

## Being a Good Girl

The construction of childhood in Tirupur, India

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## Foreword

In 1989, the UN adopted the Child Rights Convention. The bottom line of the Convention is that children all over the world should avail of the same rights. This, many scholars in the western countries have argued, again amounts to the imposition of western values on the entire world. Such an imposition has been done under the garb of universalism, the relativists claim.

In the discussion between relativists and universalists, the voice of the subject is often lacking. Froukje Gaasterland took on this challenge and went to live with the girls working in textile factories in Tirupur (India), where she, in previous visits, had learned to understand the culture and had become interested in what moved the working girls particularly.

I supervised Froukje at the Department of Anthropology/Non-Western Sociology at the University of Amsterdam and am pleased with this shortened version of her Master Thesis that she has submitted for publication by IREWOC. IREWOC believes that, in addition to theory and theoretical debates, we need empirical work; listening to what the children concerned have to say about the theoretical stands we take.

This study examines the relation between reality and desires of girls working in the garment industry. It describes their daily routines, their social relations, their work experience and their dreams. These are placed within the discussion of a universal versus a local childhood. Based on fieldwork findings, Froukje challenges the argument that child labourers desire a culturally-defined childhood over the universal childhood. It appears that in Tirupur, where so many of our garments are made, the principles of the CRC do not seem to be imposed by purely western values. The girls in this study may indeed come from traditional backgrounds, but long for change and are positive about their future.

Prof. Dr. Kristoffel Lieten

Director IREWOC



## Glossary

Arasi	Popular Tamil television series
Bindi	Dot on the forehead worn by women
Churidar	Outfit consisting of loose pants, a knee-length dress and a scarf, often worn by older girls and young unmarried women
Collector	Government official at district level
Deepavali	Hindu festival celebrated in October and/or November
Devars	Caste group from Madurai
Dhobi	Man who collects clothes to wash
Gingelly oil	Sesame oil
Hariyans	Caste group (recognized by the government as a Backward caste)
Jati	Subdivision of Varna; general term for caste group
Kaaimadi	The job of folding clothes
Kallars	Caste group from Madurai
Karamboard	Board game
Karma	Accumulated acts, destiny
Khabadi	Indian team sport with run and catch
Lakh	100,000
Maamaa	Maternal uncle
Pawns	Weight measure
Pongol	Harvest Festival celebrated in mid January
Rangoli	Design made of rice flour
Saree	Woman's dress, five to six yards of cloth
Seer	Dowry
Splendor	Type of motorcycle
Sumangali scheme	Recruitment scheme for rural girls to earn for their marriage
Tangetchi	Younger sister
Varna	Rank in the caste system (literally: colours)



## Preface

When looking at garments these days it is difficult for me to not wonder who has produced them and under what conditions. I learned in Tirupur that most clothes are produced in big export factories without any involvement of child labour. These companies provide employment, giving many rural migrants an opportunity to earn, although the salaries are low and working hours may be long. However, some clothes are produced in smaller factories, where children are indeed sometimes employed. The chain of cloth and garment production is long, which makes it hard to trace those who have been involved, and whether indeed at some location along the chain children are involved.

While spending a day with a foreign journalist, who had come to Tirupur in search of children working on western brands, I recognized the hypocrisy of the Western World towards child labour. I realized how information is being collected in order to illustrate an argument. The journalist wanted to find the perfect picture of a young child working at home on garments made for the West. It would complete his story of exploited children working for big western brands and factories outsourcing to the household industry. He could not find the shot he needed as children very rarely work at home in Tirupur. A couple of months later I saw his documentary on the BBC. He had apparently found children working in a refugee camp outside Tirupur. Whether it was a true representation of the situation in Tirupur and surroundings appeared to be irrelevant. The documentary created a lot of commotion; people were particularly shocked because the brand in question already applied an ethical code. Protests were held in front of various shop locations, and without further investigation the company cancelled all its orders from those factories in Tirupur who had outsourced the work. It was a disaster for the companies, but even more so for the adult workers who had legally been doing their job and who had now lost their income. The question should be asked: how did this improve the situation for the children?

Therefore, let us be less concerned about our clothes being produced by children, and let us rather focus on those children who work for long hours under harsh circumstances. Removing the children from 'our clothes' does not remove the problem of child labour. The children will likely move into other garment sectors, such as the units producing for the Indian market, which offers little improvement to their situation. Or they might take up jobs outside the garment industry. It is crucial in this regard to take the working child as a starting point for interventions instead of ourselves. What are the needs of these children? What can be done? Let us realize that not working does not automatically mean going to school, and that family problems are not suddenly solved. To improve the situation of these children a holistic approach is needed. Maybe that is not the easiest one, but I do believe it to be the most effective one.

Child labour in Tirupur has fortunately already decreased significantly, a trend which will hopefully continue. However, to ensure that no more children must work for long hours in garment units and that they can all go to school, continued efforts are needed. It requires effort from the government to monitor and sanction companies and to make education compulsory, affordable, relevant and available to all. The dream of education was shared by all the children I met.

This publication is a shortened version of the M.A. Thesis which I submitted at the end of my study Cultural Anthropology at the University of Amsterdam.

There are many people who contributed directly or indirectly to this study. In India, my thanks go to the NGO SAVE, especially to the director Mr. Aloysius and to the coordinator Mr. Ravindren, who inquired daily about my progress. My research was independent and SAVE can in no way be held responsible for any findings or statements.

Special thanks go to Shanti, Nagesh and Soumiya who opened their house to me and showed me Indian hospitality at its best.

Next I want to mention Bhuvana, my research assistant. Tirupur was an adventure for the two of us; we spent seven days a week together for nearly three months. Without her willingness to adapt, friendly attitude and patient explanations this research would not have been the same: Thank You.

The two people who always keep me connected to India are Mr. Alexander and sister Helen, who are like family to me. I am grateful for their love, care and support. The choices they make in life are a source of inspiration to me. I feel blessed to know them.

It is a tradition to thank the local population who participated in the research. I realize that the girls I interacted with will not have the time or the access to read this. Hopefully the children of these girls will be able to go to school and college. Maybe one of them may come across this research once and can transmit to their parents this message of thanks.

I wish to thank my parents Jan and Willemies for their support and love. They encouraged me to broaden my horizons and find my own path. Giving someone such freedom is true love. Thank you for being there for me.

To all those in the Netherlands and in India who are not mentioned by name here, of course I remember you. So, this one is for you: thank you for your time, interest, friendship, hospitality, cups of coffee, lovely food, encouraging words, bangles, openness, cakes, invitations, discussions, phone calls, patience in answering my questions, smiles and all other help that made my research and this publication possible.

Froukje Gaasterland

Amsterdam, December 2008

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

It was my second night in Tirupur, the t-shirt town of South India. I could not sleep. Loud Tamil music blasted through my open window, and so too did the endless rumbles of sewing machines. Only one metre away from my window was a garment unit, yet I was unable to see inside. It must have been an urgent order for the West as the work continued until one in the morning. The music attempted to keep everyone awake, as they had been working since 9 a.m.

I was thinking about the research situation; it was so different from how I had expected things to be. The conversation I had that day with people from the NGO made it clear that child labour in home-based industries is uncommon; most children work inside the companies. My idea of hanging around with the girls, maybe even helping them with simple work, sharing most of the day with them at home as they were working, turned out to be impossible. How to do research on children in the companies? How and when would I be able to talk to them? Would the girls have time and would they be willing to share their stories? Would I be able to enter the companies at all? The walls and security men did not look promising.



*Photo 1: Sign hanging on company wall*

Is child labour a sensitive topic in Tirupur? I remembered the sign that I had seen earlier that day on a few company walls. It said: “No child labour employed” (photo 1). What did it mean? Why was it written in English instead of Tamil? What is child labour in their definition? And do these companies really not employ children? It made me realize that people are aware that child labour is often seen as an evil practice, and that they know it is illegal. So I had to be careful; not only for myself, but also for the girls. With lots of unanswered questions I finally fell asleep, the music had stopped. Within a couple of months, these questions were settled. This thesis is about my research; the

questions and answers that provided me with an image of their lives, and that contribute to discussions on childhood.

### **Motivation, aim of research and research question**

Tirupur was selected on the advice of local people who were working at state level on child labour. They pointed me toward the garment industry in Tirupur. Despite the fact that ‘worst forms of child labour’ exist there, little research has been done [see: Kruijtbosch 1996]. The focus on the informal sector was based on the absence of knowledge of child labour which takes place in hidden workplaces. Besides this, I thought it would be easier to enter home-based industries than companies.

The aim of the research was to get a better understanding of how working girls view their own lives. The outcomes had to reflect the issues which are important to them; work is only one among many. In a broader context the research aimed to contribute to a better understanding of how local ideas relate to the universal norm of childhood propagated by NGO’s and government institutions. The following research question was formulated:

How do girls, under the age of eighteen, who work in the informal sector of the garment industry of Tirupur, experience their conditions of childhood?

This question enabled me to observe what the children were doing and how their daily lives compared to, or differed from, the universal norm of childhood. I wanted to then explore whether any differences also amounted to varying expectations; in other words, would the girls prefer a universal or culturally-defined childhood.

### **Theoretical framework**

The last century has yielded growing attention for children, as well as a long list of international actions to improve the situation of children world-wide. Organisations like Save the Children (1919), Plan (1936) and UNICEF (1946) were founded and in 1959 the United Nations (UN) adopted the Declaration on the Rights of the Child. In 1979, children worldwide received renewed attention as the UN organized the International Year of the Child. The interest during the 1980s led in 1989 to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which is still of major importance [Ansell 2005:25-26]. This convention was the most rapidly ratified international convention in history. The most recent international attempt for a pro-child international program was the introduction of the Millennium Development Goals, which were agreed on in 2000. These goals include pledges such as the achievement of universal primary education by 2015 [ibid:30]. The growing attention for children during the last century was also visible in research; discussions on children and childhood became evermore abundant [James and Prout 1990; Lieten 2008].

In this thesis I will explore an aspect of the discussion concerning childhood. My focus will be on the ideas of local and universal childhoods, which also relate to discussions concerning the CRC. Some social scientists criticize the spread of the universal idea of childhood; they claim that it is a form of colonialism, as western cultural values are imposed on other cultures, leaving no space for different ideas on childhood. Other non-western cultures would have different ideals based on different traditions. Child labour, for example, in this view can in certain cultures be seen as valuable as it prepares children for the lives they will lead. The interference of outsiders who propagate education does not match with their reality and, in their view, can therefore even be harmful.

Are they right in the way they look at childhood and children’s rights? Does the global childhood idea impose alien norms and values on other cultures? To answer this question, I will use theory and

my own ethnographic findings. This chapter is concerned with the theory. It starts with introducing the study of childhood; giving a short overview of the history to be able to understand the current paradigm on childhood. This is followed by the discussion on what childhood is, or should be, from the perspective of universalists and relativists. After this I will take a closer look at what is written in the CRC to discover how western or universal the CRC actually is.

## The Study of Childhood

The study of childhood originated in the field of education and psychology. Piaget [1972], an influential development psychologist, identified a set of development stages for children which, he thought, would be universally applicable. All children had to move through these stages which were linked to competencies, with the objective to achieve scientific rationality. Piaget's approach was criticized for being Eurocentric and empirically unreliable. However, it had a huge impact on education and on government agencies which generally used his approach to test if children developed in a 'normal' way [Ansell 2005:15-16].

