

Introduction

2006 SEWA Membership

All India membership	9,59,698
Gujarat membership	4,83,012

State		Membership
Bihar		
SEWA Bhagalpur		3,100
SEWA Munger		2,012
Delhi		6,164
Gujarat		4,83,012
Kerala	SEWA Trivandrum	800
Madhya Pradesh		4,16,000
Rajasthan	SEWA Bikaner	2,310
Uttar Pradesh	SEWA Lucknow	45,800
West Bengal	SEWA Murshidabad	500
Total membership of SEWA:		9,59,698

Gujarat membership by Trade:

Main Categories of workers	No. of women	Percentage of total membership
Manual Labourers and Service Providers	3,24,434	67 %
Home based worker	80,103	17 %
Hawkers & Vendors	51,815	11 %

Producers	26,660	5 %
Total	4,83,012	100 %

Gujarat membership - Urban and Rural distribution:

Main Categories of workers	No. of women	Percentage of total membership
Rural	2,94,848	61 %
Urban	1,88,164	39 %
Total	4,83,012	100 %

Growth of Sewa's Membership: 1972-2006 (India):

Year	Gujarat	India
1972	1070	1070
1977	1948	1948
1982	10733	10733
1987	15144	15144
1990	25911	25911
1991	46076	46076
1992	38136	45936
1993	42280	53570
1994	75615	143702
1995	158152	218797
1996	162781	212016
1997	159204	211124
1998	142810	209250

1999	147618	215234
2000	205985	318527
2001	284317	420208
2002	535674	694551
2003	469306	704166
2004	468445	688743
2005	475308	796755
2006	483012	959698

Every year in the early morning chill of January, our union leaders, called Aagewans, assemble for our annual general meeting at SEWA's Academy's Training Centre in Manipur village of Ahmedabad district. Over steaming cups of tea, Aagewans renew old friendships, develop new ones and exchange stories of struggle and of small and big successes in organizing workers. The atmosphere is like an annual family gathering. The sisterhood of SEWA is palpable.

This year too, 2000 aagewans, our elected union representatives or pratinidhis came from all corners of our state. Some Aagewans from Delhi also came to share and partake in this special event.

The focus of this year's annual meeting was to be the direction we collectively want to take, given the fast pace of changes in our country in all spheres, and also some new opportunities that are unfolding for women workers.

Our sisters involved in linking growers of vegetables with vendors of these, spoke of the far-reaching changes that are occurring in this sector. Our Mahila Cooperative Federation runs a shop in the main wholesale vegetable market in Ahmedabad city, linking growers with vendors and ensuring that they get a fair price for their hard labour. As our urban union organizers have built up a strong vendors' union over three decades of organizing them, the linkage between the growers and vendors has benefited both groups of our membership.

However, now large Indian and overseas corporations are poised to enter the retail sector and plan to directly purchase from growers. They will also provide them with the necessary inputs for production. And every few kilometers these large retail chains will have an outlet for their competitively-priced produce.

In sum, our shop and other such workers' initiatives will increasingly face direct competition from such retail giants. We will have to carve our own niche markets and review our strategies, prices and approach.

Meanwhile, the small retailers, our members who are vendors, face several challenges. First, there is much more crowding in streetvending because more men laid off from their usual employment have entered the vending sector. There are more street mafias and local toughs called goondas, who rule the streets now as compared to earlier.

Our members sell small amounts of vegetables with relatively lower profit margins than the larger merchants who sell a wide variety of vegetables. Hence, our members earn less per day than the merchants and even as compared to the men who are competing with them on the street for sales.

Further, in the push to make Ahmedabad a "megacity", our city planners have neglected to include the poor, especially space for streetvendors to sell their wares. Instead, they are hounded off the streets, their goods are confiscated and they have to put up with abuse and even violence.

When we take our case to the courts, we do not find a sympathetic hearing. In fact the middle classes, including judges, shopkeepers and others, are more concerned with parking space, as they acquire more cars and scooters.

And finally, political elements, sometimes with a nexus of goondas, as mentioned above, have infiltrated the ranks of streetvendors.

All of this makes the livelihood of streetvendors very precarious. Rather than incorporating these enterprising workers in our urban planning, city planners focus on their eviction. Streetvendors will have to continue to organize and at the same time use legal and other measures like dialogue with the authorities to safeguard their livelihoods.

