

STRATEGY FOR ORGANIZING HOME-BASED WORKERS
Case Study of the Ready-Made Garment Workers of Ahmedabad

by

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ABSTRACT

This study is about the struggle of around 1,500 home-based garment workers of Ahmedabad, India, who found a way to fight for higher wages and better working conditions by joining a trade union, the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA). This three part study is based on my field interviews of home-workers, union organizers, union leaders, employers, and state officials. The first part is about SEWA and its organizing strategy for homeworkers. The second part shows in great detail how these homeworkers were organized into a union and what was the response of the state.

The third part lists relevant findings about the strategy for organizing homeworkers; that workers get organized around shared interest in work-related issues, that various trade and occupational groups sharing a common interest collaborate, and that collective bargaining is against the employers as well as the regulatory institutions of the state. It also emphasizes that the strategy for organizing homeworkers is a joint action of union's struggle and development of cooperatives, which is carried out by direct, legal, and policy actions. This strategy increases visibility of homeworkers in state policies and helps the state counterbalance claims of business interests over public resources.

There are conclusions about the state's view on the formation of organizations such as SEWA for not what they are, but for what their potential is in asserting their demands. The state should see these organizations as reducing the burden of its regulatory and welfare agencies, encouraging entrepreneurial talents, and as examples of innovative experiments.

At the end of the third part, I have made some recommendations for the state about providing democratic and autonomous setup combining trade union and cooperatives. Such organisations should be provided with infrastructure, credit, and training. The state should take actions to stop outright evasions of the regulations as well as expand the scope and reinterpret existing labor and industrial laws.

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INTRODUCTION

What can poor and illiterate women making a meager living stitching garments in their ramshackle houses late at night do to get higher wages and better working conditions? These women are home-based workers who sell their products at piece rate and are dependent on middlemen for raw materials and sales. There are no laws to protect their wages and employment and no institutions to provide credit or health care. The Labor Department does not consider their stitching as work, and society thinks of them as mere housewives.

Those unacquainted with the struggle of these women would probably feel there was very little the women could do to change their conditions. But around 1,500 such home-based garment workers in Ahmedabad, India, found a way to fight and try to bring about some change in their circumstances by

joining a trade union, the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA). My study of what has been done by and for these unorganized home-based workers to get organized into a trade union tells us what actions could be taken to protect many more such homeworkers in other cities of India.

There are few studies on organizations of unorganized workers in the informal sector of urban economy (Peattie 1979); even fewer studies have been done on the process of organizing itself. The research emphasis has been more on the definition (ILO 1972), characteristics (Papola 1978), and linkages of the unorganized sector with the organized sector. Very little attention has been given to what has been done for and by these workers to improve their wages, benefits, and working conditions (Peattie 1979) (Portes 1981) (Weeks 1975). Neither has any attention been given to the question of what legal or policy actions could be taken to improve their lot. My study addresses some of these questions and throws some light on the state's response to the organizations of this large portion of the population that is currently not covered by its regulatory institutions.

The findings of this study may be useful to two groups. It may provide useful information to those interested in organizing homeworkers for higher wages, better working conditions, increased bargaining power, and recognition in the mainstream economy. The study may also be useful to government departments interested in how a trade union of unorganized workers can act as a representative for formulating, conveying, and implementing state policy.

The major questions I have examined in my study are: How did these women, scattered in different groups and locations, get organized to claim the attention of the state? How did they make their hard work visible and their problems audible to policy makers? Without any protective laws or job security, how did these workers, who live from 'hand to mouth', stand against victimization and sub-contracting? When there was no union and no specific employer, how did the workers bargain for higher wages? When the other trade unions felt at a loss, what strategy did SEWA adopt to organize these women workers, many of whom had never even been out of their own neighborhoods

or had ever been allowed to make any major economic decision about their own families? How did the state respond to this struggle?

To answer these specific questions, I visited SEWA in January of 1987 and conducted extensive interviews of the active participants and informed observers of the struggle of home-based garment workers in Ahmedabad. I talked at great length with the leaders of SEWA about the history and crucial issues of organizing these workers, to the organizers of SEWA about the effectiveness of the strategy adopted and the workers' response, and to the members of SEWA about the garment industry and about their views on what was done for and by them. I also studied some of SEWA's records, reports, and news periodicals.

In addition, I interviewed the Labor Commissioner and two of his staff members about their changing attitudes towards home-based work and workers, and SEWA's efforts in organizing them. I also asked them about the influence of SEWA on formulation and implementation of the state's labor and employment policies.

I also had a chance to talk to some of the businessmen who invest capital, provide cloth to the homeworkers, pay them piece rates, and sell the finished garments at a large profit margin to other traders or to final users. I talked to these businessmen about their response to SEWA's organizing efforts.

My study is divided into three parts. The first part describes the Self Employed Women's Association and its organizational setup. It also describes the home-based workers, their socio-economic conditions, and their major struggles in organizing. This part also tells the strategy that SEWA has adopted in organizing the homeworkers. The second part of the study analyses the city and the ready-made garment industry, and the major issues of the ready-made garment workers. With this background, the study shows how these homeworkers were organized and the response of the state to their efforts. The third part of this study lists important findings about the strategy for organizing homeworkers. It also draws conclusions about how the state should view formation of organizations of unprotected workers, such as SEWA. In this part I have also made some

recommendations for the state about how it can support and protect homeworkers in particular and unorganized workers in general.

