

SEWA's Campaigns

While organising women and supporting them to build their own workers' organisations, the need for mass mobilization through campaigns became evident. This mass mobilization strengthens the SEWA movement and at the same time highlights the workers' own pressing issues.

All mobilization is done as part of a campaign around a clearly identified issue. The issue is identified by the women and local leaders as one which affects large numbers of people, which then affects them deeply or is felt as unjust or intolerable, and is continually called to our attention. Mobilisation involves continuous meetings at the village or mohalla level. The meetings must include as large a representation as possible, for example an all-village meeting – 'gram sabha'. It means clear identification of issues and a strategy formulated by as inclusive a group as possible. It means follow-up of the strategy by local people supported by SEWA. It means leadership from the women themselves. It means collection of relevant information through formal and informal surveys, and equally useful dissemination of this information. Several campaigns have taken the SEWA movement forward over the years.

1. Home-based Workers' Campaign

A campaign started at SEWA more than two decades ago reached its peak at the International Labour Organisation (ILO) in 1996. A historic victory for home-based workers world-wide was won when the ILO voted for a Convention to address the needs and priorities of home-based workers everywhere, according to them full rights as workers. SEWA collaborated with unions in many countries and federations of unions like HOMENET in the campaign process. Extensive dialogue was also held with policy-makers in the labour ministry of the government of India and our own state labour department in Gujarat.

Currently, SEWA is spearheading a national and South Asian movement for the rights of home-based workers.

2. Vendors' Campaign

Vendors are an important part of the urban economy, yet they are treated as criminals. In 1995 SEWA took the campaign for 'Legal rights for Street Vendors in our cities' to the international arena, with a meeting of vendors of 11 mega cities of the world organized in Bellagio, Italy. The meeting passed an International Declaration demanding policy and space for vendors.

In 1996, we began a survey of vendors in Ahmedabad and other Indian cities. This year we extended the survey. We also contacted various groups working with vendors and disseminated information on the Bellagio Declaration. In addition, we continued our campaign at the local level with the municipal authorities, for an end to forcible eviction of vendors and to obtain alternative vending sites. Negotiations for more sites, and an end to forced eviction till suitable alternative sites are given, are in progress.

In 1997, SEWA formed NASVI – the National Alliance of Street Vendors of India which now has – organizations in its network. In 2001, through SEWA's and NASVI's efforts, a national policy on street vendors was developed. The struggle to implement this policy continues.

3. Clean Ahmedabad Campaign

Increasingly people are becoming aware of the lack of clean surroundings in our cities and its health consequences. The poor in slums especially, face piling of garbage, filthy and insufficient number of toilets, overflowing drains, stagnant pools and polluted drinking water, which spread disease and make their lives miserable. However, it is not the poor alone who can handle these problems. Those living in better off areas have come to realize that lack of cleanliness in one part of the city will affect the health of all. For various reasons, the public authorities are unable to handle the huge problems of the cities, and this has given rise to the "Clean Ahmedabad" campaign since 1994.

SEWA is conducting this campaign in working class areas of Ahmedabad. Continuous mohalla level meetings bring out the problems and raise awareness. The women leaders from the areas then take up the issues with help and guidance from SEWA organizers. Generally, the leaders handle simple garbage cleaning within the community, but for infrastructure issues like broken drain pipes, polluted drinking water and toilets they contact and co-ordinate with the municipal authorities. Continuous education in cleanliness and discussion with members, ongoing identification of local needs and daily co-ordination and pressuring of the municipal authorities for garbage clearance are the main elements of this campaign.

In the middle class residential areas, the campaign is conducted in collaboration with the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation. The paper picker members of SEWA are in the forefront of the campaign as they are the real cleaners and recyclers of the dry garbage of Ahmedabad. They are allocated certain areas to keep clean and each house is supplied with a SEWA bag for waste collection, to be replaced when filled. There is an ongoing education campaign on cleanliness with the residents. The women then re-sell the dry waste which is their only source of employment.

The women involved in this campaign are now recognised as "Arogya Bhaginis" or literally, "Health Sisters" (Health Workers).

4. The Water Campaign

The areas of North Gujarat where SEWA works are mainly arid and semi-arid. Safe drinking water is a major problem, as is water for irrigation. Without water, both living conditions and the economy remain depressed in these areas. In 1995, SEWA's local leaders organized gram sabhas in 290 villages. The response was overwhelming with villagers coming together to identify their major problem as an acute shortage of water.

The women leaders then identified the usually defunct or untapped water resources in their villages, and the exact reason for the shortage - some had no well at all, in some there was a bore well but the pump was out of order, in others there was a pipeline, but water was rarely piped through. They identified the agency responsible for their water source, and the means of obtaining assured water, new water sources and repair of existing sources. They, then, began to work with the village Panchayat towards a solution – collection of funds from villagers, contacting responsible authorities, linking with Government schemes, bringing in new technical solutions, and education campaigns within the village. The villagers have been responding to SEWA members with great enthusiasm, and in some areas results are already visible, with water tankers being provided in some villages, repair works beginning in others and new water resources provided in a few. In 2006 too, this campaign was carried forward by women leaders.

