

## **“Empowering and mainstreaming Women home-workers in Delhi, India”**

The Self Employed Women’s Association (**SEWA**) is a women’s trade union that was started in Gujarat in 1972 by Smt. Ela Bhatt, with the aim of organising women in the informal sector. SEWA’s experience in Gujarat encouraged workers in other states as well and this led to formation of **SEWA Bharat**, an all India federation of Self Employed Women’s Association in Delhi in 1984 with the aim “*to strengthen the movement of women in the informal economy by highlighting their issues at the national level and building its member organizations’ capacity to empower them.*”

### **Activities undertaken by SEWA Bharat:**

- **Organizing and Capacity Building-** *Organize women to increase their bargaining power, Ensure that their voices are heard and organize training and workshops for capacity building.*
- **Micro-finance-** *Help women in their work towards Capital formation at the household levels by providing them the necessary financial tools i.e. continuous savings, credit etc.*
- **Employment generation and Skill Development -** *Improved livelihood and market opportunities for women workers and skill enhancement program adolescent girls*
- **Social security-** *Increased access of women workers to social protection entitlements, including health, insurance, child care and pensions*
- **Advocacy and Networking -** *Women worker’s concerns are visibilised, leading to increased recognition of their rights and entitlements by organizing campaigns and linking it with the medias*

Currently it is spread in 14 states across India covering over 1.9 million women members engaged in numerous activities like home based work, street vending and hawking, manual labours, service providers and small producers.

### **SEWA’s initiative with Home based workers in Delhi :**



Lead by SEWA Bharat as part of its mandate to develop new SEWAs, SEWA Delhi started its efforts in 1999 by organizing women vegetable vendors in Jahangirpuri urban slum. During initial survey phase, SEWA identified a large number of home-based workers in eastern part of Delhi engaged in bindi, bangle, bed sheet making and embroidery. Most of them migrated from parts of Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh in search of better livelihood opportunities. These home based workers were part of the big international readymade garments supply chain .SEWA realized that large population of textile workers resides in

displacement colonies of Delhi in India and were highly disadvantaged due to their migratory status. Women (especially Muslim women) were particularly disadvantaged by strong patriarchal norms which limit their access to education and employment opportunities. Women's lack of freedom to move outside their homes hence is reliant on low-paying home based work, especially textile work such as stitching and embroidery. Most textile home-workers work for contractors who exploit them by giving low rates for their work. As most of these women are poor and illiterate, it is very hard for them to stand up for their rights. They have no choice but to depend on the middlemen to get an income. Textile home-workers also face occupational health and safety issues such as eye strain and joint problems. They also lack opportunities to improve their skills so they can command a higher income. Women were majorly involved in readymade garment supply chain and faces gender discrimination in all perspectives.

**SEWA realized that the home-workers face many problems including:**

- *Few home-workers are paid the minimum wage and even fewer earn a living wage.*
- *Record-keeping is poor or non-existent, so pay is reduced even further. Delayed payment, irregular payment and indebtedness to intermediaries are also major issues.*
- *Insufficient and irregular work.*
- *Unclear or non-existent employment or legal status.*
- *Inadequate social security and benefits.*
- *Poor health and safety.*
- *Lack of awareness of rights and organization.*

In order to address the above issues, SEWA established a ground breaking and scalable embroidery centres which was also approved by Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI), UK based alliance of retailers, garment companies, trade unions and nongovernment companies which exists to identify and promote good practices in the implementation of company codes of conduct on labour standards. These centers linked garment companies directly with workers, eliminating exploitation by middle men. The centres shorten the supply chain and provide a system to trace the whole supply chain - allowing tracking of garments from home-worker to shop floor. With layers of middle men removed, SEWA are able to pass on these savings to the home-workers so they get higher piece rates for embroidering, embellishing or sewing garments. The centres also address child labour issues through education and community monitoring.

**Gradually, SEWA established six centers operational in Delhi Sunder Nagari, Nand Nagari, Mustafabad, Mulla Colony, Rajiv Nagri and Ashok Nagar. The Centres:**

- *Linked 700 members directly to international garment suppliers and exporters.*
- *Provide 300 members with regular work and decent income to supplement their family income.*
- *Provide members financial services of savings and credit through "SEWA's Thrift and Credit Cooperative".*
- *Linkages with government welfare schemes, health programs, vocational training through SEWA Youth Resource Center.*
- *SEWA has issued artisan card to its members through Ministry of Textile and Handicrafts which gives them recognition as an artisan from Government of India to*

avail benefits of medical and insurance facilities as well as platform to showcase its skill and products in renowned places.

- SEWA also running a Non Formal education center for members' children and some of the members too.

*"We used to take work from middle-men in this area. We now get double piece rates (Rs 55-60 when we used to get Rs 20-25). We used to feel hesitant talking to men but now we feel comfortable with SEWA because we are all women. We all have increased confidence which has changed our lives. We come to the centre every day. We enjoy the work when we are earning and can save. This extra income is spent on food, education, housing and medicines. We now have separate bank accounts to our husbands." **Zarina, Home-worker (SEWA member)***

SEWA have adopted the ETI tool for establishment of piece rate based on the "time and motion study" carried by the SEWA in- house sampling team.