PART I

THE SELF EMPLOYED WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION

SEWA, which means 'service' in many Indian languages, is an acronym of the Self Employed Women's Association. SEWA is a registered trade union of 22,000 poor self-employed women working in the informal economy of the city of Ahmedabad and in the surrounding villages. SEWA was founded in 1972, out of the Women's Wing of the Textile Labor Association (TLA). SEWA worked within the TLA as a union until the 1st of May, 1981, and since then has been an independent union (SEWA Annual Report. 1985).

Gandhian ideology of peaceful struggle is a major source of inspiration for SEWA. The goal is negotiations without antagonism between workers and owners. This also means that higher wages and better working conditions are only a part of the final goal of development of the worker and his or her life. With this background, the immediate goals of SEWA are :

1. To make the work of the self-employed women workers visible.
2. To increase their income.
3. To increase their fair control over the income in the family and the society.

Based on these goals, SEWA has organized its members, who are constituted of:

1. Small scale vendors, petty traders, hawkers selling goods such as vegetables, fruits, eggs, household goods, and garments.
2. Laborers selling various services and skills including cleaning, laundering, catering, cooking, or providing labor for construction, transportation, and agriculture.
3. Home-based producers making products such as Bidis (cigarettes), Agarbattis (incense sticks), garments, small furniture, foot-wear, food products, and handicrafts. Later, in this study we will see the efforts of SEWA in organizing a part of this type of home-based workers.

Though all three types of workers are members of SEWA, the membership comprises only a portion of the total number of the workers in the various

informal trades and occupations of the economy. In its many efforts of organizing, SEWA has found it impossible and even needless to organize all the workers of the same trades group or occupation. Even if a small mass of homeworkers are organized, with the right type of strategy, they can influence the labor supply of the entire market and thus, bring benefits of the collective bargaining and protection to all the workers.

Each member pays 5 rupees as the membership fee to the union and the membership selects representatives to the General Board of 150 members. The Board elects 25 members to the Executive Committee, who in turn elect two Secretaries, one General Secretary, one Vice-President, and a President. The union has a team of 22 organizers and around 7 administrators and accountants. It is this electoral process that allows the members of the trade groups, engaged in some ongoing struggle, to come to the leadership positions in the union.

SEWA is organizing its own federation at the national level, called SEWA Bharat, to be effective in bringing the issues of its members and the other

workers into focus in the national policies. Similarly, at the international level, SEWA has found long-awaited affiliation with the International Union of Food Workers (IUFW) in 1984 and the International Federation of Plantation, Agriculture, and Allied Workers (IFPAAW) in Geneva in 1985. This has increased the influence of SEWA on the International Labor Organization (ILO) and International Textile, Leather, and Garment Worker's Federation (ITLGWF). The Director General of the ILO invariably makes a visit to SEWA when he is in India.

The Organizational Setup

SEWA has four wings: the trade union; the economic development wing, which includes SEWA's own cooperative bank; the trust; and the research and study wing.

The trade union takes up the complaints of the members, organizing new trade groups, and with the help of the workers carries out collective bargaining and negotiations for the issues of

wages, work, and working conditions.

The economic development and training wing runs thirteen cooperatives for block printers, kerosene vendors, garment makers, and workers in other trades. It also provides training for upgrading existing skills such as bamboo work and pottery making, and introduces new skills such as patch-work and radio repairing. It also provides supplies of raw materials like bamboo and cloth for various cooperatives and trade groups. Many of the SEWA members hold shares and accounts in the SEWA Cooperative Bank, which provides credit and related services of accounting and marketing to these illiterate self-employed women to make the most of the market opportunities. The bank is a handy place for these women to develop a habit of saving and being able to handle to their own accounts.

The SEWA Trust provides resources such as seed money to set up a cooperative, room to start an market outlet for the cooperatives, and initial funds for new activities. It also provides welfare and security coverage to its members in the form of life insurance, maternity benefit, widowhood support, and health-care.

The research and study wing carries out surveys of the conditions of these workers, documents their situation, and runs two publications aimed at mobilizing a favorable support of the middle class and the policy makers.

HOME-BASED WORKERS

Many of the members of SEWA are home-based producers including those who make Bidi (cigarette), Agarbatti (incense sticks), paper bags, match-sticks, and electric items. They also roll papad, shell cotton pods and ground nuts, embroider and hand print cloth. They are scattered in many locations in the city of Ahmedabad and the surrounding villages and have dissimilar work and working conditions.

Socio-Economic Conditions

SEWA carries out many surveys and reports on the condition of home-based workers to understand it and chart out its course of action. These reports have found that the workers combine their household and domestic work with production work (Jhabvala 1986). They toil from 4 hours to as long as 10 to 12 hours a day in the season. When the season is at its ebb, they are without any work for weeks, making their survival difficult and pushing them into perpetual debt to the money lenders. Their work does not give them more than 3 to 6 rupees a day, up to 130 rupees a month, less than the minimum wages declared by the state. These wages are also less than those of other workers in street vending and manual labor. The illiteracy rate of these workers is higher than 70% which is a big hinderance in their attempts to gain access to the formal regulatory and welfare institutions of the state.

Home-based production is also a form of family labor involving children with supple bodies and sharper eyes in the production process of goods like carpets and hand looms. These children do not go to school and therefore end up taking over their parents' occupation as a source of employment.

The Employers

The employers of home-based workers range from regular well-established businessmen to sub-contractors and middle men. Often many large manufacturing companies 'put out' work in order to avoid labor laws and save on the provision of welfare and social security.