A well-known work from another discipline was written by the historian Aries [1962]. His study shows how ideas on childhood changed through time. He revisited the concept of childhood, which, rather than a fixed biological process, was analyzed as being embedded in a social context [James, Jenks & Prout 1998:4]. Aries describes how the notion of childhood as a separate stage in life occurred in Europe after the Middle Ages. Before the Middle Ages, childhood did not exist as a notion; as soon as the physical dependency ended, children were treated as small adults and were fully integrated in social and economic life. The higher class invented a distinction between children and adults. Children became people with a specific nature and specific needs [Aries 1962:125]. This change had to do with the role children had in society. The higher class did not need the children's economic contribution anymore and appreciated them for emotional reasons [Zelizer 1994:5]. The way in which people experienced the outside world also changed; it was considered full of danger and children had to be protected. Therefore children had to spend their time in safe places like schools or at home [Stephens 1995:15].

As attention to agency and context increased a new paradigm arose. Since the 1990s the new paradigm, still in development, became widely accepted amongst social scientists [Ansell 2005:21]. The key features of the paradigm are:

- Childhood is understood as a social construction
- Children are actively involved in the construction of their own social lives
- Ethnography is a particularly useful methodology for the study of childhood, as it allows children's voices to be heard

Considering childhood as a social construction has far-reaching implications. The current paradigm on childhood in the academic world is dominated by a relativistic approach. If childhood is socially constructed, it implicitly claims that we cannot make any generalisations on childhood. Scholars question the universal way in which, for example, the UN defines children [White 2003:4] and they argue in favour of multiple variations of childhoods. They criticize the CRC for imposing 'western' ideals on others:

...the industrialized North is attempting to impose its own definitions and approaches on the rest of the world, without recognizing the significance, let alone the validity, of other cultures, whilst continuing to enforce the neo-liberal economic policies that are exacerbating the problems of poverty and social deprivation [Mayo 2001:282].

These critics of the CRC stress that their approach helps to understand children within their own world order and without imposing on it the normative universal idea. Ennew [1995:213], for

example, is most concerned with the consequences of some articles in the CRC for street and working children. These children are affected by the label and are stigmatized accordingly. Actions taken to improve the situation would not be taken in their best interest, since the CRC “was drafted with a particular type of childhood in mind, and treats children outside this model as marginal”. Boyden [1990:208] agrees with her, and even takes it a step further by not only criticizing the contents of the CRC, but by questioning its actual existence. Some measures for child welfare “have the effect of isolating children further from their families and community and increasing their social and economic disadvantage”. In this way, the critical authors claim to liberate childhood from the western and colonizing narrative: “the promotion of dependency on authorised professionals in the conduct of all aspects of life entail the infantilisation of citizens and the denial of the political and moral capacity of the South” [Pupavac 2001:109-110].

The two approaches, relativistic and universal, can be compared to the anthropological concepts of ethnocentrism and cultural relativism. Ethnocentrism is the situation in which other societies are seen and judged according to the norms and values of one’s own society. Cultural relativism approaches all societies and cultures as qualitatively different, all having their own unique inner logic, making it absurd to rank them [Eriksen 1995:7]. Cultural relativism can be a useful tool when attempting to understand alien societies, but Eriksen argues: “As an ethical principle, however, it is probably impossible in practice, since it seems to indicate that everything is as good as everything else, provided it makes sense in a particular society. It may ultimately lead to nihilism”.

The relativistic approach of childhood easily falls into the pitfall of cultural relativism. Although it may be true that children lead different types of lives all over the world, so too do children *within* the West. It is therefore, in my opinion, not useful to look for descriptive definitions of childhood according to the way children live. All children live a different life and in that sense there are as many ‘childhoods’ as there are children. The debate should focus on a definition of childhood that reflects the way society would like the children to live. This normative definition of childhood, with its universalistic tendency, may have originated in the West, but is no longer only found in the western world [Lieten 2007; Stephens 1995]. Aries [1962] described how in western countries childhood became a separate stage in life and how children became people with a specific nature and specific needs, requiring protection from the outside world. In the nineteenth century the childhood ideas of the West spread through migration, missionary activities, colonialism and economic globalisation. Missionaries, for example, strived to make children literate, and in some cases they removed the children from their families as they considered the parents incapable of raising children [Ansell 2005:25; Stephens 1995: 16].

## The CRC

The universalistic notion of childhood defines children as a coherent group or a state, defined by identical needs and desires, regardless of class, ethnic, or racial differences [Fernando 2001:185]. An important feature of the global model is the conviction that all children should go to school instead of work. Every society should try to achieve mass education, as education is considered vital for the economic development and general welfare of society. This view of education was adopted by many development agencies and is apparent in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the Millennium Development Goals and the policies of the ILO. Education rapidly spread around the world, but in many countries children are still part of the labour force.

The CRC is built upon the three ‘P’s: provision, protection and participation. In this way it is a compromise between the caretakers view (provision and protection) and the liberation view (participation) [Ansell 2005:229]. Participation is expressed by the right to be heard, to receive information and to associate. The CRC places the primary responsibility for children with the parents; the state has to provide support to families through institutions, facilities and services for

child care. The rights are protected by setting a minimum standard which must be met for all children. States accordingly have to undertake action and will be assessed on the measures they have taken to improve the situation. The provisions that need to be implemented depend on economic, social and cultural conditions within the state [Lieten 2007:16].

Four principles in particular form the heart of the CRC: non-discrimination in article 2, the best interest of the child in article 3, the right to life in article 6 and the consideration of the views of the child in article 12. They do not appear to be exclusively western principles. Among the articles that are often accused of imposing western norms on other societies is the article on child labour, article 32. It mentions 'the right of the child to be protected from economic exploitation, and from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child's education, or to be harmful to the child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development'. The use of the word 'and' after economic exploitation is crucial as it indicates that the CRC does not regard all kinds of work done by children as economic exploitation. The CRC does not specify what it considers economic exploitation to be. Governments are required to set a minimum age for admission to employment, but no particular age is suggested by the CRC. Such minimum ages, however, have been agreed on within the ILO framework (Convention 138 and Convention 182). State parties are required to take 'legislative, administrative, social and educational measures' for the protection of children described in article 32. The measures can be decided upon by the country itself, but they must include:

- A minimum age or minimum ages for admission to employment
- Appropriate regulations of the hours and conditions of employment
- Appropriate penalties or other sanctions to ensure the effective enforcement of the provisions of article 32 [Detrick 2004:32-33; Doek 2004:12; Myers 2001:48]

The most interesting article in my opinion is article 3, which states that all actions should be in the best interest of the child. It is undoubtedly difficult to define what is in the best interest of the child or who determines this best interest, but the inclusion of this article makes the Convention, in my opinion, non-western; it leaves space for childhood as a social construct as it creates freedom for countries to decide what is best for the child. This article gives a local freedom to deal with the specific delineation of the rights, but does not lead to cultural relativism.



## Chapter 2

### Research and Methodology

In the debate between relativists and universalists, the voice of the subject is often lacking. The principles of the CRC, as shown in chapter 1, are perhaps western in their origin, but not limited to the West. How then are these rights perceived by children in the South? Do they have different feelings? This is Boyden's assumption: "The beliefs of welfare and rights practitioners about the activities and experiences suitable for child life may differ radically from those of parents and children" [Boyden 1990:208]. In my research I shall investigate how working girls, who are having a childhood that does not match with the universal ideas of childhood, experience and visualize their lives. I shall look at a group of girls in Tirupur, India, who are out of school and who are engaged in so-called 'worst forms of child labour'.

In my search for what a childhood in Tirupur for working girls is like, I decided not to focus only on their working life since labour is only one aspect of their identity. In addition to being workers, they are also daughters, friends, neighbours etc. This approach encouraged me to pay attention to other norms and indications within society that deal with childhood. Ideas about childhood were visible everywhere: in advertisements, the presence of schools, children's roles in films, articles in newspapers and so on. These observations were fascinating to me. Did they only reflect the ideal childhood of the upper class? Would working girls dream of the same things? And do they feel that their dreams are within the reach of people like them or reserved for the privileged only? Or perhaps it is a normative construction which pervades the entire society?

The choice to do research amongst girls was motivated by the assumption that girl child labourers are even worse-off than boy child labourers: "Girls also work longer hours on average than boys. This is especially true of girls who carry a double workload - who hold down a job outside the home but must still fulfil their domestic duties on their return" [UNICEF 1997:45].

The literature had suggested that most child labour in the garment industry in Tirupur would take place at home and that the extensive subcontracting of work to other manufacturing units and even home-based women workers "had deeply fragmented the industry, leaving the workers with no enduring linkages." Furthermore, "the majority of these subcontracted garment manufacturing units are illegal and deliberately kept out of the purview of labour and factory legislation" [Ramaswamy and Davala 1992:53]. I expected a majority of those working at home to be girls, as they often work in the home environment and engage in less visible forms of child labour:

The absence of girls' work in the literature is a stunning reflection of its invisibility in the world at large... The work done by girls in their own homes, including subcontracting wage work and especially the burdensome household chores they perform is unseen because it is not considered "work". [Friedman and Dottridge 1996:1]

My ideas of Tirupur before entering the field were partly based on studies by De Neve [2003 and 2007], an anthropologist who did extensive research in Tirupur. Through his studies I gained detailed information about the region and his writings emphasized the issue of migration, which was also an important issue in relation to child labour. Other studies written by NGOs like SAVE [2000] (promoted through the Clean Clothes Campaign) focused on the problems faced by workers in general.

## Entering the field

My contacts from previous visits to Tamil Nadu and my basic knowledge of Tamil turned out to be very valuable for the research. SAVE (Social Awareness and Voluntary Education), an NGO in Tirupur, is situated between two export companies in a small street, a short distance outside of the city centre. By spending time during lunch and tea breaks in front of the office, I was already able to speak to the older girls who worked in the companies. I met frequently with, in particular, two girls and their group of friends; we used to meet weekly and I was able to follow their lives during these months. The owner of the company where the girls worked was interested in my research, which I told him was about the garment industry in general. I could often walk into his company without question and see what was going on. Later on, I visited many companies, which I thought at first would be impossible. Seeing the companies from the inside helped me to get a more complete picture on how the industry works, to see the working conditions and to be able to put the stories of the girls into a context. The companies were randomly selected, and it was not known beforehand whether or not children were employed there.

Entering a company was variably easy or more difficult. Gaining permission to enter always depended on the company owner, who was often not available. The owners or managers would explain the full manufacturing process and always stayed by my side, making it impossible to freely speak to the workers. The stories of the workers were therefore collected outside the workplaces, where they were not being watched. I often mentioned my observations during the interviews, and checked to see if my analysis was correct.

The fact that most children involved in this sector were found in companies, rather than at home, made it more difficult to carry out 'classic anthropological research'. The time I could spend with the children inside the companies was limited because I did not have a pretext to stay for much longer than it took to do casual observations and ask the managers/owners some questions. Since girl child labour was more important to my research than the aspect of home-based industries, I adjusted my plans to focus on girls working in the formal sector.

I came into contact with many of the children through the SAVE bridging schools, situated in the economically poor areas of Tirupur. Children who did not attend formal education - some of them child labourers and some children who neither worked nor went to school - were enrolled in these schools. I started by interviewing ex-child labourers; children who now attended the classes and had formerly worked in the garment industry. These were the relatively 'easy' interviews; we had no time pressure and we had a place to sit without adult interference. The children I spoke to mostly had a network of friends, who did not attend the school, to whom they introduced me. The children were great guides in the area; they knew exactly who worked and who attended school.

## Challenges

A major challenge was the fact that most of the girls worked from 8.30 or 9.00 in the morning until 9.00 in the evening, and hardly had any free time; lunch breaks became the crucial moment for me to collect data. Lunchtime was at 12.30, and for a couple of minutes the streets were filled with workers going home. A few minutes later the streets were empty again as everyone ate their lunch inside their homes. On some days everything depended on those few minutes in which we had to find girls willing to talk. We walked along with those who were willing to talk and asked our questions during their lunch. At 13.15 the girls had to return to the companies; sometimes we would stay behind and talk to the mothers, but at other times the house needed to be locked up as everyone went back to work. Occasionally the girls would stay home; for example, when they were

sick, were menstruating<sup>1</sup> or when there was no work at the company as no new orders had come in from abroad.

