

Self Employed women's Association (SEWA)

At

Chintan Shivir, February 17-18, 2020

SEWA's experience of organising 1.9 million poor women worker from the Informal Economy for more than four and a half decade says - Even today in the 21st century reality of millions of informal sector workers – especially poor women workers in India is that these workers are generally the poorest of poor. Their tools are old and worn out and they hardly have any information about or access to direct market.

The employment or livelihood opportunities available in informal economy is never constant due to severe competition, market trends and changing economic policies. In such situations, the informal workers often have to pursue more than one trade. An agricultural worker is also an artisan pursuing embroidery or a construction worker also makes kites during the kite season. Thus, their occupation varies depending on what is more conducive at what point of time. In such scenario, the dignity of such workers is often compromised and they end up in the vicious down-fall of drudgery and poverty.

Work – Productive work is the only thread that can weave a society together. Only work, a steady source of income, and asset ownership can break one's fall, help feed the workers families and brings them security. SEWA, a national trade union of over 1.5 million poor self-employed women workers from the informal economy; has understood this importance of work in the lives of its members and therefore has been striving for over 4.5 decades to facilitate full employment and self-reliance to its members and offer them new alternatives to face the various constraints and limitations imposed on them by society and the economy.

SEWA's founder Shri Ela Bhatt strongly believes that "Poverty is the worst form of violence perpetuated by the consent of the society". To be poor is to be vulnerable. The condition of being poor, of being self-employed, and of being a woman are all distinct and yet interrelated states of vulnerability. Poverty makes one become a chronic victim of forces beyond one's control. And, yet our experience has also shown us that the poor do not want charity – what they need is Productive work – a steady source of income, and asset ownership. They need enabling access to services for addressing the challenges around inclusion and economic growth.

And to achieve this, SEWA has adopted a joint strategy of Union and Cooperatives. Through the Union, SEWA organizes informal sector women workers to bring them voice, visibility and validity as a worker. Whereas through its cooperative movement, SEWA organizes its members, based on their skills into their own economic organizations – collectives / cooperatives / federations / microenterprises and producer companies – organizations; where members are not just workers, but owners and managers of their own microenterprises – this leads to capital

formation and asset creation in the name of women themselves. It leads to increased bargaining power.

On these lines, SEWA has facilitated organizing its members into over 4000 SHGs, over 110 Cooperatives, 15 Federations and 3 producer companies. These enterprises of SEWA, while focusing on fulfilling 6 basic needs of members such as food, water, shelter, housing, education and finance - also generate additional livelihood opportunities for the members.

Here I have a small video and the leaders of SEWA that talks about their journey as SEWA and how they have been instrumental in bring the change not only in their lives and livelihood but also have impact on thousands of other members not only in their villages or districts but across states and countries as well.

Film of SEWA (2.5 minutes)

Experience sharing by SEWA Leaders

- Neelaben Parmar from Anand District of Gujarat
- Nanduben Bariya from Bodeli District of Gujarat

Successful operation of SHGs, District Federations Social Enterprises owned and managed by poor women members are found to be one of the best ways to fight poverty and support entrepreneurship in rural areas; since it expands the pool of resources reaching the poor by local money saved locally for local development, poor women members have their savings at their disposal improves individual and collective ownership, rotates amongst the members to fulfill their needs, brings in internal discipline and financial discipline, builds trust among the members, absorbs shocks caused by natural disasters or economic forces, improves health and their skills since it brings in asset ownership disposal of money with the women members them shelves and much more.

Working with the poor community members the major need that is emerging is to develop climate resilient practices and scale up members own enterprises.

This will enable small and marginal farmer and informal sector women workers enterprises enter the mainstream. This would also bring in several modern tech-savvy employment opportunities for the young generations.

Thus, together we can make a big difference to lives of self respecting, hard working, and determined women around the world by helping them with the most important thing they need a fair chance.

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