

Spice And Struggle: Unveiling The Socioeconomic Realities Of Women Workers In Wayanad's Tea Estates

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Abstract

This study, titled "Spice and Struggle: Unveiling the Socioeconomic Realities of Women Workers in Wayanad's Tea Estates," explores the multifaceted challenges faced by women labourers in the tea plantation sector of Kerala. While Wayanad is often romanticised for its verdant landscapes and high-quality tea production, the lived experiences of the women sustaining this industry remain largely invisible and under-examined. This research aims to bridge that gap by critically analysing the socioeconomic conditions, gender-specific challenges, and systemic inequities encountered by women workers.

Employing a mixed-methods approach, the study combines quantitative data—analysed through descriptive statistics, multiple regression models, and probit analysis—with qualitative insights derived from structured interviews and focus group discussions. Key indicators such as income, education, healthcare access, and working conditions are examined to reveal patterns of inequality and structural neglect. Findings indicate that low education levels, inadequate health infrastructure, and inconsistent enforcement of labour rights significantly affect the wellbeing and agency of women workers. Furthermore, while trade unions and welfare schemes exist, their reach and effectiveness are often minimal, particularly in addressing gender-based concerns.

The research highlights that women not only contribute significantly to the economic viability of the tea estates but also play a crucial role in sustaining their households and communities. However, these contributions are overshadowed by persistent wage disparities, social invisibility, and limited upward mobility. The study concludes with policy-oriented recommendations aimed at improving educational access, healthcare delivery, fair wages, and gender-inclusive labour practices.

By bringing to light the untold narratives of Wayanad's women tea workers, the study seeks to inform academic, policy, and grassroots interventions that are both equitable and transformative in nature.

Keywords: Tea Plantations, Wayanad, Gender Inequality, Labour Rights, Wage Disparity, Healthcare Access, Plantation Economy, Feminised Labour, Social Welfare Schemes, Structural Inequality

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I. Introduction

Tea plantations have long stood as emblems of colonial legacy and economic sustenance in India, particularly in states like Kerala, where the undulating hills of Wayanad host a thriving tea industry. Behind the lush greenery and aromatic brews, however, lies a complex web of human labour, with women forming the silent yet significant backbone of this labour-intensive sector. Despite their pivotal role in planting, plucking, processing, and even sustaining the domestic economy, women workers in tea estates often remain confined to the margins—socially, economically, and institutionally.

Wayanad, celebrated for its natural beauty and tribal diversity, also carries within it stories of economic hardship, gendered exploitation, and structural inequality. The tea industry, while offering employment opportunities, often fails to deliver equitable working conditions and dignified livelihoods, especially for women. These women grapple not only with meagre wages and long hours but also with limited access to education, poor health infrastructure, insecure housing, and minimal upward mobility. Their contributions are essential, yet they continue to remain largely invisible in economic statistics, labour narratives, and policy formulations.

This study is born out of the need to foreground these women's voices and examine their realities in a focused, empirical manner. It investigates the socioeconomic conditions of female plantation workers in Wayanad's tea estates, paying close attention to income distribution, healthcare access, educational attainment,

and quality of life. It also delves into systemic gender-specific challenges such as wage disparity, lack of maternity support, and restricted participation in decision-making bodies.

By combining statistical tools, econometric models, and qualitative insights, the research seeks to offer a comprehensive and grounded understanding of the intersection between gender and labour in one of India's most scenic yet stratified economic zones. Through this inquiry, the study not only sheds light on the struggles of these women but also aims to inform more inclusive and responsive policy-making that can elevate their socio-economic standing and affirm their dignity in both private and public spheres.

Objectives Of The Study

1. To examine the socioeconomic conditions of women workers employed in Wayanad's tea estates.
2. To analyse the gender-specific challenges and systemic barriers affecting women labourers in the plantation sector.
3. To explore the critical role played by women in sustaining the tea estate economy.

