

## Patterns and dynamics of bonded labour and child labour in the spinning mills of Tamil Nadu: Findings from life story analysis

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*“If one’s dignity, self-respect and self-worth must be forgotten and one should be like a walking corpse, then only those like me, without anything and from lower community, can live. In this society without justice those who adjust with the supervisor can work happily and put up for the work and go peacefully. My mother, who brought me up with dignity, cannot adjust and feels that I should have died; I said this when I started to narrate my life history. Those who are like me in this society should live either by being shameless [or] if not then should become dust. Your wish to go to college to study like upper caste, it becomes unfulfilled desire” (- SSS\_1THA\_03\_BL)*

*“Sometimes I [a 17-year-old] wish that I could help my mother by going for the mill job; I enquired about the mill with the girls who had joined the mill there after their tenth completion. They also enquired and told me that I can join them for the work. When I told my mother that I could go to work in the three-year scheme, after which I will get 50,000 rupees; she refused strongly saying that I am struggling so much getting beating from your father so that you can study. So I am studying now and my mother also told me that she will not speak with me if I say to her that I will go for the mill work. So I want to finish my twelfth standard; after that I know that my mother cannot make me study in college. So after completing school I want to go to the mill work; also if I study well I can get to study free of cost so I am trying hard” (- TES – 11NAL – 29 – NBL)*

*“My one-day salary was Rs 180. But the job was very difficult. If the supervisor sees a pubescent girl, he doesn’t hesitate to touch them everywhere. He would want to look inside our blouses and asks us to bend 4 or 5 times. After some time, I couldn’t keep quiet. He came and touched my breasts one day. All the suppressed anger came out and I spat in his face and pushed him away. He verbally abused me. After that he changed me to a very difficult shift. I wanted to take revenge on him. One day when I had gone to the restroom, he was waiting outside the door; that bastard. He came and started to hurl bad words at me. He said if he touches any other girl with big breasts they get attracted at his touch. You do not know anything. So if I touch you, you will get big breasts he said without any shame. I could not work one more day there. I tried to commit suicide in the mill itself. But I wanted to take revenge on him. I wanted him to be punished for his deeds. My mother came to see me in the mill hostel one day. I could not share with her neither my feelings nor my problems, only tears came. Because the supervisor was standing and watching me closely what I was saying to my mother. I said that my mother wanted to pass urine and took her to the mill’s toilet. But he sent the lady warden to the toilet. And so I could not tell my mother properly anything. I told my mother to take me to home with her. But my mother refused saying she had spent the entire advance Rs 10,000. You work for some more months here, my mother told me as she hugged and kissed my forehead and she too left crying” (- SSS\_1THA\_03\_BL)*

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## Introduction

This is a report of the analysis of multiple life stories collected across the Freedom Fund bonded labour hotspot in Tamil Nadu. They were analysed by NGO fieldwork staff and community representatives at the Collective Story Analysis workshop, 18-22 April 2016. Where appropriate, we add reinforcing material from the scoping study conducted 2-11 December 2015. We outline the major findings and key system dynamics that emerged.

The life story collection and analysis process is the first of three research components in the IDS research on the Freedom Fund bonded labour hotspots. Alongside the life story work, a parallel participatory statistics process has been carried out. These two components will generate action research groups which will collect further data, generate solutions and test these in community, NGO and policy domains.

The life-story collection and analysis method used for this research is a systematic approach to understanding the context in which Freedom Fund partners are working, but it does not allow us to generalise beyond these participating communities, which have been selected because local civil society organisations believe that workers and their families in these areas are in greatest need. It does not allow us to make inferences about the overall conditions in the industry, though it does show the severity of problems occurring in these selected areas.

All real names in this document have been replaced by codes that will be pseudonyms in the final report.

## The life-story methodology

Life stories provide evidence which allows the peer researchers to build a comprehensive picture of how people perceive their lives, and the options they have in the context of bonded labour and child labour in Tamil Nadu. The stories are not final historic records of a person, but a here-and-now picture of how people in this context describe their lives to NGO staff and community representatives. They do not depict every aspect of a person's life, but rather important episodes and transitions in their lives that they want to talk about. They give insight into the ways people talk about and categorise the different types and forms of bonded labour. The life-story method is used because it enables us to see the different causes and consequences of factors that lead to bonded labour or perpetuate bonded labour during the life of an individual. It also allows the participant to initiate topics and talk about the things that are important to them rather than be guided by issues that are either explicit or implicit in researchers' pre-constructed questions. The aim of collecting life stories and analysing them collectively is to:

- Enable community and NGO researchers to arrive at a collective understanding of contemporary bonded labour and bonded labour issues in this hotspot in South India.
- Understand the forms of bonded labour and agree on the categories and definitions that should be used in a prevalence study in this hotspot using participatory statistics.
- Inform areas and issues that will be explored in the action research.
- Reflect on how the individual NGO programmes can most effectively respond to the issues and dynamics identified and how the whole programme can meet the needs identified.
- Identify possible gaps and reflect on if and how these might be addressed.
- Stimulate and inspire NGOs about how to make their programmes and the hotspot approach more effective and relevant.

The stories were *not* collected for advocacy purposes, to generate money from donors or for legal action.

## Life-story collection

A minimum of five stories were to be collected in each village to give enough data to indicate patterns in that village. We estimated one story to take between 30 to 60 minutes to collect. Following methodological training, field-level NGO staff collected life stories in their project areas. Each NGO was asked to collect 11 stories in 4 villages; 44 stories for each of the 7 NGOs. These were recorded as notes and written up in Tamil

as full stories. We proposed that most but not all stories should come from the people directly affected by bonded labour in a household. Of 11 stories per village:

- Seven should come from people directly affected (people in bonded labour or their families)
- Two from people who had not been in bonded labour but shared the same socio-economic and caste profile as the seven who went into bonded labour
- Two from people who can provide a broad profile and are significant in the community (e.g. teacher, PRI member).

A protocol for the safe storage and coding of stories was developed to ensure that the individuals remained anonymous. Quotes in this document are anonymised. By the end of the process, 308 stories were collected and the overall demographic profiles and characteristics of the stories collected by all NGOs were close to the planned sample. We found that 196 were people directly affected (themselves or family members in bonded labour); 56 were not currently in bonded labour, and 56 were people who could provide a broad profile of the situation. The demographic profiles of the respondents of the individual NGOs reflected their intervention area of expertise as well as their perceptions on who was directly affected by bonded labour. The sample was almost exclusively derived from women and girls because the programmes are directed to them in a context where the only boys are from outside of Tamil Nadu and living in the hostels. As with the girls in hostels, these groups are almost impossible to access because they are held without contact with the outside world. Local boys *are* working under conditions of bonded labour in other industries. Many of the bonded girls have male siblings who are living in the same house as them. All the men interviewed were opinion leaders or teachers.

