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Modern Slavery Knowledge in the Sri Lankan Tea Industry: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the state of knowledge about modern slavery and its removal in the high-risk Sri Lankan tea industry and the way Sri Lanka can move toward elimination of the practice. Primary evidence gathered through a survey of participants in the tea supply chain in Sri Lanka reveals a perceived low level of understanding of modern slavery risks. In part, this is because of the lack of education and awareness training about the practices. Nevertheless, about three-quarters of participants view modern slavery-related topics as a current and future problem to be addressed. Results also reveal there is little pressure from the dominant, non-Western, downstream purchasers of tea, with trickle-down impacts on suppliers perceived to be ineffective. The Sri Lankan Tea Board is perceived to be well placed to build future education and training programs about addressing modern slavery risk which may prove crucial to the industry's future prospects.

1 | Introduction

Modern slavery is a pervasive problem, especially in international product supply chains that begin in developing countries. While much recent attention has been given to modern slavery in developed countries (e.g., the United Kingdom, Moussa et al. 2023), some developing countries and select industries in those countries present a particularly high risk of modern slavery for companies to manage (Gold et al. 2015). It has been suggested that the benefits of developed countries legislating for company disclosures, in relation to the ways they identify and address modern slavery, might trickle down to developing countries, but that evidence is sparse (Pinnington et al. 2023). The focus of this study is on obtaining primary data to help understand how such risks in these settings might best be addressed. Given this contextual background and encouraged by Szablewska and Kubacki (2023), who suggest there is a need for non-Western insights and perspectives and more focus on Global South countries as case studies, modern slavery risk is

explored in the high-risk Sri Lankan (previously Ceylon) tea industry.

Sri Lanka is a country located in South Asia, the most prominent region of the world where modern slavery exists (Walk Free 2023). In 2023, the Global Slavery Index estimated that there were around 139,000 people currently in modern slavery in Sri Lanka. The country has been given a score of 49% for the government response to combatting modern slavery, where a higher percentage represents a stronger response (Walk Free 2023). The Sri Lankan economy relies heavily on the export of products to generate revenue for its citizens. Agriculture is one of the most important industries, where modern slavery risk exists (Crane 2013). Within the agricultural sector in Sri Lanka tea is considered an especially important commodity.

The tea sector is responsible for about 62% of the country's agricultural exports and approximately 11% of Sri Lanka's and 15% of global export earnings (Sri Lankan Tea Board 2025). Also,

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the industry employs more than one million people, directly and indirectly, and is a significant contributor to the foreign exchange earnings of the country (Alahakoon et al. 2022; Hilal and Mubarak 2016). Yet the Sri Lankan tea industry is facing a number of sustainability challenges (Alahakoon et al. 2022), and there is a dearth of research that considers the current knowledge of stakeholders about modern slavery-related matters. There is a clear need for research that considers whether the Sri Lankan tea industry is ready and/or has appropriate support to meet the information demands from large Western buyers who need to show that their products have not been made with, for example, forced labor.

Industry participants who are not prepared to address modern slavery risk may, in time, find themselves summarily cut off from export markets, or facing import bans such as those related to the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act which currently exists in the United States. The increase in ethical consumerism is also likely to drive requests for information as society seeks to make more sustainable choices. Such ethical consumerism and legislation discourage Western buyers from avoiding or terminating supply as an initial response and encourage working with supply chain partners to remediate identified modern slavery risks. Given the economic and social importance of the Sri Lankan tea industry, this study explores the practice of corporate attempts to combat modern slavery by asking the following research questions:

RQ1. *To what extent do organisations in the Sri Lankan tea industry understand modern slavery and modern slavery risks?*

RQ2. *To what extent are organisations in the Sri Lankan tea industry willing and able to address modern slavery risks in their direct operations and supply chains?*

RQ3. *How can support best be provided to ensure organisations operating in the Sri Lankan tea industry address modern slavery risks?*

In order to address the research questions, an exploratory questionnaire was developed and distributed to a range of industry participants. Based on results stemming from the questionnaire, this study makes the following contributions. First, it collects and analyses hitherto unavailable primary data about modern slavery from a high-risk export industry in a high-risk developing country. Second, the data is used to assess the extent to which global and importing country modern slavery requirements are “trickling down” to where information and action is most needed. Third, knowledge of industry participants is assessed as well as where additional resources are needed to help them better prepare to engage with and address the issue of modern slavery. Fourth, policy implications are drawn in relation to how the Sri Lankan Government, Tea Board and upstream suppliers can work to help and protect the tea industry as a key export contributor to the national economy. Finally, directions for future research are proposed in the hope that other researchers will begin to engage with bottom-up, local studies related to modern slavery.

The rest of the paper is arranged as follows. Section 2 discusses modern slavery and its impact on global supply chains. Section 3

introduces the Sri Lankan industry setting. This is followed by the research design in Section 4. Results are presented in Section 5 with the Discussion in Section 6 and Conclusion completing the paper in Section 7.

2 | Modern Slavery as a Problem in Contemporary Supply Chains

Many people think of slavery as an abhorrent practice that has been long-since abolished, but in practice there are more people enslaved today than at any other time in human history. Contemporary forms of slavery, more commonly referred to as “modern slavery,” remain a challenging and wicked problem and one targeted within the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for elimination by 2030 (Business and Human Rights Resource Centre 2017; Moussa et al. 2022).