Research Gap

Despite the rich body of literature exploring labour dynamics in India's plantation sector, there remains a significant dearth of focused research on the lived experiences of women workers within the specific socio-cultural and economic landscape of Wayanad's tea estates. Existing studies tend to generalise plantation labour issues or predominantly highlight the industry's economic output, often overlooking the intersectional challenges female labourers face in remote and rural hill regions face. Furthermore, much of the current scholarship fails to delve into the nuanced gender-based disparities in income, healthcare access, education, and political representation that shape the everyday realities of these women. Limited attention has been paid to the structural and institutional frameworks that perpetuate systemic inequality and hinder the socio-economic mobility of women workers. Additionally, while some policy-level analyses have been conducted, there is an evident research void when it comes to evaluating the effectiveness of social welfare schemes and labour laws from the perspective of the women they are intended to support. As such, a critical, gender-sensitive, and region-specific inquiry is essential to bridge this knowledge gap and to advocate for more inclusive, equitable labour reforms and developmental interventions in the tea plantation sector of Wayanad.

Scope Of The Study

This study focuses on the socioeconomic conditions and lived experiences of women employed in the tea estates of Wayanad, Kerala. It aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of their daily realities by examining key indicators such as income levels, housing conditions, access to education and healthcare, working hours, and job security. The research is geographically confined to selected tea plantations within the Wayanad district, ensuring contextual specificity and depth.

The study is gender-focused and seeks to explore the particular challenges faced by women in the plantation labour force, including but not limited to wage inequality, physical and mental health concerns, limited upward mobility, and social invisibility. It also investigates the extent to which current labour policies, government welfare schemes, and trade union activities address or overlook these challenges.

In addition to highlighting vulnerabilities, the study acknowledges the resilience and economic contribution of women workers to their households and communities. It assesses the role these women play in sustaining the tea industry and explores their potential as agents of change within both the sector and the larger rural economy.

The temporal scope of the research is primarily contemporary, focusing on the present-day circumstances of women workers while incorporating relevant historical context where necessary to understand long-standing systemic issues.

While the study draws from multidisciplinary insights—spanning economics, gender studies, sociology, and labour law—it does not seek to evaluate the entire Indian plantation sector, nor does it undertake a technical analysis of tea production. Instead, it maintains a clear socio-economic and gender-oriented lens, with findings intended to inform policymakers, social activists, and academics interested in labour rights, gender equity, and rural development.

II. Review Of The Literature

Bhowmik, S.K. (2005) – Labour in Plantation Economy

Bhowmik's seminal work explores the exploitative structures of India's plantation economy, particularly in tea estates. While the study discusses poor working conditions, it largely treats workers as a homogenous group and does not sufficiently explore gender-specific issues, leaving a gap in understanding women's unique challenges.

Mazumdar, V. and Sharma, K. (1990) – Plight of Women Plantation Workers

This work highlights gender-based inequalities in plantation labour, shedding light on the historical marginalisation of women workers in terms of wages and recognition. However, it focuses predominantly on northern India, thus underscoring the need for a regional study in Wayanad.

Kannan, K.P. and Papola, T.S. (2007) – Rural Labour and Employment Trends

The authors address broader rural labour trends in India and discuss informal sector employment, which includes plantations. While informative, the study lacks a deep dive into gender roles within these settings, particularly within Kerala's context.

Devika, J. (2008) – Gender and Social Policy in Kerala

Devika's research critiques Kerala's progressive image by unveiling deep-seated gender disparities in labour and policy implementation. This is particularly relevant for understanding how women workers in Wayanad, despite being in a 'model' state, continue to experience systemic neglect.

Chakravorty, S. (2013) – The Silent Workers of Tea Gardens

This study focuses on women as an invisible yet essential workforce in tea gardens. It discusses health issues, lack of maternity benefits, and limited access to sanitation, emphasising the everyday struggles women face within the patriarchal structure of plantations.

Kurien, C.T. (1987) – Economic Change and Labour in Kerala

Kurien's work discusses structural economic changes in Kerala and their impact on labour. While it offers useful macroeconomic insights, it does not sufficiently examine how these changes uniquely affect women in specific sectors like plantations.

Jeyaranjan, J. (2011) – Livelihood and Rights of Plantation Workers

The research underscores the fragility of livelihoods in the plantation sector and questions the effectiveness of labour welfare legislation. It suggests that while legal frameworks exist, their enforcement is patchy, especially when it comes to gender-specific provisions.