## Employment profile of respondents

Life stories on bonded labour and child labour: Tamil Nadu	LEAF	PEACE	READ	SPEECH	TESTS	WORD	SSSSS	Total
People directly affected (people in bonded labour or their families)								
Bonded labourer within the community	17			21	29	16	19	102
Non-bonded labourer	8		8		11	9	8	44
Ex-bonded/trafficked labourer	5		28				7	40
Community representative or Local opinion leader (community head, ex-PRI, Dalit leader)	7	6	7	8		7	4	39
Child labourer within the community		28		6		3	2	39
Parent of child that avoided bonded labour				9	3			12
Ex-child labourer in the community						9		9
Ex-child bonded/trafficked labourer outside community		8						8
Service provider (teacher)	1	2	1				4	8
Bonded/trafficked labourer outside the community	6							6
Parents of child labourer in community					1			1
<b>Total</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>308</b>

Other data gathered on the storytellers is as follows:

263 out of 308 of the people whose stories were gathered were known to the local NGO field worker. 118 were 18 years or under. 148 stories came from people of scheduled caste and 158 were OBC. 121 came from villages where the intervention was new and 187 from where there was an established intervention. In addition to these sample biases we should note the following limitations of the method:

- The NGO field coordinators have been working with girls who work in the mill. This could have changed people's perspectives on their lives.
- The sample has no boys and very few men. The aim was to get stories of the main constituent population targeted by the programme, but it still highlights the need to pay explicit attention to gender, age and kinship dynamics in these bonded labour hotspots.
- Local NGO field staff collected all the stories even though there was an even split between NGO field staff and spinning mill workers for the analysis.
- The method provides a perspective on the root causes of bonded labour primarily from the people directly affected, which is a just one perspective on this topic. Others with a stake in the system of bonded labour, including self-identified traffickers, moneylenders or those who control bonded labourers, would provide alternative interpretations.
- A qualitative in-depth analysis of each of these stories by social scientists could show additional themes or relationships.

## **Life-story collective analysis process**

For the analysis of the stories, we invited NGO and community representatives to come to a workshop. Each NGO came with at least one staff member and one community representative. In total there were 14 community members and 19 NGO workers, most of whom were field staff. Eight of the participants were 18 years and below. Participants were divided into pairs. Pairs comprised one local NGO field worker and one community member – each from different NGOs. Each pair was asked to read the story. If necessary, the literate member of the pair read the story to the non-literate person. They then discussed what was important in the story and explored why that was important. After doing this they were asked to write on coloured sticky notes the two things that they thought were most important about the story (two key messages or learnings that could be discerned from it). They were also asked to put on a different coloured sticky note whatever they considered as the major causal factor in the story which drove women in to the mills. This resulted in 546 sticky notes.<sup>1</sup> These were then clustered and the most important issues were identified alongside relative frequencies within the stories. Each story had a code, which participants wrote on a sticky note that was on the wall around the themes they identified. This allowed us to trace all of the stories for each cluster. This clustering of stories revealed patterns and clusters of themes that emerged from the analysis. The table that follows shows frequencies of issues that were considered to be either the most or the second most important issue raised by the story. Some of these emphasised why people ended up in the mills and others what happened once they got there.

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<sup>1</sup> The discrepancy between the 546 answers and the 616 sticky notes with issues in the 308 stories is because some only identified one issue and a few sticky notes were illegible.

ISSUE	FREQUENCY
SICK DUE TO HEAVY WORK	71
LOW FAMILY INCOME	61
SCHOOL DROP OUT	57
LOAN AND DEBT	52
MENTAL HEALTH	48
NO AWARENESS OF THE IMPORTANCE OF EDUCATION	44
IRRESPONSIBLE FAMILY	28
ALCOHOL	26
DEATH DUE TO ILL HEALTH	25
ACCIDENT	21
SEXUAL HARASSMENT	18
BIG FAMILY	15
SUICIDE	16
REGULAR INCOME IN MILL	10
CHILD MARRIAGE	8
SEPARATED FAMILY, DESERTION	8
FORCED LABOUR	8
VIOLENCE IN FAMILY	7
DEATH OF FAMILY MEMBER	5
GENDER BIAS	4
NO TRANSPORT	3
NO HOSPITAL	3
ELOPE	2
DISABILITY	2
NO OTHER JOB OPPORTUNITY	2
LACK OF FAMILY AWARENESS	1
NO WATER	1

This frequency table is important because although it tells us little about the inter-relationships between factors that drive bonded labour, it helped us to understand the significance of those factors when we looked at them later on the system maps. As we can see, the highest number of stories relates to illness as a result of the heavy work in the mills.

On the causal side, the most significant factor is the simple fact of low family income. A lot of the stories were about low family income (61) and loans and debts (52) which result from illness, death and marriage as well as big families which require a higher income.

Alcohol also shows up as a significant factor. Put together with the evidence from our scoping study (where almost every focus group of women said that the men in their village were mostly alcoholics) and the views of the peer researchers (that alcoholism was one of the strongest reasons why women were forced to work in the mills) this is clearly an important issue in the hotspot.

A lot of the stories highlighted a lack of education for young people as the cost of going to the mills. In other words, because economic factors force girls into the mills, they almost inevitably miss out on an education. While some regarded the lack of education as a function of parents' neglect or ignorance, for most it seemed to be a simple harsh reality that the way for the family to make a living is for the girls to work in the mills.

Other factors which were not seen as dominant messages in the stories were present in many of the stories and in the discussions, turned out to be critical contextual factors. These included the way in which transport limits people's options for work.

In addition to the sticky note clustering, peer researchers were asked to draw a small causal chain (with feedback loops where appropriate) which described the main causes and consequences which were narrated in the story.



**Figure 1: Pairs of community and NGO peer researchers analysing stories together<sup>2</sup>**

These causal chains were drawn to aid the construction of a large system map which drew together all of the key factors. Participants examined and discussed the relationships between these factors.

<sup>2</sup> Photo credit: Praxis Institute for Participatory Practice India



**Figure 2: A large system map which shows the interrelationship between factors<sup>3</sup>**

The large map allowed us: to see how factors identified from the experience and views of the respondents in the hotspot were interlinked; to see the chains of causalities; and to see the whole in one view. This is different from mapping at a village or an NGO level as it allows us to look at patterns and causes across the hotspot. The patterns of the clustering tell us a lot about what is going on. The causal chains tell us about the dynamics of what is going on – i.e. how one factor leads to another, and the reasons why.

