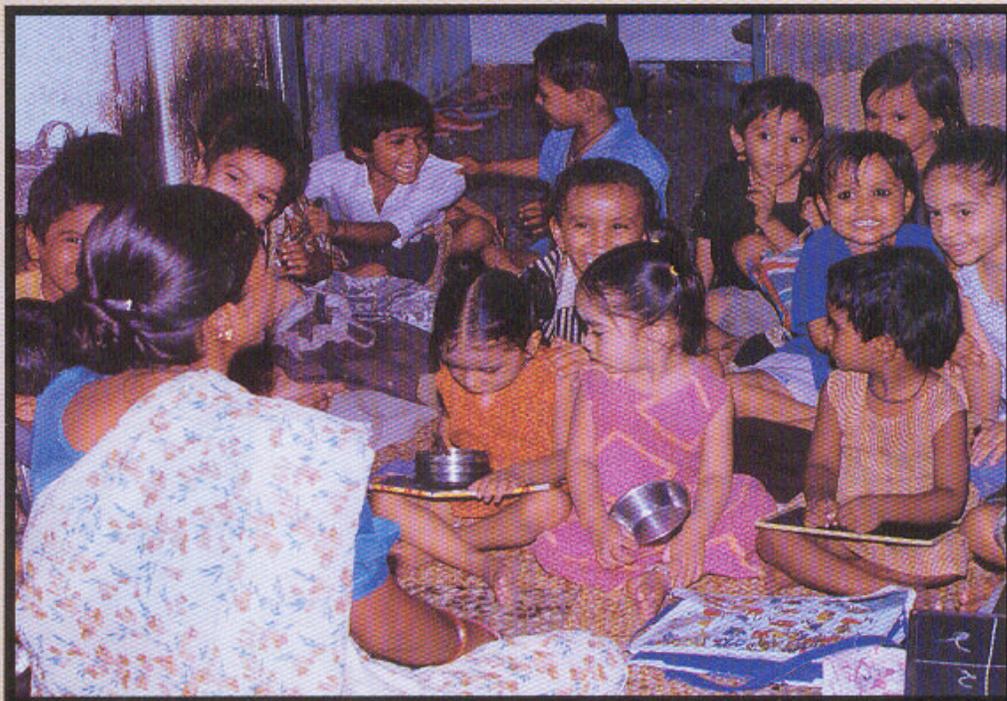


Reclaiming Childhood :
A Case Study of Child Care Centres
for the Children of Salt Pan Workers



JUNE 2000

Introduction

The major part of the north – western region of Gujarat is dry and classified as a desert region; it is known as the Little Rann of Kutch, Many of the poorest families in this district are salt workers or agarias. Twelve to fifteen thousand families from Dhangadra and Halawad talukas of Surendranagar district are engaged in the work of salt farming, which is their major occupation. For this work, these families have to migrate to the coastal desert terrains, where salt pans are being operated under private ownership. The salt workers have to stay in the proximity of their workplace for a period of six to eight months in a year i.e. from September to March. As the children also come along with their parents for six months away from their villages, it affects and disturbs their education, upbringing and overall physical and mental development. Both men and women work at the salt pans, so it becomes necessary for them to carry their children along with them to the workplace. For more than six months in a year, the families live in small shacks in the desert of the Little Rann of Kutch, pumping out brine and leading it into pans, where they slowly produce salt crystals. The salt workers work exposes them to unfavourable elements – especially the blazing sun. The children grow up by playing in salty water where their parents spend their whole day amidst the unhealthy working conditions.

Some of the families leave their children in the care of their neighbors while in some families, it is the grown up child who looks after his/her younger brothers and sisters. This affects the education and upbringing of the older child, who has to suffer in order to carry out the responsibility of baby-sitting. In this way the children of agarias have to live in insecure, uncertain life as they are largely ignored from their early childhood. Their working parents are not able to take proper care of their children nor are they able to provide them with proper education or health care.

The Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) began working with the salt-pan workers in 1992, after a study showed that the salt farming takes a heavy toll on their health and overall well-being. It was in 1993 that SEWA started a childcare centre (Balwadi) in order to take care of the physical and mental development of their children of the salt workers of Surendranagar district.

