

Our Voice Our Concerns: Bidi Workers on Welfare Benefits



WOMEN BIDI WORKERS AT THE SAMMELAN (MASS MEETING) IN AHMEDABAD CITY

Women Bidi workers in the city of Ahmedabad expressed their issues.....

at a mass meeting in Ahmedabad on 16th April 2011. The issues mainly pertained to the delay in the payment of scholarships to thousands of children of Bidi workers; non issuance of identity cards to Bidi workers; wages of Bidi workers not being uniform. A majority of Bidi workers had grievances pertaining to the payment of scholarships to their 2247 children as they had not received scholarships amounting to Rs. 2992540/- for year 2009-2010 and for year 2010-2011 the number of children was 2213 and the amount of scholarship that was due was Rs.3065760/- despite the fact that they had opened joint accounts in a nationalized bank as per the directions of the Welfare Board. Bidi Workers Welfare Board directed that there was change in the process of disbursement of scholarships as earlier the scholarship amounts were directly deposited into the respective accounts of schools but later the Board directed that scholarships of all children would be disbursed into their respective bank account in the designated banks. SEWA facilitated its members in opening of these bank accounts, which were opened with zero balance. Later, due to delay in transferring the scholarship amounts they were informed that their bank accounts had been frozen as they did not have the a minimum balance of Rs One Thousand in their accounts. Then, SEWA met the Welfare Commissioner and the bank managers and had discussions as to how these workers could deposit such big amounts and suggested to reduce the amount to Rs. Five Hundred. We also met bank managers and convinced them to reduce the amount. After all the painstaking issues were resolved the Welfare Board assured that it would expedite the process of making payment of scholarship to children, as entitled under the Bidi Welfare Fund.

SEWA has been organizing Bidi workers for over 25 years and has presently organized around 15403 women Bidi workers in the city of Ahmedabad. Vir Bhagat Sinh Hall at Gomtipur, Ahmedabad was jam packed as Bidi workers from all over the city came and fervently expressed their issues and concerns. Nearly 3000 Bidi workers occupied the hall. Among those present at the Sammelan were Shri P K Saxena, Deputy Welfare Commissioner from the Office of the Deputy Welfare Commissioner (Central); Dr. Vandana Shah, Incharge Bidi welfare dispensary, Mr. khatri Manaliben Shah, Head, Urban Union



WOMEN BIDI WORKERS COMING FOR THE SAMMELAN (MASS MEETING)

Issues of Bidi Workers

The following issues of Bidi workers were highlighted at the Sammelan:

- *Children of thousands of Bidi workers had not received scholarship amount for the last 2 years, under the Bidi Welfare Fund.*
- *It was necessary to make Bidi workers aware of the scheme - 'Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojna'(RSBY)*
- *There was need for Skill Development Training (MES) on Alternative Employment to Bidi Workers.*
- *The wages of Bidi workers were low and uneven and there was a need to enhance the same.*



SHUBHADRABEN BANDA, A BIDI WORKER, SPEAKS ON ISSUES CONCERNING HER

Shri P K Saxena, Deputy Welfare Commissioner addresses the Bidi workers.....

Shri P K Saxena, Deputy Welfare Commissioner, spoke on various issues and schemes pertinent to Bidi workers. He said that the children of Bidi workers should have a bank account so that their scholarship amounts could be deposited in the same. Shri P.K Saxena said that details of children, who had not yet received scholarship money, could be submitted to SEWA. Speaking about National Health Insurance Scheme by the Government of India, he said that the scheme could benefit Bidi Workers. He mentioned that around 8776 Bidi Workers had received Identity Cards. Workers possessing BPL (Below Poverty Line) cards could also approach Bidi Welfare Board. The workers were informed about Swasthya Yojna which provided benefit up to Rs. 30,000.

The Outcome: resolving the issues of Bidi workers...

Children of thousands of Beedi workers would now be able to avail benefit under scholarship scheme for which they had been waiting for the last two years. Manaliben assured that children would be getting scholarship within the next two months.

Bidi workers were appraised about National Health Insurance Scheme. They were being registered under this scheme at 'Bidi Kamdar Dispensary' in Rakhial, Ahmedabad. Bidi workers whose cards needed correction could get the same rectified. Adding to what Shri P.K Saxena had mentioned about children's scholarships, Manaliben mentioned that SEWA was going to open three centres for collecting the details of children whose scholarship amounts were yet to be paid. Information collected would then be submitted to 'Bidi Welfare Office' for initiating the process of disbursing scholarships to children of Bidi workers.

The biggest achievement of the Sammelan (Mass Meeting) is that SEWA did a rigorous follow-up and collected the data of all those who have not received the scholarships and gave the data to

Bidi Welfare Department. This resulted in the disbursement of scholarships to more than 1000 children in their respective bank accounts, and the process still continues.

Importance of giving Scholarships to Children

Scholarships encourage children to continue their studies and pursue higher education. According to SEWA's experience, the payment of scholarships to children of informal sector workers has greatly contributed towards the reduction of Child labour in Ahmedabad.