

## **Women Garment Workers in Tamil Nadu - Project Report**



**Part of the 'Building Decent Workplaces for Women Garment Workers Project'  
with Women Working Worldwide**

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## **Women Garment Workers in Tamil Nadu**

Tirupur, in Tamil Nadu in South India, is the centre of a textile and garment industry which supplies most big UK clothing retailers, as well as other international companies. The industry produces 'jersey' or 'banian' as it is known in Tamil, garments such as t-shirts, nightwear, children's clothes and sportswear. The area has long been a traditional area for growing cotton and the centre of a textile industry, with the production of garments for export rapidly increasing over the last twenty years. While Tirupur itself is the centre for garment production, there are many hundreds of spinning mills producing yarn in nearby parts of Tamil Nadu.

The increase in export production and competition in international markets has led to a growing proportion of women employed in the sector. Some live in Tirupur and travel to factories every day. But recent campaigns by local NGOs and trade unions have highlighted abuses of workers' rights, particularly in the employment of young women recruited from distant areas and living in company-controlled hostels. Many are working in conditions of forced or even bonded labour. It is estimated that out of a total workforce of 600,000 at least 200,000 are young women working in such conditions.

From 2011 to 2013, Homeworkers Worldwide (HWW) worked with Women Working Worldwide (WWW) on a project funded under the DfID RAGS scheme to work towards improvement of working conditions of women workers in the garments and textile sector, with a focus on those producing garments for UK retailers.

## **Women Workers in textiles and garments**

The project focused on two distinct groups of women workers:

In Tirupur itself, the Social Awareness and Voluntary Education (SAVE) focused on informal women workers, working in their own homes or in homebased informal workshops. SAVE is a well-established NGO in Tirupur and through its other work in the area was aware of the extent of subcontracting in the garment sector but had not previously done systematic work with these women. Working informally, in small workshops or in their own homes, they are outside any formal employment or social protection for workers and not generally included in trade union membership.

While Tirupur is a busy city, attracting many migrants from rural areas to work in the expanding garment sector, Rural Education and Development Foundation (READ) is based in another district of Tamil Nadu, Pudukkottai. This is a poor rural district, suffering from frequent droughts with subsequent decline in agricultural employment and few alternatives except for local quarries and brickworks. Companies from the urban areas recruit young women to work in the textile mills and garment factories and the majority live in company controlled hostels, and are known as camp labour. Some are employed under fixed contracts with the promise of a lump sum at the end of the term, known as 'sumangali' schemes, or other similar names.

Read Foundation has been established in Pudukkottai for a number of years and focused, for this project, on young women from the villages to investigate their conditions of employment and the impact of the work on their lives. Since many are as young as fourteen, and are

employed under special 'schemes' or classed as apprentices, they are not treated as permanent workers, are rarely members of trade unions and as a result suffer numerous abuses of their rights.

The two groups of women workers were therefore different in terms of their age group, origin and marital status. Most of the young rural women were single and saw their employment as temporary, whereas those doing homework in Tirupur were generally married women, settled in Tirupur, often with young children. Both groups suffer from lack of employment or social rights but SAVE and READ had to work in different ways to find out more information about the women's working conditions and to address the problems. In both cases, training was seen as a key element in bringing about change.

### **Mapping conditions**

In the initial six months of the project, both SAVE and READ carried out an investigation to learn more about the situation of the women workers. In the case of homeworkers in Tirupur, this was new work, with little research or investigation having been carried out previously, let alone any attempt to follow up with organising.

In the case of the young rural women, READ continued doing surveys throughout the project, completing over 4,000 by the end. The picture that emerged from their surveys and from meetings to discuss the topics reinforced earlier reports by Tirupur People's Forum, SOMO and Anti-Slavery International. 'Sumangali' and camp labour employment schemes, portrayed by employers as employment for poor rural women in a safe environment, actually involve widespread abuses such as non-payment of minimum wage; child labour; abuse of adolescent (14-17 years old) workers; long shifts and obligatory overtime; lack of freedom in the hostels where they live, poor facilities and food and cases of physical, verbal and sexual abuse.

In some cases, it was possible to identify that both homeworkers and young women were working in supply chains leading to UK or other international retailers. It was difficult to pin this down in all cases as the sector supplies both international and national markets. However, a general picture emerged of conditions throughout the textile and garment sector which called for urgent action, particularly in the case of the sumangali and camp labour workers whose conditions often amount to forced or even bonded labour. Campaigns have highlighted these abuses while the situation of homeworkers has attracted less attention up to present.

