

Unlocking Strength and Resilience: The Self Employed Women's Association's COVID-19 Strategies in Delhi

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Key Points

The Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) has over 2.5 million members across 18 states in India. SEWA organizes women workers to achieve full employment and self-reliance using a strategy of struggle and development. This brief provides insight into the work of SEWA Delhi during the COVID-19 pandemic to spotlight organizational strategy.

- 1 SEWA Delhi supported nearly 170,000 households using many different relief methods, including food distribution, livelihood restoration, awareness drives, and access to social security. They first focused on direct provisions to the communities they serve, and then began advocating for systemic solutions.
- 2 A network of grass-roots leaders, Aagewans, are the essential connection between the community and SEWA. These women leaders receive continuous training within SEWA and, during the pandemic, they served as a critical bridge between communities they live in and key stakeholders.
- 3 One-stop community centres – SEWA Shakti Kendras – served as spaces for coordinating and supporting frontline activities, enhancing their services and capabilities. They also provided a safe haven for women experiencing violence at home.
- 4 The COVID-19 crisis highlighted women community leaders' sense of responsibility for their communities and ability to build community resilience, with many examples of these leaders. negotiating with local and state officials, independent of SEWA Delhi staff. This shows the long-term benefits of SEWA's continuous investment in women leaders.



A street vendor member of SEWA in Delhi.
Photo credit: Rashmi Choudhury, commissioned by WIEGO.

Finding Our Way in a Time of Crisis

Those first few weeks of COVID-19 were filled with sleepless nights and feelings of uncertainty and helplessness. The challenge of formulating relief strategies amidst an unprecedented emergency, with no known solutions, was a daunting prospect. Hearing reports about hundreds of stranded migrant workers and receiving distress calls from victims of communal violence compounded the sense of crisis.

Our experiences in aiding those affected by communal violence and migrants was pivotal. We learned what was essential for ration kits and how to arrange meals for migrant workers in camps. We learned how to navigate the state machinery including their online systems. Yet, the enormity of the challenge became clear as our efforts seemed so small against the stark vulnerability of those struggling for even basic necessities. Recognizing the need to push beyond immediate relief, the idea of advocating for systemic solutions took hold.

During the lockdowns, government-led food distribution centres were established, but unequal access and very long queues hampered the execution of their services. The lockdown magnified the struggles of wage earners who depend on daily income for essentials. Despite the government's endeavours, chaos persisted due to the scale of the crisis.

Although individuals with ration cards received wheat, rice and sugar, the lockdown made grinding the wheat very difficult. Many daily wage earners typically purchase essentials like oil and salt every day. With the lockdown in effect and incomes dwindling, it became difficult for them to acquire the necessities for cooking. Thus, though the government was making many efforts, the situation remained chaotic.

The government received substantial food supplies as donations. However, storing, packing and distributing these presented significant challenges. Initial hiccups included introducing an emergency calling system without adequate personnel to manage it.

Early in the pandemic, my engagement with an official led to the creation of a unified resource pool of food supplies. SEWA Delhi offered the use of the SEWA Shakti Kendra centres as distribution hubs. I shared ideas like giving rations to the



Agewans (grass-roots leaders) walk past the SEWA Shakti Kendra centre in Sundarnagari, Delhi, which was used as a hub for relief distribution during the pandemic. Photo courtesy of SEWA.

women of the household, providing food supplies to those clearly in need even if they didn't have ration cards, and marking beneficiaries with ink (as done at voting centres) to ensure fairness. When there wasn't enough to go around, SEWA Delhi used its own resources to supplement government food supplies. I was integrated into the government's SOS relief team composed of volunteers, civil society members and government representatives. These collaborative efforts laid the groundwork for relief initiatives.

Together, the SOS team efficiently managed beneficiary data, allocated resources and ensured kit deliveries. This unity became the bedrock for navigating the more severe second wave of COVID-19 in India. The second wave witnessed civil society organizations spearheading food relief, while the government concentrated on health-care crises.