Estimates suggest there are currently more than 50 million people held in modern slavery conditions worldwide, of which almost 28 million are trapped in forced labor (ILO, Walk Free, and IOM 2022). In consequence, there is growing interest in how the practice can be identified, reduced, and eventually ended, with appropriate remediation provided to victims. Although the term “modern slavery” does not have a universally agreed definition, from a business perspective, it is generally held to include practices in which rights equivalent to ownership are exerted by one party over another for the purpose of obtaining some form of economic gain or benefit (Christ and Burritt 2023). This involves control being exerted and maintained through a variety of means which can include debt bondage or the use of physical, monetary, emotional or sexual threats against the victim and/or their families and friends (Crane 2013; Gold et al. 2015).

Victims in modern slavery can become involved in illegal work activities and feel unable to leave or contact the authorities in relation to their plight. Notwithstanding that slavery, where there exists a right of ownership over a person as a chattel, is “banned in every country in the world” (Gold et al. 2015, 487; Christ et al. 2020), this is not the case for modern slavery. For example, state sanctioning of forced labor exists in 17 countries (Walk Free 2023).

It is widely acknowledged that UN SDG 8.7, which targets the ending of modern slavery in all its forms, will not be realized within the intended timeframe. In many ways this is unsurprising given its pervasiveness. Indeed, it can be argued the fight against modern slavery taking place today is more difficult than that faced by abolitionists in centuries past. Today, there are no records linking victims to their “owners” or “controllers”. Chattel slavery was legal, involved formal ownership of one party by another and was practiced in the open, yet modern slavery occurs in the shadows as a hidden and illegal practice (Gold et al. 2015).

Further complicating the battle against modern slavery is the contemporary nature of supply chains. Following the end of the Second World War, globalization brought the world closer together through international trade and greater ease of movement for people and products (Hopper et al. 2017). Multinational corporations (MNCs) overtook many nation states to become

among the largest economic players in the world. Although it can be argued globalization increased the standard of living for billions worldwide, the benefits were not equally distributed (Hopper et al. 2017). To this day, there are nations that remain technologically disadvantaged, relying on the provision of cheap labor to fuel and maintain their economies. As international markets became more developed, MNCs became addicted to the cheap labor provided by less developed countries and moved their factories to take advantage of low wages, and poor labor protections (LeBaron and Lister 2015). The exploitation of workers was made possible because of the “governance gaps” which exist between countries, as well as a lack of oversight with regard to what occurs in multinational activities and complex supply chains (Hubers and Thijssens 2023). Christ et al. (2023) argue such action can be seen as similar to the pollution haven hypothesis, but applied to workers as opposed to the environment.

Consumerism put great pressure on global supply chains, and it became common for MNCs to push offshore suppliers to provide more goods, with shorter lead times for less money (Crane 2013; LeBaron 2014). The people who paid the price for this are workers in developing countries, laboring in poor conditions for little money and trying to provide for their families (Gold et al. 2015; Jayalath et al. 2024). Taken collectively these conditions create a perfect storm which has contributed to the global increase in people trapped in modern slavery—an increase of 10 million between 2016 and 2022 (ILO, Walk Free, and IOM 2022).

LeBaron (2014) suggests that large companies around the world must have known about the poor conditions, exploitation, and sweatshops that were fueling the global economic boom. However, many chose to disregard this as they could argue any activities related to slavery and exploitation occurred in the operations of their suppliers, which meant they could not be held responsible as they could not directly control what others do. This form of ignorance is sometimes referred to as wilful blindness (Pierce 2011), but it creates a problem, and many countries have had to decide whether this is a legacy they want to continue. In addition, an increasing number of stakeholders, including consumers, are starting to demand that the goods they buy are produced and/or manufactured in sustainable ways that respect human rights (Jayalath et al. 2024; Naffin et al. 2023).

The fight against modern slavery created a legislative challenge for countries as it is an international problem and jurisdictional enforcement is often not possible (Marx and Wouters 2017). This led many, mostly Western, governments to propose putting the matter back onto the large MNCs that profit the most from the practice. A raft of transparency-based legislation has been enacted, beginning in California via the California Transparency in Supply Chains Act 2010 and then followed by similar Acts in the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada (Christ et al. 2023; Crane 2013). In its most basic form, transparency-based legislation seeks to force large companies operating in, or registered in, select jurisdictions to provide an annual account of the modern slavery risks they face in their direct operations and supply chains and what they are doing to combat them (Christ and Helliar 2021). It was thought this would encourage a “race to the top” and bring about a cascade effect as requirements for improved labor conditions pass down the supply chain (Australian Government 2023). More recently the focus has shifted to supply

chain due diligence with legislation enacted in the European Union (European Parliament 2023). The due diligence approach is different from transparency in that organisations are required to take action to identify and manage risks and not just disclose what they are (or are not) doing (Christ and Burritt 2025). Nonetheless, the intent of bringing about trickle-down improvements to locations where modern slavery is most prevalent remains a key objective (Naffin et al. 2023).

In the years since the first modern slavery Act was passed into legislation, there has been an explosion of research concerning modern slavery in business. Most often, this research has considered the nature of disclosures made by reporting entities and whether they could be classified as good or bad, compliant or noncompliant (e.g., see Rao et al. 2022). Different disclosure indexes have been used to rank companies in different ways. Although some authors argue that improvements have been made with regard to different modern slavery issues (Ahmed et al. 2022; Schaper and Pollach 2021), to date, there is only limited research into the extent to which the “trickle-down” effect is being observed.