### **Homeworkers in Tirupur**

In the initial six months' mapping, SAVE identified homeworkers in a number of different types of work:

- **checking:** finished garments are given out for checking and finishing off loose threads. Defects have to be identified and garments sorted into sizes. Almost all workers doing this type of work are women. 33 units were found.
- **stitching:** cut cloth is given out to smaller units where the garments are assembled by machine. This work is done by men as well as women and is paid by the piece. 29 units were found.

- **waste separation:** waste cloth from the garment factories is sold and used for other purposes. Women take the cloth and are paid by the kilo for unravelling the yarn from the waste cloth. The resulting materials are used for cleaning cloths. All these workers are women. 51 units found.
- **power loom:** weaving is done in family-owned homebased units with all members of the family working. Generally, men do weaving and women do cone winding (rewinding yarn onto cones in preparation for weaving). 2 units found.
- **attaching sequins:** decoration of garments, or pieces to be made up into garments, with sequins or other forms of embroidery. This work is always done by women. 6 units found.
- **kaja buttons:** sewing on buttons and button-holing is done in small workshops. 2 units found.

In this initial period, SAVE identified 123 units altogether, out of the hundreds, if not thousands, of such units in Tirupur and the surrounding villages. But this sample gave an idea of the different kinds of work done in the units and also the markets they serve: local (in Tamil Nadu; national and international).

A broad definition of homemaker has been used in this project to include those working in small informal units, mainly homebased, as well as those working by themselves in their own homes. This is within the general definition given in the ILO Convention on Home Work since the premises where the women are working are not under the employer's control. SAVE found a majority of women working in this way and their project focused on the women workers. In this initial period, they identified 255 workers, of whom 246 were women and 9 men.

The age of the women homeworkers ranged between 20-25 (10 women) and over 50 (2 women), but the majority were in the ranges 26-30 (54 women); 31-35 (72 women) and 36-40 (64 women), with another 46 women in the ranges between 41 and 50. This is an older age group than the young women recruited from Pudukkottai. Most were married with children. Many had migrated to Tirupur either with their husbands, or to marry there and were now settled in the city.

When work was available, daily wages for men and women were in the range of 165 to 84 rupees a day, assuming an eight hour day. The majority reported working six days a week but those doing sequins and waste separation reported seven days work. Rates for men and women doing the same job - overlocking, flatbed machining and helper - were the same, when the job was the same. The best paid work was machining, both flatbed and overlocking (165, 135 respectively) and the lowest paid was the waste separation, at 84 rupees a day. Most of the work was piece work, therefore the rates of pay are an approximation calculated on how much time it would take to complete a piece.

At the time, minimum wages for machinists in factories were 145 rupees a day. Only the flatbed machinists and some of the sequin workers were able to earn this rate with the others falling below. This also assumes that work is available regularly. For informal workers, the supply of work is as much of a problem as the rate of pay since if they have no work, they

have no income. For the homeworkers this is a major problem since most of them are dependent on the factories for a supply of work. During the time of this project, there were major problems in the supply of work in Tirupur because of the closure of many dyeing and bleaching units as a result of a crackdown on pollution. There were times, therefore, when there was no work available for homeworkers.

Homeworkers reported a number of health problems including allergy to dust from the cloth; general aches and pains; headaches and pains in their back, neck and legs. Eye strain was another frequent problem.

The conclusion of the initial mapping drawn by SAVE was as follows:

***“Collective bargaining and freedom of association is completely nil among this group of workers. Absence of social protection is also found in them.***

***“To bring the decent work dignity to homebased workers we have to extend social protection to promote both inclusion and productivity by ensuring that women and men enjoy working conditions that are safe, allow adequate free time and rest, take into account family and social values, provide for adequate compensation in case of lost or reduced income and permit access to adequate healthcare. And also through promoting social dialogue, which will make certain changes in involving strong and independent workers’ and employers’ organisations central to increasing productivity, avoiding disputes at work, and building cohesive societies.”***

### **Setting up homeworker groups**

Having carried out this initial survey and built up a broader picture of homeworkers and the work they are doing, field workers for SAVE also engaged the women in discussions to explore the possibility of organising, and to find out the women’s priorities. They realised that all the women were working because they needed cash for their families’ expenses, but that there were times when no work was available, or when a major family expense was needed, when they had to go into debt to meet the costs. Some women also wanted cash for investing in machinery or premises in order to increase the scope of their work. SAVE decided that they could help the homeworkers organise themselves on a Self Help Group (SHG) model. This is a well established model for organising, particularly among women, in India and SAVE had already set up SHGs with other groups of women.