The interviews were not totally under my control; the girls had to eat and other family members were normally present. They often interfered, despite our requests for the girl's own opinion, but felt that, as elders, they knew 'better answers'. There was always enough to talk about, but the time was limited.

Throughout my fieldwork I was impacted by time constraints; often the interviews had to end before I could ask all my questions. There was no solution to this. In fact, it characterizes the daily lives of people in Tirupur; people work hard, time is valuable and free time is rare.

Many of the girls were shy, which resulted in short answers. The challenge was to make them feel at ease in a short period of time. We used to start with a child-friendly introduction to ourselves, including some jokes, and kept the questions simple at first. In most of the cases we took notes after the conversation, to avoid any formality. We always refused chairs as these created distance, and sat down with them on mats on the ground. I never used a tape recorder as it would distract them and make them feel even more unsure. I felt that most of the girls took the conversations very seriously and tried to answer honestly.

In short, gathering information became more difficult than expected after having to switch to the formal sector, which is difficult to penetrate and impacts the access to the girls. The risk of getting the girls into trouble with their bosses, the limited interview time, the chaotic interview settings and the girls' shyness were all constraining factors.

My prior knowledge of local customs, wearing local clothes and my ability to speak some Tamil helped with initial contact. My appearance did not match the images people had of the west. Especially the company owners were surprised; we came walking to the companies, wore simple dresses and placed ourselves into the subordinate role of students who needed their help. This, in combination with my assistant's convincing talk, some occasional Tamil remarks from me, and our 'innocent' smiles, all contributed to us gaining entrance to the companies.

Since my knowledge of Tamil was insufficient, I worked with an assistant. It was initially very difficult to find a girl or woman willing to join me and who spoke English, but friends in Madurai helped by recommending an unmarried girl from a simple background who was willing to adjust to a new environment. She had at the time been working in a children's home in Madurai, where children from broken families are cared for. Her experience was very useful and she could easily relate to the girls we talked to.

## **The data**

My fieldwork in Tirupur took three months in early 2008. In total we collected 68 'interviews' or conversations, in which we interacted with 87 people. Age-wise, 30 girls were younger than 14, 21 were aged 14-17, and another 26 were 18 or above. In addition 10 boys/men were interviewed. The interviews took place in 10 different areas of Tirupur. The areas with more child labour were visited more often than others. The difference between the areas was remarkable; in some neighbourhoods no working children were found whereas in other neighbourhoods of Tirupur many children obviously worked. We spent relatively a lot of time in KVR Nagar, a famous slum in Tirupur (photo 2). Other areas with high numbers of child labourers were Rakiapalayam, Velliankadu and Ambedkar Nagar. Some of the interviews were group discussions, but most were single person interviews. The interviews differed a lot from each other; some interviews were long, others were very short. The

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<sup>1</sup> Girls do not feel comfortable having to use the toilet at work when menstruating, and therefore prefer to stay at home. The mothers tend to agree that is better to rest during these days.

longer interviews were usually with ex-child labourers or with older girls who were having a day off from company work. These interviews lasted about 1 to 1.5 hour. All working children were employed on a fulltime basis.

My focus was on girls under the age of 14, but getting in touch with them was very difficult since they were always accompanied by adults who shielded them. Only 6 of the youngest girls I spoke to were found in the textile factories; 18 of the other girls under the age of 14 were actually ex-child labourers to whom I spoke in the bridge schools; the other 6 young girls were working in other professions. It was normally quite easy to recognize girls working in the companies by the way they dressed. On the streets three groups of girls can be identified: the school-going girls (all in school uniform), the company girls (wearing nice dresses and neatly combed hair) and the 'stay at home' girls who walk around with an unkempt look.



*Photo 2: Girl in the slum KVR Nagar*

### **The garment industry in Tirupur**

The city of Tirupur (Coimbatore district, bordering on Kerala) is located in Tamil Nadu, the most southern state of India. Tirupur is well connected by road and railway. In 2001, it had a population of half a million people, with a high literacy rate: 69% female literacy and 82% male literacy. It is said that few Westerners ever go there and that it is an unpleasant town with hostile people:

That is not particularly surprising, for this town is an unpleasant, suffocating sprawl of 200.000 people which is not featured in any guidebook, and on few maps. Unlike many other parts of India, the locals greet you with hostility and, at best, indifference [Buckley and Bent 1995:37].

Luckily, I did not experience Tirupur as an unpleasant town, since people were not hostile, but actually very friendly. Everywhere in Tirupur one is confronted with the garment industry through shops, advertisements, textile waste in the streets and the small factories, which are everywhere. The town has its own, very recognisable sounds, such as rumbling sewing machines and generators that supply electricity during the daily power cuts. The whole town seems to run on the textile companies' schedule; when the workers are out, the streets are busy and coffee stalls do good

business. The town is a mix of people from different places and backgrounds. Most of them are labourers, living in huts or small stone houses. Besides the workers, who are from poor backgrounds, there is also an elite, the company owners and related business people who make good money. They drive in snow-white cars amidst the flurry of three-wheelers, motorbikes and busses. You can normally see them parked in front of the Velan Hotel, the most expensive hotel of Tirupur. This is the place where important meetings are held and where foreign buyers usually stay.



**Map: Location of Tirupur in India**

The garments produced in Tirupur are mainly exported to Europe, to retail trade chains, such as H&M, C&A, Otto and Woolworth. The history of producing garments in Tirupur started in the 1930s as a cottage industry. Cotton and water (for bleaching and painting) were readily available; so too was cheap labour as the town's surroundings are dry and the infrastructure for agricultural development is lacking [Kruijtbosch 1996:39-40]. Until the 1980s production was relatively low and most items were produced for domestic and local markets. This changed during the 1980s when Tirupur started to produce for the export market. In 1994 as much as 45% of India's total garment export came from Tirupur. The sector kept growing and by 2000 the percentage was reported to have gone up to 60% [Kruijtbosch 1996:39]. In addition to direct exports, garments from Tirupur are also exported by merchant exporters in Mumbai, Chennai and Delhi [Oldenziel 2001:13].

The different manufacturing processes (such as knitting, bleaching, dyeing, printing, cutting and sewing) take place in different 'job work' units [Kruijtbosch 1996:40]. These 'job work' units belong to the informal sector and can be characterized as follows: "They usually employ fewer than ten workers. Entry and exit are easier than in the formal sector and capital investment is generally

minimal. The work is mostly labour intensive, requiring low-level skills, which workers learn on the job. The employer-employee relationship is often unwritten and informal, with little or no appreciation of industrial relations and workers' rights" [ILO 2008]. The decentralized structure made it easy for owners to violate (child) labour laws. It led to the employment of many children who were trained in simple skills in a short time period. [Kruijtbosch 1996:62].



**Photo 3: Garment company under construction**

Nowadays it is not only small companies that are found in Tirupur. Big companies are built where the full manufacturing process takes place (photo 3). Tirupur is modernizing, with very expensive air-conditioned production units, with the most modern machines. A lot of construction work on large production centres is now going on. At the same time, small units continue to exist, where the work is still mainly done by hand.

The workers in the garment industry are both locals and migrants. The migrants have come in three waves, attracted by the growth of the industry. The first wave came between the 1950s and 1970s from nearby villages as the agricultural returns decreased. Most migrants were young men from the dominant caste of Gounders; many of them had kin or caste support in Tirupur. The second wave came with the export boom from the late 1970s until the early 1990s. This time migrants came from other districts in Tamil Nadu as well. Tirupur became known as a place where jobs were easily found, which attracted many young men from poor agricultural districts in the south of Tamil Nadu. They were from different castes. The third and final wave included women as well. These women came to Tirupur because of chain migration; following their husbands or other male family members and young unmarried women from the neighbouring state Kerala [De Neve 2003:259-260].

### **Child labour in the garment industry**

The majority of the children in Tirupur go to school. In the mornings and afternoons the busses are crowded with school-going children. They can easily be recognized by their school uniforms. Only those living in poverty consider sending their children to work; but not all the poor do so, and the decision depends on a number of factors.

When I reached Tirupur I found out that the children were not doing informal garment work at home; all working children I interacted with worked in the company units (photo 4). The children could earn more if they went for company work rather than working at home. Most of them worked in the informal sector; others were working in the grey zone. It is hard to define whether smaller companies belong to the formal or informal sector. Some companies looked like factories in the formal sector with machinery, one employer and many people employed, but all with only a verbal work contract as long as work was available. All the big export companies belonged to the formal sector and did not employ children under the age of 14. However, such companies did sometimes subcontract work to other companies in the grey zone, where child labour did occur.



**Photo 4: Girl cutting loose threads off garments**

The number of child labourers in the garment industry is very hard to estimate. It largely depends on how child labour is defined. The local definition comes from article 24 on the prohibition of employment of children in factories in the Indian constitution of 1949: “No child below the age of fourteen years shall be employed in work in any factory or mine or engaged in any other hazardous employment” [Constitution of India 1949:11]. The ILO also defines 14 to 17 year old children as child labourers if they are working in hazardous labour. This hazardous work is specified and includes “work under particularly difficult conditions such as work for long hours or during the night or work where the child is unreasonably confined to the premises of the employer” [ILO Recommendation 190]. The long working hours in Tirupur mean that all working children above 14 are child labourers according to the ILO definition. That would increase the number enormously as companies recruit employees from 14 years onwards. But, the number of child labourers has declined a lot in the past years, as much action has been taken, and local NGO’s and other research institutions estimate that there are fewer than 8000 working children.



## Chapter 3

### Background

This chapter provides information on the families of the working girls, which offers a better understanding of the choices parents, and sometimes children, make. This description gives us the opportunity to understand the girls better and to contextualize their dreams and ideas, which I will discuss later. Attention will be paid to the origins of their parents, parental educational background and the current job of their parents. It also deals with the educational status of the girls themselves, and moves on to the reasons why girls work.

#### Family

The number of migrant workers in Tirupur is very high; of the 87 children and young people I interacted with only 18 came from Coimbatore district itself. The others came from 18 different districts of Tamil Nadu; most from Madurai, an economically backward and largely agricultural district. As the area is very dry, and agriculture is not profitable anymore, many agricultural workers search for other sources of income.

Coimbatore district borders the state Kerala, but the number of migrants from Kerala is relatively low. Crossing the state border entails a different language (Tamil instead of Malayalam). I spoke to four girls from Kerala. The following story of a 13-year-old girl is typical:

My mother died when I was 1.5 years old; it was a kitchen accident; her clothes caught fire. After two years my father was remarried, this was arranged by his mother without consulting him. From this marriage a son was born. The relation between my father and his new wife was not good, they were often fighting and my father often beat us. They divorced after 10 years, I felt sad as she was like a mother to me. My father wanted me to stay with him after the divorce. The reason for all these problems is that someone put a spell on my father, after that he started drinking; he borrowed lots of money for buying alcohol. A relative told my father to come to Tirupur; he would help him to find work. Both of us came, and we worked in an export company.

It is remarkable that all the young girls came to Tirupur with parent(s); only one girl I spoke to was living with her aunt because her parents were divorced and both had started a new relationship. Also for older girls it is very uncommon to be without 'supervision'.

Most of the girls come from small families with two or three children. Families of five or more children are very exceptional. In big families most children are sent out to work. Some children grow up with one parent; reasons for this are sicknesses, alcohol abuse or divorce. In their native places, the majority of the parents had been employed in agricultural or construction work. In many cases of agricultural migrants, young girls work as well, despite the fact that both parents are able to earn. Often the mother does not work, but stays at home to take care of the household or the younger children. Work is easily available for children; girls start with simple tasks, with low status, like handing the clothes to the tailor (kaaimadi). This job is almost never practised by married women. After some time of watching the tailor doing his work, the girls can start to practice stitching as well.

