

## SEWA's Approach to Poor Women's Economic Empowerment

Human rights are very important to human development. Acknowledging this fact, SEWA has been fully working for over 45 years to support it and thus support development of its over 1.9 million women workers from informal sector. From this experience of almost 5 decades working with poor women workers, SEWA has realized that definition of human rights needs to be broadened and sharpened to encompass some of the inherent rights enshrined in the universal declaration of human rights. Some of these rights are:

### 1. Right to work – decent, meaningful and productive work.

Today, while the global North lives in world of globalization and rapid economic growth, SEWA's over 1.9 million women workers put in 16 to 18 hours of work daily, yet earn very low wages and have hardly any assets. According to SEWA's founder Ela Bhatt, "poverty is a form of violence with the consent of the society. We have agreed to keep poor people poor. We make the poor vulnerable." Therefore, at SEWA we believe that organizing to seek **freedom from poverty, hunger and starvation is a human right**. To live a life of dignity and self-respect is the right of every human being. Right to Life and Right to Livelihood or Work cannot be separated.

**We at SEWA strive to achieve Right to Work by ensuring economic security.** Our members call it the Economic Freedom. So how do the members of SEWA organize.

*When SEWA started organising the members in the dry desert areas in North Gujarat in early 80s', it was observed that every household had a woman who embroidered. Yet they were all digging earth on relief sites, barely earning INR 75 (< USD 2) a month. Here was a skill, which had the potential to turn into livelihoods.*

*SEWA approached Puriben Aahir, a natural leader and a fearless pioneer and offered to bring work with fair pay, if she could find women willing to embroider. Puriben brought 5 women who took on the job of embroidering kurtas, and in the very first week earned INR 150. The women earned around INR 500 a month, sitting right at home. Slowly the word got around and more and more women started joining.*

*Puriben started organizing more and more women with embroidery and other craft skills in village after village, and in two years' time she had organised more than 15,000 women artisans all of whom are illiterate. Gradually, these women's embroidery became the major source of their income and livelihood in the area. Today, a skilled embroiderer can earn up to INR 10,000 per month. Contrary to their previous meagre income of INR. 75, today these artisan families have assets - land, water pump, tractor, house,*

*savings, insurance etc. Women's employment has been able to bring in not only financial benefits, it has also roped in demographic changes as in increased no of children attending school and decreased rate of migration. It has also brought about a change in the family dynamics as well as in the community.*

*Given the perpetual struggle for water in the area, Puriben along with her grass-root sisters, took on the challenge of building rain water harvesting structures like village ponds, roof-top water tanks and recharging wells. Despite facing dismissal, scorns and women persisted, to eventually bring water to their village and into their homes, for drinking, as well as for agriculture. Where there is water, there is agriculture; and where there is agriculture, there is work for the men. Thus, indirectly, women began the process of empowering the men.*

*Today the villages in the area have clean water to drink, crops in their fields, and flowers and fruits growing in their yards. It has taken more than a decade, but the women and their collective have changed the land and its people.*

The above experience shows that women gain confidence in their own abilities if their existing skills and knowledge are enhanced. They also gain strength from the camaraderie of other women. Thus, organising on the basis of work allows women to set in motion a transformation of herself, and of her community. In other words, Right to Life is Right to Work, Right to Work needs to start from where the woman is. And women's individual Right to Work must be made collective to be enforceable for poor women.

SEWA follows a need-based, demand driven approach to organize women to enforce Right to Work. The communities themselves are the designers and implementers of all community-based activities and work, under the leadership of SEWA's members. SEWA helps women members build and operate their own organizations. By organizing themselves into cooperatives and federations, the members develop collective bargaining power and create for themselves alternative sources of employment. In other words, women build capacity to demand and enforce Right to Work. Building human capacity is a must to enforce Human Rights of poor women. Rights without capacities means little. SEWA also strongly believes that rights must be demanded bottom up and not requested to be handed down to poor women.

