



Arulmoli, leader of the women's movement in Theni district, addresses a meeting marking International Women's Day last month. With her on the platform are the directors of some of our partner organisations and a family court lawyer who also spoke at the gathering. The theme of the event was the practical difficulties in addressing and implementing the Domestic Violence Act and the remedies available.

Breaking the silence

Ask any of the 1,800 women's groups that VST and its partners work with what is their biggest social concern and the same answer comes back: domestic violence.

This is not unique to our groups or even to India; abusive treatment of women by men occurs across the world.

But in rural India traditional attitudes towards women intensify the problem. Women are expected to be subservient to fathers, husbands, brothers, men in general. Physical and sexual violence is commonplace.

VST is stepping up its efforts to change this. We want village women to find their voice, to stop suffering in silence, and to change attitudes that allow violence to remain concealed or quietly accepted.

For many years we have undertaken gender training sessions with women's groups and with men. Recently we have started anti-violence committees in 80 problem villages to take up cases of abuse. Now we are planning a new measure: a drive to publicise India's progressive Domestic Violence Act among the women it is designed to protect and the officials who are supposed to implement it.

The act came into force in 2006 but is little used or even known about. To reverse this we are making a film about domestic violence and the new act which we will screen in hundreds of villages and distribute to NGOs across Tamil Nadu. The film will feature victims of domestic

abuse telling their stories along with drama showing how to use the Domestic Violence Act. After each showing our partners' staff will lead a discussion of the issues raised in the film.

In addition we plan to provide training on the act to around 800 police officers, lawyers and social workers. Already we have trained more than 250 police officers. Senior police officers endorsed our initiative and attended the training sessions. The local superintendent of police said: "I didn't know much about this act but now I am interested and I have ordered my officers to use it."

It will cost around £3,000 to make the film and about £15 per village to show it. Training each official costs about £6.

Women denied justice through lack of knowledge of new law

Since the Domestic Violence Act came into force hundreds of cases have been brought in some parts of India. In our project area none were registered until we started campaigning last year. It is clear that women in Tamil Nadu are not achieving empowerment or justice when it comes to dealing with domestic violence. Contributory reasons include:

- Lack of knowledge of the new act among police, lawyers and social workers. VST finds many cases where the police resist filing cases under the Domestic Violence Act, preferring instead to try to reconcile the victim and her husband or file a case under other, weaker laws. The Domestic Violence Act confers extra rights, such as a woman's right to stay in the matrimonial home, right to maintenance, right to protection and special welfare measures. Women are often sent home from the police station having been denied these rights.
- Women are usually silent victims, unable discuss their circumstances. Our research has found three main factors why women do not take action: social stigma, domestic privacy/loyalty and gender inequality. Traditionally village women are submissive and downtrodden; standing up for their rights to gender equality and freedom from violence takes courage.
- Women lack trust in the legal process – they don't know how the Domestic Violence Act can protect and assist them and they are rightly suspicious of the treatment they will receive from police officers.

The professional staff at our Indian partner organisations and the women's community groups they work with want to change this situation. Already they have the support of senior police officers. This is what they want to do:

1: 'Breaking the silence' - making a drama-documentary film and screening it in the villages where we work.

They will produce a film on domestic violence and show it to more than 100,000 people in 450 villages. The film will feature women openly speaking about their experience of domestic violence. It will contain messages from police, legal and social welfare leaders offering advice on

the Domestic Violence Act. Some scenes will show women what to do if authorities resist registering cases under the act.

We know from our experience of bringing street theatre into villages that direct contact of this kind is effective in engaging villagers in addressing issues such as domestic violence. A film can be even more effective, is relatively cheap to make, and can be shown to any audiences at any time or place. It will be distributed to partner NGOs, village councils and community groups and organisations across the state.

Costs would include the filming and production of the film, creation of 500 copies on DVD, purchase or rental of projectors for each of the seven partner NGOs and travel expenses for NGO staff. The cost of £9,094 is equivalent to 10 pence per villager reached.

2: Training on Domestic Violence Act for police, lawyers and social workers.

Our partners will train 1,580 officials across three districts - targeting 580 police personnel, 400 lawyers and 600 social workers.

By the end of each one-day training session those attending will have better understanding and sensitivity on gender issues, while the training on the Domestic Violence Act will cover responsibilities of police officials, roles of protection officers, work of welfare service providers. Last year we carried out a small number of training sessions for police personnel with the support of their senior officers. This was well attended and brought about the change in attitudes desired.

The cost of £9,848 of this one year project is equivalent to £6.23 per person trained. This covers expenditure on venue hire, training manuals and travel expenses/food for attendees.

'He is a really good man but once he drinks he changes. Then he behaves very badly'

- Victim



Committee steps in after dowry demand leads to violence

When staff from our partners visited the village of Palakombai looking for volunteers to join a 'Violence Against Women' committee Rosemary knew this was her chance.

For years the 60-year-old villager had felt angry when women were confined to the home by dominating husbands or denied the chance to dress attractively. "Women were treated like bonded labourers," she said. "They should be free to say what they want and go where they please."

