

Work Security as a Human Right

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This year's Human Development Report is not only a through inquiry and documentation of the human condition but also a moving tribute to the courage, creativity and irrepressible spirit of people everywhere.

The discourse contained within the report and the accounts of both struggle and development struck a common chord. At SEWA too, we have been fortunate to witness first-hand the grit, wisdom and tremendous potential of women workers for over three decades.

But today I'd like to focus on one aspect of the rights mentioned in the report : economic rights-or what has been called "freedom from want" and "freedom for decent work". Specifically, I would like to emphasise the right to work and its critical links with human development and human rights.

A quick glimpse into the world of work in India would be useful at this juncture. 93 % of all workers are engaged in the informal economy in India today. Their economic contribution is every significant, with the informal economy accounting for 64 % of GDP, 55 % of national savings and 47 % of all exports in our country.

And yet we have little or no rights. Protective labour legislation to prevent exploitation, unjust working conditions and for social protection like health care, child care, pension and insurance are conspicuously absent. There are laws like the Minimum Wages Act, the Equal Remuneration Act and the Contract Labour Act – but enforcement is far from satisfactory.

So the bulk of our people do not get "decent work" and work long hours for very little income or wages.

Apart from the issue of "decent work," there is the question of getting any work at all. In many parts of the country, workers are chronically underemployed and unemployed. In our experience in Gujarat, particularly in the dry areas of Saurashtra, Kutch and north Gujarat, families get only a few months of regular

employment in the agricultural season. And if the rains fail, as they did last year, there is drought no work, mass migration and a desperate scramble for any work that may come one's way. In such situations, where is the question of safeguarding human rights ? Or of human development ?

And this situation is not restricted to the rural areas alone. In Ahmedabad too, we have seen how the collapse of the textile mills over the past two decades, has led to the downward spiral in living standards of millions of working class families. The city is yet to recover from this shock. SEWA's urban members report that their traditional activities – bidi rolling, agarbatti making, garment sewing and others are going through 'slow' and 'sick' periods, resulting in little or no work. Of course changing trends in the global economy have also played their part, rendering some traditional economic activities like handloom weaving redundant and at the same time throwing up some new work opportunities.

But the general scenario in the world of work for most of our people is one of growing work insecurity and erosion of rights, a situation where the struggle for survival and human development, is increasingly precarious.

Despite this sobering scenario, at SEWA we do believe there are ways to strengthen the poor, safeguard their rights and help them emerge from poverty. Our experience points to the need for work security or put in another way, the right to work. We have learned that without the right to work we cannot have freedom from want or what, our SEWA sisters call the "Second Freedom" – freedom from poverty, along with the "First Freedom" from colonial bondage.

Let me share a few examples from our experience to illustrate what has come to be our deeply held conviction that without full employment we cannot hope to come out of poverty.

From the early seventies, SEWA began to organise the street vendors of Ahmedabad. By the early eighties, the repression and eviction of vendors had become unbearable for our members. There were daily beatings by the police, demands for “hafta” or pay-offs were increasing and the municipal corporations “anti-encroachment squad” had played havoc with women’s livelihoods. Their goods were routinely confiscated and rotted in municipal godowns and their baskets and other work equipment were locked up for weeks. And so the women organised. Their union, SEWA, initiated dialogue with the local authorities and the police, organised satyagrahas and finally approached the Supreme Court for justice.

When Laxmiben, Rajiben, Elaben and the others testified in the Supreme Court, all they asked for was for “two baskets worth of space” in the main market of Manek Chowk. They just wanted to be left to sell in peace. Fortunately for them, the Supreme Court ruled that either an alternative market be developed or that the status quo be maintained.

Today, Rajiben, Laxmiben and others sell their wares in the market as their mothers and grandmothers have done for generations. From time to time they still have to face some problems, but by and large their right to work and work security has been safeguarded. And their struggle has had its spin-off effects.

The vendors membership in SEWA has swelled. Vendor-leaders have learned to negotiate with local authorities and even use the courts where required. Vendors from five other markets also secured their right to work and sell in the markets, without fear of eviction and the customary pay-offs.