Most girls used to go to school in their places of origin, but stopped going as their parents migrated. In Tirupur most of them did not continue their education, and so many of the girls have completed

no more than 4th or 5th standard. An often heard excuse is that they are not in the possession of a Transfer Certificate (which needs to be obtained from the school where they studied before). Without this certificate new schools will not enrol the children. Another often heard reason is a lack of knowledge about the school system in Tirupur. Furthermore, those children who did enrol in Tirupur soon dropped out because of money problems or because nobody objected when they stayed at home or spent their time roaming the streets. It was apparent that many children were free to make school-related decisions themselves. The fact that children could find work easily contributed to the result.

### Reasons for working

There are different reasons why the girls in Tirupur work. The first and most important one has to do with poverty. The money that the girls earn is spent in a variety of ways. In some cases the parents have loans that need to be repaid. Loans are frequently taken to pay for medical expenses. Other parents may have taken out a mortgage on their land, and have to repay it on time or else risk losing their land, which is their only source of income. Marriages and other traditional functions were also often mentioned as reasons for taking out loans.

Besides indebtedness, girls also work to contribute to the family income. Especially in those cases where the fathers are spending their salary on alcohol or where mothers do not work. Chandraani (9) works because of this:

My parents are both working in the construction of buildings. They borrowed money and we need to repay that. My father drinks daily and spends all his earnings on alcohol, so my mother and I have to earn to pay for the household expenses and the loan. My mother promised that after repaying the loan they would send me back to school.

Girls also work when the parental income is insufficient to maintain the family. The half sisters Urshitha and Indrani (12 and 13), who are now doing *kaaimadi*, explained:

My father and mother both work in the construction of buildings. They tried to do company work once, but were not able to do the work. In construction they do not have fulltime work. They can only find work for two or three days a week, so that is why we also have to work.

Also children from single parent households are more likely to work. Ushanthi (14) said:

I worked for seven months in a company, sticking prints on t-shirts. I had to work as our family situation was very difficult. I started working when my father died. I offered my mother to go for work because I wanted to help her. She refused first and said: I will do all the work, you have to study. But there was no money for notebooks so I had to stop.

Sometimes children are taken out of school for a 'short period' with the intention of returning eventually. This can happen when, for example, one of the parents falls ill and cannot work or when loans have to be repaid quickly. Also when a girl gets her first period she is kept at home for some time. Once a child starts to contribute to the family's income, it becomes more likely they will drop out of school altogether because everyone becomes accustomed to their contributions. In addition, the prospect of having to return to school after some time, whilst friends have progressed, is off-putting.

Working to save money for their dowry is a reason to work for older girls (16 onwards). Some of the girls who want to earn for their dowry fall within the *sumangali* scheme. This scheme recruits mostly rural girls around the age of 16 years to work for three years in the garment units of Tirupur. The companies provide them with boarding and lodging and at the end of their work contract they will receive a large amount of money that they can use to get married. It is attractive for many girls

from poor economic backgrounds as they themselves can contribute to the requirements of their wedding. It was impossible for me to meet girls who are still involved in *sumangali*, as they work and live within the confines of the company units so their stories are unknown to the outside world. It is hard to enter the companies as they are protected by high walls and strict security. Outsiders are not welcome. Whereas it is easy to move from one job to another in Tirupur, this is not the case working under the *sumangali* scheme. The girls are not in touch with people outside their workplace and cannot leave before planned as the promised amount of money will only be given after 3 years. The girls intermittently receive small amounts to buy necessary items like soap [Venkat 2007:107-113].

Most of the working children never went to school in Tirupur; they stayed at home after migrating. The step from being at home to starting work in a company is smaller than from school to the company. Madeshwari (11) described her experience as follows:

After I came to Tirupur I was not going to school, as I did not have a transfer certificate. I used to sit at home all day. Then someone of the company came to our house and asked if I was willing to work. My parents first refused, my father said I was too small. My mother said, “she is sitting here all day let her go for work so she has some entertainment and earns some money”. I felt sad about it; all the other girls are studying but I have to work.

In summary, most of the working girls are migrants from rural areas in Tamil Nadu. They come with their parents, who were forced to migrate because of economic reasons. Although the parents are mainly uneducated, most girls went to school in their places of origin. After migrating, most girls do not enrol again; they stay at home and then start working. They work because loans have to be repaid, family incomes are insufficient, often associated with alcoholism, or because a parent has died. Older girls (16 and older) work to earn for their dowries. It appears that the social and economic structures determine the way children live. The situation of the family within that structure determines the sort of childhood a child gets and the extent of agency a child can exercise.

## Daily activities

The daily activities of girls can be subdivided into company work, household work and free time. The last two activities sometimes overlap.

### Company work

A regular working day in a stitching unit starts at 8.30 and lasts until 21.00 (1.5 shift) for six days a week. Only in rare cases do children, under the age of 14 in very small companies, leave after 1 shift (usually at about 17.00). One girl said she only worked for five days a week. Four children mentioned they worked for seven days a week, but only until 17.00 on Sundays. Three girls over 18 worked 7 full days a week. Two girls said that work on Sundays depends on the urgency of orders. This is also true for nightshifts. When there are urgent orders the workers have to come into work, which can last until 1 o'clock at night. Young girls work nights as well when it is required, and are brought home by the company owners at the end of their shifts. Nightshifts are more frequent in export companies as local companies usually have less time pressure. The girls said that nightshifts usually occur twice a week, but more often in the peak season, which lasts from September to December.

The companies can be subdivided into two groups: those producing for the local market and those producing for the export market. Children are employed in both, but the size of the company is a determinant. The very large companies, which are always export companies, have strict rules: children below 14 are not allowed to work. However, in many small export companies the rules are

followed less strictly. Girls I spoke to who were employed in local companies explained it was impossible to work in export companies as they did not allow children below 18 years. However, my observations inside the small export companies gave a different view.

An important aspect in choosing where to work is the distance to the company. All the girls go to work on foot and do not want to spend money or time travelling by bus even if they could earn more in other companies. Their reputation benefits from staying closer to home, as relatives and acquaintances can watch their comings and goings. Young boys and men have more freedom to choose as they can cycle to work. Working near their homes gives the girls the opportunity to have their lunch at home and makes it easier to return from nightshifts. Searching for work within walking distance does limit the choice. Everyone I interacted with defended their work in a local or export company as the best choice and mentioned the continuous orders as a reason why they worked there. The topic of work certainty was also mentioned in a study of the dyeing factories in a district bordering Coimbatore:

Permanent employment, as found in formal sector factories, is nonexistent, and the best a worker can aspire to is to become a regular worker, that is to be regularly employed by the same factory owner whenever he has work to offer. However, even these workers are never certain of 'regular' work, nor of the continuation of the relationship with their employer [De Neve 2007:10].

Workers are very concerned about orders as no orders mean no work and therefore no income. That is why many workers would rather choose for the certainty of work than for a higher salary in a new company. New companies were said to have fewer established contacts with foreign importers, which increases the risk of being without orders.

Children working in the stitching units do different work than adults. They usually start with *kaaimadi*, a job in which they assist the tailor by folding the pieces of cloth and handing them over for stitching. Young girls are also often asked to cut loose threads off garments.

The salaries young girls receive depend on their age, experience and the area they work, but most of all, on how much an owner is willing to give. 11-year-old Ishmitha earned 30 rupees (0.50 euros) for a day, working from 8.30 until 21.00. Seven other girls under the age of 14, doing *kaaimadi* or cutting the threads, mentioned the amount of 30 to 35 rupees a day (for a 1.5 shift). There is no difference made in salary between boys and girls; the 12-year-old boy Trishan also earned 25 rupees a shift. There were some exceptions, like 12-year-old Savitha, who earned 60 rupees a day for *kaaimadi*. The salaries also depended on the area; the poorer the area the lower the wages. In the areas with less child labour, those children who did work received a bit more than in slums where many children were available for work. However, the willingness of the owner is most important; the very young girl Chandraani (9) who worked in the slums of KVR Nagar, where lots of child labour occurs, earned comparatively well, with 45 rupees a day.

Salaries sometimes increase as the girls become more experienced. Iswariya, a 12-year-old girl, said she started with a salary of 50 rupees that increased to 70 rupees over time. Only in rare cases do the girls receive fixed amounts of money. Devipriya, the only girl I spoke to who lived in a company, had earned 500 rupees a month for working six days a week. This is an extremely low salary, especially as she worked one week of dayshifts followed by one week of only nightshifts. In the case of very young children at work, the money is often given directly to the parents, and as a consequence, many girls do not even know how much they earn. Turning 14 usually entails an increase in salary; at 14 they become 'legal' employees, and are no longer paid 'child wages'. Salaries for *kaaimadi* almost double after turning 14, increasing to 70 or 80 rupees a day. The mothers of the girls often receive the same amount for checking the clothes for manufacturing faults. The girls who manage to become tailors (always older than 14) earn about 125 rupees a day.

The girls I saw working, and with whom I interacted, only worked in the stitching and checking units. Work in dyeing and printing units is often considered to be a man's job and too heavy for children. The difficulties at work were a subject most older girls did not like to talk about, probably because they could not change the situation anyway. They did, however, mention the following work aspects as problematic:

- The air is often full of dust from cutting the textiles, inhaling this daily is unhealthy (no one wears mouth caps as they find it uncomfortable).
- It can be terribly hot in the companies and most companies do not have air conditioning and some do not even have fans.
- The working days can be extremely long, especially when nightshifts are added, causing tiredness and aches in arms, legs and neck.
- Girls who do *kaaimadi* complain of pain in their legs as they stand all day.

### Household work



**Photo 5: Water jars waiting to be filled when there is water supply**

Household work takes a lot of time and needs good planning, especially when everyone else works outside the home. Cooking, which is usually done by the mother, is very time consuming as people eat cooked food three times a day. Clothes are washed by hand daily, which also takes lots of time. Collecting water is a job most girls were not used to in their places of origin and which many complained about. Water is very scarce in Tirupur; in some areas the tap only runs on certain days at fixed times (photo 5). Sometimes families have to collect water for a whole week.

Household work is considered a female job. Some girls concluded: "Boys never have to do any household work, they only play. If we were boys we could also play, it's better to be a boy". Some boys also help at home; they are sometimes sent to do the shopping and help to carry water.

However, girls do many more chores than boys. Most of the girls help at home with cleaning the vessels, sweeping the floor and washing clothes. If girls live in a single parent household, they often perform more household work as the mother or father also works. Meenakshi (11) often manages the household alone. Her father died of TB and her mother has now also contracted it. Meenakshi tries to take good care of her mother and does lots of work at home. Her two younger sisters also help her, but she is clearly in charge and says: "I am the only one who can cook the food". Monisha is a 13-year-old girl, who had been working for 6 months in a company. Her parents were working in a company, where her father printed emblems on t-shirts and her mother checked t-shirts for faults. I asked her to describe her daily routine when working:

At five o'clock I used to wake up, take a bath, spread water in front of the house and made a *rangoli*. Then I would wash the clothes of my family members, eat breakfast and go to work. Work finishes around 20.30. Then I would come home, have my meal, watch some television and go to sleep around nine.

### **Leisure time**

The concept of free time is not very common for most girls. They mostly help their mothers in the household if they have any extra time. There is almost always something to do. On most Sundays the girls will actually enjoy some free time.