Each field worker was allocated a particular area and often made many visits to have discussions with the women before the decision was taken to set up a group. In the early stages, it took time to win the women’s trust and encourage them to form groups. SAVE had a stable group of field workers who visited the women regularly, befriended them and succeeded in winning their trust. This process involved a considerable amount of hard work and persistence.

The groups were based among women doing the same work and living in the same neighbourhood in order to give a common basis for organising. Initial training was given in financial management of savings and loans, starting a bank account, running the group and holding regular meetings. From the start, field workers insisted that the groups had the capacity to run their own affairs and manage their funds in order not to create dependence on SAVE.

By the end of August 2011, SAVE had already organised 9 groups of homeworkers and had begun their general training as well as the specific training on how to run a SHG.

In the second year, some of the homeworkers groups had sufficient savings and had established a record of managing their group finances so that they were able to apply for loans from the bank. This increases their capacity to extend financial help to their members.

### **Social Protection**

The homeworkeer groups brought immediate benefits in terms of an increased level of economic and social security in two ways. The women began to build up savings in the groups which they could use for family expenses either for a special occasion or emergency, or in order to tide the family over when no work was available.

In addition, the groups facilitated access to government benefits, for example schemes for girl children, for accidental death, educational loans, widows' and old age pension. Women received information about the numerous schemes operated by the Tamil Nadu state government. But also they got help to access these benefits which required a considerable amount of paper work. Since many of the women were migrants from rural areas, they had to apply in their home village for their papers. They also found that approaching bureaucrats as a group, rather than as an individual woman, facilitated the process.

In the second year of the project, SAVE supported the homeworkers in registering as unorganised workers with the Tamil Nadu Manual Workers' Welfare Board. In this case, trade unions could facilitate the registration process and the majority of the women joined a trade union specifically in order to access the benefits of the Welfare Board.

### **Training materials**

In the course of the first year of the project, SAVE developed and published a set of training materials for use with the homeworkeer groups. These were used in small groups, sometimes at the SAVE office and at other times in the localities where the women lived. The course consisted of 12 modules, covering basic workers' rights; women's rights and role in the family, community and society; brand name and label recognition. Each module had a printed sheet distributed to participants and posed a series of questions with original paintings illustrating the points to be discussed. The team of five field workers were initially trained so that they in turn could carry out training with group leaders, who would then train their members. In the second year of the project, the majority of the groups received refresher training.

### **Advocacy and lobbying**

In the course of the project, SAVE organised a number of larger meetings for a range of purposes, including advocacy and lobbying.

In December 2012 SAVE organised a meeting around social security for homeworkers, focusing particularly on the difficulties in registering for membership of the Manual Workers Welfare Board. The meeting was attended by 103 group leaders from the homeworkers' groups who were able to explain the difficulties and problems they faced to a panel of

experts. They were also supported by officials from three of the main trade unions present in the Tirupur garment sector. While it is hoped that the meeting will result in changes to simplify and speed up the process of registration and applying for benefits, this was also a unique opportunity for homeworkers themselves to hold a dialogue with experts and key officials. It is part of the process of increasing the visibility of and recognition for homeworkers, who without being organised are invisible.

In February 2013, another large meeting was organised on Gender-Based Violence. About 50 homeworkers attended and discussed roles and stereotypes of men and women; violence and harassment of women; the legal framework to protect women against violence and what action women can take themselves. Many of these topics were part of the small group training but this larger forum offered an opportunity for women to share their experiences and views with a wider group and develop a sense of solidarity and collective organising. From SAVE's perspective this was also part of the strategy for sustainability since the meeting explained existing initiatives in Tirupur on violence against women including a helpline available to all.

Other large meetings were held on different occasions, including visits by those doing monitoring and evaluation of the project and on special days such as May Day 2013. These help to build confidence and solidarity among women from different parts of the city, including those from different communities, Muslim, Hindu and Christian.

### **Impact on women homeworkers**

In the course of the two year project, SAVE organised 105 homeworkeer groups on the SHG model involving 1,279 women.

The clearest measurable impact was an increase in economic security for the women through their participation in loans and savings schemes and access to social security schemes. In addition in the second year of the project, the groups developed forms of collective bargaining and social dialogue with employers or contractors, or with local authorities around wider community issues such as supply of water or electricity. Out of 63 instances of collective bargaining carried out by the groups, 37 succeeded in winning their objectives, some of which involved an increase in wages.

