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Small World, Big Goals

Profile of a Home-Based Garment Worker in Delhi

by Leslie Vryenhoek¹

Farida-ben works in her Delhi, India home, embroidering garments for foreign retailers. Denied an education and other options, she has done this work since she was a girl. Today, her membership in the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) and her involvement with an ethical, SEWA-based producer company have expanded her world.



A large window on the far wall brightens the space. That's important, because the electricity is out again. It's a common occurrence, Farida-ben says. Power outages happen as often as twice a day and can last for hours.

Farida-ben sits on the concrete floor of the two-room home she shares with her husband and their four children. Leaning into the day's work, she pulls the fabric taut across a circular frame and begins. The girls' dresses she's adorning today are flouncy, with a ruffle at the bottom and spaghetti straps at the shoulders. They aren't the sort of garment the girls in this Muslim family ever wear, but that's irrelevant. These frocks are headed for the racks of a retail chain probably in the UK or in North America—she rarely knows just where.



Farida-ben is paid by the piece to decorate garments like these pre-stamped girls' sundresses, which are destined for far-off retail stores.

It would be easy to assume this home-based garment worker in a Delhi slum cannot imagine the far-off stores where her work sells—but the assumption would be wrong. Farida-ben's membership in the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA)² and her engagement in the SEWA-linked producer company Ruaab have dramatically expanded her view on the world.

¹ Leslie Vryenhoek is the Writer-Editor for Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO). This account of her visit with Farida-ben was facilitated by SEWA Bharat in December 2012. Interpretation was provided by Richa Hingorani. All photos by Leslie Vryenhoek.

² SEWA was registered as a trade union in 1972 in the state of Gujarat after founder Ela Bhatt convinced authorities that poor self-employed women were workers deserving of rights. Active now in 10 states across India, SEWA has more than 1.4 million members, all women, and continues to grow rapidly.

The room where Farida-ben works is a narrow rectangle, maybe 2 metres wide by 5 metres long. It is also the room where she prepares meals and feeds her family, entertains guests and washes up. To reach her here, one must walk a chaotic labyrinth of busy, grimy streets, but at the top of a steep flight of stairs, Farida-ben's home is clean and uncluttered.

A large window on the far wall brightens the space. That's important, because the electricity is out again. It's a common occurrence, Farida-ben says. Power outages happen as often as twice a day and can last for hours. Despite the unreliability, it costs about 300 rupees per month for a legal electrical connection to power a lightbulb and a small television in the second, windowless room where the whole family sleeps.

Sunlight from the window spills across the pale pink cotton onto which Farida-ben is affixing sequins to a pre-stamped design using an *ari*, a needle that looks much like a ballpoint pen. Yesterday, she went by the local centre that SEWA runs and was given seven of these children's dresses to embroider. But when news got out that she was to be interviewed today, she was allotted another three to ensure she had enough work to show off.



Farida-ben models a fancy garment of her own for which she designed and embroidered complex beadwork.

She confides this with a characteristic broad smile, her lips shining with vibrant ruby lipstick. Farida-ben is paid by the piece, 20 rupees (about US \$0.373)³ for each dress she completes, so these additional three are a help. All extra income is welcome here.

Farida-ben works quickly, her movements so practiced that she barely pauses in telling her story to reload the *ari* with sequins. Embroidery has been her trade for a quarter-century. She works hard at it out of a keen desire to see her own children get the opportunities she was denied.

Farida-ben never had the option to attend school. Her parents educated only the boys. She recalls a strict upbringing that offered little choice but to do as she was told—and at age 12, she was told to take up work as a home-based embroiderer. Growing up under such limitations in Uttar Pradesh, northern

³ 1 Indian rupee was the equivalent of \$0.01835 USD on December 14, 2013 (per www.xe.com, mid-market rate).

Her aspirations are not small, especially where her children are concerned, but Farida-ben's involvement with SEWA is helping put them within reach.



Akbar, Farida-ben's husband, is a plumber. The couple first met on the day they were married.

India, she longed to see more of the world, and asked that the man chosen to be her husband live in Delhi. That one request, at least, was met. At 20 she was married to Akbar, whom she first met on her wedding day.

The mention of her marriage brings another brilliant smile. It was a good match, she says, and 16 years later they are very happy. (When Akbar comes home at midday, the rapport between them makes this obvious.) Still, she says, there are challenges. Farida-ben would rather not have to work so much, but Akbar is a plumber and his income is unpredictable. In fact, this is the first time in a week he's been out to work. His earnings—usually no more than 6,000 rupees monthly—are only slightly higher than the 4-5,000 Farida-ben's embroidery now brings in.

"Most women want to marry so they do not have to work," Farida-ben says, but adds with a shrug and a rich laugh that she will work all her life to achieve her goals. Her aspirations are not small, especially where her children are concerned, but Farida-ben's involvement with SEWA is helping put them within reach.