The pairs worked with their stories and causal chains to identify factors and links and draw them onto the map. They drew all of the lines and factors themselves. They were only allowed to put onto the map links that were evidenced in the stories that they had analysed. The facilitation team regularly checked this evidence. Once the map was completed, participants were asked to thicken some of the lines to denote strong linkages that appeared in multiple stories. This helped us to see the dominant system dynamics. We then asked them to put a green sticky on the map to show where they had major interventions and a yellow sticky to show where they had smaller interventions. Each NGO was given 6 sticky notes so that they could locate 6 interventions. They were then given an additional sticky to add important interventions that they realised they had after conversation. This helped us to see where interventions mapped onto major causal pathways and where there were big gaps.

Both the cluster maps and the causal maps were used to trigger conversations about the issues which each lasted approximately 1.5 hours.

For the write up of this report, we checked and analysed the individual stories that participants identified as illustrating the key dynamics and themes clustered on the map during the joint analysis of the workshop.

### **Contextual observations from the scoping visits and the stories**

In many of the villages we visited, most of the girls who worked were employed in the mills. We heard that there are some mills where half of the workers are boys, but many of these are from other parts of India such as Bihar, and are living in the hostels to which we had no access. Local girls also go into the hostels, but it is not clear what proportion. It is generally recognised that conditions for these girls are much harsher. They have gone in under a ‘scheme’ – traditionally called the *Sumungali* scheme – through which they are promised money to pay for their wedding, jewellery and so on after three years of work. These schemes have

<sup>3</sup> Photo credit: Praxis Institute for Participatory Practice India

been widely criticised, not least in the Tamil Nadu press. Villagers mentioned that girls who live in the hostels are forced to stay and are not allowed contact with their families, most of whom do not know the conditions that their children live in. Even when they visit, they are usually not allowed to spend time alone with the girls, so they cannot speak freely. NGO staff and villagers reported that it is very difficult to get into the mills (certainly those with the worst conditions) and more or less impossible to get access to the girls in the hostels. We do have stories from girls who used to live in the hostels which provide insights into the poor conditions:

*“So I told my aunt that I wanted to go for some mill work and also help me to join a hostel. She first refused, then later on through a broker for 2000/- rupees I got a job at the mill at Vedachanthur. When I joined there, initially they told me to be at the hostel and join the scheme because I needed the money for my wedding. If you join the scheme your life will be good. Since I was an orphan I decided to join the scheme. I joined in the winding department. The work at the mill was hard. If I see the difficulty how can I survive? Even though I had difficulties I was happy that I had people around me so I joined the hostel. In the hostel I experienced lot of problems. There was limited food; if you asked for extra food it was denied. To take a bath there were five bathrooms, and some days, water would not come. It was quite difficult. In one room six of us had to sleep. One of us will be in day shift or night shift or afternoon shift. After coming back from night shift we cannot sleep. Others would be chatting. We do not even fold our mattresses and continue to sleep with the same ones. The biggest problem was that for each shift they used to come and wake us. Alarm would be kept and they will come and ring it and wake us up. We cannot sleep properly. If the regular working girls were on leave, they will come and ask us to work even when we had just finished night shift. They will pressure us to do overtime. You are only in the hostel; why can you not do it? What are you going to do with the scheme money? We used to receive such scolding”*

(- SSS\_2PUG\_05 \_BL)

It was evident from the scoping visit that most of the girls start at around age 14-15, 14 years being the legal age for work but not in factories. We also met quite a few who said they had started as early as 12 years old. While some underage girls were reluctant to say their ages, those who were older told us what age they had started at. The group discussions confirmed these typical starting ages. Mills employ girls from 12 years of age and only about 20% of workers are over age 25. As parents are usually over 25 years old, they do not usually get jobs in the mills, so the children have to go. Children are employed because they are believed to be fast workers and can be paid lower wages.

From our scoping study – discussions with NGOs and women and girls – we compiled some example payments for the women that work in the mills. Many women are employed as apprentices, which can be a way to avoid paying higher salaries and benefits. The basic minimum wage for an apprentice in the textile mills is 110.00, the Variable Dearness Allowance is 195.8, and so the total is 305.8. In practice, few women earn the total minimum wage for an apprentice. Payments for inexperienced workers in the spinning mills could be as low as 120-150 rupees. Typically, women reported earnings between 180 and 220 rupees with the most experienced getting 250.

People should only remain apprentices for up to 480 days (two years) after which they should become permanent. So around 10% of the mill workers should be apprentices, but actually most of the workers are. Mill owners often either send apprentices away after two years or just keep calling them apprentices. Maternity benefits are not available for women. Even where mill owners are paying apprentices 200-220 rupees a day, women in the *Sumangali* scheme are often getting paid 160 rupees (\$2.39) a day. Many of the scheme employees never received what they were promised. Brokers were paid 1,500 to 2,000 rupees to encourage women going into the mill.

The men are mostly working in the construction field but there are some men working in the spinning mills. Drivers, plumbing and gardeners typically get paid around 225-250 rupees.



What follows are some of the key dynamics that can be distilled from the system maps. Short quotations are used to illustrate the issues. Fuller stories are referenced with, for example, “LS 2, 4, 6” meaning “Life Stories 2, 4 and 6”. We have divided the findings into two sections. The first relates to the reasons why the girls go to the mills, and the second to the consequences of working in the mills. As we will see, some of the conditions they experience create feedback loops which reinforce the needs for families to send girls to the mills.

## **Reasons why girls and young women go to the mills**

We were able to obtain a consensus on the critical factors and issues which underpin bonded labour from the wall maps of sticky notes and from the large-scale system map. This did not pick up all of the underlying causes such as the caste status of people, but it picked up the factors that people have to engage with in their everyday lives. In these discussions people reached a different conclusion about the main factors and causes than from the list of sticky notes. We start with the most significant of these factors (in no particular order) and then highlight some of the other reasons why girls and young women go to the mills. These findings were derived from the stories collected in communities with high prevalence bonded labour. It is not necessarily the case that the findings can be generalised across the whole industry.

### **No money and no viable alternative income**

The failure of the monsoon means that people can no longer rely on subsistence farming so they are forced to take jobs in the mills. In any case bonded agricultural labourers have very little money so feel forced to send their girls to the mills. In addition to daily living costs they also have to raise money for marriage. Large family size adds to the requirements for some form of additional income. In some cases, children are blamed by parents for the debts – so they then feel obliged to go to the mills to pay them off. There are more or less no other jobs locally. We learned in the scoping study that many people go for the 100 days of work scheme but some are paid only 90 rupees per day, i.e. one-third of national minimum wage. The only other jobs are outside of the village and require transport, but it is only the spinning mills that provide the transport. For girls and women, who are generally not permitted to move around independently nor find it safe to do so, the lack of transport to any other work or vocational opportunity is a key factor that makes mill work inevitable. Due to transport difficulties and prevailing gender restrictions, girls and women become a captive labour market. Regularity of income from mill work is also attractive. Even when girls leave the mills, they end up going back because there’s no other option. The head of the family cannot get a regular job and even though the girls do not earn the statutory minimum wage they can often earn four times the total income of men in the same family because of the lack of regular work for men. People in the community also lack skills, so even if there were jobs they would not be able to take them. Most said that if there was another source of livelihood they would take it. For illiterate adolescents, there are jobs at the mills despite their lack of skill, and working in the mill does not require any financial investment from the family.

