THE SELF-EMPLOYED WOMEN’S ASSOCIATION (SEWA)

I. Abstract

SEWA is the acronym for the Self-Employed Women’s Association, based in Ahmedabad, India. In Hindi (an Indian language), sewa means “service.” The association, working as a cooperative union, holds the belief that women need organizing, not welfare.

The members are poor women working in the informal sector as daily wage workers or running small businesses. This sector represents 94 percent of the Indian workforce. Unlike localized one-issue movements, SEWA tackles a multitude of problems surrounding the working and living conditions of self-employed women by offering services such as banking, insurance, housing loans, training, health care (including childcare), and legal aid. Primarily operating in the Indian state of Gujarat, SEWA functions through 85 cooperatives that work toward economic and social empowerment for poor women.

SEWA Bank, providing an integrated set of services to its members, had 130,400 women account holders depositing Rs 454.3 million in the year 2002. SEWA operated 60 health care centers, through which curative care has been provided to 43,000 women until 2002. In the last ten years, 11,000 women received Rs 15 million in claims under the insurance program offered by SEWA in collaboration with national insurance companies. With its present membership at half a million, SEWA’s associations and campaigns aim to protect the interests of women working as vegetable vendors, home-based workers, construction workers, and so forth. These efforts have been instrumental in enhancing the lives of these women, and in some cases also have brought about policy changes at the national and international levels.

II. Background

SEWA was established formally in 1972, as a trade union, by Ela Bhatt, a labor organizer and a lawyer. Prior to SEWA’s formation, the women’s wing of the Textile Labor Association in Ahmedabad (in Gujarat) took up the cause of women belonging to the households of mill workers by teaching them skills such as sewing, knitting, embroidery, and spinning. In 1970, the women’s movement took a new and radical turn. In a survey conducted by the women’s wing, it was found that self-employed women had insecure employment and earned much less than workers in the organized sector. They also lacked adequate support during difficult times. The need to organize these women to avail themselves of opportunities in all spheres of life was recognized. SEWA was born in December 1971, and after a long official battle SEWA was registered as a trade union in April 1972.

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1 This case study was prepared by a team comprising Prof. Deepti Bhatnagar and Ankita Dewan at the Indian Institute of Management (Ahmedabad) and Magüi Moreno Torres and Parameeta Kanungo at the World Bank (Washington DC).

Today SEWA is a well-known name among the poor, self-employed women in the State of Gujarat. Although the majority of its operations are based in Gujarat, it also operates in other Indian states, such as Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Kerala, Bihar, and Delhi. Three groups of women form the basis of its membership: home-based workers, street vendors, and contract laborers. Any self-employed woman in India can become a member of SEWA by paying a membership fee of 5 rupees per year. According to the latest data available, SEWA’s current membership figure is 530,000. The members of each trade elect their representatives in the ratio of 1 representative per 100 members, once every three years. These representatives then form the Trade Council (Pratinidhi Mandal). In turn, the members of the Trade Council elect the highest decision-making body, the 25-member Executive Committee. Four committed and experienced SEWA organizers are also elected to the Executive Committee. This body represents the major trades and occupations of SEWA members.

In pursuit of its two stated goals—the full employment and self-reliance of its members—SEWA organizes these women to obtain better employment, bargain for higher wages, and avail themselves of a range of services. The association functions through 85 cooperatives, federations, and campaigns that assist women working as artisans, milk vendors, vegetable vendors, gum collectors, quarry workers, paper pickers, salt producers, small and marginal farmers and landless agrarian workers, and health workers. The members gain access to social services and benefits in the form of health care, childcare, savings accounts, and insurance.

III. Impact/Results

Cooperatives and Campaigns

The women are part of various cooperatives in fields such as artisan work, dairy, trading and vending, services and labor, and land-based cooperatives. Cooperatives have given women an opportunity to gain control over their own resources, as they can directly link their produce to the final consumer, eliminating the exploitative channels of middlemen, contractors, and merchants. The negotiating power of SEWA members has increased, leading to improvements in the stability of employment and in wages. Incidents of domestic violence against women have diminished due to the fact that they contribute to the family income. Perhaps more importantly, cooperative activities have encouraged women to step out of their houses, exchange views, and take independent decisions.