Farida-ben first connected with SEWA about nine years ago when the Secretary to the SEWA Delhi Trust, a neighbour, suggested she go to the nearby SEWA Centre and ask for some embroidery jobs. Until then, Farida-ben had worked, as most home-based workers do, for middlemen.

Middlemen (or contractors) typically occupy a space in the apparel chain between the producer and the retailer. Along with taking a substantial cut of the proceeds, these intermediaries obscure the working conditions at the bottom of the production chain. Retail brands can't always see whether the people who make their garments are exploited. SEWA, however, works differently because it is focused on improving the livelihoods and raising the status of home-based producers.

Farida-ben won't abide middlemen anymore—SEWA, she says, offers more money per piece plus timely payments. Before, she might earn 100 or even 150 rupees per day but have to wait months to get paid. Now she earns a reliable (if variable) income—today's dresses will bring 200 rupees—and can access health benefits through SEWA. These include eye clinics to help counteract the strain caused by such constant, close work.

Trade union activity, successfully negotiating better wages and working conditions across a range of occupations, is core to SEWA, but it has developed into a multifaceted movement that embraces a holistic approach. Coming together in sustainable organizations, SEWA believes, is the best way for women to promote their own development. Hundreds of "sister" organizations within the SEWA family address myriad needs: financial, social security (including childcare), health, skills training, and marketing (Sinha 2013). All are comprised of SEWA members, and all are strongly bound by a shared ideology of women's empowerment.

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SEWA offers vocational training to young women. This includes traditional skills such as embroidery and tailoring, but also computer and business skills.

Still, Farida-ben longs for fewer limitations and wishes she could take a job outside the home. “My world is very small most days.”



In 1994, SEWA Bharat—the All India Federation of the Self Employed Women’s Association—was created to serve as a connecting nucleus. It serves to transmit knowledge between organizations and helps foster the development of emerging SEWAs in new locations until they become self-sufficient. (SEWA Delhi, established in 1999 and now autonomous, is one of these.)

SEWA Bharat also directly administers some initiatives, including a range of training and skills development programmes. Embroidery has been one of its most successful.

According to Richa Hingorani, Media & Communications Manager for SEWA Bharat, the embroidery programme took off where others—pickle production, for example—had failed.

“Women have been exposed to embroidery work for a long time, but they did not understand themselves as workers,” she notes. That changed as the women came to understand, through SEWA, their value and their rights. In addition to enhanced embroidery skills, SEWA’s members are connected to marketing and business skills, and exposed to broader horizons.

“Whatever knowledge I have of the world,” Farida-ben says, “I got from SEWA.” She notes that she has learned to speak freely and articulately, and can talk to even the richest of people because of the confidence that her relationship with SEWA has instilled.

Ms. Hingorani says this newfound confidence is common. SEWA Delhi organizers have noted a trend among the women embroiderers, most of them Muslim, to step out more on their own.

Still, Farida-ben longs for fewer limitations and wishes she could take a job outside the home—in a factory, where she’d make better money folding and packaging, or in an office—but her traditional husband won’t allow it. He wants her at home so she can run the household and make sure the children get to school and do their homework.

She too believes that is important work, but says, “My world is very small most days.”

While her world may be small, her work goes far. Farida-ben is a member of Delhi-based Ruaab, a producer company under SEWA Bharat’s umbrella. Ruaab (which loosely translated means “dignified pride” and hints at high quality) began as a programme to help women improve their incomes and skills. In recent years it has blossomed into a full-fledged business that sells the work of nearly 1,500 fairly-paid embroidery artisans to major global markets. Orders come in from well-known international brands like Zara, Gap Inc., NEXT, Newlook and Vero Moda.



Ruaab, an artisans’ producer company registered by SEWA Delhi in 2010, links the skilled work of home-based embroiderers with suppliers for mainstream international brands. Focused on fair treatment for the women workers, Ruaab eliminates middlemen, ensures better wages and prevents child labour.



Farida-ben is adamant that all of her children, sons and daughters, will be educated and have ample employment choices.



Six-year-old Nazreen, just home from school, wants to grow up to be a teacher.

By linking producers like Farida-ben directly to major brands, Ruaab creates transparency while ensuring more money makes it into the hands of the producers. But it's a competitive business. Operating as a multinational business necessitates international trips to promote products. And not long ago, Farida-ben was selected to represent Ruaab's embroiderers on a marketing mission to the UK.

Since her oldest child, a daughter Yasmin, was born, Farida-ben has saved an impressive 140,000 rupees. Despite the family's limited means, she explains that she deposits at least 50 rupees, and whatever else she can, in an account at SEWA Delhi Co-operative every month. She is the family planner; Akbar, she admits, is less interested in worrying about the future. The savings are all earmarked for the children's education and for their weddings, which are large, expensive multi-day affairs.

