

Our Urban Union struggling for our rights and for recognition in the urban economy

Ahmedabad city is the birthplace of SEWA. We have been organizing women workers here for the last 34 years. For the last 6 years, we have been organizing through the campaigns. Self-employed women workers from 74 trades are active in our urban union. The campaign address work-related issues of as many women as possible. They also influence policy and laws. This has not only helped strengthen the major trades in the union but also it has been a major support to workers in small trades like bangle making and garland making etc.

Our main urban union campaigns are given below, along with the issues they are addressing :

1. Home Based Workers
 - a. Piece Rate Minimum wages
 - b. Identity Cards
 - c. Social Security
 - d. Minimum wages for all the trades included in the category
 - e. National Policy for home-based workers
2. Labor and Service Providers
 - a. Construction workers campaign for a board and worker benefits
 - b. Head Loaders campaign for better working conditions
 - c. Small Factory workers, Casual Workers and Paper Pickers campaign for recognition and rights.
3. Street Vendors
 - a. Space and Licences to sell
 - b. National and State Policy to safeguard vendor's rights
 - c. Family Identity Cards

In all organizing, two issues are key.

1. Identity Cards
2. Umbrella Legislation

Organising for Social Security involves frequent area meetings. The most pressing issue is identified by members and local union leaders and taken up for action.

Our urban union has been struggling to preserve, protect and generate women's work in the city of Ahmedabad. Its efforts in this direction are summarized in the table below.

Table 5.1
Employment and income generated

Particulars	No. of Women	Total Amount (Rs)
Employment	35,688	9,18,45,272
Income	1,37,723	20,03,26,598
Asset-building	49,569	1,47,21,842

The four major occupation categories constituting our urban membership and their activities this year are described below.

1. Home-based workers

Home-based workers are among the first members of SEWA. We began our urban union by organizing home-based quilt-makers, ready made garment workers, bidi workers and women blacksmiths. Today, we have organized a total of 48,995 home-based workers in Ahmedabad city.

A total of 12,859 workers have obtained support in various ways for their employment. Mainly this has been through protection and defending of their work and their rights. Through collective bargaining, we helped workers raise their daily wage rate and also to obtain other benefits and improvements in working conditions. In fact, Rs. 3.20 Crores worth of employment was generated and safeguarded in 2005. Union action also benefitted 64,520 workers, leading to income of Rs. 7.54 Crores.

In addition to the employment focus of the union, we provided social security services like health care, child care and insurance by linking with our social security team. In particular, we organized diagnostic camps with a focus on women and children's health and also eye check-ups.

Similarly, financial services were made available to women through SEWA Bank, and capacity-building, especially leadership training, and research was undertaken jointly with the SEWA Academy.

The highlights of organizing the main occupations within the home-based workers category are given below.

A) Bidi Workers

Total members: 11,547

13,000 workers obtained Rs.1.34 Crores by way of increased wages and, therefore, income. Bidi workers were earning Rs. 36 per day for rolling 1000 bidis or Indian cigarettes. Today this has increased to Rs. 40 per day. This was achieved through collective bargaining with employers. 5,204 women also got extra welfare benefits worth Rs. 32 lakhs.

Our union also helped 102 bidi workers get new avenues of work like embroidery, so that their sources of employment and income increased and diversified.

As part of our organizing, we held various meetings to bring out the workers' issues and to collectively decide how to move forward. Such meetings were held with over 5000 workers.

In addition, we have meetings with the labour department, employers and others. We met several times over the year with the Labour Commissioner of our state for identity cards, minimum wages, housing provident fund and other benefits for our members.

Our meetings with officials responsible for workers' welfare resulted in workers getting scholarships for their children and also medical care from the bidi workers dispensary.

Further, 5,000 workers took shares worth Rs.12.5 lakhs in our own SEWA Bank, thereby increasing their assets.

B) Agarbatti or incense-stick workers

Total members: 9,868



Very significant strides were made in organizing agarbatti workers. 11,050 workers obtained Rs. 1.04 Crores worth of employment and 10,000 of them benefitted from our collective bargaining efforts, earning an additional 60 lakhs this year by way of wage increases. 10,000 workers also got bonus wages of Rs. 5 lakhs during the festival season. 500 of them also obtained identity cards, a major breakthrough. Further, 1,050 workers were employed in this industry, resulting in employment of Rs. 1 crore being generated.

These workers are piece-rated like the bidi workers and those rolling “water-based” and “oil-based” agarbattis both obtained a wage increase of 0.50 paise per day.

Agarbatti workers now earn Rs.7.00 per day for water-based and Rs. 8.00 per day for oil-based agarbattis.

This organizing was possible through intensive contact and 2,500 meetings with workers. We also held 500 meetings with employers which eventually resulted in increase in the minimum wage. 300 meetings were held with the labour department.