Often these employers have warehouses to store raw materials, from where it is distributed to home-based workers for production. The employers then receive the finished product to sell in other shops and outlets. Depending upon the market and traditional practice, the production process may or may not involve sub-contracting.

The most common entrepreneur is the small trader who lives in the same area with the workers. He also comes from the same community and has his family and relatives working for him as home-based workers. Often he has worked himself as a home-based worker in the past. In this situation, the workers are directly economically, socially, and

even politically dependent on the employers. Many are fatalistic and resigned about their working and living conditions. This makes it very difficult to organize them.

Legal Protection

SEWA has found that these workers should and can be covered under many laws and regulations. The Minimum Wages Act, the Industrial Representation and Dispute Act, the Factories Act, and many other provisions of the Labor Laws can be applied to these workers and their employers to provide higher wages, better working conditions, and social welfare. However, the definition of work, workers, and work-site in these laws makes it very difficult for SEWA to fight their case. In this event, SEWA tries to either set a precedent by filing a case or collects exceptions to the rules by finding examples of inclusion of some of the workers in the regulations or the welfare institutions. An example is the special welfare board established for the Bidi workers to provide health, housing, and education facilities.

Policy Protection

Changes in the policies related to technology or industrialization do not tend to take home-based workers into account. This has an adverse effect on their incomes, and employment. The automation of the Bidi industry for example, rendered thousands of home-based workers unemployed.

WORKERS' ISSUES

Employer Related Issues

What is an advantage to the employer is a disadvantage to the workers (Jhabvala 1986). For example, the employer saves a lot by having no overhead cost in the form of a building or a workshop as goods are produced in the homes of the workers. But this itself is hazardous to the health of the workers and causes overcrowding in their small homes. The employer does not have to buy the tools or the equipment required for the production. But the workers have to invest money in the machines on the borrowed loans from the

private money lenders. The workers also have to maintain these machines and tools and spend a lot on repairs. This big expense for the workers is not considered in their wages. Sometimes the employers do give a machine, but the high rents compensate for the cost of the machine. Often the workers have to pay for some of the raw materials like oil in making food products and threads in stitching garments. These costs are not considered in the wages and, as a result, the rise in the prices of these materials affect workers' earnings directly. Thus, it is clear that the workers are almost subsidizing the employers, and in return they get low wages, job insecurity, and no welfare benefits.

Because homeworkers are not unionized or protected under many labor laws, the employers treat them like a captive pool of labor, pay them way below minimum wages, provide no protection against injuries, and have no benefits of health-care, holidays, and housing. Therefore SEWA finds it so important to organize them to bargain for higher wages on the one hand, and meanwhile provide them better social services on the other hand.

Trade Union Related Issues

The traditional trade unions have not done much to attempt to reach homeworkers in India. Often they have a rather negative attitude about such workers because there is no clear employer-employee relationship. The trade unions also see these workers snatching away the employment and pulling down the wages of the organized sector workers. Often these trade unions are found to be arguing for restrictions and sometimes even a ban on the activities of homeworkers, not realizing that this would only allow employers to carry on the exploitative sub-contracting activities without providing any protection or welfare. The trade unions of the organized sector find it difficult to organize homeworkers on the grounds that they are scattered in many locations, have dissimilar jobs, and do not share a common interest in collective bargaining. The same factors led SEWA to organize homeworkers and bring them in the mainstream labor movement.

THE STRATEGY

SEWA defines its strategy as comprising three kinds of actions: Direct Action, Legal Action, and Policy Action. All three actions are directed not only at employers, but also at the regulatory and welfare laws and the institutions of the state. Often these actions are directed at the concepts of WORK and WORKERS as they are defined in the policies. The definitions are based on the understanding of work and workers of the formal industrial sector, which is so different from the conditions of work and workers in the informal sector of the urban economy. Also all these actions are in the form of trade union struggle or cooperative development.

Direct Actions: The direct actions against the employers are in the form of strikes, marches, and negotiations. There are also development actions such as providing an alternative supply of raw materials to home-based workers from one of the SEWA cooperatives to reduce the control of the employer over the workers. The direct actions

against the welfare institutions are in the form of presentations and helping to increase access of the workers to institutions such as hospitals and banks.

Legal Actions: The legal actions against the employers are in the form of filing court cases of individual victimization and getting informal transactions registered or documented. Demands for separate labor tribunals for the workers' grievances and tripartite welfare boards are examples of legal actions against the state institutions.

Policy Actions: The policy actions are aimed against wider and larger issues of the workers related to women, to poverty, to the class struggle and others. SEWA publications, Anasuya and We The Self-Employed, are their mouth pieces. Participation in many national seminars, planning bodies, labor boards, and having the SEWA General Secretary in the Upper House of Indian Parliament has given SEWA a chance to influence government policies and their implementation.

There is no final strategy for organizing that SEWA follows. It is the work-related issues that are the starting point of the struggle. The direct actions lead to the legal actions, and in turn to the policy actions. Often these actions have to be taken simultaneously.

PART II

THE SETTING

Like many other cities in India, Ahmedabad was established in 1415, on the trade route between the capital, Delhi, and the sea port, Khambhat. The trade of hand-crafted items for domestic use and manufacturing of hand-loomed textiles for exports were major economic activities. Artisans produced these goods at home and sold them face to face to the consumers or through vendors. Industrialization reached the city in the latter part of the 18th century, displacing a large number of rural artisans and home-based producers. However, home-based production has continued its role in the city-economy in spite of industrialization and the rules and regulations related to it.

