Tea Farming and Workers: The Part Marketing Skips

From the teas.co.uk wiki

> **Tea plantation labour, in summary:** The full picture of who picks tea: wages, conditions, women workers, what certifications do and do not fix, and what a drinker can actually do.

The least marketed and most important part of tea ethics is the people who pick it. It sits in the ethics cluster alongside ethical tea sourcing.

Last reviewed by the teas.co.uk team in May 2026.

Issue	Detail
Wage levels	Tea wages in major producers (Kenya, Sri Lanka, Assam) are at or below national minimum
Working conditions	Long hours, weather exposure, repetitive strain; some estates far better than others
Housing on estates	Many workers live on-estate in basic housing; conditions vary widely
Women workers	Most pickers are women in many regions; reports of harassment and safety gaps
Child labour	Less common than once but persists in some smallholder contexts; certified estates largely free
Certified vs uncertified	Rainforest Alliance, Fairtrade, Ethical Tea Partnership members show measurably better conditions
What certification doesn't fix	Underlying low wages; structural inequality; long-term political reform

Why labour is the core question, and the documented problems

Quality tea is largely hand-plucked, intensely labour-intensive and concentrated in lower-income producing regions, so working conditions are not a side issue but the core ethical question. The cheap UK cup (roughly 3-5p mainstream) rests on the labour-cost difference between origin countries and Britain, which is a structural fact rather than a moral indictment of tea-drinking. A responsible resource should say what mainstream marketing skips: multiple credible investigations over the past fifteen years (the 2015 BBC Panorama on Assam estates, an Oxfam report on Sri Lankan estates, journalists' work on Kenyan

plantations) have documented poverty wages, poor housing, inadequate healthcare and gender-based safety concerns. These are mainstream findings backed by site visits and worker interviews, not marginal claims. See is tea sustainable.

Smallholders, estates, and what certifications attempt

Tea is not one labour story. Smallholder farms (common in Kenya and parts of India) are small family plots, where the issues are income volatility and weak bargaining power against buyers. Plantation estates (typical in Sri Lanka, Assam and large parts of Kenya) employ wage workers, where the issues are low wages, on-estate housing and employer-employee power imbalances. Certifications target different points: Fairtrade requires minimum producer prices plus a social premium; Rainforest Alliance is process- and sustainability-focused with some labour standards; the Ethical Tea Partnership is an industry coalition coordinating improvement projects. Each is a partial improvement, not a full fix, and the combined certifications (Fairtrade plus Organic plus Rainforest Alliance) deliver the most robust outcomes. See Fairtrade.

What a drinker can realistically do

Buying certified tea consistently does measurably improve outcomes for those producers' workers, but it does not single-handedly reform a global industry. A useful heuristic is transparency: brands that publish specific, auditable sourcing and welfare detail (Williamson on its Kenyan estates, Pukka and Clipper on their certifications) are usually the ones with better practice to publish, while resistance to disclosure often signals the opposite. The structural limit is real: the per-cup price leaves little margin, and even doubling picker wages would add only a few pence at UK retail, technically achievable but needing brand willingness and consumer acceptance. So the realistic forecast is gradual improvement, driven by cumulative consumer choice, which is exactly why the certified market is far bigger now than twenty years ago. See ethical tea sourcing.

What to buy

Prefer credibly certified to uncertified: Fairtrade lines like Clipper, Rainforest Alliance brands such as Teapigs, or organic-and-Fairtrade combined options. Browse the full tea shop. Buy on the cup and the per cup price, never the marketing; free UK delivery is over £35.

Reference noted

- Encyclopaedia Britannica: Tea (beverage)

FROM THE CURATOR

teas · The infusion is more important than the shop. A short careful brew can lift a budget bag past a careless premium one.

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- Ethical tea sourcing
- Tea and Fairtrade
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- Rainforest Alliance tea

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