

Good Neighbours: Women's Development Resource Centre

Tamil Nadu, South India



Introduction

The Women Development Resource Centre in South India makes change happen. A voluntary organisation established in Madurai, Tamil Nadu, South India in 1991, WDRC focuses on women's and community development. They help the poorest and often illiterate communities to break down barriers of gender, caste and discrimination. Families that once were indentured labourers without education can now send their children to school and feed them more regularly. Communities that were paid a pittance for their labour if at all are now a force to be reckoned with in local politics. Dalit (also known as "untouchables"), Tribal (indigenous) peoples, and gypsy families are demanding their basic human rights.

WDRC emerged out of a realization of the need to integrate gender perspective in class and caste struggles and of the need to provide a strong thrust to organize grass root women and empower them socially, economically and politically. It has achieved remarkable success over many years in

supporting and inspiring Dalit and Tribal women to organise collectively and to form *sangham* and women's micro-banks. The mission of WDRC is to help promote a strong grassroots women's movement. The Centre also addressed the livelihood needs of women, works on actions against violence on women and encourages the political participation of women in local governmental systems.

There is much more to the work of WDRC:

- Sustainable livelihoods: credit unions, a women's bank, unions for better wages and conditions for flower workers, rubbish collectors, scavengers, crematorium workers and women's employment
- Consultation on broader issues like global warming and violence against women
- Teaching eco-friendly agriculture practices to small and marginal farmers
- Training for Dalit and tribal women's movements and for local government
- Working with men and women to strengthen gender equality and awareness
- Promotion of women's health and rights
- Campaigning for rights of Dalit and Tribal peoples and access to government entitlements
- Help Dalit and tribal children have better education, more opportunities and understand their rights

Activities in 2014

- Capacity building and strengthening of Dalit and Tribal Women movement towards sustainable development
- Organising of issue based consultation and meetings
- Encouraging Dalit and Tribal women for the participation at local government and promoting good governance
- Livelihood promotion through credit union and co-operative activities
- Encouraging eco-friendly agriculture practices among small and marginal farmers
- Strengthening gender equality concept among men members through gender trainings
- Children rights programmes – including the right to attend school up to 14 years of age
- Solidarity links and networking with like-minded organisations and movements
- Promotion of women's right to health
- Rights of Dalit and Tribal people, protection of Dalit women human rights





Enrolment in National Pension Scheme

Greatest Achievements 2014

- The women and union members showing more interest in children's and particularly girls' education
- Women and workers showing increased confidence and self-reliance in decision making and more awareness of their constitutional and democratic rights
- More sharing of resources to address illiteracy has helped reduce the incidence of child labour
- The increasing involvement of women workers as leaders
- A reduction in domestic violence
- Dalit and non-Dalit workers are joining together on common causes
- Improved access to housing, drinking water, electricity and education through petitions to government
- More women moving into leadership positions

Case Study: New Home

Arumugathammal lived with her husband and three children in a small hut with coconut leaves thatched roof which was destroyed every year in heavy rains. She explained, “During the rainy season I was much worried about the condition of our hut as it will be ruined every year. At that time I dreamed about a well-built *pacca* house which could protect our family from the heavy wind and rain. Arumugathammal and her family belong to the Dalit community. Dalits, make up nearly one quarter of the country’s 1.2 billion population.



WDRC came to the Sakkampatty village in 1998 and formed an association of Dalit women. The *sangham* organized meetings, prioritising the need for women to own their houses. They actively petitioned the government and achieved success. Government officials asked them to search for five acres of land near their village and agreed to pay three quarters of the land cost. Just three years later, the *sangham* established 91 house sites in women members’ names, and the women paid one quarter of the land cost through savings in the credit union. In the past ten years, 43 solid, permanent homes have been built. Fifteen houses were constructed under Indira Gandhi Memorial housing scheme of the national government and 28 green houses jointly by the state and national government. Arumugathammal writes, “We all shifted our dwelling places from the small huts and rented houses to our newly built houses. It is a source of great pride for us. The Dalit caste subdivisions were mingled by having alternative houses. We have broken the social structure that separates living places among the Dalit sub-castes. We are proud that we have created a model village.” Now the Dalit women are lobbying the government for electricity, street lights, drinking water and school and child care centres.

Case Study: Back to School

Saritha and her husband, Murugan, lived in Pottampatti village earning a low income from their small business of making pearl ornaments and selling them at bus stations and village festivals. Their two sons studied in the primary school at a residential school run by Christian mission. The family joined the Gypsy Association and the Credit Union in 2013. After her alcoholic husband abandoned the family, Saritha struggled to make ends meet. She had little choice but to remove her sons from school to help her in the family business. The Gypsy Community Association became aware of the family’s situation. The Association and WDRC staff met with Saritha and the school offered her moral support and a business loan, enabling the two boys to resume their education.



Last year, CWS raised money for WDRC in their “Live Below the Line” campaign. It was an annual fundraising activity where participants get sponsored to live on less than the World Bank poverty line for five days. In New Zealand they decided this is equal to \$2.25 a day.