

5.4 SEWA (Self Employed Women's Association)

SEWA is a "movement" of self-employed women in rural and urban India, It is the largest trade union of India and was established in 1972 for the empowerment of self-employed women and of women employed in the informal economy enterprises like small, unregistered enterprises and informal economy jobs like jobs without secure contracts, worker benefits and social protection. It provides voice to these women, along with income, food and social security so that they can achieve self-reliance. It promotes women's leadership at micro, meso and macro levels. (SEWA 2014)

SEWA is organised along Gandhian principles and believes in capacity building as a means to achieve its goals (Blaxall, John 2004). SEWA engages members in three main ways (Blaxall, John 2004):

- a union, with both urban union and rural branches, that helps members in their collective struggle for fair treatment and access to justice, to markets, and to services;
- cooperatives, that help members produce and market the fruits of their labor and build their assets; and
- member services, that are financed partly by user charges, but also in part by donors, and by government departments that have been unsuccessful in providing the services for which they are responsible by statute.

A list of some organisations in the SEWA family and their founding dates is as follows:

- SEWA Cooperative Bank (1974)
- First Milk Cooperative (1979)
- Anasuya (newsletter) (1982)
- SEWA National Association (1982)
- First Artisans' Cooperative (1982)
- Video SEWA (1984)
- First Child Care Cooperative (1986)
- First Tree Growers' Cooperative (1986)
- BDMSA (first rural program, in a drought-prone area) (1987)
- First Vegetable and Fruit Vendors' Cooperative (1989)

- SEWA Academy (1990)
- First Health Care Cooperative (1990)
- First Salt Farmers' Cooperative (1991)
- Vimo SEWA (Insurance) (1992)
- SEWA Cooperative Federation (1993)
- Gujarat Mahila Housing Trust (1994)
- First Midwives Cooperative (1994)
- Kutch Craft Association (1995)
- SEWA Gram Mahila Haat (local marketing) (1999)
- SEWA Trade Facilitation Center (2000)

Three case studies of SEWA's contribution to women's empowerment and capability enhancement are presented below:

1. Waste Pickers of Ahmedabad, Gujarat - (SEWA, SEWA) Recycling in India is largely undertaken by a huge mass of workers involved in the informal sector out of which 95% are women. The city of Ahmedabad has around 50,000 waste pickers. Waste pickers are amongst the poorest of the urban population and make around Rs. 50-70 per day. These garbage collectors mine through heaps, landfills and bins for recyclable wastes like plastic papers and metal. Since being part of the informal sector, they hardly have any job security and suffer from tons of health hazards due to their work environment. In 2004 SEWA organised 42,809 waste pickers of Ahmedabad into a co-operative and strengthened the waste pickers by:
 1. Mainstreaming them in the market - co-operative helped them in getting contracts for collection from government offices, comical complexes, societies, etc.
 2. Creating awareness amongst waster pickers by organising meetings
 3. Formation of economic institutions of waste pickers
 4. Skill training
 5. Lobbying and advocacy for their fundamental rights, including social security

SEWA through its co-operative, Arogya Bhaginis entered into agreement with municipal corporations to collect segregated wet and dry waste from 46,842 households and commercial buildings. Thus now the

informal sector of waste pickers became an inclusive part of the city's Solid Waste Management System. The Arogya Bhaginis were given training by SEWA on how to interact with the residents, creating awareness amongst residents regarding waste segregation, waste segregation into wet and dry, provision of aprons and working with honesty and integrity. The workers thus slowly built connections with the residents. The co-operative platform gave them a sense of livelihood security. Due to the awareness activity conducted regarding waste segregation, cleaner dry waste was available for recycling. The following chart summarises the difference brought in the life of the waste pickers due to this initiative:

	Before Intervention	After Intervention
Earning	Rs. 1000 - 1200/ month	Rs. 2500 - 3000/ month (Rs. 2000 - 2500 for door to door collection and Rs. 500-1000 telling dry waste)
Livelihood	Unsustainable (money from waste picking did not provide secure earnings)	Sustainable livelihood (door to door collection was a permanent source of income)
Type of waste	Inferior quality, unclean	Clean and good quality
Sorting hours	More hours in sorting	Less hours in sorting, clean waste
Occupational Walking	Walked 6-8 Km to be able to earn 2 meals per day	Walk 1 Km and had provision for hand carts and cycles
Standard of Life	–	Children's education, savings, nutritious food, rented/ own house
Working Hours	4 AM to 3 PM	8 AM to 12 PM
Occupational Hazards	No precaution for dealing with waste	Aprons provided

In 2006 a new Door to Dump collection system was launched and a tendering system was introduced. As a result, a private company won the contract. SEWA could not succeed due to lack of infrastructure like trucks. On losing this opportunity, SEWA engaged itself in collection of waste from slums of the city. The waste pickers of the slum were organised and trained to persuade slum dwellers in waste segregation and not dumping carelessly in the nearby naala. They were also trained in door to door waste collection. The municipality was persuaded for permissions. As a result of these efforts, following observations were made:

	Before Intervention	After Intervention
Earning	Family income - Rs. 3000/ month	Individual women's income - Rs. 2500 - 3000/ month
Livelihood	Unsustainable	Sustainable livelihood (door to door collection was a permanent source of income)

Change in perception/ lives of the family	Many of the women's husbands are alcoholics	Inspired by the women's work and earnings, men stated doing odd jobs and contributing to family income
Groceries	Bought on a daily basis	Purchased monthly grocery for the first time
Occupational Walking	Walked 6-8 Km to be able to earn 2 meals per day	Walk 1 Km and had provision for hand carts and cycles
Standard of Life	–	Children's education, savings, nutritious food, rented/ own house
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Currently SEWA has trained the waste pickers in making products out of waste which have reached organisations like World Bank (Sharma, Radha 26 December 2011).

2. Vanlaxmi Women Tree Grower's Cooperative, Mehsana district, Gujarat - (SEWA 2014) In 1986, SEWA started organizing landless agricultural workers in Gujarat's Mehsana district into a co-operative called the Vanlaxmi Women Tree Grower's Cooperative, after obtaining a 10-acre plot from the local village council on a 30 year lease. It took SEWA village members over 3 years (1986-1989) to clear the land, till it and make it arable. Today, the Vanlaxmi cooperative stands as a model for the entire district of how the landless rural poor can successfully practice collective agriculture. The success of this initiative has led SEWA to maintain a needs-based and demand-driven approach in rural areas, where livelihood activities are structured according to local needs and regional characteristics.

3. Martha Chen's study of Devdholera village in Gujarat which is the regional rural headquarter of SEWA says that, Green Revolution and White Revolution has enhanced the production in the village but at the same time made crops and cattle very weather dependant. Due to SEWA's intervention in the area, women have done well and get the same wages as men. Women's cooperatives for dairy and weaving are flourishing, government loans for fairiy cattle are reserved for women and several programs for women employment are in place. The wool and cotton weaving co-operatives provide work to 30 families. The progress of the women in this village are in stark contrast with developments in north Indian villages studied by William, Charlotte Wiser and Susan Wadley. They report degradation in status of women and lack of social and physical protection as they have been left behind by the menfolk who ventured out of the village in search of economic opportunities. In Devdholera, SEWA has helped to improve economic resources base in the village as well as the status of women. (Spodek, Howard 1994)

SEWA is not a traditional trade union, but includes different organisational structures such as cooperatives, producers' groups, societies, service organisations, federations, SHGs and membership-based organisations within its fold. Its multitude of institutions and activities are created as SEWA believes in a flexible working strategy which can be adjusted to suite the needs and experiences of self-employed women in a given

context (SEWA 2014). SEWA has built unions for struggle and cooperatives for development (Spodek, Howard 1994). It is a member-based organisation where activities are based on member demands and needs. This ensures a feeling of ownership and can harness full co-operation, confidence and support (Blaxall, John 2004). Thus, SEWA presents a unique example of capacity building approach for generating sustainable development.

Bibliography

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