*\*“My name is Ramya [Name Changed], age 24. My father’s name is Muthu [Name Changed] and mother’s name is Muniyamma [Name Changed]. I have four siblings; all are girls. I do not have brothers. My father brought us up like boys. My father’s job was at the ironsmith. My mother was at home because of her age. We used to help our father like boys. The job at the ironsmith was only for 15 days; household expenses had to be taken care of with the money earned and we had to pay for festivities too. So we had a financial burden. Since we were five children we were facing food scarcity. We used to get only 25 kilos of rice from the ration per month. It was not sufficient. For a human, food is the first need, which we were lacking; secondly clothes. We do not have clothes to change. I feel very embarrassed to say this. All of us had experienced all the troubles faced by the elders at a very young age itself. We used to have two meals per day. I was the second born in the family. My parents were elderly people. So they cannot go and work in other places. One of my neighbours, who was my age, used to go for the mill job. I used to watch their family keenly; I was thinking of how their family was happy. So I took a decision; my education will not buy me food. So I thought let me go for the mill work. If I go for the work, my family can come to a good level.*

(- SSS\_4EMA\_06\_BL)

Of course the pathways to mill work vary from village to village. Some families, for example, were brewing illegal liquor. When the government stopped them, they had no alternative but to go to the mill.

### **Gender discrimination**

Gender discrimination is a key factor within the context of employment in the mills for many reasons. Inside the family there is discrimination between sons and daughters in access to education. Girls are often forced to drop out of school and pressured to go to the mills. There is also gender discrimination in selection of jobs that are considered suitable for girls: they must go to the mills rather than anywhere else. Critically, even when girls go to the mills to work, they often only keep a tiny amount of the money that they earn, while boys may not give any or all of their earnings to parents. Parents have a high expectation of children to contribute to family income. Girls are expected to be compliant and obedient to parents and this includes contributing more of their earnings. Boys are seen as the inheritors of family resources while girls will marry outside of the family and go to other houses. Companies prefer submissive girls rather than boys – and they pay them less, which increases their profits. Boys work as electricians, plumbers, in technical jobs, etc., which are not as harmful as work with the spindles.

### **Free transport to the mills**

As we saw above, transport is a very big issue in many stories. Mill vans and buses are the way people can access a livelihood. If there were government bus services people could go for other work and those over 8th grade could get to the schools.

*“Also there are no transport facilities and so many children and young people go for the mill work only. If there is a solution for this, we would be happy. It would be a total change for the village. Because there are no transport facilities the children cannot continue school, also they are attracted by the money and go for the mill work. But I am very much determined I will not send my children for mill work and to make them study!” (- PEA\_2\_NAT\_1\_NBL)*

*“Around fifty people from my village go for the mill job. They feel that it is everyday work and they are also provided with transportation. Moreover they have some schemes” (- SSS\_3MAN\_11\_CM)*

*“People prefer this job because they work in the field only 8 hours and to meet the marriage expenses they have to have permanent job. Half of the rural development schemes are not coming to our village, like no community hall, no primary health centre and no bus facility available in the village” (- SPE\_1MDU\_1\_CR)*

*“My mother and brothers wish to make me to study even by facing any kind of difficulties. Our village doesn’t have any basic facilities what most of the villages have no shops, no bus services etc. I am going to school daily and coming back and going to forest for work. There is no opportunity to develop my knowledge” (-SPE\_4SAM\_11\_NBL)*

### **Corruption and bribery**

Bribery is often required to get access to protective schemes. For example, to get different welfare schemes – e.g. widow pensions – the Village Admin Officer must be bribed. The Government’s rural employment scheme MGNREGA is important but in some places there is malpractice. The *panchayat* president may extract part of the pay from the MGNREGA workers e.g. when they go to pick up pay from their bank accounts. They feel compelled to go to the mill if MGNREGA is not working well. Often, to get a good job, people have to pay bribes which they cannot afford, so they see no point in going to school or getting further training.

## Debt

Debt is a major issue. When people have to take loans, often the only way that they can pay them back is to send their girls into the mills. The irony is that the price of one child getting into higher education is sometimes that another has to work in the mill to pay for the loan. Similarly, when one sister gets married and the family loses her income, then the next sister will have to go to the mill. If they have to take a loan, they must pay interest; if repayments are delayed (because someone gets sick), they have to pay extra. Some mills offer an attractive advance to cover such costs. Participants in the workshop reported that in their experience 9 out of 10 people have these loans from the mills (10,000-20,000 rupees) which get paid from their wages. Often a broker (middle man) will give some thousand rupees to the father to get him to send the girl. If three girls from one family go to one mill, they can get a loan up to 100,000 rupees. Debt also sometimes leads to suicide. This loss of a parent only pushes more children into the mill.

In the analysis workshop participants ranked what people were most likely to get loans for.

Ranking of things that people need to get loans for			
	Community representatives' ranking	NGO representatives' ranking	Total
Illness	9	15	24
Marriage	3	12	15
Higher education	6	8	14
Alcohol	5	8	13
Accident	5	7	12
Death	3	3	6
House-building/repair	4	2	6
Daily expenses	2	2	4
Gambling	3	0	3
"Unnecessary things"	0	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>97</b>

The largest number of loans relate to illness and accidents, followed by marriage, education and alcohol. It was agreed by the group that, as in Northern India, the need for loans arises because people cannot get enough money to support themselves through crises from the sources that are available. Self-help groups only produce relatively small amounts of money which can help in livelihood initiatives and so on but cannot cover the larger loans that are often needed. Also, banks will not lend for marriage, death, illness or accidents. There is some provision – not least by Freedom Fund – for children's education, and girls who complete 10th and 12th grade education are usually entitled to state help for marriage. There are also small grants available through some NGOs for entrepreneurial activities. However, many will not get these and there is nothing available to deal with the high costs related to illness, funeral expenses and accidents.

*"My mother started to go for the daily wage labour. They said that my dad had a problem in heart we borrowed money and treated him. Even my brothers started to go for work. My father was scared that he will die; so he wanted to see my sister's wedding. So we borrowed money and my sister got married. After this our debt increased and my mother found it very difficult to repay; the loan people will come home and fight with us. So after eight standard I stopped my studies and went for the mill work"*

(- TES – 18SIV – 25 – BL)

*“My father is an alcoholic and what he earns is enough for his drinking. We borrowed money from different people and got her married. My mother goes for daily wages work and supports the family. Since we borrowed money for sister’s wedding we had to repay the debt” (- TES – 18SIV – 10 – BL)*

## **School drop-out**

A lot of the children drop out of school because they face bad treatment and have to do menial jobs in the school – like clear out the toilets. Caste discrimination is a factor in school drop-out in some places. It is worth noting that there was a big difference of opinion here between NGO members who did not immediately see it as an issue and the community members who saw discrimination as an important issue. The views of the NGO participants were that school drop-out was often a direct result of parent neglect and lack of information.

