

## SEWA & COVID 19: A HOLISTIC RESPONSE

### SEWA

Founded in 1972, the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) is a trade union with a sisterhood of service-providing organizations. The SEWA Union is now the largest national trade union in India with around 2 million members, all women informal workers, from 18 states of the country. It is also the largest organization of informal workers in the world. The SEWA sisterhood includes affiliated organizations of informal workers in 18 states and a range of service-providing institutions, some of which are themselves membership-based organizations: for instance, the SEWA Bank, founded in 1974, is a cooperative bank.

The membership of the SEWA Union is not only large (1.8 million women informal workers) but also diverse (from nearly 100 trade groups). For organizing and governance purposes, the SEWA Union groups the membership into four broad trade groups:

- **hawkers and vendors**, who sell a range of products including vegetables, fruit, and used clothing from a cloth or basket on the ground, push carts, or small stalls
- **home-based producers**, who stitch garments, make patch-work quilts, roll hand-made cigarettes (*bidi*) or incense sticks (*agarbati*), prepare snack foods, recycle scrap metal, process agricultural products, produce pottery, or make craft items from in or around their homes
- **labourers and service providers**, who sell their labour (as cart-pullers, head-loaders, or construction workers and agricultural labourers), or who sell services such as waste picking, laundry services, or domestic services.
- **rural producers**: small farmers, milk producers, shepherds and cattle rearers, salt farmers, or gum collectors

The COVID 19 pandemic-cum-lockdown in India have impacted the physical, mental and economic health of SEWA's members and other informal workers across India. All organizations in the SEWA family, collectively and individually, have mounted responses to the health and economic impacts of the COVID 19 crisis on SEWA members.

### SEWA: A HOLISTIC RESPONSE TO THE COVID 19 CRISIS

In response to the COVID 19 crisis, SEWA has sought to protect the physical, mental and economic health of its members. It has done so by issuing appeals or letters to the national, state and local governments on behalf of its members; by providing (or leveraging) relief assistance, preventive health and mental health counselling, transport, marketing and other livelihood support services for its members; and by disseminating SEWA's vision for a better future, especially for informal workers, through the media and to the national and international development communities.

### Appeals to National and State Governments

*National Government* - On March 26, 2020, on behalf of its 2 million members across 18 states of India, SEWA made an [appeal to the Government of India](#) to:

1. Provide income support to all the families of the informal economy workers to tide over this crisis, so that they are able to sustain their basic needs.
2. Issue a Circular to all the States directing Building and other Construction Workers Welfare Board and other existing Labour Welfare Boards to declare a compensatory package of 5000 rupees per month to all the registered workers to tide over crisis.
3. As the income crisis will cause a food crisis, mandate that all Public Distribution Systems (PDS) shops to provide free rations to all card holders until the crisis is over.
4. Mandate a six-month moratorium on repayment of all loans.

As a follow-up measure, SEWA issued a [statement](#) that contained information on the impact of the pandemic-cum-lockdown on different groups of informal workers as well as the original appeal. The National Committee of Domestic Workers of the SEWA Union issued an [appeal](#) on behalf of the estimated 4 million domestic workers in India which called for employers to pay their domestic workers for the days when the workers are obliged to remain at home under the national lockdown orders and for government to provide emergency cash transfers; and joined the National Association of Women's Organization's campaign to demand support for migrant domestic workers.

*State and Local Governments* - Several state affiliates of SEWA, including SEWA Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Odisha, issued appeals or wrote letters to state and local governments in their respective jurisdictions. The [common core recommendations](#) in these appeals or letters were food aid and emergency cash grants for informal workers.

Once the national, state or local governments announced their relief packages, SEWA began to work with government ministries and departments at all levels to facilitate the implementation of the relief packages. They helped to register SEWA members and other informal workers for the relief packages; to help SEWA members and other informal workers compile documents and complete application forms; and to help those who didn't have bank accounts to open one. They called for uniformity in the implementation of the national relief package and policy in all states: for instance, they called upon state-level Construction Workers Boards to give construction workers the 5000 rupees per month mandated by the national relief policy. SEWA also pointed to weaknesses in the relief packages and policies: e.g. the debt amortization policy does not cover those who borrow money from money lenders and will result in significant interest rate burdens for those able to postpone their debt repayments.

