

TMPI helps Pandiammal win redress from a violent husband

Pandiammal's parents were very poor, and so before she was born they migrated from their home village to work in the nearby hills. She grew up there, and after just a few years at school began working along with the rest of the family as a daily wage labourer in the orange and coffee plantations.

At the age of 13 Pandiammal was married to a man of 30. "Initially he was a good husband," she says, "but my first child was a girl, and after that, the problems started. My husband and mother-in-law began to harass my family for more dowry, but they couldn't pay more." Despite the birth of two more children, including a boy, the problems continued. "My husband's family were involved with crime – they stole from the plantations – and I was not happy about that. I wanted him to stop stealing and that caused lots of arguments."

Pandiammal thinks the main issue was that her husband drank and took drugs. "When he was drunk he would beat me, and he would throw knives and metal tools at me – he would even hurl kerosene. He was constantly throwing me out of the house and I would be forced to go and stay with my family." Her family had tried to negotiate with him, but he threw them out onto the road.

"I stayed with him because of the children," she explains, "I didn't want them to grow up without a father, and I thought people would look down on them if we divorced."

Her husband's violent behaviour escalated and tears come to Pandiammal's eyes as she remembers one particularly terrifying incident. "We were



Pandiammal: fled with her three children after husband set fire to their home

living in a very remote forest area and he came home drunk and started to pour kerosene around our hut. He set fire to it and I only managed to escape with the children by climbing out of the roof." Pandiammal and her three young children hid in the forest all night, and the next day walked 5km to the road and managed to flee by bus.

The group members told me: 'This can't go on'

Meanwhile, Pandiammal's mother and father returned to their home village, and her mother became a member of the local women's self-help group. "The group members told me, 'this can't go on'," Pandiammal explains. Eventually, with the support of the local Violence Against Women committee, she decided to apply for a divorce and to file a case with the police. "Without the self-help group members motivating me I could not have done it." In 2014 the court issued a protection order that stipulates the financial support and compensation Pandiammal's husband should

provide, but so far, this has not been enforced. Pandiammal faced many problems pursuing the case: she and all her family are illiterate, so they were not able to read the legal documents; her village does not have a bus service, and it cost approximately two days wages to travel to court by auto-rickshaw; her advocate also demanded additional fees to handle the case.

In 2015, the local women's federation referred her case to TMPI (the district women's movement), who are now providing Pandiammal with free legal advice, covering the cost of her transport and helping her to understand the court process.

"Without their help I would not be able to do this," she says, "it's a really expensive and stressful process."

Pandiammal and her children now live with her mother and father in their home village. "I really hope my daughters do not have to face these problems," Pandiammal says.

"They should have the chance to go to school and have a good life. With the help I have now, I believe that it is possible."

Village Service Trust

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Dominated wife who became the leader of 27,000 women

Denied a career in teaching by a strict husband, Arun Mozhi's talents found expression in Theni's women's movement. **Paula Nightingale** heard her story

Arun Mozhi grew up in a small village near Theni, the daughter of a farmer. Her mother struggled hard to make sure she stayed in school and she became the only girl in her village to complete her education. She went to college to study for a degree. "I hoped to become a teacher, but it wasn't to be," she explains.

At the age of 20, Arun Mozhi was married to her maternal uncle. Her husband was a teacher, and Arun Mozhi also wanted to work, "but at that time it wasn't allowed, my husband was very strict and I was expected to stay at home and take care of the family". The couple had five children – Arun Mozhi covers her face in embarrassment as she remembers that her eldest daughter was married at the age of just 14. "I had a degree but I had no awareness of women's rights at all!" When Arun Mozhi was 35, she joined a women's self-help group that had started in her village with the help of one of VST's partner organisations. At first, her husband opposed her involvement, but after the local federation helped the family sort out a problem with the police, he began to see the value of it.

Despite having been a leader in school and college, "I felt I lost my confidence in all those years spent at home with the family," Arun Mozhi says. But the self-help group identified her potential and recruited Arun



Arun Mozhi: 'I had a degree but I had no awareness of women's rights at all'

Mozhi first as a village health volunteer, then sent her for leadership training. She became treasurer of her local federation, and in 2014 was elected president of TMPI. "I was very proud and happy to be elected," she smiles, "I am supported by all the members, and we want to change a lot of things!" Arun Mozhi describes the main role of TMPI as linking the women members with the government. "We want to create an understanding of women's issues among

'My dream is of equality between men and women'

local officials – they recognise our expertise and we should work together to create change." She thinks it's important to fight corruption in local government and ensure that politicians, the police and the authorities take action to uphold the law. Arun Mozhi is proud of what TMPI has achieved: "We have held a public meeting on domestic violence that the district judge attended, and have petitioned for a woman to join the official Child Welfare Committee. We pressured the local government to make marriage registration compulsory and to force marriage halls and temples to ask for proof of age for wedding ceremonies. "Next year, we plan a campaign on monitoring pre-natal scan centres, to ensure the law against sex-selective abortion is enforced, and also aim to raise the issue of child marriage with the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu."

Campaigners on child marriage have Chennai in their sights

The 27,000-strong district organisation is a powerful force in the area, even taking aim at authorities in the state capital

VST's partners in India work with the most economically and socially marginalised members of society – and women make up the largest of these target groups.

