

# Women's Empowerment through a Social Welfare Project under the Catholic Church in South India

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In this paper, I will study a social welfare project to empower women in the diocese of Thuckalay—part of the Catholic Church in South India. I will especially focus on the social role of religious organizations in this project.

I researched one of the units under the Kanyakumari Social Service Society of the diocese of Thuckalay in February and March 2015. My research focused on one of three income-generating units, Angel Garments, which is engaged in the production of ready-made garments in collaboration with V-Star Creations Private Limited.

In 2011, the KKSSS established Angel Garments to encourage economic independence of rural women in Pulkal, Kanyakumari district, Tamil Nadu. The establishment of Angel Garments is closely related to the economic circumstances of the Pulkal area. Most of the households live in poverty.

Angel Garments is a unit for women in need of help. Many of the workers said that they recovered their dignity and found a voice after they joined Angel Garments. Most of the workers feel more confident than before, and they have hope in their future.

Angel Garments is a successful joint venture between the partners. The reason this joint venture has gone well is that there is a very well-balanced division of labor between partners at Angel Garments.

Key Words: Women, Empowerment, Catholic Church, India

## Introduction

The Catholic Church is a religious organization and one of the Christian denominations. The Church has performed charitable works over the centuries in many countries. In this paper, I will study a social welfare project to empower women in the diocese of Thuckalay—part of the Catholic Church in South India. I will especially focus on the social role of religious organizations in this project.

The diocese of Thuckalay's Syro-Malabar Catholic Church was erected on

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November 11, 1996. This diocese is located in the Kanyakumari District and the taluk of Shenkottai in Tirunelveli District, Tamil Nadu. The total area is 1793.94 sq. km. The total number of catholic faithful in the diocese is 30,000.

I researched one of the units under the Kanyakumari Social Service Society (hereafter, KKSSS) of the diocese of Thuckalay in February and March 2015. My research focused on one of three income-generating units, Angel Garments, which is engaged in the production of readymade garments in collaboration with V-Star Creations Private Limited<sup>1)</sup> (hereafter V-Star Creations) (KKSSS 2013: 15).

## I. Charity in the Church and the Organizational Structure of the KKSSS as an Institution under the Catholic Church

Charity is one of the three theological virtues. Both Christian individuals and communities perform acts of charity in many ways (Ekstrom 2002: 68-69). Catholics believe that Jesus of Nazareth cared for the downtrodden, the marginalized, and the poor (Ekstrom 2002: 200-201). The Bible discusses acts of charity as follows:

For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.' Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?' And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.' (Matthew 25: 35-40).

According to the Christian faith, in the poor, we serve Christ himself, Christians see Christ as present in every person; hence, their works of charity stem from their love of Christ.

In 1972, the diocese of Thuckalay set up the KKSSS as an institution that undertook charitable activities under the motto "To Reach Out and Empower." The vision of the KKSSS is "A society in which human worth and dignity are valued and respected." It defines its mission as "Sustainable development of the poor and the marginalized through community organization and capacity building" (KKSSS 2014: 4).

Although the KKSSS is a Christian institution, it is involved in projects that

improve the lives of all of the people in the diocese, irrespective of caste, community, race, and creed. The society defines the seven objectives of its projects as follows:

- 1) Ensure the voices and choices of the poor are heard by responsible persons.
- 2) Equip the poor with access to public services and government benefits through rights-based approaches.
- 3) Promote human rights and self-reliant communities, i.e., self-help groups.
- 4) Promote gender equity and gender equality among the public.
- 5) Address new developmental challenges through collective advocacy.
- 6) Motivate and organize people for sustainable development (KKSSS 2013).

The KKSSS is an official wing that focuses on social welfare matters in the diocese of Thuckalay. To ensure it works smoothly, it was registered as a charitable institution under the Tamil Nadu Societies Registration Act, 1975. This act is for any institution that promotes education, literature, science, religion, charity, social reform, art, craft, cottage industries, athletics, sports (including indoor games), recreation, public health, social services, and cultural activities (the Tamil Nadu Societies Registration Act, 1975).<sup>2)</sup>

Any society registered under this act enjoys the status of legal entity. Registration is essential for opening a bank account, obtaining registration and approvals under the Income Tax Act, and lawfully vesting properties. It also gives recognition to the society at all forums and before all authorities (via the Helpline Law). Unregistered societies cannot claim benefits under the Income Tax Act. The KKSSS is a registered society and thus enjoys tax exemption status.