Some academics have considered this potential by asking focal companies whether suppliers seem to be engaging. For example, McGaughey (2021) reports on interviews with Australian entities finding that some companies report good relationships with suppliers and a willingness to engage with audits and questionnaires which might suggest evidence of a potential “trickle-down.” However, the companies included in this project were confined to a Western country, Australia, and the same study reported that obtaining access to these first-tier suppliers could be a challenge. In contrast, Rao et al. (2022) present statistical evidence from a sample of modern slavery disclosures to suggest that relying on a normative trickle-down effect to ensure labor conditions are improved is unlikely to be successful. Pinnington et al. (2023) likewise mention the logic of the hypothesized trickle-down but note that arguments in support of this effect remain largely unsubstantiated.

Although not modern slavery or human rights specific, Naffin et al. (2023) present evidence to suggest that for focal companies nurturing relationships with first tier suppliers is key to improving sustainability performance in supply chains and that capacity building and trust are key to moving beyond a “tick box” approach. Research from Bodendorf et al. (2023) likewise recommends collaboration and the development of partnerships with suppliers and sub-suppliers to combat modern slavery, while acknowledging research on this topic remains underdeveloped. In another study which sought to better understand the components that make up supplier codes of conduct (SCC) used by large companies, Vandenbroucke et al. (2024) found that labor rights and fair work provisions were now common inclusions. However, the authors also caution against misinterpretation arguing that while the inclusion of labor requirements may look impressive, it does not of itself constitute evidence of a practical commitment to improve or monitor working conditions. Given past evidence which shows international efforts to combat modern slavery often fail to trickle-down to nations where improvement is most needed (e.g., see Rosas-Moreno 2018), this represents an area where knowledge to inform policy guidance is very much needed.

Given that modern slavery legislation has been in place in various forms from a number of countries for about 15 years, it is pertinent to consider the extent to which exporting organizations operating in high-risk sectors and countries are aware of modern slavery and other labor issues being discussed and targeted by supply chain legislation enacted in Western developed countries. This will necessarily involve going further up the supply chain to the locations most at risk which are often ignored by conventional CSR and sustainable supply chain activities (Bodendorf et al. 2023; Welford and Frost 2006). Research needs to consider the extent to which such organizations are currently affected by, or even aware of, foreign legislation that might impact them indirectly, either now or in the future. It also needs to reveal how prepared organizations are to address requests for information and/or change their activities to respond to concerns raised. Such research will help evaluate the “trickle-down” effect while also providing evidence concerning what might help businesses in high-risk sectors to engage more with the modern slavery agenda and participate in larger supply chain initiatives.

Collection of data from and better understanding of the needs of organizations operating within the upstream, labor-intensive tiers within a supply chain also addresses calls for bottom-up knowledge of modern slavery at the company level (Emberson et al. 2022; Szablewska and Kubacki 2023; Welford and Frost 2006). Although some studies have considered bottom-up approaches, for example, in terms of advocating for worker voice, few studies have addressed the organizational knowledge and requirements that are needed to engage meaningfully with high-risk countries and high-risk industries. This is especially relevant upon considering evidence which suggests international trade has advanced progress toward the SDGs in developed countries while less developed countries, like Sri Lanka, are left behind or going backwards (Xu et al. 2020).

3 | The Specific Study Setting—The Sri Lankan Tea Industry and Modern Slavery

The tea industry has long been identified as being critical to the Sri Lankan economy (Wenzlhuemer 2007). The colonial history of Sri Lanka, moving from the Portuguese to the Dutch to the British in the 19th Century, left a strong mark on labor practices through a plantation culture, first introduced with coffee trading and, when this failed, with tea cultivation in estates (Wickramasinghe and Cameron 2005). In contrast with coffee plantations, the tea industry has grown and remained a successful business. As Wickramasinghe and Cameron (2005) observe, the British relied heavily on introducing low wage, migrant Tamil labor from Southern India, creating distinct socio-ethnic communities in plantations and reinforcing difference from local Sinhalese labor. The Tamil laborers worked as laborers bonded to the recruiters (Wenzlhuemer 2007), which today would class them as victims of modern slavery. In postcolonial times, the tea industry remains an important part of the social fabric and influence on the history of labor practices. Indeed, descendants of the Tamil laborers still represent a unique subculture within the Sri Lankan tea industry (Philips 2003). Although the tea industry continues to thrive in Sri Lanka (Thushara 2015), with increasing competition from other developing countries, including

China, Kenya, India, and Indonesia, it is also an industry under increasing threat (Hilal 2020; Kasturiratne 2008).

Sri Lanka is well situated to grow a variety of teas as different regions have different agro-climatic conditions and tea can be produced all year round (Kasturiratne 2008). In practice the market reality is such that the local tea industry does not earn enough to be viable with “value added” activities occurring in countries closer to the end consumption point (Hilal 2020). The tea industry is labor intensive, requiring both female and male workers and, it has been suggested, it is rife with forced labor, child labor and is a destination for human trafficking victims (Human Trafficking Search 2019). Indeed, the situation is such that Sri Lankan youth are said to be less than enthusiastic to follow in their forebears’ footsteps to continue the tradition of tea growing (Hilal 2020).

The International Roundtable for Sustainable Tea (THIRST 2022) published a literature review in 2022 in which forced labor and debt bondage were observed as key challenges facing the tea industry, including in Sri Lanka. Information gathered and reported in 2021 by the UN’s Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Slavery supports these findings (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner 2021). When visiting Sri Lanka, the Special Rapporteur found that workers in the tea industry generally live in squalid conditions with wages, when paid, failing to provide an income sufficient to meet daily living. Women were also found to be disproportionately affected when it comes to poor working conditions and risk of exploitation. THIRST suggests it is possible that the growing number of legislative Acts which include Modern Slavery Acts in Australia and the United Kingdom, as well as various due diligence laws and directives in the European Union, might bring about a positive change for workers.