In the course of action-research with the groups, SAVE documented the labels and brand names of the garments on which the women were working and tried to identify the supply chains involved. This proved to be difficult since the subcontracting arrangements are complex and information is not always forthcoming from middlemen. However, SAVE was able to facilitate negotiations between homeworkeer groups involved in sequin and other work and the supplier for one major UK retailer. At the end of the project, negotiations were still ongoing and although an arrangement for supply of work had been agreed in principle, there was not agreement on the price. Since the retailer involved is a member of the Ethical Trading Initiative, it is committed in principle to paying homeworkers a living wage, or at least minimum rates of pay.

Some of the economic gains - in terms of higher wages and social security protection - will take time to be consolidated, particularly in view of the highly precarious and irregular nature of the work of most of the homeworkers. However, SAVE has demonstrated through the two year project, what gains can be made and a model for future work. Key to all their work has

been the insistence that groups take responsibility for decisions and activities. SAVE is there to support, facilitate and give advice but the groups must not be dependent on SAVE.

It is more difficult to measure other results for the women which were reported in assessments of the training courses, other activities and in the course of monitoring and evaluation visits. These include:

- **increased visibility and recognition** for this important workforce of homeworkers in Tirupur. SAVE estimates that they reached about 1% of the workforce and there is a lot more work that can be done. Through collective organising, advocacy and lobbying and the publication and awareness about the situation of the women, the work that they do and the problems that they face, SAVE has made them visible within the NGO, with local trade union and government officials, and with the wider networks that SAVE is linked to. For homeworkers, this is always the first step in winning any rights.
- **increased confidence and awareness** among the women. Women have responded swiftly to the formation of groups and the training they have been given. They have reported many gains in terms of confidence to go out of the house and neighbourhood; need to be independent financially; need to take of their children, particularly daughters, differently; need for solidarity among each other and to work together to improve the situation of all.

The training course developed by SAVE appears to have been the key factor in all the progress that has been made. This was designed specifically for the homeworkers' groups, even if it can be used more widely and had a strong emphasis on building confidence and awareness of women. The methodology was participatory and did not involve much reading or writing, relying on specially commissioned pictures as a basis for much discussion. The method used for implementing training was cascading, so that field workers also benefited from the training, then in turn group leaders and members of the groups. A refresher training course was carried out in the second year with most of the groups.

SAVE is planning further work with homeworkers to expand the work done so far and consolidate it through a federation of homemaker groups in Tirupur. We are working with SAVE to find further funding to organise many hundreds more women homeworkers. It has the potential to create a dynamic and powerful organisation to act as a representative body for these previously invisible workers. In addition to the work in Tirupur, this should also give more time for work in the UK, through the Ethical Trading Initiative and its retailer members to raise their awareness of homeworking within the supply chains and work out ways in which improvements can be made in their conditions.

### **Young women workers from Pudukkottai**

Read Foundation carried out their work in three blocks - Viralimalai, Annavasal and Kunnandarkovil - of Pudukkottai district in order to focus their resources within a limited area. In the course of the project, field workers visited most of the villages within these three blocks and identified many young women who had worked in factories or mills in the East of Tamil Nadu where they had been living in company controlled hostels; some who were currently working there and were on leave in the villages and others planning to go. A minority of the women were working in local mills which they travelled to every day while

still living at home with their parents.

The general situation was vividly summarised by Vijaya, a senior field worker:.

*“Why do they go? Because in Pudukkottai there is a drought so there are few opportunities for work here. Agriculture is not flourishing and land is being sold for property development. Ten years ago, there was gem-cutting but this is now in decline. Apart from this there are the quarries and the brickworks. People think that working in garments is better than this.*

*“The economic situation is changing and there is a lack of jobs. Prices are rising. Many fathers are irresponsible and the families are poor. There are also orphans without parents. In some families the children are semi-orphans because the fathers are alcoholics or terminally ill. Boys may stay in school but if there are a lot of daughters, the dowry and marriage will be a problem. One person’s income is not sufficient and three or four members of the family need to work. Usually, if there are two parents, both of them work and they think that the factories are a safe place for their daughters.*

*“The agents make many promises. They make the schemes sound attractive. They use different strategies including advertising on wedding invitations.*

*“Agricultural work is seasonal and they think the work is hard. The garment industry seems a better alternative. Also the parents have to pay off debts, educate siblings or pay medical costs, so the young women need to earn money.*