Children also drop out because of parent’s death and parent’s separation resulting in a sudden loss of income or children who have to take care of themselves and their families. Sometimes children do not finish their education because parents see that even people who are educated need to pay bribes in order to get a job. If they have not got the funds to do this, then it shows the community that higher education is unproductive. If they do pay the bribes, then it means that younger siblings are pressed into mill work to pay for the cost of the bribe and that there is not enough money for the other children. Participants gave examples of the sorts of jobs that demand bribes: ICDS assistant, teacher, police, sanitation worker, *panchayat* clerk, village admin officer.

## **Alcohol**

Men typically have seasonal work or work just a few days a week in work that requires no education and little professional skills such as building outdoor canopies. Women in the scoping study said that almost all of the men were alcoholics and that when they are not working they are drinking.

Dyeing and construction sites pay better than mills, but the work is very hard, mostly in the sun and heat. Due to this heavy work, boys started to drink and it becomes a habit when they grow up as adults (Notes from Scoping Study focus group).

One story tells of ‘manual scavengers’<sup>4</sup> who drink to make their work bearable and to make the stench less noticeable. More generally men get sick from pains from heavy work and then start drinking to control the pain. For some younger men, heavy drinking now seems to be a social norm. Alcohol consumption results in men not working or else spending what they earn to pay for alcohol. In either case, there is no money in the house so the wife and or female child have to go out to work. In the analysis discussion this came out as the biggest category when we looked at causal factors for women entering the mills.

## **Love, sex and attraction**

Love and relationships are on the minds of young girls and boys. Parental fears of daughters’ pre-marital contact with boys is a major determinant of what is possible for girls. For example, the government runs hostels for education for which scheduled castes get priority – but parents do not want to send the girls away from home because they are afraid they will meet boys. Despite parents seeing the mills as a “safe” environment where adolescent girls will not get into trouble with boys, the reality is that mill owners do not take care about boys and girls mixing together and so inevitably relationships are formed. Even “well-disciplined” girls get into love affairs at the mill – sometimes leading to marriage. Families are reluctant to send girls to higher education when it involves travelling to other locations, yet they think it is safe for girls to travel in mill buses. For some of the girls who have no other contact with males and no other recreation,

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<sup>4</sup> The [Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013](#) gives a detailed definition of ‘manual scavenger’ as: “a person engaged or employed, at the commencement of this Act or at any time thereafter, by an individual or local authority or an agency or a contractor, for manually cleaning, carrying, disposing of, or otherwise handling in any manner, human excreta in an insanitary latrine or in an open drain or pit into which the human excreta from the insanitary latrines is disposed of, or on a railway track or in such other spaces or premises, as the Central Government of a State Government may notify, before the excreta fully decomposes in such manner as may be prescribed...”

the bus driver can become an object of affection – and vice versa – when he puts on suggestive songs for them on the journeys.

### **Death in the family and family separation**

Death and separation lead to loss of income, which leads to girls going to the mills. This in turn can be caused by alcoholism, although other reasons were given. For example, parents separate when the men have illicit affairs or after child marriages where young couples have difficulty understanding each other. Parental death is also a major reason why children drop out of schools and have to go to the mills.

### **Self-sacrifice**

Many children sacrifice themselves so that their sisters or brothers can get an education. Some went to save their mothers from having to work.

### **Other reasons**

Other reasons given for working in the mills included: boredom, enticement and peer pressure; homelessness; lack of awareness about conditions within the mill; access to the Provident Fund (PF) and Employees State Insurance (ESI). One of the more positive reasons given for going to the mill was the perceived opportunity to study at the same time as working in the mill. It was also perceived by some that there was an equality of castes in the mill and that people could mix across castes.

### **Consequences of working in the mills**

The research analysis derived from the cluster maps, the system maps and the analytical dialogue that was stimulated by them highlighted a range of key consequences for mill workers. At the core of the discussion was health and illness. Illnesses in the mills that were named were:

- Menstrual problems and irregular or missed periods
- Miscarriage
- Breathing problems
- Fever and boils on the head
- Infertility
- Irritation in the eyes
- White discharge
- Mental health issues
- Fainting from heat
- Malnutrition
- Respiratory problems

Many of the girls cited the heat and cotton dust as the main cause of illness. However, 5 out of 11 problems are reproductive health related and there has been little actual medical diagnosis. Illness resulting from mill work leads to the need to take out more loans – once again putting another girl in the family at risk of having to go the mills.

### **Heavy workload**

Girls are regularly forced to do extra shifts – most are doing 8-9 hour shifts per day but often the shifts will actually be 10 hours once they have finished cleaning up. Forced overtime is a big problem. Sometimes they do one shift after another (17 or 18 hours) – when they change the timing of their shift pattern or if they have to cover for someone. Because they get so exhausted from double shifts, they cannot eat when they get home and become under-nourished. 14-15 year olds look much older due to tiredness and malnourishment. Many girls use substances and get addicted. Sometimes this is to enable them to cope with harassment from supervisors and boys, and sometimes because they simply need to stay awake. Women are often provided with substances to keep them awake. We heard, for example, that tablets are put into the 7UP. One peer researcher reported that in her mill, nearly everyone uses substances although we were not

able to discern exactly what substances were used. Community members also told of women (including themselves) who deliberately burned themselves on the hot machines in order to keep themselves awake.

The mill workers are typically forced to work six days a week and if they take leave (or are sick) in between they have to do overtime. If they do overtime, they are not paid properly and suffer the problems outlined above. Sometimes they may even have to do three shifts (i.e. 24 hours) in succession. In the hostel, if a day worker does not come then the hostel resident has to work day and night. Even community-based day workers may have to do this. Peer researchers said that doing nine shifts a week rather than six is fairly common – typically they would do eight.

### **Fines lead to pressure to do more shifts**

The girls must produce a number of completed cones and if a cone is dropped and gets dirty, then they must pay a fine out of their wages. The supervisor may get money deducted from his wages, and he in turn will take this deduction back from the girl so she may take home only 10 rupees for that shift. At one mill this happens regularly.

The machines are often worn out and break. The girl is fined 1,000 rupees if it breaks while she's working on it. She will also be taken to the General Manager and scolded for spoiling the machines.