In order to tackle important issues facing its members, such as recognition for their economic contribution, accessibility of local water sources, or the need for skills upgrading and capacity building, SEWA has initiated many campaigns. Examples include the Home-Based Workers campaign, the Water Campaign, the Street Vendors Campaign, and the Construction Workers campaign.

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**Financial Support**

SEWA Bank provides an integrated set of banking services to its members. These services include savings and fixed-deposit accounts, credit facilities, integrated insurance services, and technical and management assistance in trade.

The Bank has established a relationship of trust by providing services designed for the life-cycle financial needs of poor women. Illiterate, vulnerable women, once dependent on exploitative moneylenders, now deal with formal banking procedures and exercise control over their income. Encouraging women to participate fully in banking activities has been an important contribution of the Bank. Saving and investing on a continuous basis has resulted in an upgrading of women’s skills and of their ownership of productive assets.

In October 2002, SEWA bank launched its new Pension Scheme, with the aim of providing a secure income for women once they retire from work. In the first 10 days, 35 new accounts were opened. The 5,000 accounts that existed under the old scheme account for a corpus of more than Rs 7.5 million.3

In addition to finance-linked supportive services, SEWA Bank operates through savings and credit groups in rural areas. Currently, 200 such groups are active in 8 districts of Gujarat. The table below outlines the banking activities of women in the year 2002.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activities</th>
<th>No. of Women</th>
<th>Amount (in 100,000 rupees)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Savings accounts</td>
<td>130,368</td>
<td>4543.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loans</td>
<td>44,187</td>
<td>1143.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share capital</td>
<td>32,385</td>
<td>130.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total working capital</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>6683.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surplus</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>566.45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Shri Mahila SEWA Sahakari Bank Limited, Ahmedabad (Gujarat).*

**Insurance Facilities**

SEWA insurance facilities provide essential economic support to women in times of illness, widowhood, accident, fire, communal riots, floods, and other natural and manmade calamities. Emphasis is laid on education and increasing awareness among the community about the concept of insurance. The program operates as a cooperative, with members managing the services and promoting coverage. The members also make decisions on claims, disbursement practices, premiums, and policies. Operating since 1992 in collaboration with national insurance companies, SEWA insurance facilities have paid out about Rs 15 million in claims to 11,000 women.

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**SEWA’s Housing Trust**

Most poor women, especially in rural areas, live in mud and thatch houses, easily damaged by natural calamities. Shri Mahila SEWA Housing Trust has served the housing needs of poor women since 1994 by providing technical and financial services. The trust, working in close coordination with the Government of Gujarat, has constructed more than 365 *pacca* (permanent) houses in three districts of Gujarat.

1. **Training Facilities**

The SEWA Academy provides skills and knowledge training through eleven courses, including leadership training, conversation training, worker training, and research training. SEWA’s training programs have grown extensively, as has internal staff capacity. The SEWA Academy functions as a members’ “university” and provides most of the members with their first introduction to a formal learning environment.

2. **Health Care and Child Care**

Many women are engaged in hazardous and low-paid work in the unorganized sector. SEWA’s health approach is grounded on the philosophy “My Health: My Asset and My Right.” In pursuit of this philosophy, SEWA engages in health promotion and local capacity building, and operates 60 health care centers that provide medical treatment, health care training, and tuberculosis control programs. A few local women are trained as “barefoot doctors” who provide health education, information, and low-cost medicines. SEWA also runs childcare centers and administers the health-insurance system. The following table indicates the total number of women, men, and children served by SEWA health workers and midwives to April 2002.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service delivered</th>
<th>Women reached</th>
<th>Men reached</th>
<th>Children reached</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Health education</td>
<td>29,451</td>
<td>9,348</td>
<td>11,265</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curative care through Health Centers</td>
<td>42,658</td>
<td>14,660</td>
<td>15391</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curative care through diagnostic camps</td>
<td>19,473</td>
<td>10,247</td>
<td>7,848</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuberculosis care (curative)</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immunization (in collaboration with govt.)</td>
<td>72,798</td>
<td>2,131</td>
<td>69,675</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family planning</td>
<td>2,297</td>
<td>2,230</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

— Not available.