Very young girls enjoy playing games like skipping and tag. Girls play different games than young boys, who all love to play cricket, *khabadi* or rough games. Girls say that they do not want to play these games as they may fall and hurt themselves. The 'choice' also has to do with the fact that adults deem it inappropriate for girls to play rough games. Girls often imitate their mothers' behaviour by playing 'cook', etc. They also like to sit together with other girls, comb each other's hair and make themselves beautiful with face powder and *bindis*. Girls are expected to stay near their homes and many feel bored in the weekends as they have no one to play with. Their parents never play with them. So most of the time they watch television; the younger girls like watching cartoons on a children's channel and the older girls usually watch Tamil music videos and some like to imitate the dances at home. Dancing is seen as making yourself attractive and is therefore done with lots of giggling. Television series such as *Arasi* are also very popular among older girls. This daily show is broadcasted all over Tamil Nadu and is watched by different social classes. It shows the lifestyle of upper-class people, but many workers say that they recognize themselves in the problems; it touches issues like love marriages and family honour. Television is a very important medium for information for women, and almost every family has a television.

## Chapter 4

### Being a Girl

#### Social relations

Social relations differ from person to person. The relationships of importance for many girls are with their parents, brothers and sisters, *maamaas* (maternal uncles), neighbours, bosses, fellow-workers and boyfriends.

For most girls the mother is the most important person in their life. The girls feel very responsible for their family and are concerned about the problems that their mothers face. They try to help by doing household work or taking up work in companies. The girls see their mothers suffer and do not want to bother them with their own problems; like an 11-year-old girl told me: “I do not share my problems with any one; I just sit by myself and cry. If I would go to my mother she will also start to feel bad and cry”. Crying is considered to be bad behaviour, something that should be avoided at any time. In cases where the mothers hold jobs and also run the household, little time is left for raising the children; children are expected to keep themselves busy. In many cases the girls receive little affection from their mothers, as they are busy and have enough problems.

Fathers play a small - and often negative - role in the life of the girls. They do not spend a lot of time at home; they go to work, spend time in tea stalls or roam around. Many have a moped with which they drive around. Often it is unclear to the rest of the family where they are; being a man gives them the freedom to do what they want without the need to justify themselves. It is common to find alcohol abuse among the men, which is a large reason for the girls to dislike their fathers as it often leads to domestic violence. 13 of the 87 girls mentioned that their fathers had a serious alcohol problem (daily drinking). Krishani (18) started working at the age of 12:

My father is not working daily; he is drinking lots of alcohol. I don't like him so I never speak to him. He never shares any of his earnings with our family; it's always been like that. He often asks my mother for extra money... And he often beats her.

The young working girls, who still had both parents, told a similar story; the fights at home often result in beatings, and are normally about money for alcohol. Most girls feel very sad about this as they love their mothers a lot. Alcohol is easily available in Tirupur; from government shops or in bars, which are usually out of sight. On Sunday all over Tirupur men are drunk; both young and old spend their salaries (or their wives' salaries) on whiskey.

Most workers know their neighbours well as everyone lives in small houses and daily life is played out in front of these homes. Neighbours are aware of alcohol problems and domestic violence as they cannot be hidden. Girls come and go in neighbours' homes, and they can be a good support to one another. Gowrisha, a 12-year-old girl who lives with her father, likes that best about Tirupur: “In 2005 we came to this place; I like it here, because many women help me. I know many people here; they comb my hair and help with other things”. The good relation many have with their neighbours is based on the fact that they share the same circumstances. Their lives are similar and many face the same problems. However, close proximity also cultivates gossip, which may worsen the situation, and so serious problems are not openly discussed. Gowrisha explained: “If there is any problem we sit inside the house and cry. I will not share it with anyone. People may talk about our problems to others...and they will make fun of us.” Crying in public is not accepted, also not for children. Tears are always directly wiped away.

The other female fellow workers are very important to the girls. Many of them become friends; most of them are from the same neighbourhood. The free time they spend with their fellow workers is usually a lot of fun; it makes work bearable and many girls mentioned this when I asked them about their work. They explained how they sit together during breaks, chatting and making jokes. Teasing is very common, especially about boys. In the breaks girls and boys remain separated; girls usually sit down and boys stand some distance away.

The girls enjoy a certain freedom to be with friends of their own age. In the case of younger girls the situation is different; they do not enjoy the contact with fellow workers that much. The main reason is that most fellow workers are often older than they are. However, the fellow workers usually treat them nicely; the girls are often called *tangetchi*, which means little sister. It is a way of showing affection. There are usually not many young children working in the same company, so they are a bit lonely in that way. If there are more girls they usually are under supervision of their family, which makes them more protected.

### **Being a good girl**

When asked what they find important in life, many girls answered 'to be good girl'. They define a good girl as someone who obeys her parents and respects her elders. She is also helpful to others and stays away from boys. A good girl thinks first of her family and then about herself. She is able to control her anger and does not cry. She helps her mother when guests come to the house. Good girls do not attract attention by talking loudly or laughing. This concept of being a good girl is not only applicable for young girls. Also in their teens girls support this idea, which is almost opposite to the teenage period in the western culture where girls are expected to discover their own self and often do not follow their parents will. The concept of being a good boy is less clear. None of the boys mentioned the desire to be a good boy. Boys have to obey fewer rules and their behaviour is less often corrected. 'Being good' seems to apply mostly to girls.

Being a 'good girl' applies to all fields of life. Most girls feel happy that they can help their families when necessary, by working or doing household chores. Thinking of yourself and your own education is in some circumstances considered to be selfish. However, many girls I spoke to did acknowledge their dilemma; they know how important education is in changing their future and to increase success in life, but they do not want to disappoint their parents. Some girls had appealed to their parents for permission to continue their education and had even cried for it, whilst others adjusted to their situation and had not protested as they knew their mother's difficulties. In the end they had all fulfilled their parents' wish.

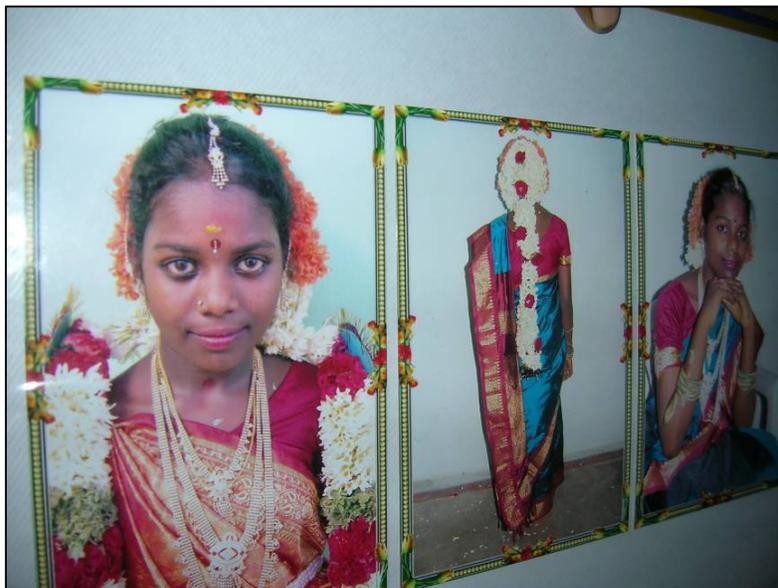
A good girl is also someone who does not complain. In the beginning I was struck by the fact that all girls said they enjoyed working in the companies. It puzzled me as the working days are long, the work pressure high and the work tedious. Most of them said that they were happy that the companies provided work, but agreed that they wished there was no need for them to go for work. Compared to other jobs this work provided them more money as it provided them with many hours of work. Later on in the interviews they would occasionally start to mention the difficulties of the job as well: the heat of the sewing machines; sitting bent over constantly, resulting in neck-aches; swollen or painful legs from standing 12 hours a day; and the nightshifts when they were already tired. Most girls preferred to not talk of these problems, as they felt their complaints will not change anything. They chose, instead, to focus on enjoying their free time, making jokes and chatting about fun topics.

### **Growing up**

Certain rites of passage are marked by official coming-of-age ceremonies, and one of the significant events for young girls is when they have their first menstruation. This traditional ceremony is still

celebrated, but its meaning has changed over time as ideas have changed about what a suitable age for marriage is. It is a clear example of how ideas on childhood can change and how traditions are flexible. In former days this ceremony marked the day that a girl was ready for marriage, but now most girls will only get married after the age of 18. Nevertheless, the event is still a very important step towards womanhood and therefore celebrated.

As soon as the girl starts her first period, she is kept at home from work or school. The length of time that she stays home depends on her caste; it can vary from one week to three months, during which time she is not allowed to leave the house. For good health the girl is given a daily portion of raw eggs and *gingelly* oil, for a month. The *churidar* the girl was wearing when she got her period is given to a *dhobi* or burnt. The coming-of-age ceremony takes place a couple of weeks later, at home or when the parents can afford it, in a marriage hall. All family and relatives are invited for the ceremony. Uncles present the girl with traditional gifts, such as stainless pots, money, betel leaves, bananas and coconuts. The stainless pots are given with the prospect of her marriage.



**Photo 6: Album with photos of coming of age ceremony**

During the function the girl sits on a sort of throne, on a stage. An aunt stays next to her to keep her company and tells her what to do. Men busy themselves by arranging the gifts and conducting the rituals with the help of a Hindu priest. The girl is expected to follow the instructions given to her, like standing up to receive the gifts and thanking people by kneeling down so she can touch their feet, which is a sign of respect. It is not a particularly joyful celebration for the girl, but later most girls say they did enjoy the ceremony. They mentioned that everyone had treated them nicely, that they had enjoyed being dressed up, and receiving all the gifts. Monisha (13) enjoyed the function: “Around 20 family members came over to Tirupur from my native place. I wore a silk *saree* and I enjoyed the function as I got lots of gifts”.

The girl wears a *saree* for the first time during the ceremony, which is normally a dress reserved for married women. It is a silk *saree*, given to her by her *maama*. The girl looks at her best, adorned with lots of jewellery and make-up. Taking photos is a very important part of the ceremony. After the ceremony the girls usually have an album of the ceremony, which can be shown to friends and relatives (photo 6).

The moment a girl starts to menstruate, many things change in her life. She is no longer considered a child and her parents feel the need to protect her against men. Devipriya said: "I got my period 10 days before; the only thing my mother said was that I was now grown up and that from this moment onwards I have to be careful with boys". Girls are expected to change their behaviour; playing on the streets, running or dancing is not done anymore and she should stay away from boys and men. It is usually the mother who talks to the girl about this. The talk is very general, no real sex education is given, and the mother will only emphasize that the girl has to avoid boys as they have bad intentions. Parvathi, who I met the first day she returned to school after a break of three months because of her first period, told me the following:

My mother told me that after I came of age I should not talk loudly or laugh loudly. What also changed was that I was never sent for shopping anymore. I have to stay at home all the time. I did not like getting my period as I couldn't go to school.

A girl who comes of age usually wears a *churidar* instead of the blouse and skirt younger girls wear. The girl can also wear a half-*saree*, a dress worn only by unmarried girls who have come of age. A *saree*, such as was worn during the ceremony, is not worn again until the girl marries.

The older working girls I spoke to were very aware of dowry, and most of them worked to save towards it. They handed their salaries over to their mothers and together they would go and buy golden jewellery. Gold is very important in Tamil Nadu and the rest of India. The gold rate is closely followed and an increase in the rate is first page news. The billboards in Tirupur emphasize that happiness and beauty comes with gold. People like to show off their best *sarees* and most expensive golden jewellery on weddings or other festival days. Gold shows your rank in society. The jewellery girls buy belong to them and are not directly given on the wedding day to the in-laws. The in-laws ask for an amount of gold that the girl should bring to the marriage. For these girls, about 100 grams of gold (1500-2000 euro) is usually the request.