Throughout this journey, I encountered poignant stories and received blessings from those we tried to support. SEWA Delhi's response demonstrated effective collaboration during crises, underscoring the power of collective action and the potential for positive transformation even in the most dire circumstances. The experience was a mixture of overwhelming emotions and deep contentment, and I am profoundly moved by the sense of purpose it gave me.

Introduction

Across the Global South, the COVID-19 pandemic worsened both working and living conditions of workers in informal employment – daily wagers, home-based workers, casual labourers, domestic workers, vendors – with the most adverse effects borne by the most vulnerable of these workers., the women (Chen, Rogan and Sen 2023; WIEGO 2020; WIEGO 2022). Apart from their loss of income due to the lockdowns, most of which was trade-specific, these workers had to battle food insecurity, compounded by various health and monetary uncertainties. They also had to grapple with the uncertainty of their livelihoods surviving in a post-pandemic economy. Most workers in informal employment live in informal settlements where there is little scope for social distancing, which made them particularly vulnerable to contracting COVID-19. The lack of basic services, inadequate infrastructure, no access to health care or other social protections (which would have been a safety net), combined with the absence of recognition as workers and the loss of livelihoods exacerbated the problems. This combination threatens the survival of the bottom-of-pyramid populations in tough times.

In India, where over 90 per cent of those who work are in the informal economy, this impact was particularly acute (Ram and Yadav 2021; WIEGO 2021; WIEGO 2022). The worst affected were migrant workers who, in the absence of both means of transportation and income, had to walk barefoot to their villages on empty stomachs

for days. The Indian government put containment measures in place to curb the spread of COVID-19. In time, the government introduced measures to provide relief through increased rations per family from the public distribution system and cash transfers through Jan Dhan accounts. However, many workers in informal employment were unable to access these relief measures and entitlements because they did not have documents such as *Aadhar* or ration cards or bank accounts.

The lack of documentation, weak financial inclusion and inadequate relief measures affected women workers disproportionately. Women workers had the additional burdens of domestic work and care of both young children and older adults. The burden of care work was acute as strict quarantine measures kept people at home, and day-care facilities and schools were closed. Women had to feed and look after family members, who were all huddling together with even fewer resources than before.

This brief focuses on how SEWA Delhi pivoted their work during the crisis, stepping in to provide services to the “last mile” and reach the underserved and marginalized on multiple levels. It starts by outlining SEWA’s overall approach. Communal violence was the first challenge SEWA Delhi faced and the brief outlines how they tackled this. SEWA Delhi’s initial focus was on serving the community directly, followed by efforts at the organizational level. Subsequently, they advocated for systemic

changes to benefit not only the communities where SEWA operates but also beyond. The brief considers each level in turn.

The Self Employed Women’s Association’s Approach and Work in Delhi

SEWA, founded in Gujarat in April 1972, is the largest central trade union in India. With more than 2.5 million members, SEWA represents self-employed women workers from the informal economy spanning 18 states in India. SEWA organizes towards the twin goals of full employment and self-reliance using a strategy of struggle and development. In 1984 SEWA Bharat was established as a federation of women-led institutions providing economic and social support to women in the informal economy. SEWA Bharat emerged out of the need to address the SEWA movement’s challenges with geographical expansion and coordination. SEWA Bharat is a family of SEWA organizations to further informal women workers’ rights, livelihoods, financial independence, education, health, and social security. SEWA Bharat directly supports 7 state chapters with Sewa Delhi being one of the chapters.

Since 1999, SEWA has been organizing informal women workers in Delhi to bring them out of the shadows, support their livelihoods and lift them out of poverty. SEWA Delhi's work in Delhi began with women vegetable vendors in the Jahangirpuri area. They now cover 11 areas in the city including: Raghubir Nagar (west), Jahangirpuri (northwest), Rajeev Nagar, Mustafabad, Sunder Nagri, Gokulpuri and Nand Nagri (northeast), Timarpur (North), New Ashok Nagar, Anand Vihar (East) and Harkesh Nagar. SEWA Delhi has 100,000 members spread across slum clusters, unauthorized and resettlement colonies of Delhi.