C) Ready made and Embroidery Workers

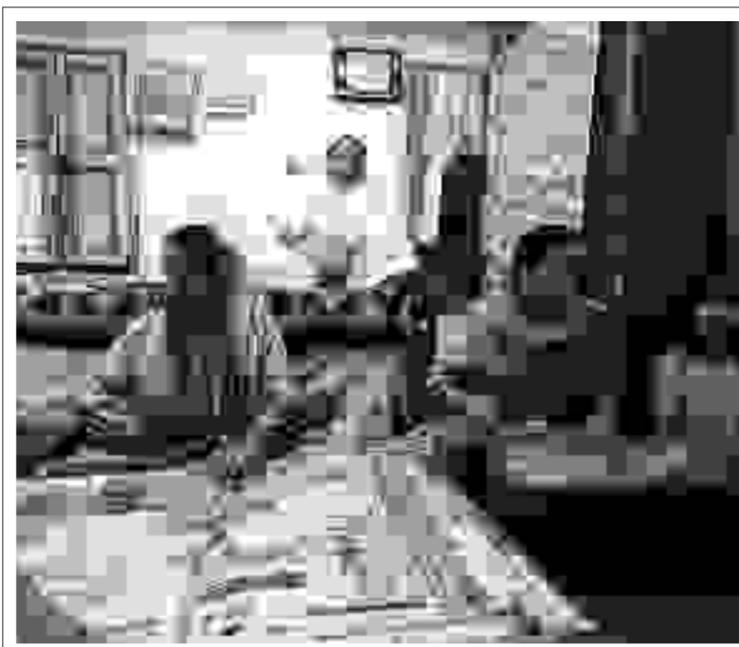
Total members: 32,739

1,435 of these workers got employment worth Rs. 40.3 lakhs. 1,405 of this was new employment worth Rs. 39 lakhs which was generated by union action. 1,200 women also benefitted from wage increases of Rs. 8 lakhs in total, as a result of collective bargaining.

As some of these were new members, we organized 1,000 small meetings in the areas where workers live. We also had 450 workers' education classes and 180 legal training sessions for them.

D) Kite-makers and other home-based occupations

Total members: 3,526



446 kite-makers obtained income worth Rs. 31 lakhs through their work. All also obtained identity cards. 500 workers in diverse home-based economic activities like bangle-making, women's accessories making, to name a few, obtained income worth Rs. 1.45 Crores. 300 of them also obtained identity cards.

In order to organize these smaller but in sum, significant numbers of workers scattered in many occupations we held many of meetings 1,500 for kite-makers and 360 for others. Meetings were also held with employers and the labour officials.

2. Street Vendors

Total members: 40,391

These workers, like the bidi workers, are our oldest members. The street vendors have always been a solid and vocal block within our urban membership. In fact, they constitute the largest group within our urban membership. They have been raising their issues articulately within our union for the last forty years. In fact, vendors were the founders of SEWA Bank and continue to be among their best customers both saving regularly and taking loans and re-paying these on time, from the increased earnings of their small and medium-sized businesses.

Our vendor sisters are self-employed and contribute actively to the urban informal economy. They provide fresh produce and other modestly-priced goods to the public. They are critical to the urban distribution system of goods. Yet they are harassed by the police and municipal authorities and left out of urban development plans.

Because of the harassment they face every day, the major union action with and for vendors include re-instating them in the marketplace and restoring their confiscated goods to them. This year 15,626 vendors were re-instated in the marketplace, enabling them to earn Rs. 18.75 lakhs in sales. Another 136 street vendors began selling their wares and earning Rs. 9.6 lakhs.

In addition, 7,449 vendors' payment of fines was waived, saving them Rs. 8 lakhs collectively. 1,845 women did not have to pay bribes worth Rs. 18,450 to officials as a result of our union action. Hence, this was also an earning for them.

Further, tools, equipment like push-carts ("laris") and goods worth Rs. 1.51 Crores were restored to 4390 street vendors. And 1,122 women obtained identity cards. Many of them take loans regularly from SEWA Bank this year 1,000 business loans were taken.

All of the above union action was possible through 500 meetings with street vendors, 487 with the municipal authorities and 600 meetings with the police department. In order to support our efforts to work out city plan for street vending with the municipal authorities, we surveyed 153 existing and potential vending sites.

The vendors lives are especially full of struggles that are often violent beatings, forcible evictions and abuser their daily fare. Some of these struggles are given in the box below.

In addition, to direct economic benefit through union action, street vendors also obtained social security services and took part in many leadership training and workers' education programmes.

3. Manual Labourers and Service Providers

Total members: 65,167

Manual labourers and service providers, like the home-based workers, consist of a very wide range of occupations. These include our very first group of union members, the head loaders, as well as those working in small foundries and factories that have mushroomed in the city.