*“They dislike agriculture. There is caste discrimination. The agents tend to be upper caste and they target scheduled caste or most backward castes. Girls finish school after 10<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> standard. For higher education, they need to go out of the village to the towns and the parents don’t want them to travel. Going to work can also be a way of putting off marriage. The houses in the villages are small and the girls have no privacy and sometimes not even any food. Dowry is the main problem and the industry is an opportunity to earn some money. When the girls reach puberty, they are not encouraged to continue their education.*

*“Problems at work include: hostels - physical conditions are not good; food, bathrooms and toilets - not good; food is insufficient and not on time; compulsory overtime with long hours of work - average at least 84 hours a week; no sick leave; no rest time; verbal abuse particularly in first six months; interrupted when they sleep; no social security; restricted freedom of movement - they can’t go out. Nowhere to complain. Not allowed to go to toilets. Sometimes they have to work beyond the three years to make up time. When a girl dies, there is no compensation. The supervisors have favourites and demand sexual favours from them.*

*“When they go back to the village, it usually takes one or two years before they can arrange a marriage. Sometimes the company does not pay the amount they are owed.*

*“There are no rehabilitation measures. Some even lose their lives. There is no health and safety at work.*

*“The impact on women is of three kinds - physical, mental and social.*

*“Food. They get ulcers, body pain and tiredness. They have respiratory problems and get infections in their lungs. They are affected by noise and eyes are affected by dust. Many have anaemia, and menstrual problems leading to a white discharge. Later when they are married, there are problems, leading to many miscarriages. Sometimes they have excessive bleeding during periods. Their bodies get weak. Because of their state of health they are liable to accidents. They age fast because of poor nutrition.*

*“They get very depressed and are homesick. They are not allowed to phone home. They have restricted mobility. They are not allowed to go to their village. Sometimes they can’t concentrate and they have accidents. If they have a day off without permission, they have to work for one month to make it up.*

*“When they return to the village, they are different from the other girls. They have lost their happiness and tend to be lonely and isolated. They cannot share their problems. The parents feel guilty about all this. Sometimes even the girls commit suicide. There are also social problems because the girls are treated with suspicion. They went to work to help their family, but many stories are passed around and sometimes it is difficult to arrange a marriage because of the way the girls are seen. It is difficult to find a husband. When they marry, sometimes they cannot conceive because their fertility is affected by the work. Even after marriage, there are still suspicions which lead to arguments or even marriage breakups.”*

Throughout the project, READ Foundation carried out surveys with young women workers. This activity had a dual function of collecting a body of information about the young women workers but also giving the field workers a good understanding of the issues.

In total, Read Foundation surveyed 4,110 young women workers in the three blocks. The majority of them had worked or were currently working under ‘sumangali’ type schemes. Camp labour includes all those working in the sector living in company controlled hostels. ‘Scheme’ means those working on schemes called various names such as sumangali, where the worker is contracted for a specific period, often three years, and a substantial part of the wages is paid at the end of the period, as a lump sum. ‘Local’ means those working in spinning mills in Pudukkottai and travelling daily to work. ‘Others’ is those working in other sectors, for example, processing cashew nuts or cutting and polishing artificial diamonds. The breakdown is as follows:

camp labour	643	15.6%
schemes	3151	76.6%
local	230	5.6%
other	86	2.1%
TOTAL	4110	100%

The number of surveys done in each of the three blocks was roughly similar:

Annavaasal	1235	30%
Kunnandarkovil	1282	31%
Viralimalalai	1593	39%

TOTAL	4110	100%
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It seems that for unskilled jobs in spinning mills and garment factories, there is a policy by the local agents working for the companies to target the poorest families, the majority dalits, and those with more daughters or with single parents. This is reflected in the proportion of those surveyed in the lowest castes:

Backward caste	233	5.7%
Scheduled caste	2848	69.3%
Most backward caste	1029	25.0%
TOTAL	4110	100%

The proportion of scheduled caste people in the total population of Pudukkottai is calculated at 30% in the official government statistics. We can see therefore that since those going to work in mills and factories made up 69% of those surveyed, they make up a disproportionate number.