Issues and Problems of Salt Pan Workers

Gujarat state in India produces 40 lakh metric tons of salt every year. This quantity serves the needs of 60% of the population of India. In Surendranagar

district, places like Dhangadra, Halawad and Dasada talukas are where the work of salt farming is undertaken. About 12,000 to 15,000 people from the adjoining areas migrate to these salt pans to earn their livelihood every year. There is an increase in the number of migrants every year.

In Surendranagar, district, within the areas adjoining the desert Rann of Kutch, there are 150 small and big salt-pans. The people involved in the work of salt farming are: (1) Merchants, b) Agarias, and c) Labourers. The merchants own the leases on the salt farms. They advance a sum of money to the agarias and buy the salt from them at a fixed rate at the end of the seasons. The rate is often less than one-third the market rate. The agarias are families who undertake to produce a certain quantity of salt during the seasons for the merchants. The labourers are paid on a daily wage basis and are called only when there is extra work that can not be completed by the agaria family.

The work of salt farming is done during the months of September to April i.e. for eight months in a calendar year. During these months, the labourers who live in nearby areas, frequently travel between these farms and their own villages. But those workers mainly agarias, who come to work from far off places, construct temporary huts in the vicinity of the salt farms. As these workers come here to stay with their entire families, the children also accompany them and stay with them near the salt farms. The workers are not able to send their children to the schools and in fact, the children are asked to help in the work of salt farming. The workers work in shifts at the salt-pans where the work begins at 9 a.m. and goes on till 5 p.m. in the evening. Women workers equally participate in this work with their male counterparts. In spite of working in the salt-pans, the women also have to fulfill their entire household responsibilities including childcare. Most of the women workers take their children along with them to their worksite at the salt-pans, the women also have to fulfill their entire household responsibilities including childcare. Most of the women workers take their children along with them to their worksite at the salt-pans. This not only exposes their children to rough conditions but also makes them vulnerable to health hazards, affecting the overall physical and mental development of the children.

According to the National Family Health Survey Report of 1992-93, 40% of the children in the age bracket of 6 - 11 months and 60% of the children in the age bracket of 1-2 years are found to be underweight in India. This indicates that the number of malnourished children is much more in India than in any other country. Due to this, the children are found to be weak right from their early childhood and they become easy targets of illness. Also, when these women labourers go to work, they find it difficult to take proper care of

their siblings. Either they have to keep their children at their neighbour's house or they are taken care of by their older siblings in their homes. Generally, most of the women workers prefer to carry their children along with them to their work sites. In this case, the overall development of the children is affected as they do not get enough nutrition at the proper times and they are also exposed to unhygienic conditions, making them vulnerable.

In 1990, SEWA conducted a survey of the salt workers of Surendranagar district in collaboration with the Foundation for Public Interest. During this survey, information about how these workers had to work under harsh conditions, wherein they were exposed to hot and humid climates all year round, was obtained. In spite of their hard work, salt workers are very underpaid. They do not have access to even the basic necessities of life and thus continue to suffer in order to earn bread for their families, who have migrated with them to these salt-pans. The women, who work with their husbands in the salt - pans, do not have enough time to give proper attention to their children. The children grow up playing near the working parents. They become prone to health hazards and acquire skin diseases, chronic coughs and tuberculosis. SEWA started a mobile clinic with permission from the Rural Labour Commissioner in 1991, in order to cater to the health needs of the salt pan workers. The organization also approached the Commissioner for starting of creches and childcare centers for the children, including education and literacy classes for the older children. After being granted the permission by the government, SEWA started its first childcare centre on 1st March, 1992 in Ruda village of Dhangadra taluka, with the collaboration of Gujarat State Rural Workers Development Union. By 1993, 6 childcare centers were established. In 1996, there were almost 21 such centers in different villages. 75% of the operating funds are provided by the Gujarat State Rural Workers Development Union, while 25% of the funds are provided by SEWA for the childcare centers.