The so-called *seer* (dowry) is a burden to the girls' family; *seer* literally means pots, but often includes all the items needed to start a household, like vessels, a cupboard, a bed and a television. This costs, in addition to the gold, about a *lakh* (100,000 rupees, about 1700 euros). Another, often heard, request from the in-laws is for a motorbike, which costs about half a *lakh*. The other expenses depend on the family traditions; in some cases the girl's family pays everything for the wedding day (another *lakh*); in other cases the costs are split with the in-laws. The total costs are extremely high considering most girls only earn 100 rupees a day and that only a small portion of that can be saved.

When I asked the girls about their marriage the mother would often take over the conversation. It was made clear that the girl is not considered to have an opinion about this matter. When no one else was around and I asked the girls what kind of husband they hoped to marry, many started to laugh in a shy way. Only after encouraging them did they start talking. Poojita (22), who started working when she was 15 to save for her dowry, said "He should not drink or smoke...and he should take care of me till the end... he should be a happy man, who does not fight."

Many girls mentioned the fear for a husband with an alcohol problem and the related violence. They all seemed to agree that arranged marriages are better, as with love marriages the boy easily leaves the girl for someone else. A love marriage is also considered to be disrespectful towards your parents: "Only those girls that give no respect to their parents go for love marriage". Livinia (14) stated, "I like an arranged marriage, because in an arranged marriage all will be satisfied, in a love marriage only the two people will be satisfied."

The topic of marriage made clear to me that a lot is hidden. For example, many girls do choose for love marriages and run away with their boyfriends. Everyone I spoke to knew girls who had run away, but all said they would never do it themselves. They all gave me the 'good girl' answer by

Tamil standards. Most girls would not admit having a boyfriend. It could create a lot of trouble if someone would find out. Asking about boyfriends always caused lots of giggling.



## Chapter 5

### Opinions and Dreams

#### Ideas on education

All the girls with whom I spoke considered education a very important aspect of life; most of them referred to the better job opportunities it presents. The 10-year-old Pratheesha, living with her aunt in Tirupur ever since her father divorced her mother for a love marriage, told me: “I like to go to school. I want to get first rank in my class so that I can become a teacher”. Many other young girls also expressed the dream of becoming a teacher, but also collector, doctor and police woman. They all said that to get such jobs, education is needed.

Education not only leads to better jobs, but also to another sort of life; two 11-year-old girls commented: “Education is important because afterwards we can get a good job. Without education our parents will give us in marriage to a drunkard”. These girls realized that, to step out of the cycle of poverty and alcoholism, they need to marry a good partner. The level of education a girl receives is considered when parents choose a bride for their son. The 12-year-old Neranya is convinced that education will give her better opportunities in life. Her family migrated from Madurai to Tirupur when she was six years old. Her father was working in construction; he got sick and has been at home now for over a year, which means no income. Her mother stays at home to take care of him. Her two older brothers of 16 and 18 years are working for a company; she herself started company work at the age of ten, and now she combines school with other work:

I wake up every morning at 4 o'clock to sell flower strings<sup>2</sup> that my mother makes. At nine I go to school until 4.30; after that I sell flowers again, usually until six o'clock. It depends on my sales. It is very tiring, but what to do, I have to help my family. And this is better than going for work in a company, as with this work I can also attend school. Education is very important for children. The children of the neighbouring house told me so. They went to school and told me that if I would go to school I would not have to suffer like my mother.

This shows how much importance the girls place on education and how this importance is already rooted in society. By working so hard the girls make it clear that they want their own futures to be different from their mothers’.

One girl, the 11-year-old Triswara, whose parents had never had any education, mentioned that education was important without referring to job opportunities: “If I can read and write, I can read the names of the busses and put my own signatures”. This was quite an exceptional view as most children (probably inspired by adults) only emphasized the economic benefit of education.

All the children who returned to school, after a period of working, were happy to be back in school. Like the 11-year-old Meenakshi, who came with her mother and two younger sisters to Tirupur after her father had died. She worked for a year in a company to support her mother, who was earning very little from sweeping floors in a company. When asked why she enjoys school, she said: “It is jolly, I see all my friends”. School is thus not only relevant for the future, but also enjoyable in the present. Going to school gives girls the opportunity to be with other children, to be within their own childhood space. They can learn and play with others, start friendships and learn social skills from interacting with other children (photo 7). If girls do not attend school these opportunities do not

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<sup>2</sup> Tamil women wear fresh strings of flowers in their hair everyday.

exist as they then have to stay at home; they are not as free as boys to roam around and meet friends on the streets.



*Photo 7: Play hour at an informal education centre*

The feelings towards education can change over time. Krishani (18) attended school until she was nine, but then she was sent with her little sister to Kerala as a domestic servant. They returned when her sister developed mental problems. Her father is a carpenter, but does not work daily as he is an alcoholic; her mother works in construction. She commented on the moment she had to leave school: “I did not like studying that much, but now I feel very sad, I should have studied; only now I realize how important it is”. Girls who were not doing so well in class often mentioned their poor school results as the reason for dropping out of school. The 12-year-old Priyani was careful about what she shared with us. She said that her father does not drink any alcohol, but later her sister confirmed that he spends half his salary on liquor. Priyani had worked for three months in a local company with her brother, but had recently changed jobs to assist a marriage astrologer: “I was not good in studying, so I stopped”. But that probably was not the real story. Her older sister said:

No, it was mostly a money matter. After she started working the teacher of the NGO school has come many times to our house to encourage her to come to school. She was working and after my parents got her salary they did not like the teacher coming by anymore. “Why do you come here and ask us again and again; we are not interested in sending her to school”.

There is probably not a single truth in such cases. The girl was maybe less willing to go to school as she felt she could not live up to the expectations. But it also might have been used as an excuse by her parents, who were already thinking of taking her out of school. By mentioning school results, the blame is put on the child instead of on the parents and on the poverty, which is also a topic of shame. Girls have the tendency to protect their parents; they often blame themselves rather than poverty or their parents.

In general, Indian society considers education to be very important. There is a lot of pressure put on children to get the highest marks. Parents spend lots of money on extra after-school tutoring and

most school-going children study for long hours. As job opportunities are rare they have to differentiate themselves from others, which creates a very competitive atmosphere. The girls are very conscious of the challenge and this often results in them choosing for an immediate, unskilled, job rather than continued study. The girls thus develop mixed feelings about school when confronted by reality. For the previous two years, Komathi (15) had been working for seven days a week. I spoke to her on the last day of her *Pongol* holidays. She spoke of her hopes to attend school again, but also of her hopes, a more realistic one, of becoming a tailor:

I started working when I did not get admission in a school, but hopefully next year I can go to school. My parents told me: you can study whenever you want to, but if you learn the company work now it will be easy. I hope to become a tailor.

In a group discussion with young women they all agreed that education is important. However, at the end one of the mothers said: “My girl will only study up to 10th standard, then she can go for work, if she learns machine tailoring she can earn nicely, there is no use of further studies as in this place there are only companies where you can get employed”. This statement shows that people realize that education will not automatically lead to good jobs. Then again, the mother did want her child to study up to 10th standard even though this would not lead to a higher-earning career. The wish to attain a particular level of schooling, despite the lack of certainty, does fit into the idea of a childhood in which children study instead of work. 14-year-old Madesh had also realized as much:

Education is important to get a good job. But not all the children who study will get a good job, half of them will. For my future it is not important. I need to learn how to stitch nicely and to control the sewing machine. It is the responsibility of children to look after their parents. So my brothers and I will do that.

## Experiencing work

There was a striking difference in how younger and older girls experience work. Almost all the young girls expressed their dislike of the work, like Tharani, a 10-year-old girl. Her parents moved three years ago with their four children from Tanjavur to Tirupur. Her father started ironing in a company and her mother worked as a housewife. Tharani folded clothes in a company: “I did not like the work because the owner always scolded me when I talked to others during work time”.

Receiving a scolding is often the reason for girls to dislike their work. They are scolded for talking, working too slowly or for making mistakes. Young girls often take it personally and feel bad about it, whereas many older girls accept the fact that all owners shout and it seems to have less of an impact on them. Devipriya (13), worked for a company for one year:

I liked the nightshifts as no one shouted at me. I found working very difficult; we had to stand continuously, people scolded me and sometimes beat me. Only the young children would get beatings. None of us interfered as they were all afraid of losing their job. I told it to my father who was working in another part of the building; he spoke to the owner. The owner said: “If you don’t like it here, you go away.” My father said to me: “Just try to continue now, we will try to find another place.”

Devipriya was the only girl who mentioned physical violence. Other young girls did not express their dislike so clearly. They made it clear to me that the question of liking the job is irrelevant, work is necessary: “We are from a poor family, so what to do?” said the 12-year-old Neranya. The same thing was expressed by Bamila (13) who started working at the age of ten: “Whether I like it or not, I have to go to work as there is no money.”

Having to work makes many young girls sad. The 11-year-old Madeshwari said: “When I had to go to work I thought, ‘all are studying but I have to work’; I felt very sad about it.” Many other girls expressed the same feelings. Kayathri, a 15-year-old girl from Kerala added to this: “In the beginning I was crying as I wanted to go to school, but after seeing other girls going to work I felt somehow consoled. My little sister of 11 years and I started work in the same company. I like the nightshifts as we can get extra money.”

Kayathri expressed the mixed feelings towards work: the pain of not going to school and later the gratitude of nightshifts as she knows how the extra money is appreciated.

In all the areas, I saw many children in school uniforms. They were a visible reminder of another sort of childhood. Let me repeat that most children in Tirupur do go to school, working children are an exception. Education is the norm.

The often-heard argument in favour of child labour, in the sense that work equips children with much-needed skills for a future job, is not shared by the children who are employed in the garment factories. They do not have the feeling they learn anything in the companies. Mirthubala (11) said: “Work is only earning, what is there to learn from folding clothes?” However, when the girls compared working in a company with staying at home all day, some preferred to work. Urshitha and Indrani (12 and 13) commented “I like the work. Working is better than staying at home as we can learn. Sitting at home all day makes us feel lazy. If I could choose I would like to study, but we have to obey our parents. And as they have no work, we should work.”

However, the majority of the older girls (above 14) claimed to enjoy their work. They do not have the feeling of missing out on a normal childhood. They do not experience work as forced upon them. This difference in experience is probably influenced by the fact that it is legally and socially acceptable for them to work. They often feel more in control over their lives than the younger girls. The 18-year-old Hemalika, who started working at the age of 15, expressed her experience with work:

On Sundays we will work up to 17.00. It is always a nice day as they play FM radio during work, also in nightshifts we listen to the radio. Money is not the most important thing why we like to work. The nice thing about working is that all friends will meet. At home only my parents are there, so I feel bored. After finishing work at 21.00 we walk slowly home so we have enough time to talk.

In this quote work is referred to as something enjoyable. It is a choice that is within her control. Enjoying the work can be seen as a form of resistance as she can challenge the boring and unrewarding structure she lives in. Being master of her time, by slowly walking home, is also a form of exercising agency. Many older girls expressed that they enjoyed the social aspect of working. Working in a company gives a certain amount of freedom. This was only the case for the older girls as younger girls are normally accompanied by an older person and are usually not part of a peer group. The freedom that company work provides to certain girls became clear when I visited the house of Athisaya and Sashu (19 and 18). When they showed me around in their house, a poster of Vijay (a Tamil movie star) attracted my attention. They had gone to the cinema to see the movie. When I asked if their parents had given permission, they started laughing: “We told our parents that we had to go to work. Only when we came back we told them that we went to the cinema”. Such naughty behaviour was an exception; it did not match with the desire of being a good girl.

