



AUTUMN STORY

By Gillian Southey, CWS communications coordinator.

GIVE GIRLS A FAIR GO

Fourteen year old Pooni is glad to be back at school. She loves to learn and says her class teacher likes her very much. She has her heart set on being a schoolteacher.

Two years ago her life was looking quite different. A clever girl, Pooni had agreed to leave school for the sake of her family. With five other girls from her village, she went to work in one of Tamil Nadu's many yarn factories.

To her mother who suffers from asthma and is no longer able to work in the fields, it seemed an answer to the family's struggles. Her husband worked nineteen days in a good month as an agricultural worker. When he worked, the family of five had money for food, but when there was no work, they had little to eat and nothing for school expenses.

Compelled by their poverty, Pooni's mother had discussed their difficulties with an aunt who recommended employment in the textile mills through a form of bonded labour known as Sumangali Thittam (wedding scheme). When a member of her extended family offered work, Pooni's mother accepted, believing Pooni would be well cared for and the family's honour safe.

Under the scheme, factory owners provide free accommodation and food for three to five years in return for a young woman's labour. At the end of the contract, the family is paid an agreed sum of \$780 - \$1,100. The middle men argue families save the costs of their daughter's education and the money will make it easier to arrange their marriage.

WORKING IN THE YARN FACTORY

Pooni said the first week in the factory went very well. In the second week, the working conditions were changed. Instead of an eight hour day, she had to work shifts and

Many Indian girls face discrimination on a daily basis. At the Girls Club, WDRC teaches them about their rights, the dangers of Sumangali and child labour, and the importance of attending school. Photos Pauline McKay



WDRC has organised Kodaikanal's day labourers into sangams so Dalit families can improve their livelihoods and protect their rights.

overtime. Her free accommodation was crowded with one bathroom for the 22 young women who shared a dormitory built for 10. Pooni said the free food was not good or prepared hygienically, and when she got sick she had to find her own way to the government hospital for treatment. Her health worsened and with no entitlement to sick leave she had to make up the hours missed. After eighteen months, she could bear it no longer and returned home with nothing to show for her efforts.

At first the factory owner resisted the family's requests for wages, so her mother went to CWS partner the Women Development Resource Centre for help. WDRC took the matter up with the legal authorities and successfully won \$550 for Pooni and five other young women they had rescued from the factory. WDRC arranged evening tuition so they could catch up and now all the girls are back in school.

The state of Tamil Nadu is critical to the textile industry which employs more than 35 million Indians across the country, second only to agriculture. Its factories produce more than 65% of India's yarn and play a significant role





The boarding hostel at Killai run by EKTA was built after the tsunami. It is home to 24 young Tribal women who attend the government school next door. As well as encouraging them in their schoolwork, EKTA organises dancing, singing, art and storytelling to enhance their wellbeing.



Pauline was impressed with the self-discipline of the students and their strong sense of self-worth. Tribal children are known for their mathematical skills and ability to play chess. Photo: EKTA



in dyeing and other manufacturing processes. Labour is often drawn from poor, rural villages where there are few if any opportunities for young people to work.

STANDING UP FOR POOR FAMILIES

Condemned by all of CWS's partners in South India, Sumangali is illegal but used by mill and factory owners intent on keeping labour costs as low as possible. WDRC, Neythal, EKTA, SAND Trust and HRF warn poor families of the scheme's false promises and educate children about its dangers.

Deeply involved in their communities, CWS partners are making the case to government for education and the rights of girls and young women. They demand better laws and adequate funding for teachers and schools. Amongst the teaching profession, they have encouraged Dalit (formerly known as untouchables) and women teachers to work together to improve outcomes for Dalit and Tribal children. Working with the most exploited Dalit and Tribal (indigenous) families, they educate and argue for the girls.

Thanks to a concerted effort by government and non-governmental organisations, many more children are in India's schools. Despite legislation making schooling compulsory, an estimated 8.4 million children do not attend school at all. Without the efforts of groups like WDRC who have the trust of the poorest communities,

India will not achieve Sustainable Development Goal 4 to give boys and girls access to primary and secondary education by 2030. Operating at the village level, staff convince families to invest in their daughters.

When girls are literate, they have skills to earn more income and stand up to people who might exploit them. When they have confidence and know their legal rights, they can protect themselves against violence and support each other. When boys are trained to think about how they treat girls, there is hope for a fairer world. Please support the Autumn Appeal so our partners can create a world fit for all children.

JOIN OPERATION REFUGEE

Could you live on refugee rations? CWS is looking for people who want to show Syrian refugees they care enough to help. Sign up and we will send you a Food Box (minus the rice) and some tips on how to cook the rations for five days from 16-20 June. You find sponsors or sponsor someone doing the challenge. Together we aim to raise as much money as we can so our partner the Department of Service to Palestinian Refugees can supply emergency food, education, medical care and support. Together we can keep the lifeline going to Syrian refugees. Check out: <http://www.cwsoperationrefugee.nz/>

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Reference: Your CWS Supporter ID no.

Email your postal details to cws@cws.org.nz for a tax receipt.

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