

Women in the Informal Economy

The growth of the informal economy, the role of women workers in it and their need for support has become the focus of a global movement. This brochure presents the story of these workers and that movement in the hopes of securing your support as a partner and collaborator.



“It took ten years to build an organization and twenty years to build a movement.”

Ela Bhatt, founder, SEWA and chair, WIEGO

A GLOBAL PICTURE

The informal economy

- Once expected to dwindle with economic growth, the informal sector today provides the majority of employment in many developing countries
- Over the past two decades the sector has been growing rapidly all over the world

Women in the informal economy

- In some countries of sub-Saharan Africa, virtually all of the female non-agricultural labour force works in the informal economy
- In many developing countries more women than men work in the informal economy
- Most women working in the informal sector are home-based workers or street vendors
- Women's informal sector work contributes substantially to GDP
- Women homeworkers, a nearly invisible group, contribute greatly to global trade

Women, poverty and the informal economy

- Gender, informal sector work and poverty often go together
- Though low, women's income from informal sector work sustains many poor households

Globalizing

- Globalization frequently weakens the bargaining power of workers and drives more people into the informal sector
- Women informal workers are an integral part of a globalizing economy

Organizing

- Women workers need to organize at local and international levels to respond to new opportunities as well as negative impacts of globalization
- Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) is a worldwide network of institutions and individuals concerned with improving the status of women in the informal economy

THE GLOBAL MOVEMENT

Over the past two decades, a movement has emerged in support of women workers in the informal sector worldwide. Much of the impetus and inspiration for this fast-growing movement has come from a trade union of low-income working women founded in India in 1972, the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA). SEWA members include street vendors, home-based workers, agricultural labourers, construction workers, head-loaders and rag-pickers. With several hundred thousand members today, SEWA has become an international force working with the women's and labour movements worldwide.

In the mid-'90s two international alliances were formed, HomeNet and StreetNet, to empower home-based workers and street vendors. From its inception, HomeNet was heavily involved in lobbying for the passage of the International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention on Homework (1996), the ratification of which will help bring about equality of treatment between homeworkers and other wage earners. HomeNet brings together existing organizations of homeworkers and encourages the development of new organizations. At the first StreetNet meeting in 1995, founding members drafted an International Declaration setting forth a plan to promote national policies to support and protect the rights of street vendors.

Established in 1997, WIEGO is dedicated to supporting the work of women in the informal sector, and its agenda is driven by their circumstances and needs. Led by HomeNet, StreetNet and WIEGO, this fast-expanding global movement of and on behalf of low income women who work in the informal sector is a unique example of the joint action of unions and other grassroots organizations of working women with research institutions and international development agencies.