

# WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT PRINCIPLES

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2021 UN Women  
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Regional Awardee Profile



Lionel Desclée  
CEO

Winner

## The Very Group

### The Very Group

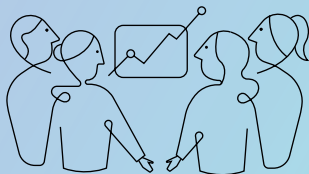
**Country:** United Kingdom (HQ)

**Employees:** 1001 – 5000  
employees

**Industry:** Online Retail

#### Website

[www.theverygroup.com](http://www.theverygroup.com)



### About the Company

*The Very Group, which operates digital retailer Very, combines over 2,000 big brands with flexible payment options to help families in the UK and Ireland get more out of life. They also strive to create positive impact across their supply chain in the communities where they operate, including Tamil Nadu in India.*

### Leading Systemic Change in Tamil Nadu

The Very Group estimates that more than 20,000 young girls between the ages of 12 to 25 are employed as temporary labourers in the textile industry in Tamil Nadu, India. To meet marriage expenses, commonly in the form of a dowry, families often seek jobs for their daughters in order to generate the extra income needed. Many textile companies in the area see this as an opportunity to attract girls from rural areas in a scheme called 'sumangali thittam', the wedding scheme. Employers at the factories are often known to the potential female employee (e.g., a relative, friend, community member), thereby making it easier to convince the family to send their daughter to work. This scheme commonly results in a form of forced labour, where the condition of girls following their work in the scheme can be poor. Health problems can occur, leading to most of the income earned through employment being spent on healthcare. The vulnerability of families also becomes much higher with debt bondage, no alternatives for the girls, no alternative livelihoods for the family, and added psychological pressures on parents.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> <https://freedomfund.org/wp-content/uploads/Addressing-modern-slavery-in-Tamil-Nadu-Textile-Industry-26Feb15.pdf>;

<https://in.apparelresources.com/business-news/sustainability/serious-allegations-tamil-nadu-textile-industry-high-time-change-even-report-makers/>



Access to remedy is key to addressing and providing support to girls and families impacted by poor labour practices. The Very Group seeks to ensure that workers are given a platform to file labour violations and that the parties involved (e.g., textile companies) are held accountable for their actions and required to provide financial and/or non-financial compensation for grievances. The Very Group's TIMBY app accomplishes this by encouraging current and former workers in the textile industry to raise employment related grievances on the easy-to-use digital platform. TIMBY's impact is far reaching: 364 people across Tamil Nadu have used TIMBY to date and a total of 250 grievances have been received with 75 resolved and 37 in progress.

TIMBY is a part of The Very Group's South Indian Textile Mill project, launched in the second year of the program's operation in 2020 with the goal of addressing issues of forced labour and gender discrimination in the Tamil Nadu textile industry. The Very Group has rolled out the project across five main districts of Tamil Nadu - Pullur, Tirupur, Arungal, Thenmudiyanur and Ayyampalaym - where approximately 23,000 people have been impacted so far. Objectives of the project include building awareness of workers' rights, implementation of ethical employment practices, establishing a grievance redressal mechanism to give workers a voice, and providing access to remedy. To carry out these actions, The Very Group proactively engages with factories, mills, workers, and factory-employed labour brokers to lead change.

Through this project, The Very Group actively promotes ethical recruitment to the labour brokers, who act as the primary intermediaries between factories and local families, as a key method in preventing the exploitation of vulnerable women. Additionally, beneficiaries of the project, including new workers, parents, and community members have received training and awareness on pre-employment knowledge and labour rights. Several welfare activities have also been deployed through the project including health camps for girls, computer and financial literacy training, and counselling for workers and their families.

## Overcoming Challenges through Community Engagement & Partnerships

The South Indian Textile Mill project runs in partnership with two international retail brands: NEXT and the Varner Group. The Very Group's implementation partner, SAVE, is a local NGO based in Tirupur that carries out programs to uplift socio-economically poor and marginalized communities. SAVE's strong focus and existing capacity on eliminating child labour, empowering women and youth, and promoting fair labour practices has enabled The Very Group to overcome challenges in their program implementation.

Wanting to ensure that people beyond their own supply chain workforce could benefit, The Very Group decided to provide access to TIMBY through community centers, meaning that workers from any factory or mill could utilize the app. One of the biggest challenges faced in the implementation phase was the initial lack of required support from industry associations in dealing with grievances received from workers which were not directly part of The Very Group's supply chain. To overcome this, SAVE reached out to industry associations like TEA (Tirupur Export Association), TASMA (Tamil Nadu Spinning Mill Association), and SIMA (South India Mills Association) requesting their participation in the program. The spinning mills and factories are The Very Group suppliers and also members of these associations, which allows them to facilitate the process of grievances.



Access to technology was an additional challenge faced in the implementation of the project. With limited access to smartphones and restrictions on phone usage at work, many workers found the app inaccessible. To overcome this challenge, The Very Group's resource managers reached out to community members across Tamil Nadu who were unable to access the app, individually spoke to them about their problems, and logged them into the TIMBY app on behalf of the person. In doing so, workers who have limited access to smartphones are still able to raise their grievances. Workers and their families who have improved access to technology can use the app directly and are able to access the platform whether they are at work or at home, as well as through the community centers. The Very Group is working on a new launch of TIMBY that integrates WhatsApp, making it even easier for workers to use the app.

## Results and Sustainability

The Very Group has made great strides towards eliminating child labour among young girls and uplifting communities in Tamil Nadu by empowering women through fair labour practices. In Phase one of the South Indian Textile Mill project launched in 2019, The Very Group successfully reached 8,500 people through their programming, including 950 workers trained in employment knowledge and labour rights. In Phase two launched in 2020, 2,476 people were trained in labour right pre-employment, 1,748 women received financial literacy training, and 1,073 adolescent girls received awareness on menstrual hygiene.

Key metrics used by The Very Group to measure the success of the program include the reduction in school dropouts, successful remediation of grievances, engagement of the industry associations, and the adoption of fair recruitment practices by employers. To sustain their project, The Very Group will continue to collect and analyze data on key metrics through future phases, with the aim of creating systemic change by protecting and empowering women, girls, and communities through collaboration and education.

## Women's Empowerment Principles



High-Level Corporate Leadership



Treat all Women and Men Fairly at Work without Discrimination



Employee Health, Well-Being and Safety



Education and Training for Career Advancement




Enterprise Development, Supply Chain and Marketing Practices




Community Initiatives and Advocacy



Measurement and Reporting

 [asiapacificwepsawards.org](http://asiapacificwepsawards.org)

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