At the same time, societies registered under the Act are required to meet certain conditions determined by this act. The KKSSS forms "committees" as a governing body, where memoranda and the bylaws of the society are prescribed. The KKSSS has a registered office and keeps proper account books. At the end of each financial year, it has its receipts, expenditure account, and balance sheet audited. All property of the KKSSS is vested in the committee. It holds at least one general meeting during each financial year (the Tamil Nadu Societies Registration Act, 1975<sup>3)</sup>: Chapter 2(a); Chapter 5; Chapter 16(1), 18, 26(1)).

The administrative body of the KKSSS is divided into a project wing and an account wing. The project wing plans the policy of both administration and projects, takes charge of decision making, and oversees the administration and management of projects. The project wing consists of a bishop as the patron, the president, the

secretary, the director, the assistant-director, a project officer, three coordinators (self-help group coordinator, recording coordinator, saving coordinator), four field-supervisors (part-time staff), and 32 animators (part-time staff). The account wing consists of a financial consultant, an accountant, and a driver.

The KKSSS has a general body in accordance with the Act. It consists of 30 members; the president, the vice-president, the secretary, the treasurer, and 26 members. A total of 26 of the 30 are religious; this means that the KKSSS is an institution controlled by religious people.

The core members of the KKSSS are the patron, the president, the secretary, the treasurer, and three members from the general body. They decide the administrative principles and project policies of the society. The general body approves of matters that the core members propose when it meets once a year (KKSSS 2013: 18-19; 2014: 17). Actually, the core members decide most of the matters of the KKSSS.

The society is a registered institution that performs social welfare work, since the religious organization is a matrix. In this kind of set-up, the bishop, as the head of the religious unit, has strong influence over the administrative matters.

## II. Women's Empowerment and the Establishment of the KKSSS in the Diocese of Thuckalay

I will now discuss the social situation of the women in the village area of Kanyakumari district, where the diocese of Thuckalay is located. Then, I will list the reasons the diocese set up the KKSSS and why the society gives priority to women's empowerment in its activities.

First of all, the social situation for women in India is harsh. India is a male-centric society, and there is a tendency for women not to be given important positions. What is more, women who cannot economically contribute to their household are isolated both at home and in society. In such a condition, women feel unrecognized by others; they do not value themselves, so many of them tend to lose their dignity.

Secondly, there is a tacit pressure for women to marry in their village area once they reach marriageable age. Regardless of socio-economic condition, there is a deep-rooted idea that women should marry and give birth as soon as possible. Even if they are not independent mentally or economically, women face strong pressure to marry. This social situation is detrimental to women's lives.

The diocese of Thuckalay takes women's marginalization in society and at home very seriously. Because half of the world's population is female, if women are inde-

pendent socially and economically, they would be a driving force that changes society.

The diocese decided to take action to protect women against the present difficulties they face. It set up the KKSSS, an official internal institution in charge of social welfare work, in 1972.

The projects taken on by the KKSSS target the following eight areas: 1) family development, 2) women's empowerment, 3) education for empowerment, 4) rehabilitation for the differently abled, 5) tribal development, 6) livelihood enhancement, 7) environment protection, and 8) health and hygiene (KKSSS 2014: 2; [www.kksss.org](http://www.kksss.org); [www.thuckalaydiocese.org](http://www.thuckalaydiocese.org)).

Regarding social conditions in India, the KKSSS gives priority to women's empowerment among the above eight categories. It describes women's empowerment as follows:

"Empowerment means women achieving increased control in decision making and better access to services, opportunities and resources. Empowerment is ensured when economic participation, economic opportunity, political participation, educational attainments, health and well-being of women are accomplished" (KKSSS 2010).

According to the diocese of Thuckalay, its intention with women's empowerment is shown in the objectives of the KKSSS. The following is written in the 2012-13 annual report of the KKSSS: "Bringing gender equity and gender equality among the public" (KKSSS 2013).

