

A study on school dropout among students from tea estates in the Nuwara Eliya district.

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Introduction

What is education? Education is one of the most powerful and transformative forces in human society. It can be globally described as the informal and formal learning that people of all ages undertake, which develops and maintains their health, communities, and the economy. UNESCO (2015) postulates that education is “a fundamental human right and a public good which contributes to the development of individuals’ capacity, promotes social and economic development and fosters the unity of cultural policies”. On a higher, more philosophical plane, we can say that the educational process of civilization is not limited to what goes on between schools -when fees are paid, and when teachers teach wherever education takes place, it is an ongoing process in which human beings learn to adapt themselves to life's demands and whatever else lies presented along their path. Education is a public institution and a personal process of development. As an organic entity, it reproduces and disseminates the culture of a society, its customs, beliefs, and norms. It functions as a tool for social action in order to compensate for structural disparities and provide access to better chances of life. As an individual activity, education forms the mind, develops moral character, and instills independence and deductive reasoning (Dewey, 1916). As John Dewey put it, “education is not preparation for life; education is life itself,” emphasizing its continuous and experiential nature.

Contextual Highlight: The Communities of Nuwara Eliya Tea Estates

Education is a foundational pillar for social mobility and national development. However, significant disparities persist in educational attainment across different communities in Sri Lanka. This study focuses on the Nuwara Eliya district, a region central to the nation's tea industry, and specifically on the students residing within the tea estate communities. These communities trace their origins to the colonial era, when laborers were brought from South India to work on the plantations. Historically marginalized, the Indian Tamil community in these estates continues to face unique socioeconomic challenges that affect their access to and retention in the formal education system.

Due to their low income, high reliance on daily wages, and frequently unstable living conditions, tea estate workers usually live in line-rooms or housing provided by the estates. Physical isolation is exacerbated by the fact that many estates are located in isolated, hilly areas. Access to basic services, such as reputable transportation systems, high-quality schools, and healthcare, is frequently hampered by this isolation. Children of estate workers are disproportionately at risk of dropping out of school due to a combination of historical deprivation, economic vulnerability, and geographic barriers that make learning challenging.

The rate of school dropout among students from the Nuwara Eliya tea estates is still a significant and enduring problem, even with the constitutional guarantee of free education and numerous government initiatives to increase enrollment. There is a distinct lack of recent, comprehensive, and localized studies that specifically analyze the complex interplay of factors driving premature school exit within this particular demographic, despite the existence of general research on national dropout trends. The unique, community-specific factors that influence dropout rates, such as the prevalence of child labor associated with plantation work, generational poverty that drives early wage earning, and the particular infrastructure challenges faced by estate-managed schools, are often obscured by existing data that aggregates the estate sector with general rural statistics. Inaccurately identifying these particular causes hinders the development of focused and efficient interventions. In order to dissect, identify, and critically evaluate the major causes of school dropout among Nuwara Eliya tea estate students, this study is essential.

Methodology

The Ministry of Education, Higher Education, and Vocational Education (MOE) and associated governmental organizations (such as the Department of Census and Statistics) provide official statistics, which are the sole source of secondary analysis used in this study's quantitative research design. This method, which focuses on data disaggregated for the Estate Sector, is required to determine the official, verified scale and trends of school dropout among students in Government Schools within the Nuwara Eliya District. This methodology is essential because it utilizes official government data, lending high authority and credibility to the findings regarding the reported dropout rate.

There are five educational zones in Nuwara Eliya district. The data extracted from the official reports of the Ministry of Education, Higher Education and Vocational Education will be analyzed using Comparative Descriptive Statistics. This methodology is crucial for fulfilling the study's objective of highlighting the magnitude of the educational disparity faced by the tea estate

communities. For each year in the study period, the following descriptive statistics will be calculated across all comparative units,



- Average Annual Dropout Rate: The mean percentage of students dropping out across the entire study period.
- Grade-Specific Dropout Rates: The dropout percentages are calculated for critical transition points.
- Gender Disparity Index: A ratio or simple difference between male and female dropout rates within the Nuwara Eliya Estate Sector.

The primary limitation of this methodology is the reliance on reported data. Official MOE figures may:

- Understate the problem: The official definition of a 'dropout' (e.g., two months of absence) may exclude highly irregular attendees or those whose exits are not formally reported by the school, particularly in remote areas.
- Lack qualitative depth: The statistics do not explain the reasons for the dropout which can only be uncovered through a primary qualitative study.

