



A Holiday to Raise Awareness and a Call for Action **Karen Kayser**

“International Widows Day” is a United Nations ratified holiday that occurs annually on June 23rd. It is a little-known holiday, and **its purpose is to raise awareness of the experiences of widows globally and to stimulate action in support of their basic human rights**. Worldwide there are 258 million widows. Many widows around the world face significant hardships after the loss of their spouses, discrimination, poverty, and social isolation. India is the country with the largest number of widows with an estimated 46 million. **This holiday recognizes not only the widows’ plight but is a call for action for stronger legal protections and social support systems to ensure that widows everywhere can live with dignity and security.**

With the help of Kalangarai and other women-rights groups in the state of Tamil Nadu, India, the Kalangarai participants have been advocating for their rights by supporting bills and policies. Lobbying with the State legislature, government, and other key decision-makers, they influence the enactment of legislation to protect and promote the rights and entitlements of widows. A new legislative bill aims to protect widows from discrimination and violence and ensure social security (a small pension). Kalangarai also advocates for policy changes to make welfare compensations and programs more accessible for widows. These are major steps to promoting gender equality and supporting widows who are struggling with the economic and social challenges of widowhood.

In celebration of International Widows Day, Friends of Kalangarai will be raising funds to support widows’ daughters’ education. Scholarships will enable their daughters to attend college and eventually acquire jobs with sustainable incomes. Won’t you please help us to continue our support of programs to ensure that widows and their children can live with dignity and security?

The Journey of Mrs. Kasthuri: From Tragedy to Empowerment

I am Mrs. Kasthuri, a 53-year-old woman who participates in the Kalangarai programs. Life was once simple and joyful—my husband ran a small petty shop in our village, and we were raising our three young children with love and hope. But in 2006, everything changed. My husband was diagnosed with leukemia. **Despite borrowing money from a moneylender to pay for his treatment, he passed away, leaving me a widow at the age of 35 with a 12-year-old son and two daughters, aged 9 and 7.** Along with grief, I faced debt, despair, and uncertainty.



Mrs. Kasthuri speaking on International Widows’ Day

But I made a firm decision—I would not let tragedy define our future. To support my family, I took up tailoring and continued running the petty shop. Despite social stigma and false accusations about my character from my brother-in-law who tried to close the shop, I stood strong. I was determined to raise my children with dignity and give them the education they deserved.

In 2011, I secured a temporary position as an attendant at a government hospital near my village, which helped me raise my children as a single mother. The following year, I joined a Self-Help Group (SHG) in my village, facilitated by Kalangarai. This group became a source of strength—both financially and emotionally. **Through Kalangarai and the SHG, I found sisterhood, a platform to save money, and a renewed sense of purpose.** Empowered by this network, I began mobilizing other women in neighboring villages. In 2019, I organized a successful campaign to remove a liquor shop from our village, uniting women against a common issue.

Recognizing my commitment and leadership, widows from my SHG zone elected me to the General Body of the Widows' Livelihood Rights Movement. A year later, I became an Executive Member, and in 2021, I was elected President of the Movement.

Kalangarai played a vital role in developing my leadership skills—training me to organize public meetings, mobilize women, speak confidently, and challenge long-standing social taboos. As a single woman, I proudly wear a bindi, flowers, and participate in auspicious events, defying societal norms that seek to silence widows. These acts are now symbols of my boldness and resistance.

Since 2021, I have taken a leading role—supported by the General Body members of the Movement and Kalangarai—in organizing International Women's Day and Widows' Day events and working with government departments and police officials to ensure safety, rights, and recognition for widows.

In 2024, I led our members to the District Collectorate of Nagapattinam, demanding justice for a widow who was sexually abused. Our movement secured a meeting with the District Collector, who promised necessary medical support and livelihood assistance.

Today, my dream is clear: Widows in Tamil Nadu must live with dignity, respect, and recognition. I believe deeply in the power of our Widows Movement and the Widows' Federation of Tamil Nadu to empower women and advocate for our rights. Together, we are rewriting the narrative of widowhood—from silence and sorrow to strength and solidarity.