The survey also recorded educational status in all three blocks. Although substantial numbers had only studied up to 8<sup>th</sup> standard, the findings confirm that up to this point, education for this young generation is almost universal in Tamil Nadu, even for girls and those from lower castes, unlike in some other parts of India. As the girls reach puberty, however, some begin to drop out of school and only a small proportion have completed school up to 12<sup>th</sup> standard.

up to 8 <sup>th</sup> standard	1132	27.5%
between 8 <sup>th</sup> and 10 <sup>th</sup>	2298	55.9%
10 <sup>th</sup> to 12 <sup>th</sup> standard	680	16.5%
TOTAL	4110	100%

The ranges used for age when starting work make it impossible to determine what proportion started work under 14, or under 18 but are as follows:

13-15 years old	787	19.1%
16-18	1641	39.9%
19-20	1546	37.6%
21 and over	136	3.3%
TOTAL	4110	100%

These figures show that the overwhelming majority of the workers going away to work are young women, many of them very young. This is also confirmed by the fact that the overwhelming (95.7%) majority are single women.

Figures for salaries earned from the employment are not very informative since it is unclear if these are for gross or net pay, or for how many days or hours worked. Many of the young women do not receive payslips, or if they do, as is the case in a few companies, they are written in English and deductions made from the salary are not well understood. Deductions

are reported in some cases for ESI (equivalent to NI), Provident Fund (pension), food and sometimes for commission to agents, among other items. If we make a rough calculation of a minimum wage of 150 a day, assuming 24 days work in a month, the gross pay should be over 3,000 rupees a month. Only 1427 women (34.7%) reported earning over 3,000 a month. This minimum wage also assumes an eight hour day when in fact many of the young women are working a basic 10 or 12 hour shift with overtime additional. So it is clear that even on these approximate figures, pay levels for the majority are well below minimum wage levels, let alone a living wage. It is also not clear from the figures collected, how many women were due a lump sum at the end of their employment in addition to the monthly wage.

## **Strategies**

The difficulty of working with this group of workers is that the majority live in hostels at the workplace and are only allowed out infrequently, usually accompanied by a security guard, for example once or twice a month. No NGOs or trade unions have access to them while they are at work in the hostels. Therefore many NGOs in Tamil Nadu, based in areas from which the companies recruit through their networks of agents, work in the communities from which they come, after they have finished their employment; or come back to the villages on leave for festivals or prepare the women who are planning to go away to work. As Read Foundation found, this is not an easy group to organise since it is a constantly shifting group, with members coming and going to the workplace. Nevertheless, it is the only way to reach many of these young women at present until freedom of movement and association is established in the hostels, factories and mills.

In the course of the project, READ Foundation organised 62 sangam with 668 members in the three blocks.

The strategy adopted by READ Foundation was to set up small groups (sangam) in the villages whose members could be past, current or future workers in the textile and garment sector. They developed numerous training course on issues around health and legal rights; leadership skills and personal development, as well as giving information on government benefits, how to do a legal case for monies owed, and other relevant issues. Many of these training sessions were held at the Read Foundation office, especially those for group leaders, while field staff carried out other sessions in the villages with the sangam. They also developed group counselling sessions, with the possibility for individual work when specific problems or difficulties emerged during the sessions.

A dedicated team of field workers of six was assigned two to each block. Volunteers were also recruited, usually ex-workers, to help the field workers. A wider group of cadres were also designated to support the work of the different sangam.

In one of the first meetings organised with young women, they expressed their feelings about their employment in factories and mills. They listed many different abuses, but many summed up what they felt saying “It is like a prison.” They also said that this was the first time that they had been able to talk openly about how they felt. Many of the young women are only too aware of the extreme poverty of their families and their need for income. Although in theory, many of the employment schemes are advertised as providing ‘marriage expenses’ in the form of the lump sum payment (in other words ‘dowry’ which is illegal), many families need their daughters’ income from work to pay for daily expenses, repay debts or other necessities rather than saving it up for a marriage payment. Given this pressure on

the whole family, they felt unable to explain to parents the problems at the workplace or the impact on their health and mental state.

As a result, READ Foundation also organised meetings in the villages with parents of the young women and talked to them about the need to collect clear information about the companies where the girls were working; make regular visits and keep track of what was going on. This was later extended into a more general campaign with the communities, with meetings being organised in schools, nurseries (anganwadis), with parent-teacher associations and local panchayats (village committees).

READ Foundation was also able to access other funding to carry out related activities. They organised a cultural team, consisting of about eight young people who performed a street play, with singing and dancing, about the situation of young women in factories. This team toured many villages and attracted local audiences who could identify with this way of communication. Members of the audience sometimes intervened in the play and argued with the 'factory manager or supervisor' about the way the young workers were being treated.

Another activity was to provide alternative training or education to young women. Some of these women had come back from working away, while others would otherwise have had to go away. Training was provided in tailoring, embroidery and computer skills and funding for courses to train as nurses, an occupation where there are plenty of job opportunities. Other women were provided with extra tuition in order to enable them to go back to mainstream school and catch up with their schooling. This could only provide alternatives to a small number (138) of the women because of limited resources.