SEWA Delhi's main programmes are built around advocacy, microfinance, skills development, and education and outreach centres. At the core of the SEWA approach is facilitating the grass-roots organizing of women in informal employment. Through *mohalla*, or community meetings, women are brought together to discuss their concerns and find solutions. SEWA organizers, local community workers and grass-roots women leaders called *Aagewans* conduct these meetings in the local community to raise awareness about local issues. Aagewans are the essential connection between the community and SEWA. They engage with local stakeholders on work and trade-specific issues as well as community-wide issues.

SEWA in Delhi operates in and through "one-stop centres" known as SEWA Shakti Kendras. Through these coordination centres,

SEWA strengthens members' capacities to access entitlements through mobilization, building awareness and nurturing grass-roots leadership. Mindful of the specific needs of each community, these centres offer awareness-building programmes about various government schemes. They also provide adult literacy, youth empowerment and health programmes.

Within the SEWA ecosystem, a core belief is that communities progress faster and more efficiently when their members take charge of and address their own needs. SEWA's activities prove that communities with strong leadership and participation from women are the key to sustainable impact and lasting socio-economic change. These women leaders become the bridge between community members and the different stakeholders who support them. With their prompt responses to their members' needs during the COVID-19 crisis, the SEWA community, led by the Aagewans, again demonstrated their sense of responsibility, ownership and accountability.

SEWA's response to communal violence

In February 2020, some parts of Delhi witnessed communal violence, resulting in injuries and the destruction of homes. SEWA Delhi, which had a significant number of members in those areas, promptly provided support. They assisted victims in accessing government compensation and empowered women at the relief camp at the Idgah Masjid in Mustafabad camp by facilitating the making of clothing for fellow residents.

They also offered food relief, restoration kits, educational materials and livelihood resources.

While the rehabilitation process was underway, COVID-19 emerged in India. A nationwide lockdown was announced and SEWA Delhi quickly transitioned its focus to COVID-19 support. They also increased their assistance to the victims of communal violence to stop their vulnerability from worsening, ensuring that those who had to move to rented accommodation received essential provisions through digital payment platforms such as Paytm.

