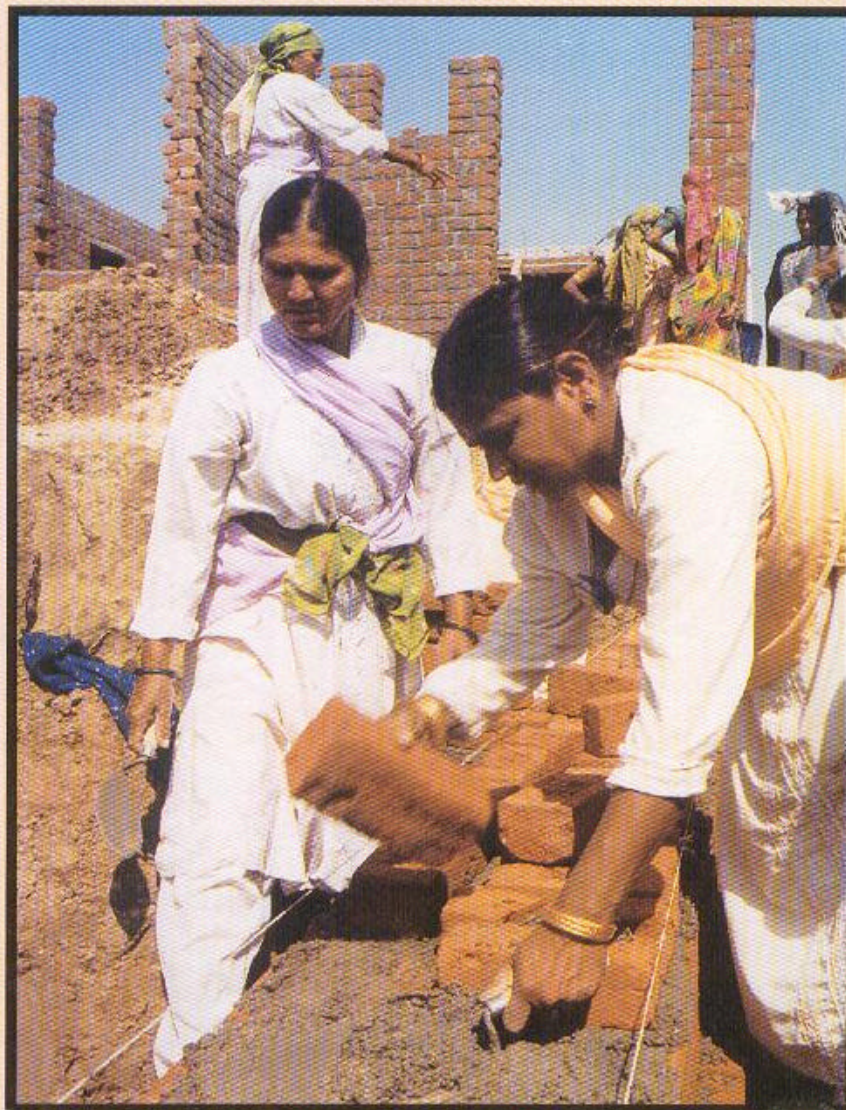


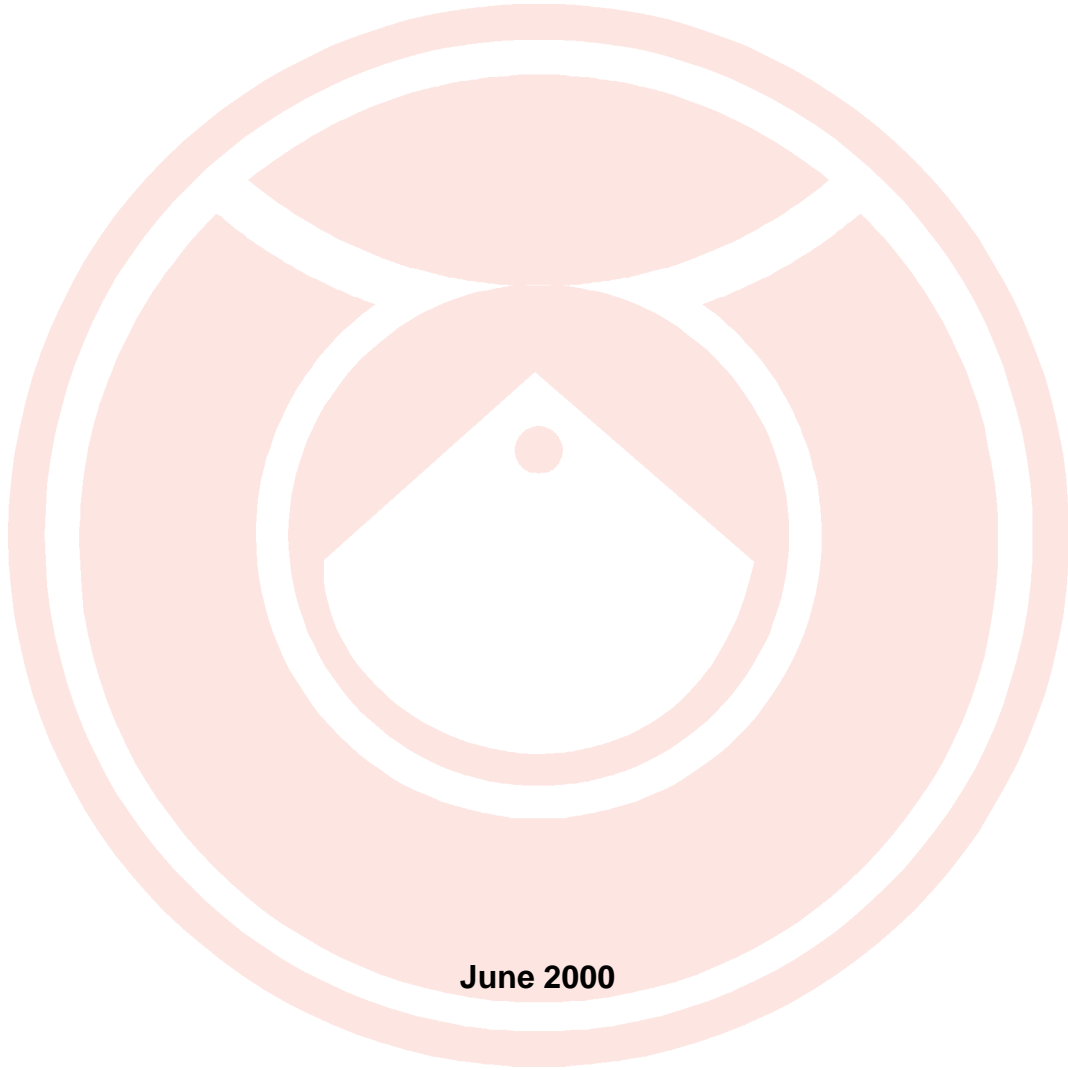
# **Labouring Brick by Brick : A Study of Construction Workers**



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## **Background**

SEWA is a trade union registered in 1972. It is an organization of poor, self-employed women workers. These are women who earn a living through their own labour or small business. They do not obtain regular salaried employment with welfare benefits like workers in the organized sector. They are the unprotected labour force of our country. Of the female labour force in India, more than 92% are in the informal sector. However their work is not counted and hence remains invisible. In fact, the women workers themselves remain uncared under-cared and invisible. SEWA's main goals are to organize these women workers for full employment and self-reliance, through the strategy of struggle and development.

SEWA's struggle is against the many constraints and limitations imposed on them by society and the economy, while its developmental activities strengthen women's bargaining power and offer them new alternatives. Practically, the strategy is implemented through the joint action of union and cooperatives. Gandhian philosophy is the guiding force for SEWA's poor, self-employed members in organizing for social change. Also 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 policy-making and decision making fora. It is their issues, their priorities and needs which should guide and mould the development process in our country.

Towards this end, SEWA has been supporting its members in capacity building and in developing their own economic organizations. Over a period of 27 years, SEWA has organized women workers in almost 72 different trades. The construction trade is one of them. There has been a change in the socioeconomic status of construction workers today, because of the process of organisation.