Discussion

Only publicly available statistics from Sri Lanka's Ministry of Education, Higher Education, and Vocational Education (MOE), particularly the yearly School Census Reports, serve as the basis for the data used in the Comparative Descriptive Analysis. To capture current trends and the effects of national events (like the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing economic crisis) on educational continuity, the study uses a three-period time series of dropout rates by grade for Government Schools.

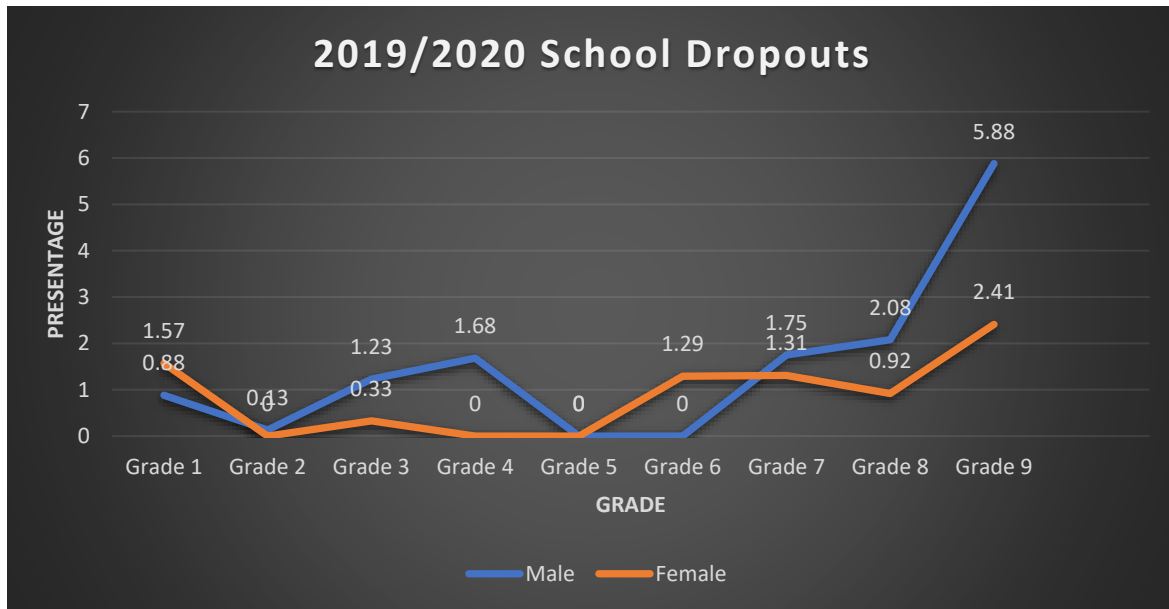
The following official MOE publications will serve as the basis for the analysis:

- Dropout Rate by Grade 2019/2020. Information taken from Table 4.15 of the Annual School Census Report 2020.
- Dropout Rate by Grade 2022/2023 Information taken from the Annual School Census Report 2023.

4.15 - Dropouts Rate by Grade - 2019/2020 (in Govt.Schools)																			
Province	District	Grade 1		Grade 2		Grade 3		Grade 4		Grade 5		Grade 6		Grade 7		Grade 8		Grade 9	
		Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Western	Colombo	0.65	0.00	0.00	0.32	0.00	0.63	0.54	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.89	0.00	0.08	0.00	0.97	0.00	1.63	0.90
	Gampaha	1.19	0.00	0.25	0.43	0.70	0.49	0.90	0.00	3.90	0.94	0.54	0.00	2.43	0.00	1.94	0.00	1.96	0.00
	Kalutara	0.00	0.00	0.49	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.21	1.21	2.40	0.01	0.53	0.00	0.29	0.60	0.93	0.67	2.37	0.00
	Total	0.69	0.00	0.22	0.29	0.27	0.42	0.60	0.30	2.07	0.37	0.68	0.00	0.99	0.15	1.31	0.16	1.92	0.35
Central	Kandy	0.18	0.00	0.00	0.46	0.88	1.01	1.06	0.00	1.57	0.00	0.56	0.36	0.93	0.58	1.08	0.51	0.28	1.58
	Matale	0.64	0.56	0.93	0.00	0.29	0.00	0.92	1.20	2.58	4.76	0.62	0.02	0.81	2.00	0.00	0.05	2.07	0.18
	Nuwara Eliya	0.88	1.57	0.13	0.00	1.23	0.33	1.68	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	1.29	1.75	1.31	2.08	0.92	5.88	2.41
	Total	0.48	0.59	0.23	0.23	0.87	0.61	1.22	0.23	1.29	0.92	0.40	0.57	1.17	1.07	1.20	0.56	2.36	1.58

