When Daughters Discover Their Voice, a Mother Finds New Possibilities

The story of Dharani, Soornadevi and their mother in Keelaeral



Mother and Daughters sharing a Exciting Moment

A world of expectations

In Keelaeral, Dharani and Soornadevi grew up surrounded by familiar expectations about girls and their futures. People advised their parents to prepare them for marriage, questioned the need for too much education and discouraged them from sending the girls outside the village. Their mother valued her relationships in the community and found it difficult to ignore what others might say. Yet she also knew what it meant to have limited choices. She had been unable to continue her own education for want of money, opportunities and guidance, and she did not want her daughters to face the same limitations.

In 2019, CEDAR opened a Children's Resource Centre (CRC) in Keelaeral, with Selvi and Sangeetha as facilitators. Soornadevi, then about ten, visited expecting an ordinary tuition centre. Instead, she found children drawing, using crayons and creating from their own ideas. Excited, she told her elder sister Dharani, then about thirteen. She too joined her. Over the next five years, the sisters drew, played, read newspapers, told stories and took part in the Children's Collective. At the CRC, they were encouraged to explore, make mistakes and try again. Gradually, they began to discover what they could do.

Daughters finding their voices



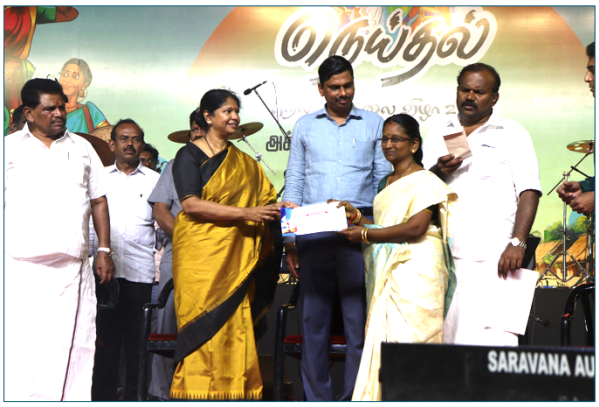
Dharani Learning Photography

For Dharani, an important change was learning to speak before others without fear. The Children's Collective gave her opportunities to share ideas, work with her peers and take responsibility. She went on to explore music and filmmaking, writing lyrics and singing for a children's music video. Soornadevi, who had enjoyed drawing, found another way to express herself through Some photography activities required Soornadevi to travel outside the village.

Her mother was hesitant: the opportunities were unfamiliar, and she worried about community reaction. Eventually she agreed, though not without reservations. Then, in 2024, Soornadevi's photograph won an award at the Tamil Nadt government Neithal Festival. Her mother travelled to receive it on her daughter's behalf from Member of Parliament Kanimozhi Karunanidhi.

The occasion filled her with pride. The activity she had hesitated to permit had enabled her daughter to create something that others valued. The award did not erase her anxieties overnight, but it helped her see Soornadevi's ability—and the possibilities before her—in a new light. Dharani's growing confidence and creative work, too, showed her mother what her daughters could accomplish when given opportunities to explore.

Another experience drew the mother herself into public action. Through CEDAR's Green Action project, children in Keelaeral photographed and documented a polluted culvert, organised an exhibition in the village and took their concern forward through a petition to the District Collector. The issue was sensitive for their mother because some people she knew were connected with the circumstances surrounding the pollution.



A Proud Moment for Mother: Mother receiving award on behalf of Daughter

Although interested in the project, she feared that taking a public position might affect her relationships. When the petition was submitted, she nevertheless stepped forward and contributed. She was still afraid, but she was happy that she had participated.

A mother's trust, two different futures

The family's outlook changed gradually, through the sisters' years at the CRC, their creative achievements, their mother's engagement with CEDAR and her own experience of community action. Today, Dharani is in her first year of college, continues to pursue a part-time filmmaking

course with CEDAR and hopes to become an Indian Administrative Service officer. College staff approach her when creative work needs to be done. “If anyone gives me a task,” she says, “I will take a lot of responsibility and make sure the work is done perfectly.”

Soornadevi, who secured second rank in her school’s Secondary School Leaving Certificate Examination (SSLC), wants to explore computers and technology after higher secondary education. She hopes to decide her future for herself when she is ready. Their ambitions differ, but their mother increasingly supports each daughter’s freedom to choose. “What they want to study, they study. What they want to become, they become,” she says. Reflecting on the education she herself could not continue, she adds: “Now they have these opportunities. The only things they need are trust and freedom.”

Dharani and Soornadevi’s story shows how children’s creative development can reach beyond the child. As the sisters found their voices and their abilities became visible, their mother began to reconsider the limits that social expectations had placed on their futures. Her journey, like theirs, continues; but she is now more willing to trust her daughters to discover what they want to become.