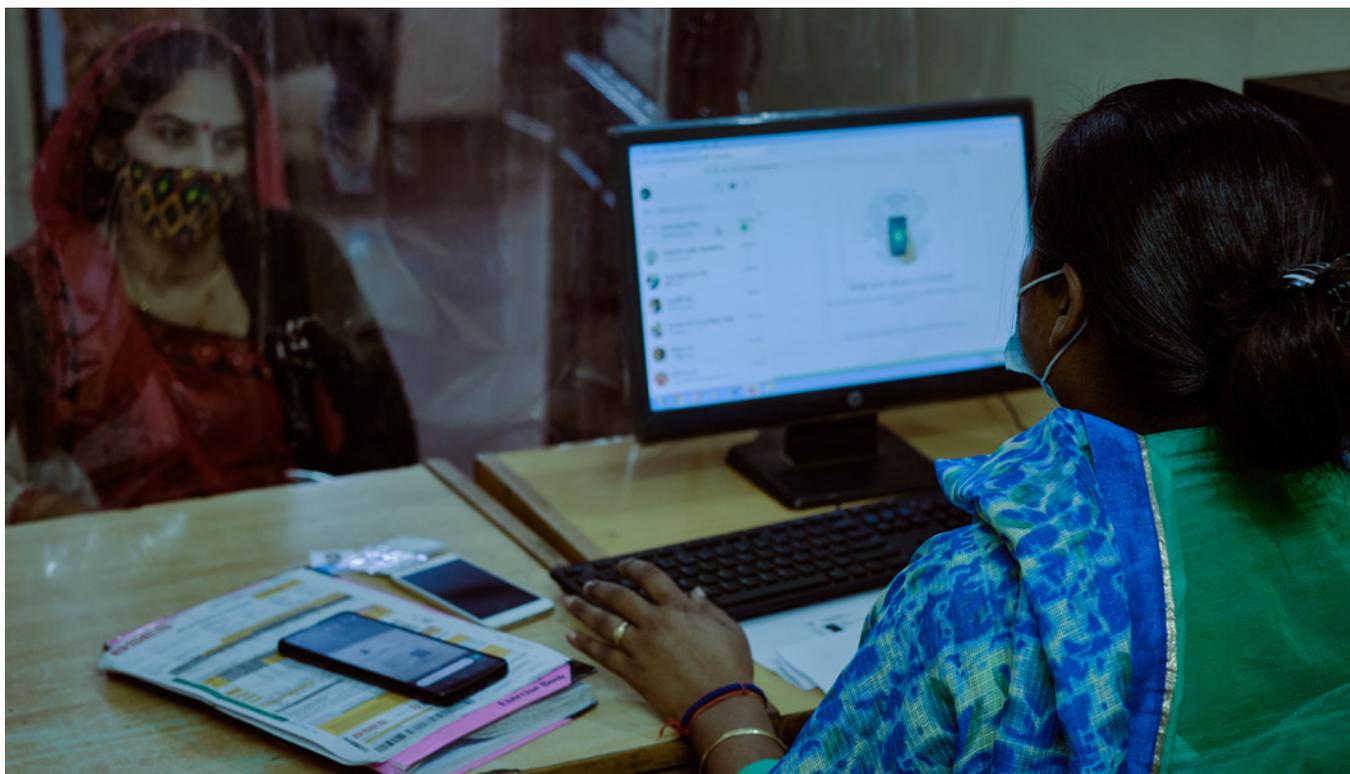
SEWA Delhi, with a sizable membership in the capital city and bolstered by proactive leaders, was confident in its ability to organize COVID-19-related support, particularly in areas where they had a strong community presence. During the communal violence rehabilitation efforts, SEWA Delhi had established a positive rapport with government authorities and agencies, and they rekindled these relationships to organize pandemic-related relief initiatives; thus continuing their critical support work in the face of evolving challenges.

The Role of Grass-roots Leaders and One Stop Community Centres

During the pandemic, as the middle class and formal sector embraced remote and digital living, SEWA Delhi mobilized resources to provide crucial sustenance to communities living in poverty in both urban and rural India. This support was facilitated through their network of grass-roots leaders known as Aagewans, a term derived from the Gujarati words “*Aagal aavwana ben*”, meaning “the woman who steps forward”. Aagewans play a vital role in SEWA’s advocacy efforts, serving as a crucial link between staff and members. They bring invaluable lived experience to their roles and are the primary point of contact for their communities in Delhi, offering guidance and addressing urgent needs.

Through initiatives like Aagewan Vikas, these women leaders receive continuous training within SEWA. The training covers a wide range of topics, including workers’ rights, navigating the public and private sectors, leadership, conflict resolution and negotiation skills. Aagewans also work as health workers, financial inclusion advocates, land rights and tenure advisers, and negotiators to combat domestic violence and address workplace issues.

Despite the fear of being infected by COVID-19, SEWA Delhi members worked hard to serve their community. Field teams and Aagewans used WhatsApp to assess community needs and visited homes while maintaining physical



A SEWA Delhi organizer assisting a member during COVID-19.
Photo courtesy of SEWA.

distance. Aagewans were taught by team leaders how to use WhatsApp, Zoom and Google Meets for community outreach and team meetings. Training included how to use online banking and digital payments to transfer relief funds to community members.

After local travel restrictions were lifted, these leaders assumed responsibility for the consistent distribution of food and sanitation kits. They provided accurate information about COVID-19 and counselling to families, and facilitated connections with medical experts. This involved

comprehensive health training by SEWA’s health and social security teams as well as external partners, including mental health organizations and a network of doctors recruited for teleconsultation services. With the digital training that the women had received as the pandemic started, this entire process was conducted online. The Aagewans served as translators and intermediaries for community members who had difficulties interacting directly with doctors unfamiliar with the realities of living in informal settlements (LSST and SB 2021).