Message of the Water Campaign: Access to clean drinking water is the right of every human being. Water is the basic necessity for life, livelihood, health and progress. Lack of water is the main cause of migration.

Demand of the Water Campaign: In every village, there is a need to set up sources for drinking water. The responsibility of operating and maintaining these sources lies with the local members.

This year also various capacity building trainings were organized under the water campaign. These trainings were mainly in the area of water harvesting, water quality and fluosis control, water and water borne disease, water management and environment, water quality, monitoring and surveillance, hand pump repairing training, operation and maintenance training, Health Education and hygiene. 152 members from 5 districts had received plumbing training. These members were also given plumbing kits and thereby earned an income of Rs. 500 per month.

The water campaign team also worked during the floods in 2006. The water campaign teams played an important role in cleanliness of the villages and prevented the outbreak of disease.

SEWA is also a governing board member of India Water Partnership, which is the country chapter of Global Water Partnership. SEWA is also a member of Gender and Water Alliance which works at the global level. Both these organization work for water related issues at the global level and that the campaign for these issues world-wide gains momentum.

5. Campaign for Forest Workers

Women have been forest and nursery workers and collectors of minor forest produce for years. However, they have not received the technical support and services that they require. On the other hand, it is they who are the worst sufferers in the increasing ecological degeneration and land degradation at the local level. In addition, some policies of government's forest department, including their own nursery raising, are an impediment to women's employment. These policies are not only a hindrance but also result in declining incomes of the poorest of women who depend on forest and nursery raising for survival. In this context, SEWA has initiated a national and state level campaign since last 13 years to hand over nursery-raising to local women.

Some of the major issues emerging out of the campaign are partial allotment of nurseries by the forest department inspite of the huge demand for nurseries.

This results in non availability of employment for the members. This is a major challenge because in absence of the support from the state, the members are unable to sustain the activity taken up by them. E.g. the contract for raising of nursery is given to group of women for only a year and this does not ensure sustainable livelihood. The member's receive capacity building training for raising of nursery, but their knowledge and capabilities in the area becomes redundant if they are unable to seek sustainable employment.

Also the forestry related schemes of the forest department are based on cost norms that are more than a decade old. There is a need to revise these norms, in absence of which it is extremely difficult to make the nurseries profitable or even viable. Also the forest department presently pays Rs.1.10 for non-fruit and fruit growing plants. This is to the women who work so hard and far below the market rates. Unless plantation become an income generating activity poor will not take up forestry on scale to make forests sustainable; forestry must be made a sustainable source of income for poor families and women. Also there is hardly any technical guidance available to the women who take up forestry as an economic activity. Forestry schemes without support services have no meaning. Such technical services should be available at the plantation level, and also it must adapt local needs from region-to-region basis.

Therefore under the feminize our forests campaign, SEWA is advocating for annual nurseries as well as increasing the allocation of costs. The campaign has also led to demonstrate actions with an integrated approach and achieving sustainability.

Women have now started taking-up nursery raising as an economic activity. In spite of absence of allocation of nurseries from the state government the women now take loans and raise nurseries.

The campaign is now also reaching national and international levels. SEWA being a member of UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), SEWA was also invited as a country representative at the Women's Committee to Combat Desertification setup by UNCCD. SEWA presented the policy issues at this consultation and the same were added and formed a part of the recommendations for policy formulations.

6. Campaign for Agricultural Labourers

Over 60% of our members live in rural areas which have arid and semi-arid climate. The main occupation of these members is agriculture, which is mainly rain-fed. With the depleting water tables, the condition of the farmers is pitiable. In order to solve the problems of these agricultural workers, SEWA started the agriculture campaign in the year 1995. Today this campaign has taken the form of a movement.

The major problems faced by the small and marginal farmers include non-availability of credit, water, seeds, fertilizers, other inputs, lack of access to technology and lack of access to markets. All these factors have led to exploitation of the farmers and they remain in the clutches of traders and money lenders and pay heavy interest rates which push them further in the vicious circle of poverty.

Also with globalization and increasing mechanization in farming, as well as other rapid changes in agriculture like export oriented cash crop cultivation, our members face many challenges. Secondly, our members do all the work related to agriculture. Yet their contribution is not recognized. They need identity cards, voice and representation. When policies are made, our members demand that they are consulted and involved in such decision making. Therefore the agriculture campaign has taken up the issues of recognition of women as farmers to building of village level farmers organization which collectively work on providing the needed agricultural inputs such as seeds and fertilizers.

The farmers organization were also equipped by setting up tools and equipments libraries which have the needed as well as latest tools and equipments which gives the farmers timely access to tools and equipments. Thus the agriculture campaign provides an integrated package of credit, technology, inputs. With this the most crucial link is access to markets. The agriculture campaign encouraged and motivated the farmers to organize Krishi Bazaars – farmers markets- locally as well as at national level. The members have earned a total income of Rs. 12,27,481 through these krishi bazaars.

