



Southern India Hotspot 2016 Annual Report

SOUTHERN INDIA HOTSPOT OVERVIEW

Program goal and objectives:

Goal:

To reduce forms of bonded labour, especially focused on spinning mills in Tamil Nadu.

Objectives:

1. Increase community capacity to prevent bonded labour, especially through community support groups, adolescent groups and economic self-help groups taking action against the causes of vulnerability for young workers.
2. Enable increased action by officials to uphold worker rights and protections, through supporting partner organisations and concerned businesses to liaise with local officials.
3. Improve working conditions and worker rights within spinning mills through development of worker support groups and supervisor and management training.

BONDED LABOUR IN SOUTHERN INDIA

- Thousands of girls and young women have been recruited into jobs that result in excessive hours of work and extremely low pay.
- Young workers often suffer appalling effects on their mental and physical health
- Spinning mills have a higher level of bonded labour than other parts of the garment supply chain.



1. OPERATING CONTEXT



Image: Peace Trust

With funding from the C&A Foundation, the Southern India Hotspot aims to reduce bonded labour in the textile industry in the state of Tamil Nadu, particularly among girls and young women working in the spinning mills. While jobs in the mills are vital for workers and their families, many of them suffer excessive work hours including forced overtime, wages much below the legal minimum, frequent abuse and harassment, and a variety of health issues arising from the work.

The hotspot supports community-based work in four districts where there are a large number of adolescent girls going to work in exploitative conditions. During 2016, we continued to fund 13 organisations located in Dindigul, Erode, Namakkal and Virudhunagar Districts. The key components of this work include: Formation of adolescent girls' groups, community support groups and economic self-help groups; improving access to education and vocational training,

assisting girls to exit situations of bonded labour and providing help with recovery for survivors.

Community-based partners now work in 405 villages supporting community freedom groups that are taking collective actions to address the underlying causes that push families to send young people to work the mills, such as poverty, limited educational benefits at local schools, and beliefs about how to keep girls “safe” until marriage.

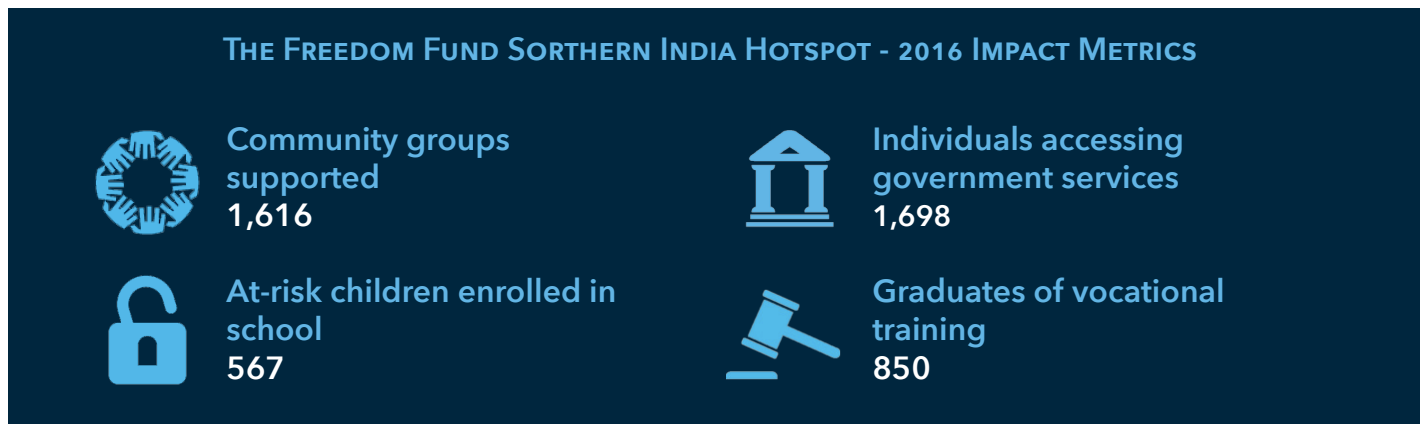
The hotspot made progress in its work with business and private industry, as well as in its work with local government to support better practices. The Freedom Fund supported the Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI) to expand its Worker Peer Group Program reaching into a further 10 mills, involving 3,995 workers, directly supporting them to be aware of their rights as well as basic health issues in the workplace.

