

**Viji Srinivasan was a founder member of the Federation of Homeworkers Worldwide. For many years, Viji worked with rural women and girls in the rural areas of Bihar and Jharkhand with Adithi, the organisation that she founded. From 2000 to 2005, when she died, Viji worked with Homeworkers Worldwide, coordinating the mapping programme in South Asia. She was an inspiration to thousands of women, not only in India but in many other parts of the world. We will never forget her!**

**In this interview, given to Zoran Majdin in March 2005, Viji talks about her own life and history more than she usually did in her many writings and speeches.**

*How long have you been doing this kind of work?*

Since 1962.

*What were you doing before?*

I was studying. I was doing everything, I was married and I had a child.

*What was your occupation?*

I had an MA in sociology. Then in London I studied community development and extension work.

*What were your motives in starting to do this kind work instead of building up another kind of career?*

When I was nine years old, that was the year of Indian independence, 1947. We were all young and much impressed with what Gandhi says, Nehru says, all that. Everybody said that once we are independent and not a British colony any more, there will not be any more poverty. So we all believed that and we learned songs about it. Important poets in Tamil had also written about this and we all believed that. When we grew up, we saw that it was not happening. It was not true any more. There was more poverty and politicians were worse than the British. The politicians are probably worse than the British although you can't really compare. That was what we all learned when we were nine years old. When we were grown up, we felt now we should do something. And the same about women.

I had no brothers. We were only two sisters. Luckily. Because I think if we had had brothers, my father and mother might have preferred brothers. But they did not. They brought us up well, gave us a good education. In other families, I saw women suffering, so I wanted to do something for women also.

*When did you start? How did you start concretely?*

I knew nothing about poverty, not much. I was looking for a job, an ordinary upper middle class job, looking to teach in a college or something. My brother-in-law said just outside Chennai there are people from Swallows, an organization from Sweden and Denmark, they are doing urban community development work and they are looking for a woman who speaks Tamil. You go and work there and then when you can find a job, you can go in six months or so. So I went and I was so happy that I stayed six years. That's how I got into it.

From 1962 to 1967 I stayed with Swallows.

I was very happy for two reasons. The women in spite of all their problems were so cheerful. Our problems are so much more sophisticated. But when they are like that and responding to us we feel like working with them. I was very happy. Also at that time we made batik and it was sold in Sweden and they got money. From that time came my interest in the crafts and all that so that was also very interesting. The Swedish and Danish people have a real sense of equality: they live equally and they have a real sense of all human beings are equal and how to build up democratic organisations from the ground, democracy on the ground.

I wrote about all my experiences in the newspaper in 1967 and then the principal of a college doing social work saw that and liked it very much and asked me to come and talk to their students for one hour. So I went and talked to the students. They liked it very much because that college was more theoretical and I was speaking from what I was doing. So then that same principal asked me if I would come and work there so I decided to because I felt I was getting too narrow an experience and I should get some broader experience. So I went and worked there from 1967 to 1972 and I did a lot of interesting field work projects for women. But the problem was that my best students would come to me and say of course I will come to work. But then they would come back and say that their husbands said they don't want them to work. My mother-in-law doesn't want me to work. So nobody dared go to the field. So I left in 1972 for that reason.

From 1972 to 1976, I worked in the Tamil Nadu Slum Clearance Board. That meant that they were clearing the shanty towns and building alternatives for the people. I worked very hard and we were also doing very good work.

I worked with the women. I was very happy. But you must understand that until 1975 whenever I talked about women no-one listened to me. It was only in the UN Year of Women in 1975, then people began to say 'Ah ha, what she is saying, there is something in it'. Then people began to believe me but not till then.

I left because of the Emergency. Indira Gandhi declared an Emergency in 76. So I left at that time because I did not want to work with the government. From 76, I worked for UNICEF in Madras up to 80. Then I worked with the Ford Foundation in Delhi where I was Women's Programme Officer. I was very very very happy.

### ***What kind of women's programmes?***

The government had a big dairy development scheme but all the co-operative members were men so we introduced many women's co-operatives. Women were doing the work, all the work. But when they put the milk in cans, the men carried it across to the co-operative and got the money. Many, many projects, I was very lucky. After that, I wanted to work in Bihar so I asked the Ford Foundation to support us. They gave us money and they supported us to come to Patna. So I came to Patna with my husband from 1988.

### ***Why Bihar?***

The Ford Foundation was in Delhi. Before I was 9 years old, I was in Bihar and there was so much poverty at that time. The girls who came to school with me would say I didn't have

breakfast, I didn't have lunch. People fell dead on the streets. There was famine. So I wanted to work in Bihar from when I was seven or eight

***Can it be said generally that you are fighting for women's rights and for them to get out of poverty? . How can you describe your work in Bihar? Is Bihar poorer as a state when we are ranking the states in India?***

The poorest. We work with more than 100,000 women and girl children, eight kinds of women: homebased workers, street vendors, traditional crafts women, tribal women, women with savings and credit, adolescent girls, traditional fisherwomen and sharecroppers. Then we added four more: women in panchayati raj – women elected to the panchayat; women troubled by reproductive health and children in difficult circumstances included sex workers' children as well as trafficked children. And the last was girls troubled by having very early childbirth at 15 years old or so.

***How can you in short describe the success of your work here?***

We don't go anywhere near politicians. I never met one and I never invited one to a function. We never saw a Chief Minister or an MLA, MP. Nothing. We have nothing to do with politicians. We do contact people in the government, individual bureaucrats who help us. As a system nobody helps. But individual bureaucrats help.

First of all poor women responded. They said this is our only opportunity to do something for ourselves and our children. Men in the beginning were against us. But slowly when they saw that the women were investing in their children with the money they were able to earn, they came round. What rights they got they were only giving to their children. So the men supported them. But the rich men still don't support us. But now we are strong. The Chief Secretary knows our work. We are successful in our work, top bureaucrats know our work and now no-one can harm us. The poor will support us. This is all I think.

***Does that influence through bureaucrats, is that only on local or state level or do you have approach to central government?*** Both.

***How much you are satisfied with that kind of support?***

Individuals have helped. I am satisfied. But not as a system. For example, one bureaucrat granted the lease of a big pond to one hundred women. That was a government-owned pond leased to the traditional fisherwomen. Then other bureaucrats also began granting leases to women. But then when the women began to demand that fifty percent of the ponds in Bihar should be allotted to women, then no-one gave them. To this day no-one did.

***Would you like to add anything?***

NGOs by themselves cannot change poverty. We are too small. At the most I reach one lakh, one hundred thousand women. Even if you put together all the NGOs, they would only reach 2% of the country, at most 3% or 4% of the country's population. So if at all there has to be a solution to poverty, the government must do something. So I would like Adithi and all the other organizations in the Federation of Homeworkers Worldwide to come together to talk to our government

