



Children from two villages enjoy the first session of the Speak Out programme, combining life skills and games. Photos: Ekta

## Spring Story

# SPEAK OUT FOR JUSTICE

BY GILLIAN SOUTHEY | CWS COMMUNICATIONS COORDINATOR.

**A**fter two long years of Covid, Dalit and Tribal children are finding hope again in Tamil Nadu, South India. The pandemic has been especially hard on their families, many of whom have spent long periods unable to earn an income and sometimes without any food at all.

For some, it is too late. Children have been trapped into early marriages or are working long hours as labourers. During the pandemic, children have been subjected to increased violence including sexual exploitation. Violence against women in Tamil Nadu has doubled according to our partner Ekta. The need for community-level campaigns to protect children from harm is now more urgent than ever.

CWS partners including Ekta are determined to make up for lost time. They want to make sure children are back in school and can speak out to protect themselves, their family and friends.

Young women like Archana (not pictured) know exactly what that help means. She is now resident at the Nambikkai Centre for Dalit and Tribal young women, run by Ekta. Three years ago, she narrowly escaped a child marriage after hearing a Child Helpline radio advertisement.

Archana's parents work for very low wages as agricultural labourers. The little money they saved paid for Archana's elder brother to study for a diploma in civil engineering. When a close relative of her father asked if he might marry the 14-year-old student, her father declined. But the man persisted. Although he was deaf and could not speak well, he owned a shop



Peer group leaders learn about human rights and discuss the issues children face in their villages.

with a steady income. Archana kept telling her parents that she wanted to stay in school and not get married.

Instead of listening to what she was saying, her parents threatened to kill themselves with rat poison if she did not take up the offer. Archana grew scared. She did not know what would happen to her if they died. At night she could not sleep.



Left: Ekta is the NGO partner for the Madurai Railway Station Child Help Desk which has rescued more than 518 children since it was established in 2018. Right: As part of their training, the young peer leaders map their villages and talk about the changes they want to see.

One day Archana heard about the toll-free Child Helpline on the radio. She wrote the number 1098 on her hand and raced home to ask her mother's permission to visit a friend who lived nearby. With her permission, Archana ran off again. She borrowed the mother's mobile phone and rang the number. The call was answered immediately, and the staff worker assured Archana, someone would be there within two hours. She ran home. Her heart was beating fast.

As promised, the Child Welfare Committee members arrived at her home and spoke with her parents. After a long discussion they took Archana into custody because she told them she was scared her parents would force her to marry the man as soon as they left. She was taken to the Nambikkai Centre run by Ekta.

Archana is now in Standard 12 at the local high school, working hard at her studies and enjoying sports like Kabbadi, a popular team game in South Asia.

Ekta runs the Speak Out programme with Dalit and Tribal children and young people in Tamil Nadu with the support of their parents.

Speak Out teaches life skills and trains the children in sports like netball. The eager students have fun while learning good communication skills, the benefits of positive thinking, and how to make sensible decisions. By working together, they gain more confidence to speak out to keep their communities safe from harm. Dalit and Tribal communities frequently experience violence and discrimination because of their caste. Without this programme, the children and young people are more likely to leave school early and be exploited in their homes and at work.

Ekta runs Children's camps and six regular Children's Clubs for 11–15-year olds with adult supervision. At

their meetings the young people discuss family issues and organise special projects. The Clubs keep the school grounds clean. Members encourage their friends to attend school and their parents to go to medical clinics and *Panchayat* or local council meetings. Working together the clubs have persuaded the *Panchayat* to install streetlights and rubbish bins in their villages.



Above: After training, the peer leaders will teach other children from their villages about human rights, organise group and community activities, and play games together.

## Please support our Spring Appeal for child justice.

Your generous gift could help children and young people find a pathway out of poverty. It will fund Speak Out training events, children's camps and clubs. It will contribute to child-focused campaigns to stop child labour and violence in their homes and community. You will be changing attitudes and behaviour where it counts most.

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