Reflections from Friends who visited Kalangarai – January, 2025



Karen Wilbur meets the resilient women of Kalangarai's Widow program

Two main things stand out for me as I reflect on our trip to visit Kalangarai in Tamil Nadu, India. The first is the joyfulness and exuberance of the widows we were lucky enough to meet. Their sense of community and their ability to provide support to one another is obvious and contagious. It was exhilarating to be among them and to hear their stories. The second is the astounding ability of Jesuit Fathers Kulandai, Richard and Francis to strategize and move the needs of the widows and their children, widows and their children, many of whom are young adults, to the forefront of local and governmental thinking. Step by step, they have built a case for the needed support, always in the most gracious and intelligent way. From small projects like assembling Tulsi seed balls which provides incomes for the women and a gift to the environment, to the creation of the community college, to lobbying the central government on behalf of the more than 46 million Indian widows, their expansive and deliberate thinking is breathtaking. The work of Kalangarai deserves as much support as we can gather. A little goes a long way, the need is great and the results are mighty.

Karen Wilbur
Advisory Board Member
Dallas, TX



Pamela visits the brave women transforming lives at Kalangarai

I visited India in January with the Friends of Kalangarai. As a social worker there was much to appreciate, as Karen Kayser planned the trip to enable us to visit the widows and their self-help groups, multiple schools, a hospital and cultural attractions along the way—a social worker's dream come true! We weren't disappointed!

In retrospect, I am very grateful for the experience, as it certainly changed my perception of India, especially southern India where we traveled. We were greeted by curiosity and smiles, music and dancing, ceremony and hospitality, thousand-year-old temples and interesting driving choices, but also extreme poverty and beaches littered with trash. Living for a week at Kalangari headquarters, a spartan facility, hosted by the Jesuits who administer the programs enabled us to get a first-hand view of all the incredible work that the staff is doing to support the widows. But mostly I left with a desire to continue to do what I can to help improve the lives of the widows of Kalangarai whose faces and courageous spirit are now engraved upon my heart.

Pamela Lowell
Therapist, Author,
Friends of Kalangarai's Supporter
Dartmouth, MA

New Bedford Film Festival: Screening of "Women of Truth and Courage"



Thanks to all of you who came out to support the screening of our documentary at the New Bedford Film Festival. Friends hosted a brunch prior to the screening and Festival organizers moderated a discussion between the audience and filmmakers after the screening. Festival publicity about the film included appearances on the WCAI Public Radio program "The Point" and the local Community TV Show "SouthCoast Matters," and an article in "The New Bedford Light." Links to these interviews can be found in our website's [*"In the Media" page*](#).



Warli Tribal Paintings: In Harmony with Nature



The art gallery at 134 Collaborative in Providence hosted our exhibit of Warli Tribal Paintings during the month of April. The theme, "In Harmony with Nature," reflects the paintings' depiction of the tribe's relationship with nature throughout their daily activities and celebrations of life. The Exhibit's reception occurred on the evening of the monthly Providence Gallery Walk and sought to bring awareness to our work with Kalangarai.

Coming Events

Friends of Kalangarai Book Group

Friday, June 13, 2025

4:00 pm-5:00 pm

The Magnificent Ruins by Nayantara Roy.

Join us in person or by Zoom.

In Person: Friends of Kalangarai, 227 Union Street, Ste 707, New Bedford, MA 02740

For more information and to register:

<https://kalangarai-india.org/events>



REGISTER HERE



We are grateful to our volunteers who helped with the Film Festival and the Warli Tribal Paintings Exhibit:

Sarah Beston
Ashwini Biradar
Bonnie Cooper
SriLakshmi Gandham
Barbara Honthumb
Cathy Ivanoski

Pamela Lowell
Alissa Souza Nadeau
Soma Koganti
Sarah Sandford
Kerry Staniunas
Deborah Weinstein

Welcome New Intern!

Ashwini Biradar

Ashwini is a Master's student in Computer Science at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth. Alongside her technical background in software engineering, she has been actively involved in nonprofit work—most notably volunteering in rural India to support housing and community development. Ashwini is passionate about combining technology with purpose and is eager to contribute her skills to support Kalangarai's mission and expand its reach.

YOUR IMPACT

Thank you to all who have contributed to our mission. With your generous gifts of time and donations, we have been able to sustain our organizational activities, provide grants to support the livelihoods of widows and their children, and meet our program goals of providing educational content on gender equity, economic development, and sustainability in South India.

Celebrate International Widows Day with a donation!!

DONATE Now and Make 2X the impact with a Matched Gift, ONLINE AT: <https://kalangarai-india.org/donate/>

OR

Send a check to:
Friends of Kalangarai

P.O. Box 8755
New Bedford, MA 02742