*Source: SEWA Main Office, Ahmedabad.*

**Technology and SEWA**

Computer awareness programs and training on basic computer skills have enabled members to sell their products in the virtual global marketplace.
The computerization of SEWA Bank has resulted in the maintenance of up-to-date records and increased productivity levels. This has aided in the expansion of the self-help groups involved in financial services at the village and district level.

A program called Video SEWA has been making simple, appropriate, and modern video technology available to SEWA members; SEWA organizers; policymakers and planners at regional, national, and international levels; and the public in general. Videos on issues of the self-employed are recorded, edited, and acted by workers themselves.

**Legal Aid**

SEWA organizes legal training and has established a special unit to deal with legal complaints of its members. Inadequate space for selling by street vendors, demand for provident fund payments, and compensation for accidents are some of the common problems tackled by the unit. Provident Fund refers to Employees’ Provident Fund (EPF), a social security scheme under which both the employee and employer contribute to the fund at the rate of 12 percent of the employee’s income per month. This scheme is mandatory for most organizations in India and perhaps the most popular social security scheme in the country. In 2000, more than 15,000 complaints were registered with the unit.

**SEWA Trade Facilitation Center**

A trade facilitation center, set up in 2000, functions as a bridge between the poor women artisans and global markets. The center conducts market research for its members and focuses on developing international sales and marketing channels, product development, supply-chain development, and training. It organizes these artisans so that they can engage in collective bargaining and gain a fair remuneration for their skills and labor.

**IV. Key Elements of Empowerment**

**Access to Information**

SEWA has brought poor, illiterate, and vulnerable women face-to-face with means and mechanisms that aid in their holistic development and provide for their life-cycle needs. Women have access to insurance, banking, health care, and social security benefits.

Capacity building and formal training has helped them acquire knowledge and skills in their respective fields. Regular meetings organized for members, such as gram sabhas (village meetings) and Pratinidhi Milan (trade council meetings) aid in information dissemination. The Trade Committees meet every month and discuss the problems of their trades and possible solutions to them.

With the help of the Satellite Communication Network (SATCOM) facility, SEWA conducts training programs on disaster management, organizing, leadership-building,
water conservation, and so forth. The SEWA Mahila Housing Trust provides easy access to infrastructure and housing finance. Formation of cooperatives has helped women to gain continuous knowledge of labor markets, and to maintain contact with larger economic bodies and with the government.

Inclusion/Participation

The increased participation of women in such activities as training, banking, and decisionmaking at both the individual and policy levels has enhanced their confidence and self esteem.

Most of the members belong to disadvantaged communities, such as the Harijan (low caste) community. Their participation in activities such as health care, and savings groups has raised the status of these women in their villages. Despite the initial resistance among the community members, Harijan participation has been accepted in economic activities. A few of these women have also been elected as representatives in village councils.

Accountability

Meetings organized for elected representatives focus on identifying and providing possible solutions for the problems faced by the members. The performance of these representatives is also reviewed in these meetings by monitoring the progress made by the members under their purview. A “Retreat,” organized once every three months for SEWA staff and top management, is a forum for discussions and brainstorming sessions that reinforce the vision and long-term goals of SEWA. Internal accountability is thus enforced.

SEWA has brought about many policy changes through its numerous campaigns. For instance, in 1996, due to the efforts of the home-based workers’ campaign and Video SEWA, the International Labour Organization recognized the home-based workers as full-fledged “workers” for their economic contribution to the GDP of the country. Similarly, the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation granted licenses to the street vendors and entitled them to receive bonuses from contractors, as a result of the Street Vendors’ Campaign.