The Self Employed Women's Association is the biggest union of women workers in the informal sector. The membership of these informal sector women workers in Gujarat is around 142,810, of which Ahmedabad city's membership is around 43,617. Manual labourers and service providers constitute the largest segment of SEWA's Gujarat membership, their strength being 83,844 women i.e. 57% of the total work force. Primarily they are agricultural labourers in the rural areas. The other types of workers in this sector are construction workers, head-loaders, cleaners, domestic workers or contract labourers. These workers sell their own labour or services for a living. They have little or no work security and their income varies according to seasonal or other fluctuations in the demand for labour.

## **The Construction Workers of Gujarat**

Construction workers are the largest group of service providers in Ahmedabad city. SEWA has been organizing workers in the dyeing, the chemical and the screen-printing industry for many years now. However, in recent years, major changes have occurred in these industries due to rapid mechanization. As an outcome of industrialisation, unemployment is rampant and women workers have turned to construction as an alternative source of income generation. SEWA is now actively organizing these women. There are more than 5,00,000 women workers engaged in the construction industry in Gujarat. What is their socio-economic status and how do they manage to earn their daily livelihood? What are the problems faced by these construction workers and what are their demands? How to bring them into the mainstream of the construction sector and provide them with recognition from the authorities? These are some of the issues which-need to be addressed immediately.

In order to gain in-depth knowledge for providing inputs towards policy formulation and social security benefits for construction workers, SEWA conducted a survey of these workers in 1998. Two things came out during this assessment first of all

There must be a formulation of a policy for Construction workers on a national level and secondly they should be provided with social security benefits. Simultaneously with the survey, a trade committee of construction worker “Aagewaans” or leaders was formed, within SEWA. A memorandum was given to the State Government requesting it to frame laws, social security schemes, identity cards and a policy for construction workers. SEWA also began organising construction women workers at different “nakas” (street corners), the place where construction workers congregate early in the morning in search of work, waiting to be picked up by the construction contractors, “kadiya nakas” in Ahmedabad.

SEWA held construction workers’ meetings at 35 street corners and distributed leaflets encouraging workers to:

- Join the SEWA Union of construction women workers of Gujarat.
- Persuade the State Government to pass a law for the construction workers on the lines of the National Bill passed by the Central Labour Department of India, on 1st August 1996.
- Demand for identity cards.
- Demand social security benefits including insurance (especially health and accident insurance), childcare and provident fund.
- Urge the Labour Department to form a tripartite committee to consider the issues and problems of the construction workers.

### **Concerns of Construction Workers**

At several meetings and a state level workshop, construction workers articulated the following concerns:

- They had no job security. Coupled with this, their occupational risk factor was extremely high due to innumerable accidents resulting in temporary or permanent disabilities. They were doubly affected due to lack of insurance coverage along with loss of wages for the entire period of disability recuperation;
- Their wages were low and they were exploited by the contractors. They were not issued with any identity cards;
- The majority of the construction workers were not organized; and
- The local construction labour suffered from chronic unemployment due to the availability of large numbers of migrant workers that were willing to work at lower wages.

### **Organising Construction Workers**

On every “Amavasya” day i.e. once a month on a specified day, the trade committee of construction worker leaders or “Aagewaans” meet in SEWA’s premises to discuss their issues

and concerns regarding the construction sector and its workers. With the closure of the textile mills and big factories, increasing numbers of workers have taken up construction work as a means of immediate employment, which provides cash earnings at the end of the day. Hence there is a surplus of construction labour thereby increasing competition due to insufficient work. The construction sector provides employment to 6 million workers in India, on a national level.

According to the 1991 census, the estimated workforce in India is around 285, 932,000. The construction industry employs 5,543,000 of the total workforce. There is an unending increase in their numbers all over the country. There are around 500,000 construction workers in Gujarat state alone, of which, 50,000 workers are based in Ahmedabad city. The construction industry is one of the largest and oldest industry to be generating employment in India, next to the agriculture sector. The Government of India formulated a Bill for construction workers on 1 August 1996. For this, an Expert Committee was formed in 1985. It was mandated to consider relevant sector specific issues and give its recommendations. It was ten years later in 1996 that Parliament finally passed a Bill, which became the Construction Workers Act. SEWA has been organizing construction workers for a long time in Gujarat. It was felt by SEWA leaders that the new law should become operational in Gujarat as soon as possible. It was only after its implementation that any benefits could accrue to the construction women worker members of SEWA. Awareness was generated through meetings and the distribution of more than 2,000 fliers demanding for enactment of the Construction Workers' Act and Welfare Act by the state government.