In this area of Tamil Nadu, women rarely earn as much as men, and have much less power and influence in family and village life. A boy child is considered a blessing, but a girl is often seen as a burden. Partly this is because women usually leave their birth family when married, and the husband's family demand a dowry; but also, boys are considered essential to the continuation of the family line, and so are inherently valued more. Therefore, women and girls are disadvantaged in many aspects of life; girls often leave education early, child marriage is common, and many women experience domestic violence.

For many years, VST's partners have aimed to combat these issues through encouraging the creation of women's self-help groups in local villages. Groups of around 12-20 women join together to discuss issues that affect them, provide support and training and also implement savings schemes. This allows self-help groups to offer loans to their members to develop small businesses and improve

agricultural production, or to cover family expenses such as health care and children's education, and also to pay off high-interest loans from moneylenders.

As the network of women's self-help groups has grown, they have joined together to form local federations, sharing resources and working collectively to maximise the impact of



TMPI distributes booklets about child marriage through its member federations of women's self-help groups

training and campaigns. Each federation elects its own leaders, and many are now moving towards being financially and administratively independent.

TMPI (Tamil Manila Penkal Iyakkam – which translates as "Tamil Nadu Women's Movement") is an organisation that brings together ten women's federations in the area – eight within Theni district and two in neighbouring districts of Tamil Nadu.

TMPI is a source of practical advice and support for its members; it works to promote women's rights, provides training and runs campaigns on issues such as domestic violence, child marriage, female foeticide, girls' education and women's micro-enterprise. It also provides an important link for the local federations and village self-help groups to the authorities, helping them gain access to government schemes and resources.

With 27,000 women members, TMPI is a powerful force in the local area. The Indian constitution and legal system enshrine women's basic rights, but the law is rarely upheld. TMPI is able to mobilise women to draw attention to this widespread abuse – putting pressure on the police, local politicians and government officials to implement the law. Their demands for change have reached village councils and the district government, and now they are aiming to reach the whole state, with a child marriage campaign planned for 2017 aimed at influencing the Tamil Nadu state government in Chennai.



Women take up challenge of alcohol abuse

The bumpy winding road up the Varasanadu valley ends at the small village of Valiparai. Here, women are taking action against what they see as a major contributor to domestic violence – alcohol. Members of the local Violence Against Women committee explain: "There used to be toddy, (a local alcoholic drink) produced here, but not that much. Then, over the last few years, hard liquor has become readily available through a government licensed alcohol shop in the nearest town, and through black-market traders." Also, a new development is an increase in the use of drugs, especially by younger men. "We are not sure what it is they take, there is a tablet and also a sachet of powder." "Only men drink, women never do," the committee members say. "Men drink to

celebrate, but also to prove their manliness, to show they are not like women. It causes lots of problems in the village, especially fighting and shouting abuse in public, and rowdy behaviour at festival-times. It impacts on family life as men spend all their money on alcohol, and leads to an increase in domestic violence. Some women are even driven to suicide by their husband's behaviour." The Violence Against Women committee decided it was time to act. They campaigned against the sale of blackmarket alcohol in the village, and in the last year this has reduced substantially, forcing the family who traded it to move away. The committee members also discussed the issue with the village leaders and agreed a scheme to punish those who

were drunk and disorderly. "We came up with a plan to fine anyone who started fighting or shouting in the village square, and put up a sign board to publicise it. In the last year, four people have been fined," they proudly report. "Since passing this rule, we feel able to challenge men who are drunk in public – before they would have beaten us." The outcome has been an observable decrease in alcohol abuse and the committee members think that attitudes towards domestic violence in Valiparai are starting to change. "There has been a reduction in the reported cases of domestic violence. Fewer men beat their wives now, and they also seem to do it less frequently – we hope it's the beginning of real change."

Small business loan helps widow escape from poverty

Perumayee is a widow; she is not sure of her exact age, but thinks she was about 17 when she was married to a farmer in the remote village of Thummakundu. Her husband owned five acres of dry land, but he became ill and they sold the land to pay for his hospital treatment. When he finally died, Perumayee was left with five children to support, and no assets.

The family depended on seasonal agricultural work to survive. "It was hard to earn enough to feed and clothe the children," she says, "and when my daughter

got married, I fell into debt." The local money lenders charge around 60% interest, so it's difficult to ever pay off the loan.

About 10 years ago, Perumayee decided to join the local women's self-help group and was enrolled in the savings scheme. Her house is very close to the village school, and so she took a loan to start a small business selling sweets and snacks outside the school gates. "I got training from the self-help group and it gave me the confidence to

start a business. It went well, so I began to sell more items in front of the house, and then earlier this year I got another loan from the self-help group to start a small shop."

Perumayee borrowed 20,000 rupees (about £230); she spent about 15,000 rupees on building the shop and about 5,000 rupees on purchasing stock. The shop sells sweets and snacks, biscuits, cigarettes, soap and shampoo. "Most days I make sales of about 300 rupees," she says, "but on a good day it can be as

much as 1,000 rupees". So far she has managed to repay 1,000 rupees per month of her loan. Perumayee never went to school and is illiterate. "I can't even write numbers," she says, "but I learned about profit and loss from the self-help group and so I can do my accounts in my head." She hopes to expand the range of items the shop sells to include groceries and small household items. "I now eat well everyday and have more money for clothes and to cover hospital

expenses. I have ten grandchildren, and I can now support them a bit too - I want them to stay in school." "If I had not got the loan from the self-help group I think I would be in the cemetery," Perumayee says. "My children are very poor – how could they look after me? I am the only person in the family with a regular income, so I have encouraged my daughter to join the self-help group too, it makes women's lives so much better!"