As the KKSSS gives importance to women's empowerment among their activities, many activities organized by the society are intended to encourage women's participation (KKSSS 2013; 2014). Actually, the number of women who participate in the activities and projects by the KKSSS is much higher than that of men (Okamitsu 2015).

One of the efforts to promote women's empowerment by the KKSSS is the celebration of International Women's Day on March 8<sup>th</sup>. The society holds a celebration of International Women's Day every year. This celebration consists of speeches by guests, awarding the women's prize, song performances, dance performances, and drama performances. It is not only a significant celebration but also a kind of entertainment for the participants. What is more important is that the KKSSS organizes this celebration to show their sincere attitude toward prioritizing women's empowerment (Okamitsu 2015).

### III. The Establishment of Angel Garments

In this Chapter, I will discuss the establishment of Angel Garments—one of three income-generating units under the KKSSS—from the point of view of women's empowerment.

In 2011, the KKSSS established Angel Garments to encourage economic independence of rural youths and women in collaboration with V-Star Creations in Pulkal, Kanniyakumari district, Tamil Nadu. Local women are engaged in producing inner garments (KKSSS 2013: 15).

The establishment of Angel Garments is closely related to the economic circumstances of the Pulkal area. Most of the residents of Pulkal are fishermen, and most of the households live in poverty. The reality in Pulkal is that most women cannot get a stable job due to a lack of education. Domestic chores weigh heavily on married women, so they cannot go far away to work. They covet an income of their own, but it is difficult for them to work outside.

In this situation, women in Pulkal took action. The female faithful implored Fr. Mathew Plathottam M.S.T. (a former parish priest) to set up something for them to earn a living in the church compound.

Fr. Mathew was struck by their passion. Early in the 2000s, he complied with their request and set up the Angel Bag Making Unit, which produced bags made of clothes in the church compound. The Angel Bag Making Unit was launched in a portion of a former storehouse<sup>4</sup> in the church compound. Around five or six women started working there (KKSSS Web Page).<sup>5</sup>

The Angel Bag Making Unit made products to order, but there were no regular orders. The unit did not have a proper supervisor and they sewed their products using Indian sewing machines for household use. As a result, the quality of their products was uneven. They hardly ever took any orders, and hence the workers could not get a steady salary. The workers wanted to secure a steady income throughout the year.

Responding to the demand from the workers, the KKSSS started looking for a partner. V-Star Creations was one of the companies that they contacted. They agreed to launch a joint venture to produce women's underwear. They made an agreement as outlined below:

The KKSSS, as the promoter, agreed to provide the necessary apparatus for production, enough space for a workshop, workers engaged in production, and a person to supervise the workers. V-Star agreed to train the workers at their own

expense, supply materials, and conduct market research (KKSSS 2011). With this agreement, the KKSSS officially decided to set up Angel Garments as one of their units in Pulkal.

#### IV. The Operational Condition of Angel Garments

The KKSSS registered Angel Garments as a manufacturing enterprise under the Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises Development Act, 2006 (the Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises Development Act, 2006). Institutions registered under this law gain the following benefits. First, they can obtain priority loans from banks. And second, institutions registered under this law can take out an over-10-lakhs loan from a bank without interest.

In accordance with the law, the KKSSS, as a small enterprise, made an initial investment of 25 lakhs in Angel Garments, as the minimum investment stipulated in the Act. The society equipped Angel Garments with electricity, water, flooring, ventilation, and the necessary machines. Angel Garments has not received any funds from any agency, as the KKSSS has covered all operating costs.<sup>6)</sup>

On March 10<sup>th</sup> 2011, Angel Garments launched with the parish priest (Fr. Mathew) as the unit director,<sup>7)</sup> a nun in charge (Sr. Asha), and 27 female workers. What is more, one staff member from V-Star Creations was appointed as a quality controller who supervises the workers and checks the quality of the products. Angel Garments started in the same place where the Angel Bag Making Unit used to operate.

Before the start of operations, V-Star Creations sent a trainer to provide vocational training for workers for three months. During the training period, only a small payment was given to the trainees. According to the original workers, this was a very hard time for them. They learned techniques and skills to operate the machines from the beginning. The training was very tough for the workers.<sup>8)</sup>

The workers' salaries are paid by piece at Angel Garments. In 2011, the first year of operation, the average daily wage for workers was Rs. 150-200 because of operating difficulties.