## **2. Right to access to Energy**

*Twenty-one-year-old Rubina Akhtar - a young Muslim girl from Kashmir, lost her father in the political turmoil. Although Rubina wanted to study, she had to drop out of school to help her mother with household chores. The family was hardly able to afford one meal a day and Rubina was continuously plagued with worries about their future.*

*One day, Rubina learned about SEWA and came to SEWA, Gujarat in a group of 25 women, to take a month-long training in assembling and repairing solar lights. Villages around her hometown of Kupwara rarely have electricity, and the women collect firewood for cooking and heating. To relieve women like her mother from the drudgery of collecting wood, Rubina went back to Kupwara and organized a Self-Help Group to assemble and sell solar lights.*

*The men in the village, none too happy that a young girl like her dared to set up a new enterprise, challenged her - If you are any good, then repair this light. And they pointed to the solar light in the village mosque that had been out of order for two years. Rubina, humbly accepted the challenge, quietly set to work, and in a flash, the light started working. The maulvi - the clergy man was so impressed, that he himself came to honor her. His approval would open the doors for other girls like her.*

The above case shows that when women have access to energy, it not only generates livelihood opportunities but also earns them respect from the society & community and gives them the dignity. It also relieves them from the drudgery of very hard and strenuous work while tremendously helping in improving their health. Right to Life thus depends on Right to Energy – a Human Right for SEWA sisters.

SEWA's approach is strongly based on the Gandhian philosophy which emphasises that Every right has a responsibility attached to it. SEWA also believes that rights have limited meaning if corresponding responsibility is not performed. Hence, SEWA's members perform their responsibilities first before demanding rights. The next set of rights are such having responsibilities attached to them

### **3. Right to Access to Credit**

Women's **Right to access to credit** has the responsibility of savings attached to it. Therefore, at SEWA we call it as Savings First!

World over more emphasis is placed on credit at the cost of savings and savings related services such as pension, insurance, etc. However, SEWA's experience shows that with increase in income, women have small but, in cash, disposable amount in their hands. Poor women are often the most affected victims of effects of natural disasters such as droughts and floods. The effects of such natural disasters along with other causes like illness and lack of ownership of productive tools or assets such as land, house or water causes indebtedness. The women therefore prefer savings.

SEWA helps its members by providing savings related services that includes ways of repaying debt; buy new assets such as land or house or well or cattle; expand the existing economic activity

in volume or diversity; deepen the reasons that generate surplus for savings; and help plan and mitigate the impact and reduce the possibility of being vulnerable to natural disasters.

World over, savings is hardly seen as the basis of economic growth or prosperity. However, at SEWA, we strongly believe savings as economic discipline and consumer restraint and not as a goal in itself. Thus, at SEWA, ***Right to Credit is achieved by performing responsibility to save.***

Additionally, when women have cash, disposable income, however small, their status in their family and the community enhances. They are taken more seriously. Savings also leads to asset building – a tool to fight poverty.

## **4. Right to Education**

SEWA members believe that **Right to Education** has the responsibility of educating the girl child. During the Annual General Meeting (AGM) in the year 2000, identifying lack of education, specifically literacy as the biggest impediment to their growth, the leaders of SEWA themselves demanded for education. The women demanded better education opportunities and felt illiteracy was the largest roadblock in the path of their progress. This led to the conception of **Jeevan Shala**. Through Jeevan Shala, SEWA also focuses on educating the young daughters and the young members.

As the elected representative Shantaben tells, ***“Uptill now, I lived in the world of darkness. But with education, I can read the numbers on the bus, I can read the signboards. I suddenly feel as if I am in a new world. I realised that I do not have to depend on anyone.”***

The curriculum of Jeevan Shala was developed to cater specifically to the needs of the members who needed to learn about things relevant to their daily lives. Members expressed their immediate need to learn to read minor but important matter, such as the numbers on buses, the destination information, sign boards, road maps, and newspapers. In addition, members wanted to learn writing skills to fill out application forms and write to government agencies. The Jeevan Shala includes these things and much more. The program teaches vocabulary relevant to different trades and has its own periodical for learners to practice reading and writing. Jeevan Shala also incorporates educational exposure visits as well as linkages to higher education.

SEWA realized that the younger generation of its members – the adolescents, face huge challenges, which deprive them of opportunities such as lack of resources, education, financial backing, etc. For these reasons, SEWA begun establishing programs specifically related to their development that include capacity building, literacy, organizing and livelihood skills among others.