4.15 - Dropouts Rate by Grade - 2022/2023 (in Government Schools)																								
Province	District	Grade 1		Grade 2		Grade 3		Grade 4		Grade 5		Grade 6		Grade 7		Grade 8		Grade 9		Grade 10		Grade 1-10 Total Dropout Rate		
		Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Total
Western	Colombo	0.76	0.75	0.00	0.03	0.22	0.42	0.98	0.66	0.00	0.00	1.34	0.53	1.67	1.50	2.22	0.65	3.39	0.31	4.69	2.62	1.67	0.79	1.24
	Gampaha	1.05	0.37	2.09	0.95	0.03	0.22	2.39	0.81	3.96	2.44	0.00	1.54	1.70	2.46	0.08	1.24	2.57	1.47	4.04	2.17	1.83	1.40	1.61
	Kalutara	1.30	0.72	0.00	0.00	1.02	0.00	0.66	1.90	5.77	1.49	1.85	0.80	1.28	0.41	1.62	2.15	4.08	1.09	3.66	1.70	2.16	1.05	1.61
	Total	1.01	0.59	0.79	0.38	0.36	0.23	1.43	1.04	2.97	1.32	0.98	0.98	1.59	1.60	1.31	1.23	3.25	0.94	4.21	2.23	1.85	1.09	1.47
Central	Kandy	0.20	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.27	0.00	0.00	0.15	1.20	1.17	1.98	0.27	0.76	0.92	1.70	1.02	1.10	1.05	3.57	1.93	1.09	0.67	0.88
	Matale	0.00	1.46	0.96	0.83	1.15	0.00	0.09	0.00	3.44	3.32	1.80	0.94	1.85	0.00	1.33	2.62	0.00	0.00	4.67	3.02	1.55	1.24	1.39
	Nuwara Eliya	1.37	1.41	0.00	0.00	0.61	1.91	0.00	0.00	0.10	1.57	1.92	0.60	3.08	3.31	4.78	1.38	7.64	2.05	7.94	3.25	2.76	1.56	2.17
	Total	0.50	0.71	0.19	0.17	0.55	0.56	0.02	0.08	1.31	1.71	1.93	0.50	1.67	1.49	2.57	1.42	2.85	1.14	5.04	2.53	1.68	1.05	1.36

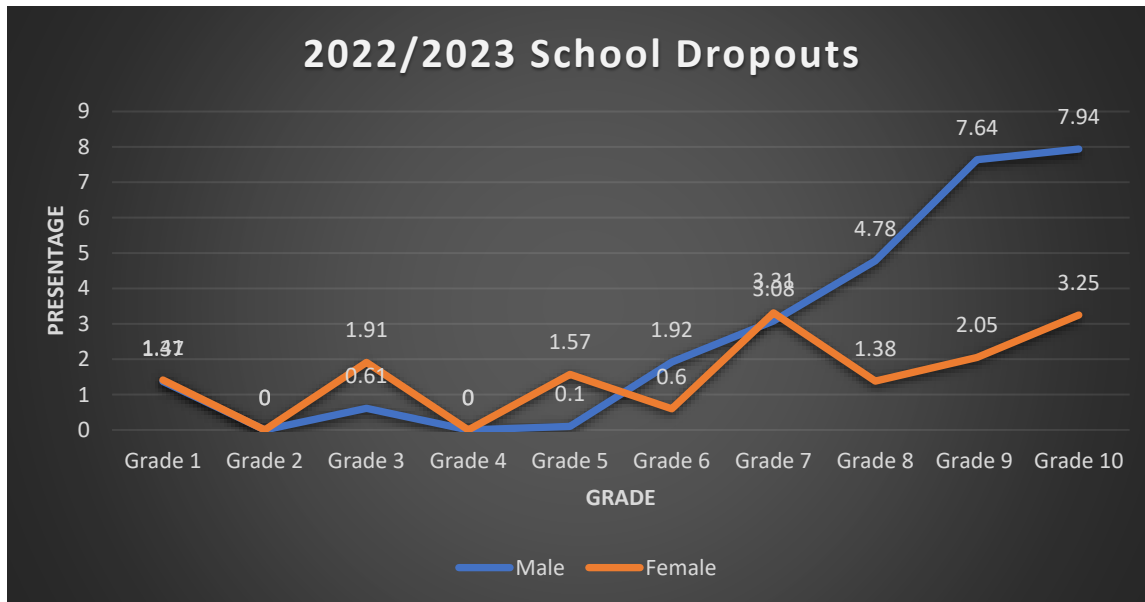
The images provided contain official school dropout data by grade and gender for Government Schools in the 2019/2020 and 2022/2023 academic years, including the Nuwara Eliya District.



