

**SEWA: Efforts of The Dedicated Cooperative Leader- Shri Ela Bhatt**

(A study with special reference to SEWA Homecare Mahila Sahakari Mandali)

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**Abstract**

*It is a tribute to a dedicated cooperative leader Late Shri Ela Bhatt who sacrificed her whole life to organize and strengthen the needy women segment for their exploitation free, better and respectful living. Self Employed Women Association (SEWA) was born under her dedicated and visionary leadership. Her life was inspired by Gandhiji which reveals her simple living and devoted efforts. She had strong belief in cooperative philosophy. SEWA was initially registered as a trade union but with the socio-economic development of their members and their family, SEWA formed a Cooperative Federation. Under this umbrella, various activities are organized on cooperative business module towards empowerment of members. SEWA Homecare Mahila Sahakari Mandali was one cooperative business module, which was established in 2010 to address the collective needs of domestic workers in assessing their potential livelihood. This mandali is playing a significant role in organizing, capacity building, opportunity seeking, carving the self reliant and self respect with self confidence spirit among the members. Thus, the present study focuses on the vision and leadership behind SEWA with special reference to SEWA Homecare Mahila Sahakari Mandali and its contribution to Sustainable Development Goals.*

**Key words :** SEWA: legend cooperative leader, social entrepreneurship, empowerment, cooperative philosophy

**1. Introduction :**

A visionary and dedicated cooperative leader Ela Bhatt .....

Gandhian & Padm Vibhushan (1986) Ela Bhatt was born on 7th September 1933 and expired on 2nd November 2022.

She could not come in direct contact of Gandhi, nor participate in his movement but such values entered in her life. She represented Gandhi's ideas

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thorough her simple living and sensitivity for vulnerable women. She was a torch bearer for the voice of unorganized women. SEWA (Self Employed Women Association) was established in 1972 and registered as a trade Union. This is perhaps world's first largest women organization. Ela Bhat provided legend leadership to women and dedicated her life for their upliftment. She had strong belief in cooperative philosophy for inclusive development of weaker sections and she formed SEWA Cooperative Federation for Empowerment of women through various constructive activities. It is an organized effort to bring self-sufficiency, self-reliant, and self-respect to face the challenges for decent living. She gave vision of sustainable development and 100 miles swadeshi concept for real swaraj in her book- Anubandh. She headed various national and international Gandhian institutions but never compromised with truth and moral values. She worked by coordinating with Government and society in the interest of the needy women segment. Under her devoted and visionary leadership, SEWA Homecare Mahila Sahakari Mandali was formed in 2010. She inculcated leadership spirit in the members of SEWA's Cooperative Societies who were actually the owners of her organization. She prepared them to perform managerial responsibilities of the organization despite their educational and age constraints. The women were full of confidence to develop and use their skills with full efficiency and firm to face various type of exploitation for themselves. In July, 2007 she took the initiative to form an international E –Elders Groups of Gandhian believers with Nelson Mandela & Dismond Tutu etc. The purpose of this group was to work for peace and non violence where she left footprints as a true Gandhian follower to conserve and construct the humanitarian and moral values on world canvas.

## **2. SEWA: Formation and Vision :**

In this section, the historical background and vision of SEWA are discussed.

### **2.1 Historical Background :**

It was 1971, when a small group of migrant women working as handcart pullers/ head loaders in Ahmedabad cloth market came to the Textile Labour Association (TLA) looking for help to secure decent wages. Those women lived on the street and were poor to afford even a shack. The all worked in the city's thriving cloth market, ferrying bolts of cloth between wholesalers and retailers. Wholesalers shop owners would pay them per job act exploitative wages.

Ela Bhatt wrote an article about the same in the local newspaper recounting

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the unfair wages and the other problems of the head loaders. The cloth merchants countered the charges against them with an article by their owner, announcing the fair wages they were paying the head loaders. Of-course the women did not receive their fair wages they claimed, so the women wing reprinted the merchants claim on little cards and distributed them throughout the market to use as leverage against them.