2016 brought new opportunities within the policy context: The government of India released draft legislation aiming to address all forms of modern slavery - the Trafficking of Persons (Prevention, Protection, and Rehabilitation) Bill 2016. The government invited comments and then made very significant improvements on the draft as a result of hundreds of submissions. Our partners joined in providing informed input to this Bill, as well as commenting on the new rules issued for the Bonded Labour System Abolition Act-1976.

In November, the government declared that all 500 INR and 1,000 INR banknotes would no longer be considered legal tender. As a result, there were prolonged cash shortages, and this demonetisation of the economy delayed project activities as our partner organisations and community members dealt with the lack of legal currency at local banks. The resulting national political disruption also meant that the new draft Trafficking Bill was not brought before the parliament in the winter session.

Also, during the 2016 monsoon season, the region received only 65% of the average rainfall totals. This affected crops and agricultural jobs, worsening communities’ economic status. Partners are concerned that, as a result, an increasing number of workers will seek jobs in risky circumstances.

2. HEADLINE RESULTS



Community group expansion and creation of film-based toolkit

Partner NGOs now support 1,616 community groups based in 405 villages. A total of 23,973 individuals are actively involved in these groups. 575 of the groups are adolescent girls' groups, 247 are adolescent boys' groups, 350 are community support groups and 359 are economic self-help groups, with the remainder being worker groups and child parliaments. Roles of these different groups are described below.

The hotspot is now piloting a film-based toolkit for use by these groups. The narrative in the film aims to trigger lively discussions about the dilemmas that families face, as well as creating an appetite to learn together about young workers' rights, communication skills, health issues, resilience and mutual protection.

To produce the film and toolkit the Freedom Fund contracted Novo Media who worked closely with three partner NGOs to develop the storyline and script for the fictional film about a girl facing family struggles who goes to work in a mill. Production was completed using local residents as actors. The final product is a moving and beautifully shot story that we believe will have a significant impact.

The film and toolkit encourage groups to think critically about the root causes of bonded labour in their communities and to collectively take steps to prevent it. For girls especially, their capacity to protect themselves relies on knowing their rights and skills in negotiating at work and at home – as well as being watchful for each other. The toolkit also puts information into the hands of the groups about the relevant legal provisions and about local providers of skills trainings. A version of the toolkit is now being prepared for the adult community support groups and for adolescent boys' groups.

Partners have recruited community facilitators who live in the target villages to implement the toolkit alongside field staff. Many of the facilitators are young women who previously worked in the mills. A total of 479 facilitators were trained in facilitation skills during 2016.

A further important role of the community support groups (CSGs) is to link economically vulnerable families with government social protection schemes. During 2016, 1,698 people gained new access to government services.

The CSGs are also increasingly taking the initiative to resolve local risk factors, such as school drop out, access to transport and ensuring safe water sources.



Image from the film, "Call Me Priya".

Supporting adolescents to stay in - or get back to - education

In October 2016, all hotspot partners launched Community Resource Centres in their working villages. Operated by community-based facilitators, the main purpose of these Resource Centres is to motivate children to continue their education, especially by providing after-school tutoring assistance. It is hoped that this tutoring can reduce the number of children failing in exams. Failing exams leaves them vulnerable to entering the workforce under risky circumstances. In addition, during 2016, community support group members identified 567 previously out of school children and enrolled them back into village schools. They then ensure that children continue to attend. These enrolled children include 309 adolescents that have exited bonded labour in spinning mills.

Support for skill training and economic alternatives

During 2016, 850 individuals graduated from vocational training supported by our partners. 579 of these were survivors who had left spinning mills. Many partners have formed relationships with local training institutes to enable participants to find training that better matches their interests. In addition, 277 started their own trading or self-employment.

Partners continued to assist self-help groups (SHG) to generate income so that survivors and their families do not re-enter situations of bonded labour. Several partners helped groups access low interest loans for income generation. For example, Don Bosco linked 12 members of an SHG with a micro-finance institution that provided business training and loans of Rs. 25,000 (\$375) for each member. Most of the members were previously working in a garment unit but are now undertaking other activities such as animal husbandry and making and selling flour. Another partner, READ, helped two SHGs to receive loans of up to Rs.400,000 (\$6,100) to be managed within the SHG for income generation activities.