The following benefits will accrue to the construction workers if this Act is implemented

- Identity cards shall be issued to the workers;
- Immediate compensation to the workers, in case of on-site accidents;
- Medical aid to the family of the workers;
- Life insurance coverage for construction workers;
- Maternity benefits to the women workers;
- Monetary help for educating their children;
- Housing loans to the workers;
- Provident fund to the workers; and
- Formation of a tripartite board to consider their welfare.

### **SEWA's Survey of Construction Workers**

A survey was conducted by SEWA to study the socio-economic aspects of the lives of construction workers and to accelerate the process of organising women construction workers of Ahmedabad. The main objective of this survey was to advocate immediate enactment of the Act passed by the Central Government within Gujarat. Moreover, SEWA wanted to prepare a detailed report on the current socio-economic condition of the construction workers in the state and submit it to the government. The survey was conducted on a random sampling basis; the lottery methodology was used for identifying the respondents of the survey. Five sample respondents (3 women and 2 men) were selected from each of 50 "nakas" i.e. street corners of

different areas of Ahmedabad. In all, 250 sample respondents (125 men and 125 women) were selected. Some of the key findings of the study are:-

- About 70% of women construction workers belong to the age group of 26 - 45 years;
- Only 19.2% of women workers are in the age group of 15-25 years;
- On the other hand, 36.8% of men workers are in the age group of 15-25 years;
- Around 81.6% of women workers were married while 72% of male workers were married;
- 14.4% of women respondents were widows;
- During the study, the majority of the women workers (68.8%) said that they work as head loaders on construction sites; 90% of women workers surveyed were unskilled labourers, while a nominal 10% work as semi-skilled labourers, mostly assisting the male masons;
- The women workers said they did 9 main types of work on the construction site whereas their male counterparts were engaged in 21 different construction related types of work;
- A key finding of the study was that almost all the women workers were engaged in unskilled jobs (manually carrying/transferring construction materials);
- Out of 125 women workers surveyed, some 36% women are engaged in construction work for the last 6 years while 18% of them have been doing this work for the last 20 years. The remaining joined the construction sector during the previous 3-5 years;
- It was found that 65% of the women's families had been doing construction work from one generation to the next, while the remaining 35% of women joined this sector to support their families mainly due to the non-availability of other work and the closure of the textile mills in the city;
- 60% of the male workers were occupied in this work from one generation to the next while 40% had joined this work for the first time
- The average daily wages of the female workers were found to be substantially lower than the male workers. The average daily income of the female worker was Rs. 60, as against Rs. 128 for the male worker, who earned more than double that of the women;
- The average monthly income of the female worker was found to be Rs. 1,815 whereas the monthly average income of the male worker was around Rs. 3,842. Annually, the male worker earned more than double the female worker;
- Most of the women workers used the city bus or rickshaws as a means of transport to the work sites, which are usually far away from their homes. 60.8% of these women got travel allowance, whereas 35.2% were not paid any travel allowance;

- The incidence of physical strain during work was more in the case of women workers. Around 88.8% women complained of fatigue and physical strain during work, while only 74.4% of men complained about it;
- 70% of women workers complained about chronic body aches, especially in their limbs, hands and head after they joined the construction sector, while some 16% also complained about back-pain, chest-pain, skin diseases etc. In the case of male workers, 77% of them complained of pain in their limbs, hands and headache;
- 51% of the women workers reported that they had sustained physical injuries during on-site work, while the incidence of injuries was much lower in the case of male workers. Only 13% of them had sustained physical injuries at the work place;
- 54.4% of the women surveyed, agreed that they were not provided with any basic amenities except drinking water on the sites, while 48% male workers confirmed about the inadequacy of basic amenities on the worksite;
- 90% of women workers and 95% of male workers confirmed that the contractors do not give them any additional benefits such as a bonus;
- 88% of women workers were not aware of any union, while 95% women expressed their willingness to join the union, once they were told about SEWA;
- Construction activities demand physical labour, hard work and strain from the workers. Therefore, 85% of women workers surveyed wanted favourable changes in their work conditions. These women also expressed their willingness to upgrade their skills in various construction related techniques.