Other women (and some men) in the village felt the same way too. They supported Rosemary. So they formed a committee. They learned about women's rights, about India's progressive Domestic Violence Act, about how to obtain legal rights and how to demand a proper response from the police, even how to handle husbands reluctant to see wives join activist groups.

The committee started in 2008. It put up posters and its members spoke in village meetings about domestic violence. It took up the case of Ponnathai, 45, (pictured above) the wife of Veluchamy. They had had a love marriage, with no dowry paid. Now 20 years later Veluchamy had begun beating his wife, demanding that her family provide money and jewellery as dowry. Ponnathai sought help from her women's group who called in the Violence Against Women committee. The committee members approached Veluchamy and after some discussion he agreed to stop the beatings. Ponnathai remains doubtful that the violence will really end, but says the abuse has reduced.

VST's partners have set up and trained anti-violence committees in 70 villages. In the coming year we expect our campaign against domestic violence to reach tens of thousands of people.

The scan scandal

Visit a scan centre in India to learn about your unborn child and you may be told to come back on Monday, or perhaps on Friday. Or you might be offered a soft drink: a Fanta or a Miranda.

These are coded messages. This is how scan centres tell you whether your baby will be Male or Female.

Indian law forbids the disclosure of foetal sex, hoping to stem sex-selective abortion and the skewed sex ratio that results. In some villages where VST works boys outnumber girls by a substantial margin.

It's a cultural issue. A marriage without a boy child and male heir is deemed unsatisfactory, there is an outdated idea that boys look after parents in old age (in fact, more often girl children do this) while girls require costly dowries. These attitudes, combined with the trend in recent decades to smaller families, results in growing pressure to abort girl foetuses.

For women's leaders in Theni district this issue figures strongly on their violence against women agenda: not only over the destruction of female life but also the cultural attitudes that value a boy child more than a girl.

And so they have campaigned against scan centre practices – and their efforts have paid off. Recently they sent a number of pregnant women to some of the 15 scan centres in the district to find out whether the sex of the foetus would be disclosed. None did so. But the problem has not necessarily been solved. Parents seeking to know the sex of a foetus now travel to other districts where scan centres have not faced such campaigns.

VST will continue to support women's leaders in their campaign. Theni district women's movement is using the Right to Information Act to obtain official statistics on sex ratios which it plans to publicise in the media and at village meetings.

So far the campaigning has taken the form of village dramas using role play, quiz competitions, exhibitions, posters, and pamphlets, reaching 60,000 people. Similar programmes were given in schools.

CASE STUDY

Soft drinks enterprise brings hard earnings

Pandiammal is proud of the neat little house she owns with her husband in the village of Annanchai.

But four years ago she was a farm labourer earning 50 rupees (70 pence) for a 12-hour day of exhausting manual work, while her husband Kalliappan worked in a soft drinks factory.

It was her husband's knowledge of the soft drinks trade that gave her the idea for a business – that and the encouragement of her women's group.

Pandiammal and her husband now have a thriving cottage industry bottling soft drinks using the simplest of equipment. Pandiammal and an assistant pour syrup and water into bottles, add the CO2 and cap the bottles in a shed beside the house. Kalliappan delivers the drinks on his motorcycle to shops and tea stalls in surrounding villages.

It is still hard work; at busy times they fill 600 bottles a day. But now they earn 500 rupees on a good day.

Pandiammal had been a member of the women's group for some years. She had saved regularly with the group and took a loan from the group when she needed extra cash. At group meetings she learnt about microenterprise and how it could transform her income and living standards.

When it came to starting the drinks business the group members assessed her proposition. They knew she was a reliable saver and had repaid her previous loans. They judged her business was viable and that she and her husband were up to the task. So they sanctioned a loan of 45,000 rupees (£650) and gave some basic business training.

The money covered the cost of machinery and working capital. It was difficult at first to establish customers but Kalliappan toured the countryside offering trial drinks and soon they proved they had a quality product at a good price. Pandiammal struggled at first with the unfamiliar machinery and broke many bottles but eventually mastered the task.

Within 18 months the loan had been repaid. The couple have bought their house and have money to spend on their children's education.

"I am now living happily," says Pandiammal. "Others respect me and I have the dignity of earning and running my family. And this is all because I found a women's group and they motivated me."

Village Service Trust and its partners work with 26,000 women who are members of 1,800 women's groups so that thousands of women like Pandiammal have a chance to improve their lives.



Pandiammal corks another bottle of soda. The work is hard but now she earns a decent living

Geography students visit Vasandham

VST's partner, Vasandham, hosted a visit by 17 geography students from the University of Sussex last month.

The students carried out research into land use and water resources and learned about Vasandham's campaigns on water conservation.

They also met women's leaders and discussed their efforts to promote microenterprise and community

health messages through street drama.

It was the high point of a visit to India that also took in Kerala's beaches and the famous temple at Madurai.

The students were delighted by the experience and said they were disappointed that they had not been able to stay longer. The university plans to repeat the exercise next year with double the number of students.

Diary date

Village Service Trust is to hold a supporters' meeting on October 2nd in London. It will be a joint event with Action Village India. A programme is being planned to include speakers, films, music and food. More details with our next mailing.

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