While the vegetable growing and vending chain was discussed as one of many such changes in our members' world of work at the micro level, the macro changes likely to affect all of us were also outlined at our meeting.

At the macro level, privatisation, and an approach that promotes business, especially big business, as opposed to the "small" and people's sector seems to be the order of the day. Both Indian and multinational corporations are entering the retail, food-processing and textile sectors, as we saw in the earlier example of the vegetable growing and vending chain. The government continues to develop some pro-poor policies and yet the fruits of liberalization and high economic growth are yet to reach our members.

The above changing macroeconomic environment presents some new opportunities as well as threats. Workers' organizations like our's are not afraid of competition. But we demand a level playing field. We need to understand that this is an era of fast-moving changes; this is an era that favours the large.

SEWA is a large and strong organization. But we need to organize and build our collective strength further. We need to develop new skills in accordance with the new employment opportunities, and we need to harness the new technologies to help us attain self-reliance. We also need to educate our next generation in a manner that will increase their ability to obtain work and income. At the same time, we need to retain our focus on women workers and to retain our core values and principles.

The social sector is also facing significant changes. Social security for the poor has become a priority on the poverty agenda. In fact, today there are greater financial resources for health care, child care and education than ever before. This is a welcome step forward. But the vexing issue of implementation—of how to ensure that the poorest, women and traditionally under-served communities actually obtain these services—still remains.

Our years of experience in providing services by, for and with local women workers offers some useful lessons on implementation at the grass roots level.

Further, we still have the largest unregulated private medical sector in the world. And medical costs, including for life-saving medicines, are increasing rapidly, driving the poor deeper into indebtedness and poverty.

In this context, health insurance is being mooted as a possible way to keep people out of illness-related debt and poverty. SEWA's almost two decades of experience in both preventive primary health care and health insurance for hospitalization can be useful to show how such services can be provided and in a viable and low cost way.

At the same time, there are now more opportunities for employment in the social or service sector. Human resources—trained personnel, and preferably local women—are required in greater numbers to reach services to our remotest villages and to often-forgotten slums. Hence, we need to develop our midwives and child and health workers' schools to equip ourselves to take advantage of the new opportunities in the service sector.

Well-known academic and social commentator, Shri Achyutbhai Yagnik of Gujarat, shared his views on the changing times with our Aagewans. He said that there are some in India who are looking to the Western model of development; of building India into a strong economic and military power. But their vision does not include workers. Their's is a different vision of development.

SEWA's contribution lies in showing how the poor and poorest can be organized for their own development and for self-reliance. The other large contribution is in the social sphere. SEWA unites all workers. It has joined thousands of women from all communities. This has not gone unnoticed by the divisive forces in our society.

The way to build further on this special unity is to reflect on the work, the strategies and direction. Above all, he exhorted the aagewans, our union leaders, to ask questions, for only then would we get answers. And along with building our organized strength, our shakti, we should educate ourselves for critical awareness. This, in turn, will fuel our organising, as knowledge and education is power.

Finally, he encouraged us to promote our core values and principles such that they become the values of all of society. That is what Mahatma Gandhi tried to do in "Hind Swaraj" in 1908. What he wrote is still relevant to our situation today. In that very spirit, SEWA should lead by showing all people the vision for a fair, just and value-based society.

Elaben congratulated all aagewans and organizers for the growth of our union in 2006. In particular, she acknowledged the untiring efforts of our sisters in Madhya Pradesh—Manorama Joshi and Shikha Joshi—who along with their union leaders helped the union to cross 4,00,000 in their state. Thus, SEWA is now a union of almost 10 lakh or one million workers.

She noted that despite continuing efforts by the state to discredit and discourage us, we have prevailed and grown from strength to strength. This is a matter of pride and inspiration.

She also said that the world of work has changed—not only in terms of economic structures, but also in terms of thinking and values. The challenge before us is how to channelise and lead thinking in the direction of the poor.

Our main strength is our union. This is our main asset as well. We should always keep the poorest and weakest in the centre of all our efforts.

But organising and building up organizations of the poor alone are not enough. It is not just a question of numbers. Each and every member must have the chance to develop to her fullest potential. All of us must speak in one voice. We must work harder to help our members come out of poverty and move towards self-reliance. Asset-building and in women's name, is an essential part of our work.

"And remember," Elaben reminded all present, "We must remain 'small' in spirit and retain our humility, even as we grow and become 'big'—Nana rahiye ane mota pan thaiye."