## **Responses to the Health Crisis**

### **# 1- Public health messages and medical advice**

SEWA converted the messages from WHO, UNICEF and Government of India's Ministry of Health into colloquial voice-based messages and disseminated them to SEWA members to spread awareness about the pandemic; mobilized its frontline health workers and local leaders to disseminate accurate information about the virus and preventive health measures and to monitor

cases in communities. Several of the state affiliates of SEWA mounted multi-media awareness-building campaigns, using WhatsApp messages, printed leaflets and posters (some designed by the children of SEWA members), to raise awareness about the virus and public health measures. SEWA Social Security started a rapid training in digital technology, as the lockdown and lack of mobility exposed the need to bridge the digital divide.

## **# 2 – Protective Equipment and Materials**

SEWA engaged many of its members in producing protective masks and thus providing them a livelihood. SEWA sold some of these masks and distribute some mask to health workers, police stations and public hospitals. SEWA also distributed hand sanitizer and soap to its members. SEWA Social Security negotiated permission from the government for its Ayurvedic medicine production unit to make low-cost hand sanitizers which are sold through its medicine shops (see below).

## **# 3 Health Care and Medicines**

SEWA's frontline health workers and local leaders referred cases of COVID 19 to hospitals. SEWA Social Security, through its health cooperative, continued to run two low-cost medicine shops in Ahmedabad City which are open 24x7 and an Ayurvedic medicine production unit

## **# 4 Mental Health Support**

Through local leaders and by phone, SEWA has maintained contact with individual members to provide counselling and support. For instance, SEWA Punjab started making phone calls to women to discuss with/educate them on the stress and anxiety being caused by the pandemic and how families should fight the crisis, focusing on children, the elderly and pregnant women. And SEWA Gujarat started a home-learning project for children of its members led by a SEWA educator: in one assignment, the children were asked to [create art from waste materials](#). SEWA also partnered with PRATHAM, well-known NGO active in education, to share their videos, training and play materials for children in eight states.

Muntaz-ben, a SEWA member in rural Gujarat who rears goats, reported how she applied the stress-management training that she had earlier received from SEWA in dealing with the lockdown restrictions:

“For the past year, I have been receiving stress-management training from SEWA, in which one of the things we learnt was that to fight stress, one has to keep oneself engaged. I applied this training in my family. Since everyone is staying at home the whole day, I have assigned different duties to all family members... such as fetching fodder for the goats, fetching ration, grocery and vegetables from market, feeding and watering the goats, cleaning the shed etc. Due to this everyone is engaged in some or other work whole day – so that they don't sit idle and since they have work, they also don't get agitated and stressed... and in the process, my workload has also been shared... I send my son to fetch the grocery... stand in queue for food rations... so that he can also understand household responsibilities.”

## **Responses to the Economic Crisis**

### **# 1 – Channelling of Government Relief Measures**

SEWA has both supported its members to register for emergency cash transfers, free food rations and more; and support government to channel cash grants, food rations and cooked food to its members and other informal workers. SEWA Delhi advocated for an e-coupon system that would allow those without the necessary documentation for the Public Distribution System (PDS) to access the free ration supplies as mandated by the national governments relief package. SEWA Delhi organizers then helped members get e-coupons to access free rations: one member offered her rations to a neighbour who did not have an e-coupon and was more needy than herself. SEWA Gujarat negotiated government passes for its rural team to deliver grocery kits from RUDI to SEWA members in two rural districts. SEWA Jharkhand organizers called government helpline to get cooked meals for needy villagers. SEWA Punjab contacted the District Commissioner's office and police stations to distribute food kits to informal workers and non-card holders and contacted local gurdwara's (Sikh temples) to arrange cooked food; helped informal workers to register for monetary benefits from the government (e.g. registering agricultural workers on the government app COVA) and informed all eligible beneficiaries to withdraw pensions, social security benefits from the government.