Although legislative developments are expected to put pressure on countries like Sri Lanka that export tea into increasingly socially conscious markets, THIRST’s report notes that it is not yet clear how this will impact tea producing countries (THIRST 2022). In particular, Sri Lanka’s main exports of Ceylon tea are to Iraq, Libya, the Russian Federation, the UAE, Türkiye, and Iran (Tea Exporters Association Sri Lanka 2025), none of which are known for their concern about modern slavery work practices. However, if these laws work as they are designed to do by creating a trickle-down effect in high-risk industries and regions, the precautionary principle suggests it is pertinent for countries such as Sri Lanka to begin preparing and changing their industries to meet the expected growth in demand for information and action on human rights and working conditions. At the very least, research is needed to assess the current state of knowledge in the tea industry regarding modern slavery as well as evidence of the practices currently in place to identify, prevent, and remediate it. The aim is to assist with the development of policy to protect survival of the industry and possibly even position it to command higher prices, making it more economically sustainable in the long term.

In summary, not only does the Sri Lankan tea industry present a stimulating setting to examine the trickle-down effects of foreign modern slavery developments, it also embodies an opportunity to understand the industry and provide recommendations

to position it as a leader by moving ahead of other tea producing nations on the topic of modern slavery. Thus, the implications from this study are not only important to the tea industry itself, but to the Sri Lankan economy moving forward.

4 | Research Design

This exploratory study extends previous literature including that of a previous single case study of labor control and bonded labor conditions of workers in a colonially inspired tea plantation in Bangladesh (Shahadat and Uddin 2022). Interviews of different types of workers formed the basis for evidence gathered by Shahadat and Uddin (2022). Whether the workers included were actually in conditions of modern slavery is a moot point, as the authors state, “They were legally free to take jobs outside the tea plantations....” (Shahadat and Uddin 2022, 533), but social and ethical pressure was assumed to be sufficient for the purposes of the research. Nevertheless, a condition for modern slavery to exist is that a person cannot leave because of threats, violence, coercion, deception, or abuse of power (ILO 2024). Irrespective of the definition this does raise the issue, addressed here in RQ1, of what supply chain parties understand by modern slavery and modern slavery risk located in a high-risk developing country and industry. To find out about such understanding, an online questionnaire survey was developed with a view to targeting key stakeholders in the supply chain. These stakeholders include growers, brokers, exporters, manufacturers, planters, and processors.

4.1 | Survey Design

The semi-structured survey developed was divided into several sections (see Tables S2–S17 associated with this research). Personal demographic information is addressed in Questions 2–5. Questions 1 and 6 to 14 aim to reveal perceptions of the organizational context in which the respondents are employed. Questions about perceived pre-understanding of modern slavery within the respondent’s organizations, designed to address RQ1, is built up from answers to Questions 15 and 16 and 17–19. Questions 20–25 address RQ2 and indicate perceptions of whether organisations in the Sri Lankan tea industry are willing and able to address modern slavery risks in their direct operations and supply chains. Questions 26–40 help reveal RQ3’s intention to explore perceptions of how support can best be provided to ensure organisations address modern slavery risks in their operations and supply chains.

Questions to be included in the questionnaire were initially developed in English based on the authors’ level of expertise, experience in the tea industry and understanding of prior literature. The questions were pilot-tested with four academics to confirm their relevance to addressing the research questions. Changes made to the questions after the pilot testing included correcting several errors and minor changes to the wording of some questions to improve comprehension. A mix of response types was included in the questionnaire. Answers to some exploratory questions were sought using “Yes,” “No,” and “Unsure” categories. For example, “Before completing this survey, had you heard of the following terms?.” Two types of Likert scales were used for

the structured questions. Where a forced answer was required a four-point scale was used. For example, where respondents answered “Yes” to the question “Do you think foreign modern slavery legislation is likely to affect your operations?,” the strength of this perception was followed up by asking “To what extent do you think foreign modern slavery legislation might impact your organization?,” “To a minimal extent,” “To some extent,” “To a moderate extent,” or “To a great extent.” For most structured questions, however, a 5-point Likert scale was used reflecting two extreme poles and a neutral option. For example, answers to the following question “To what extent do you believe each of the following is a problem in the Sri Lankan tea industry?.” The five options are “Not at all,” “A little problematic,” “Problematic,” “Very problematic,” and “Definitely problematic.”

4.2 | Survey Administration

In the first instance, the questionnaire was attached and emailed to potential participants in the supply chain using a database available from the Sri Lankan Tea Board, the Sri Lanka State of Plantation Corporation, the Tea Exporters Association, and the Tea Brokers Association. Based on this database, a total of 474 emails containing the online survey link were distributed. However, this process resulted in only 14 responses (a 3% response rate). The reasons for such a low response rate to the web survey are not known, but literature over the last 50 years has identified the complexities of possible explanations, such as length and perceived salience of questionnaires and the advantages of a face-to-face approach (Heberlein and Baumgartner 1978; Sammut et al. 2021).

This outcome meant it was necessary to adjust the approach taken, and a second round of data collection was implemented. In this second round, participants were approached individually using phone calls and visits to their workplaces to ask if they could complete the survey. It became evident that there was a language barrier among some of the respondents, which was then resolved by using a professional translator who translated the survey into the Sinhala language. Backwards translation was undertaken by industry connections in the tea industry. Only minor typographical errors were identified with no change to meaning. A printed copy of the translated survey was then given to potential participants. The data collection process took more than 6 months but resulted in 144 responses (a 30% response rate).

