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December 1, 2016

## Friends of Kalangarai

A Non-profit Organization that Supports the Human Rights of Widows in India

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### Upcoming Events

#### Friends of Kalangarai Fund-raising Event

Hosts: Jane O'Rourke &  
Ursula Matulonis

2045 Massachusetts Ave  
Lexington, MA 02421

Thurs, Dec. 8, 2016

7:00-9:00 pm

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## Reflections on International Widows Day

Karen Kayser

Since 2010, International Widows Day has been celebrated worldwide on June 23<sup>rd</sup>. It is a day that we focus on raising the awareness of the plight of widowed women and their children who are suffering from poverty, social injustice, sexual exploitation, and social isolation due to their gender and marital status.

Widows in India are particularly vulnerable to age-old beliefs and customs that women who lose their husbands are inauspicious, impure, and bad luck. When widowed, they are prohibited from wearing any adornments (bindi, jewelry, flowers in hair) and nice clothing. Also, the widows are reluctant to leave their homes due to shame and mistreatment. Excluded by society, they are denied basic human rights to employment, safe housing, and healthcare. They are sexually exploited due to their status of not belonging to a man. Likewise, their children are discriminated against and bullied by peers. Child labor is common among widow-headed families since the income from a child's work is needed to support the family.

This summer I had the privilege to participate in the Widows Movement in South India and celebrate International Widows Day. I marched with 640 widows who carried signs and banners with demands for social justice throughout the streets of Nagapattinam, India. With two trucks carrying loud speakers, they were able to shout their demands for the government to overturn unjust policies against widows. After marching for more than a mile through the city, we assembled at a large hall where we listened to empowering speeches from leaders of women's organizations and the widows themselves. I watched the women dancing, singing, and performing dramas. I rejoiced

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with their new-found voices and strength; I was sad for the society that still allows the oppression of these women.

The Widows Movement inspires us with the message of hope, justice, and compassion. Their resistance to old customs, and their hard work and tenacity to fight for human rights and a better world for their children are examples to all of us that discrimination based on gender should not be tolerated anywhere in the world. The non-profit organization *Kalangarai* (which means "lighthouse" in English) continues to be a guiding beacon of hope to widowed women. Starting with micro-credit self-help groups, *Kalangarai* provided small loans to the widows to start their own businesses, send their children to school, or pay off debts.

Empowering vulnerable women to become self-sufficient and to meet their basic human needs for self-respect and dignity begins at the individual level. It can begin by giving a woman a small loan or a job or a skill that enables her to maintain a livelihood and support her family. As the women meet and support each other through self-help groups, they are also able to make change in the communities and ultimately, create a brighter future for their children.

### **Thank you for your support**

Proceeds from our fund-raiser last June supported five nursing students with tuition and housing so that they could attend St. Joseph's College in Nagapattinam. This college was established by *Kalangarai* to provide young men and women with training in computers (desktop publishing/graphics), small appliance repair, and nursing. Many of the students of this college are children of the widowed women who participate in the programs of *Kalangarai*. When we visited them in the summer, they were taking their exams for certification in nurse assistant and finishing their practica. They all had jobs waiting for them upon graduation.



**Students of St. Joseph's College**



Photo: Students in white dresses are in the nursing assistant program.

***Friends of Kalangarai is a U.S.A. non-profit that supports the programs of Kalangarai through fund-raising, education, and research. We are a 501(c)3 charitable organization. Please consider sending a donation to:***

***Friends of Kalangarai, P.O. Box 5366 Louisville, KY 40255***

***To learn more about the programs, visit [www.kalangarai-india.org](http://www.kalangarai-india.org)***