The year 2006 was one which saw a significant boost in the organizing of women workers of the informal economy, our members. The biggest boost came from our sisters in Madhya Pradesh whose union crossed four lakhs membership.

We also continued the strengthening of our efforts towards self-reliance. Self-reliance entails planning and implementing each activity and programme of SEWA such that it is economically viable, and such that in the aggregate women's own organizations are sustainable in the long term. Self-reliance also means that women workers run and own these organizations.

2006 was also a year of floods in five districts, causing devastation of homes, crops and livestock and disruption of livelihoods. The five districts – Anand, Kheda, Vadodara, Ahmedabad and Sabarkantha suffered very heavy losses. Those of Anand and Kheda were perhaps the worst ever so far. Hence, we focussed on helping our members recover and re-build their lives. This will be described later in this report.

2006 was also a year of several steps towards our goals of full employment and self-reliance. These are also described in this report.

Most of all, this year we reached close to the one million member (10 lakhs) mark. This increase in our membership, in organizations within the SEWA movement and the growth of our activities and programmes are a testimony to the commitment and strength of our members, their unflagging energy and hope in the future, and their faith in SEWA and in their own sister organizations.

The Self-Employed Women's Association—SEWA

SEWA is a trade union registered in 1972. Today it is a national union of poor, self-employed women workers, with members from nine states—Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Kerala, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Delhi, West Bengal and Uttarakhand. Our members are women who earn a living through their own labour or small businesses. 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. Constituting 93% of the labour force, these are workers of the informal economy. Of the female labour force in India, more than 94% are in this informal or unorganized sector. However, their work is not counted and hence remains invisible. In fact, women workers themselves remain uncounted, undercounted and invisible.

Self-Employed Women Workers

These are workers who have no fixed employee-employer relationship and depend on their own labour for survival. They are poor, often illiterate and vulnerable. They barely have any assets or working capital. But they are extremely active economically, contributing very significantly to the economy and society with their labour.

There are four types of self-employed workers:

1. Hawkers, vendors and small business women like vendors of vegetable, fruit, fish, egg and other food items, household goods and clothes.
2. Home-based workers like weavers, potters, bidi and agarbatti workers, papad rollers, ready-made garment workers, women who process agricultural products and artisans.
3. Manual labourers & service providers like agricultural labourers, construction workers, contract labourers, handcart pullers, head-loaders, domestic workers and laundry workers.
4. Small producers like artisans and salt farmers.

SEWA's main goals are to organize women workers for full employment and self reliance. Full employment means employment whereby workers obtain work security, income security, food security and social security (at least health care, child care and shelter). SEWA organizes women to ensure that every family obtains full employment. By self-reliance we mean that women should be autonomous and self-reliant, individually and collectively, both economically and in terms of their decision-making ability.

At SEWA we organize workers to achieve their goals of full employment and self reliance through the strategy of struggle and development. The struggle is against the

many constraints and limitations imposed on them by society and the economy, while development activities strengthen women's bargaining power and offer them new alternatives. Practically, the strategy is carried out through the joint action of union and cooperatives. Gandhian thinking is the guiding force for SEWA's poor, self-employed members in organizing for social change. We follow the principles of satya (truth), ahimsa (non-violence), sarvadharmā (integrating all faiths, all people) and Khadi (propagation of local employment and self reliance).

Through their faith in organizing for their rights, to protect their livelihoods and to safeguard their rightful place in the economy, self-employed women have made their mark. They are now visible, more articulate and self-confident. Three decades ago, people didn't even recognize them as a group nor their significant contributions to our country. Today there is a growing recognition of this, of their immense leadership potential and their abilities.

And yet, we have a long way to go. There are still millions of women who remain in poverty and are exploited, despite their long hours of hard labour. They are not yet organized. Also there is much to be done in terms of strengthening women's leadership, their confidence, their bargaining power within and outside their home and their representation in policy-making fora. It is their issues, their priorities and needs which should guide and mould the development process in our country. Towards this end, we have to support women in building their own capacities and in strengthening and developing their own economic organisations.

Any self-employed woman worker in India can become a member of SEWA by paying a membership fee of Rs. 5 per year. Every three years SEWA's members elect their representatives to a Trade Council made up of worker-leaders. This committee then elects the Executive Committee of SEWA.

