

Ray of hope – Ramayees's story

Fishing had been the mainstay of Ramayee and her husband Kandeeban of the tiny coastal hamlet of Oyalikuppam in Kanchipuram District. The couple and their three children lived in a mud and limestone thatched house before that fateful day in December 2004 when giant waves of Tsunami washed away their home and virtually everything they owned including boats and fishing nets, leaving a trail of destruction and bleak future for survivors.

Like most women of the affected area, fish hawking had been the only trade known to Ramayee. Distraught and unable to come to terms with her loss after the disaster she, nevertheless, resolved to pick up the threads of life again. She joined the ILO's skills development training programme for incense stick production. This programme was a direct response to the livelihood challenges faced by the people hit by the calamity. The ILO initiated this intervention through its on-going "Women Workers' Education Project".

Ramayee was quick to pick up the new skill. Today she puts it to good use to enhance her household income. With fear slowly ebbing away from the minds of people struck by the disaster, fishing activity is again picking up in coastal villages. She engages in fish vending in the mornings and evenings, and in her spare time she rolls nearly 1500 incense sticks a day which gives her an additional income of about Rs. 40 every day. This ensures that her three children continue their education and the family has the means to rebuild their lives.

In addition to acquiring a new skill, Ramayee also understood the importance of being organized and being associated with a trade union. She enrolled with the Indian National Rural Labour Federation (INRLF), an ILO partner union, as a paying member. She has started reaping the benefits belonging to an organized group. The Union has helped her register with Tamilnadu State Governments' Welfare Board for the Unorganized Workers. She now has access to a variety of social security schemes of the Board. She received Rs.1000/ towards Education claims for her elder daughter, who completed her 10th standard and is now studying in 11th grade, which entitles Ramayee to another Education grant for her daughter.

She has also joined a micro credit saving scheme through the Self Help Group activity and saves 25 rupees per week. Encouraged by the benefits of her participation in group development activities, her husband has also

joined a Self Help group for men and saves 100 rupees every month. Together they are building a new life for themselves and a secure future for their children.