Angel Garments has solved its problems one by one and gradually developed. Product returns from V-Star Creations to Angel Garments have been very small in number. What is more, the products are delivered before the due date. V-Star Creations has placed more orders with Angel Garments.

During my research (February and March 2015), the operation of Angel Garments was left to the parish priest as the unit director,<sup>9)</sup> a sister in charge (Sr.

Annie Rose<sup>10)</sup>, and a sister in charge of accountancy (Sr. Princy)<sup>11)</sup> from the religious sector, plus a quality controller from V-Star Creations. At that time, the number of workers had increased to 44 after starting at 27.

Official working hours at Angel Garments are from nine o'clock in the morning till half past five in the afternoon. Although they must deliver the products by the appointed date, each worker has a quota. The workers can work extra hours. If they want to work outside of operating hours, they can borrow the key to the workplace from the unit director. They return the key after they finish.

The main role of the KKSSS is financing each unit. For the operation of Angel Garments, the KKSSS took out a loan to add equipment to the workplace. The main role of the unit director is ensuring the unit operates smoothly. In the case of Angel Garments, the unit director takes all responsibility for checking the account book; paying the employees; taking care of both the mental and physical health of the employees; and setting up the toilet, water supply, and electricity. The sister in charge takes responsibility for caring for the employees to ensure they work smoothly, communicating with V-Star Creations, managing the delivery of materials, storing materials, taking product orders, delivering the products on time, and managing the salaries. The accountant takes responsibility for the employees' attendance, checks the payroll, and supports the sister in charge.

The operation of Angel Garments is a successful example among the units under the KKSSS. A great honor for Angel Garments was the receipt of an Excellence in Organizational Productivity Award from V-Star Creations in 2013. Angel Garments became one of 3 units to receive the award among the 23 units working for V-Star Creations. The award proved that Angel Garments produces high-quality products.

The development of Angel Garments can be seen in the increase in employees, worker salaries, machines, and products. They started with 27 workers in 2011, which increased to 44 by February 2015, then 65 by October 2016. The total salary for all employees was Rs. 200,000 (2 lakhs) in February 2015. The number of machines was 37 in February 2015. They manufactured 2,450 brassieres in January 2015.

The reason Angel Garments has grown is that they produce high-quality, complete products in a punctual fashion. V-Star Creations trusts Angel Garments on this point, so they place more orders. They plan to expand the business and manufacture more products in the future.<sup>12)</sup>

Actually, storage space for materials at Angel Garments is insufficient. The storage room occupies the floor under the workplace. The parish nursery school used to occupy this floor, but Angel Garments took it over. The KKSSS then built a new

hall for the parish in its compound in 2016.

Although the KKSSS does not make any profit from Angel Garments, it does pay for all of Angel Garments operating expenses. Thinking just about the investment in the equipment, that is a large amount. For example, a single-needle sewing machine costs Rs. 750,000, a two-needle one Rs. 150,000, and both a power machine and a locking machine cost Rs. 200,000. The KKSSS continues to invest in Angel Garments.

The KKSSS is the official social welfare wing of the diocese of Thuckalay, intended to work for the benefit of the poor, so they do not think about income from their activities. Angel Garments is a unit for women in need of help. Many of the workers said that they recovered their dignity and found a voice after they joined Angel Garments. Most of the workers feel more confident than before, and they have hope in their future.<sup>13)</sup> The KKSSS gives priority to women's empowerment, and the operation of Angel Garments empowers the workers on a small scale. The reality of Angel Garments is the concrete achievement of the objectives of the KKSSS.

## V. Conclusion

Angel Garments is a successful joint venture between the KKSSS and V-Star Creations. If conditions permitted, joint ventures between the partners could work out. The reason this joint venture has gone well is that there is a very well-balanced division of labor between partners at Angel Garments.

