

## **Building Decent Workplaces for Women Garment Workers**

In Tirupur, a city in Tamil Nadu in the South of India, thousands of young women are working in the textile and garment industry. In the city itself and surrounding areas, there is a booming export sector supplying T-shirts, children's clothes, sportswear and other garments to many of Europe's large retailers. Women make up the majority of the workforce: they spin the yarn, machine garments, check for quality, cut loose threads, fasten buttons, make buttonholes, and many other jobs.

Tirupur and nearby Coimbatore have long been the centres of a textile and garment industry supplying a national market. But as the sector has increasingly supplied European and other retailers, the workforce has changed from being predominantly male and unionised to one made up of thousands of young women from rural areas, informal workers in small workshops and migrant labour from distant parts of India.

Conditions of employment for many of the young women workers have been the subject of a broad campaign in India since they are far from what could be called 'decent work'. Now Women Working Worldwide and Homeworkers Worldwide (HWW) are collaborating in a project with labour NGOs in the area with support from the Department for International Development RAGS fund.

The aim of the project is to support women workers in taking an active role in improving conditions of employment, through support and training. We are working with two NGOs: SAVE – Social Awareness and Voluntary Education, based in Tirupur, at the centre of the garment industry and READ Foundation – Rural Education and Development, based in Pudukkottai, a poor rural area from which many young women are recruited to work in garment factories or spinning mills.

Both organisations have been actively involved for a number of years in campaigns to support women workers. Recently they have been focusing on the conditions of employment of the young women employed in sumangali schemes, or in camp labour. The sumangali scheme is used to recruit young women from the age of 14 upwards to work on three year contracts, during which time they are paid low wages on the basis that at the end they will receive a lump sum to help towards marriage expenses. Both these young workers, and those working in the camp labour scheme, live in company controlled premises.

There are many complaints about the standard of food and accommodation, but above all the workers complain that they have no freedom. They are not allowed out of the factory premises by themselves and are more or less on call seven days a week, to work whatever shifts are needed. It is common for young workers to report working twelve hour shifts, including night shifts, seven days a week.. Both the sumangali and camp labour schemes can be seen as a system of forced labour, part from numerous other violations of labour rights.

Save has been coordinating a campaign to abolish the sumangali scheme and improve conditions in the factory controlled hostels through the Tirupur People's Forum, an alliance of trade unions and NGOs, including Read Foundation.

The scale of the problems in this area is huge: Save estimates there are around 11,000 young women working in the sector, making up around one sixth of the total workforce.

In the RAGS project, the aim is to carry out basic research on conditions in the sector, particularly focusing on women workers and develop training programmes that enable them to develop forms of collective action to improve their conditions.

The two NGOs are focusing on different sections of the workforce in the garment sector. Read Foundation is based in Pudukkottai, a poor rural area from where agents recruit young women to work in the factories and mills, around five hours away from Tirupur. The majority are from the poorest families, usually dalit, and agents often paint a rosy picture of employment in the garment factories to persuade parents to send their daughters to the city to work. Read Foundation aims to raise awareness about conditions in the factories and build an active network of young women workers.

While Save is already actively working on the sumangali campaign in Tirupur, their focus in this project is on women workers in the small informal workshops that are found throughout Tirupur, usually based in homes. There is a web of subcontracting from the big factories to small workplaces, often family based enterprises, not covered by labour law because of the small numbers of workers employed.

Both organisations are focusing on issues around labour law, human rights and social security. At the same time, through coordination with Women Working Worldwide and HWW, they aim to raise abuses of human and labour rights violations with some of the retailers, particularly those based in the UK. Many of these retailers are members of the Ethical Trade Initiative which has already started discussions around conditions in the garment factories of Tirupur and surrounding areas.

The project is now reaching the end of the initial stage of its work, consisting of exploring conditions and issues with the women workers. Following discussion of the results of this work, training programmes will be organised for women workers in order to support their capacity to organise and fight for their rights.

Trainers will be trained in ILO conventions, ETI based codes, technical issues and gender (including leadership) and trainers will train workers. During the lifetime of the project (March 2011 – May 2013) the goal is that 2,000 workers in India will directly benefit from improvements in wage, hourly earnings, working hours and overtime, reduced incidence in child labour, access to social protection, access to maternity leave and worker organising and bargaining. This cascading approach to worker training has been used extensively by Women Working Worldwide in previous projects and has proved effective in reaching large numbers of workers and with proven results in terms of improvements in working conditions.

In May, Save and Read Foundation hosted an international planning meeting at the start of the project. Local organisers were joined by trade union activists from Lesotho and Madagascar, and heard about organising work in Bangladesh. While organising locally is key to the success of the project, all participants are aware of the international nature of the garment industry. Production is spread out around the world and links between organisers in different countries helps to ensure that organising too has a global reach.