

LOAD OF TROUBLES POST COVID FOR HEADLOADER WOMEN WORKERS

Headloader is a term simply for laborers who carry loads on their heads. The name head-loaders was given to women workers by Sewa's founder Elaben Bhatt to women who eked their living carrying cloth bundles on their heads from one shop to another, from one market to another. One woman is employed by one or multiple cloth merchants. Most women also help in packaging the textiles before they are sent out for delivery.

Experts say that there are some 50,000 women headloaders employed in different markets in Ahmedabad. Their concentration is specifically high in wholesale cloth markets which sell choicest textiles manufactured across mills in Gujarat to merchants from across India. Currently, there are some 2,500 women headloaders employed in panchkuva and other neighbouring cloth markets.

While work of a headloader was always tough, the Corona pandemic has thrown the life of most women handloaders out of gear. For three odd months, markets remained closed, completely drying up earnings. Many women were forced to take personal loans to eat.

Since July, the markets have opened but the impact of pandemic nationally and globally has unleashed a major slowdown in the textile markets. Buyers are fewer and far between. This has resulted in a major income crisis for women headloaders who are forced to go back home with Rs 50-100 in hand. Many say they cannot afford to pay their children's' fees while few also admit to going hungry, eating only one meal a day.

These women have spent their lives carrying loads on their heads. They may be too proud to beg but they call for some help in getting their lives back-- at least till the time impact of Covid-19 is writ large on the textile business and markets.

- SEWA organized headloader women for the first time in the textile city of Ahmedabad.
- Some 100-150 headloaders joined hands with SEWA's founder Elaben Bhatt. They were paid 10 paisa per bundle for a round of headloading and 50 paisa for stitching a parcel and carrying it.
- Currently, some 2,500 headloader women work in the Panchkuva cloth market and other wholesale textile markets located nearby in the city of Ahmedabad, Gujarat.
- Post-Covid, there is an obvious slowdown in the textile market. Women headloaders earning Rs 350-500 per day are having to make do with Rs 50 per day income.
- Many confess to eating one meal or sometimes going hungry

POST-COVID, UNEASY LAYS AHEAD OF THE WOMEN HEADLOADERS

WITH HER EARNINGS DWINDLING DOWN TO RS 50/DAY; FEISTY HEADLODER WOMAN LASUBEN NEEDS SOME HELP TO PUT TWO SQUARE MEALS ON HER FAMILY'S PLATE

AHMEDABAD: Lasuben Shivilal Raval, 70, works as a headloader in the panch-kuva cloth market, one of the biggest wholesale cloth markets in Ahmedabad, formerly known as the 'Manchester of the East'. She started working as a seven-year-old girl and, over the seven decades, she has never shied away from taking on responsibilities on her frail shoulders.

Her struggles started early. In 1963, she was thrown out of her marital home while she was three months pregnant. Two years later, she got divorced. Carrying heavy bales of cloth on her head, she still managed to always hold it high as she raised her daughter single-handedly.

It is said that no parent should outlive her child. Lasuben suffered a massive blow as a mother when her daughter committed suicide and left six children-- five daughters and a son - motherless. The feisty grandmother took the children under her wings and toiled hard in the cloth markets, working overtime, to educate them. She takes pride in the fact she educated four girls till class 7 and ensured two even complete class 12!

Over the years, Lasuben became weak and she could not sustain being a headloader. A member of Sewa since the day it was founded by Magsaysay award winner and Padma Bhushan Elaben Bhatt, she became the leader and representative of the headloaders. She would resolve the issues of fellow headloader women and help many get employment. She would earn Rs 350-500 per day, packaging cloth at big merchants' shops which was enough to put food on her family's plates.

Covid-19 pandemic, the unprecedented lockdown and the slowdown in it's aftermath, however has thrown a curve at this elderly widow who continues to support her grandchildren. Her grandson stays with her while one granddaughter has come back to live with her with two children after she was thrown out of her house.

Four months after lockdown was imposed on March 25, 2020 in Gujarat, she did not earn a penny. It became an existential crisis for the septuagenarian as the markets were shut and cloth merchants she worked with, did not take calls.



"Most days, I spent the lockdown eating a single meal. If there was flour, there would be no oil. If there was sugar, there would be no tea leaves. Some days, there was no food, so we slept drinking plain water," reminisces Lasuben.

The markets tentatively opened around August but the slowdown is visible. *"Ever since Covid-19 outbreak, there has been tremendous physical and mental stress. Work is slow, most of the headloader sisters barely make Rs 50 per day against an average Rs 300-500 per day,"* says Lasuben.

She says merchants and SEWA have helped the headloader sisters. They have received Rs 800 as assistance from the Textile Labour Association (TLA) but the debts have mounted. Not working for months and poor business in the aftermath of Covid-19 has made it tough to make two ends meet.

"Covid-19 has led to social turmoil. My grand-daughter was kicked out of the house with her two children. I can stay without food but the children need milk. It is tough to see children go without milk," says Lasuben.

The feisty woman has been going back to the cloth market daily for work. She does not lift load but packages textile for wholesale merchants. She can see that the business is slow, markets are not as crowded as in pre-Covid times. The Rs. 50 she earns daily is obviously not enough. Help would be forthcoming.

"I have never given up on life. Would not do it now. But some help would be welcome