

Village Service Trust

Newsletter | Winter 2025

When women take the wheel

Supporting women entrepreneurs to break gender norms and strengthen their livelihoods

A line of autos stands at a bus stop in southern Tamil Nadu. The drivers are chatting among themselves, their voices blending with the hum of the busy town.

A few feet away, one auto stands out, adorned with turmeric, vermilion, and a garland of flowers. Out steps a lone woman driver, 31-year-old M. Tamilselvi, who assists an elderly passenger into her three-wheeler.

While this may be a common sight in a metropolitan city, auto driving is often frowned upon in Tamilselvi's small town. Luckily, she feels empowered in her choice of livelihood. Tamilselvi attributes her success as an auto driver for the past five years to her husband, as well as help from the women's federation supported by VST's partner, Arogya Agam.

Having observed the potential in Tamilselvi, who was a struggling teacher, the federation offered her



Tamilselvi, 31, waits for her next customer in her auto-rickshaw

To support women like Tamilselvi, visit:

<https://globalgiving.org/projects/free-indian-families-from-debt-and-deprivation>

the path to become an auto driver. "My husband, an auto driver himself, taught me to drive. While I was excited to learn a skill, I never would have made it a career if it were not for the federation," Tamilselvi said.

Arogya Agam facilitates more than 300 women's self help groups in Theni District, working through the federation leaders of nearly 4,000 women across 80 villages. Their holistic approach supports participating women's

financial inclusion and entrepreneurial skills, as well as linking participants to existing government programmes.

Linking women to financial institutions can have a major impact. Since women in these communities commonly work in the informal sector, they would otherwise only be able to obtain loans through village lenders who charge them exorbitant interest rates.

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The Sanitation Workers' Forum leads the way towards ending centuries of marginalisation

Our partners assist a forum for sanitation workers to claim their rights and entitlements

The Arunthathiyar communities of Tamil Nadu are some of the most marginalised people in the area of South India where we work. They make up about 3% of the population and have for centuries on end been discriminated against, including by other Dalits, hence the term “the Dalits of the Dalits”.

Before modernisation in villages across India, the Dalit castes were forced into performing the jobs no one else would do, such as sweeping waste, including human faeces, cleaning drains, treating and cleaning dead bodies for cremation, and removing dead animals. People doing this work were called ‘scavengers’.

Now, progressive Indian laws ban ‘manual scavenging’ and ‘untouchability’. India is modernising this rural sanitation work, which has become a form of wage labour, predominantly done by Arunthathiyars. They struggle to receive fair working conditions and pay,

access to adequate personal protective equipment, and to be treated with dignity and respect.

During large-scale crises such as the 2004 tsunami and more recently in 2021 during a lethal wave of COVID-19, sanitation workers were designated as “key workers” and the name was changed from ‘sanitation’ to ‘conservancy’ workers. They were made to do their traditional job of disposing of the dead bodies, with little or no compensation. They also share that they are still often expected to dispose of dead animals for which the local bodies are responsible. Most wear no protective clothing, use short brushes, and are liable to get



Community members attending a meeting of a women’s self-help group (sanitation workers are not pictured, for confidentiality)

infections and exposure to syringe needles in the waste.

In response to the historically marginalised position of sanitation workers, the state government has established the Tamil Nadu Sanitation Workers Welfare Board. However, elderly workers and those in rural communities may not have strong reading and writing skills, are often not aware of government provisions, and may be wary of government authorities. To address this

challenge, a group of sanitation workers approached one of our partners in 2018 to help them form a Sanitation Workers' Forum.

The Forum meets each month to discuss and resolve any issues that they have been facing. One of the first actions taken was to ensure that sufficient PPE is provided such as shoes, gloves, masks and uniforms.

The sanitation workers are appointed by the Panchayat, which is the most grassroots village-level unit of self governance, usually encompassing three to four rural hamlets.

The sanitation workers are expected to work four or five hours five days a week, but often work full time. Those with less than three years’ service get 4,000 rupees (£40) per month, and those with longer experience should receive double that. However, often the

Panchayats do not maintain proper records and this is not implemented.

Arunthathiyars are expected to be subservient and are paid last, if and when there is money available. Their payments are frequently delayed for up to six months and are often below the agreed rate, further delaying payment. The forum supports its members to obtain the agreed wage.

The Sanitation Workers Forum recently made eight new resolutions (see box to the right) which address the ways in which they have been previously exploited and marginalised.

Resolution 7 is inspired by the promising practice in a neighbouring state, Karnataka, which uses a direct payment system for the Block Office to pay workers into their bank accounts, mitigating the need for workers to repeatedly rely on the Panchayat Secretary to receive their wages.

The Forum has requested our Partner to help them to facilitate additional forums, starting with neighbouring blocks (a block is a small administrative area).

In light of major shifts, such as the increasingly digitised Indian economy and improvements in sewer-cleaning technology, the continuation of these forums and expansion into new communities supports ongoing improvements in the lives and livelihoods of local sanitation workers.

Eight resolutions:

1. Service records for sanitation workers should be maintained regularly, on a monthly basis by panchayats.
2. The supervisors should take steps to record the work in the daily attendance register.
3. Take steps to make the government ID card available to all the sanitation workers.
4. Ensure adequate safety equipment is available for all the sanitation workers.
5. The sanitation workers should ensure that while on duty they use gloves and shoes.
6. A request should be made on behalf of the forum to the government for salary hike and notification as full time employees.
7. Recommendation for payments of salaries to sanitation workers directly from the block development office to their bank account.
8. Sanitation workers to have a medical check-up and treatment every month.

Introduction of the Tamil Nadu Sanitation Workers Welfare Board identity card

The recently introduced Welfare Board identity cards provide a number of benefits for cardholders. The Forum seeks to ensure that all group members receive the card and know how to claim the benefits to which they are entitled.

Benefits include the following:

- Accident and death compensation
- Education scholarships
- Marriage allowance
- Pregnancy assistance
- Spectacles allowance
- Old age pensions

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For women like Tamilselvi, the federation provides major subsidies for driving school fees and auto-rickshaw purchases, as well as supporting them to access a low-interest bank loan to pay for their remaining fees.

This support can make all the difference for federation participants. While Tamilselvi, a mother of two, had struggled to support her family as a primary school teacher, her shift to auto driving has greatly improved her household's wellbeing. "We moved to our own home from a rented place. We are able to cater to our children's needs," she said, with a glint in her eye.

Having built a consistent customer base and demonstrated the value of women in rickshaw driver roles, Tamilselvi aspires to



Tamilselvi behind the wheel, a lone woman driver in the community

complete her Bachelor of Education and return to teaching, while continuing driving on the side.

As for other participants in the women's movement, while five are also pursuing auto-rickshaw driving, inspired by Tamilselvi's success, the programme also supports women in other entrepreneurial ventures.

Among them, 35 women participants have received digital marketing and

tailoring courses, and 20 were trained in jute bag making. These all provide women with the capacity to generate income with more flexible hours, empowering them to balance their career with domestic or caregiving responsibilities.

Through VST's support, programmes such as these will continue to empower women to achieve their aspirations while bringing about a shift in gender norms in their communities.

Full stomachs, bright minds

Support from VST also contributes to projects engaging with pre-school classes, known as *balwadis*, in tribal hamlets. In particularly remote hamlets, project volunteers collect food to ensure the children can receive a midday meal.

To help secure the teachers needed for classes of all ages in project hamlets, Arogya Agam assists women's groups to submit petitions, helping communities to empower future generations.



Pre-school children in tribal communities

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