

The Balsewa Benefits: SEWA's Innovative Child Care Centres & Workers

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Gauriben Parmar has seen the full value of the innovative Balsewa child care centre model.

As a teacher for 24 years, she has benefitted from decent work and a deep sense of purpose and community involvement. As a parent who availed of the centre's services, she was able to continue earning income while her children were small – and then watch those children thrive because of the early childhood education they had received. And as a cooperative board member, she has been able to play a governing role in ensuring the centres continue to run well and provide quality child care.

The Balsewa model

The Balsewa child care centre model was initiated by the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA), a trade union in India, to fill a gap in the provision of child care facilities for its members: poor women working in the informal economy. Balsewa centres have operated for 30 years in some communities. Today there are 33 in the state of Gujarat; 13 of these are in the city of Ahmedabad, the birthplace of SEWA in 1972.

What sets Balsewas apart from other child care centres is that they are run as cooperatives. This means that the mothers of children who attend a centre and the teachers who work in it are the shareholders and SEWA members. They have the power to make decisions that affect how the centre operates. A governing Board is elected from among the parents and teachers.

Because of this innovative model, Balsewa centres do more than offer abundant benefits to young children and their parents – they provide decent work and growth opportunities for care workers.

Benefits to mothers and children

The centres accept children aged zero to five or six, and are open from 9am to about 5pm. This enables women to put in a full day earning income



Gauriben Parmar has worked at the Balsewa for 24 years and is on the cooperative board.



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while knowing their young children are safe and well cared for.

Access to a SEWA child care centre can have a notable impact on the economic status of mothers. A 2011 study confirmed that 68 per cent of women who sent their children to the SEWA centres were engaged in income-earning – a much higher percentage than those who sent their kids to the government-run Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) Centres (50 per cent) and those who used no child care (50 per cent). The ICDS Centres in Gujarat are only open four hours a day, so do not cover a full day of work for women informal workers. Furthermore, the majority of working mothers (64 per cent) who used a SEWA centre said that they were able to increase their working days due to the support from the centre, leading, in turn, to an increase in income of between 500–2,000 rupees (US\$7.75–31¹) per month.

Those additional earnings can be crucial to these households. At the Balsewa in Anil Starch, parents are primarily construction workers and home-based workers who do stitching and threading. The construction workers earn between 300–500 rupees (US\$4.65–7.75) per day, while home-based workers earn, on average, 150 rupees (US\$2.33) per day. In the Balsewa centre in Pathan Ni Chaali, another Ahmedabad

neighbourhood, parents are predominantly incense stick makers, earning only about 100 rupees (US\$1.55) per day, as well as street vendors and home-based workers, who can make 200–300 rupees (US\$3.10–4.65) per day.

Gauriben works as a *balsevika* (child care worker) and serves on the board of the centre in Anil Starch. Although usually there are two or three balsevikas per centre, she is on her own this particular day. But with 24 years of experience teaching here, she has no trouble managing the group of children who are seated on the floor in neat rows, singing. Around them, the walls are brightly coloured and filled with posters and alphabets.

The Balsewa curriculum is based on early childhood development principles. Activities are designed to care for both the mental and physical aspects of the child. A morning snack and fresh, healthy lunch are provided daily to ensure children are receiving the nutrition they need in these foundational years.

Gauriben says both of her own children attended this centre. She believes that its rich learning environment gave them a head start on their subsequent schooling and development. In her community, 11 children received bursaries to study in a private school; five of these children came from the Balsewa centre – and her daughter was one of them. Gauriben beams with pride when she talks about the success of her

¹ Currency conversions throughout this document are based on the mid-market rate of June 1, 2017 found at www.xe.com: 1 rupee = .0155 US dollars.



Despite the crucial role Balsewas play in helping young people develop and thrive, care work is generally undervalued in society.

daughter, who has just finished grade 12 and has a black belt in karate.

Like her daughter, Gauriben must be able to do many things well and simultaneously. Balsevikas do it all, from singing songs to cooking food to moving children between activities – and they do this six full days a week. They get Sundays off, as well as festival days and 30 days of leave annually.