And where has this right to work led ? Street vendors have sent their children to school – there are even a few doctors and lawyers among them! They have organised child care for their children while they’re out at work. And health care, including health insurance for themselves. Through their own SEWA Bank, they have saved, taken loans and developed their businesses. Some have even

stood for political office! Others have developed as strong leaders within the union. Leelaben who was part of the first Manek Chowk struggle is now a video producer. And they have their own vendors cooperative and now direct linkages with growers for better prices for both vendors and growers.

And with their new found work and income security, many vendors have invested in their neighbourhoods. They have joined hands with the municipal corporation and contributed from their earnings towards basic amenities – water, toilets drainage, electricity – in their neighbourhoods. They say proudly we no longer live in a slum but in a housing colony !

Another example of the right to work becoming the building block for development and a way out of poverty is that of the dry, drought-prone desert district of Banaskantha. Long considered one of Gujarat's poorest areas, a quiet transformation has begun in this desert. Twelve years ago, the Gujarat government asked SEWA to help organise water committees – “pani panchayats” – to manage the use of water delivered by a pipe-line in the district. Recognising that access to work opportunities and thus regular and stable income were the bottom-line for the families of the area, SEWA began the process of stabilizing, strengthening and developing multiple work and employment opportunities. Assisted by a Gujarat-based action-research organisation, Foundation for Public Interest, FPI, SEWA studied the existing work patterns and opportunities for local people especially women. Then women were organised into their own collectives of embroiderers, those involved in dairying, salt manufacturers, gum collectors, women who worked in their own nurseries and plantations and others. SEWA helped them link with the government to access and implement rural development programmes like DWCRA. Backward and forward linkages in each economic activity were slowly established. Markets for their products were secured including their own shop in Ahmedabad, and at the same time women were encouraged to form their own savings groups, child care centres and health programmes.

The economic collectives, functioning like cooperatives, gave rise to women's leadership. Women of the Ahir community who were prohibited from leaving their district headquarters by their men-folk, defied the ban and went to Ahmedabad, Delhi and even as far Beijing and Perth to learn and to share their experiences.

They formed their own thriving local economic association at district-level, still a part of the SEWA movement, but independently run, managed and controlled by Rannbai, Puriben, Dahiben and other local women leaders.

As part of their efforts to fight drought in their district, these women even negotiated with the Gujarat government for a loan to increase their craft production as a drought-relief measure. Better they said, to use our skills and create products that will sell and bring us more income than be restricted to working at relief sites.

And now they are greening their desert home, actively planting trees to secure their future, collecting every drop of rainwater in village ponds dug by themselves or in underground tanks in their homes. The “pani panchayats” envisaged by the government are now actively functioning water management committees with women taking the lead. Now that there is work in the district, out migration has been reduced to a trickle and women are asking for better schools, housing health care and insurance – a future for their children.

They are no longer bound to money-lenders or exploitative middlemen who paid a pittance for their exquisite embroidery. They are coming out of the cycle of poverty.

These are not isolated “flashes in the pan”. In SEWA we have many such examples and experiences big and small in virtually all aspects of development – banking, health, capacity-building and more.

In both of the examples mentioned here and in others at SEWA, it is not a question of the rights approach preceding human development but rather both converging and building on the strengths of each. Very much on the lines suggested in the Human Development Report, we have seen at SEWA that the joint strategy of struggle and development can lead to some powerful outcomes. So it is not a question of “either-or” or “before and after” but of harnessing the energies released from both. And of course, the first, crucial step is that of organising people. In our case, it has been women coming together to safeguard their rights through collective strength, increase their bargaining power and visibility and reclaim their rightful place in the economy and society.

I have tried to explain that the right to work or work security is the bottom line for our people. Without this we cannot have human development. Without this we cannot enjoy the seven freedoms of the Human Development Report. But the converse is also true. Without those seven freedoms work security will remain forever elusive. Thus, human rights and human development necessarily go hand-in-hand. SEWA’s experience points to the need for an integrated approach and joint strategy incorporating both struggle and rights, and development, as mentioned earlier.