50,621 workers of this category obtained income worth Rs. 8.14 Crores this year.

A) Head loaders

Total members: 2,718



The head loaders transport bales of cloth on their heads or in push-carts in the main wholesale cloth market of Ahmedabad. They have been doing so for generations, linked to the same traders and merchants. Through union action, a tripartite board was constituted, with representatives of unionized workers, employers and the labour department. This board has been providing welfare benefits and also, importantly, been working out wage increases for many years now.

This year 3000 head loaders got Rs. 15 lakhs worth of bonus at festival time. 3,052 of them got other economic benefits totaling Rs. 5.7 lakhs. They also obtained 300 identity cards and organized 100 workers' education sessions. They were able to achieve all of this through 2,000 meetings with workers and 15 meetings with employers.

B) Construction Workers

Total members: 14,549

Construction workers are engaged in hard labour, building and re-building our homes, offices and cities. It is also the most dangerous industry with accidents and even deaths being commonplace. Most of our

members work alongside their menfolk at building sites. But the women are mainly involved in unskilled labour. SEWA is trying to upgrade their skills and to convert them into skilled workers like masons. The Mahila Housing SEWA Trust, our union's sister organization, is training our members in this regard.

In 2005, 15,000 workers obtained income increases worth Rs. 1.8 Crores. 596 received bonus income of Rs. 1.7 lakhs and 681 obtained welfare benefits totaling Rs. 79 lakhs. 201 workers got Rs. 6.85 as claims for accidents. In addition, 1700 workers obtained identity cards.

Workers' education classes for 240 workers, a mass education campaign on their legal rights through flyers, and leadership training activities were undertaken. 856 workers attended legal training to appraise them of their rights under the special law for construction workers. About 6,500 meetings were held with workers.

Some of the construction workers also formed their own workers' cooperative, Racheta, through which 10 workers are getting employment.

C) Paper Pickers

Total members: 20,336



Women who collect re-cyclables from the street, garbage dumps and offices for a living, are our poorest and most downtrodden of members in the city. This back-breaking activity with earnings below poverty line income levels, also carries a social stigma. This work is associated with the poorest of urban communities. And yet the paper-picker women are strong, resilient and vocal. This year 600 of them got new employment and a total income of Rs. 38 lakhs, while 448 workers' incomes stabilized as a result of union action. The latter collectively earned Rs. 65 lakhs. 145 women were re-instated, meaning that they had been barred from collecting re-cyclables from dumps or offices,

and we helped them resume their work. As a result of this, income worth Rs. 4.2 lakhs passed through their hands.

In addition, 18,650 workers got bonus worth Rs. 19.36 lakhs and income increases were enjoyed by 5,390 paper-pickers who as a result earned Rs. 50.3 lakhs. Through years of collective bargaining, workers obtain regular access to waste paper from government offices. 653 workers had access to this waste paper, earning a total of Rs. 17 lakhs. Welfare benefits from the government were obtained by 722 women. They got Rs. 9.7 lakhs worth of such workers' benefits.

Further, for their recognition as workers and union members, SEWA provided 7,350 women identity cards. 10,000 meetings were held with 29,000 paper-pickers to strengthen their union. 960 women attended workers' education classes and 300 participated in legal training. An additional 150 meetings were held with the municipal authorities, enabling women to get work with dignity in the city.

As with other urban workers, these women obtained financial services from SEWA Bank, social security like child care, health check-ups and insurance with our social security team and leadership training and literacy classes in conjunction with the SEWA Academy.

D) Cleaners, Diamond polishers, Catering workers and small factory workers (contractual workers)

Total members: 13,677

Cleaners, like their paper-picker sisters, are the most socio-economically downtrodden of workers. This year 282 of these women obtained Rs.16 lakhs worth of employment; 75 of them through new employment. 99 workers obtained income increases of Rs. 3 lakhs in total and 60 got welfare benefits from government totaling Rs. 1.4 lakhs.

We gave SEWA identity cards to 300 women, thus according them full status as union members.

150 diamond polishers got identity cards from SEWA and 297 of them started their own bank account in SEWA Bank. We organized 20 meetings and workers' education sessions with them, in order to increase their organizing into our union.

Catering workers are women who work in catering businesses as contractual labour, mainly in the cleaning and chopping of vegetables, some cooking and serving the cooked food and finally washing cooking vessels and dishes. We gave 500 workers identity cards from our union, and helped 150 of them get wage increases of Rs. 2 lakhs. 72 women got employment through union action either new work or re-instatement. The income generated from this amounted to Rs. 8 lakhs.

Finally small factory workers, all contract labour, also include temporary workers. We gave 600 of these workers identity cards from our union. 170 workers obtained employment worth Rs. 41 lakhs and 325 got Rs. 1.6 lakhs worth of income as bonus.