According to this chart, Grades 1–5 in elementary school, Grade 1 Male dropout rates 1.57% are almost twice as high as female dropout rates 0.88%, indicating that males face greater initial barriers to continuing their education. Grade 2 Both rates fall precipitously, with the female rate at a nearly insignificant 0.13% and the male rate at 0.13%. Grade 3 The rates for males and females both slightly increase to 1.23% and 0.33%, respectively. In favor of male dropouts, the gender gap widens once more. Grade 4: The biggest gender disparity in favor of male dropouts occurs during this phase, with the male rate peaking marginally at 1.68 and the female rate falling to 0%. Grade 5 The dropout rate is very low 0% for both genders.

Grades 6 through 8 in middle school the female dropout rate surpasses the male dropout rate for three consecutive grades during this phase, which represents a significant shift. Grade 6 The female rate is the only dropout percentage for this grade, with the male rate staying at 0% and the female rate rising to 1.29%. Grade 7 Both rates rise once more, with the female rate marginally higher at 1.75% and the male rate increasing to 1.31%. Grade 8 The male rate increases again, albeit marginally, to 2.08%, while the female rate falls slightly to 0.92%.

Grade 9 Secondary School Grade 9 of all grades, dropout rates are highest for both sexes. The female dropout rate increases to 2.41%, while the male dropout rate soars to 5.88%. With the male dropout rate more than double that of the female, the increase for males is more pronounced, producing the chart's largest absolute gender difference.



The "2022/2023 School Dropouts" trend for Grades 1–10 is shown in the chart, demonstrating how attrition changes and varies by gender. By connecting the numerical spikes in the chart to the known socioeconomic and structural barriers that students in the Nuwara Eliya tea estate sector must contend with, this intricate pattern can be thoroughly examined.

Grades 1–5: Primary Stability and "Silent Exclusion"
 Data Point: In Grades 2 and 4, the dropout rate is 0%, which is incredibly low. For males in Grade 5, the highest rate is 1.57%.

Deep Implication: Academic success is not indicated by this low rate of overt withdrawal. According to research, the main issue in this field is "silent exclusion," which refers to enrolled children who are at risk because of their poor performance, inconsistent attendance, and exclusion from valuable education. The minimal primary dropout rate only conceals a growing educational deficit (poor functional literacy and numeracy), which only becomes fatal to a student's educational trajectory later on, as the highest absenteeism rates are observed in communities like Park Estate in Nuwara Eliya.

Peak Female Attrition and the Critical Transition (Grades 6–7)
Data Point: In Grade 7, both male and female dropout rates increase significantly, with female attrition reaching a peak of 3.31%. At 3.08%, the male rate is not far behind.

Deep Implication (Gendered Constraints): According to the research, gendered mobility constraints may be connected to this earlier peak in female withdrawal. Social customs and cultural norms prevent young women from leaving their homes as they enter the post-adolescent stages, especially in areas like Nuwara Eliya where Muslims and Tamils predominate. Long commutes are frequently required to attend consolidated secondary schools, which puts young women at risk for social stigma and safety issues.

Dominant Male Attrition and Secondary Acceleration (Grades 8–10)
Data Point: From 4.78% in Grade 8 to an overwhelming peak of 7.94% in Grade 10, male dropout rates increase sharply and steadily. In Grade 10, the male rate is more than twice as high as the female rate, although the female rate also increases to 3.25%. Deep Implication The poverty and social backwardness that are endemic to the estate sector, which has some of the highest poverty rates in Sri Lanka, are directly responsible for the sharp and ongoing acceleration of male dropout in the highest grades. The economic opportunity cost of keeping male adolescents in school rises as they get older because of their increased earning potential. This pattern demonstrates how older male students are being dragged out of school to work as illegal children in order to support their families. A final, systematic failure to retain students just before the end of the required basic education cycle is represented by the Grade 10 spike.