Local Organizational Capacity

Organizational capacity is perhaps the greatest strength of SEWA, as it has enabled the organization of women at both the local and the international level. Through this medium, vulnerable and illiterate poor women have been recognized for their contribution to the economy. In addition to providing them with social and financial

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4 Performance could be reviewed by checking the number of saving accounts increased; the loan repayment status of the women; whether the problems put forward by the members in earlier meetings could be resolved; and so forth.
5 Prior to the granting of licenses, Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation authorities confiscated the vendors’ goods, arguing that they were encroaching on the roads and had no licenses.
security, organizing has increased their bargaining power and made them independent decisionmakers.

V. Issues and Lessons

Challenges

Organization of women into cooperatives was not an easy task. There was resistance from vested interests. For instance, middlemen tried to break up the dairy cooperatives and prevent the sale of milk directly to the milk federations. Traders also made attempts to stop cultivation and direct sale of vegetables by SEWA members to retail customers.

Many women live in poverty and continue to be exploited because of low levels of literacy, low access to training, and resistance from the upper socioeconomic classes. Women, especially in the rural areas, are yet to be recognized as farmers and traders who can run their own cooperative movements. Lack of ownership and control of assets, such as a plot of land, cattle, or a house, along with inadequate initial investment and unavailability of immediate liquid cash, are some of the other problems encountered by SEWA members.

In spite of having a membership of more than 500,000 women, SEWA is not represented in policymaking bodies. National policies and laws do not recognize the members or the issues concerning the unorganized sector as a matter for serious concern. For instance, vending is a major form of employment in Indian cities, yet there is no recognition of the vendors as performing a useful service: instead of formulating policies that would give them secure vending space, they are treated as “traffic offenders.”

The unorganized sector is a major contributor to the economy of India. The priorities and needs of this sector should influence the development process of the country. Concrete strategies need to be devised to help women achieve ownership and control over productive assets, individually and collectively. Ownership and control are the most important factors for women’s empowerment and economic well being.

Training in cooperative management and marketing must also be provided to women, along with training in their respective trade fields. In addition, there is much to be done in terms of strengthening women’s leadership, their confidence, their bargaining power within and outside their homes, and their representation in policymaking and decisionmaking processes.

Key Lessons for Empowerment

1. Empowerment is a journey, not a destination.

The SEWA experience shows that, instead of starting the process of empowering the poor with a predetermined blueprint, it helps to evolve the activities and projects organically as the understanding of the beneficiaries and their needs grows. SEWA started as a trade
union to organize poor women engaged in small economic activity from their homes, but sensing of the further needs of these women, SEWA moved on to areas important for these women, such as banking, insurance, housing loans, training, and health care. Flexibility and organic evolution help SEWA to succeed.

2. **Appropriate technology can be used as an effective tool for empowerment.**

SEWA’s initiatives show neither a fear of technology, nor a fixation with high-end technology. Appropriate information and communication technologies are used. The Internet is used for e-marketing the handicrafts produced by SEWA members, and video technology is used extensively by trained SEWA members for awareness generation and disseminating their cause, thus leading to local organizational capacity building.

3. **Empowerment entails personal growth.**

SEWA experience shows that when women—even those with low levels of education—are given a chance to participate in activities such as health care and savings groups, their capabilities, self-esteem, and social status are enhanced. Many have emerged as local leaders and representatives in village councils. Thus, inclusion and participation can lead to enhanced personal and political power.

The key lesson learned is that the experience of success can trigger women’s potential and sense of self-efficacy. Once they internalize a feeling of empowerment, women can find by themselves new ways of exercising their influence.

VI. **Further Information: References and Worldwide Web Resources**

**References**


**Interviews with Officers and Staff**

SEWA Main Office. (Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India).

Shri Mahila SEWA Sahakari Bank Limited. (Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India).

**Web Pages**


Digital Partners: SEWA, Self-Employed Women’s Association Case Study. URL: <http://www.digitalpartners.org/sewa.html>.
