



Self-Employed Women:

A PROFILE OF

SEWA'S MEMBERSHIP

Martha Alter Chen
Harvard University

with
Nidhi Mirani &
Mita Parikh
SEWA Academy



SEWA
Self-Employed Women's Association
SEWA Reception Centre, Opp. Victoria Garden,
Bhadra, Ahmedabad-380 001.
Phone : 91-79-25506444 / 441 / 477
E-mail : mail@sewa.org

Copyright © Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), 2006

First published in 2006 by



Sewa Academy
Krishna Bhuvan,
Next to Hariharanand Ashram,
Ellisbridge, Ahmedabad-380 006.
Phone : +91 79 26577115 26587086
Fax : +91 79 26587708
E mail : sewaacdy@icenet.co.in



table of contents

Foreword	ii
INTRODUCTION	1
PART I : OVERVIEW OF SEWA'S MEMBERSHIP	4
Growth in Numbers	5
Changing Composition	7
Standard of Living	18
Economic Status	22
PART II : THE WORK ARRANGEMENTS OF SEWA MEMBERS	30
Place of Work	31
Employment Status	37
'Hidden Costs'	39
Part III : MAJOR TRADE GROUPS IN SEWA MEMBERSHIP	46
Urban Trade Groups	47
Rural Trade Groups	70
Part IV : COMMON RISKS FACED BY SEWA MEMBERS	82
High Exposure to Common Core Risks	83
Specific Risks during Widespread Crises	86
Coping with Risks	89
Part V : MEMBERSHIP AND LEADERSHIP IN SEWA	92
Organising Strategy of SEWA	93
Types of Membership in SEWA	94
General Members of SEWA	95
Grassroots Leaders of SEWA	100
Solidarity through SEWA	104
Cited References	105

Cover Photos : The four photos on the cover represent the four main occupational categories of SEWA members: hawkers and vendors; home-based producers; labourers and service providers; and rural producers.

Photos : All photos are by Martha Chen or from SEWA Archives, except one (of Gum Collectors) by William Steel.





Tables, Boxes, Figures, Map and Photos

Tables :

1	SEWA Membership in India by Decade/Year and Region	6
2	SEWA Membership in Gujarat by Year and Region	7
3	SEWA Membership in Gujarat by District (2004)	12
4	SEWA Membership in Gujarat by Year and Trade Groups	14
5	SEWA Membership in Gujarat by Occupations and Trade Groups (2004)	16
6	Average Piece-Rates for Different Trades: Ahmedabad City (by decade)	23
7	Daily Net Earnings from Common Informal Occupations: Ahmedabad City (2000)	25
8	Average Monthly Earnings of SEWA Members in Different Trades (2003-04)	26
9	'Place of Work' of SEWA Members (2004)	31
10	Employment and Unemployment, Regularity and Multiplicity of Work: Ahmedabad City (2001)	42
11	Nature of Work and Income by Employment Status (2001)	44
12	Number of SEWA Members, Elected Representatives, and Leaders of Various Kinds (2003-04)	97

Boxes:

1	A New Front Verandah Becomes a Workplace	33
2	Leela-ben: Vegetable Vendor and SEWA Leader	51
3	Razia-bibi: Garment Maker	56
4	Dipa-ben: Bidi-Roller	60
5	Ratan-ben: Construction Worker	65
6	Three Waste Pickers	69
7	Dohi-ben: From Migrant Worker to Embroidery Artisan	72
8	Kamla-ben: Tobacco Worker and SEWA Leader	75
9	Jamu-ben: Salt Worker and SEWA Leader	78
10	Co-operative of Gum Collectors	81
11	Average Expenses on Medical Emergencies	85
12	Medical Emergency Leads to Financial Crisis	86
13	Major Crises 1970-2005: Ahmedabad City and Gujarat State	87
14	Profile of an Active SEWA Member	99
15	Two SEWA Leaders	103

Figures:

1	Growth of SEWA Membership in India	6
2	Growth of SEWA Membership in Gujarat	8
3	Growth of SEWA Membership in Gujarat by Trade Groups	15
4	Organising Strategy of SEWA	94
5	Concentric Circles of SEWA Membership	96

Map :

1	Gujarat State: District Map	11
---	-----------------------------	----





Photos :