### **Health issues in the mills**

With regard to health, there are feedback loops which come from working in the mill, meaning that harm caused by working in the mill leads to further vulnerability in the family to harmful work. For example, after 10 years, the worker cannot usually work anymore. There are also many accidents. Older women might get cleaning jobs or other work, but not the work on the spindles. As they are less likely to be able to get work themselves, older women must rely on their adolescent children entering the mills. This is a cycle that is perpetuated over time. Other conditions that affect health include poor sanitation, not being allowed to go to the toilet, very short breaks, and insufficient and or bad food.

### **Pregnancy and miscarriage**

Even when the girls are pregnant they have to do the same work, up to about the fifth month, then they usually leave the mill. Many girls miscarry while working. Mill workers often have fertility problems. Some asserted that if a boy knows that a girl works in the mill he might not marry her due to likely infertility (although of course there are many married women in the mills). The girls have to leave the mill during the latter part of her pregnancy. This may mean that another girl from the family needs to join the mill to make up for lost income, not to mention another mouth to feed. Girls have to go back to work after having a child, leaving the baby with extended family.

### **Accidents**

Accidents are rife. They happen because equipment is old and people are tired and lose concentration. Workers get nervous because they are scolded and afraid to get it wrong. Being made to work on machines without previous knowledge and training leads to accidents. Accidents leads to the loss of fingers or other serious injuries which in turn lead to a loss of work. Future research should try to obtain more information about how many accidents there are. These accidents are mostly covered up by the management. Workers fear reporting them because then they will get no money from the mill owners.

*“They started to give me frequently overtime. Since they used to be at the back of us when we did not work I got addicted to certain habits. I became addicted to snuff, Ramu (Name Changed) to nicotine use and Malini (Name Changed) to betelnut use. one day under the influence of the addiction I accidentally put my hand in the machine and it got cut. From the mill they took me to the hospital. They did not give any salary for that day. I took 15 days of leave; they did not help me also” (- SSS\_2PUG\_02 \_BL)*

*"I am sharing an incident that happened in my company; that a lady while working, her sari accidentally got caught in a machine wheel and she died. She worked well and helped me a lot in the company and was affectionate with me. I cannot forget her"*

(- SPE\_4SAM\_3\_BL)

### **Mental health problems and suicide**

Mental health problems appear from the scoping study discussions, the stories, and the analysis of cotton mill researchers to be endemic. Suicides are often linked to sexual harassment, verbal abuse and scolding that causes mental stress. This is seen as very important. In one mill community research participants reported that there were 10 suicides. In others there were two or three. The 14 peer researcher mill workers spoke of 9 mills with a total of 34 suicides in last year.

### **Unable to leave because of the financial consequences**

If workers want to leave the job before the agreed period, they are denied their Provident Fund.

They are also frequently not paid if they try to leave.

*"Initially we used to go daily for work from home; since it was difficult we went and stayed at the hostel. Our salary one day was 220 rupees. My mother used to visit us once in a month. We thought we could take rest in the hostel but it was not so. We were forced to do overtime and also clean the machines after work since we were in the hostel. Also the supervisor troubled us much. He used to always be looking at us with a silly smile. If we are not careful he might do anything to us. One day I decided to be at the hostel because of stomach pain during menstruation. As I was lying down someone came and gave me slap on my cheek; it was my hostel warden. She started to scold me by saying you are always saying some lame excuse to not go for work. Weekly once four of us had to join and clean the toilets; it was very difficult and I used to cry. When my mother came to visit us we cried to her and told all our troubles and asked her to take us home. So my mother came and took us with her and got the salary the very next week. After that we worked in the mills for six months. There also they would ask us to do lot of overtime. We did not continue and when we went and asked the provident fund money they refused to give us saying if you work only for six months it does not belong to you but to the government" (- SSS\_4EMA\_08\_NBL)*

### **Collusion and corruption**

We learned from the scoping studies that labour inspection is characterised by corruption. Often mills are tipped off about any inspection visits. They all have signals. In some mills the girls just disappear out the back and run home. In others they are put into a pit and covered in cotton. These stories were corroborated by the peer researchers. In any case government or business-led regulation below the level of the garment factories is more or less non-existent.

### **Where are the NGO interventions and what are the gaps?**

We looked together at the large system map and asked people to place their major interventions against the factors and relationships that they had mapped.

There is some work on sexual harassment and more generally some work on conditions in the mills. Some of the NGOs have helped mills to introduce complaints committees, and conditions do seem to have improved at those sites. Some have managed, for example, to introduce masks.

There are some non-Freedom Fund interventions that focus on health camps. There are a few others – one focusing on collecting blood samples of people in the mills and another focusing on nutrition. However, the range of health issues include missed periods, miscarriages, uterine prolapse, white discharge, skin complaints, asthmatic and breathing complaints. Abortion is mentioned frequently, but it is not clear when they are referring to abortion if they are talking about miscarriage or abortion.

There are various livelihood programmes that partners work on. Some partners are supporting credit and savings groups, others are facilitating low-interest bank loans for income generation, vocational training, youth employment or help for micro-enterprises.

A number of major needs were identified for interventions – which obviously cannot and should not all be done by the Freedom Fund. Some of the priorities that have been identified could, however, be areas that people can take action on themselves. Community members and other stakeholders will explore this in action research. In the next phase we will have eight action research groups that will work together on learning about and hopefully addressing some of these issues.

Priorities identified for action research groups were: alcoholism; school drop outs; loans and debts; illness, accidents and suicide in the mills; alternative employment (including transport). As we can see above, the 12 NGOs are already undertaking a range of education initiatives and various activities that attempt to improve conditions in the mills.

The biggest gaps relate to the drivers of bondage and child labour, which seem to centre around transport, major loans in response to life crises especially health, primary health –especially Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR), anaemia, alcohol addiction, and a lack of alternative employment for men and women. These should also be considered as priorities for the programme as a whole. Action research (community-led research) is a strategy to find out how these can be addressed, and whether this should be done by the communities themselves or others.

Having done the exercise above, the groups prioritised the issues that they felt were important to engage with in more depth in the action research groups.

Issues	Frequency
Alcohol	17
School drop out	11
Loan and debts	8
Illness, accident, suicide etc. in the mill	8
No other local work, jobs, alternative livelihoods	8
Caste	6
Sexual harassment and scolding in the mill	5
Family separation	3
Gender and discrimination	1
Child marriage	1

Alcohol comes out as the most important, followed by issues related to education and schooling. We can probably combine work on illness and accident with loans and work on harassment (mainly sexual) and scolding with mental health and suicide. There is also a need for more work on alternative livelihoods.

## Conclusion

Key priorities for the programme to focus on based on the life stories are as follows:

1. Work needs to continue on **alternative livelihoods**, but it is difficult to see how alternative livelihood development can gain traction without **effective transport** so urgent attention needs to be given to this.