#### **Formation of Ruaab SEWA Artisans Producer Company:**

By 2010, SEWA's model gained recognition both internationally and nationally as it promoted a transparent and ethical sourcing of garments and at the same time worked for the development of the artisans and its families. It was successfully providing regular work to around 300 artisans who were supplementing their family income. The orders to the organization had started increasing in numbers and the embroiderers in the areas of work were visibly benefitting.

It was then decided to give SEWA's embroidery work a proper legal structure and expand it in a more formal fashion. So, SEWA organized all the artisans into a producers' company – **Ruaab SEWA Artisans Producers Company Ltd.** Registered in 2010, Ruaab is producer-owned company that supplies handmade embroidery from artisans directly to exporters and retailers that support ethical trade practices such as fair wages, decent working conditions and transparent supply chain.

The company is managed and owned by women artisans and are also on the management committee. At present, Ruaab SEWA has ten board members who are representative of respective communities to bring forth their concerns for better future and progress of their own enterprise. Till date, 750 members are proud shareholders in the company.

Ruaab SEWA has a very structured process of work. The team comprises of a Manager, Production Coordinator, Centre In charges, Senior Quality In charge, Centre -Checkers, merchandiser, runner and sampling team. The company has also initiated direct export with small U.K and US buyers. It is very conscious with the quality and timeliness delivery of the work received from domestic as well as international buyers.

Currently Ruaab has been securing regular work from buyers like GAP, ZARA, PRIMARK, MONSOON and C&A. In FY 2013-14, 350 women brought a business of worth Rs 65 lac for Ruaab SEWA and earned worth Rs 45 lac.

Ruaab SEWA launched its first named “**Loom Mool**” in October 2013 to house products made by various artisans of SEWA collectives across India. It connects the weavers directly with the mainstream market and expanding to provide livelihood to as many artisans as possible.

Refer to [www.loommool.org](http://www.loommool.org)

#### **Advantage of SEWA’s model** - *Changing lives of home –workers*

- No issue of mobility as centers is located at close proximity of their homes. Located within Community and operated by only female team allows free mobility for many Muslim women without family restrictions.
- Flexible timing of work which allows them to take care of household responsibilities
- Regular work and timely payments
- Proper Record keeping
- Scope of enhancing new skills
- Linkages with other developmental programs of SEWA
- Gained collective voice through SEWA union
- Economic Securities - Better income for work
- Improvement in status of both in family and society
- Health and safety Trainings for better working conditions
- Better future of children as SEWA demote child labour and promotes education
- Improved knowledge of mainstream market
- Freedom from the clutches of unfaithful contractors
- Provides opportunity for building the members’ capacity and ensures self-reliance among the members.

**Touch of India-Delhi (Indian Supplier)-** “ *SEWA has a Clean image from its past. The transparency in its supply chain and its fair practices are undoubted.*”

**Monsoon Accessorize Trust, U.K,Buyer** –“*SEWA needs more guidance and support in terms of quality and understanding of products than working with other main range factories but has learnt a lot over the last few years and is now a very competent partner, while delivering great benefits for disadvantaged women artisans.*”

#### **Benefits for Brands:**

In developing countries as many as 300 million people, more than half of them women, do paid work at home, making a significant contribution to household incomes among predominantly poor families. But few home workers have legal status as employees and are thus vulnerable to exploitation. **Ethical Trade Initiative, U.K**

- SEWA model offers an ethical and transparent supply chain to buyers at no extra cost
- SEWA help buyers source high quality, affordable products and meet international labour standards
- High quality products – delivered on time and at a competitive rate
- Higher and regular wages given to home-workers / no child labour
- Opportunity to support a model which supports home-workers and help them in moving out of Poverty
- Opportunity to visit the centre and see the process themselves
- Handling by professionals – brands regularly informed on the progress
- Ensures Corporate Social Responsibility and Sustainable Development which is increasingly important to the business of buyers

**Quick Look at the condition of home-workers in India - Benefits of SEWA's model:**

In India, 96% percent of women workers are self-employed in the informal sector. Unorganised, isolated and often living in extreme poverty with no regular income or protection, they bear the brunt of this inequality. Around 30 million work at home, many trying to make a living from sewing and hand embroidery for domestic and international markets. These women face numerous and inter-related problems, including:

*-Poverty - lack of sufficient food, access to basic services, credit and education for their children.*

*- Exploitation and very low or late pay - no benefits or social protection.*

*- Lack of regular work and lack of access to domestic and international markets.*

*- Lack of training, proper equipment and materials to improve their skills and raise their income.*

*- Health problems from poor working conditions.*

*- Isolation - they are usually unorganized and unrepresented.*

*- Lack of political voice and power within their communities.*

SEWA's work areas are poor urban slums and predominantly Muslim. These areas suffer from high levels of poverty, poor housing, inadequate sanitation, lack of affordable health facilities and severe unemployment. School dropout rates are very high. SEWA's model addresses the complex problems that women home-workers face in North India whilst also tackling the social and family barriers that women experience in trying to improve their skills, and become economically independent – such as household and childcare responsibilities, restrictions placed on their mobility from male family members, and a lack of training and education.