The KKSSS is an institution whose matrix is a religious organization; their objectives are based on a religious philosophy. Therefore, the governing body of the KKSSS is controlled by religious people, with its patron being a bishop. The society does not keep a professional with business know-how and experience on their staff, so in this sense it is an amateur in the business field. Therefore, the KKSSS is not involved in the business management of Angel Garments; it takes responsibility only for the religious people who look after the unit, workers, workplace, necessary equipment, and facility. The KKSSS has increased its investment in Angel Garments as it has grown. The total investment was Rs. 3.5million-4million as of March 2015.

On the other hand, V-Star Creations is a private company pursuing profits, and has produced excellent business results. It takes control of all matters on the business side, such as the delivery of goods, quality control, product distribution, and marketing. V-Star Creations has not taken on any risk from this investment.

The KKSSS and V-Star Creations distinguish their own areas of responsibility.

They do not intrude into their counterpart's area. They cooperate well to ensure the smooth operation of Angel Garments. Consequently, Angel Garments has produced a good result up to the present.

As long as Angel Garments runs well, the KKSSS can provide a salary to workers who need money for a better life through this joint venture. The operation of Angel Garments is not making a profit, but as it is a charitable activity from the point of view of the KKSSS, this is acceptable. Meanwhile, V-Star Creations can get high-quality products and make a profit. In this sense, Angel Garments benefits both parties.

From the point of view of women's empowerment, Angel Garments helps the women who work there to stabilize their lives. Most of the workers face both economic difficulty and social oppression. After joining Angel Garments, they can earn money by themselves and contribute to their households, which makes them more confident in themselves. In this situation, they have a voice both in society and at home.

At the same time, because of self-confidence and economic stability, they cease to worry too much about their life, and gradually become able to plan for their future. Many interviewees said that their life changed after they started working at Angel Garments. Because of this, Angel Garments can be seen as an entity that empowers women in society. If the KKSSS had not set up Angel Garments, these women would not have had hope in their lives.

However, Angel Garments is just a small unit under a religious organization; its influence on society is limited. The number of workers who can work there is small, thus limiting the number of people who can enjoy the benefits of working there. In India, there are many women who need to work regularly and recover their self-confidence.

The KKSSS is one institution under a religious organization, and their activity would not exist without their religious philosophy. The operation of Angel Garments is an alternative to the atrocities in India, but not a solution in itself.

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### Notes

- 1) V-Star Creations Pvt. Ltd. is an Indian manufacturer of inner wear, founded in 1995. It launched a line of inner wear for women under the brand Vanessa in 2002. It also arranges for units run by charitable institutions to employ women to manufacture its products.
- 2) The name of the act is used instead of the name of the author.
- 3) The name of the act is used instead of the name of the author.
- 4) From 1972 to 1975, there was a food distribution program for poor people sponsored by the USA. This program supplied mid-day meals to children at nursery schools and students at unaided private schools, and food and medical support to TB-affected people. Under this program, mother and child health services were operated to improve maternal health and hygienic practices training for children and mothers. The storehouse was built in the church compound in Pulkal to store food, medical supplies, seeds, and manure for improving agricultural produce (KKSSS HP).
- 5) Personal interview with Sr. Annie Rose FDSHJ.
- 6) Personal interview with Fr. Thekkekytt and Sr. Annie Rose.
- 7) In the diocese of Thuckalay, a parish priest from Pulkal became the unit director of Angel Garments. From a personal interview with Fr. Thekkekutt.
- 8) Personal interview with workers at Angel Garments.
- 9) Angel Garments is located in the church compound of Pulkal parish. During my research, the parish priest was Fr. Mathew Thekkekutt. He was appointed as the parish priest of Pulkal in May 2013.
- 10) Sr. Annie Rose was the sister in charge during my research. She was appointed as sister in charge in June 2014.
- 11) In the beginning, the number of workers was just 27. One sister in charge was enough to take care of all matters including accounting. As the number of workers increased, it was too difficult for Sr. Annie Rose to handle everything alone. Sr. Annie Rose used to look after Angel Garments during working hours and then did the accounting at night. She requested another sister to help share the workload. Sr. Princy FDSHJ was appointed as accountant in June 2014.
- 12) Personal interview with Fr. Saji Elambasseril SDB, Sr. Soji FDSHJ, and Sr. Annie Rose in March 2015.
- 13) Personal interviews with workers.

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