All through the year we organized hundreds of meetings, workers' education classes and other forums for these workers to unite and increase their combined strength in our union.

Solidarity with our sisters the Shanta Livelihood Programme for communal violence-affected women workers and their families

Gujarat witnessed the worst communal violence in India's post-independence history in 2002. SEWA was very much involved both because our sisters were severely affected and because from the very first day of the crisis we were involved in ensuring that relief and rehabilitation initiatives actually reached the affected families.

Our efforts have been reported in previous annual reports and also in a special document called "Shantipath".

In 2002, the then Prime Minister of India asked SEWA to take up the responsibility of rehabilitating the violence-affected widows and their families. We call our sisters "Shanta Behen" or literally, "Sisters of Peace". And their children and those who lost one or both parents are called "Hamare Bache" or "Our Children". All are involved in our Shanta Programme of rehabilitation and reintegration into society. This effort is supported by the central government.

The programme has rehabilitation through livelihood at its core. Each and every Shanta bahen was identified and provided with, or linked to, a means of livelihood. This meant that of the total of 273 women, some have started small businesses, others make garments at home and others raise milch cattle. In this way, they obtain work and income, and some hope to re-build their lives.

SEWA has also helped them invest the compensation monies they received and to obtain housing where they feel secure. All of our sisters have also been insured with SEWA Insurance or Vimo SEWA.

They also get health check-ups and special counseling by experts in the public hospitals on dealing with stress and even depression. For the latter, we have developed strong links with mental health professionals in the public hospitals for referral care.

In addition, and perhaps most importantly, the Shanta bahens have been integrated into the SEWA family. Two of them were elected as leaders in our union. Several are active in our trade committees, and one of them is an active insurance promoter!

Thus, slowly but steadily, and with much encouragement, patience and support, our Shanta sisters have become members of our SEWA family. Relief gave way to rehabilitation work and now, three years after the crisis, to reintegration into society.

Meanwhile, their children and others have also been very much involved in our rehabilitation programme. The scholarships they received has been safely invested and they are all in school. Their health and insurance, including counseling where required, has also been ensured.

There are 800 such children. They are still closely in touch with us. In the long summer vacation months, we organize "summer camps" for the children where they learn new skills, play games and have fun. They also are involved in art and craft sessions and make different items like greeting cards, clay pots and paintings on fabric. We also took them on exposure trips to the science city and on picnics.

Our Shantipath Centre space and solidarity through workers' unity

After the communal violence of 2002, SEWA set up peace centers called Shantipath Centres, to build peace and solidarity through workers' unity. It was increasingly clear to us that in order to ensure peace, communal harmony and the security of all, women workers would have to take the lead. And they have done so with courage, determination and commitment.

"We will ensure that such violence will never happen again" is an often-heard refrain. Women have shown that they are serious peace-makers, and through issues that are close to workers' hearts.

At the centers, various activities were undertaken in the year 2005.

1. Peace Education

Through structured training sessions, celebration of all festivals, understanding and learning about different religions, women have become closer and have learned to deal with diversity and respect each others' faiths and traditions. They also learn about Gandhiji and his approach to safeguarding our multicultural and multi-religious society.

As a result, women have taken several bold actions like organizing sit-inseven sleeping on and blocking the road when their men-folk were on the verge of resorting to violence.

2. Livelihood and Social Security

The centers have become the hub for restoring and promoting livelihood in their neighbourhoods. Sewing classes are held for young women and they are linked up with local traders and tailors for work and income.

In the Shahpur area of Ahmedabad, we set up a special training centre for upgrading sewing skills for girls and women.

The centers also serve as collection centers for SEWA Bank and as insurance promotion centers, enrolling workers in Vimo SEWA or SEWA Insurance. In addition, health education sessions and even diagnostic camps are organized for our members.

3. Library

Our centers also serve as community libraries, where literature and books are available to workers and their families. We also have board games like carom for our members' children.

Flood Relief Action in 2005

The monsoons in 2005 were particularly heavy, leaving many parts of the city flooded. Water not only entered into our members' homes, but also ruined their goods, food grains and household items. Fortunately, many of the women were insured with SEWA Insurance or Vimo SEWA.

However, the first need was to pump out the water which had accumulated in these areas. In addition, there was the fear of epidemics, especially of water-borne diseases. We managed to get the municipality to pump out the water and clean up our areas. Further, we obtained and distributed 40,000 chlorine tablets for them and pamphlets to spread information about prevention of diseases. We also distributed 800 oral rehydration packets for gastroenteritis. Finally, we ensured that our members got medicines and treatment that they required for malaria and other diseases from the local municipal health authorities.

In the above process, we organized several camps and treated more than 1,000 patients.