

**Exposure Dialogue Programme on Law and Informality
Ahmedabad, 27 January to 1 February 2013**

Personnel Reflection: Chris Bonner March 2013

We were a group of three:

- Chris Bonner, WIEGO Organization and Representation Programme Director, and involved in WIEGOs Law Project from 2006,
- Megan Corrarino, a graduate student who is working with WIEGO on the Law and Informality micro-site and has written legal briefs for WIEGO
- Rafael Blanca, a legal activist from Lima, Peru, who works with the trade unions and with WIEGO projects in Lima

Our host lady was 48 year-old Kamalaben Bahubhai Parmer, a waste picker living in Amraiwadi, a poor area in Ahmedabad. We spent about 24 hours with Kamalaben, including an overnight stay in her house

SEWA facilitators, Kirtiben and Amrutaben, assisted us.

Home and Community

We arrived at Kamalaben's house in the late afternoon after being dropped off on the main road. Walking through a narrow lane to reach her house, we were watched with much curiosity by men, women and children of all ages. Three people, rather than two as in other groups, had been assigned to Kamalaben's house as she 'has a bigger house than other host ladies'. The house was indeed bigger than the house I had stayed in on a previous EDP, but by middle class standards was tiny. It had two rooms and a toilet outside the front door. One of the rooms contained a bed and had an area in the corner where washing of all kinds was done (dishes, clothes, bodies!) using water stored in large pots. The pots were filled from a pipe outside the house during limited hours of water supply in the early morning. The second room was equipped with a bed and had cooking facilities- a stove and shiny pots and pans. However, we learned that Kamalaben was renting the house for 2000 rupees a month, and the cooking facilities were not for the use of Kamalaben and her family. Rather they had to cook on an open fire outside. Interestingly the next day lunch was made in the kitchen/bedroom on the stove. Because we were there the landlord had allowed the use of the kitchen and stove. Kamalaben considers herself and her family to be lucky to have such a house with a good landlord who lives opposite.

Kamalaben lives in the house with her son, daughter-in-law and their two year old son. Her daughter who is separated from her husband also lives there but was away at the time. Kamalaben is a widow her husband having died several years ago.

On arrival our first job was to walk to the market and buy vegetables for the evening meal. This is something that Kamalaben does daily, using the money she has earned that day. The streets were dusty and littered. There were cows wandering around. On our way to the market we passed many people engaged in informal work activities: small shops/stalls, a dairy, scrap dealers, food sellers and so on.



The streets of Amraiwadi



We returned to her house and had tea at the landlord's home, which is directly opposite. Kamalaben then made a fire in small bucket outside the house. For fuel she used materials she had collected. With the help of the SEWA campaign leader in that neighbourhood, and watched by many neighbours, she made the meal: millet chapatis and vegetable curry.

Making the fire to cook our meal

We did of course assist by peeling vegetables and even tried making chapatis – not very successfully.



'Helping to prepare the meal



We ate the meal inside the house, where we sat on a mat on the floor with the family members and surrounded by neighbours-women, men and children-many of whom asked us to visit their homes. It was clear that having visitors to stay was an important status symbol.

After the meal we continued the conversation with Kamalaben, family and neighbours. We then retired for the night: six women and Kamalaben's grandson in one room (one on the bed and five on the floor) and two men in the other.

This was a community of 'lower caste' people. Waste picking is a traditional profession for them. The issue of caste was not something that we were able to talk about and when we raised a question about discrimination against people

/children from the community, the group of family and neighbours were adamant that they did not suffer discrimination.

The community appeared supportive of each other and networks seemed to be very important, including SEWA networks. There are approximately 4000 women waste pickers in the community, most of whom are SEWA members. SEWA has campaign leaders within the community who meet with members regularly and are there to assist with a range of challenges.

HerStory

Kamalaben comes originally from another area of Ahmedabad. Both her parents died when she was young as a result of industrial health problems/accidents. She had two brothers who looked after her. They ran a tea stall but when this did not work out they started waste picking for a living. So at 10 years old Kamalaben became a waste picker.

She was married at 14 years old to a man living in her current area, Amraiwadi. This was an arranged marriage and relatives in Amraiwadi assisted her brother to find her a husband. She moved in with her in-laws. Kamalaben and her husband tried different occupations to make a living such as wood-carving and brick making. But eventually her husband got a job in a factory and she took up waste picking again. However, her husband proved to be a drinker and did not contribute much to the family and she had a hard time bringing up her two children. Eventually he died of kidney failure leaving her alone with the two children to support through her waste picking activities. She became emotional when speaking of this and seemed to indicate that he had been abusive

Kamalaben joined SEWA about 12 years ago and is an active member. As Kamalaben said, "Since I joined SEWA things are better for me. We support each other".

Making a living: a family affair

The home-based worker and unpaid household worker



One thing that immediately struck me as I walked into the house was a young woman, Kamalaben's daughter in law, working on a crude machine. She was assembling tiny lightbulbs for a Tata factory. She obtained work through an intermediary, although she first heard about this work through her sister who used to work at the factory. However, the piece rate was very low and she was considering not continuing with the work.

Producing lightbulbs at home

She also carried out much of the housework whilst Kamala was out on the streets as well as caring for her son.

The factory worker

Her son on the other hand had a formal job working in a factory warehouse some distance away. Although he earned in the region of 5000 rupees a month, his expenditure on transport was very high.

