuse and domestic violence, she added.

Her hostel girls recover from their trauma with counseling and care. "Several of our former girls have come up in life with jobs and better living conditions," Pramilda said.

One of them, Maharani, an orphan, now studies law in Poland.

Pramilda quoted her acknowledging that she would not have had that opportunity but for the nuns' help.

"For me, my parents are the Catholic nuns and I am ever indebted to them," said the message from Maharani, who now wants to fight for the human rights of the plantation workers after her studies.

Malkanthi, who too grew up in the hostel, plans to join a university. "I have nowhere to go, and no one to claim as my parents, but I have a mother home," she told GSR in English, holding Pramilda's hands.

She is currently assisting the nun as a hostel warden and English teacher.

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Apostolic Carmel Sr. Maria Ebisagini with a student of the Montessori school that is managed by her congregation for tea plantation workers' children at Pussellawa, Sri Lanka (Thomas Scaria)

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Apostolic Carmel Sr. Maria Amali visits a worker at a tea factory. (Thomas Scaria)

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Children of tea plantation workers return from classes at a Tamil medium school in Pussellawa, Sri Lanka. (Thomas Scaria)

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Apostolic Carmel Sr. Maria Pramilda, left, the director of a girl's home for the children of tea plantation workers at Badulla, Sri Lanka (Thomas Scaria)

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Apostolic Carmel Sr. Maria Daphney, right, and Sr. Maria Lakmalini, who serve tea plantation workers in Badulla, a hill countryside in central Sri Lanka (Thomas Scaria)

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The iconic post office of Nuwereliya, a hill station that was the main communication center of the British planters in Sri Lanka (Thomas Scaria)

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Kids enjoy an outdoor session at the Montessori school managed by Sr. Pupika Perera of the Sisters of Charity of Jesus and Mary at Nuwereliya, Sri Lanka. (Thomas Scaria)

Apostolic Carmel Sr. Maria Daphney, another member of the Badulla convent, says the tea plantation workers have become victims of an institutionalized, exploitative system that they cannot easily break.

The Salvatorians have a convent on the outskirts of Badulla where they have joined Caritas Sri Lanka to work in human rights movements that demand just wages for the workers.

The sisters also manage preschools for the workers' children and conduct an outreach program for the youth.

"We have formed some youth groups in villages to help them take leadership roles in their community and fight for justice," Salvatorian Sr. Thushari Fernando, who has worked among the plantation communities for more than 20 years, told GSR.

When the British left the island nation in 1948, they handed over the tea plantations to the government. "But the situation of the workers has only worsened thereafter," Fernando said.

Many private groups, who had bought the plantations from the government, forced the authorities to fix a minimum wage that is less than 1,000 Sri Lankan rupees (US$3.50) a day. "That too, only if they pick at least 18 kilos of tea leaves a day," Fernando explained.

Tea leaves are collected in plastic bags ready for transport to tea factories in Sri Lanka. (Thomas Scaria)

Most young people in the plantations have migrated to cities to work in hotels or do menial jobs that get them better wages.

The Sisters of the Holy Cross serve in Badulla's Central Hospital, and provide health care services to the tea plantation workers.

One of them, Sister Domilda, a nurse, said they often organize health camps for the tea workers. "The health condition of the tea estate workers is really bad," said the nun, who observed that despite giving free health services, the workers seldom come for further treatment in hospital.

"If they don't work a day, there is no meal in their homes," the Holy Cross nun explained.

In Nuwereliya, an upcountry tourist destination some 100 miles east of Colombo, the Sisters of Charity of Jesus and Mary manage a Montessori school as well as form self-help groups for women.

Sr. Rupika Perera, superior of the convent, says they also reach out to the children's parents.

"We have monthly meetings with the parents and where we convince them about the importance of education as a step to improvements in life," she told GSR.

The Charity of Jesus and Mary nuns manage a Montessori school for the children of plantation and factory workers at Nuwereliya town, a hill station in central Sri Lanka. (Thomas Scaria)

The Good Shepherd Sisters have adapted a community-based approach to serve plantation children without institutionalizing them.

Good Shepherd Sr. Ayola Corera told GSR that they, too, were involved in children's education for several years, but in 2017 began a community-based project that cares for children in their homes.

"For this, our sisters visit homes and ensure a healthy environment for children to grow under the care of parents," said the nun, who is based at her congregation's headquarters in Wattala, near Colombo.

Fr. Dilex Shanth Fernando, the parish priest of St. Mary's Cathedral in Nuwereliya, says the church has been in the forefront to ensure social justice for the plantation workers, and the nuns have played a major role in educating the new generation.

"Perhaps we have failed in ensuring justice and dignity for them in social, political and economic spheres, but certainly the church, with the sisters' help, has educated their young generations to come up in life," he said.