Trained in public service outreach, the Aagewans contacted local leaders, ward councillors and public representatives. They highlighted problems faced by vulnerable women and followed up persistently until action was taken to resolve these. For instance, SEWA Delhi's Aagewans campaigned for improved waste collection to reduce the spread of COVID-19 from medical waste. They also assisted communities in accessing documentation for government relief schemes. Vandana Ben, an Aagewan from Jahangirpuri, stands out for raising awareness of COVID-19-related issues in her area.

Vandana Ben had been working in the Jahangirpuri cluster for about five years when COVID-19 hit. Supporting SEWA's mission to assist vulnerable families, Vandana Ben facilitated access to health-care resources throughout the pandemic. On discovering that some families were struggling to put food on their table because they did not have ration cards, and hence limited access to the public distribution system, Vandana Ben embarked on a personal mission. She personally assisted each of these families in applying online for the Delhi Government's E-Coupon Facility, providing crucial temporary ration support.

Identifying 40 households with delayed online applications, Vandana Ben compiled a list and, along with affected members, visited the ward councillor's office for assistance. Following the official's advice, she submitted an application to the Department of Food Safety with the details

of the affected families. After the families had received codes on their mobile phones, a new challenge arose as the distribution centre was far from their homes. Vandana Ben, as SEWA's community leader, contacted the local Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) for help and he asked for a fee of INR 20 per person for printouts of the coupon codes. After she had explained the community's socioeconomic conditions, the fees were waived and the MLA promised swift assistance.

Vandana Ben followed up regularly with the MLA and within a week he had organized the distribution of ration kits at his local office, ensuring that all the families received essential supplies. Vandana Ben expressed her joy at this victory: "After overcoming initial hurdles, we finally succeeded. All forty families have received ration kits. I am delighted that through SEWA, I could provide immediate relief to my community's most vulnerable families." (*Bohot dikkaton ke baad bhi, aaj hum safal huye aur unn chalis parivaron ko ration kit mohaiyya karai gayi. Mujhe khushi hai ki SEWA ke zariye main ye kaam kar paayi aur apne samudaaye ki inn zaruratmand parivaron ko kuchh rahat dila paayi.*)

Essential to the coordination work done by the Aagewans were the SEWA Shakti Kendras, known as SSKs (Sen and Atkins 2020). In the early 2000s, SEWA Delhi introduced SSKs as one-stop community spaces. They initially focused on linkages but expanded their roles during the pandemic amid SEWA Delhi's decentralization

efforts. Serving as community outreach centres, SSKs coordinated and supported all frontline activities, enhancing their services and capabilities. Additionally, they functioned as storage centres for relief supplies, including ration kits and health and sanitation supplies. Amid increased stress on the home front, the SSKs provided a safe haven for women, addressing issues such as intimate-partner violence and facilitating conversations with families to enable women to return home under improved conditions.

These grass-roots services acted as the bridge between the community and SEWA Delhi as well as local governments, also enabling communications with various civil society support and advocacy groups and other stakeholders (funders, national-level advocacy teams, state-level governments) aimed at supporting communities, particularly women.

The Process of Securing Food, Health Kits and Financial Aid

In April 2020, during the initial national lockdown, SEWA Delhi, along with community leaders and members, swiftly assessed all seven SEWA community clusters in the city. The goal was to identify residents, including SEWA members, who could not access government support. The assessment revealed that at least 1,500–2,000 families in each cluster faced this challenge. With movement restrictions, it was difficult to confirm the numbers accurately and they were likely higher. SEWA Delhi prioritized these vulnerable members, especially those who had rent to pay.

Using the results of this assessment and SEWA's database, SEWA Delhi worked strategically on two levels to support these members and their families. First, they coordinated relief, providing food and health and sanitation kits to vulnerable households. They also enabled access to Jan Dhan and other financial accounts and helped enrol residents in government schemes. Second, they undertook sustained networking for systemic improvements with state government officials through both multi-lateral civil society advocacy platforms and official government committees set up in Delhi.