Another reason for being positive about their - long and heavy - work days is that, compared to their mothers’ jobs, they consider themselves lucky. Four older girls from Coonor commented: “We like our work; if you compare this work with plucking tea on the tea estates in our native place this is much better. The work is neat: we can dress nicely and work inside.” Many parents who are employed in Tirupur in construction expressed the same feeling; they are happy that their girls do

not have to carry heavy bricks and can stay clean during work time. They realize they are comparatively better off in the garment units and see this work as a step forward.



**Photo 8: Truck in Tirupur making a statement about child labour**

The younger girls experience their work negatively; they feel sad about not going to school. Work does not have any positive aspect for them. Older girls find the work hard, but also enjoy the social aspect of working and the freedom it gives. The difference in experience can be found in what their environment expects from them, and how they see themselves reflected by their surroundings (photo 8).

The environment has different expectations of girls under the age of 14. They are considered innocent and should study instead of work. These expectations are known to the girls and make them feel that they are not living as they should according to society. Older working girls experience a positive attitude (sometimes even pride) towards their parents, whereas parents of younger working girls need the money, but would nevertheless still rather have their girls in school than at work. The age of 13/14 seems to be a transitional age; girls are no longer children and are starting to turn into adults. At this age work is no longer seen as abnormal by their environment. Coming of age, also defined by their first period, is culturally still a significant event for these girls. Traditionally this was the transition point from child to adult. Nowadays childhood ideas are changing as girls marry at a later age and education is given so much importance. It seems that there is confusion between two ideas of childhood. The idea that childhood ends at around 13/14 years old is still clearly rooted in society as the environment of the girls does not condemn work from this age onwards.

## **Dreams**

Talking about dreams is a bit strange in a setting in which girls have little to say about their future. Nevertheless, all the girls have dreams. Many young girls spoke of a future as a teacher, collector or doctor. Teaching as a job for women is socially accepted and appreciated. Schools are considered safe working places for women, the job can be combined with household chores after school and a government job (such as teaching) is desirable since it ensures a job up to the age of 60. The dream

of becoming a doctor or collector is probably inspired by television as none of the girls knew anyone working as a doctor or collector. On television these occupations are depicted as socially admired, well-paid and well-respected. The dream of becoming a police woman was a bit surprising at first, as it does not really suit the image of a good girl. But police have an admirable social function, and that desire to do good attracts the girls. Devipriya (13) explained her dream: “I want to study well so I can become a police woman. Then I will catch the men who drink and beat their wives”. Her dream expresses the desire to change something about her own situation, and the powerlessness she feels towards the problems men create.

Most of the young girls’ dream choice of job is socially motivated. They want to be teachers “to serve the children who have no education” or become a collector “to do good things for all people”. As a policewoman they would “punish men and help children” or as a doctor they would “give free treatments”. No one mentioned high salaries as a reason for choosing a job, which does not mean that it plays no role as the mentioned jobs are well-paid. None of the girls dreamt of becoming a company owner or perform any work related to the garment industry.

As most girls came from poor economic backgrounds, I wanted to know what they would spend money on if they had a lot. The answers of the older girls all reflected the need to save for a dowry: “I would buy golden jewellery from the money, the more we can give the better are our chances for a good husband”. Out of the 20 younger girls who answered it was striking to note that 19 girls would not spend the money on themselves, they said they would spend it on their family. The 11-year-old girl who did express her own wish answered with a shy laugh that she wanted to buy earrings. She was wearing small sticks of wood in the holes of her ear.

The girls who wanted to use the money for their families had various plans. Some did not know what was needed. Savitha, a 12-year-old girl said: “I would hand it all over to my parents”. However, most of the girls had clear plans for the money. The 10-year-old Pratheesha said: “I would buy *churidars* and *sarees* for my sister and mother”. The 13-year-old Meena felt the same: “I would buy new dresses for all my family members; and some household items like a lunchbox for my father and schoolbags for all the children”. The 13-year-old Srinidhi who was not attending school, but instead taking care of the household and goats, as other family members worked for companies, said: “I would repay the loan of my parents”. When asked what she would like for herself, she answered: “a *karam* board to play with my sister and brother”.

The dream of education was also revealed when asked what they would do with lots of money. Eleven young girls mentioned they would spend the money on schoolbooks or admission fees for brothers or sisters so they could study well. When asked what they wanted for themselves they answered similarly. One 11-year-old girl dreamt of buying a computer: “I want to learn to work on it as we are living in a computer world.”

In short, the question again revealed the sacrificing attitude of many girls towards their families. The girls were shy to speak about their own desires, but in the end they admitted that if they were able to spend money on themselves they would use it for education, as that would give them the chance of a different life.

I also asked the girls the general question “what would you change in your life if you could?” The answers show the problems girls face in their lives. Most of the girls wished they could change something about the problems at home; particularly fights about alcohol were mentioned a lot.

The 11-year-old Meenakshi, who lost her father to TB when she was four years old, wished her mother could be cured from TB. The 9-year-old Tania said: “I wished that the three of us could go to school and that my father would not drink.” 11-year-old Mirthubala also has a father with a serious alcohol problem, which often creates tension at home: “I wish my father and mother would stop fighting.” Mivya, a girl of 11 from a broken family, feels the need for herself to change: “I wish to change to a good character; someone who obeys elders, studies well and so on.” The girl never

went to school and made a very obedient impression. Older girls realize they cannot do much to change the situation. The 18-year-old girl Krishani expressed her hope for a better life:

I wish everything changes to a better situation. It is possible because I met a lady in the company and she also struggled a lot in her life. She told me about it. She married at a young age, but to a very nice man. She said this might happen to me also, after struggling things can turn out all right. I have struggled a lot, since I was 12 years old I had to work, I feel very sad about it.

When the girls were asked what life they wished for their future children, they all answered: “our own children should not work but study”. That this view was shared by all of them indicates that a so-called culturally defined childhood with work is not seen as desirable. This dream also puts the joy they manage to get from work into another perspective; the life they live now is not satisfying. They are not confined by traditions, but are open for change; they see many possibilities and opportunities for another sort of life. An 18-year-old girl commented: “My child should study first and after that the child may decide what it wants to do.” I asked if tailoring would be an option. She answered: “No, they should get a nice job, tailoring is not nice, it does not give a good salary.” The 14-year-old boy Madesh also believes that another childhood is better: “My own children should go for studies, I did not study well but they should.”



## Chapter 6

### Conclusion

This study has described the childhood of girls working in Tirupur's garment units and how it is experienced by them. The aim was to investigate whether the universalistic approach on childhood imposes a 'western view' on other cultures. The main findings of the research can be summarized as follows:

- The actual local lived-in childhood differs from the universal ideas on childhood. However, the conversations made clear that their lived-in childhood is no longer culturally legitimised.
- Even though the new norm includes education rather than child labour, social economic circumstances force a number of these children into a working childhood. The girls have grown up in the tradition of going to school, but this was interrupted as most girls migrated with their parents from rural areas of Tamil Nadu to the town Tirupur, in search of work. Their schooling was interrupted because of migration rather than because of a traditional childhood norm. The new childhood norm that already exists in their society was possibly not yet strong enough and tradition re-imposed itself during unsettled conditions.
- The transition into work is easier when girls do not attend school, but instead spend their days at home. Surprisingly, the step of being taken out of school is, for many girls, more painful than the change from household work to company work: working reconnects them with society, particularly with their peers.
- There is a striking difference in the way work is experienced by younger and older girls. Girls under the age of 14 expressed their dislike; they had the feeling that they were 'abnormal' as they were missing out on a school-going childhood, although at the same time they were also happy to help their parents and to do what a 'good girl' should do. Girls over 14 expressed that they liked the work, often mentioning the opportunity to meet others at work. Being aware of their limited options also contributed to their positive feelings towards company work. Most girls compared their work to that of their parents and considered the clean company work as a step forward. Another aspect that can explain the difference in experience is the fact that for the older girls working in general is not considered abnormal; they are not considered real children anymore, but are in a sort of 'in between stage'.
- Even though the older girls mentioned that they like the work, none of them wanted their own future children to work in the garment units.
- Despite the fact that older girls claimed to enjoy company work, working in the garment industry is heavy work: the working days are long, sometimes with nightshifts, and almost all girls suffered from physical pain caused by repetitive movements.
- Besides company work, all the girls helped with household chores; depending on the family situation girls either assist their mothers or are expected to run the whole household themselves. Boys rarely have to do any chores. Free time is rare for girls. Their free time is devoted to household work. Lunch breaks at the companies are in comparison a form of free time, and are therefore a big benefit of company work.
- Childhood in Tirupur is very gendered; there are high expectations placed on girls on how to behave. This is internalized and often makes girls express the wish to be 'a good girl': being obedient to parents and not attracting any attention from boys/men. The wish to be a good girl

sometimes clashes with the universal idea of childhood, particularly when parents ask their girls to work.

- Almost all girls emphasized the importance of education, often referring to better job opportunities that would lead to a better life. School also turns out to be important for social development. Girls enjoy going to school as it gives them the opportunity to meet other girls.
- In the past, in traditional society, child labour might have been very important for children in order to acquire skills for their future life. Under the changing present conditions, however, going to school provides children with opportunities for work and personal growth. They are very aware of this. They live in a world that highly values education. The economy has changed and to be able to benefit from this growth, all children feel that they should have the opportunity to go to school, instead of sticking to old traditions, which are not always suitable anymore.
- The girls' dreams seem to reflect the modernizing universal ideals: they dream of a life in which they can help others, a life with education for their children and opportunities to study, a life with a good husband who does not drink, a life without working in the garment units for such long days. Older girls hope to make these dreams come true for their children; younger girls still have the hope that change will benefit themselves.

Returning for a moment to the theory on childhood: relativists define childhood as the way children actually live; universalists adhere to the belief in one global ideal childhood. The relativist definition allows for many different childhoods as the children of the world live their lives in innumerable ways, not only across the globe, but also within the same society.

It is hard to speak of a shared childhood in this respect. 'A Tirupur childhood', for example, does not exist. The differences between the various childhoods in Tirupur are extreme, ranging from the richest children, who go to the TEA public school (an upper class English school), to the girls in the slum areas who work on a daily basis. Even when the selection is narrowed to only the working girls, it is still hard to speak of a shared childhood as all conditions and stories are different. Age also makes a difference to the experience of childhood; an 11-year-old girl experiences her life very differently to a 17-year-old girl.

Thus, if one approaches childhood from a relativist point of view, one could say that the term childhood is barely relevant; each child indeed has a different lived-in childhood. So many in fact, that not one definition can be made. So, at times, as in Tiripur, it can be more useful to use the universal approach when trying to understand childhood.

This universal, normative definition of childhood is also useful for looking at policies to improve the situation of children; whether a society supports the universal ideas, but is unable to achieve them, or whether another childhood is seen as more desirable, will lead to totally different policy decisions.

For the working girls in Tiripur, their lived-in childhood differs from the mainstream values of their ambient culture, and, as a result, the young girls feel sad that they cannot attend school. The girls compare their own childhood with neighbouring children who do attend school. The school-going childhood is not something western and unattainable to them, but something that should be available to all children. The universal approach has become localized, not only in formal institutions, but also in the minds of people, mostly of youngsters. However, the idea is fresh, and has not yet internalized as an absolute norm; poverty and other unsettling conditions, such as migration, form a real challenge to the new ways of thinking and people may revert to traditional ways in times of uncertainty.

Relativists criticize universal rights, but provide no alternatives for the suffering of children. The relativistic approach reminds us to be aware of ethnocentrism, but it risks a laissez-faire attitude towards inequalities. Regarding local traditions as static and superior is just as dangerous as ethnocentrism. Childhood is not unaffected by other social developments; economic circumstances, for example, can alter cultures, including their ideas on childhood. The current situation of the girls in Tirupur is not the result of the current local view of childhood. Instead, it is a result of poverty, which forces these girls into work.

