



QSA Notes

people, places & projects

Celebrating women

BY **ALETIA DUNDAS** | QSA

What does the construction of a toilet, an office and a warehouse in southern India have to do with International Women's Day? Quite a lot, according to QSA. As many of us commemorate International Women's Day on 8 March for the struggles and achievements of women in Australia, the journey of our partners in India gives us an additional sense of achievement and hope.

Women in the Varusanadu Valley, Tamil Nadu, southern India, are concerned about the traditional water reservoirs (called kanmai) and the fact that they are being encroached upon by large and wealthy landowners. Kanmai store rainwater in the rainy season through to the dry season, provide irrigation for the land surrounding them and are useful in preventing flood. Sadly, farmers with land adjoining the kanmai in Varusanadu have expanded their fields into it and this has limited access for poorer people. A fear of violence, harassment and withdrawal of work has kept local people silent over the issue.

Lakshmi is one of those marginal farmers living in Varusanadu village. She owns one acre of land, on which she cultivates silk cotton while her husband works as an agricultural labourer. During the drought which broke in 2005, the Vaigai river and all the wells in the village dried up each summer. 'The water level fell below 500 feet, and 150 wells were dry' Lakshmi says. Hand pumps

were installed, but were only able to supply the village for one hour per day, so Lakshmi was forced to fetch water from a bore hole belonging to a rich farmer about 1-2km away from her home. 'He would shout at us and we were forced to beg for it' she added.

'Every day I went to the well twice, I would carry three vessels on each trip, two on my head and one in my hand. Even then, I didn't have enough water to keep the children clean, they got scabies and head lice'. Other women in the village reported an increase in eye infections and diarrhoea, especially amongst children. Lakshmi believes restoring the kanmai would help the community cope with drought. 'Our grandfathers told us about the kanmai. It has been there since

before independence, when this area was ruled by a zamindari (local king). We have to get the government to take action' she says. Local communities are well aware of the positive effect that a restored kanmai would have on their water security, thanks to the Vasandham Society, which started a water rights awareness programme in 2004. The Society aims to help people most in need to help themselves through women's development, programs that address violence against women, gender equality programs, micro-enterprise schemes, assisting access to housing repair and community representation in local councils, community health, prevention of TB and HIV/AIDS and natural resource awareness.



Vasandham Women's group, Varusanadu
Photo QSA

QSA is a member of the Australian Council for International Development (ACFID), and is a signatory to the ACFID Code of Conduct. The purpose of QSA is to express in a practical way the concern of Australian Quakers for the building of a more peaceful, equitable, just and compassionate world. To this end QSA works with communities in need to improve their quality of life with projects which are economically and environmentally appropriate and sustainable.

119 Devonshire St Surry Hills, NSW 2010 Australia • quakersa@acay.com.au
PHONE +61 2 9698 9103 • FAX: +61 2 9225 9241 • ABN 35 989 797 918



Education on water rights issues was provided to 525 women in 35 women's self help groups and they were motivated to take action. On World Water Day in 2004, 225 people gathered and passed a resolution to demand the government restore Panjan-thangi Kanmai, removing the encroachers who were using the land for growing coconut, silk cotton and other crops. When the government had not responded after one month, a one day fast was called. Eventually a member of the District Collector came and promised to reconstruct the kanmai. Following the momentum gained from this action, women's self help groups in two more villages demanded the restoration of their kanmais. However, these requests have only brought partial success. Community based organisations at the centre of these campaigns need to develop more skills in advocacy and public speaking. The campaigns also need more publicity.

The response to these needs was to construct a secure base from which to work and support local enterprise. An office for the Vaigai Women's Association, a project of Vasandham, has been built, in addition to a warehouse, toilet block and kitchen, thanks to support from QSA. The warehouse will store raw silk cotton, ensuring that the produce can be sold at a fair price according to the market not the season. This is seen as a step towards supporting local farmers and families as well as a move towards self sufficiency for the organisation as a whole.

This small contribution is given with a sense of pride and excitement at what a group of women can achieve and hope to achieve in the future. This is what International Women's Day is all about.

Australian Friend adopts QSA Notes

From now on, *QSA Notes*, a regular update from QSA, will appear in each edition of *The Australian Friend*. This will mean that more Friends will hear about our work, without busy, involved people receiving yet another newsletter by mail. We want to strengthen the communication between Australian Friends and QSA and we hope that this will be one way we can achieve it. We expect these two pages to include stories about our projects and the development issues that our partners face, as well as staff and program updates.

News of Friends in Kenya

Many Friends have been calling us to ask about the violence surrounding the December elections in Kenya. QSA does not have any projects in Kenya at the moment, but we are concerned about the situation. We have heard that Quakers in western province of Kenya held a Peace Conference on 24 – 27 January 2008 to discuss the way forward for Friends in the area. A call to the community and government for nonviolence was one of the outcomes of this gathering. They also discussed ways to assist those affected by the violence. If you would like to support this work, you could send funding to Friends United Meeting, Kenya, who bore the costs of the conference. <http://www.fum.org/contributions/index.html>

Aboriginal women have answers

Another group of women who 'have answers themselves' are the Women of

Balgo, a remote community in Western Australia. The Kapululangu Aboriginal Women's Association aims to establish an intergenerational cultural healing and education program in their community in an effort to protect, improve and enhance the lives of their Indigenous women and children in the region and address child sexual assault. The 'Teaching Culture: Healing People' project will support the Kapululangu elders to teach their cultural knowledge to their younger generations and to run a tjarrtjurra (women's healing) program for women, men, youth, children and babies. They will achieve this through culture classes, women's ceremonies, and culture camps. We look forward to updates as this project progresses.

Children's Meeting Resources

QSA staff Jasmine Payget and Aletia Dundas enjoyed spending a day with the children at Yearly Meeting 2008. Activities related to water and water security were very appropriate on the 40 degree day, and after the children had carried water back and forth from the 'village well' to their 'houses' they talked about what it means to not have enough water or to only have dirty drinking water. As a result of this day, QSA is developing fun and thought-provoking children's resources to share with every local children's meeting in Australia. These should be sent out in March or April. Please let us know if you find these resources helpful or if you have any suggestions for improvement.