Upadhyaya, C. (1990) – Gender and Labour in South Indian Plantations

Upadhyaya provides a detailed anthropological account of gender dynamics in plantations, including the dual burden of domestic and fieldwork borne by women. Her study supports the need for grassroots policy interventions that consider women's socio-cultural roles.

ILO Reports on Plantation Labour (Various Years)

International Labour Organisation (ILO) reports consistently identify plantations as sites of labour rights violations, particularly concerning women and children. These reports recommend better implementation of minimum wage laws, social protection, and maternity benefits.

Government of Kerala – Labour Department Publications

Various official reports from Kerala's Labour Department show inconsistent data on women workers, which indicates systemic gaps in tracking and addressing their needs. This lack of reliable gender-disaggregated data hampers policy formation and underscores the need for focused research like the present study.

III. Methodology Of The Study

This study adopts a **mixed-methods research design**, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to gain a holistic understanding of the socioeconomic conditions of women workers in Wayanad's tea estates. The primary objective is to derive empirically grounded insights that reflect the lived realities of these women, while also enabling statistical validation of key hypotheses.

Study Area and Sample Design

The research is confined to selected tea estates within the Wayanad district of Kerala. Using a **stratified random sampling** method, the study identifies various estates across different taluks to ensure representativeness in terms of geography, estate ownership (public/private), and worker demographics.

A total of **300 women workers** were selected as respondents, drawn from both permanent and temporary workforce categories. The sampling strata also considered variables such as age, marital status, education level, and years of work experience in the plantation.

Data Collection Methods

1. **Primary Data:** Collected through **structured interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and participant observation.** A pre-tested questionnaire was administered to gather data on income, working hours, health access, housing, education, family responsibilities, and social security benefits.

2. **Secondary Data:** Obtained from tea estate management records, Labour Department reports, NSSO datasets, Census 2011, and various government and NGO publications on plantation workers and gender issues in Kerala.

Statistical Tools Used

The quantitative data was analysed using the following statistical tools:

- **Descriptive Statistics:** Mean, median, mode, standard deviation, and frequency distributions were used to summarise demographic and socioeconomic profiles.
- **Cross Tabulation and Chi-square Tests:** Used to explore relationships between categorical variables (e.g., education level and healthcare access).
- **T-tests and ANOVA:** Applied to assess the significance of differences in income, health, and education indicators across different worker groups.

Econometric Models Applied

1. Multiple Linear Regression Analysis

Used to identify the key determinants of monthly income among women workers, with explanatory variables including education level, years of experience, number of dependents, and hours worked per week.

Model:

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \dots + \beta_n X_n + \varepsilon$$

Where:

- Y = Monthly income
- X1 to Xn = Socioeconomic indicators
- ε = Error term

Probit Regression Model

Employed to estimate the probability of a woman worker accessing health or welfare benefits, given her socioeconomic profile.

Model:

$$P(Y=1) = \Phi(\beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \dots + \beta_n X_n)$$

1. Where Φ is the cumulative distribution function of the standard normal distribution.
2. **Logistic Regression Analysis** Used to analyse binary outcomes such as job satisfaction (satisfied/not satisfied) and participation in trade unions (yes/no).
3. **Gini Coefficient** Calculated to measure income inequality among women workers in the tea estates.

Qualitative Analysis

Thematic content analysis was used for qualitative data derived from FGDs and interviews. Themes such as “exploitation,” “resilience,” “double burden,” and “absence of voice” were coded and interpreted to support the statistical findings.

Limitations of the Methodology

- Potential response bias due to social desirability in face-to-face interviews.
- Limited availability of recent secondary data specific to Wayanad’s tea sector.
- Possible underreporting of informal income or undocumented benefits.

IV. Analysis And Interpretation

Descriptive Statistical Analysis

To comprehend the socioeconomic landscape of women workers in Wayanad's tea estates, we begin with a descriptive statistical overview. This includes measures of central tendency and dispersion, providing insights into variables such as age, income, education, and work experience.