The length of time over which data were gathered does raise the issue of possible response bias occurring. As is the norm (see He et al. 2024), to check for this possibility, the first 30% and last 30% of responses were compared, and no response bias was evident (see Table 1 for details).

5 | Results

Results of responses to the questionnaire are provided in relation to the three research questions which address levels of understanding, willingness, and ability to address modern slavery risk, and perceptions of how best such willingness might be further encouraged. Prior to this, however, diagnostics relating to

TABLE 1 | Perception about the impact of modern slavery on the Sri Lankan tea industry.

	Not at all problematic no. (%)	A little problematic no. (%)	Problematic no. (%)	Very problematic no. (%)	Definitely problematic no. (%)
Modern slavery	24 (17)	18 (13)	77 (53)	16 (11)	9 (6)
Forced labour	28 (19)	19 (13)	76 (53)	14 (10)	7 (5)
Bonded labor	26 (18)	33 (23)	61 (42)	18 (13)	6 (4)
Worst forms of child labor	23 (16)	32 (22)	64 (44)	17 (12)	8 (6)
Human trafficking	30 (21)	25 (17)	69 (48)	14 (10)	6 (4)

Note: For each row—total no. = 144; total % = 100.

the respondents and their organizations are reported, as these provide the context.

5.1 | Respondent Diagnostics

Diagnostics about respondents were sought in order to establish the functions in which they work in their employer organizations, and prior education and experience which should make their perceptions relevant and well advised. Initial personal diagnostics in relation to respondents revealed the following data. Respondents working within organizations in the tea supply chain have a number of functions such as: management (30%), operations (13%), accounting (33%), finance (16%), marketing (4%), and legal (4%). Although management has general responsibility for employee conditions and assessment of relevant risks of modern slavery to the business as well as communication within and outside the organization, accountants are responsible for gathering data for decision-making and reporting, finance staff are involved with the funding of modern slavery mitigation activities, and legal personnel keep the organization within regulatory and professional requirements. While over two-thirds of respondents have a bachelor's degree or higher academic qualification, 51% hold professional qualifications. Just under half the respondents have had six or more years' experience in their positions. Thus, the respondents represent a group of highly educated, experienced employees whose responses, provided in full confidence, are taken to be representative.

5.2 | Organizational Diagnostics

The respondents represent employees in organizations at each stage of tea production in Sri Lanka up to retail and include (in supply chain order from source to end): tea planters and harvesters (17), tea manufacturers (63), tea processors (20), tea exporters (50), and tea brokers (11). The tea brokers have multiple functions including marketing, warehousing, finance, technical advisory services, and macroaspects of the global tea industry.

Respondent employees are equally split between listed and unlisted organizations in the tea industry supply chain. This mix is important because upstream organizations in the supply chain are more likely to be smaller private and/or family-based

businesses, and tea production involves smallholdings as well as large tea estates.

As large overseas retailers may exert strong power to influence upstream supplier practices toward modern slavery through a trickle-down effect involving regulations and such tools as SCC, it is of interest to note that respondents indicate that 83% of their organizations sell overseas and, thus, might be influenced by pressures from those jurisdictions. The organizations in which respondents work largely sell both to non-retail businesses (B2B) and retailers (71%), with only a quarter selling B2B. Again, the potential impact of the long supply chains of international retailers is evident.

In addition, 70% of respondents from across the supply chain report a long-term engagement (more than 10 years) with international markets which include Asia (21%), Europe (20% including the United Kingdom), the Middle East (20%), and Australasia (15%). Although this may appear to conflict with the official statistics published by the Tea Exporters Association Sri Lanka (2025), the quantity of tea traded by respondent organisations with each location is not known and will be negligible in some cases. Figures from the Tea Exporters Association suggest that while Ceylon tea is exported to many countries, the main export partners are not from regions that dominate modern slavery legislation, such as Europe, North America, and Australasia. Impacts from North American jurisdictions on perceptions of respondents might be expected to be low as people in the United States and Canada are not large tea drinkers. Furthermore, Asia is where most modern slavery is located in supply chains and is not being seriously addressed. Similar comments can be made about the Middle East. The inference is that if current pressure to understand and address modern slavery is observable, then it is likely to stem from European and Australasian approaches. This current context is bolstered by the observation that in the past, Sri Lanka has been a UK colony (Ceylon) but is hindered by the current export distribution.

Of the organizations who are not currently involved with international tea trading, 80% of respondents expect to engage with international markets in the future. The result confirms that developments in overseas jurisdictions in relation to modern slavery reduction in supply chains are directly relevant to 68% of the organizations employing respondents. This emphasizes the importance of the research to reveal the extent of understanding of

such developments for modern slavery identification, mitigation and risk management in the Sri Lankan tea industry.

Finally, most of the respondent organisations (86%) are medium to large in size (with over 50 employees) and employ more seasonal and casual employees (47%) than permanent (38%), thereby opening up the possibility for modern slavery conditions to exist in practice. Furthermore, 18% of organisations employ overseas employees who may experience greater risk of falling into trafficking and modern slavery when compared with local employees (Crane 2013).