Keeping in mind the objective of fulfilling the need for education opportunities specifically for adolescent girls in mind, SEWA initiated “SHANU” programme which works with adolescent girls

and their communities to better understand and improve their educational and employment opportunities as they transition through adolescence.

*Jamuben Khangabhai Ayar, from Dhokawada village of Santalpur block in Patan district is an artisan and a crafts leader monitoring, facilitating and coordinating for artisans in her village as well as in the cluster of villages surrounding her village.*

*Women from her community are not allowed to go out of the house. After joining SEWA, they got to know the value of their traditional embroidery and that they could earn a livelihood from it. Jamuben and other women started doing embroidery. However, they did not let their girls go to school. SEWA organizers persistently tried to convince and encourage them to send their daughters to school. Finally, Jamuben was convince and decide to send her daughter Sakhi to school. Everyone in the family opposed her. However, Jamuben was determined and told them that "I will not ask a penny from you for her education and will educate her from the money that I make from embroidery."*

*Sakhi (Jamuben's daughter) started going to school. However, she did not like as there were no other girls. Jamuben talked to the mothers of other girls who were her age to send their daughters to school. At first, they also opposed but finally Jamuben convinced 4 other girls to go to school. For higher studies, they did not have a school in their village. Jamuben learned that higher education facility for girls was available in the nearby town Junagadh and it would cost INR 15,000. Jamuben worked on embroidery and gathered the money to send her to study. Today, Sakhi has completed her PTC and is pursuing her MA.*

*Jamuben says, "After seeing my daughter, all the members in our community educate their girls. There is not a single person in our community now who does not send their girls to study. Due to my decision to educate my daughter, I have been selected as a member of the school education committee and attend the meetings regularly."*

With education, the young members of SEWA now aspire or dream. The artisans want to become designers, the farm labourers want to become entrepreneurs.

## **5. Right to Street Vending**

This right has the responsibility of keeping the streets clean and safe. Poor women as citizens have Right to City. Right to City means Right to Work in Cities. Right to Work in Cities means Right to hawk or vend on the streets.

Since last 40 years, SEWA is fighting for the recognition and validation of Street Vendors right. Its vendor members always face the wrath of the civic authorities because they are not legalized.

SEWA along with its street vendor members have pioneered schematic plans to regularize the natural markets in the era of urbanization of the cities to blend with the scenario. SEWA feels that the Natural Markets should be persevered and on these lines, has also formed natural market committees comprising of the vendors leaders to manage the affairs of the natural markets.

*About 150 vendor members of SEWA were vending fruits, vegetables and other items of daily need for past 20 years near the Kharicut Canal in Naroda, Ahmedabad. However due to some instances of chain-snatching near the market, the residents opposed to these members vending and complained to the police and stopped them from sitting at that place. The vendors lost their natural market.*

*SEWA's team struggled for the right of the vendors; to get them their natural market back. The teams along with the market committee for this area met with the police inspector, local government officials, the communities and local residents and explained them and came to an agreement where the vendors were given a place to sit and vend.*

*The local market committee comprising of 11 elected vendors from this area, is given various trainings by SEWA like different trainings on behavior with the customers, values, maintaining cleanliness, responsibilities of the vendors, how to display the products, etc. The purpose of this committee is that in case of small problems with the police or the municipal corporation, the committee can manage and talk to them. SEWA provides hand holding support in case of grave problems.*

## **Way Forward**

SEWA strongly believes that it is the right – a human right for every individual to be able to live a life of dignity and self-respect – so that the world is full of hope, opportunities and happiness for every human being.

These Human Rights also mean Right to Work, Right to Street Vending, Right to Credit, and Right to Energy. When SEWA's members look at their lives, they come up with Right to Income, Right to Asset, Right to Water, Right to Sanitation, Right to Health (not only medical but full health), Right to Mobility, Right to Education, Right to Finance and Banking, Right to Connectivity, and Right to Energy. When poor women are on their way to achieve or realize the above Rights, they are on their way to achieve or realize Human Rights.

SEWA stands at the cross roads of promoting these Rights – locally, nationally and globally. SEWA's sisters have come thus far and are poised to chart their way ahead.