Before starting these centres, a number of meetings were held with various salt panworkers from different villages. During these meetings, different issues like the number of salt workers in the region, their issues and problems, cooperation from the people, availability of educated and trained volunteers to run these childcare centers, feasibility of a childcare centre in a particular region etc. were discussed. It was after the collection and analysis of all such required information and data that a particular village was selected as a site for such a childcare centre. A Gram Sabha was also convened in order to make the village people aware of the concept of a childcare centre and educate them about what needs it will cater to. At present there are 21 childcare centers in the surendranagar district, where children in the age

group of 0 - 6 years are taken care of, by trained and educated staff. Again, in 1995, a small survey was conducted by SEWA on 150 such women whose children were kept in these Balwadis. The motive behind such a survey was to seek their opinion and know their needs; accordingly changes could be made in the operation of these centers to suit their requirements.

Initially, it was very difficult to convince the women salt workers to ask them to leave their children in the care of these childcare centers. They were reluctant to act as they believed that only mothers could take proper care of their own children and not anyone else. It was a totally new concept for them. How can one trust another woman and entrust one's child in her personal care? How can one know that her children are being given proper and adequate nutrition or not?

To convince these women salt workers, the teachers at the Balwadis had to go to their houses in order to fetch the children. The organizers at SEWA conducted meetings with the women workers and explained how their children were safe in these childcare centers and that they would be provided with adequate nutrition. They explained that this will relieve their household burden and then the mothers can work without any tension for a higher number of hours, which will also increase their average income. After a lot of discussions, the women workers were ready to put their children in these centers. Slowly and steadily the concept of childcare centres picked up among these women.

Findings of the Study

The above mentioned study was conducted on 150 women salt pan workers. It was found that most of the women lived below the poverty line, and were unable to take care of their children.

- 0 50% of the families surveyed, revealed that their average monthly income is in the range of only Rs. 500 - Rs. 1,000 per month.
- 0 98% of the women salt workers are illiterate and 82% of the men are illiterate.
- 0 Before these childcare centers were started, 68% of women used to take their children along with them to the workplace, while 26% used to keep their children in the care of elderly relatives or grown-up children at home or in their neighborhood.

One of the major impacts of the child care centres was to increase the earnings as well as the peace of mind of the mothers.

- 0 There has been an increase in the average monthly income of the women salt workers after their children's admission in the childcare centre. This increase was registered-in the case of 82% of women and the increment was in the range of Rs. 100 - 300 per worker.
 - 0 48% of the women respondents can now work overtime in the salt pans and thus earn more because they are relieved of the tension of childcare. Most of the mothers felt that there was a great improvement in the health of their children after they started attending the centres
 - 0 One major change noted in the children after their admission to the childcare centre is that 100% of the children have now been vaccinated.
 - 0 88% of the women respondent are of the opinion that their children have become healthier after their enrollment in these childcare centres.
 - 0 More than 70% of the women respondents have started giving Vitamin A capsules to their children, which has benefited their health.
 - 0 Mothers felt that the mental and emotional growth of their children had also improved
 - 0 51% of the women respondents say that their children have learnt many new things at the childcare centre, which has resulted in their overall mental development.
 - o 38% of the women respondents believe that along with their children's mental and physical development, they have also learnt some new lessons in their lives.
 - 0 12% of these children have learnt to live with more discipline and cleanliness.
- Although mother's felt that child care centres had benefited their children, they felt that there needed to be some improvements, especially in terms of timings
- o 68% women said that the staff at these centers took proper care of their children.
 - o Only 40% women replied that the timings of these childcare centers suited their work timings.
 - 0 29% of of the women respondents demanded that the Balwadis should remain open for longer hours than their scheduled time.

Recommendations

The following suggestions emerged from the study.

- The women felt that the children centers should coincide with their work schedules. They should be open for more than 8 hours a day. At present they work only for 4 hours per day.
- Women suggested that there should be a provision for more toys, games, slides, playground equipments and rides for the children, at these centers.

- Some mothers suggested that an increased quantity of milk per child should be provided at these childcare centers.
- Some women wanted better ventilation at these centers.

Conclusion

The Balwadi teacher enjoy a good rapport with the women salt workers in the different villages of Supendranagar district. In the aftermath of their initiation, there has been increased overall mental peace and positive changes in the lives of these salt workers, especially women workers. They need not worry about their child's mental and physical development and can work for an increased number of hours. This directly helps them in getting more earnings and in improving their living standards. It is not only the children who are benefited by these Balwadis, but also, the mothers, who can learn some good practical lessons about taking care of their children at home in a more efficient manner.

www.sewa.org
www.sewaresearch.org

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.