2. As was found in the North India life stories process, **high levels of loans** are driven by the demands of **health crises** (including accidents) and a solution needs to be found to this, otherwise the only way people can get access to money is to get advances for sending their child to the mill. A good starting point would be effective preventive work through primary care – especially on anaemia and SRHR and collect more hard evidence about what is actually happening. What health issues are being paid out of pocket, are these preventable, and should they be covered elsewhere by public facilities? Do people want to use these public facilities? This can support NGO programme interventions and activity generated through the action research process. Work also needs to be done on **how people can get insured for these crises**.
3. **School drop-out** is a major issue. The danger is that without alternative sources of income a child can get an education but still end up in the mills afterwards (see story on cover page). In the meantime, her sister will have had to go to the mill to pay for her education. So attention needs to be paid to the dynamics within the family that prevent or facilitate school drop-out.
4. Work needs to continue on **conditions in the mills** including masks, toilet breaks, working hours and wages, accident risk etc. However particular attention needs to be given to the issue of sexual harassment and the link to mental health problems and suicide.
5. **Alcoholism** is a significant factor driving the dynamics that perpetuate bonded labour for women in the mills. If attention is not given to this, then many women are likely to continue to enter risky situations in the mills. Some of the causes – men's options for work, alcohol abuse – should be integrated into the programme as socio-economic stability within the family is critical.
6. A major difficulty in the process and in the NGO programmes is how to engage with the girls and boys from other states who are **living in the mill hostels**. These people often face a much harsher environment than those who are come from the village and it is very hard to get access to them. This needs some priority attention and should perhaps be a focus of one of the action research groups in its own right.

## Life stories

We have reproduced some more extended sections of stories below to show how the multiple issues discussed above intersect and interrelate.

### Story 1:

*I have studied till fourth standard. When I was eleven years I went to the mill for work. I have five sisters. I got married when I was eighteen. Because of the dowry problem I was chased back to my parent's home. I was only a month at my in-laws' place. Even my husband told me that he did not like me. I went for a tailoring job for one month. I fell in love with one person called Rakesh and we got married. My family accepted us; but his family started to relate to us only after a child was born. They refused to give him property also. Now I have been married for five years; in the beginning he was very good to me but later on he used to doubt me and became an alcoholic. He used to fight with me and go to his mother's home; his mother says to him she belongs to a different caste so you leave her and come you can get married once more. All the money he earns he spends on drinking. If I ask money for house expenses he will say that he will not live with me anymore; he has gone and complained to the police station twice saying that he does not want to live with me. My child needs milk to drink, I need food to eat; my parents are very old. How will they take care of me and my child? I am going for the mill work leaving my child with my parents [crying]. He has borrowed huge money even my gold chain given by my parents was pawned. I do not know what me and my child will do. Since I married on my own my sisters' husbands are not helping me. I have been going to work continuously for the past ten years. I have developed a cold and fall sick often. My husband has been drinking from quite young age so now his hands are trembling and even for one day he cannot be without drinking. I do not know when my family situation will change! (- PEA\_3KUR7\_BL)*

### Story 2:

*I am Bhagya and my father's name is Mohan. My mother's name is Shailaja. I have one brother and a sister. My brother's name is Raman and he is studying at Polytechnic. My sister's name is Girija and she is studying 5th Standard at Virudunagar. I discontinued my studies at the class of 7th Standard. My brother and sister study well. My parents are working as woodcutters. I am working in a mill.*

*My father has alcohol regularly and quarrels with my mother and us. It is very difficult to manage such situations in the family. That's why my grandparents asked me to go for work. So I tried a job and got into a mill at Coimbatore for 5 years. We have lands but due to the rainless years we can't do any farming there. Due to the difficulties (finance) I am forced to choose a job in a mill. If I had studied I would go for good jobs and earn a good salary.*

*My husband also worked in the same mill and he is a distant relative. His name is Maran and has studied up to 5th Standard. Now he is going to Granite Quarry for work. He is getting 15 days' job in a month. It is hardly enough to fulfil our needs. I don't like to go to millwork. I asked an increment in my salary from the mill I work, they assured to increase the salary. They suggested learning some other skill while working at the mill like a beautician course and making baskets etc. Sometimes I have stomach ache while I was working at the millwork but we have to do the work by taking medicine and we work without rest. Some days I do my work with tears.*

*Our marriage is a love marriage and marriage happened last year. I met him when I was working at the mill. We don't have kids. Due to the difficulties in the family I have to go for the work at the mill. I don't have any other option. Cottons will go into the nose and mouth. It leads to lot of health issues like foot pain, allergy etc. Later on we will have all health problems.*

*When I went to mill job I was afraid. The lady who works with me gave me hope and confidence. My father is an alcoholic so the gold in the house is hypothecated at the bank. They have given me very few jewels for my marriage. My father in law knows everything but didn't asked anything about that. I don't have any issues in the mill, but if I took leave then they will scold and use bad words. My father always drinks alcohol and fight with us. Such habits of my father made my grandparents demand I discontinue my studies and go for some job.*

*I don't want my brother and sister to have the same experience as me and discontinue their studies. I just want to make them to study and I am taking care of their studies. The income, which I am getting, is to run the family and is not enough to make a saving. The family situation is alright now. I want to learn some skills through training and want to make money. I don't know how to go out and study, due to that I am working in the mill. If anyone comes to our place to teach skills, I am ready to learn that! (- SPE\_4SAM\_12\_BL)*

### **Story 3:**

*My name is Bhagyalakshmi, age 27. I was born and brought up in this Manjanayakkanpatti.*

*We did not have any land. So my father went to work as daily wage labourer. Even my mother was a daily wage worker. Sometimes they did not have work and stayed at home. I have four siblings; two younger brothers and two elder sisters. Even though we were born in the village my parents gave us education. I wanted to study well and get a good job and raise my children; this was my dream. With such big dreams I went to school. I could not continue my education after 10th standard. My mother fell ill and had to undergo an operation; my father had to borrow huge money for the expense. My family was pushed to a very difficult situation. So my father discontinued my studies and joined me at the Vedesandur's 'Every ready' mill; I used to go with other girls in the village. I joined in the three-year scheme; after completing three years of work they said I will get 40,000 rupees. I and my father had to sign some papers. Some of the papers were in English and some were blank papers. I started to go for the mill work. After I finished my three years of work my father thought with that amount he can settle my marriage. I saw that my classmates were going to school when I was going for mill work. I felt very sad seeing that. I used to feel sorry for my situation. The work at the mill was very difficult. I told my father that I could not stand and work continuously for 10 hours at a stretch. He said what to do our family situation is bad you have to go for work. I did not have any other way so I went for the mill work. After coming back from the mill work my mother used to keep hot water for bathing; I used to take a bath and go to sleep. I did not like the job but was forced to go because of the family situation; thinking of the job I used to cry.*