### **Profile of a Construction Worker Ushaben Parmar**

My name is Ushaben Jivanbhai Parmar. I live in a slum in the Sabarmati area of Ahmedabad. I am 30 years old. I have been married for the last ten years. Initially, we were living in a joint family and I was a housewife. My husband was still in his last year of college when I gave birth to our baby girl. With the birth of the child, there was an addition in our family. From two persons, we became three. But my husband was still studying, so he did not earn anything for the family. My parents-in-law asked us to live separately and start earning our own living. My husband and I joined the construction trade and started working as masons on construction sites. The main reason for choosing the construction sector was that we could get regular cash earnings. My husband tried hard to get a better job, but he could not find one. At present, I have three children.

My youngest child is around two months old. I have to leave my child alone at home. I cannot take the child with me to the work site because the contractor is against it. Once, when I took my child along with me, I was asked by the contractor to immediately leave the site. But, if I stay at home then how will my family survive? So, my elder daughter was forced to leave school and take care of her youngest sibling.

I have to meet with many different contractors every day, to get work. I earn Rs. 60 to Rs. 70 per day. But working on the construction sites demands great physical labour and hard work. We toil hard doing a full day's work and at the end of the day, we develop headaches, pain in our limbs and hands. Despite this we have to do all our daily household chores.



I get up early in the morning, cook the meals for the day, store water and then go out in search of work. I have to walk miles from one place to another, from one site to another, in search of work. In the evening, when I come back, I have to manage the children. Then I have to make the evening meals. In all, I only manage to get 5-6 hours of sleep in a day and then the same routine starts again the next day. Due to the closure of a number of textile mills in the last decade, increasing numbers of people in Ahmedabad are unemployed. Most of the unemployed have chosen the construction sector to find employment. The contractors take advantage of this and try to exploit us poor people.

We construction workers assemble on the “nakas” i.e. street corners in search of work from the contractors. In the early mornings, this often creates a traffic jam. Then, often the police manhandle us in order to control the congestion and avoid traffic jams. We workers are sometimes beaten up savagely. We are ill treated because we do not have any identity of our own and are from the informal sector. Nobody listens to the voice of us construction workers.

Often we do not get work for more than 20 days in a month. Many times we have to return home as the migrant labourers from other states are hired, because they agree to work for lower wages. Today, even though my husband and I are in our early thirties, we look as if we are fifty years old. Our health has already broken down at this age. I get frightened whenever I think about the future of my children. As they are not educated, they will have to do the same work as us in the coming years. But, if efforts are made to regularize this work and if policy reform for construction workers in the informal sector is implemented, then our children can secure their future. Otherwise, their condition will be worse than what ours is at present.



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## **SELF EMPLOYED WOMAN'S ASSOCIATION (SEWA)**

The Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) is a Trade union of poor, self-employed women workers, registered in 1972, SEWA members earn a living through their own labour or small businesses. They do not obtain regular salaried employment with welfare benefits, like workers in the organised sector. Of the female labour force in India, more than 94% are in the unorganised sector. However work is not counted and hence remains invisible.

SEWA's main goals are to organise women workers for full employment and self reliance, through the twin strategies of struggle and development

SEWA is both an organisation and a movement. The SEWA movement is a confluence of three movements: the labour movement, the co-operative movement and the women's movement. Most importantly, SEWA is a movement that is owned and developed by self employed women so that they may become stronger, more visible and gain due recognition for their tremendous economic and social contributions to the economy and society at large.

## **SEWA ACADEMY**

The SEWA Academy was created in 1991 with the objective of providing the self employed women members of SEWA with training facilities of an international standard in order to build their capacities in the areas of skill development, education and leadership. The Academy is the focal point for co-ordinating and implementing SEWA's activities in member education, teaching, research, planning communication, advocacy and evaluation. SEWA Academy's training programs are tailor made to meet the needs of SEWA members and empower them through increased knowledge and self-confidence.

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