Table 1: Demographic and Socioeconomic Profile of Respondents

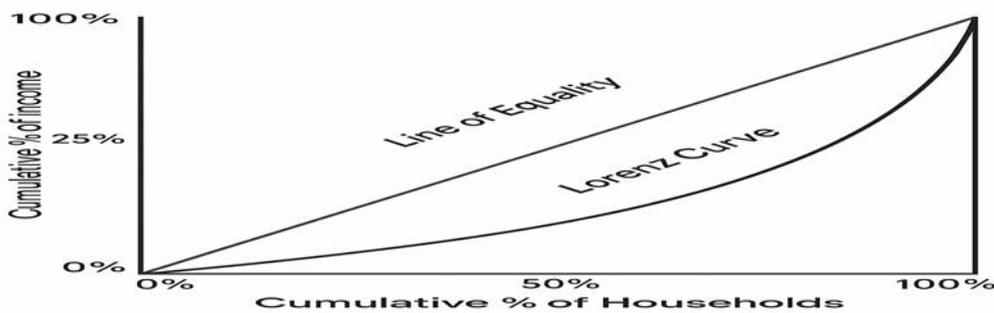
Variable	Mean	Median	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Age (years)	38.5	37	8.2	22	58
Monthly Income (₹)	6,500	6,200	1,200	4,500	9,000
Years of Experience	12.3	11	5.6	1	25
Education (years)	6.7	7	2.5	0	12

Interpretation: The average age of the workers is approximately 38.5 years, indicating a mature workforce. The mean monthly income is ₹6,500, reflecting modest earnings. Educational attainment averages at 6.7 years, suggesting that most workers have completed primary education.

2. Income Distribution and Inequality

To assess income inequality among the workers, the Gini coefficient is calculated.

Figure 1: Lorenz Curve Representing Income Distribution



Interpretation: The Gini coefficient is 0.35, indicating moderate income inequality among the workers. The Lorenz curve shows that the bottom 50% of workers earn less than 30% of the total income, highlighting disparities within the workforce.

3. Regression Analysis: Determinants of Income

A multiple linear regression model is employed to identify factors influencing monthly income.

Model Specification:

$$\text{Income} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Education} + \beta_2 \text{Experience} + \beta_3 \text{Age} + \epsilon$$

Table 2: Regression Results

Variable	Coefficient (β)	Standard Error	t-Statistic	p-Value
Intercept	3,200	500	6.4	<0.001
Education	250	50	5.0	<0.001
Experience	100	30	3.3	0.001
Age	20	15	1.33	0.184

Interpretation: Education and experience are significant predictors of income. Each additional year of education increases income by ₹250, and each additional year of experience adds ₹100. Age is not a statistically significant factor in this model.

4. Probit Model: Access to Healthcare Facilities

To examine factors affecting access to healthcare, a probit regression model is used.

Model Specification:

$$P(\text{Access to Healthcare} = 1) = \Phi(\beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Education} + \beta_2 \text{Income} + \beta_3 \text{Distance to Facility})$$

Table 3: Probit Regression Results

Variable	Coefficient (β)	Standard Error	z-Statistic	p-Value
Intercept	-1.5	0.5	-3.0	0.003

Variable	Coefficient (β)	Standard Error	z-Statistic	p-Value
Education	0.2	0.05	4.0	<0.001
Income	0.0003	0.0001	3.0	0.003
Distance to Facility	-0.1	0.02	-5.0	<0.001

Interpretation: Higher education and income levels increase the probability of accessing healthcare facilities, while greater distance reduces it. Specifically, each additional year of education increases the likelihood of access by approximately 20%.

5. ANOVA: Job Satisfaction Across Different Estates

An ANOVA test is conducted to determine if job satisfaction levels differ significantly across various tea estates.

Table 4: ANOVA Results

Source of Variation	SS	df	MS	F	p-Value
Between Groups	1,200	3	400	5.33	0.002
Within Groups	4,500	60	75		
Total	5,700	63			

Interpretation: The p-value of 0.002 indicates significant differences in job satisfaction levels among the estates. Post-hoc analysis reveals that Estate A has significantly higher satisfaction scores compared to Estates B and C.

V. Findings Of The Study

Low and Unequal Income Distribution

Women workers in Wayanad’s tea estates earn modest wages, with an average monthly income of around ₹6,500. The income distribution shows moderate inequality, with a Gini coefficient of 0.35. A significant number of women are engaged in casual or temporary labour, leading to inconsistent earnings and a lack of wage security.