3,955 workers in spinning mills joined workplace improvement groups

Throughout 2016, we supported the Ethical Trading Initiative's (ETI) Tamil Nadu Multi-Stakeholder Nalam Programme to implement a worker peer group program, expanding their involvement to 10 more spinning mills, with further mills planning to join the program. The program teaches workers about rights in the workplace, assertive communication skills, and basic health and safety. The program includes measuring specific indicators of workplace improvements.

In addition, one of the hotspot partners, Peace Trust held a series of meetings with 16 mills regarding the creation of internal complaints committees (ICCs). Under Indian law, these committees are required in every workplace to address worker complaints, especially in relation to sexual harassment. After initial meetings, ICCs were formed in seven of the mills. Partners conducted awareness sessions with 286 workers focused on the functioning of ICCs. Partners are encouraged by the cooperation of mill management in several locations, and have reached out to nine additional mills that expressed willingness to create ICCs.

3. ADDRESSING SYSTEMIC DRIVERS OF SLAVERY



All of the above activities tackled systemic causes of vulnerability. In addition, the hotspot program worked to affect the wider environment and help eliminate bonded labour:

Engaging local business and government

Partners continued emphasising the legal requirement for mills to register their hostels. The importance of this requirement is that it allows for official inspections to ensure that hostels meet certain safety guidelines. In October 2016, partners organised an event in Erode District with several mill owners, local government officials, representatives from international brands, and the ILO to discuss the hostel registration guidelines. The event raised awareness among mill management about the concern of local officials, buyers, and community members that mills should register their hostels. In Dindigul district, 5S held a similar event in partnership with Tamil Nadu Spinning Mills Association (TASMA). Partners continue to meet with district government officials to raise awareness about the importance of frequent and thorough inspections of the spinning mills.

Work with brands and retailers

During 2016, a group of eight leading retailers met three times in Bangalore to share information about actions to improve conditions in the spinning mills. These meetings provided the Freedom Fund with better information on how international businesses can support better practices and the businesses expressed willingness to continue to join in events with local government in Tamil Nadu to support implementation of key protections in the mills. Given the range of other business dialogues taking place, they decided not to continue meeting as a group in Bangalore within the hotspot program.

The Freedom Fund is also contributing ideas within the Yarn Ethically and Sustainably Sourced (YESS) initiative of the Responsible Sourcing Network, and has joined the Social and Labour Convergence process of the apparel industry, so we can use our experience of work in Tamil Nadu to help ensure that robust indicators relevant to forced labour and trafficking are included in these tools.

Bringing analysis from local work to support national policies

Southern India NGO partners continued to send representatives to attend meetings of an inter-state working group to support effective policy engagement of grassroots NGOs with the new Trafficking Bill. The government's Bill aims to comprehensively address both labour and sex trafficking, and would provide clear rights to reintegration assistance for survivors. In anticipation of the Bill's introduction, partners in the Southern India hotspot arranged a series of informational meetings with local Members of Parliament (MPs) to provide real examples of the impact that bonded labour has from the perspective of community members and survivors.

One of the Southern India hotspot partners was invited to join in a meeting of the NITI Aayog (the government institution established by the current government to replace India's 5 year planning procedures) to give input on bonded labour and trafficking issues. Hotspot partners have responded enthusiastically to these opportunities offered by government bodies for policy engagement, giving them and the communities they serve a greater voice in systems-level change.

4. ENHANCING CIVIL SOCIETY CAPACITY



Community facilitator leading information session.

The Freedom Fund arranged a two-day workshop for our partners hosted by a legal service organisation to increase partners' understanding of laws related to trafficking, bonded labour, and child protection, as well as how to work more effectively with labour courts. In addition, partners participated in a financial training to help strengthen internal financial practices.

Partners were also trained in effective group facilitation. This training for 479 facilitators is a significant investment in the sustainability of the results of the hotspot, enabling communities to be less reliant on NGO workers to animate and organise groups to address collective problems. The succession of three-day workshops for batches of facilitators included best practices for group formation and how to manage group dynamics. Continuous on-going support and networking of these facilitators will be needed over the next couple of years as they build their confidence. We also see this as a way to change the prevailing gender norms, because we are equipping these young women to become assertive and progressive leaders in their home communities.