SEWA Annual General Meeting '05, Ahmedabad District	i
SEWA Village Meeting, Surat District	2
SEWA Annual General Meeting '05, Ahmedabad District	3
Migrant Broom Makers, Ahmedabad City	9
Small Farmer, Ahmedabad District	10
Fish Monger, Ahmedabad City	13
Paper Bag Maker, Ahmedabad City	13
Construction Workers, Ahmedabad District	13
Dairy Producer, Ahmedabad District	13
Tobacco Worker, Ahmedabad District	22
Street Vendors, Ahmedabad City	29
Quilt-Maker, Ahmedabad District	34
Street Vendors, Ahmedabad City	35
Agricultural Workers, Mehsana District	36
Dairy Producers, Gandhinagar District	36
Dairy Producers, Gandhinagar District	45
Street Vendors, Ahmedabad City	50
Garment Factor Workers, Ahmedabad City	55
Home-based Garment Maker, Ahmedabad City	55
Bidi-Roller, Ahmedabad City	59
Construction Worker, Ahmedabad City	64
Waste Picker, Ahmedabad City	68
Embroiderer, Kutch District	71
Tobacco Field Worker, Surat District	74
Tobacco Factory Worker, Surat District	74
Salt Farmer, Surendranagar District	77
Salt Farmer, Surendranagar District	78
Gum Collectors, Patan District	81
2000 Cyclone Devastation Kutch District	88
1987 Drought Relief Work, Ahmedabad District	90
Gum Collectors, Patan District	91
SEWA Member, Ahmedabad City	98
SEWA Member, Ahmedabad City	98
SEWA Leader, Ahmedabad District	101
SEWA Leader, Ahmedabad City	101
SEWA Village Meeting, Surat District	102







foreword

The Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) is a trade union registered in 1972 that organizes and provides services to women in the informal economy. Over 700,000 women from six states of India are SEWA members. Within SEWA, the SEWA Academy has been the focal point for capacity building, communications and research efforts since 1991. The Academy recently created the Eminent Visiting Professor position, an honorary post held by an eminent researcher or policy maker, sensitive to the cause of SEWA. In 2003, SEWA asked Dr. Martha Chen, in her role as Eminent Visiting Professor, to undertake a project along with researchers at the SEWA Academy designed to carry out a collection, synthesis, and analysis of existing studies on or by SEWA.

The overall purpose of this project, called the 'SEWA at Thirty' project, was to help SEWA take stock of its own experience and to communicate the lessons from its experience to the broader development community, both locally, nationally, and internationally. The specific purposes of the project, identified through consultation with senior SEWA organizers, were a) to take stock of SEWA's impact over the past thirty years, b) to compile an overview picture of SEWA's membership, and c) to provide a summary description of SEWA's philosophy, structure, and strategies. This booklet is the second of three booklets produced under this project. The other two booklets are entitled:

"Towards Economic Freedom: The Impact of SEWA"

"The Spreading Banyan Tree: The Philosophy, Structure, and Strategies of SEWA"

In addition to producing three booklets, the 'SEWA at Thirty' project collected over 300 documents on SEWA in a catalogued archive housed at the SEWA Academy.

The need for this project arose from requests of various individuals and institutions and from our own desire to conduct a comprehensive review of our work. Over these last thirty years, we initiated and led many struggles for the economic and social development of women workers in the informal economy. Some of these efforts were successful and some were not. Each provided its own lessons and some set us working in new directions. We documented these experiences as best we could and our grassroots research approach often allowed us to capture the stories of women in their own words and to evaluate our work with an in-depth knowledge of the local context. At the same time, many visitors to SEWA have also studied our work, using perspectives and frameworks from fields ranging from economics to education to women's studies.

This series of three booklets is the output of the endeavor to synthesize and analyze various studies on or by SEWA. We hope that these booklets will help disseminate the experiences of SEWA to local, national and international audiences. We also hope that others will use the booklets to understand our philosophy, achievements and challenges and to grow the movement of organizations of workers and women everywhere. These booklets are a continuing effort on SEWA's part to write 'herstory' and share it with others who are concerned about poor women's lives.





The three booklets have been possible only because of the collective efforts of a wide range of people. Special thanks are due to Marty Chen for her hard work, careful analysis, and valuable insights. As a long-time friend of SEWA, and as someone who has carried out earlier research on both SEWA's rural and urban activities, she brought a special 'insider-outsider' perspective to this initiative. SEWA Academy received invaluable strategic and financial support from the Ford Foundation, New Delhi, especially Rekha Mehra, making the Visiting Professor Programme possible. Nidhi Mirani and Mita Parikh worked tirelessly with Marty Chen on creating these booklets. Sushila Koshti and Alka Solanki greatly helped in gathering books and articles. We would also like to thank Marais Canali and Beth Graves of the WIEGO Secretariat and Sejal Rasanía of the SEWA Academy for helping with the production of this booklet; and Liz Schenkel who helped with the design of the booklet. Our colleagues in SEWA Academy and SEWA also supported this project by providing their insights, materials and time. Mirai Chatterjee, Renana Jhabvala, and Reema Nanavaty provided valuable feedback on early drafts of the booklets. Ela Bhatt and Renana Jhabvala guided and encouraged the project team over the past two and a half years.

SEWA looks forward to receiving your feedback on our impact, membership, strategies, and experience as captured in these booklets.

Namrata Bali
General Secretary, SEWA
January 2006



Introduction

"In 1972, when we started SEWA, we had no idea how to do it, or where to start, but two things I saw clearly. In our country, most of the production of goods and services is done through the self-employed sector. Eighty-nine per cent of our labour force is self-employed. Unless they are brought into the mainstream of the labour movement, it is no movement worth its name.