Reasons for School Dropouts in Nuwara Eliya District

The issue of school dropouts in the Nuwara Eliya District is a deep-rooted, structural problem overwhelmingly concentrated in the estate (plantation) sector. It stems from a vicious cycle of inherited poverty, poor infrastructure, and weak educational pathways.

- **The Overwhelming Impact of Poverty and Economic Crisis**

The Profound Effects of Economic Crisis and Poverty
One of Sri Lanka's most marginalized and economically vulnerable communities is the plantation community. The first cost to be reduced for these families is education.

The main direct cause of dropping out, especially for boys in higher grades, is the necessity for child labor. Children must work to survive in families with incredibly low and unstable monthly incomes (with median incomes frequently below a sustainable level). According to research, 58% of school dropouts from the estate sector either work or are looking for work.

Worsening Economic Crisis: This problem has gotten worse due to Sri Lanka's recent economic crisis. According to Nuwara Eliya principals, the high cost of living renders essentials like uniforms, shoes, stationery, and transportation fees unaffordable. Due to their parents' inability to even provide them with a daily meal, some students only eat roti or plain rice twice a day. Students are routinely absent or drop out.

- **Structural Barriers to Secondary Education**

One of the biggest challenges is the educational system itself, particularly beyond the primary level.

Lack of Higher-Grade Schools: In the Nuwara Eliya district, over 50% of schools are Type 3 schools, offering only primary grades. Children are compelled to attend distant secondary schools, frequently located in urban areas, after completing their primary education.

High Travel Cost: Low-income families find the daily public transportation required to get to city schools to be prohibitively expensive, which frequently results in dropouts after Grade 5. Attendance irregularities are a sign of impending dropout. During times of financial hardship, students miss weeks or months of school to work with their parents on seasonal or casual projects, which prevents them from catching up on their coursework.

Lack of proper facilities, functional sanitation, and enough supplies cause plantation schools to frequently fall short of national standards, which has a detrimental effect on the standard of the learning environment.

- **Gender-Specific and Social Factors**

Girls

- The middle-grade spike in the data for girls indicates that the reasons for dropping out vary greatly by gender. Teenage pregnancy and early marriage are two of the main causes of dropout among adolescent girls working in the estate industry. Domestic Duties: In households where the mother is the main provider of income, girls frequently perform unpaid domestic work and look after younger siblings or ailing family members.
- Vulnerability to Abuse: Research shows that these communities have high rates of abuse and violence, which can also lead to trauma, low attendance, and eventually dropout.

Boys

- The main provider for the family Role: The main reason why boys drop out of school is the direct pressure to work as children, usually in manual labor or the unorganized sector.

Suggestions to reduce school dropouts

- **Addressing Economic Barriers**

Expand and Give Priority to School Meal Programs: Ensure that the school meal program is maintained and expanded, giving children in the most underprivileged plantation communities priority. The food insecurity that leads to malnutrition and absenteeism is directly addressed by this.

Targeted Financial Assistance: Create a scholarship or stipend program that is funded by the school and intended exclusively for secondary school students from low-income or heavily indebted families. The indirect expenses of education (transport, uniforms, shoes, stationery) ought to be covered by this fund.

- **Improving School Infrastructure and Quality**

Teacher Training and Resource Distribution: Make sure that resources, such as operational science labs, IT hardware, and hygienic restrooms, are distributed fairly. Provide specialized training on inclusive pedagogies for underprivileged students and implement special programs

to attract and retain qualified subject teachers (Math, Science, English, etc.).

"Catch-Up" and Remedial Programs: Implement special "catch-up programs" for students who missed a lot of learning during the pandemic and economic crisis, especially those in the older grades. This keeps them from quitting because of low self-esteem or subpar academic performance.

- **Targeted Interventions for Vulnerable Groups**

Mentoring and Career Guidance: Provide Grades 8 and 9 students with robust career guidance and life skills mentoring. This raises the perceived value of continuing education by assisting students in seeing a way out of the plantation and beyond low-paying labor.

Girls' Retention Programs: Create safe, gender-sensitive areas inside or close to schools and raise awareness of sexual and reproductive health issues in order to address the causes of early marriage and pregnancy.

