

Girl Power on the Tea Plantations of India



Sulekha Begum definitely does not want to follow in her mother's footsteps — and her mother is just fine with that. Since Sulekha's mother Janaswari was sixteen years old, she has spent long, difficult days toiling on a tea plantation in Assam, India.

Eighty-eight percent of India's tea is grown in Assam, and women traditionally pick it. With large baskets on their backs, and bent almost perpendicular to the ground, they slowly move down the rows, gathering the small leaves from hip-high bushes. In the course of a day, Sulekha's mother must pick nearly 45 pounds — about three full baskets of tea — to earn her daily wage of 58 rupees, a mere \$1.19.

Girls who grow up on the tea plantations are expected to become tea pickers as well. Despite laws in the country against child labor, it's not unusual for girls to drop out of school and start picking while still in their teens. But UNICEF, in partnership with the Assam Branch Indian Tea Association, is working to change that. They've teamed up to create Adolescent Girls' Clubs on the plantations. The core purpose of the clubs is to empower girls, giving them the confidence and support they need to continue an education that will help them get a good job away from the tea plantations someday.

Sulekha is a leader of the 56-member Adolescent Girls' Club on the Nahartoli Tea Estate where she and her mother live. Older girls — the clubs' leaders — encourage and tutor younger girls. They teach the importance of delaying marriage (girls who live on the tea plantations may traditionally marry as young as thirteen) and practical life skills like menstrual hygiene and how to protect against HIV infection. Plantation labor unions value the positive influence of the clubs, and even partner with the girls



Top, a woman picks tea on the Nahartoli Tea Estate in Assam, India. Below, members of the plantation's Adolescent Girls Club meet.

to curb drinking and stop child marriages among plantation residents.

"I want to stand on my own feet," Sulekha says. "I want to earn my own living. I want to teach the younger girls whatever I know."

Girls all over the world face an uphill climb when it comes to breaking from a cycle of poverty and from traditions —

like early marriage — that can keep them from shaping their own futures. UNICEF is constantly looking for innovative, effective ways to give girls the support they need. In Assam, Adolescent Girls' Clubs are doing just that.

"The club is the best platform for us," Sulekha says. "We will show what we can achieve together."