

## The story of Shweta

The following is an extract written by Open Doors (OD) partner Sarah after she visits a tailoring centre established in South India by Open Doors partners.

This small sewing centre offers a glimmer of hope for many Christian women who live their lives in utmost poverty and oppression. During the visit, the writer was able to connect with an incredible woman called Shweta who shared her story, as she described her victory over extreme persecution. Shweta also explained how her training at the Sewing Centre has empowered her life and made her stronger.

As I enter a long room with many windows, I see a group of ladies seated on the floor. Some of them are cutting material and a few are sewing papers together. There are small pieces of fabric scattered across the floor. This is the scene in a tailoring centre in one of the most remote villages in South India.

Open Doors partners in the area are passionate about empowering women within the community with a tailoring skills development initiative; most of the attendees are secret believers. *"The centre was closed for several months due to Covid-19 but reopened 4-5 months ago. We now have about ten women coming regularly to the centre."* mentions the local OD partner \*David who coordinates and runs the centre. He shares with us how it all started.

*"I was so burdened in my heart when I saw many Christian women in my locality struggling to fend for their families as their husbands were not earning enough. Most of them were illiterate and had no option of acquiring a respectable job anywhere other than daily wage labour. Since several of these ladies were secret believers, I approached OD partners who helped me set up this centre for them. At this tailoring centre, we provide them with detailed tailoring training. When they complete the course, most of them are capable of functioning as a full-time tailor. Shweta was one lady whose life was impacted, through this centre."* David continues, *"It was last year that I had the privilege of knowing sister Shweta; she was a lady from another church in a nearby locality. She also introduced several ladies from her community who were believers and wanted to learn tailoring."*

### Shweta's story

Shweta, a beautiful lady with expressive eyes, was a persecution victim herself. Her resilience and faith in Jesus enabled her to overcome her difficulties and emerge as a female leader in her church. With the new tailoring skills that she has acquired, she is further empowered. David helped me to find an ideal opportunity to meet Shweta in person and to hear her story.

Shweta recounts, *"I belonged to a Christian family, but I got married to a person from a staunch Hindu family. I was humiliated every day because of my faith. My mother-in-law scolded me for petty things, and physically abused me a lot. The abuse grew day by day. Sometimes I would go to my mother's house to have some relief from the verbal and physical torment. I tried to put up with my struggles as I loved my husband and wanted to stay with him. Then one day, I was having fever. My mother-in-law got to know about my sickness, and she said it was because of the bad omen brought in by my Christian faith. She said she would have to call a sorcerer who would do some ritual to free me from this bad omen. Before I could even refuse, a sorcerer was summoned, and a ceremony was initiated. I was made to sit in the centre of the room. As the ceremony ended, my mother-in-law and other ladies from the family started slapping me and hitting me for no reason. They said they wanted to remove the unclean spirit from me."*

As she wipes away a tear, Shweta continues, *"That day was so traumatizing, I do not even want to recall that moment. I was already having a fever and the ladies kept on showering kicks and blows on me. They even used shoes and sandals to beat me. My eldest child was a little baby at that time, and she was lying on the floor next to me. I do not remember when I fainted, I woke up after several hours and when I opened my eyes I was in a hospital."*

#### The rescue and overcoming the trauma

It was Shweta's mother who came to her rescue. Someone had called her anonymously and informed her of the horrible incident that took place in Shweta's in-law's house, however it took 4 hours for her to reach the place. *"When my mom arrived to help me, I was unconscious and bleeding profusely from my forehead,"* said Shweta as she showed me the scar on her head which is still visible from the time of the incident. *"I still shudder at the thought that my baby was near me, and that she could have been hurt, but God has protected her. My mother also told me that my baby had not been fed for several hours, until she arrived."* Her voice grows softer, *"How heartless those women from my husband's family must be to have left my little baby unattended for hours."*

It took several months for Shweta to heal physically and spiritually, but her mental healing took longer. *"I had constant headaches and sometimes lost my senses and behaved erratically. The pastor's family visited and counselled me regularly. It took me over a year to be able to think clearly and move on from the incident. I read the Bible more and prayed more and soon God was delivering me and strengthening me."*

#### Societal pressure to go back

*"After I became better, my husband came back to take me; this time he promised me that he would protect me. I turned him down twice, but the third time, I felt I should agree. Also, in India, once you get married, society considers that you belong to your in-law's family. Hence, I had some societal pressure to go back. I was fearful within, but this time, my faith in God had been reinstated."*

Shweta's husband prepared a small hut near his parent's house and settled there with Shweta. Shweta was able to gradually grow with the Lord and forgive her in-laws. She shares, *"It was difficult to forgive, these were the people who had almost killed me! But I eventually grew to forgive them. I was able to show my love through my small acts of help repeatedly as my in-laws were elderly. They saw my attitude and were influenced. Now, about 5 years later, they talk to me nicely and often call me to their house. They acknowledge that they treated me wrongly in the past. They also ask me to pray for them when they are unwell."*

#### Why the sewing centre is a blessing

Shweta shares with us about the sewing centre, *"I am so glad that I had an opportunity to gain experience in tailoring here. I am almost through with the course, and I know how to stitch clothes now. I have started taking stitching orders and it helps me earn more and support my family."* Shweta's tailoring skills are helping her to become financially empowered. She proudly shares, *"It is all His blessings, because of my earning, I can put my children in a better school. They are doing very well with their studies, and I am so sure they will have a good future."*

#### A tailoring centre that is life changing

There are several other women like Shweta who have been able to attain tailoring skills and consequently have been enabled to earn good incomes. David shares happily, *"I never knew that an initiative as small as a tailoring centre could change lives forever. I only wanted to do something for*

*these ladies who are held back in society. They have so many factors of persecution – firstly they are financially poor, secondly, they are women (women are considered second class citizens in our society), and thirdly they choose Christian faith. I am so glad that this tailoring centre has enabled women to enhance their financial status. Not only this, but the centre is also a common place for persecuted Christian women from the nearby different localities to come together, to pray and learn from the Word before they start the training every day.”*