Today, there are 64 textile mills in the city, and most of the 300,000 textile workers are members of the Textile Labor Association (TLA). The rest

of the workers have formal employment in industries other than textiles, or are part of the informal sector. The census and the other government departments do not collect any figures on the number of these workers. However, an estimate suggests that the informal sector of Ahmedabad constitutes around 45 to 60% of the work force of (Papola, 1978.). In the last decade, 70% of the growth in employment was absorbed in this informal sector (Mehta, M. 1982). Thus, the informal sector workers play a significant role in the urban economy of Ahmedabad and form one of the largest constituencies of voters.

From its direct involvement and many reports, SEWA estimates that 40% of these informal sector workers are women. Workers in this sector include the petty traders and vendors, or workers who sell their services and labor like laundrymen or cart-pullers. Many others produce goods at home and sell them on their own; they are called own-account home-based workers. Those who get piece-rate wages for their work from employers or wholesalers are called piece-rate home-based workers. This study is focused on the home-based piece-rate garment workers or homeworkers.

The Ready-Made Garment Industry

The ready-made garment industry in Ahmedabad can be divided into the upscale, export-oriented industry producing goods in the modern factories, and the remaining home-industry supplying garments for the middle-and-lower-income people in the city and the surrounding villages. Without any state support of capital or infrastructure, these homeworkers have managed to find an occupation to make a living (Acharya 1986, Hegde 1986). There are around 100 ready-made garment businessmen in the city, of which two-thirds are producers and sellers and the remaining one third are middle-men or subcontractors. They provide piece-rate employment to around 3,000 workers, of which 90% are home-based. Each employer has a minimum of 25 to a maximum of 75 workers working for him (SEWA Report on Garment Workers, 1986.).

Production Areas and Products

Production of garments is spread over many areas of the city, and each area specializes in a

certain type of garment. The Sindhi Bazaar produces Chaniya (long skirts), Theli (hand bags), and Takiya (pillow covers); the Shahpur area produces only ready-made frocks; the Revadi Bazaar produces ready-made Chaniya, Chaddi (shorts), and Khol (mattress covers); the Sarangpur area deals in Chaniya; and the Dariyapur area deals in Khol and Chindi (fans and rags). Because of India's strong and diverse religious and communal traditions, the workers are divided into many groups such as Hindu and Muslim, Chipa (hand-printer community), and Marvadi (people from the western states of India). Thus, garment production is spread over many areas and varies a lot in the type of work it involves. The workers are also scattered in many areas and, therefore, they do not know the rates, skills, products, conditions, and problems of workers in other areas. Because these workers are scattered throughout various locations and possess dissimilar jobs, SEWA has had to focus its organizing efforts on defining a shared interest in collective bargaining.

Production Process

The businessmen bring a lorry full of cloth worth about 50 thousand rupees from the textile mills at a bulk rate. This cloth is sorted out according to the type and size of the fabric. The cutters, who are mostly men, cut the cloth in many designs and patterns, and are paid 200 rupees as retainer fees, in addition to the piece-rates. The women workers come to the shop to pick up the cut cloth, take it back home, and stitch it into various products. When the finished garments are returned to the shop on the next day or so, the businessmen make an entry in a record book; they keep the record book to themselves and never show it to the workers or the factory inspectors. Thus, it is very difficult to document the number of persons employed, their duration of employment, and their wages, which are paid at piece-rate on a weekly or fortnightly basis. Besides attending to the domestic duties of cooking, cleaning, and child rearing, women workers may stitch as many as two and a half dozen garments in a day. These workers have to spend time and bus fare to go to the businessmen or employers, and wait long hours to get paid. They use their own crowded homes as places of production, use their own machines for stitching, pay for the electricity bills of the

stitching machines, and use their own oil and threads. None of these materials are provided for in the wages. Having suffered from generations of social, economic, and political dependency on their employers, these homeworkers have developed fatalism and resignation towards their working conditions.

Piece-Rates

The rates homeworkers are paid are dependent on the margin of profit the businessmen and employers make on their products. Approximately 10% of the homeworkers work for a subcontractor and are paid relatively higher wages, but suffer from unannounced lay-offs. Around 30% are own-account workers who have been in the trade for a generation or two. Their incomes are moderate, but often they have some other sewing-related skills such as embroidery, which sometimes provide them alternative work. The majority, around 60% of the homeworkers, are piece-rate workers who have been in the trade for the last decade or two, and earn the least among all the three types of homeworkers.. The husbands of these homeworkers

are mostly employed in casual labor or some other odd job of petty trading or driving auto-rickshaws on streets. Frequently they are seasonably or sometimes completely unemployed.

Rates vary from three to seven rupees per dozen, according to the size of the items and the labor involved. Frocks are stitched at the rate of 3 rupees per dozen and 5 rupees per dozen for larger frocks. Chaddis are made at the rate of 1 rupee a dozen, and skirts are made at the rate of 6 to 7 rupees. In spite of 8 to 10 hours of hard work, the workers do not earn more than 12 rupees a day in peak season. Moreover, the low seasons and the seasonal unemployment average out these wages to 120 rupees a month, half the state minimum wages of 240 rupees per month.. These rates are also lower than those of many other workers in the unorganized sector, such as vendors. Furthermore, piece-rate workers are not included in the definition of work in the Factory Act; this exclusion makes the workers vulnerable to unfair dismissals, accidents and health hazards, and leaves their welfare and social security unprovided for.

