Ms. Renana Jhabvala

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Renana Jhabvala is an Indian social worker based in Ahmedabad, India, who has been active for decades in organising women into organisations and trade unions in India, and has been extensively involved in policy issues relating to poor women and the informal economy. She is best known for her long association with the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), India, and for her writings on issues of women in the informal economy.

In 1990, she was awarded a Padma Shri from the Government of India for her contributions in the field of social work. In April 2012, she became Chancellor of Gandhigram Rural Institute, a Deemed University in Tamil Nadu, India.

Early life, family and education

Renana Jhabvala was born in Delhi to the Booker-prize winning novelist and screen-writer, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, and well-known architect Cyrus S. H. Jhabvala. Her grandparents were active in public life during the early to mid part of the twentieth century. Her grandfather, Shavaksha Jhabvala, was active in the early Indian trade union movement, and her grandmother, Mehraben Jhabvala, in the emerging women's movement. In a February 2012 talk given at the India International Centre (Delhi), Renana spoke about the work of Mehraben, who was a dedicated organiser and advocate of women and the President of the All-India Women's Conference from 1965–68. This talk can be viewed at the India International Centre's website.

Renana Jhabvala was raised and schooled in Delhi and graduated from Hindu College, University of Delhi, in 1972 with a distinction in BSc Math. She attended Harvard University to pursue an additional degree in BA Math. She then went on to the Yale University to pursue post-graduate studies in Economics.

Career and honours

After completing her studies, Jhabvala joined SEWA in Ahmedabad, in 1977 as an organiser. She worked first with the women workers stitching quilts in the Muslim area of Ahmedabad; she was instrumental in forming the first Cooperative in SEWA. Her main work was organising women into SEWA as a trade union. In 1981, she was elected Secretary of SEWA under the leadership of Ela Bhatt and organised beedi workers, agricultural workers, garment workers, street vendors and many others to bargain for higher income, better working conditions, space to work and social security. She was active in fostering the growth of SEWA across India, taking the experiences of the organisation to States like Madhya Pradesh and Bihar and most recently to Uttarakhand and West Bengal. Jhabvala was instrumental in forming SEWA Bharat, a National Federation of SEWAs now in nine States of India. In 1995, she became the National Coordinator of SEWA and started the national office in Delhi.
When the women members of SEWA began expressing the need for basic infrastructure and housing, she was one of the founders of the Mahila Housing SEWA Trust. In 2002 she became the Chair of SEWA Bank and helped to increase finance for poor women in many parts of the country.

She has been active at the international level, representing SEWA at the International Labour Organization (ILO) in 1995 and 1996 during the discussion on Convention for Home Workers; and subsequently in 2002 during the Resolution on the Informal Economy. At the South Asia level she was instrumental in forming HomeNet South Asia, bringing together organisations in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bhutan working with women home-based workers. She is presently the Chair of HomeNet South Asia. She is one of the founders and present Chair of WIEGO (Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing) and has been active in the formation of international networks for women workers in the informal economy.

In addition to organising women into trade unions and co-operatives she has been interested and involved in policy issues of poor women and of the informal economy. She has been active in many Government committees and task forces which have formulated policies ranging from National Policy for Street Vendors, to the Law for Social Security of Unorganised Workers, to policies for unorganised workers in various States. She has written widely on these issues in journals and newspapers and has co-authored seven books.

**Personal life**

She is married to Harish Khare. The couple has one son.

**Positions held (selected)**

**In the SEWA family of organizations**
- Chairperson, SEWA Grih Rin Limited (2014 - present)
- Chairperson, SEWA Bank (2002–2008)
- National Co-ordinator, SEWA (1995 – present)
- Chairperson, SEWA Bharat (All India SEWA) (2001 – present)
- Executive Trustee, Mahila Housing SEWA Trust (1994 – present)
- Secretary, SEWA (1981–1995)

**In international organisations (selected)**
- Member, Secretary General’s High Level Panel on Women’s Economic Empowerment in 2016-2017.
- Chairperson, WIEGO (Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing)
- Chairperson, HomeNet South Asia (2007 – present)

**In government (selected)**


Other
- Member Council, Integrated Research for Action and Development (IRADe)(2015 –Present )
- Member, India Senior Energy Advisory Council (ISEAC), Sponsored by Shell Company (2014–2016)
- Board member, Invest India Micro Pensions (a company for pension for the poor) (2006 – 2014)
- Board member, Institute for Human Development. New Delhi (2006 – present)
- Board member, India Development Foundation, Gurgaon (2010 – 2012)
- Board member, Indian Institute for Human Settlements (2010 – present)

Awards
- 'Lifetime Achievement Award 2017, awarded of Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industries Ladies Organisation,2017.
- 'Women of the year’ Award for her commendable contribution in public service, Awarded by Radio one, 2014.
- India Today Woman in Public Service, Awarded by India Today Group, 2013.
- Padma Shri, awarded by Government of India, 1990.
- Outstanding Social Worker, awarded of Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industries Ladies Organisation, 1990.
- Award for Outstanding Young Person, Given by Jaycees Karnavati – 1984.

Publications

Books


Empowering Women in an Insecure World: Joining SEWA Makes a Difference: Co-authored with Sapna Desai and Jignasa Dave. SEWA Academy, 2010.


**Selected articles in journals**

- "Basic Income should have maximum inclusion" in Governance Now, February 2017.


- "India’s time for unconditional cash transfers - We need to move towards a basic income regime, but cautiously, so that the vulnerable population does not suffer" in in The Financial Express May 2016.

- 'Cash gets stuck in that last mile- Banks need to focus on getting the banking correspondent model right' in The Financial Express, December 2015.

- “Column: Empowering women through cash transfers - Unconditional cash transfers could transform the lives of women and make them more assertive”(with Dr. Guy Standing)in The Financial Express May 2015.

- 'No conditions apply” in Indian Express, December 2014.

- 'Let's use CSR to strengthen people's sector' in Governance Now, May 2014.

- 'The unaccounted" in Indian Express, 2014.


Liberalisation and the Woman Worker (with Shalini Sinha) in Economic and Political Weekly, 25 May 2002.


“In the Wake of a Quake: SEWA’s Relief Efforts in Kutch,” in Manushi, Issue 122.


“Out of the Shadows: Home-based Workers Organise for International Recognition” (with Jane Tate) in SEEDS, No. 18, 1996.

“India Can Take the Lead” in Labour File, Vol. 2, No. 4, Centre for Communications, New Delhi, April 1996.


3. Selected articles in edited volumes


4. SEWA Academy publications

• Impact of Implementing the CDS through Sangini Childcare and Workers’ Co-operative, by Renana Jhabvala, Mirai Chatterjee and Mita Parikh, 1996.
- The Role of Street Vendors in the Growing Urban Economies (n.d.).

References


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