5.3 | Understanding of Modern Slavery and Modern Slavery Risk

To address RQ1, following the gathering of personal and organizational data to establish the current level of familiarity with the term modern slavery and its subcomponents by respondents in the Sri Lankan Tea industry, it was established whether respondents were already aware of the terms—modern slavery, forced labor, bonded labor, worst forms of child labor, and human trafficking. Their general level of knowledge about each was then explored. While 63% had heard of the term modern slavery, the terms forced labor (86%), worst forms of child labor (84%) and human trafficking (85%) were better known. Bonded labor was the least well-known term. In spite of these results, one third of respondents familiar with the term admitted that their level of knowledge about modern slavery was below average or very poor. Indeed, excellent knowledge was only claimed by 4% of respondents overall, and in the case of subcomponents, 8% was the highest for human trafficking. This finding accords with Betts and Higgins (2017) who observe that the Sri Lankan Government, in association with the Australian Government, provides many awareness programmes concerning human trafficking and the illegal labor trade, mainly to avoid illegal migration from Sri Lanka to Australia. Nevertheless, the level of understanding is still very low.

Respondents were also asked whether they had previously heard of foreign modern slavery legislation with regard to corporate supply chains. While 35% stated that they had heard about it, unsurprisingly, two-thirds admitted that their knowledge was very poor. Nobody felt that they had excellent knowledge. Finally, respondents who had previously heard of foreign modern slavery legislation were asked about the extent to which they believed such legislation might impact their organization. Only just over a third of respondents (36%) felt that there might be an impact. Of these, 56% of respondents felt that the legislation would impact them to a great or significant extent, whereas only 4% thought it would have a minimal impact. These results suggest a potentially important lack of knowledge with regard to participants in the Sri Lankan tea industry as most do not sufficiently understand modern slavery or its subcomponents, and this could negatively impact the sector in the medium to long term.

The results confirm that the participants in the Sri Lankan tea industry do not have sufficient understanding or knowledge when it comes to modern slavery and its different components. Without such knowledge, they will be unable to assess the

modern slavery risks relating to their supply chain or to provide information to trading partners when asked. However, at the same time, when presented with information concerning what modern slavery entails, most agree that this is an issue they expect to impact their supply chain operations in the future.

Scope for building upon such a poor knowledge base appears great, with the implication that a granular approach has in the past been more successful. Improving knowledge and understanding about the requirements of overseas legislation is important, especially for those both currently and planning to sell internationally in European and Australasian countries, if their trade is to continue.

5.4 | Willingness and Ability of Sri Lankan Tea Industry Organizations to Address Modern Slavery Risks

Respondents were asked, given the definitions of modern slavery and other subcategories provided, to what extent they believed modern slavery and each of the four subthemes is a problem in the Sri Lankan tea industry. Table 1 shows that 83% of respondents believe modern slavery (probably or stronger) represents a problem facing the Sri Lankan Tea industry, with 9% sharing that it is definitely a problem.

Given the perception of a large group of respondents that modern slavery represents a problem for the tea industry, answers to the question of whether the industry has practices in place to identify and prevent forced labor, bonded labor, the worst forms of child labor, or modern slavery are revealing, with 45% feeling that it did and 43% unsure, again indicating the need for knowledge to be built up. This was confirmed by 58% of respondents indicating that their knowledge of these industry practices was below average.

5.5 | Support to Safeguard Workers and Organisations Against Modern Slavery Risks

Modern slavery risk management is about organizations learning to identify and address modern slavery risk to workers and to provide remediation where necessary. As a minimum, support could come from the organizations themselves, the purchasers of tea, the government, NGOs such as the Tea Leaf Trust (2025) and worker unions.

Organizations themselves can develop a range of activities to build understanding of modern slavery and its mitigation. These include awareness training and setting and implementing policies and procedures, such as SCC and voluntary tea certification schemes for exporters. There is stronger interest in voluntary standards, with 64% of the organizations involved in tea certification schemes, through the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) and Sri Lanka Standards (SLS) Institute. ISO standards are focused on quality, safety, and testing of different types of tea rather than the people involved in tea production. For example, ISO 3720:2011 establishes the definition and basic physical/chemical production requirements for black tea used in trade, while ISO 11287:2011 outlines similar conditions

TABLE 2 | Perceptions of what the Sri Lanka Tea Board could do to help.

Comments made by respondents
Arrange and conduct awareness and education programs and campaigns
Implement comprehensive risk assessment
Introduce sufficient policies and procedures
Enhance educational opportunities
Periodically monitor the entire tea industry operators
Implement suitable policies and procedures
Enhance transparency and reporting
Prepare a code of conduct
Facilitate collaboration with stakeholders
Promote ethical sourcing and fair trades
Conducting regular audit and assessments
Establishing hotlines and reporting tools
Improve communication with registered companies
Build collaboration and partnership
Formulation of rules and holding of conferences done to understand the rules and regulations
Nothing, as the existing conditions in Sri Lanka do not envisage any difficulty in answering such conditions, as modern slavery is non-existent
They could provide clear guidelines to mandatorily follow by all the supply chain partners in the tea industry
Police standards

for green tea. Local provisions are required by the SLS Institute. For example, the Institute's SLS 486 sets down quality standards for black tea, including widely traded Ceylon tea, and SLS 574 sets out hygiene standards for tea production. The question for future research is how a focus on labor conditions and the labor supply chain can be brought to the fore and improved to add to current voluntary concerns for the product supply chain.

While half (49%) of the organizations reported that they had a human rights or modern slavery policy, this was made available to the public by 69% of the organizations with a policy, indicating a fairly close relationship between policy and external disclosure that could be built upon.