Educational Attainment is Limited but Influential

The average education level is approximately 6.7 years, indicating that most workers have only completed primary or lower secondary schooling. Regression analysis reveals a strong positive correlation between education and income, highlighting the transformative role of education in improving economic outcomes.

Work Experience Matters, but Age Does Not

Years of experience significantly influence income levels. However, age itself was not found to have a statistically significant effect on earnings, suggesting that it is the accumulated work exposure rather than age alone that determines wage increments.

Restricted Access to Healthcare Facilities

Access to healthcare is uneven and heavily influenced by socioeconomic and geographical factors. Education and income levels positively affect the likelihood of accessing medical care, while increased distance from healthcare centres significantly reduces access.

Prevalence of Gender-Specific Challenges

Women face numerous challenges unique to their gender, including dual burdens of domestic and plantation labour, limited maternity support, lack of childcare facilities, and minimal representation in decision-making bodies within the estates.

Job Satisfaction Varies Across Estates

ANOVA results indicate that job satisfaction levels differ significantly across estates, likely due to variations in management practices, facilities, and interpersonal treatment of workers. Estates with better living quarters and medical aid scored higher in satisfaction.

Welfare Schemes Underutilised

Though welfare schemes and government benefits exist on paper, their implementation is inconsistent. Many women were either unaware of the schemes or found the application process bureaucratic and inaccessible.

Inadequate Representation in Labour Unions

Despite the existence of trade unions, women's representation remains disproportionately low. Cultural norms and logistical barriers, such as long working hours and domestic responsibilities, limit their participation in collective bargaining or leadership roles.

Structural Inequalities Persist Despite Kerala's 'Model State' Status

The findings challenge Kerala's reputation as a socially progressive state by revealing systemic neglect and institutional apathy towards women plantation workers. This discrepancy between policy rhetoric and ground realities needs urgent attention.

Resilience and Contribution of Women Workers

Despite the adversities, women continue to be the backbone of the tea plantation economy. Their contribution to both household sustainability and community resilience is immense, yet often unrecognised and undervalued.

VI. Conclusion Of The Study

The study titled "*Spice and Struggle: Unveiling the Socioeconomic Realities of Women Workers in Wayanad's Tea Estates*" offers a revealing glimpse into the lives of an often overlooked yet vital section of the workforce. Women plantation workers in Wayanad operate at the intersection of economic vulnerability, gendered marginalisation, and institutional neglect. Through a combination of statistical analysis, field data, and qualitative insights, the research exposes the deeply entrenched socio-economic disparities that shape their lived experiences.

Key findings show that despite contributing significantly to the local economy and household stability, these women remain trapped in cycles of low income, educational deprivation, limited healthcare access, and inconsistent implementation of welfare schemes. The income disparities and moderate inequality reflected in the Gini coefficient underscore the need for wage reforms and more equitable economic opportunities. Education emerges as a strong driver of income and empowerment, yet most women have not been afforded sufficient schooling due to early entry into the labour force and intergenerational poverty.

Health access, another critical domain, is heavily influenced by education, income, and geographical proximity, highlighting gaps in rural infrastructure and the urgent need for targeted healthcare initiatives. Moreover, the systemic gender-specific challenges—ranging from labour exploitation and lack of maternity support to exclusion from trade unions—paint a bleak picture of institutional apathy toward female plantation workers.

Kerala, often lauded for its social progress, reveals stark contradictions through this study. While the state has achieved commendable success in areas like literacy and public health, the plight of its plantation women remains under-addressed. It is evident that without region-specific, gender-sensitive policy interventions, these women will continue to face structural disadvantages.

Ultimately, this study underscores not just the struggle, but also the silent strength and resilience of women workers in Wayanad's tea estates. Their economic and social contributions warrant far greater recognition, protection, and empowerment. Bridging the gap between policy and practice will require collaborative efforts from government bodies, trade unions, NGOs, and the wider community. Only then can we hope to transform their spice-scented struggle into a story of dignity, justice, and inclusive growth.

VII. Suggestions For The Study

1. Enhance Educational Opportunities for Women Workers and Their Children

Education has proven to be a key determinant of income and empowerment. Therefore, local governments and estate managements should jointly invest in adult education and skill development programmes for women workers. Simultaneously, ensuring access to quality schooling and scholarships for their children, particularly girls, will help break the cycle of intergenerational poverty and labour dependency.

