



photo: Julian Luckham

## The Journey of Varshaben From Vegetable Vending to Video SEWA

**Impact:** *Young women have few opportunities to break out of the roles they are traditionally expected to take on in their families and as workers. The story of Varsha demonstrates how training through SEWA Academy allowed her to break through multiple barriers to become a confident professional and example in her community.*

The journey made by Varsha Prabhudas Parmar has not been an easy one, but hers is the story of how determination can triumph over disappointment, especially when it meets the strength of a supportive organization.

Varshaben was born in 1986 in Ahmedabad, one of six children in her family. The mill where her father worked was closed when she was very young, and her father never recovered from the shock of losing his job. The entire responsibility of earning an income, running the household and educating the children fell upon her mother, who worked as a vegetable labourer. For two decades, her mother has been a member of SEWA and SEWA Bank. With great difficulty, she educated her children.

Varshaben was an avid student and aspired to be a teacher. Unfortunately, her dreams were dashed when rioting in the city prevented her from attending her final exams to complete her standard 10.

When the family relocated to Chandkheda, Varshaben's mother saw the opportunity to begin selling vegetables, and Varshaben helped her. Business increased and the family soon had four carts. Varshaben's mother continued to work hard, rising at 3 a.m. every morning to start work. After their education, both of sons also began working and contributing to the family's income, which helped with the eventual purchase of a house in Chandkheda.

When Varshaben was 19, she was given in marriage. However, the sexual harassment of her father-in-law proved too much. Varshaben returned to her mother's home and was divorced after two years. She became dependent on her family again and was very depressed. To fill her days, she began helping her mother with selling vegetables.

Varshaben became determined that an early marriage would not happen to her younger sister. Recalling her past dreams, she motivated her sister to enroll for Primary Teacher's Certificate (PTC) and availed of a loan from SEWA Bank to educate her sister. Her family members were not in favour of her sister's education, but Varshaben was adamant, and her sister did well in her PTC.

Then, from a relative who worked with SEWA Bank, Varshaben learned about SEWA Academy's Skill Development Programme for young women, where several classes are offered. She had never used a computer in her life, but she joined and learned computer skills as well as English. Through the Academy's Life Skill Training Programme, which aims to empower a second generation of SEWA members, she also took courses in a wide range of areas, including leadership, libraries, self-defence, social and civic issues, organizing, financial literacy, health, and micro-finance. This education boosted her self-confidence and decision-making ability.

When she got an opportunity to be self-reliant, she went for an interview for a job at Video SEWA and was overjoyed to be selected.

Video SEWA was launched in 1984. It uses the authentic and honest power of this mass communication media to help tell the stories of self-employed women's lives and struggles. Video tapes have been used by SEWA to motivate and inspire women, to foster organizing, to educate, and to build the movement. Video SEWA creates films that provide information on various topics: legal, health, nutrition, and government policies and programmes for the self-employed. It gives women the ability to communicate their issues and concerns in their own way and to transfer information between groups of self-employed women, and between them and the public, policy planners and other government officials. Awareness is raised about the lives of these women, helping to build understanding and reduce prejudice and discrimination.

Varshaben's family initially opposed her work with Video SEWA as it involved night stays during field visits. Varshaben used the skills she had learned in her training to persuade her brother that she should do it. Today, she is a capable technician who shoots, captures and replays video. As part of her work, she also operates a computer for making reports and other purposes. She is very proud of working with Video SEWA, which has given her a new identity.

She still assists her mother, too. Every morning before going to the office, Varshaben goes to the APMC market, Vasna, to purchase potatoes wholesale and then helps her mother to run their vegetable business. In the evening, she sells vegetables. But even while she is so busy, she aspires to study further.

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