

Force of Nature Shantaben, Vegetable Vendor and Defender of Workers' Rights

by Leslie Vryenhoek

(May 2012) To meet Shantaben at her vegetable market stall in Ahmedabad is to encounter a force of nature. This is a woman who has not just found her voice, but found the strength to speak out for the tens of thousands of vendors who also struggle daily to earn a living in Ahmedabad – the capital city of the state of Gujarat in India. It's increasingly important, because there are many challenges, both old and new.

For 35 years Shantaben has been operating her vegetable stand on this same corner – an unusually long run of stability in a city where the greatest challenge for vendors is finding a fixed location. Police harassment, usually predicated on a charge that the vendors are obstructing traffic or creating an unclean environment, is commonplace. Sometimes goods are confiscated; other times, bribes are paid. Either means a loss of income for workers who are earning a meagre daily sum in the informal economy.

Today, with the temperature hovering around 41°C (106°F), Shantaben sits under a tree she planted five years back as a seedling. The tree now towers over her, having swallowed a traffic light and a street lamp, and provides a cool place from which she can watch over the large market stall her grown children—two sons and two daughters—now operate. She expertly peels a cucumber and slices it for her very young granddaughter while explaining that although she has retired from selling, her presence here is vital to preventing harassment. The authorities know that tangling with Shantaben means tangling with some pretty powerful women.

For three decades, Shantaben has been a member of the Self Employed Women's Association



For 35 years, Shantaben's family market stall has occupied the same location—a remarkable achievement in an occupation often plagued by evictions. Photo: Leslie Vryenhoek

(SEWA), a trade union of informal women workers that was formed in 1972 and now has 1.3 million members. Her membership has been crucial to making Shantaben confident in taking on the authorities. A member who is being harassed can count on SEWA's support, and years back, Shantaben recalls that it was a daily occurrence for SEWA organizers and leaders to have to come to the market to intervene on behalf of a vendor.

But the benefits extend beyond this important solidarity. Shantaben and her daughters—also SEWA members—have received training on everything from financial planning to occupational health and safety, and receive some social protection under the Welfare Board that was initiated by SEWA. The family has also been able to open a savings account in the union's financial arm, SEWA Bank.

Having the money to save, however, has become more challenging than ever. Large food retailers like Reliance are proving to be stiff competition, and inflation in recent years has been soaring. On a good day in the festival season, Shantaben says, her family's stall earns 500 rupees (about US \$9, a small return for a work day that begins at 4 a.m. and ends at 8 p.m.). On the worst day, they will go home with nothing after the cost of goods bought



Shantaben hopes her hard-won achievements, many won through her membership in SEWA, will help her children, who now manage the family's vegetable stall. Photo: Leslie Vryenhoek

wholesale is factored in. Their prices must remain affordable for customers also feeling the pinch, and sometimes things just don't sell. Shantaben points to a pile of green beans, bought three days before, that have not moved. They will soon be too old, and spoiled food represents a significant loss of income.

Recently a new threat has emerged. Instead of buying directly from the farmers as they did in the past, vegetable vendors are now required to purchase from a municipal-run agricultural market that serves as a "middleman" and charges a commission. This is a battle SEWA fought and lost, despite a week of strike action by the vendors, who had to return to their work to earn a livelihood. A positive outcome, however, was the opening of a SEWA vegetable shop, run by SEWA's Federation, that serves to tie the rural farmers directly to the urban vendors.

Shantaben continues to play an active role in SEWA, sitting on its Executive Committee as vice president. She also represents vendors on the Town Vending Committee of the Municipal Corporation, which arose out of public interest litigation and a biometric survey on vendors in 2004. Here, she is a forceful champion of her fellow vendors' point of view. Though the work is separate from her SEWA work, she notes that it has been facilitated by the legal training she received from SEWA which has helped her master the language of official committees.

Vending, she believes, is still a good and perhaps the only option for her children, who haven't the education to pursue "white collar" work. But she hopes that the hard won achievements of her life—securing a fixed location on a busy street corner for the stall, and purchasing a family home five years ago with a 30,000 rupee (US \$551) loan from SEWA Bank—will mean less struggle for them.

Based on an interview with Shantaben in Ahmedabad on May 7, 2012, with interpretation by Khushbu Shah.

SEWA is a partner in the Inclusive Cities project.