ISSUES OF GARMENT WORKERS

Historically, there have been six major issues of concern to homeworkers in garment industry. First, their piece rates have been very low in comparison to the other workers, as well as to the state's minimum wages. Wages have not included the cost of transportation, waiting time, rental of space used for production, and the depreciation of sewing machines. Even the costs of the threads and oil used for production have never been counted in the piece-rates. The rates have occasionally been revised, either on bazaar's special occasions like the celebration of the anniversary, or when there are major fluctuations in the demand for garments. Labor had never initiated revision of piece-rates before SEWA intervened in 1977. There have been no formal records of raises and wage revisions in the industry, nor have there been any laws and regulations for such purpose.

Second, the payment of wages has been very irregular. Sometimes it is made on the same day, but most of the time it is twelve to fifteen days after the delivery of the finished garments. Since the workers can not read and write, the records can often be manipulated and changed without their knowledge. The existing Factories Act and Minimum Wages Act haven't provided for the protection of homeworkers and are not possible to enforce, as there are no state agencies or regulatory institutions for this purpose.

Third, garment-work has been erratic, seasonal, and often required to be done at short notice. In other words, the workers have not had any definite sense of their future and have been dependent on their employer's or businessmen's goodwill. The employers exploit this situation, and plan their production in the lean season, when the rates are low and the supply of labor is ample. Often, traders collaborate to see that they do not all have their garments stitched at the same time, causing a demand for labor that may pull wages up. There have been no state policies on employment and labor that can lessen workers' dependency on their employers by providing alternative employment or

protection.

Fourth, garment-work has been tedious, done with old machines without electric motors. These conditions reduce the number of garments produced in a day, so the wages earned are less. Furthermore, because these homeworkers are women, they have to do traditional Indian women's work. Thus, these homeworkers bear the double load of domestic duties and garment-work.

Fifth, these garment workers live 'from hand to mouth' and daily provision of work is essential. Because they have not amassed savings or reliable incomes, they can not hold out without work for more than a couple of days. Driven by the need for money it is very difficult for them not to take up the jobs of other victimized workers. Without any alternative employment, access to credit or access to supplies of raw materials and market outlets, it is very difficult for homeworkers to organize or be organized for better working conditions.

Sixth, the working conditions of garment workers are very poor. Their small, dimly lit, badly ventilated, and crowded houses overflow with

raw materials and finished garments. These hardships, coupled with poor nutrition, make anemia and TB very common among these workers. Abdominal diseases and swollen legs are common complaints of homeworkers who paddle sewing machines for long hours. There are no welfare hospitals where homeworkers can go for medical treatment, since homeworkers do not have identity cards issued by their employers with which to benefit from public facilities for industrial workers. There are no laws requiring employers to pay for homeworkers' health care.

Hard-pressed under above circumstances in 1978, some of these workers decided not to return the finished garments of a middle-size employer for three days. They could not risk asking outright for higher wages, but made excuses that they were ill or had leave town. On the third day, the employer agreed to raise the piece-rate by 0.10 rupees. However, he did not keep his word for long.

The sense of being cheated and exasperated compelled some of the homeworkers to go to the

teacher of SEWA's local sewing class. Significantly, it was the workers who decided to go to SEWA and ask for some assistance, not SEWA which solicited their participation. The workers directed to the SEWA office in the Bhadra area, which was the first major step they took towards something to improve their situation by and for themselves.. Recalling her first day in the SEWA building, one worker reports:

We went to the building, it was full of women of all kinds, some were like college girls and many were workers like us. They all freely talked with each other and asked us a lot of questions about our work.

THE STRUGGLE

The workers that initially approached SEWA were asked to hold a group meeting of the women workers in their area. Around 50 women came to the meeting, which was held in the home of one of the workers. SEWA encouraged the women to talk at length about their work and work-related problems. Three things emerged from

the discussion.. First, SEWA organizers gained a fair sense of the situation of the homeworkers and the garment industry. Second, the workers realized that, despite individual variations in their work, they all shared common handicaps and difficulties. Third, the workers saw one another not only as neighbors or relatives, but also as workers. In other words, once these workers took a step to contact SEWA, SEWA helped them come out of their fatalism and resignation as these workers became visible to SEWA and its organizers. Most importantly, the workers saw for themselves that though they did not have similar jobs and were scattered over many areas and under many employers, their common interest was to collectively bargain for higher wages and better working conditions with the state.

Some 10 such meetings were carried out in the area over a period of two to three months. In order not to attract the attention of the employers, the meetings were low key, held in some temple or community hall, and had some entertainment at the end. As Pallavi, one of the SEWA organizers said, " The employers took my meetings to be like the other meetings held by the ladies clubs to tell these women how to improve themselves."

The homeworkers discussed how they were unprotected by the existing industrial and labor laws. For example, they became aware that the Factories Act, which provides for protection if an establishment has more than 20 workers, served the contrary purpose of encouraging employers to falsify (underreport) records of their workers in order to avoid state intervention. The homeworkers also saw that the labor and employment departments of the state had no information or understanding about their problems.

Soon the employers came to know of the real purpose of the meetings. They started victimizing the workers by isolating the weakest and the neediest and not providing them enough work. The employers would make an excuse that there was a general slump in the industry, or that the workers should come back again the next day. Thus, although the employers did not come out against the workers getting organized, they provided a subtle but effective demonstration of who was in control of the situation.

The workers with little or no work became worried about their fates and decided to no longer attend SEWA meetings. Like almost all the homeworkers, they earned all their income from this direct employment and had no

other source of income, such as rents or capital or alternative employment in a textile mill or factory. The state could do nothing to protect these workers, as there was no legal backing for its intervention.