The work in the communities led to participation in the twice yearly Gram Sabha (village meetings) where READ Foundation put on the agenda the issue of sumangali schemes and camp labour. Resolutions were passed at all the meetings against forced and bonded labour encouraging communities to take care of the conditions of employment of their daughters. Before this campaign, panchayat officials had often collaborated with the local agents in identifying girls who could be recruited for companies without clearly establishing terms and conditions on their behalf.

READ Foundation was also able to do a certain amount of individual case work, mainly supporting young women who were owed money by a company whose employment they had left. Some of this money was in the form of Provident Fund (pension) payments which were returnable to the women after they left employment. However, they needed documentation before they could claim the money back from the relevant administration. Other cases involved the non-payment of the lump sum at the end of the contracted period. One case involved asking for compensation for the family of a young woman who died as a result of her employment at a spinning mill and another accessing funds for a woman with serious heart problems which she associated with her previous work.

### **Impact on young women and communities**

The impact of the project was indirect, rather than directly changing conditions at the workplace, although there were some indications that young women in the sangam were beginning to get together to compare conditions at different workplaces and take collective decisions about whether to go back to work, and if so, which company offered better terms. They also felt confident enough to challenge the agents who are the main recruiters in the

villages and understood the need to have clear information about the company, name, address and basic terms of employment, none of which had been available earlier.

The young women themselves benefited from getting together with others, making new friends with whom they could share their experience, and from the training courses they attended. Many of the training sessions dealt with the situation of women and this was probably the first time, for many, that they understood clearly that they had rights as young women, most of whom are from dalit castes. They began to see their personal situation in a wider context and question some of the assumptions made about their lives.

The main economic benefits came from information and access to government benefits which either helped the young women directly or members of their family, for example, in the case of old age pensions. An additional benefit was that many took out medical insurance or registered in the Manual Workers' Welfare Board as one route to access different benefits.

The main impact has been on the wider community where the project has opened up spaces for discussion within the community on daughters' employment and education, on listening to the views of the young women themselves and in general around issues of gender and caste discrimination.

In these three blocks of Pudukkottai, most of the young women were from Hindu families, the majority from dalit or other low castes, usually the poorest. Read Foundation noted that Christian families do not usually send their daughters away to work and that they had not been able to reach the Muslim community. They thought that Muslim women did work in the garment sector but generally not at a young age, and that they were often skilled machinists who enjoyed better conditions than the young unskilled women.

Given the poverty in the villages, poor often landless families are trapped in economic hardship and increasing demands for dowry payments a practice which have spread to all castes in recent years. Investment in daughters is seen as a wasted opportunity since it is assumed that they will marry out of their immediate family and at the same time the difficulty of accumulating funds for the dowry is one more burden on already impoverished families. Families tend to invest in a boy's education rather than that of their daughters, and also do not restrict family size until they have a boy. Once girls have completed the years of compulsory schooling (up to 14 years), parents are often reluctant to invest any further in girls' education and happy for their daughters to earn additional income for the family expenses.

Given this situation and the fact that the poorest families are also the lowest caste, discussions within the communities about sending their daughters away to work opens up big issues around equality for women, elimination of caste discrimination and the place of work, marriage and the family for women. READ Foundation encouraged the young women themselves to think about such issues and supported them in discussions with key actors in the community.

### **A mixed message?**

The main problem that emerged in the course of the project was whether to prepare young women for the situation at the workplace or, given the extreme abuses taking place in the sector, discourage them from going away at all and to help them look for alternatives. The main obstacle to this latter course was that few alternatives exist.

The problem was linked to issues around what can be classed as child labour according to Indian law and international standards. In Indian labour law, any child under fourteen is not allowed to work. There have been many examples documented of children under fourteen working in the sector, particularly the textile mills and there is an active campaign to report such examples of child labour and organise rescue missions. Some of the young women contacted by READ Foundation said that they started work at twelve years old although at the time of the project they were older.

In Indian labour law, workers of fourteen years old and under eighteen are classified as 'adolescent' workers and there is specific legislation covering this group. The law restricts the numbers of hours they can work; specifies that some form of training or education must be provided in addition to employment and that this age group cannot undertake 'hazardous employment'. This legislation is clearly not being implemented in Tamil Nadu as young women from fourteen upwards are often working at least eight and more commonly 10 or 12 hour shifts in the sector. It is also argued by many that the cotton dust caused by the spinning process makes working in the mills a hazardous occupation in which young women should not be employed. Another way round the law is that the young women are classified as 'apprentices' so that they are not entitled to the same benefits as permanent trained workers. Their apprenticeship can go on for many years.

