

## Sumangali scheme and bonded labour in India

In early September, Dutch newspaper De Volkskrant published a series of articles on bonded labour in Coimbatore, India. Young girls were reported to be trapped in hostels of textile mills working under hazardous conditions. Fair Wear Foundation was asked to give an insight into the issue.

According to a report published in 2007, the government of India identified and released 280,000 bonded labourers. 46% of them were from Tamil Nadu and Karnataka<sup>1</sup>. During FWF's consultation of local stakeholders in July 2010, However, Social Awareness and Voluntary Education (SAVE), a local NGO in Tiruppur told FWF that the Sumangali scheme is still prevalent.

The Sumangali scheme, which is a form of forced labour in India, is said to have started in 1989. The word "Sumangali" in Tamil means an unmarried girl becoming a respectable woman by entering into marriage. Thus, the scheme is also known as "marriage assistance system". In an ordinary Hindu arranged marriage, the bride's parents must provide the groom's family a substantial dowry, and should bear the expenses of the wedding. If she doesn't meet the expectation of the groom's family, the bride is prone to extreme hardships after marriage.

Under the Sumangali scheme, girls' parents, usually poor and from the lower castes, are persuaded by brokers to sign up their daughter(s). The scheme promises a bulk of money after completion of a three-year contract working in the factory. It – ostensibly – meets the need of poor families and provides stable workforce to factories in Coimbatore.

Different factories manage the Sumangali scheme differently. Workers are treated very well in some cases, while in other cases the picture is not so pretty. Once the contract is signed, young girls are under the control of the factory or the broker. It is often reported that the girls lived in captivity for a long period. Local newspaper The Hindu<sup>2</sup> reported on 17<sup>th</sup> of September that a 17 years old girl escaped from a private mill in Coimbatore, where she had been trapped for the last five years. According to research by the Centre for Education and Communication in India, girls are often forced to work up to 12 hours a day, live in hostels with few facilities and are earning a very low wage.<sup>3</sup> Some factories are reported to fire the girls or make them resign shortly before they finish the three-year contract so as to avoid paying the marriage assistance fund, ranging from 30,000 to 50,000 rupees (around € 500-800).<sup>4</sup> The marriage assistance fund far from adequately compensates the hard work, let alone forced work. Current wages of the Sumangali girls are reported to amount to about 50 rupees a day<sup>2</sup>, while legal minimum wage was about 140 rupees in Coimbatore in 2008. Thus, after three years the employer will owe the girl

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<sup>1</sup> Ajay Bishnoi, *The Removal of Bonded Labor System in India*, <http://www.legalserviceindia.com/article/I94-THE-REMOVAL-OF-BONDED-LABOR-SYSTEM-IN-INDIA.html>

<sup>2</sup> P.V. Srividya, *She Escaped from Rigours of Bonded Labour*, <http://hindu.com/2010/09/17/stories/2010091753340500.htm>

<sup>3</sup> V Mohanasundaram, *Report On Bonded Labour in Tamil Nadu*, [http://www.cec-india.org/images/stories/pdf/CECWork\\_paper/Bonded\\_Labour\\_Tamilnadu\\_2007.pdf](http://www.cec-india.org/images/stories/pdf/CECWork_paper/Bonded_Labour_Tamilnadu_2007.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Sindhu Menon, *"Adolescent Dreams Shattered in the Lure of Marriage": Sumangali System: A New Form of Bondage in Tamil Nadu*, <http://labourfile.org/ArticleMore.aspx?Id=826>



no less than 80,000 rupees against the legal minimum wage, not even counting overtime work.

The Sumangali scheme is not a straightforward issue of bonded labour. It often involves child labour and juvenile workers. The problem is complex and should be viewed in the context of Hindu culture and the Indian caste system. The Sumangali scheme as practiced in most cases, though widely accepted, is not legal according to Indian law.

Any solution to the problem must be legal and sustainable and must consider the needs of both the victims and the supplying factory. There is no quick fix for these forced labour cases. A few basic principles:

- Sumangali workers and other workers in the factory should not be disadvantaged by any solution.
- It is essential that local trade unions and NGOs are consulted and/or involved in the process.
- The supplier should at least continue to offer job opportunities to the girls, paying no less than minimum wage and OT compensation.
- In case of child labour, the girls should be brought back to education.
- Alternative accommodation needs to be arranged or allowed.
- The Sumangali girls should be able choose whether to continue working at the factory or leave with their owed wages.

The news in De Volkskrant should make all brands sourcing from South India alert. It is not easy for any companies to work on this issue alone. It is important to raise awareness of local auditors on the issue of forced labour. Many experienced auditors sometimes overlook the issue, as the scheme is culturally accepted to a certain extent. Auditors may not spend enough time investigating the 'real deal' among brokers, workers and the employer during the short factory visit. While they might find that minimum wages are not being paid or excessive overtime is being demanded, the underlying scheme may go undetected.

More measures should be taken to assist the traditional audit approach. Offsite worker interviews and complaints handling – as already practised by the audit teams working for FWF – can largely contribute to monitoring suppliers' behaviour. Companies should keep themselves and their auditors updated on specific labour problems in different areas.

Currently, seven FWF members source from nine factories in Tamil Nadu. FWF offers country studies and stakeholder consultation reports from many countries including India. The information is accessible through our website and free of charge.

To prevent bonded labour, merely informing suppliers on the Code is not enough. It is crucial for brands to communicate with their suppliers openly and provide assistance as a first step, so as to minimise resistance from the suppliers. One of the reasons why suppliers are using the Sumangali scheme is that they need to acquire and keep workers during the time of labour shortage.

A more effective and sustainable (not to mention responsible) measure to retain a stable workforce is to pay a living wage. If the factory pays more than average in the area, it is more competitive in the labour market and does not need to trap workers. Buyers should review and improve their sourcing and pricing strategy to support the suppliers on paying living wage. It is probably one of the most effective approaches for garment brands to end forced labour.