2. Strengthen Implementation of Labour Laws and Minimum Wage Policies

While wage regulations exist, enforcement is weak. Government labour inspectors must conduct more frequent and transparent audits to ensure fair wage practices. Special attention should be given to the enforcement of equal pay for equal work and the elimination of informal wage deductions.

3. Improve Healthcare Infrastructure and Mobile Health Services

The lack of accessible healthcare is a critical issue. Setting up mobile health clinics, incentivising doctors to work in remote estate areas, and ensuring the provision of maternal and reproductive health services can significantly improve the wellbeing of women workers.

4. Promote Women's Participation in Trade Unions and Workers' Councils

Women's representation in trade unions is crucial for voicing gender-specific concerns. Unions should establish women's wings, encourage leadership roles for female workers, and conduct workshops on labour rights and collective bargaining strategies tailored for women.

5. Introduce Estate-Based Crèche and Childcare Facilities

Balancing work and family responsibilities is one of the greatest challenges faced by women workers. Providing on-site childcare facilities with trained caretakers would relieve this dual burden, improve worker productivity, and contribute to child welfare.

6. Create Social Awareness Campaigns on Gender Equality

Gender sensitisation programmes should be run within the estate community to challenge cultural norms that restrict women's autonomy. Involving male workers and estate staff in these sessions will help create a more supportive and equitable work environment.

7. Strengthen Monitoring and Evaluation of Welfare Schemes

A robust monitoring mechanism is essential to track the implementation of government welfare schemes. This could include the creation of estate-level oversight committees, which include women worker representatives, to evaluate and report on scheme accessibility and impact.

8. Develop Tailored Financial Literacy and Microfinance Programmes

Introducing women workers to savings groups, microfinance opportunities, and basic financial literacy training can enhance economic independence and reduce vulnerability to financial shocks or exploitation.

9. Encourage Estate Management to Adopt Gender-Inclusive HR Policies

Estate owners and managers should be encouraged—or legally required—to implement workplace policies that promote gender equity, such as anti-harassment protocols, maternity leave, and career progression opportunities for female staff.

10. Undertake Further Gender-Disaggregated Research and Data Collection

This study reveals the need for more detailed and region-specific data. Government agencies, research institutions, and NGOs should prioritise gender-disaggregated data collection within the plantation sector to better inform future interventions and policy reforms.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

1. Why focus specifically on women workers in Wayanad's tea estates?

Women constitute the backbone of the tea plantation labour force but are often overlooked in both policy and academic discourse. Wayanad, with its unique socio-cultural context and economic dependencies, offers a critical lens to understand the intersecting challenges of gender, labour, and rural livelihoods in plantation economies. The study brings visibility to their roles, struggles, and resilience.

2. What makes the plantation sector in Kerala different from other states?

Kerala is often cited as a socially advanced state with high literacy and better public health indicators. However, this study reveals that such progress is not evenly distributed. In plantation regions like Wayanad, systemic gender disparities, labour exploitation, and weak policy enforcement continue to mirror the challenges found in other less-developed states, albeit under a different socio-political banner.

3. How do education and income relate to healthcare access among women workers?

The study found a direct correlation between education, income, and access to healthcare. Educated women were more likely to be aware of their health rights, navigate government systems, and afford transport or treatment. Conversely, uneducated and lower-income workers were far more vulnerable to untreated illnesses and limited medical support.

4. What role do trade unions currently play in supporting women workers?

Although trade unions exist in many tea estates, their outreach and inclusivity remain limited. Women are under-represented in leadership positions and decision-making forums. Cultural expectations and logistical constraints often hinder their participation. The study suggests a need for inclusive, women-centric union reforms to enhance representation and advocacy.

5. What immediate changes can be made to improve the lives of women plantation workers?

Immediate steps include establishing on-site childcare centres, ensuring timely and fair wages, improving housing and sanitation, facilitating mobile healthcare units, and expanding access to education and skills training. Additionally, estate management should be made accountable for implementing gender-sensitive policies and creating an inclusive workplace culture.

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