The waste picker and unpaid household worker

Kamalaben on average made around 130 rupees a day. From this she pays the rent and buys food daily.

Making a living as a waste picker: the daily grindstone

An experience

5.30 a.m. Kamalaben and our group of five rise and prepare to leave. We have tea made by her daughter-in-law and nibble on last night's left over chapati bread.

6 a.m. We walk through the dark streets en route to Kamalaben's work area in a nearby neighbourhood. Apparently all the women waste pickers from the community have an area they work in and this somehow seems to work without competition and conflict. Kamalaben starts picking up recyclable waste immediately from the streets whilst it is still dark. How does she do it? I can barely see where I am going. She picks up mainly plastic bags but some plastic bottles (these are good!), cardboard and paper, glass. She puts the recyclables in the plastic sack she is carrying on her back.



Waste picking in the dark

7.30 a.m Kamalaben leaves the first full sack under a tree in an open area. She takes out another sack and proceeds along the streets continuously picking up materials especially plastics, and we arrive at a small commercial area. After picking up recyclables here we return to the 'tree' again and store another sack.



Ready for another round

8h30 Back to the commercial area again, picking up all the time. Kamalaben locates some full sacks she stored there a few days ago. Helped by another women waste picker they both carry the full sacks on their heads and walk back to the tree

Helping one another



9h30 She sits down under the tree and sorts the materials into plastics, cardboard, other- much more plastic than anything else. Other women waste pickers are also in this area carrying out a similar routine. We try to help with the sorting.



Sorting Round 1: under the tree

10.00 Next comes a negotiation with a driver who approaches Kamalaben and asks to transport her now several sacks. We thought this was someone being helpful. But no- it is his business. He charges 10 rupees to take the full sacks to an area close to the scrap dealer who will later buy the materials.

10.15 Time for another round...off we go. But first we find somewhere to have tea (normally Kamala would take tea a bit later and probably not in the same place as we were taken).

11h00 We continue our round through the streets which are now much busier. We are becoming tired, losing concentration and chatting about the law in Peru as we walk along, forgetting about our work. But Kamalaben just carries on picking up recyclables uncomplaining and non-stop. We notice a man pushing a small cart in a uniform. He is picking up the 'litter', putting it in his cart and then depositing it in large waste bins. We were not able to establish exactly who he was. But we were told he was from the municipality. The two systems seemed to operate side by side. In fact Kamalaben and other waste pickers collected recyclables from inside the bins.



Collecting from the bins

11h30 We are back at the commercial section and locate the sacks that have been delivered. Surrounded now by several sacks Kamalaben sits down and begins to sort again. This time she is re-sorting the materials, and especially into different grades of plastics- the majority of materials collected. We try to help. It is difficult to decide what goes where... This is really a skilled job! We also provide enormous amusement for a group of schoolchildren from a nearby school.



13h00 The sorting is done and the bags are packed tightly. Off we go to the scrap shop dealer just around the corner. It is to this dealer that Kamalaben sells her recyclables daily. Kamalaben places each sack containing the different materials on a scale and the dealer records the weight and price.

Sorting Round 2: near the scrap shop

When all the sacks are weighed Kamalaben receives 130 rupees. It is interesting to note that the scrap shop owner would not tell us where he sold the recyclables nor were we allowed to take photographs.

There is a tight relationship between the waste pickers and the scrap shop dealer they sell to. Apparently they give loans to the waste pickers who then remain indebted to them. A cooperative scrap shop had been established by SEWA in the community. However, this failed due to this indebtedness of the waste pickers to the scrap show owners and the obligation then to sell the recyclables to them.

14h00 We arrive back at the house. Kamalaben usually finishes off at around 16h00 but as we were there she finished early. While Kamalaben washes and changes (at a neighbour's house), her daughter-in-law was preparing lunch- roti and daal- delicious. Once again we try our hand at making the 'bread'- better this time but unfortunately not the perfect circle! Once again neighbours- children, women, men-gathered around us talking, questioning, commenting and watching.

15h30 We say goodbye to the family and neighbours, board an auto rickshaw and head for the SEWA offices and from there to the training centre in at Manipur for our discussions on SEWA's legal strategies.

'Circles' – group reflection

Our group reflection on the exposure was summed up in circular images: life for our host lady and family contained many circles but these were not all static circles. The waste picking daily circuit (the grindstone) produced income for the family. This provided a base for health and enjoyment within the family (the sparks), and for slow but upward progression in life (the spiral).

Final reflection



Kamalaben is a tiny person with a beautiful smile. 48 years old but looking much older, she is strong, determined and focused on what she has to do to provide and care for herself and her family. Despite all the disruption our visit caused, her focus on what she needed to do never waived; whilst we became tired walking round and only intermittently helped her pick up materials she never stopped searching and collecting. It is a very hard existence that she carries out with a positive attitude, although at times her pain came clearly through. She has a wonderful relationship with her grandson who loves his "dadi" very much. I think this brings lots of joy to her life.

Short and tall: Kamalaben and Rafael

The work process is very traditional and very basic with no equipment apart from sacks. It seems as yet untouched by new developments in the pipeline as reported by SEWA i.e. that SEWA will be handling waste collection for the whole

city in terms of a newly negotiated agreement that will become a high court order. It will be interesting to see if and how Kamalaben and her community of waste pickers will be integrated into this new system and what effect it will have on their lives.

Thank you Kamalaben for your generosity in sharing a small piece of your life with us.

Chris Bonner, March 2013