There have been some recent initiatives in India, based on the UN Rights of the Child Convention, to define all those under eighteen as children, thereby making it illegal to employ anyone under eighteen. Organisations have been campaigning for this new age limit.

At the same time as implementing the RAGS project, Read Foundation has been campaigning against child labour and at times it appears that a mixed message has been sent out to the communities. While it may be a good aim for young women under the age of eighteen not to have to do paid work but remain in education, this did not address the real problems faced by these women because of their poverty. They were reluctant to talk about returning to work, which they were aware of as the reality of their situation, and could not as a result engage in discussions about working towards better working conditions.

Apart from the issue of age of starting work, there is still a need to address the abuse of rights in the textile and garment sector in Tamil Nadu, whatever their age, and a long way to go before this can offer a decent alternative to young women workers looking for a way out of rural poverty.

There have been some improvements reported in parts of the industry as a result of local and international campaigning against bonded and forced labour. However, in the villages, the lump sum schemes (a form of bonded labour) which tie women into a fixed term contract with full wages only being paid at the end as a lump sum are proliferating, under many different names. The High Court in Tamil Nadu has declared such schemes illegal but the reality for many has changed little.

Even where women are not employed in such lump schemes but are working as camp labour - living in company controlled hostels, there are many elements of forced labour which still need to be eliminated as a first step. As long as women are 'imprisoned' in hostels, forced to work excessive hours and live and work in dismal conditions, there is little chance of change.

READ Foundation has made a start in raising important issues about the situation of the young women in the textile and garment sector. Through its work with this project, it has been able to campaign and lobby both in Pudukkottai district and through Tirupur People's Forum and Campaign Against the Sumangali Scheme throughout Tamil Nadu. It will take time and further work before we can say confidently that the textile and garment sector offers 'decent work' to young women.

### **Ethical Trading Initiative - working with retailers and brands**

The two UK-based organisations, Homeworkers Worldwide (HWW) and Women Working Worldwide (WWW) were responsible for advocacy in the UK through their membership of the Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI).

In the course of the project, HWW and WWW participated in ETI meetings and were able to contribute information drawn from both projects in Tamil Nadu about abuse of human and workers' rights in the sector. It had earlier been apparent that a large number of UK retailers and other international fashion companies were sourcing from Tamil Nadu and a specific group had been formed within the ETI to explore ways in which these issues could be tackled through working with retailers, NGOs and companies.

The information that we were able to contribute from our direct experience of the project in Tamil Nadu around young women workers was consistent with many other studies that had been carried out, both by local organisations and others such as SOMO in the Netherlands and Anti-Slavery International in the UK. The main focus of discussions within the ETI has been on the situation of these young women even though it is known that there are many other issues in the supply chains. The project has brought first-hand evidence to support this advocacy work.

There has been slow progress in designing and implementing a project in Tamil Nadu, supported by the retailers, through the ETI, although some retailers have initiated their own projects. Part of this process involved a large, tripartite meeting held in Tamil Nadu in March 2012, in which both SAVE and Read participated and some of the young women organised were able to participate themselves in the meeting. HWW and WWW have been able to contribute to discussions about the design of an ETI project in consultation with partners in Tamil Nadu who we have worked with in the course of the project, both Read Foundation and SAVE, as well as others in Tirupur People's Forum. At the end of the RAGS project, this was still an ongoing discussion.

We also hoped to have discussions with individual retailers about conditions identified by partners in Tamil Nadu in their particular supply chains. This has proved to need longer than the timeframe of this project, in order to collect solid evidence.

Similarly, the focus of ETI work has been on the large workplaces, particularly the spinning mills where the worst conditions are found. While the ETI has good policies around homeworking, this has not been a priority for the Tamil Nadu group within the ETI and we will take this up in future work.

### **Conclusion**

Much work has been done on the ground in Tamil Nadu by NGOs and trade unions to bring

to light serious abuses of human rights in the local textile and garment sector. Other research has also linked these abuses to production for companies supplying UK retailers and other international brands. While it will take time to change this situation, the project has ensured that through the grassroots work with women workers, their voices and priorities cannot be ignored in this process. This is an opportunity for UK retailers to bring their great resources and influence to bear on a situation that urgently calls for change so that decent work becomes a real alternative for women workers in Tamil Nadu.

HWW August, 2013.