Renana, one of the SEWA secretaries who was an organizer at that time, said, " How could we sit back and preach to these workers to get organized while they were starving?" The workers had lost their relatively regular and only source of employment. They contributed at least a significant 30% of their family's earnings or were sole breadwinners. Because of high rates of divorce among Muslims, it has been very common to find female-headed households among these homeworkers. Any cut in their income means a direct cut in their consumption of food. Based upon SEWA's experience from other cases, the group decided to take direct action by providing raw materials to these victimized workers to give them alternative work and keep them going.

To store the cloth bought from the textile mills, SEWA rented a small warehouse next to the sewing class. This place was a part of the workers' education library, run by the state labor department. The alternative source of raw material supplied by SEWA attracted other workers to the warehouse or supply depot, asking for

work. There was no way of separating the needy from the neediest. However, by and large, the victims of employers' harassments and the neediest were preferred for providing alternative employment. This strategy weakened the control of employers over the workers since the 'punished' ones could still go to the SEWA store and find alternate work. Thus, on the one hand, SEWA struggled for higher wages and better conditions, and on the other hand, SEWA tried to provide alternative work, credit, and training to the homeworkers.

Though the employers did threaten to permanently lay off certain workers, in effect, they could not afford to do so. To ensure a reliable supply of labor, these employers had to at least have some workers working for them all the time. In fact, before SEWA formed its cooperative, the reasons for leaving an employer were limited to either the closure of the establishment or the dismissal of the worker. In extreme cases, homeworkers left their employers because of unfair rejection of their finished garments by the employers for which the workers had to often pay market price, or because of dissatisfaction with record-keeping by the employers, which did not give them their due wages. Some workers also left their employers because of old age and failing health; no pensions were provided. Now,

for the first time, workers had left employers in order to join the supply depot run by SEWA.

Over a period of time, SEWA decided to form a cooperative to run the depot. Around 200 workers bought ten-rupees shares in the cooperative and elected their secretary and president. The SEWA organizers remember this event as the day when these homeworkers saw that the cooperative was an alternative not only to their existing economic exploitation through low wages, but to the state's political connivance with the employers. The workers saw this as both, an economic as well as a political alternative to their existing situation. One SEWA worker who had a good background in sewing and the garment industry, and was talented in dealing with the textile mills and the other government departments, became the manager of the cooperative. Now the cooperative would compete with the employers in the market in buying the raw materials, storing them, getting the right designs, and marketing the products. Though the workers had not run a business of their own before, they soon came to know a lot about the garment industry through the cooperative. And the combination of these workers and SEWA's managerial and other support made the cooperative successful. Their piece-rates were higher than those paid by the employers since the profit

margin was low, and profits were shared by the workers.

Pallavi, one of the SEWA organizers, said, " It was also a good idea to run the cooperative, as now the workers had a better idea of how the garment industry operated. This later helped some of the workers to set up their own self-employment."

Thus SEWA's cooperative provided a space for warehousing the raw materials and the finished goods, and for sorting out the materials. Some of the workers without any other place to work could work there. The SEWA cooperative bank provided the homeworkers with credit for buying their own sewing machines to start up on their own businesses and take advantage of the market opportunities. The workers and leaders of the other thirteen cooperatives run by SEWA provided management and technical skills for running a cooperative or being self-employed. Because of the contacts and working relations, the homeworkers who worked for the SEWA cooperative had access to the state's agencies and institutions, such as public sector corporations, banks, and marketing agencies, and asked for help in finding reasonably priced raw materials and access to expanding market opportunities. The Labor Department, so used to the compensation funds for victimized workers, found the joint action of trade union struggle and cooperative

development a novel way of protecting and supporting workers.

Very soon the cooperative had to buy its own outlet in the market next to the shops of the employers. This act of direct confrontation and competition infuriated the employers the most. Also, SEWA decided to provide training to the younger girls who worked with their mothers. Most of the new entrants in the garment industry were young. They are not from other industries but are the young children of homeworkers who are trained by parents, relatives, and neighbors in stitching and other skills. There is no cost for the state to train this work force. But, sadly enough, it has no other choice for work, since the homeworkers only know this type of work. For these girls, training classes provided some literacy, some functional knowledge of their work, and some information on women's issues. The training also included better garment design and diversification of the clients. The trainees found this apprenticeship very useful.

Now that the SEWA cooperative paid higher wages, the workers could go to the employers and demand the same. Though they did not get the higher wages this time, they could at least get their accounts with the

employers in proper order. They also felt less dependent on their employers. The cooperative made the workers feel related to each other in terms of work, and made them feel a common interest and collective strength. This in turn made them less economically dependent on the employers. Also, since the workers now knew many other people in the area and outside and mingled among the workers and leaders of SEWA, they gained some social status in their community. This in turn made them less socially dependent on their employers. In fact, the regular income improved the status of these women breadwinners within their families. Under normal circumstances, they would have lost their social status by being an 'employed worker' instead of a more respectable 'homeworker'. However, in this case, the workers gained social status by joining SEWA: as they worked for a cooperative of their 'own', they mingled among the respectable middle class SEWA organizers and leaders. And once in a while they had a chance to go to the capital and meet the Labor Minister or some such dignitary in person!

SEWA has a good liaison with the government and its elected members who are on the various boards and commissions appointed for the welfare and benefit of workers. Thus, SEWA come in to contact with the

politics at the local community level and at higher levels. Though SEWA does not directly participate in party politics, it does have a definite political outlook regarding the problems of the workers. In each election, SEWA comes up with its own manifesto of workers demands and suggests that its members vote for the candidate who they think supports these demands. Thus, the workers develop their own political choice irrespective of the employers' persuasions.