Links with the purchasers of tea in relation to modern slavery risk were seen to be poor. Given the supply chain context, it is unsurprising that four out of five organizations have not been approached by international trading partners to explain labor policies. Trickle-down is not evident. Indeed, it was found that only 21% of respondent organizations had been approached by international trading partners to explain their labor policies. This involved requests for information on direct operations (43%), suppliers (30%), working conditions (13%), and site and working conditions audit (13%). Respondents were asked about their future preparedness to engage with international supply chain partners on the topic of modern slavery risk. Only 19% stated they were well prepared, whereas 28% were slightly prepared, and 51% were moderately or not prepared. Only 2% had followed up requests for information by asking their large

international trading partners for assistance with managing the risk of modern slavery that might exist in their direct operations and supply chains.

Finally, a government-owned body, the Sri Lanka Tea Board, is responsible, among other things, for regulations concerning production, cultivation and replanting, the establishment and operation of tea factories, and maintenance of tea quality standards. This includes safeguarding the interests of the workers in the tea industry so as to foster increased performance as well as to ensure their economic and social well-being (Law No. 14 of 1975, Section 4(j)). In essence, the question arises of whether the Tea Board has or could have a responsibility to build awareness of modern slavery in the industry, in the interests of building the tea trade. When respondents were asked whether the Tea Board provides training to help them understand the potential requests for information that might be received from supply chain partners as a result of foreign modern slavery and human rights legislation, 68% said no, or that they were unsure.

Of note is that of the 31% of respondents who said they had received training related to modern slavery or human rights from the Sri Lankan Tea Board, 89% felt this was useful.

The role of the Tea Board in relation to modern slavery clearly needs to be clarified. A range of ways identified in which it could help promote knowledge, understanding and management of modern slavery risk, based on respondents' answers, is shown in Table 2.

6 | Discussion

Overall, evidence from the survey indicates a low level of understanding of modern slavery risk in the Sri Lankan tea industry. There is also low understanding of subcomponents of modern slavery risk, such as forced, child and bonded labor. Given current patterns of tea trade between Sri Lanka and non-Western countries, the impact of Western jurisdictional modern slavery legislation is likely to be negligible, unless these patterns change. This raises the future research issue of whether the aspiration to end modern slavery is firewalled as Sri Lankan tea trade is separated from Western attempts to improve working conditions through trickle-down effects to developing countries. Nevertheless, Sri Lanka's main tea trading partners are signatories to the UN SDGs aspiring to end modern slavery by 2030. This suggests the tea industry needs to be proactive in addressing modern slavery risk now as import requirements associated with different trading partners could change at short notice.

Trade with the United Arab Emirates provides a case in point as in recent years there has been growing interest in sustainability. Although the current focus is primarily concerned with environmental as opposed to social issues (Sustainable UAE 2025), there is no guarantee that this will not change in the future. This is likely given the current concern over human rights in the Middle East following Saudi Arabia being awarded the 2034 FIFA World Cup on the back of the modern slavery scandal that engulfed Qatar, which hosted the same event in 2022 (Anti-Slavery International 2022). The scandal in the case of Qatar included reports of thousands of deaths of migrant workers who were employed to construct the stadiums for the event (Kelly 2022). As an example, the possibility of a greater focus on workers in the United Arab Emirates forewarns that the Sri Lankan tea industry needs, as a minimum, to be ready for possible changes in market conditions to protect itself in the medium and long-terms.

Further to the above, the Sri Lankan landscape in this area becomes more complex given that, although it is considered important to the Sri Lankan economy, tea is not the country's main source of export revenue. Indeed, recent years have seen the garment sector gain prominence to make up more than 50% of Sri Lanka's annual exports, with most countries to whom these goods are sent being located in Western countries where modern slavery and human rights legislation is already strong (see Sri Lanka Export Development Board 2025a).

In seeking to understand and contextualize the results of the questionnaire, information provided by The Sri Lanka Export Development Board was considered post hoc. The Sri Lanka Export Development Board (2025b) proudly states on its website that “[The] Sri Lankan Apparel Industry's sustainability incorporates its entire production, human resources and supply chain process.” Beyond this and relevant to the topic the following is declared: “Positioned as a socially responsible and preferred destination for apparel sourcing, Sri Lanka stands out as a reliable source that pays fair wages to its workers and child labor or forced labor is not at all used in its businesses” (Sri Lanka Export Development Board 2025b). This represents a strong statement that the country is aware of overseas requirements and is trying to sell itself as a supply chain partner of

choice based on sustainability and human rights, at least with regard to apparel.

Nevertheless, the section dealing with Ceylon tea on the same website does not explicitly consider any issues associated with sustainability or labor rights (Sri Lanka Export Development Board 2025c). Thus, it is possible that support for exporters in Sri Lanka is available, but it is only provided on an industry-specific basis and in areas where buyer demands are likely to be high. Although speculative, this information suggests a trickle-down effect may be present in some industries while others, such as tea, remain firewalled. As a result, there is a need for comparative research in which the knowledge and understanding of modern slavery in different Sri Lankan export industries, subject to different trade patterns, are investigated.

It appears that Sri Lanka may be taking a selective approach to addressing modern slavery risk. Although this might seem to be strategically sensible in the short term, it also provides a foundation for creating a two-tier society over time, if workers in some sectors are treated better and more fairly than those employed in others. In this regard, it would be useful to conduct research which seeks to obtain data directly from Sri Lankan government representatives to determine how and why these decisions are made. Unfortunately, obtaining access to the officials necessary to complete such a project is likely to be problematic. Nonetheless, if conditions are better in some industries in comparison with others, this may explain why young people do not see the tea industry as offering an attractive career choice (Hilal 2020). There is also a hidden reputational risk for Sri Lanka if labor issues are not treated equally across different industries. For example, a modern slavery scandal in one section of the country's economy may create reputational damage in other sectors, creating a collective crisis (Comyns and Franklin-Johnson 2018). Although this effect is more common in relation to actors within individual industries, set against increasing international interest in modern slavery, it is possible country-level crises could ensue.