5. LEARNING

The hotspot partnered with the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) and Praxis India as independent evaluators for the program. During the first quarter of 2016, with support from IDS and Praxis, partners collected 308 life stories from among affected communities and families, and these were collectively analysed during a 4 day workshop by mill workers and NGO field staff. The report is available [here](#), and the research allowed partners to compare their current activities with the issues found to be of greatest relevance with regard to bonded labour in this context, and start to make adjustments.

IDS and Praxis also trained our NGO partners to enable them to form local action research groups. These are groups that include members with wide perspectives and they commit to meeting together to look at a well-defined issue of concern and try out different ways to address the problem. They then document their reasons for trying specific actions, the resulting outcomes and what actions they decide to try next. Arising from the life stories analysis, current topics selected include: how to avoid massive loans for health, marriage and deaths; how to tackle alcohol abuse; and how to address caste discrimination.

By September 2016, partners had also completed a participatory prevalence study in a random sample of 66 of their intervention communities, with 2,970 households, with on-site support and validation by Praxis India. Results of this study are summarised in the IDS Mid-Term Review. The study found that within the intervention communities of these partners, 45% of the households had no bonded labourers. In 36% of the households, all of the working family members were in bonded labour and 18% of households had at least one family member in bonded labour. The prevalence results are not intended to provide an estimate beyond the intervention communities. Among all the households, almost 10% had a bonded labourer who was aged 18 or below, and in two-thirds of these cases, the bonded labourer was a girl. The study looked at what was causing families to take out loans, and found that health expenses were the most significant reason. The study will be repeated in approximately 2.5 years' time to see whether these levels of bonded labour have reduced.

A further point of learning during the year was about the need to expand provision to include adolescent boys. Mills recruit adolescent boys for work and they are also vulnerable to bonded labour and exploitation. Boys are at risk of trafficking to other states. Our partners recognised that at the community level, these boys need a platform to discuss the issues they face, so they started to form adolescent boys' groups in their working areas. As well as addressing their own exploitation, boys will examine the gender dynamics that affect family, school and industry contexts, with the hope that they will be allies for their sisters, mothers, and friends.

6. LOOKING AHEAD



Inaugural meeting of adolescent boys group.

Priorities for 2017 include:

Policy engagement: Continuing to enhance partners' policy engagement at the state and national levels, through exploring convergence of the different networks active on the issue in Tamil Nadu.

Focus on health issues: Increasing the focus within the community-based work regarding the impact of health issues in generating unmanageable loans that result in bonded labour. This will include beginning to plan for a diagnostic study on types of mental health impacts associated with bonded labour in spinning mills and how they could be addressed through building the skills of our partners' field staff.

Addressing spinning mill management/supervisor practices via ETI's program: Reaching out to mill management in the sites where there are worker peer groups in order to expand ETI's work to include additional supervisors' training and management systems consultancy. The goal is to build capacity of mill management so that the mill can reach the key standards for worker rights.

Designing an approach to use of mobile phones for reinforcing key messages to group members and young workers: Following research during 2016, we are consulting with partners about plans to make systematic use of SMS in support of awareness of rights and entitlements.

Image, above: Peace Trust



7. CASE STUDY

Shanthi's story

Shanthi is an 18-year old living in a village in Tamil Nadu. Despite her father's work in agriculture and her mother's job at a textile mill, Shanthi had to drop out of school and work at the mill to help support her family. She had to work 10 - 12 hours a day, receiving 150 rupees (\$2.25) per shift. Shanthi was not allowed to sit or rest during the whole work day, which caused severe leg pains and health problems.

Shanthi decided to join the adolescent girls' group run in her village by Freedom Fund NGO partner Vaan Muhil, and she was quickly elected as the group secretary. Shanthi explained that she wanted to continue her studies or pursue an alternative livelihood, so Vaan Muhil helped her complete a tailoring course and provided a sewing machine. Now she earns an income as an independent seamstress providing services to the surrounding villages. Shanthi has become financially independent, making around 5,500 rupees per month (\$82).



Ginny Baumann

Senior Program Officer

The Freedom Fund

London

+44 203 077 2122

gbaumann@freedomfund.org

The Freedom Fund (UK)

Lighterman House
26-36 Wharfdale Road,
London, N1 9RY
United Kingdom
+ 44 203 077 2222

The Freedom Fund (U.S.)

33 Irving Place
New York, NY 10003
USA
+1 (929) 244-9722

freedomfund.org