Farida-ben is adamant that all of her children, sons and daughters, will be educated and have ample employment choices. The Right to Education Act in India guarantees children a free education, including books and supplies, only between the ages of 6 and 14 or through the 8th standard. At 15, Yasmin will be in 9th standard soon—the oldest son is close behind—and while the government has waived the fees for the poor even for higher grades, Farida-ben estimates it will cost about 1,000 rupees per month for uniforms and school supplies.

However, she insists she won't force her daughter to take up embroidery work to earn money, as she was made to, though she shows us a kurta

that Yasmin has artfully embellished. She knows the value of earning money will be learned soon enough, and she fervently hopes her daughters will have more opportunities than she did. For this reason, she wants Yasmin to attend SEWA's Polytechnic when she reaches the minimum age of 16.

The Polytechnic was established to offer vocational training in 2005 in response to a keen desire among SEWA members to see their children gain employable skills. The offerings are broad, and Farida-ben wants Yasmin to avail of all possible courses: embroidery, tailoring and the traditional art of henna tattooing called mendhi, but also computers and business skills.

When asked if she thinks her husband will let his daughters go to work out in the world, Farida-ben's eyes flash and she vows she'll argue with him. It's not hard to imagine that she will win that battle. After all, she won the fight to go to London three years ago, despite Akbar's fears that she would be harmed, corrupted or simply not return to him.

Farida-ben's London adventure was made possible by Ruaab and by her own dogged determination. SEWA Bharat Executive Director Sanjay Kumar and three other managers were going on a trade mission to meet buyers from major retail chains and show off the work of the company's artisans—and they wanted to have one of their skilled workers along. Farida-ben secured the single spot by being the most prolific worker, embroidering around the clock for 20 days to earn over 10,000 rupees.

She knows the value of earning money will be learned soon enough, and she fervently hopes her daughters will have more opportunities than she did.



Yasmin's embroidery skills are displayed on this kurta, but Farida-ben will not compel her daughter to take up embroidery work. Instead, she wants Yasmin to study a range of trades at SEWA's Polytechnic.

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But when she told her husband, Akbar resisted. "His first reaction was NO!" she recalls. While the other women from SEWA tried to reassure him that she would be accompanied and safe, the community, including Akbar's family who live nearby, warned of the dangers—that Farida-ben could be attacked or might even run off with a foreigner. It took almost two weeks of SEWA intervention and his wife's strong-willed convincing before he relented.

It was the first time Farida-ben had travelled on an airplane, her first trip far from India. And she was dazzled by everything. Or almost everything—she did find the British diet bland for her tastes, though she was amazed by the abundant food. She recalls a vegetable market with incredible variety and reasonable prices. Back home, inflation has been eating up the family budget; the price of staples like rice, oil, and flour has risen – and sugar, so essential for tea, has become an outrageous expense. But in her London hotel, fresh fruit, coffee and tea were available any time for free. She took advantage, she confides, and managed to save a considerable portion of her per diem.

Farida-ben and her children spent a portion of the week sightseeing with her companions using a pass for public transportation. As she details her travels, Farida-ben takes out the photo album and we look at tourist shots of London—the Eye, the old English architecture, the Thames.

Going around such a strange and foreign place gave her a new confidence and relieved her of fear, she explains. Now, she can go around Delhi by herself and is not afraid to ask directions of strangers, even men, if she's uncertain. "But I always ask more than one person—I've learned that!" She flashes a grin.

While Farida-ben has been showing her photos and serving tea, Akbar has been to the school to collect the youngest daughter, Nazreen, who at six years old is too young to manage the dangerous Delhi traffic. As soon as the child arrives, Farida-ben directs her to wash up. The obedient child fills a small basin from the tap that brings municipal water into the house—a cost of about 1,500



Piped water coming directly into the home makes it much easier for Farida-ben to meet her high standards for cleanliness.



Going around a place as foreign as London gave Farida-ben new confidence and relieved her of fear. Now, she says, she is not afraid to travel around Delhi by herself. (Photo inset courtesy of SEWA Bharat.)

rupees (US \$27.50) every six months—and tackles the grime she's worn home. She scrubs at her face earnestly and washes her hands up past her elbows. Then, cleaned up and combed, Nazreen nibbles at a small packaged snack and shyly says she wants to be a teacher when she grows up.

Then Farida-ben continues her narrative. In London, she reveals, she wandered through The Gap and looked at the clothes. There, she spied something familiar—a garment, or one in the same pattern, that she herself had embroidered. Of course she looked at its price tag.

She shakes her head, incredulous. “I’m not stupid,” she asserts. “We should be paid more.”

But she’s astute enough to understand the larger issue of global competition in a world where garment contracts regularly travel to find the cheapest bidder. Despite the better rates SEWA is able to achieve for its members, those involved in the production of garments—even highly skilled artisans—have little control over the value chain.

“So we have the choice to do the work for this pay, or someone else will,” she says. Ultimately, like so many things in her 36 years, “The choice is really no choice at all.”

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