Reintegration of Dropouts: Provide older dropouts with formal and informal educational pathways, possibly combining basic education and vocational training to provide them with a second opportunity at job acquisition and skill development.

Importance of Education for Human Dignity

Education is the foundation of an empowered individual, a developed society, and a progressing economy. In the case of tea estate communities in Sri Lanka, education assumes even greater significance given the historical marginalization and poverty experienced by these minorities. Education provides children with knowledge, skills, and competencies to live life well; it encourages critical thinking and contributes to upward social mobility (UNESCO, 2020). The findings of this research highlight how the lack of consistent educational engagement, as reflected in high dropout rates, perpetuates cycles of poverty and limits opportunities for personal and community development.

The development of human capital depends on education. Regular school attendance helps children develop the literacy and numeracy skills, technical knowledge, and problem-solving abilities necessary to participate in the modern workforce. Education offers a way out of generational poverty in the tea estate industry, where families frequently depend on manual labor to survive. Children who drop out of school lose the chance to develop their creativity, cognitive skills, and potential for financial independence. As observed in this research, many children leave school to engage in plantation labor at a young age. This practice, while providing immediate financial relief, limits their long-term earning potential and reinforces the structural inequalities of the estate community.

Education contributes to the improvement of social well-being and civic engagement. Schools function not only as centers of academic learning but also as spaces where children learn values, ethics, and social responsibility. For children in plantation communities, education can foster awareness about health, gender equality, and social rights, thereby enhancing their ability to participate meaningfully in society. The findings of this study indicate that early marriage and gendered societal expectations disproportionately affect girls' educational attainment. A comprehensive education system can challenge these social norms by promoting gender equity and empowering children, especially girls, to make informed decisions about their futures.

Education is very important for the growth of a country. Literacy and educational attainment are two of the most important indicators of a country's human development index, and they are closely linked to economic growth, social stability, and democratic participation (Department of Census and Statistics, 2020). For example, the Nuwara Eliya tea estates have low school retention rates, which makes it harder to build a skilled workforce and slows down economic growth in both the local and national levels. Educating children in poor communities can help close the gap between rich and poor, boost productivity, and make society fairer.

Education affects people of all ages. Kids who finish school are more likely to go on to college or vocational training, which makes it easier for them to find work. Parents who have a good education are also more likely to value and support their children's education. This creates a positive feedback loop that lowers dropout rates over time. In the context of estates, tackling the economic obstacles that contribute to school absenteeism such as insufficient school supplies,

transportation difficulties, and poor nutrition can markedly enhance educational outcomes and disrupt the cycle of poverty identified in this study.

Education builds strength in times of trouble. The study shows that the ongoing economic crisis in Sri Lanka has had a direct effect on children's ability to stay in school. Education gives people the tools they need to adapt to new situations, spot opportunities, and make smart choices about their lives. For kids who live on plantations, a good education can help them deal with the bad effects of unstable economies, working at a young age, and social pressures.

Conclusion

Education is the fundamental foundation for human dignity and is particularly vital for Nuwara Eliya's marginalized tea estate communities, offering the only reliable path out of generational poverty. It is the key driver of human capital, providing the critical literacy, technical skills, and problem-solving abilities necessary for meaningful participation in the modern workforce. High dropout rates, driven by economic survival, directly compromise this potential, trapping children in low-wage plantation labor and reinforcing structural inequalities. Education also serves as a crucial tool for social well-being, fostering awareness of health, gender equality, and social rights, which empowers individuals, especially girls to make informed decisions and break free from limiting societal expectations like early marriage. Ultimately, consistent educational engagement is essential for closing economic disparities, boosting regional productivity, and building resilience against the crises that destabilize these communities.

The persistent high school dropout rate in the Nuwara Eliya District is a critical issue stemming from the systemic poverty and structural inequality of the estate sector. A serious problem resulting from the structural inequality and systemic poverty of the estate industry is the Nuwara Eliya District's high school dropout rate. Since education is the best way for young people to escape poverty and achieve a skilled life outside of plantation labor, this crisis calls into question its vital importance. The issue is exemplified by the rise in Grade 9 dropouts, which occurs when children are forced into child labor to survive financially, and is made worse by the dearth of secondary schools and qualified teachers in the area. A multifaceted approach is required to address this: we must invest in structural reform by promoting primary schools to secondary level, establish targeted economic safety nets like stipends and expanded school meal programs, and offer crucial academic and social support.

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