## **# 2 - Food Packets & Cooked food**

In many states across India, SEWA distributed food packets and set up community kitchens to provide cooked food to needy families. For instance, SEWA Gujarat helped rural SEWA members set-up food-camps along the highways near their villages to feed migrant workers walking back to their home villages; and SEWA Social Security has mobilized and supported its childcare cooperative members to cook and provide nutritious meals to the children and their families; and SEWA Punjab contacted local Sikh temples (*gurdwaras*) to provide cooked meals each day to needy families.

## **# 3 – Market Linkages**

SEWA has also facilitated market linkages for its members during the lockdown. The interventions to ensure market linkages differ by trade, as illustrated by the following examples:

- **SEWA Cooperative Federation** continued to facilitate supply of vegetables from SEWA producers in Kheda District to to an existing bulk buyer in Ahmedabad, which supplies food to the elderly in Ahmedabad city.
- **SEWA Cooperative Federation** negotiated full salary payments for all workers in the Homecare (domestic worker) Cooperative for the month of March and encouraged employers to continue payments for April.
- **SEWA Gujarat** collaborated with the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation on a [Vegetables on Wheels scheme](#) that engaged over 60 of SEWA's vegetable vendors in the delivery of vegetables and milk during the lockdown
- **SEWA Gujarat** negotiated with the state government to provide transport to small-scale salt farmers so that they could transport their produce to [markets](#)
- **SEWA Gujarat** procured farm produce from small and marginal farmers through its agri-business enterprise RUDI
- **SEWA Gujarat** arranged for SEWA smallholder farmers to sell vegetables through its Kamala sales outlet in Ahmedabad, after the wholesale markets were closed in Ahmedabad City.
- **SEWA Punjab** negotiated orders of wheat for smallholder farmers through government grain markets)

- When in late April the Kerala state government introduced a new system of fixed prices at first point of sale (i.e., where the fishing boats land) for the small-scale fishery sector, **SEWA Kerala** negotiated with the Fisheries Ministry to ensure that local women from fishing communities, who have traditionally been the fish sellers, would be given priority to buy fish directly from the fishermen.

For a sense of how SEWA's support works in practice, here is what Rahima-ben, a SEWA member and seasonal salt-pan farmer, reported:

**Rahima-ben:  
Salt-Pan Farmer, Gujarat**

“Last week, I needed to weld a special tool onto the back of the tractor for strengthening the sides of the salt pans. But due to the lock-down no welding shop was open. And this was the challenge faced not just by me but by thousands of poor salt-pan workers like me. I was looking at a loss of almost 200 tons of salt. I was worried sick – how would I pay off the traders and how would I repay the loan for the solar pump? But all of a sudden there was a phone call... it was SEWA's team leader from the Patan office and she was calling me to inquire if I was OK. I poured my heart out over the phone... I was crying... and so was the team leader on the other end of the phone call... After a couple of hours, she called me back... and informed me that on behalf of all salt-pan workers in the district, SEWA had sent an appeal to the district collector to open a welding shop specially for the salt-pan workers and the district collector had agreed. We were given a token number and daily about 15-20 salt pan farmers can visit the welding shop as per their token number.”

Rahima-ben summarized the situation as follows: “COVID 19 doesn't frighten us. It's the lockdown that poses a threat to our livelihood and sustenance. But so long as our SEWA is with us, we can win any fight.”

**SEWA MEMBERS: STORIES OF LEADERSHIP, RESILIENCE & MUTUAL AID**

SEWA has compiled stories of SEWA members and leaders during the crisis from across India, including how they have been impacted by the pandemic-cum-lockdowns, how they have coped with these impacts, and how they have led or assisted with relief efforts and public health measures. The common themes that emerge from these stories are the exemplary leadership, resilience, mutual aid and selflessness shown by SEWA's members and leaders: serving others first, focusing on needy families and the elderly. Here are three stories which illustrate these qualities.

**Sarabjit-ben:  
Domestic Worker, Caterer and Agricultural Worker, Punjab**

Sarabjit Kaur is a widow who lives in Patiala district with her son. She works as a domestic worker primarily, but also cooks for weddings and functions and works as agricultural labour to make ends meet. During this crisis, she has stepped up and taken on additional responsibilities to help her community.