Meanwhile the government put a new tax on the cloth and fans sold to the employers. The employers and the traders argued to the government that they could not afford to pay this tax and that it would force them out of business. This would have caused a widespread unemployment of women workers. One day one of the employers came to SEWA to ask for a photograph of some working women so that he could show it to the government to prove that they provided employment to many poor women.. Immediately, one of the SEWA organizers went to the state capital and found out more about the new taxation on fans. An emergency meeting of the workers was called, and they all decided to go to the Labor Minister and use this crucial situation to demand higher wages. Karima, the garment worker, recalled the event during my interview:

Imagine, I had never been out of my area, and never talked to my elders with a loud voice. SEWA wanted me to go to Gandhinagar, the state capital, and talk to the Labor Minister!

Many group meetings and the work-related content of the discussions helped the workers to clearly represent their demands to the Labor Minister. Since the workers had "said all that they felt about their hard work," SEWA organizers and the leaders had only to submit the typed copy of the workers' demand for higher wages, health protection, and regular employment. Such acts of putting the workers face to face with the political leaders has many benefits. First, the homeworkers get direct visibility among the decision makers of the state. Second, the workers see the state as a reality with which they can deal rather than as a mystifying abstraction. Third, since they have been following through the process with SEWA, the workers develop patience for results. Fourth, even if they get impatient with the delays, their impatience is with the state and not with SEWA.

The businessmen were soon summoned to the Labor Commissioner's office for a tripartite meeting, with the employers, workers, and the government officials, on

higher rates and better working conditions. The businessmen were very upset and tried their best to delay the meeting. The main reason for their reluctance was fear of admitting and establishing an employer-employee relationship with these homeworkers and thus in turn of being subjected to the Minimum Wage Act, which provides certain minimum wages to their workers. The Minimum Wage Act in Gujarat is linked with the cost of living index of the state. As the cost of living goes up, the wages go up, and the employers automatically have to pay more to their workers. They also feared the additional burden of the bonus they would have to pay the homeworkers under the law if the relationship is established. Moreover, they did not want to contribute to the state's provident funds for the workers or give health care benefits and holidays under various acts of the state.

But eventually, after a month or so, the meeting was held. The major point of argument was the fact that these workers were not the employees of the businessmen. In order to make enforcement of the law difficult, they argued that homeworkers actually 'buy' the raw materials from them and later 'sell' the finished products back to them. Thus, homeworkers were traders and not employees. It was equally difficult to negotiate for higher wages

and inclusion of the cost of threads and electricity in the wages. The state was happy to have SEWA representatives at the meeting to counterbalance the pressures and claims of the employers. SEWA representatives had facts and figures and represented an underlying threat of collective action on the part of homeworkers.

Many SEWA members had to go home to do their domestic chores, but others stayed to negotiate. Late at night, at around 10 pm, the businessmen agreed to give a raise of 1.20 rupees a dozen Chaniya. Renana, the SEWA secretary, said, " That was one more victory of our strategy of joint action of union struggle and cooperative development."

The next step was to gain strength by increasing membership. The SEWA organizers would go to the residential areas of these workers and talk to them about work and work-related problems. Often it is difficult to separate social and family problems, and the organizers refer homeworkers to the people in SEWA who take care of health-related or other issues. However, the organizers remain conscious that they have to make these workers see themselves as workers. The organizers did realize that it was difficult to organize

all the homeworkers in the union. In fact they saw that there was no need for doing that. Organizing only a crucial mass of workers was enough since the potential membership and its possible assertion was a good threat to the state and the employers to take SEWA seriously. It was in the interest of SEWA not to waste all of its efforts in organizing all the workers, as in fact if they did; it would have been very difficult to manage all of them with the limited resources and staff of SEWA. One organizer reports:

I would go to these women in small meetings and talk to them about their work, wages, different laws, unionization, and how other members of SEWA, like the vegetable vendors, organized and received a right to sit on the street, or how the Bidi rollers benefited from the welfare funds. Sometime one of the other members of the other trade groups would come with me, and the home-based workers could see for themselves, what workers like them can and had done.

Often workers' education classes are conducted and around 40 women come together for three days. These classes are conducted just before some collective action, such as a march or a demonstration, to build up the morale of the workers. In 1986, just before the march to the Labor Commissioner's office, several such meetings were held. Often the speakers are from the

related government departments of employment, labor, and industries. Once the Commissioner came and heard the difficulties of the workers and improved the factory inspection in the city. Thus these meeting serve many functions, including education, mobilizing, policy influence, and as a show of strength. There was also one more purpose to this meetings. Once the small occupational group of faithful and active membership was formed, SEWA realized that the rest of the support will come from the fact that there were large groups of potential members waiting to lend their support in the form of marches and demonstrations as well as actual strikes if need arises.

SEWA prepared a survey and made a report on the conditions of the workers and submitted its demands for the garment workers. The demands are for higher wages, health benefits, job security, and identity cards for the workers with the name of the employer on it. The demands were accepted, and now a tripartite committee is working to follow up by including homework of garment making in the schedule of the Minimum Wages Act. Thus the struggle is still on to change the Factories Act to redefine the concepts of WORK, WORKERS, and WORK-SITES.

PART III

FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based upon what we have discussed in parts I and II of this study, I will first list some of the important findings about SEWA's strategy for organizing homeworkers. Second, I will draw conclusions about how the attitude of the state towards organizations like SEWA. Third, I will make recommendations to the state about how to protect and support homeworkers in particular and unorganized workers in general.

