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Home-based Garment Workers The Impact of the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA)

Impact: There is arguably no greater gap in economic wealth and bargaining power than between the home-based garment worker and the owner of the large garment manufacturing or retail firm for which she produces. SEWA works with home-based garment workers to increase their incomes, improve their equipment, and develop their skills.

The garment sector is one of the most globalized sectors and employs large numbers of women under poor working conditions. In addition to low piece rates, home-based workers often are not paid for months on end, and have to cover many of the costs of production, including: workplace, equipment, and utilities.

Ayesha-ben's Story

"At a friend's house, I learned to sew on a machine. This was a useful skill. I had dreamed of being a doctor, or a teacher but it was not to be. I stopped going to school and became a garment worker. Then in 1985, there was terrible communal violence in Ahmedabad. My sewing machine was burned and damaged.¹ I could no longer work and earn. It was at this time that I came into contact with SEWA...SEWA gave me a new sewing machine and so I began sewing again and re-building my life. My son was still very small so I put him in SEWA's crèche (daycare) in my area. Then I became active in our garment worker's union. We organised a rally and demanded minimum wages. Rahima-ben, who was a working class woman like me, took the leadership. Seeing her confront the merchants who paid us a pittance for our hard labour gave me strength and the will to fight. Our wages increased to eighteen and then thirty rupees per dozen petticoats sewed. Then Rahima-ben suggested that I join SEWA's health team. I had always wanted to be a doctor...so I took training to be the doctor of my area. So on one hand I sewed for a living and the other I got a stipend from SEWA for time spent away from sewing on health work. Since I joined SEWA, I got the strength to continue...I found the courage to speak out."



photo: Martha Chen

In organising garment workers, SEWA has focused primarily on negotiating higher piece-rates and fairer working conditions for sub-contract garment workers – many of whom are Muslim. This has involved negotiations with the Labour Commissioner to demand minimum wages, identify cards, and social benefits (childcare, health care, and school scholarships) for sub-contracted garment workers.

Over the years, SEWA has also helped home-based own account garment makers to acquire new skills, improved equipment, and market information to try to compete in the fast-changing local garment market. This has included loans for improved sewing machines, training at the National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT), and installing electricity in the homes of SEWA members.

Through the Inclusive Cities project, SEWA will continue to improve the livelihoods of home-based workers with increased presence in other regions of India. SEWA will also exchange knowledge, best practices, and capacity-building insight with partner organisations HomeNet South Asia and HomeNet South East Asia, whose combined efforts will unite and represent the voice of one of society's least visible sectors - home-based workers.

¹ After the riots of 1985 and the communal violence in 2002, when Muslim homes were burned and looted, SEWA has helped rehabilitate its Muslim members – many of whom are home-based garment makers.

Inclusive Cities project: Inclusive Cities focuses on support and capacity building for membership-based organisations (MBOs) of the working poor in the urban informal economy. Through organising, advocacy, and policy analysis, informal workers are making their needs heard within urban planning processes. Partners in the Inclusive Cities project include MBOs of the working poor, international alliances of MBOs, and support organisations committed to improving the situation of the working poor. For more information, and to access research and publications on inclusive urban planning and capacity building tools for MBOs, visit: www.InclusiveCities.org