

Balsevikas: Serving Children, Families and Women Informal Workers

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From an early age, Kaminiben Patel knew she wanted to be a teacher. But in Grade 10, when she tried to apply for training, she encountered a problem many young women in India face: her father refused to let her leave the house to study. So she married instead. Years later, after her son had gone to school, she decided to try again, motivated by a sense that she could help children in the community through teaching. Today Kaminiben is a *balsevika* – or child care teacher – at a Balsewa child care centre in Ahmedabad, a city in the western Indian state of Gujarat.

While Kaminiben wants to give children a solid foundation for their future, the work she does also has far-reaching benefits for women informal workers, families and the community.

Having access to quality child care enables mothers to earn an income while knowing their children are safe and well cared for.

All of the mothers who use the Balsewa centres work in the informal economy, where earnings are typically low, and belong to the Self Employed Women's Association ([SEWA](#)) of India. A trade union for informal workers, SEWA understands that its members' needs are diverse, so it offers a range of services, from banking and insurance to health care and child care.

Some Balsewa child care centres, which accept children from birth up to age six, have operated for 30 years. Today there are 13 in Ahmedabad and 20 more in other regions of Gujarat. Each runs as a cooperative. The mothers who use a centre and its teachers are the shareholders, and they elect a Board to govern the cooperative from among their constituencies.

Full working days

The centre stays open all day to accommodate the hours that mothers work. This ensures parents won't lose out on valuable earning time to fetch their children during the day. Kaminiben is at



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the centre before 9am, when the children start to arrive, and her day extends to at least 5pm, when parents come to collect them. Sometimes, teachers even pick up a child from home or drop the child off if the parents must work longer hours. The downside, of course, is that it does make long days for balsevikas like Kaminiben.

And the days are busy. Balsevikas do everything from singing songs to cooking food to moving children around for activities.

Balsevikas work Monday to Saturday. They get Sundays off, as well as festivals and 30 days of leave annually. For these long, busy weeks, the balsevikas earn 6,000 rupees (US\$93¹) per month. It is less than the minimum salary of 7,500 rupees (US\$116.25) paid to their counterparts at the government-run Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) centres. However, as members of SEWA, balsevikas benefit from their association's full range of services. This puts them in a better position than child carers in the ICDS centres, who are considered casual workers, not state employees, and consequently don't receive any labour or social protections. However, both ICDS and balsevika workers require more government investment to ensure a living wage and better labour and social protections.

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.

Part of the problem is that caring work is considered "women's work," an extension of their unpaid domestic labour. As such, it is undervalued by society.

That's ironic, because the work is so valued within the community. The sense of empowerment and improved status that balsevikas feel comes across when talking to Kaminiben and her colleagues. Jashodaben Parmar, who worked in a factory prior to becoming a balsevika, states it plainly: "Working in the child care centres, people give you respect because you are teacher."

A solid foundation for children

Jashodaben, a teacher in Khodiyar Nagar and president of the cooperative, describes the learning environment of the Balsewa. While she speaks, she gently pushes one child in the hammock while holding another on her lap.

The children follow a set timetable. Those who are four years and above receive pre-primary education. Based on Early Childhood Development principles, the curriculum and activities are designed to care for the mental and physical aspects of the child and include activities such as singing, rhymes, alphabet, basic writing and play time.

At the centre in Khodiyar Nagar where Jashodaben is based, the balsevikas teach in both



At Balsewas, children receive early-years education, nutritious food, and health interventions such as vaccines.

Gujarati and Hindi to ensure they are reaching all the children, since many of the centre’s families migrated from other states of India, attracted by work opportunities in Ahmadabad’s factories.

“My last child is the smartest and he went to the centres – I can see the difference between him and my other children,” Jashodaben tells us.

Another balsevika, Shilpaben Makwana, shares the sentiment. All three of her children attended Balsewa child care centres, and because of this “they’ve all stayed away from addictions – alcohol, drugs, playing cards,” she says. Her eldest son is doing especially well and is now working as an assistant librarian.

Not only are the children cared for in a safe environment and getting stimulation to set them up on their future educational path, they also receive necessary health interventions. The Balsewa centres regularly document children’s growth in terms of weight and height, and in many places, they have become a nodal point where children are vaccinated and given necessary medical doses from time to time by the state authorities.

A focus on good nutrition is another key component of the Balsewa’s holistic approach. The children are fed a morning snack and a nutritious and freshly prepared lunch every day. As Jashodaben emphasizes, the first six years are foundational, yet it is during these years that there is the highest rate of malnutrition. Providing

nutritious food is the best way to prevent illness and help children grow toward their full potential.

Balsewa’s also provide enormous economic benefits to parents and their low-income households. 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 ICDS Centres (50 per cent) and those who used no child care at all (50 per cent). ICDS centres in Gujarat are only open four hours a day and so do not cover women informal workers’ working hours. Furthermore, the majority of working mothers (64 per cent) who used the SEWA centres said that they were able to increase their working days due to the support from the child care centre, leading, in turn, to an increase in income of between 500-2,000 rupees (US\$7.75-31) per month.

Fees and funding

The convenient opening hours, the nutritious fresh food, the quality of the early childhood development education, and the integrated approach are all important factors in parents’ decisions to send their children to a Balsewa. So is the “deep level of trust within the community of the centres, which have been operating for so many years,” says Shilpaben.

This added value is important. While government-funded ICDS centres are free, Balsewa centres

charge parents 175 rupees (US\$2.71) per month per child. These fees cover just 10 to 15 per cent of the running costs, making the centres reliant on other funding from government and private funds.

Unfortunately, the importance of quality child care is overlooked in the allocation of government spending in India. Research increasingly shows just how important the first five years of a child's development are for well-being and productivity in later adult life. Yet in the past few years there have been funding cuts for child-related social interventions, including ICDS and other child care centres. These cuts have forced a number of centres to shut down, leaving parents and children without much-needed services.

The surviving Balsewa child care centres in operation in Ahmedabad rely, in part, on cooperative funds that have been invested and are generating interest. However, the responsibility for funding child care services properly rests with the state, which will benefit from the long-term outcomes of their provision.

A crucial role in the community

Because the centres are embedded within local communities, balsevikas get to know and build rapport with the families of the children they care for. They meet with the mothers on a daily basis – and every three months, they hold meetings with the fathers. In this way, the balsevikas are helping change gendered norms and expectations about

caring for children. Kaminiben explains that it used to be the sole responsibility of the mother to pay Balsewa fees and come to meetings. Then they called together families and raised awareness about the need for both parents to take care of the child. Now some of the fathers contribute as well.

Through these interactions, facilitators have also been able to provide guidance to parents on school admissions, as well as support and advice on various social problems. One example is alcohol abuse, which is a problem in some of the communities, especially among men. The sale of alcohol is illegal in the state of Gujarat, but drinking and drugs are still prevalent. The balsevikas in Khodiyar Nagar used their most recent meeting with fathers to discuss the issue. Half the fathers who send their children to the centre attended, which speaks to the respect and influence of the balsevikas.

When the balsevikas share their stories, the sense of pride and purpose they experience through their work is tangible. They know they are giving so much to children, parents and communities. And they also reaping benefits. For women informal workers such as Kaminiben, Jashodaben and Shilpaben, the opportunity to receive training, to work with children, to manage a centre, and to participate as a cooperative board member has opened up horizons far beyond the limits that once constrained them.

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