Addressing the need for livelihood rejuvenation after the pandemic, SEWA Delhi supplied direct financial aid to those in need via the SEWA Delhi Credit Cooperative Society. Additionally, they partnered with financial services provider



A vendor selling used goods at the weekly mahila bazaar – a women's market supported by SEWA. Photo credit: Rashmi Choudhury, commissioned by WIEGO.

Samhita to inject funds into the cooperative, expanding its financial resources. This allowed SEWA Delhi to provide capital support at zero or minimal (significantly below market) interest rates. Direct cash transfers were also extended to SEWA members with the support of UN Women, particularly those experiencing violence and its consequences (such as homelessness, loss of documentation, harassment from public officials or in the workplace).

Seema Ben, a 36-year-old resident of Raghurib Nagar in west Delhi, benefitted from this initiative

and is now able to support her family. She faced significant challenges after her husband died from COVID-19 during India's first wave and she lost her livelihood as a domestic worker when the first lockdown was declared. SEWA's Aagewans ensured Seema Ben received a ration kit for basic sustenance. Subsequently, with the support of the SEWA Delhi Credit Cooperative, she received financial aid amounting to INR 10,000 to start her own business. Opting to become a vegetable vendor, Seema Ben sustains her entire family and manages to save for her children's education through the SEWA Delhi Credit Cooperative.

SEWA Delhi identified alternative income-generating opportunities for women, especially for those who had lost home-based work due to a lack of contracts. Redirecting them to mask-making activities under Ruaab, SEWA's in-house garment production unit, proved successful. Ruaab formed partnerships with Niti Aayog and private companies to procure raw materials during lockdowns and established markets for the masks; thus providing a sustainable income source for women. Consequently, many women became primary earners for their families. They earned respect within their communities and this enhanced SEWA Delhi's reputation.

In addition to these initiatives, SEWA Delhi collaborated with affiliated organizations to cater to diverse member needs. For instance, all frontline workers received insurance coverage through the National Insurance VimoSEWA Cooperative Ltd, designed to offer financial protection to self-employed women workers and their families. This proved beneficial for community leaders who risked their lives during the pandemic, ensuring their families' protection and instilling a sense of security. Moreover, through the Lok Swasthya SEWA Trust, a group of "master trainers" were taught to identify COVID-19 symptoms and recognize critically ill patients. They were then connected to government hospitals or facilities through SEWA Delhi's pre-existing relationships before the second phase of the pandemic.

Renu, one of SEWA Delhi's master trainers, described her experience: "We used the phone more than ever before. As there was rigorous COVID-19 screening taking place in Delhi, we looked on the internet and found the details of screening centres near an area. This was then shared with women in the area so that they could refer suspected cases. We also explained how to properly undergo home quarantine and kept in touch when they were quarantined. We shared pamphlets on WhatsApp to raise awareness about COVID-19 and other health issues, which were very helpful."

Navigating the State to Access Relief Measures

At the beginning of the pandemic, the Delhi government called for support from civil society organizations to bolster the personnel required to reach every person in the city. Thus, the SOS Hunger Relief team, consisting of civil society organization members, government employees and volunteers, was formed. This team helped identify and mitigate bottlenecks in the large-scale delivery of food kits across the city. Each organization contributed their own strengths, and SEWA Delhi offered the use of its community centres to help the government to pool together relief materials from different organizations and distribute them. SEWA Delhi also provided help with packing, transporting and distributing these materials, while keeping meticulous records of the disbursement and ensuring a seamless

supply to beneficiaries. The SOS Hunger Relief team met every day to take stock of available relief materials, verify and allocate demand, and coordinate last-mile delivery. SEWA Delhi's team was involved at each level of this SOS team.

