

Swavlamban: A tool towards second freedom

A Brief Note

The Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA): SEWA is a trade union of poor, self-employed women workers founded in 1972. SEWA's main goals are to organize poor women workers to secure full employment and self reliance. Spread across 11 states in India and 14 districts in Gujarat, SEWA now has a membership of over 1.25 million women a majority of which is from the rural areas and is the largest national level union of poor self-employed women in India. What began as a trade union has now grown to a number of member-driven institutions, formed by the vision of the founders and the demand of SEWA's empowered members. Throughout its existence, SEWA has empowered the communities to be the active change agents or active partners in development and not passive recipients. At the core of SEWA's activities and initiatives is the Gandhian philosophy of self-reliance. SEWA defines self-reliance as second freedom, and has constantly endeavored to help its members secure this for themselves.

SEWA has initiated market led vocational skill building initiative "Swavlamban" for the poor informal sector women workers with the support of European Commission. **Swavlamban-** Self Reliance- intends to empower 25,000 informal sector women through market relevant capacity building programs within the next 4 years. The core objective of the **Swavlamban** is to build self-reliance among poor, marginalized women.

Skill &Capacity Building in SEWA: SEWA and its members have understood the importance of training and development and leverage of technology as powerful tools for catalyzing income generation at the grassroots. Skill and capacity building has been an integral part of SEWA's methodology. SEWA's training methodology begins with awareness of basic human rights, followed by awareness about the importance of skill building, saving, organizing and collective strength. This is followed by leadership training which builds confidence and motivation and lays the base for the subsequent skill and capacity building activities.

SEWA perceives Skill building and training as an integrated and holistic concept linking it with self reliance and poverty alleviation. SEWA's interventions are part of a larger framework, designed in a manner that maximizes the effectiveness of each individual intervention. Since skill building and training is directly linked to the livelihood of poor women workers, their family, the household, the neighbors and the community are of central importance for securing basic survival needs through diverse and often complex livelihood strategies. Additionally, SEWA strongly believes that the training would need to build up capabilities to shift from one profession to another, to obtain the freedom to make choices without losing status. Essentially what is required is the freedom to grow, to chose a career and develop it. Instead of focusing only on the paradigm shift from training for employment, SEWA concentrates on training for empowerment which is closely linked to the notion of decent work and self sufficiency.

The skill-building package in SEWA is different for producers, traders and service providers and is developed in consultation with the community. As mentioned earlier, skill building doesn't end with training. Rather it involves continuous handholding on issues like accessing credit, mobilizing micro-finance through self-help groups, marketing, accessing information, knowledge of markets, placement etc.

The Context: Though informal sector contributes major share of GDP in India, the workers lack necessary skill to compete in the current era of competitiveness and efficiency. Despite the recent rapid growth of the Indian economy, over 90 percent of the workforce still resides in the informal sector and 44 per cent are illiterate. Furthermore, 94 percent of working women are in the informal sector. Currently little investment or opportunity exist for worker's within the informal

sector to receive skills, let alone develop their own enterprise. The result is a major gap in skills, which must be overcome if India is to achieve rapid, inclusive growth.

For SEWA, this represents a significant challenge – a challenge it aims to address through an implementation methodology perfected over the years, albeit at a much larger scale and in a much more rigorous fashion. Towards this, SEWA has titled its intention to roll out large scale skill and capacity building activities as ‘ **Swavlamban** ’

Swavlamban Program: The core objective of this program is to build self-reliance in poor, marginalized women. Since women are the key to the economic wellbeing of a household, by making poor women self-reliant we expect to increase household income and consequently improve the quality of nutrition and the level of education of the children – thereby helping the household emerge out of poverty over a period of time, as well as helping it provide a good future for its next generation. The core of the program is large scale capacity building in the following areas:

Textiles and garmenting, Agro and food processing, Agriculture and nursery raising, Construction, Information and communications technology, Building and managing micro-enterprises, Salt production, Para-medical training, Para-veterinary training, Renewable energy, rural infrastructure and livelihood

SEWA intends to impart direct training to an estimated 25,000 women over a span of three years. Since skill and capacity building is only one part of SEWA's integrated approach towards uplifting households, the trained women would be exposed to one or more of the following services to facilitate livelihood generation.

- Market linkages and access to market information (particularly for trades such as agriculture and salt production)
- Handholding support and microfinance for those who choose to run their own micro enterprises
- Opportunity to work in the supply chain – as producers, processors, value-adders and sales personnel in one of SEWA's producer companies
- Opportunity to be part of SEWA's rural resource and training team to train more women (and thereby create a multiplier effect)

Another main thrust is to build a **cadre of trainers** who can provide training to the other people in the subsequent years. We expect that out of the pool of trained cadres, some cadres can become trainers and start investing on this skill as an asset. They can find out a livelihood out of this skill and become master trainers. More specifically, the trainers take this training as their own enterprise and livelihood and therefore these trained trainers will go out to respective states and districts, enroll trainees and carry out training in batches.

Within a span of 5 years, SEWA expects to uplift 25,000 families (and thereby at least 100,000 people). SEWA would monitor their economic situation and other parameters such as capital formation, quality of nutrition, children's education etc. SEWA expects at least twice this number of families to benefit through indirect training (through its rural resource and training team).

For the members of SEWA, the program is indeed a harbinger of hope and aspiration. We know that the path towards freedom and Self reliance will be always through long and difficult terrains. *To keep our promises to the millions of our sisters, we have to go miles before we sleep...* Yet, we strongly believe in our vision and collectively strive towards our goal because at the bottom of our hearts we know that we shall overcome *one day.....*