Fortunately, today there are many who have recognised the need for this approach, starting with work security and the right to work.

More than ten years ago, the right to work was being seriously considered for inclusion as a fundamental right in the Constitution. Although the government fell and progress on this was stalled, it generated much discussion in several quarters, including the Planning Commission.

More recently, at the Social Summit meeting in Geneva in June of this year, governments have included Full Employment – including work, income security, and social security in Commitment 3 of the document adopted by the plenary at the Summit. The commitment states :

“To promote the goal of full employment as a basic priority of our economic and social policies, and to enable all men and women to attain secure and sustainable livelihoods through freely chosen productive employment and work.”.

But how can we go about enabling people to obtain “secure and sustainable livelihoods” and “productive employment and work”?

SEWA’s experience suggests that first the poor must organise and build their own representative membership-based organisation. It is virtually impossible for workers to obtain regular employment with decent income or stand firm in the marketplace without collective strength and the bargaining power that this brings.

Also, the collective helps individual workers obtain the strength they require to withstand all the pulls and pushes which are part of their struggle – and struggle it is – to secure their livelihoods. In the case of poor women, we have seen at SEWA that without organising and without their own workers organisation, it is very difficult for them to obtain any measure of work security.

Along with organising, specific need based programmes help to propel people in the direction of work security and ultimately self reliance. These include financial services and asset creation – especially in women’s name. Our over twenty-five years of experience of providing financial services to poor women through SEWA Bank shows that promoting savings and developing work and business opportunities through loans has not only helped women emerge from poverty, but also develop themselves and their families in a number of ways. Many women even take loans to put their children through school, college or a course with employment prospects. That women gravitate towards such a service goes without saying. In twenty-five years, they have built their bank from 4000 depositors and Rs 40,000 working capital to 1,30,000 women and over Rs 38 crores with their own hard-earned money.

Social protection and social security is another area which is required by the poor and helps them secure their livelihoods. Apart from the intrinsic value of health care, child care, insurance and housing services, when these are provided they help plug the financial leakage's resulting from sickness, loss of assets in disasters, caring for a small child and hence losing income and even a 'Kutchha' house with a leaking roof.

And the provision of social security services can itself be an important source of employment for the poor. Thus, in every way, social protection is an integral and essential part of work security.

Capacity-building – to run and manage their own economic activities, to hone their skills and build up their knowledge and to lead and represent their own organisation – is also a vital part of all efforts to stabilise the lives of the poor. The Human Development Report asserts the need to assist in people's efforts to develop to their fullest potential. At SEWA too we have witnessed how just a little support and a few inputs can help women grow into strong and courageous leaders, holding their own with the police, employers, their men-folk and even the market.

Thus, need-based appropriate inputs to support and encourage workers attempts towards self-development and growth are essential for work security.

Finally, a policy environment which promotes full employment as an anti-poverty measure and a fundamental right can have very significant impact on workers' quest for work security. There are so many ways in which this may be done.

When the Gujarat government issued a Government Resolution (GR) to the effect that all government establishments may purchase products from women's

cooperatives without tender, workers obtained regular markets for their products and hence work security.

The Livelihood Fund made available to drought – affected women mentioned earlier, helped them earn and feed their children at a time when others had to migrate because of lack of employment. Such a Livelihood Security Fund with dedicated resources and appropriated decentralised functioning through people’s organisations, is required on a permanent basis, not only in times of disasters.

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And the Planning Commission’s recent efforts to identify bottle-necks in policies affecting the poor with the help of people’s organisation and NGOs is another important step in the direction of creating a climate that enables and supports the poor in all matters, including work security.

I would like to conclude with a quote from my colleague, Bashiranbibi, agricultural labourer and Executive Committee member of SEWA, who eloquently explains what happens when one organises people for work security :

“Before I joined our union, I was afraid of everyone and everything. But we women organised for minimum wages, more employment and basic services. We built our organisation and secured our livelihoods. Now I am not afraid of anything”.

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