Constructing theoretically different childhoods for children of the poor (in which they work) and children of the rich (in which they go to school) keeps the differences in place. Propagating against universal rights means making - and keeping - a difference between children from poor economic backgrounds and children from well to do backgrounds who do have the opportunity to go to school and enjoy a carefree childhood. In my opinion the relativistic view contributes to the maintenance of poverty.



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## APPENDIX: SUMMARY CRC

Article 1 (Definition of the child): The Convention defines a 'child' as a person below the age of 18, unless the laws of a particular country set the legal age for adulthood younger. The Committee on the Rights of the Child, the monitoring body for the Convention, has encouraged States to review the age of majority if it is set below 18 and to increase the level of protection for all children under 18.

Article 2 (Non-discrimination): The Convention applies to all children, whatever their race, religion or abilities; whatever they think or say, whatever type of family they come from. It doesn't matter where children live, what language they speak, what their parents do, whether they are boys or girls, what their culture is, whether they have a disability or whether they are rich or poor. No child should be treated unfairly on any basis.

Article 3 (Best interests of the child): The best interests of children must be the primary concern in making decisions that may affect them. All adults should do what is best for children. When adults make decisions, they should think about how their decisions will affect children. This particularly applies to budget, policy and law makers.

Article 4 (Protection of rights): Governments have a responsibility to take all available measures to make sure children's rights are respected, protected and fulfilled. When countries ratify the Convention, they agree to review their laws relating to children. This involves assessing their social services, legal, health and educational systems, as well as levels of funding for these services. Governments are then obliged to take all necessary steps to ensure that the minimum standards set by the Convention in these areas are being met. They must help families protect children's rights and create an environment where they can grow and reach their potential. In some instances, this may involve changing existing laws or creating new ones. Such legislative changes are not imposed, but come about through the same process by which any law is created or reformed within a country. Article 41 of the Convention points out that when a country already has higher legal standards than those seen in the Convention, the higher standards always prevail.

Article 5 (Parental guidance): Governments should respect the rights and responsibilities of families to direct and guide their children so that, as they grow, they learn to use their rights properly. Helping children to understand their rights does not mean pushing them to make choices with consequences that they are too young to handle. Article 5 encourages parents to deal with rights issues "in a manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the child". The Convention does not take responsibility for children away from their parents and give more authority to governments. It does place on governments the responsibility to protect and assist families in fulfilling their essential role as nurturers of children.

Article 6 (Survival and development): Children have the right to live. Governments should ensure that children survive and develop healthily.

Article 7 (Registration, name, nationality, care): All children have the right to a legally registered name, officially recognised by the government. Children have the right to a nationality (to belong to a country). Children also have the right to know and, as far as possible, to be cared for by their parents.

Article 8 (Preservation of identity): Children have the right to an identity - an official record of who they are. Governments should respect children's right to a name, a nationality and family ties.

Article 9 (Separation from parents): Children have the right to live with their parent(s), unless it is bad for them. Children whose parents do not live together have the right to stay in contact with both parents, unless this might hurt the child.

Article 10 (Family reunification): Families whose members live in different countries should be allowed to move between those countries so that parents and children can stay in contact, or get back together as a family.

Article 11 (Kidnapping): Governments should take steps to stop children being taken out of their own country illegally. This article is particularly concerned with parental abductions. The Convention's Optional Protocol on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography has a provision that concerns abduction for financial gain.

Article 12 (Respect for the views of the child): When adults are making decisions that affect children, children have the right to say what they think should happen and have their opinions taken into account. This does not mean that children can now tell their parents what to do. This Convention encourages adults to listen to the opinions of children and involve them in decision-making -- not give children authority over adults. Article 12 does not interfere with parents' right and responsibility to express their views on matters affecting their children. Moreover, the Convention recognizes that the level of a child's participation in decisions must be appropriate to the child's level of maturity. Children's ability to form and express their opinions develops with age and most adults will naturally give the views of teenagers greater weight than those of a preschooler, whether in family, legal or administrative decisions.

Article 12 (Respect for the views of the child): When adults are making decisions that affect children, children have the right to say what they think should happen and have their opinions taken into account.

Article 13 (Freedom of expression): Children have the right to get and share information, as long as the information is not damaging to them or others. In exercising the right to freedom of expression, children have the responsibility to also respect the rights, freedoms and reputations of others. The freedom of expression includes the right to share information in any way they choose, including by talking, drawing or writing.

Article 14 (Freedom of thought, conscience and religion): Children have the right to think and believe what they want and to practise their religion, as long as they are not stopping other people from enjoying their rights. Parents should help guide their children in these matters. The

Convention respects the rights and duties of parents in providing religious and moral guidance to their children. Religious groups around the world have expressed support for the Convention, which indicates that it in no way prevents parents from bringing their children up within a religious tradition. At the same time, the Convention recognizes that as children mature and are able to form their own views, some may question certain religious practices or cultural traditions. The Convention supports children's right to examine their beliefs, but it also states that their right to express their beliefs implies respect for the rights and freedoms of others.

Article 15 (Freedom of association): Children have the right to meet together and to join groups and organisations, as long as it does not stop other people from enjoying their rights. In exercising their rights, children have the responsibility to respect the rights, freedoms and reputations of others.

Article 16 (Right to privacy): Children have a right to privacy. The law should protect them from attacks against their way of life, their good name, their families and their homes.

Article 17 (Access to information; mass media): Children have the right to get information that is important to their health and well-being. Governments should encourage mass media - radio, television, newspapers and Internet content sources - to provide information that children can understand and to not promote materials that could harm children. Mass media should particularly be encouraged to supply information in languages that minority and indigenous children can understand. Children should also have access to children's books.

Article 18 (Parental responsibilities; state assistance): Both parents share responsibility for bringing up their children, and should always consider what is best for each child. Governments must respect the responsibility of parents for providing appropriate guidance to their children - the Convention does not take responsibility for children away from their parents and give more authority to governments. It places a responsibility on governments to provide support services to parents, especially if both parents work outside the home.

Article 19 (Protection from all forms of violence): Children have the right to be protected from being hurt and mistreated, physically or mentally. Governments should ensure that children are properly cared for and protect them from violence, abuse and neglect by their parents, or anyone else who looks after them. In terms of discipline, the Convention does not specify what forms of punishment parents should use. However any form of discipline involving violence is unacceptable. There are ways to discipline children that are effective in helping children learn about family and social expectations for their behaviour - ones that are non-violent, are appropriate to the child's level of development and take the best interests of the child into consideration. In most countries, laws already define what sorts of punishments are considered excessive or abusive. It is up to each government to review these laws in light of the Convention.

Article 20 (Children deprived of family environment): Children who cannot be looked after by their own family have a right to special care and must be looked after properly, by people who respect their ethnic group, religion, culture and language.

Article 21 (Adoption): Children have the right to care and protection if they are adopted or in foster care. The first concern must be what is best for them. The same rules should apply whether they are adopted in the country where they were born, or if they are taken to live in another country.

Article 22 (Refugee children): Children have the right to special protection and help if they are refugees (if they have been forced to leave their home and live in another country), as well as all the rights in this Convention.

Article 23 (Children with disabilities): Children who have any kind of disability have the right to special care and support, as well as all the rights in the Convention, so that they can live full and independent lives.

Article 24 (Health and health services): Children have the right to good quality health care - the best health care possible - to safe drinking water, nutritious food, a clean and safe environment, and information to help them stay healthy. Rich countries should help poorer countries achieve this.

Article 25 (Review of treatment in care): Children who are looked after by their local authorities, rather than their parents, have the right to have these living arrangements looked at regularly to see if they are the most appropriate. Their care and treatment should always be based on “the best interests of the child”. (see Guiding Principles, Article 3)

Article 26 (Social security): Children - either through their guardians or directly - have the right to help from the government if they are poor or in need.

Article 27 (Adequate standard of living): Children have the right to a standard of living that is good enough to meet their physical and mental needs. Governments should help families and guardians who cannot afford to provide this, particularly with regard to food, clothing and housing.

Article 28: (Right to education): All children have the right to a primary education, which should be free. Wealthy countries should help poorer countries achieve this right. Discipline in schools should respect children’s dignity. For children to benefit from education, schools must be run in an orderly way - without the use of violence. Any form of school discipline should take into account the child’s human dignity. Therefore, governments must ensure that school administrators review their discipline policies and eliminate any discipline practices involving physical or mental violence, abuse or neglect. The Convention places a high value on education. Young people should be encouraged to reach the highest level of education of which they are capable.

Article 29 (Goals of education): Children’s education should develop each child’s personality, talents and abilities to the fullest. It should encourage children to respect others, human rights and their own and other cultures. It should also help them learn to live peacefully, protect the environment and respect other people. Children have a particular responsibility to respect the rights their parents, and education should aim to develop respect for the values and culture of their parents. The Convention does not address such issues as school uniforms, dress codes, the singing of the national anthem or prayer in schools. It is up to governments and school officials in each

country to determine whether, in the context of their society and existing laws, such matters infringe upon other rights protected by the Convention.

Article 30 (Children of minorities/indigenous groups): Minority or indigenous children have the right to learn about and practice their own culture, language and religion. The right to practice one's own culture, language and religion applies to everyone; the Convention here highlights this right in instances where the practices are not shared by the majority of people in the country.

Article 31 (Leisure, play and culture): Children have the right to relax and play, and to join in a wide range of cultural, artistic and other recreational activities.

Article 32 (Child labour): The government should protect children from work that is dangerous or might harm their health or their education. While the Convention protects children from harmful and exploitative work, there is nothing in it that prohibits parents from expecting their children to help out at home in ways that are safe and appropriate to their age. If children help out in a family farm or business, the tasks they do be safe and suited to their level of development and comply with national labour laws. Children's work should not jeopardize any of their other rights, including the right to education, or the right to relaxation and play.

Article 33 (Drug abuse): Governments should use all means possible to protect children from the use of harmful drugs and from being used in the drug trade.

Article 34 (Sexual exploitation): Governments should protect children from all forms of sexual exploitation and abuse. This provision in the Convention is augmented by the Optional Protocol on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography.

Article 35 (Abduction, sale and trafficking): The government should take all measures possible to make sure that children are not abducted, sold or trafficked. This provision in the Convention is augmented by the Optional Protocol on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography.

Article 36 (Other forms of exploitation): Children should be protected from any activity that takes advantage of them or could harm their welfare and development.

Article 37 (Detention and punishment): No one is allowed to punish children in a cruel or harmful way. Children who break the law should not be treated cruelly. They should not be put in prison with adults, should be able to keep in contact with their families, and should not be sentenced to death or life imprisonment without possibility of release.

Article 38 (War and armed conflicts): Governments must do everything they can to protect and care for children affected by war. Children under 15 should not be forced or recruited to take part in a war or join the armed forces. The Convention's Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict further develops this right, raising the age for direct participation in armed conflict to 18 and establishing a ban on compulsory recruitment for children under 18.

Article 39 (Rehabilitation of child victims): Children who have been neglected, abused or exploited should receive special help to physically and psychologically recover and reintegrate into society. Particular attention should be paid to restoring the health, self-respect and dignity of the child.

Article 40 (Juvenile justice): Children who are accused of breaking the law have the right to legal help and fair treatment in a justice system that respects their rights. Governments are required to set a minimum age below which children cannot be held criminally responsible and to provide minimum guarantees for the fairness and quick resolution of judicial or alternative proceedings.

Article 41 (Respect for superior national standards): If the laws of a country provide better protection of children's rights than the articles in this Convention, those laws should apply.

Article 42 (Knowledge of rights): Governments should make the Convention known to adults and children. Adults should help children learn about their rights, too. (See also article 4.)

Articles 43-54 (implementation measures): These articles discuss how governments and international organizations like UNICEF should work to ensure children are protected in their rights.