Vegetables and agricultural commodities are now sold through the farmers market, thus linking up the farmers directly to the market. This approach also strengthens the farmers to build alliances with the private sector. The agriculture campaign has now gained momentum and also spread to national and regional level where SEWA is founder of All India Women Farmers Association and at the regional level, SEWA is setting-up the farmers forum.

7. Campaign for Recognition of Dais (Traditional Birth Attendants) as Village Health Workers

Dais or Traditional Birth Attendants (TBAs) have been conducting home deliveries in Gujarat's villages for centuries. They also provide general primary health services to families. Yet they remain unrecognized by the government's Health Department and society in general. They neither get the respect that is their due nor do they play any significant role in the government health system. SEWA has been demanding that the dais be registered, given identity cards and be given responsibility for providing decentralized health care at women's doorsteps in the villages.

In 2004, the government issued a formal resolution (GR) recognising dais and promoting them as village health workers. The Dai Sangathan (Gujarat) was formally registered as an organization of dais from all over the State in 2005. SEWA is a founder member, along with 6 NGOs. SEWA is also the secretariat of this new organization.

8. Campaign for Child Care as a Basic Service

For poor working women, child care is a priority and basic need. Our experience has been that when appropriate and affordable child care is organized for workers, they can earn and their productivity increases. Enhanced income brings in better food, nutrition and health care to women's families, as they can now spend on these needs. They also report "peace of mind", knowing that their children are being taken care of properly. Finally, workers' older children are released from child care responsibilities and start attending school.

For all these reasons, SEWA has been campaigning for child care as an entitlement for all women workers for some years now. We have been a founder-member of FORCES (Forum for Creches and Child Care Services). In 1996 we began the process of starting a Gujarat chapter of FORCES. A state-level meeting of several organisations involved in child care was held and its recommendation widely circulated, follow-up dialogue with state-level planners and policy-makers is continuing. In addition, we have been pressing our demand for child care as part of the governments' Minimum Needs Programme and for appropriate budgetary allocations at both state and central government levels. In 2005 40 NGOs were part of Gujarat FORCES whose secretariat is at SEWA.

Some of the campaigns described here are undertaken at national level, state or local level. Some are even active at the international level. Still others are operative at a combination of levels. This year, we put considerable emphasis and effort in pushing these campaigns forward. Women themselves actively participated, voicing their concerns and contributing to plans in committees and with the concerned government officials. Most of them are ongoing and have to be pursued actively each year.

Through these campaigns there is increased mobilization. They are a boost to SEWA's organizing efforts. They also strengthen women's leadership and own workers' organizations. It is a slow and long-term process which leads to overall development of women, their families and ultimately social change. It brings poor women and their concerns into the mainstream of society. It makes them more and more visible.

9. Campaign for legislation entitling workers on the informal economy to social security.

Policy Action for Umbrella Legislation for Unorganised Sector Workers: -

The Government of India through its resolution dated 15,October 1999 constituted the Second National Commission on Labour, with the twin objective of suggesting rationalization of existing labour laws in the organized sector and to suggest "umbrella legislation" for ensuring a minimum level of protection to the workers in the unorganised sector. Elaben Bhatt, Founder of SEWA, was a member of the Commission.

This Commission then set up a task force which thoroughly examined the issues of unorganised sector workers and gave its report. Based on this report the Commission suggested a draft bill, which was part of the Commission's report. On the recommendations of the Commission, the ministry of Labour prepared a bill which was known as "Unorganised Sector Workers Bill, 2003". The main objective of the bill is to regulate the employment and conditions of service of unorganised sector workers and to provide for their safety, social security, health and welfare.

The bill was then discussed in the Indian Labour Conference and other fora where SEWA participated. It was also circulated to the Government Ministries and the State Governments for the Comments.

In 2005, the Government asked SEWA to prepare a new draft bill. SEWA focused on social security and prepared "The Unorganised Sector Social Security Bill, 2005 and submitted it to the government.

SEWA was also invited to be an adviser in the National Commission on Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector (NCEUS). Here, too, we helped to prepare both a bill on social security incorporating most of SEWA's earlier draft bill and a report on the social security of unorganised sector workers.

SEWA has been actively working with other national level unions and workers' groups to press for this legislation— that it should for a start, be tabled in the Parliament and debated there. We have been meeting with the government, especially the labour ministry, and stressing the importance of this bill and the need for social security as a right of unorganised sector workers.

This has now developed into a national level campaign. SEWA organised a rally to press for this social security legislation in New Delhi, along with other national unions. The rally was held on October 2nd, 2006 –Mahatma Gandhi's birthday—with 2000 informal workers from all over India participating. Several union leaders and leaders of people's movements, like the one for the Right to Information, addressed the rally. All present pledged to ensure that the social security legislation passed through Parliament and that the benefits would actually reach the workers of the informal economy in all parts of the country.