As soon as she heard about the impending lockdown, she identified all needy families in her community who would need support immediately and conveyed this information to the local SEWA staff member as well as the political leaders. These families received ration kits on a priority basis therefore, which also allowed her *mohalla* to maintain lockdown from the beginning.

She herself was eligible for ration kits as distributed by the local MLA, which she shared with a neighbouring colony of migrants who were ineligible for ration distribution due to their migrant status. SEWA was able to lobby on behalf of these families for continued ration distribution, but police inquiries into the *mohalla* scared the women. Sarabjit Ben stepped up again and played peacemaker and helped control the situation before it could escalate.

She has also been very active in supporting livelihood opportunities during this crisis. While she herself doesn't stitch, she identified women in the community who could and connected them to SEWA to stitch face masks and coordinated the distribution of materials and masks on their behalf so they could make some money during the lockdown.

**Parveen-ben:  
Lacquer Craft Maker, Rajasthan**

Parveen, belongs to a poor family in Jaipur, Rajasthan. She takes care of a family of 6 and assists her parents in their lacquer craft business. She has been associated with SEWA for the past one year, she started with learning stitching and is now a Micro-Enterprise Leader (MEL) for the Digital Beti Project.

When Parveen learnt about wearing masks as a precautionary measure against COVID-19, she took to stitching masks herself from the fabric lying at her house. She stitched 200 masks learning the technique from a YouTube video and distributed them in her community for free. She also learnt about the symptoms, precautionary measures and government relief programmes associated with COVID-19 through the internet and raised awareness of these topics in her neighbourhood. She helped people understand where and how to get free rations under various state and central government schemes.

**Aanchala-ben:  
Home-based Worker, Uttarakhand**

Aanchala-ben is a home-based worker in Dehra Dun district, Uttarakhand. She has been associated and working with SEWA for a long time and is a community leader from Patel Nagar area. Aanchala-ben made a list of 60 households in her locality who did not have ration cards and contacted the local member of the legislative assembly (MLA) to deliver basic essentials and food to these households: the MLA distributed food rations, masks and sanitizers to 25 households. For the remaining families, Aanchala-ben along with others collected money and bought rations for the most needy households.

For short videos of SEWA members and leaders helping others, see [SEWA Mahila Housing Trust](#).

## SEWA VISION FOR THE FUTURE

The pandemic-cum-lockdown in India has exposed the pre-existing vulnerabilities and injustices faced by informal workers but it has also shown a spotlight on the contribution of informal workers in providing essentials goods and services before and during the crisis and on their leadership, resilience and humanitarian instincts in dealing with the crisis at the community level.

But what will happen going forward? Will the situation for informal workers revert to the old normal or to a new normal? And will the new normal be better or worse for informal workers and their livelihood activities than the old normal? Already, there are indications that the politicians and corporate sector will take advantage of the concerns about the virus and the economy to impose a worse new normal: some state governments have called for a suspension of labour regulations and some corporations are calling for 12-hour workdays. However, there is an opportunity to build on the public consciousness of the plight of migrant workers and other informal workers as well as the contributions of informal workers to the economy and to the relief efforts.

SEWA has a vision for the future – for the way forward. For the immediate future when the lockdown is lifted, SEWA is calling for *recovery cash grants* for the informal self-employed who work in single-person or family units or on family farms, rehiring of *informal wage workers*, and continuation of *social safety nets* for all informal workers. The recovery packages and stimulus plans must focus on the informal base of the economy and workforce: what SEWA calls the “people’s sector”. After all in India, over 90 per cent of all workers are informally employed and the vast majority of enterprises are informal. The Indian economy cannot recover without protecting and promoting informal workers and their livelihood activities.

SEWA is also calling for fundamental reforms – a reimagining and resetting of existing approaches to economic development, health care and social protection. This vision is well captured in the following statement by Ela Bhatt, the founder of SEWA:

“The current COVID-19 pandemic has become a wake-up call for every country, big and small, rich or poor, developed or developing. It has opened our eyes to the fragility of our healthcare systems, the instability of our economic structures, rising communal hatred, and to the vulnerabilities of our society. How well we cope with this crisis will depend on how we respond to local - not only global - realities, and how well we recover from the crisis will depend on how willing we are to reorganise our priorities when we rebuild.”