

Seven years CEWAS - continuous work on grassroots level shows its impact

When Sathya came to CEWAS six years ago, she was nine month pregnant and desperate. She was unmarried, the child's father refused to marry her. Unmarried and pregnant she was a disgrace to her family and was sent away. In CEWAS she delivered the child and later on started working for CEWAS. With the help of CEWAS she managed to reunite with her family. She now lives as a single parent back in her village - a very unusual situation, which shows that change is possible. Her work at CEWAS, her fearless interaction with the police and the court has given her a certain status in the village. She is respected. "Do not mess with Sathya, she will file a case against you in the court!" the people in her village use to say. Sathya walks the two kilometers distance from the bus stop to her village in the dark all by herself. Nobody dares to harm her.

In the six years in which Sathya has been working for CEWAS, she noted the following changes in the thirty villages of CEWAS. Those changes were later on confirmed to me in meetings with women's groups in two villages and during a leaders meeting in CEWAS office.

- There are fewer cases of suicide because the women have more self-confidence and know solutions for their problems (for example job opportunities, hostel places for their children, alcohol de-addiction therapies for their husbands, access to pensions for widows, child maintenance for single parent, knowledge about various government programs on health, training, job opportunities ...)
- The parents give more importance to their children's education. There is a certain social pressure among the group members to send children to school regularly. In addition, the women in the group also have an eye on the other women in the village and interfere, if they do not send their children to school.
- The women's groups turn towards the Panchayat (municipality) president for solutions to common problems of the village (water, electricity, public transport ...)
- Women's groups will contact the police, if necessary. The police does not dare to refrain from actions or to ask for money when the name CEWAS is mentioned.
- The group leader's capacities have reached a level that allows them to solve many family problems independently. 15 villages are on the way to independence. Regular visits by CEWAS staff members can be reduced.
- Public hearings about family conflicts in the male-dominated and often money-based decisions of the Panchayats (village or caste councils) can be prevented.
- Certain patterns of thoughts have changed: for example women who were in some way discredited (e.g. by a premarital love relationship) are met with more understanding, as all are aware that each family could be affected by such problems.
- Men support their wives in their work at CEWAS. There are some men who drop their wives at the CEWAS office for the monthly leaders meetings. Many are aware that their own daughters might someday be faced with problems for which CEWAS has solutions.

During the meetings, which I attended, issues were seriously discussed and at the same time there was also a lot of laughing and joking.

Within the groups solidarity has developed. There were two cases where a group of women collected money among themselves to give it to a poor young woman in order for her to be able to get married.

The word 'Tairiyam', which means 'courage', was mentioned very often.

And all women praised Sathya. Sathya and the director Saravana are the main characters of CEWAS. Only thanks to their continuous hard work CEWAS has reached a good level of empowerment among the women's groups.

I am surprised about all the positive developments. Despite many small and bigger crises in the office, the work in the villages could go on constantly. Slowly but steady empowerment emerged, which is reflected in the appearance of the women, in their brave talks, their safety within the group and their self confidence.

Promising team

Sathya works as a Fieldworker. She visits the villages every day and speaks with the women's groups about their rights, listens to their problems and tries to find a solution. A year ago Sathya also became the coordinator of the field operations. She now is the supervisor of a total of four field workers, she plans the village visits and monitors the daily reporting.

The other fieldworkers who work in the villages are Revathi, Savitri and Vimala.

Revathi:

"Previously I was unaware of the world out there. Since working at CEWAS I know that other women have even bigger problems than me. This encourages me to manage my own situation and to work for CEWAS."

Revathi came to CEWAS six months ago. She is about 30 years old. For ten years she was in a relationship with a man who promised to marry her. But finally one day he decided to marry another woman. This had far-reaching consequences for Revathi: She will not find a new husband, her reputation is ruined. CEWAS took action against Revathi's ex-boyfriend and was able to prevent his planned marriage.

Savitri:

"The work in the 'lawyers office' (CEWAS) gives me respect."

Savitri has two daughters (10 and 12 years old) from a love marriage. When her husband died four years after the wedding, she stood alone with two little daughters without the support of her family. She found work as a cook in a NGO. Her children were placed in hostels. She met a new man and married him. However, he became increasingly violent. For three months now she has lived separated from him and works for CEWAS.

Vimala, the fourth fieldworker of CEWAS, was lying down with chickenpox during my visit, so I was not able to talk to her.

Umpathi:

After a two year break Umapathi returned to CEWAS. In the two years of working at Teddy's Trust he has learned a lot: English, preparation of training materials, and he brought in a new network to CEWAS.

In addition to his MSW, he will receive his lawyers patent this summer.

Umapathi wants to keep working for CEWAS. He is highly motivated and has plenty of ideas.

Future Plans

- Creating training materials for fieldworkers and village leaders
- Intensive trainings for leaders in two days workshops
- Street theater (drama) with children from the villages
- Drop-in Centers: These are meant as sustainability programs for the 'old' villages: For each village a suitable woman from the group will be selected to do a free government sponsored training program as a beautician. With initial support from CEWAS a beautician center will be established in the village. This should allow the woman to have an income and at the same time serve as a drop- in and information center for CEWAS.
- Expand to new villages: 15 dedicated leaders will take responsibility for three to five new villages.
- Documentation and public relations: Short YouTube videos (3 minutes) about the work of CEWAS will be screened via CEWAS Facebook page.

Tamil Nadu generally:

Vigilante justice, so-called Kattapanchayats are still going on and even increase. Problems are solved with muscle men and money payments.

Inter-caste marriages can still end in tragedies: Recently there was a case in the newspaper, in which a pregnant woman was murdered by her own family members because the child was of a lower caste man.

There are government-run alcohol shops in each village. Therefore, in the last decade alcohol problems among men have increased. The men spend their free time with drinking. In addition to that, alcohol drinking is also glorified via popular Tamil movies as a sign of masculinity.

Poor people get paralyzed by government provided 'poverty reduction' programs. At the same time, money returns back to the government by the poor man's expenditures at the alcohol shops.

It seems that after the necessary and important focus on women's empowerment in the past ten to twenty years, there is a need for men to catch up.

Nathalie Peyer, May 2014

