

SEWA Sisters Wage War Against Health & Economic Loss Triggered By Pandemic

Engage in Mask Distribution, Setting Up Covid Isolation Centers and Mobilizing Vaccination To Ease Covid Crisis In Villages.

Ahmedabad: Chhaya Bhavsar, SEWA's national coordinator for agriculture enhancement, lost her battle to Covid-19 on May 2 after a valiant struggle for weeks in the ICU of a local hospital in Ahmedabad. She was only 43.

Lakhs of SEWA sisters who had prayed hard for her recovery were left shattered and heart-broken. It is not easy to lose a leader who hand-held thousands of women farmers on the path to self-sustenance.

"Across Gujarat, some 100 SEWA sisters have lost their lives to Covid-19 infection. This number would be more if one takes into account deaths of their kin," says Reema Nanavaty of SEWA.

For the first time, Covid-19 has tightened its grip on rural areas which were largely left untouched by the previous Corona wave in 2020. Rural Gujarat where majority SEWA sisters dwell is struggling with onslaught of the deadly pandemic. Sisters reported there are fever cases in every second house, villagers are fast losing lives to the pandemic.

The situation in villages with scarce health infrastructure and medical resources is precarious. As incomes due to partial lockdown and poor economic activities shrink, villagers stare at medical bills running into lakhs of rupees which is pushing them into financial debts.

Financial distress is acute. Jashiben Ratan Thakor, residing in Moti Pipli village in Radhanpur had to desperately borrow Rs 1.5 lakh for the treatment of her husband Ratan after he contracted Covid. "We took him to the hospital in town but despite spending so much money, we could not save him," says Jashi. As her husband, a driver by profession, was out of work due to extended restrictions on travel, Jashi along with her children was forced to move into her parent's house as she does not have money for her daily survival too.

In another village, Bhikhiben Koli, a farm labourer, also battles a debt of Rs 1.4 lakh she borrowed for the treatment of her son Arvind. "His fever did not go down and we hospitalized him to save his life," says Bhikhiben. With no farm labour jobs available in scorching summer, Bhikhiben is hoping to get some monetary assistance or a loan from formal channels to manage a square meal and pay off instalments on the debt she took for treatment at 3% monthly interest.

"Some 15 villagers have died in Corona. Unfortunately, most of them were young men and women who were sole breadwinners of their families. Situation is grim. Villagers are being asked to pay Rs 5,000 for an injection; Rs 1 lakh deposit before admitting a patient at a local dispensary. One villager was handed a bill of Rs 4 lakh for Covid treatment. Poor are scared as they do not have resources for medical treatment," says Pushpaben, a SEWA leader in Radhanpur in Patan district of Gujarat.

Rasuben, an embroidery worker in Koliwada village in Santalpur, Patan says her village is shocked at losing young men and women to the pandemic. "Young men and women in their 20s and 30s are just dropping dead. We also lost our members Savitaben and Dhaniben. We are scared of this calamity," said Rasuben.

Scared they may be, but SEWA sisters are contributing their bit to preventing large scale disease and death due to Covid-19 in villages. Efforts are largely concentrated towards mask distribution and vaccination for preventing villagers from contracting Covid-19 and setting up isolation centers to help Covid-19 patients get better without risking spread to other family members.

In fact, SEWA has readied Covid isolation centers in 11 of its centers. "The Sanskar Kendra in Koliwada is ready with beds for isolating Covid patients. Houses in villages are cramped and many times have only one or two rooms. In such cases, fever patients can be isolated at the center. Food and other facilities can be arranged," said Rasuben.

In Pij in Anand, SEWA sisters took the lead in offering to develop its center as Covid facility and wrote letters to the district development officer and the collector. "SEWA center in Pij is located next to the primary healthcare center and is perfect for Covid patients' recovery," said Lalitaben, coordinator for Anand district.

Three doctors, Dr Sahil, Dr Mansi and Dr Rajvi, offering services to SEWA through tele-medicine have also been helping villagers in identifying Covid-19 symptoms and getting them timely medical care.

Making villagers understand the importance of masking up is an uphill struggle but SEWA sisters say they are relentless. "In our village, we have made it mandatory for people to wear masks when stepping out of homes. It is more difficult to convince men than women but we don't give up," says Dinaben Makwana, a farm labourer and SEWA worker in Petlad, Anand. Dina says that SEWA meetings have kept her updated about the perils of Covid virus and its spread. "Scientists are saying it can now spread through air. We have to be careful," says Dina.

In Sanand near Ahmedabad, Kapilaben, master trainer of SEWA from Moti Devti village, says even as lockdown-like situations prevail in their area, traders in the vegetable market do not comply with wearing masks. "They say they feel suffocated and breathless when wearing a mask. Have they not seen people dying gasping for breath due to Covid? It is frustrating but we will not give up," says Kapilaben.

The movement of mass vaccination against Corona is the need of the hour but rural folk tend to harbour many misgivings. SEWA sisters are toiling hard to mobilize rural people to get vaccinated. "People go into hiding in the farms or run away on seeing a government health department vehicle. They feel the injection will give them disease and even death. We are constantly creating awareness about the benefits of vaccination and are readying the rural folks to get the shot. It is a tough exercise but we are committed," says Alkaben, SEWA leader in Anand district.

"SEWA coordinators have been updated about Covid-19 vaccination drives and directed to become a bridge between the government and communities and mobilize villages for mass vaccination," says Nanavaty.

In other rural parts, incomes are shrinking due to Covid-19 illness. With the partial lockdown situation prevailing, work has come to a standstill. Disease spread has led to standing crops not being harvested. Crops which are harvested are not being sold as market yards are closed.

In Surendranagar, SEWA sisters are doing their bit to get good prices for crops so that families have some money in hand for food and medicines. "We negotiated with the farmer union and ensured that women growing chickpeas are able to sell their produce. We got them a price of Rs 900 per 20 kg, which is more than market price. This way, they will at least have money in hand in wake of any crisis," says Subiben, SEWA leader in the arid district of Surendranagar.

Women leaders also concede of changing social behaviour which is consistent with Covid-19 guidelines. More SEWA sisters confess to have stopped going for marriage and death functions which are of great social relevance in the villages of India. They also convince people not to go in crowds for mourning and become party to spreading the virus.

"Driving such a change which requires massive shifts in social attitudes and behaviours apart from being prepared to take on physical, mental and financial batterings is a great challenge. SEWA sisters have advocated to become agents of this change," says Nanavaty.