Findings

First, the strategy for organizing homeworkers has to define their shared interest in work-related issues of wages, working conditions, and welfare so that a collective action for these scattered groups of workers is possible.

Second, because homeworkers come from various trade and occupation groups without any single employer against whom they can define their common interest, the strategy for organizing them is in identifying relatively small and somewhat homogenous groups facing common exploitative circumstances, for example, lack of legal protection against unfair dismissal. In the next stage, these groups can be joined in larger organizations of other homeworkers or unorganized workers like them to further enhance their bargaining power.

Third, collective bargaining against the employers for higher wages is not the only goal for organizing homeworkers. It is equally important to devise strategies that struggle for extension of the scope and reinterpretation of the existing labor regulations, increase access to the state's institutions that provide social security and allocate resources, and change the limited definitions of work, workers, and work-sites in state policies.

Fourth, the strategy for organizing homeworkers is two pronged. On the one hand, the struggle for higher wages and better working conditions are carried out by

the trade union through organizing and mobilizing workers for collective actions. On the other hand, workers are organized into cooperatives to protect them from victimization and unemployment through alternative work, as well as strengthen their productivity and enhance their capacity of setting up their own business or entering self-employment through credit, training, and marketing facilities.

Fifth, the strategy for organizing homeworkers leads to three types of actions: direct action, legal action, and policy action. Examples of direct actions are demonstrations, deputations, marches, and negotiations. Training, providing credit, supplying raw materials, and providing alternative work through cooperatives are also direct actions. Examples of legal action are filing individual court cases and providing evidence for expansion of the scope and reinterpretation of the existing labor and industrial laws. Often demands for tripartite committees and statutory bodies to examine the issues of workers are also good examples of legal actions. Examples of policy action are participation in policy making bodies like planning commissions and boards. Innovative and workable solutions found during organizing the homeworkers are documented and discussed through publications and

seminars so that policy-makers in particular and public opinion in general, is favorably influenced.

Sixth, these three actions have an additional purpose of increasing visibility of homeworkers in official records, census, statistical surveys, and reports that are instrumental in policy making. Various surveys, reports, and publications carried out to understand the problems of homeworkers are also useful in helping the state fill in missing information about such workers and their work.

Seventh, by exposing the control of the business interests over the regulatory institutions and welfare resources of the state through effective use of all the three actions mentioned above, the strategy for organizing homeworkers can be made useful to the state in counterbalancing the established claims of the business interests.

Conclusions

Keeping in mind the significance of these

unorganized workers' contribution to the economic development and political stability of the country, the state must change its attitude towards the organizations that represent their interests.

First, organizations of informal sector workers, such as SEWA, gain their strength not only from their direct membership but also from their ability to effectively mobilize vast numbers of other workers around a common interest. Thus, the state should not view such organizations for what they are, but for what their potential is in asserting their demands through large-scale mobilization of unorganized workers.

Second, homework is not a backward and traditional form of temporary work carried out by workers, till full industrialization of the economy is achieved. It is a way of work and production of essential goods at a very low cost, for the use of low-income people, who are in a majority in the country. By organizing these homeworkers, organizations like SEWA are supporting them to find their own sources of income and employment. The state should view these organizations reducing the state's burden of providing employment and the responsibility for the welfare of so many people.

Third, unorganized workers suffer from generations of social, economic, and even political dependency on their employers. The state should view positively the role played by organizations such as SEWA in addressing the fatalism and resignation of large numbers of women, children, and workers toiling for long hours at low wages in sweat shops. Such organizations address these workers' needs not only by encouraging their entrepreneurial talents but also by providing examples of economic success.

Fourth, state officials believe that it would be a chaos if the rules and regulations applied in the formal sector are also applied to the unorganized workers. However, this very limited experience of the state and the other trade unions in working with unorganized workers should be seen by the state as a challenge to break new grounds in search of successful efforts of organizing homeworkers.

Recommendations

The state should make an effort to curb at least

the worst of the failings of its labor and welfare regulations such as very low wages, sweatshop drudgery, lack of social security, and lack of collective bargaining power of workers.

First, in order to protect and support unorganized workers, the state must see that they form democratic organizations of their own for effective representation in state policies. The state must also encourage autonomy of these organizations to avoid over-institutionalization and overlap of activities. However, the state's protection and support should be available even to the workers who are not members of these organizations, as it is not possible, nor even required, to organize all unprotected workers.

Third, the state should see that these organizations are able to carry out their trade union struggle and cooperative development of the workers. Provision of infrastructure, such as storage space, water, and electricity should be provided to support these cooperatives. The state should also provide training programs in managerial and technical skills that are useful to homeworkers to form their own cooperatives and increase productivity.

Fourth, the state must try to stop outright evasion of labor laws related to minimum wages, working conditions, and welfare of the workers. This can be done by effectively enforcing the existing labor and industrial regulations through inspection of not only the factories but also the areas where home-based production is done through sub-contracting of work and under reporting of records.

Fifth, protection and benefits of existing labor and industrial laws must be extended to the unemployed and victimized homeworkers. Examples are provident funds, health care, accident compensation, and protection from occupational hazards.

Sixth, the state should make it easier for the homeworkers to take advantage of market opportunities by providing them with credit for the purchase of their own tools of production. The state agencies and institutions, such as public sector corporations, banks, and marketing authorities, should also help the homeworkers to obtain reasonably priced raw materials and access to expanding market opportunities.

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