

## Case Study 2.1

# Child labour and young women garment workers in Tamil Nadu, India

This case study illustrates how a desire to escape rural poverty combined with poorly regulated industries can lead to labour abuses and even trafficking for sexual exploitation. Adolescent girls from poor rural families are particularly vulnerable to the practice known as ‘*sumangali*’, a form of forced labour. Parents, believing their daughters will be safe in a factory environment, send their daughters to work in factories in the cities.

Tirupur, in Tamil Nadu in South India, is the centre of a textile and garment industry that supplies many big international clothing retailers. Hundreds of thousands of workers have been drawn to the city. Exact figures are difficult to obtain, but Indian NGO SAVE estimates that at least half of the 400,000 garment workers in Tirupur are migrants.

*“Employers adopt diverse strategies with the single objective of creating textile mills and garment factories without trade unions.” (A. Aloysius, convener of the Tirupur People’s Forum for Protection of Environment and Labour Rights)*

Under the *sumangali* scheme, brokers promise a girl’s parents an attractive sum of money after completion of a three-year contract working in the factory. The money is often seen as a way for poor families to save for their daughters’ dowries. Parents assume that factories and dormitories are safe.

*“The agents make many promises. They make the schemes sound attractive. They use different strategies including advertising on wedding invitations.” (Vijaya, a senior field worker for Read Foundation)*

Once the contract is signed, the adolescent girls are transported from their rural homes to garment factories to work for the first time in urban areas. They are under the control of the factory or the broker, living in dormitories, where they sleep in shifts. They often work up to 12 hours a day. Many *sumangali* workers are migrants who do not speak the local language, which exacerbates their isolation and dependency. Wages are only paid at the end of the contract, which can be for as long as three or five years. This gives employers a great deal of power over the young women. The combination of their youth and inexperience, with the power the factories have over them through withholding their pay, makes it almost impossible for workers to complain or join a union.

*“Collective bargaining and freedom of association is completely nil among this group of workers.” (SAVE, a local NGO working with FWF in Bangladesh)*

Local IndustriALL trade union affiliates report that 90-hour working weeks are common, especially during the peak seasons. Some major exporters will pay overtime wages but many factories do not.

*“The tailor would slap them, prick them with his needle and even kick them, for no reason at all.” (Ramya, a ‘helper’ in garment factory, Tirupur, FWF)*

The pressure on workers has resulted in widespread reports of worryingly large numbers of garment workers committing suicide in Tamil Nadu – many of them young women. In September 2010 the national Indian journal Frontline quoted police and ‘informed’ sources who stated that over 20 suicide attempts are made every day in the district. Frontline reported that ‘trade unions and labour rights activists blame the high suicide rate in Tirupur on the practices of the garment industry’. Anecdotal reports suggest that sexual harassment played a part in some suicide attempts.