On Their Own: Development strategies of the Self-Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) in India

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ABSTRACT Rekha Datta outlines some of the strategies used by the now world-renowned Indian informal sector organization – SEWA, the Self-Employed Women’s Association – as an integrated model of empowerment.

KEYWORDS activism; co-operatives; credit; education; informal sector; trade unions

Introduction

SEWA, the Self-Employed Women’s Association in India, registered as a trade union in 1972 in Ahmedabad, India. In the past 25 years SEWA has grown from a trade organization of poor, self-employed workers to a movement. As a movement, it includes a labour movement, a co-operative movement, and a women’s movement. SEWA has introduced several innovative strategies to lead these movements. These strategies include skilful negotiations with the government (labour and trade union movement); time taken to consult with other women on new types of co-operative efforts (SEWA co-operatives, and SEWA Bank), and leadership and empowerment through literacy classes and Video SEWA.

SEWA as a trade union: innovative strategies of intervention

At its inception in 1972, SEWA was affiliated with the Textile Labour Association (TLA). Mahatma Gandhi and Ansuyabehn Sarabhai, the sister of a leading textile mills owner, formed the TLA in 1917. The objective of this union was to negotiate between the workers and the mill owners to get workers their fair share in the bargaining process. In 1955, trained as a lawyer, Ela Bhatt, an associate of Ansuyabehn, joined TLA to represent the workers. Between 1955 and 1958 she worked on proposals for labour laws. In 1961 she began to work for the Ministry of Labour in the state of Gujarat in western India.
In 1968 Bhatt headed the Women’s Wing of the TLA and came into contact with hundreds of poor women who worked in the informal sector and had no one to represent their interests and needs. Most of these women were migrant and temporary workers. When they did find jobs as head-loaders and cart-pullers, middlemen and contractors usurped most of their earnings. In addition, street vendors and hawkers were harassed and fined by the police. They were considered a nuisance, illegally encroaching on city streets and sidewalks. Even though this is the most traditional form of trading in India, the laws, carried over from the British legal system, did not consider these traders legitimate (Rose, 1992: 40–3).

Accordingly, when in 1972 Bhatt and 600 garment workers approached the Labour Commissioner of Gujarat to register the garment worker’s union, they were told that they were not considered ‘workers’. All they did was ‘sit at home and stitch garments’. They were not in the census and were therefore ‘invisible’ as economic contributors (SEWA Union, 1995: 5). After four months of intense negotiations with the government, SEWA was able to convince the authorities that Indian labour laws recognized that unions could be formed against employers as well as for improving the lives of workers. Thus SEWA was recognized as a union for the workers. Its main goals were to make its members visible, to improve their economic position by giving them access to credit and raw materials and to give them control over their own income (Rose, 1992: 45). This process involved social, economic and political mobilization.

Organizing and mobilizing poor illiterate women was a huge challenge. Recalling their first meeting, Bhatt said,

‘For the first hour, we could not get the meeting going because all the women were shouting at the others . . . After waiting a long time and no one heeding anyone else’s advice, I finally shouted “Quiet!!” We were all finding different voices to deal with each other . . . ’ (Bhatt in Rose, 1992: 44).

Thus SEWA was created, successfully mobilizing poor, illiterate women to find a voice of their own.

Ela Bhatt was General Secretary of the Union and Arvind Buch, TLA President, became the President of SEWA.

SEWA devised several innovative strategies to address the condition of poor, self-employed women. As a trade union, SEWA is different. Its main purpose is to mobilize and organize the self-employed women. Its goal is to organize self-employed women into sustainable organizations such that they can promote their collective development. According to a recent estimate, union action led to a considerable increase in income for members of SEWA (SEWA, 1998: 19). In the urban areas, union action often led to creation of jobs and job stability compounded through local economic organizations such as co-operatives and the SEWA bank.

This, however, is not a priority for SEWA members in rural areas. According to one SEWA account, ‘There were many struggles for minimum wages, organizers were attacked in the fields and legal cases were undertaken. Leave alone obtaining minimum wages, the village women who constitute 50 percent of the work force even lost whatever low-paid work they had, as a result of the union action’ (SEWA, 1997: 13). Thus SEWA realized that the only way to empower rural women would be to increase their local employment possibilities so that they did not feel weak and vulnerable. This called for the need to create co-operatives.

SEWA and new types of co-operatives

In rural India, there are three areas from which most households derive their income. They are agriculture, livestock, and handicrafts. SEWA identified these areas and directed its efforts toward helping women organize so that they can make a profit by producing and selling their products and services. The co-operatives that emerged in the rural setting centred on the needs and the assets of the poor, rural women. Thus, SEWA initiated milk co-operatives, nursery, handicrafts, credit and savings groups, child care and health co-operatives. In some districts they organized women dairy producers to enter the mainstream of the dairy industry. In some others, such as the Kutch district, women making crafts were linked to markets so they could sell their wares at higher rates than selling them to middlemen. The goal of these and