A good example of the effectiveness of this team was its response to an urgent plea from a non-governmental organization seeking relief for members of the transgender community in east Delhi. The Delhi government's volunteers asked SEWA Delhi for support, and within a day 39 families had received rations through a collaboration with another partner organization. Another urgent request for support was received from the families of visually disabled persons living in Burari. After verifying the request, the Delhi government's volunteers along with SEWA Delhi's logistics support delivered food kits to a local contact who ensured that all those in need received the rations.

Thus, at every step, SEWA's team ensured that those in need received appropriate assistance. In one instance, to guard the food at the community centre, SEWA members took turns in spending the night there so that the stocks were secure. As Kokila Ben, an Aagewan at the centre, said, "We could not even close our eyes for a minute as we wanted to make sure that the food supplies were secure. It was our centre, and it was our responsibility to ensure safe delivery. Thus, we all decided to take turns and sleep there."

With constant involvement at different levels, SEWA Delhi supported the city government in various areas. They urged the inclusion of essential items such as personal hygiene products, cooking oil and spices in the relief kits. This was a suggestion gleaned from community feedback and was quickly adopted by the government. During SOS Hunger Relief meetings with public officials, SEWA Delhi persistently highlighted the need for, and encouraged the universalization of, government rations for at least three to four months after the onset of the pandemic. SEWA Delhi was able to provide these forward-thinking inputs because of their experience with previous crises (for example, the fallout of demonetization in 2016). Their deep involvement in communities allowed them to understand and predict income levels and the revival of economic opportunities.

SEWA Delhi also helped members without ration cards to link into the Delhi government's e-coupon service to receive temporary rations. This required advocacy work as initially the scheme included only ration card holders, which would have left the most marginalized members of the community outside the social safety net.

The strategy employed in relief efforts in the first wave clearly demonstrated that a collaborative model involving civil society organizations and the government was the most effective way to address pandemic challenges. This was especially evident in ensuring the last-mile delivery of food, medical supplies and other essential



*SEWA organizers at one of their regular meetings that took place throughout the pandemic.
Photo courtesy of SEWA.*

support. The government was able to provide support at scale while organizations such as SEWA Delhi were able to leverage their deep community knowledge and experience of the most marginalized to ensure that no one was left behind. With these systems in place, when the deadly second wave hit India in March 2021 and the nation was engulfed in a massive medical crisis, civil society organizations took charge of community kitchens and food and ration distribution. At the same time, government bodies focused on addressing the shortage of medical supplies and hospital beds.

The SEWA Delhi team also supported the government during the second wave by conducting mobilization drives to encourage people to be vaccinated against COVID-19. Through their master trainers, they not only helped many people get vaccinated, but also allayed their doubts and fears. Thus, in both waves of the pandemic, SEWA Delhi extended not only food relief support, but helped with public health messaging, channelling government relief measures and establishing market linkages (Chen 2020) for all its members and many other workers in informal employment too.

Conclusion

During the first two years of the pandemic, SEWA Delhi, along with a dedicated group of Aagewans and women workers in informal employment, extended relief and support to 169,091 households. This encompassed diverse activities including distributing food, providing nutrition kits, restoring livelihoods, conducting awareness campaigns, and establishing connections to social security benefits. The pandemic underscored the vital role of community-based organizations, demonstrating that effective relief efforts nationwide relied on the active engagement of communities.

With more than 50 years of experience as a membership-based organization, SEWA has seen that strong leadership and member participation often leads to sustainable impacts in communities that can, in turn, lead to significant socioeconomic change. The organization has

invested in communities and women leaders continuously and over extensive periods of time to ensure the high quality of the capacity building undertaken in the communities they support. Maintaining local leaders ensures that SEWA has a finger on the pulse of the community and the continuous investment in these leaders ensures that they are able to mobilize and keep members invested and active.

Local leaders acting as a bridge between community members and different stakeholders ensures that community capacity endures. The COVID-19 crisis again demonstrated these leaders' sense of responsibility and ownership towards their communities. Their ability to negotiate with local and state officials independent of SEWA Delhi staff shows the long-term benefits of collaborative work and deep investment to further the resilience of grass-roots communities and create sustainable communities driven by their people.

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Women in Informal Employment:
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