

# Teamwork for creating opportunities

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**In a difficult time for the Garments industry in India five bold women in Natham Kovilpatti take on the challenge to create new opportunities for girls in the area. Their goal? Creating jobs for women from poor families to generate some extra income and empowering women in their own entrepreneurship. But... how do you do that?**

The steady rattling of newly bought sewing machines is the first thing that welcomes me in the scarcely lit room of the MERDS Garment Center. The halfway closed shutters keep the pre-summer heat of the small town of Natham outside and the fast turning fans on the ceiling provide a refreshing breeze. Next to the sewing machines, some tables, and some plastic chairs the room is empty except for some fabric and ribbons loosely draped over the tables. Three women are working with concentrated looks on their faces.

The rattling comes to a sudden stop when I and Chandra, the chairman of MERDS, walk into

the room and the women look up from their work. Smiles and head nods are exchanged as soon as Chandra greets the women and starts to explain my visit to the Center. Clearly I am not the first volunteer sniffing around at the MERDS NGO as I quickly and without a single questioning look get invited forward to take a closer look at the fabrics the women were previously working on. There is a very thin and long piece of fabric called a saree laying over two of the machines with a broad string of decorative ribbon partly attached to the ends. "These are the last pieces of the second batch of trial pieces, where they have to stitch the decorative ribbon on the saree", Chandra explains. "Before this, they were stitching women's nighties. These pieces are only to show the quality of our work so we can get more orders in the future".

After the short visit Chandra and I take a seat in his office, which is next to the Garment Center room. Here he explains the idea behind the Center. "We opened at the end of January. We provided the machines and the room for

five women. As soon as the real production starts, they will start paying a small contribution for the use of the materials and the machines. The goal is to get orders from Garment producers that will continuously provide the women with enough work, so they have a day job stitching and more women can come up to the center to use the machines and do orders.”



Ofcourse, that sounds like a very good idea. But what does this mean for the payment the women get for their work? At the moment, honoustly, it's not much. As the first orders were small jobs in part of the production of the complete piece, the women only got a small piece rate of 10 rupees a piece. Here, they didn't have to pay for the use of the machines and materials yet. Also, the women have to get trained in the specific orders to be able to do many pieces on one day to assure them some steady income that is worthwhile. So for now, the profit is at a minimum. However, the women just started in January, which means that with the right effort there is a chance that more difficult orders come in that give a better piece rate, which gives a fast rise in the women's salary and chances of expanding the capacity of the Garment Center.

In the following week I repeatedly visited the Garment Center, finding only an empty room. “The real orders will only start after March”, Chandra explains at my second visit, “It is a really difficult time you know, for starting a business like this.” And he is right. After the demonetization a lot of people stopped buying

new clothes, which has had a large impact on India's small-scale garment industries that produce for the domestic market. As new orders stayed out many Garment Centers had to close or reduce their production which meant that a lot of mainly women lost their income without having much perspective on a new job. This only makes me want to know more about the ambitions of MERDS' new Garment Center and their motivations to involve with this business. “I can call the women of our Garment Center for you if you would like to speak to them?” Chandra offered kindly and without waiting for an answer he quickly starts calling and messaging people on his cellphone.

About an hour later Anuradha walks into the office. She is wearing a beautiful purple saree and after greeting us with a smile. She slowly sits down in the chair next to mine. As I ask after her motivations to join the Garment Center, she says: “Well, my children have left the house now, so it's very quiet in the home. The Garment Center offers me a challenge and some company while stitching. You know, downstairs of the Garment Center there is a stitching course for girls and women, which has been running for a long time now. I was among the first women to be entering into that course. And see me now, I'm helping to build up a business to be helping other girls to start stitching for themselves, just like me.” “So for you, the MERDS Garment Center is not just for the money, but it's also a very social thing?” I ask. “That's right” she says. Chandra adds: “ Also, sometimes there are women in the stitching center that are not allowed to get out of the house much, but are allowed to go to the stitching course for a couple of hours a week. For them it's extra sad when the stitching course is over after 10 months and they are stuck at home again. The Garment center provides them with the opportunity to keep doing something for themselves and have a place to share their opinion with others.”

The next time I arrive in Natham, it is a very hot day and Chandra picks me up at the busstation to go to the office. Not long after we arrive at the office, Amaaravathi, Kasthuri, and Leeladevi walk in, three other women who

work at the Garment Center. We place some chairs in a circle in Chandra's office so that everyone has a place to sit. As soon as we take our places, the women start telling me stories about their lives and their motives to start working at the Garment Center at this time. It strikes me that the motives to join the group are very different. Amaaravathi mainly focuses on expanding her skills in the Center: "It can be a great opportunity to work with different kinds of materials as we have very good machines and experienced women". Kasthuri tells that she has schoolgoing children, and that the money her husband makes is no longer efficient to cover the increasing cost of school. However, she also mentions that she really wants to help making the Garment Center a success as she sees that there is much stitching talent among the girls in Natham Kovilpatti but they have to travel very far for a job which holds them back from using their talent. Finally, Leeladevi tells us how her family just needs the money she gets from the Garment Center, and wants to contribute to the family income as her parents do not earn a lot of money.



*From left to right: Kasthuri, Leeladevi, Amaaravatha, Roos, Chandra*

Although the background stories and the motives of the women are quite different, they all share a common goal. They see the opportunities that the Garment Center can provide themselves and others on economical level, but also on social level. They have a clear image of the long path that lays ahead to reach those goals. Even though times are difficult now, they have faith in the Center and in their capabilities to get it up and running. The start is there, ladies, and I have all faith in you to make this project into a great success.