The benefits of being a balsevika

For balsevikas, becoming a SEWA member and teacher provides opportunities to learn new skills and generate independent income. To be eligible for the role, women must have completed Grade 10 and be from the community. They undergo a ten-day training course on different teaching techniques for young children, and learn first aid. Refresher workshops are held every three months.

Ranjanben has been working as a balsevika for seven years. She used to do stitching work at home, earning about 1,000 rupees (US\$15.50) per month. Her husband had a very low paying job, too, and they struggled to make ends meet. She got to know about the Balsewas because she was living in a house next to a local centre. When one of the teachers left, she applied for the opening and was accepted. Ranjanben says the job brings respect. Her financial position and status in the community have been enhanced by joining SEWA and becoming a balsevika, and she has enjoyed personal development.

“Before joining, I was like a blank slate,” she emphasizes. “I didn’t know how to work. Now I know how to take care of children because I’ve had training on various issues: child development and child care.”

SEWA brings women together to learn, share experiences, and access services. Being part of a cooperative structure within a larger association that focuses on empowering women has expanded the horizons of many balsevikas, and created a sense of solidarity.

Another balsevika, Hansaben was a teacher prior to joining SEWA, but feels like she is making a real contribution through her work at the Balsewa. She contributes to the children and their parents, but also supports her SEWA sisters when they are “struggling in their personal lives.” For Hansaben, SEWA is like a family. “Even if you’re struggling and then you hear other people’s stories, it puts it into perspective. It gives you confidence.”

Divyaben Solanki joined SEWA 15 years ago. In 1999 her husband died, leaving her with two children to care for. Divyaben’s mother was a SEWA member; it was through this connection that Divyaben met some SEWA members who asked her to join the child care centres. “SEWA gave so much more support,” Divyaben stresses.

She was once afraid to leave the house, but now she’s a leader. She says that before, it felt as though everything was against her: her



Balsevikas continually receive training and gain new knowledge, which they bring back to the centre – and to the families.

husband had died, her parents didn't support her, the community didn't support her. But now she's pulled through. "Now," Divyaben says, "I am strong." And this has made her loyal to SEWA. When she was approached to teach at a government-sponsored ICDS centre, where the salary is better, she chose to stay with SEWA.

Care work is typically undervalued as it is considered "women's work" – an extension of their unpaid domestic labour. Balsevikas earn an average monthly salary of 6,000 rupees (US\$93), which sits slightly below the newly increased minimum salary of 7,500 rupees (US\$116.25) received by government-funded ICDS workers.

However, balsevikas are all members of SEWA, so they benefit from a range of social services, including health insurance and access to banking and credit. But for both balsevikas and ICDS workers, more government investment is needed to ensure a living wage and better labour and social protections. The centres are linked to the government's primary healthcare infrastructure. This is part of SEWA's integrated approach to development. The balsevikas have established linkages with urban health centres in their areas

and are able to take children to the closest clinic if a child is ill.

Because the balsevikas continually receive training and gain new knowledge, they are able to bring new information to the centre. This improves the learning environment – and extends to the families who use the centre. The balsevikas do regular home visits, where they provide health education to families, and use the centre itself as a hub to bring parents together for education. In one centre, for example, the child care workers shared their recent training on breast cancer detection with the mothers.

Government-run and private child care centres could learn from the innovative Balsewa cooperative model. However, the responsibility for funding child care services must rest with the state. As such, the balsevikas and SEWA support [the international campaign for quality public child care services](#) to increase investments and improve the quality of ICDS centres so that they become available to more women informal workers. A healthy and well educated population is, after all, a country's greatest asset.

About WIEGO: Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing is a global network focused on securing livelihoods for the working poor, especially women, in the informal economy. We believe all workers should have equal economic opportunities and rights. WIEGO creates change by building capacity among informal worker organizations, expanding the knowledge base about the informal economy and influencing local, national and international policies. Visit www.wiego.org.