Irrespective, the current results suggest the need for improved education about modern slavery within the Sri Lankan business community. The respondents in this survey are well educated yet display limited knowledge when it comes to modern slavery risk and how this might impact their businesses. Given these results it would be interesting to extend the research to consider the extent of worker knowledge in the tea industry about rights concerning fair work conditions and how to seek help when and if these rights are violated. If access to workers is too difficult to obtain, relevant data could be sought from unions or worker associations and local or regional NGOs. This research could be used to improve policy advice and help the Sri Lankan government as it seeks to address identification and reduction of modern slavery.

From a global perspective, the results from this study mean that, irrespective of trade patterns, there is a need to build knowledge of ways of combating the practice of modern slavery. As a member of the UN, the Sri Lankan government has signed the UN SDGs and is committed to ending modern slavery. To assist in this process, the government might look to the focal organizations to try and identify and remove modern slavery risk in their operations and supply chains. Unfortunately, although the

evidence indicates that organizations recognize the problem of modern slavery risk in the tea industry, they need education and training if they are to help end modern slavery practices.

As pressure from downstream purchasers does not currently look to be a useful source of stimulus to action, the government needs to look to upstream entities. Indeed, one body that might be able to assist is the Sri Lanka Tea Board, and this might require a refocus of its constitution, especially the responsibility to safeguard workers in the tea industry. The potential is supported by the open-ended responses provided by respondents most of whom suggest there are many ways the Tea Board can help. In particular, given the Sri Lankan Tea Board includes members from a variety of segments within the tea supply chain, it is also well placed to understand the specific challenges involved with different activities associated with tea cultivation and production (e.g., farming, harvesting, processing, etc.). The Tea Board can also help guide small and medium-sized growers irrespective of whether they export. It only takes one scandal for the entire tea industry to be tainted, which means organizations of all sizes need to be supported to address their modern slavery risks. A sole focus on large players is insufficient.

The Board could also expand its membership to include bodies such as the SLS Institute, which is currently not a member (Sri Lanka Tea Board 2025). There is an interest in voluntary standards, which could be built upon. With 64% of the organizations involved in tea certification schemes through the ISO and SLS Institute, there is scope for piggybacking on these voluntary initiatives. ISO standards are focused on quality, safety, and testing of different types of tea rather than the people involved in tea production. For example, ISO 3720:2011 establishes the definition and basic physical/chemical production requirements for black tea used in trade, while ISO 11287:2011 outlines similar conditions for green tea. Similarly, local provisions are required by the SLS Institute. The question for future research is how a focus on voluntary standards about labor conditions and the labor supply chain could be brought to the fore and improved to add to current voluntary concerns for the product supply chain.

In the long term, there is also potential to increase knowledge about modern slavery via Sri Lanka's school and university systems. By incorporating modern slavery into the education system, the Sri Lankan government could ensure its citizens understand global developments and international obligations before they enter the workforce and/or go into business, including the tea industry. In addition, it is acknowledged that knowing their rights is the first step toward workers protecting themselves when it comes to avoiding and, if necessary, escaping exploitation. By ensuring knowledge of modern slavery becomes the norm and not the exception, the role for industry associations and regulators, like the Tea Board, would be reduced over time. The Board would be able to focus on industry-specific issues and strategies as opposed to more general forms of education, including what modern slavery is and why it is a problem.

7 | Conclusion

Evidence gathered from this survey of supply chain participants in the Sri Lankan tea industry demonstrates the lack of

knowledge about modern slavery and its subcomponents. It shows that if the tea industry is to compete in the export industry in the future, participants need to be educated and trained to recognize the possible and actual existence of modern slavery. The tea industry is an important Sri Lankan export industry, but the Tea Board is seen to be underutilised. It has a relatively ineffective reach where the communication of recognition, mitigation, and restitution of the lives of victims of modern slavery is concerned. It is not helped by the current configuration of trade with countries which hitherto have been little concerned with ending modern slavery. Nevertheless, the government is committed to UN SDG 8.7, which aims to end the global problem of modern slavery. In conclusion, given the evidence revealed that businesses lack required knowledge and drive, bodies such as the Tea Board are in a prime position to bring parties, such as the SLS Institute and companies, together, implement policy, and encourage labor supply chain standards that will address the issue. Action by the government in cooperation with affected parties is a necessity. In particular, this research contributes to informing upstream parties, including the Tea Board and government policymakers, of how they might respond proactively to supply chain modern slavery risk.

The research here highlights directions for future research in addition to those already considered. In particular, the results support the call from Szablewska and Kubacki (2023) for more primary research focusing on high-risk non-Western countries. If modern slavery is to be ended, there is a need for both top-down and bottom-up approaches, and the latter need to be informed by rigorous, context-specific data. This study focused on Sri Lanka, but there are many countries where modern slavery is a problem.

Questionnaire-based research, such as that presented here, provides a good opportunity to gauge what is happening in high-risk industries and countries. This should then be followed up with more in-depth interview-based studies and case studies. There is also a need to investigate how to ensure the response to modern slavery in high-risk countries is not limited to those companies and industries that have a direct relationship with Western buyers. Western legislation can provide an impetus for governments in high-risk countries to act, but they need to ensure all their workers benefit from improved conditions. A piecemeal response to modern slavery will not help to eliminate the practice. Research from high-risk non-Western countries is needed if there is to be hope of ever achieving a world where modern slavery no longer exists.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section.