*As time went by I became used to the routine. I used to comfort myself by saying, "If I am born poor this is the prize I will get". Was I treated as a human? It was questionable. I was crushed by the work is all I can say. After completing two years of work I got married. I was happy that I could escape the 'mill prison'; little did I know that there was another one waiting. I asked my scheme money at the mill. You have not completed the three years so you cannot get the scheme money they said. My father fought with them strongly and told them to give my two years of the scheme amount. So they gave us 20,000 rupees only. With that amount and some money borrowed my father married me off. Somehow my parents fulfilled their duty by marrying me. After that only I have to live my life. I lived quietly for some time at my husband's place. I realised that my husband family also was very poor; I come from a poor family so I will get someone from same situation only, how can I get a king? So I went back to the mill work after six months of marriage; the only job that I knew. It became very hard as I had to go the mill work and also come back home and finish the household work also. I became pregnant. I worked hard even in that situation. I delivered a beautiful girl baby. I was worried looking at my baby, whether she will also suffer like me? I decided strongly then that I will raise my child even if I had to work hard. My husband was slowly becoming an alcoholic. My husband started his day by drinking; he was not worth paisa. "If married to a donkey you have to bear the burden".*

*All my dreams I thought I will make a reality through my child; with this thought my life went on.*

*Till my child was four years of age I was going for the mill work. When I got the monthly salary I used to give some money so my husband could drink; otherwise he would come and fight with me. As time went by I had to completely take care of the house. My mother-in-law fell sick. I had to see to her medical expenses also. My father-in-law abandoned us.*

*After some time, my mother-in-law passed away. I did not go to work for two months; I thought my husband would come to his senses. But my useless husband started to drink much more. I tolerated my husband just for my child's sake. So I did not bother about his drinking and also about the fact he was not worth a paisa. When my child was in the second standard my husband's torture started to increase; rather than doing cooking most of the time I was fighting with him. I could not do both the mill work and come home and be at peace. I started to hate living; I did not want to stay alive. To suffer daily I thought let me die; so I decided to hang myself. I went and bought a rope. When I went to hang myself I heard the sound of my daughter. Immediately I stopped myself saying, after I die who will take care of my child? My husband drank heavily. Because of that his intestines became weak and he had to be admitted to hospital. All the expenses were taken care by me. After fifteen days of hospitalisation he became better and we came home. I could not go for any work during that time. To care for my husband, I had to borrow a huge amount of money from most of the village people and became a debtor. I thought after this he will not drink. After one month he started to drink again; how a single person can manage alone. Seeing my difficult situation my parents used to give me now and then some 100 or 200 rupees. Even my parents were in a very difficult situation. My mother used to frequently come and see me. Whenever she prepares something nice she brings it for me. She was very much worried about my situation. She was my only security and help in the whole world.*

*My father became ill. I used to go sometimes and visit him and my younger brother. I could not do much as I was also going for the mill work. The mill job was not like early one; if within eight hours we do not get the manufactured product they will scold us. If we had to go to toilet we can go only for five minutes. We didn't even have enough time to eat. As time went by the mill job became more difficult. I joined another scheme to pay off my debts. Since I could not go regularly for work they said that they cannot give me the scheme money. "Misfortunes never come singly" – such was my state. All my dreams to pay off my debt became impossible; I cried because I had worked for three years in difficult situation yet could not get money. My health was spoilt because of the hard work. I felt helpless. From my stomach they removed three cotton balls. I had to go for treatment. Only one day in the mill was I happy: the day when I met all the other workers and they shared their problems and I could also share mine. In tears I shared my problems with them; I felt like half of my burden had come down. When I realised that the other women workers' problems were much more severe than mine I felt little better. It was workers' day. All of us had food and was feeling relaxed. That day I will never forget for all of my life.*

*When I was working the supervisors used to ill-treat me; they used to scold very badly. I had a co-worker called Shanthi. The supervisor used to follow her everywhere. He used to touch her and speak; once I saw him touch her breast. I felt very sad after that incident. She could not speak against him; if anything was said against them they would take revenge on us.*

*All who work at the mill are bonded labourers. We do not have opportunities to even speak about our problems. Because of our family situation we go for work; there they treat us like tools. We go to work to improve our situation; but there the situation is much worse. My only aim is to make my children study well and send them to a good job. How can I run my family with a day wage of 230 rupees? That is the situation I am in. I hope for a better dawn. (-SSS\_3MAN\_06\_BL)*

## NGO participant feedback

At the end of the process we held a feedback session to identify what the NGOs had learned. This is important because it tells us something about what learning the NGOs were taking back into their organisations. The following are the key points from each of the NGO representatives in turn:

*“We only deal with issues in our own place – but we’ve come to understand issues in other areas of the hotspot. Specific issues are related to other issues. We’ve got more idea of the cycle of causes and consequences. We’ve already done issue mapping in six villages to get a better understanding of the issues.”*

*“I had thought manual scavenging was abolished, but now I know it’s still there.”*

*“In our districts – Dindigul – many castes are going to the mill. Also boys are going to the mill – about 50-50. Other industries are affected by issues of bonded labour/exploitation as well as the mills.”*

*“When we analysed stories we found many things in them. It’s a complex situation. What we were missing in our programmes, we’ve come to understand.”*

*“I’m able to understand issues outside our district through other participants. If we reduce the causes, we can automatically reduce the consequences.”*

*“In our area, it’s primarily Dalits that we need to work with, but now we realise that other castes suffer in other areas. We also saw the complexity of the situation.”*

*“Through the story collection, we got a deeper understanding of what the issues are. It took us deeper than our regular work.”*

*“When we collected the stories, we thought there was exaggeration, but now we understand the extent of the problem. We used to think it was because of the parents only that girls were going to the mills, but now we can see all the problems. We can see it’s not just the parents’ fault.”*

*“In families and villages people don’t know how many people are struggling. They can’t see how many are going for the work. The analysis should happen within their own villages so the problem because shared knowledge. Then they can focus on the real issues and how to address the problems.”*

*“Through story collection, we got new information – like the example of workers having to keep themselves awake during night shifts by using hot rods on their skin.”*

*“Initially, we didn’t know why we were collecting the stories. Now by coming here, we realise we can see the whole process.”*

*“Problems vary across the districts. We realised that other districts have other problems.”*

*“At the beginning it seemed like an additional task. But the stories then allowed me to see the depth of the issues – so I became involved in all the stories being collected by my NGO. It motivated me to be part of the whole process of collection. I learned about issues in other districts. My suggestion: The person collecting the story should also do the analysis of the story they collected (not giving it initially to someone else). Also, they should look at what is the most important issue at the level of the family, the mills, the community from each story (not just two sticky notes on what’s important).”*

*“I understand other people’s issues from other districts.”*