Secondly, I recognized that 80 per cent of Indian women are poor, illiterate, and economically very active. It is these working class women who should be taking a leading role in the women's movement of our country. Ninety per cent of these women's time is taken up in their work. Work is their priority. If we bring these women into the movement on the basis of work, it is strategically the most effective way of organising large numbers of women according to issues which are relevant to them."

Ela Bhatt, 1988 Interview (Rose 1992: 36)

"The economic activities (of the self-employed) have been described by various names, such as unorganised, unprotected, unregistered, marginal or informal, a more recent term being the black economy. It is contradictory to describe such a vast, active workforce in terms that relegates it to a peripheral position, while in reality it is central to the economy. In my view, in order to properly characterize this work force, it should be called the "self-employed sector" or the "self-employed"...even though there is no simple definition for such a diverse working population."

Ela Bhatt 1995

In 1971, a small group of migrant women cart pullers in Ahmedabad's wholesale cloth market approached the Textile Labour Association (TLA) to ask whether the TLA might be able to help them find housing. Ela Bhatt, then head of the Women's Wing of the TLA, accompanied the women to the wholesale cloth market where she met another group of women who were working as head loaders, carrying loads of cloth to and from the wholesale market. The head loaders described their work, including their low and erratic wages. The head loaders were paid on a per trip basis by the merchants - not according to the distance traveled or weight carried. Because no records were maintained of how many trips they made, they were often not paid the full amount they were owed.

Under the auspices of the Women's Wing of the TLA, Ela Bhatt decided to organise a public meeting for the head loaders in the cloth market to discuss their problems. During the meeting, she told the women that they should organise if they wished to address their problems: the women agreed to organise themselves into a group and each paid 25 *paisa* (quarter of a rupee) as a membership fee. Following the meeting, Ela Bhatt wrote an article for a local newspaper detailing the problems of the head loaders. The cloth merchants countered with their own news article in which they denied the allegations and claimed that they treated the head loaders fairly. The TLA Women's Wing responded by reprinting the merchant's claims of fair treatment on cards which they distributed to the head loaders to use to hold the merchants accountable: thus turning the merchant's rebuttal to the head loaders' advantage (Sebstad 1982).

Word of the head loaders' moral victory spread quickly. Soon, a group of used-clothing dealers approached the TLA Women's Wing with their complaints. Again, Ela Bhatt called a public meeting to which over 100 used-garment dealers and other women came. During that meeting, a woman from the crowd suggested they form an association of their own. Thus, on an appeal from the women and at the initiative of Ela Bhatt and the TLA Women's Wing, the Self-Employed Women's Association was born on December 3, 1971. The rest, as the saying goes, is SEWA's history.



Although she was not able to negotiate housing for the cart pullers, Ela Bhatt arranged to have the TLA Women's Wing provide a 'hot meal' to the cart-pullers at the end of each day near where they worked. Supa Goba-ji, the leader of the migrant cart pullers from Maharashtra state who first approached Ela Bhatt, became one of the founding members of SEWA.¹

By the time SEWA was founded, Ela Bhatt, a labour lawyer by training, had begun organising two other overlooked and largely-female segments of the textile industry - home-based garment makers and quilt-makers (who made patchwork quilts from textile waste called *chindi*-) as well as street vendors. By 1975, membership in the SEWA Union had grown to 2,750 women from 15 trade groups of which the largest was street vendors (400 members) followed by head loaders, garment makers, used-clothing dealers, and bidi rollers (300 members each). In 1975, SEWA also began organising agricultural labourers in several villages in Ahmedabad District. But it was only in 1989 that SEWA began to significantly expand its rural operations. By end-2004, there were nearly 470,000 SEWA members in Gujarat state from over 80 occupational groups. Despite the heterogeneity of its membership, SEWA classifies its membership into four main categories: vendors and hawkers, home-based workers, labour or service providers, and rural producers.

This booklet, the second in a series of three booklets on 'SEWA at Thirty', provides a detailed picture of SEWA's membership.² Part I discusses the size, composition, living standards, and economic status of the *membership as a whole*. While Part II describes the *general* work arrangements of SEWA's members, Part III describes the *specific* work arrangements of *nine of the large trade groups* in SEWA's membership, including a profile of a woman from each group. And Part IV briefly describes the *common risks* faced by SEWA members, their coping strategies, and SEWA's strategies to help its members cope with these risks. The booklet concludes with a discussion, in Part V, of how members of SEWA participate in the organisation, the *leadership* that emerges from the general membership, and the *solidarity* that is built among the members.



¹ Three of the meeting halls in the SEWA Reception Centre are named after founding members of SEWA who have died, including Supa (the cart puller), Zora (a *chindi* quilt-maker), and Kapila (a vegetable vendor).

² The other two booklets are *Towards Economic Freedom: The Impact of SEWA* and *The Spreading Banyan Tree: The Philosophy, Structure and, Strategies of SEWA*.