This strategy was so effective that word spread among the women and a group of used cloth dealers approached the women's wing with their own grievances. A public meeting of used garment dealers was called and over hundred women attended. During the meeting in a public park, the women suggested that they form an association of their own.

Therefore, following an appeal from the women and at the initiative of Shri Ela Bhatt and the President of the TLA Arvind Buch, the idea of forming Self-employed Women's Association (SEWA) – An association of poor self employed women workers from the informal economy was conventionalized in December 1971. And SEWA was born as a trade union of poor self-employed women in 1972 in the city of Ahmedabad, Gujarat. It was the voice of every woman who wanted to enjoy her fundamental rights. It grew out of the Women's Wing of the Textile Labour Association (TLA) which was India's oldest and largest union of textile workers founded in 1920 by Anasuya Sarabhai and Mahatma Gandhi. The original purpose of the Women's Wing was to provide training in sewing, spinning, knitting, embroidery, and other welfare activities to the wives and daughters of mill workers. SEWA, a National Trade Union which represented members of 18 states of India.

## **2.2 SEWA'S Vision :**

Millions of workers in independent India are yet to enjoy Poorna Swaraj a meaningful Freedom. SEWA believes that freedom is enjoying self-reliance both economic and mental, in thinking and in decision-making. In our experience, this is not possible without full employment.

Full-employment means that every household enjoys basic food security, has access to clean water, clothing and shelter. They should be able to afford these from their own earnings. They should also obtain social security, including health care, child care, insurance and pension.

SEWA has been working over the past 51 years and will continue to work to assist her members till they achieve full-employment by organizing, and through non-violent struggle and constructive action.

SEWA's core values are and will continue to be integrity, communal harmony, social justice and simplicity. SEWA's strategy is to organize women workers into unions and cooperatives or collectives for self-reliance. Through organizing, women workers will have voice and her work be more visible. Their contribution to the nation's economy will be valued. Full freedom will be achieved when women workers lead their families and communities.

SEWA attempted to address the needs of a worker as labour as well as of a woman. SEWA formed trade cooperatives under SEWA Cooperative Federation for better income, skills upgradation, marketing and access to credit for poverty eradication. SEWA built cooperatives to gain access banking, healthcare, insurance, housing and legal services that protect the members from falling into spiral vulnerabilities. SEWA has 125 different trades under its cooperative umbrella. SEWA Homecare Mahila Sahakari Manadli is one of them.

### **2.3 SEWA Members-The Self Employed Women Workers :**

SEWA is the only National Union of women workers from the unorganized sector in India. It's membership is in 18 states of India viz Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan, West Bengal, Delhi, Uttrakhand, Kerala, Maharashtra, Orissa, Assam, Jharkhand, Meghalay, Kashmir and Nagaland. Today, 35% of SEWA's membership is from the young generation. SEWA initiated its "sustainability campaign" – a campaign focusing on making SEWA, as a union, self-sustaining.

SEWA membership consists of four types of self-employed workers. SEWA members are workers who have no fixed employee-employer relationship and depend on their own labour for survival. They are poor, illiterate and vulnerable. They barely have any assets or working capital. But they are economically extremely active, contributing very significantly to the economy and society with their labour. About 62% of GDP is accounted by the self-employed of our country. There are four types of self-employed women workers:-

Vendors and hawkers- Small-scale traders, vendors and hawkers selling goods like vegetable, fruit, fish, egg, other food items, used Garments and other consumable goods. Most of these women traders sell either on pavement, spreading their goods on burlap along the city streets or by wandering through neighborhoods with baskets on their heads.

Home-based workers- These workers are invisible to the society, literally, in that they work within their homes. These workers can be further classified into piece-rate workers and small producers. Some of the workers in this category includes (but not limited to) weavers, potters, bidi and agarbatti workers, papad rollers, readymade garment workers, women who process agricultural products and artisans.

Labour and service providers- These workers form the largest section in our economy and they sell their labour and services. This category includes agricultural workers, construction workers, workers in small factories, contract labours, hand card pullers, head loaders, domestic workers, tendu-patta pluckers and waste recyclers. In addition to these three categories there is emergency of another category of women workers.

Producers- Who invest their labour and capital to carry out their business. This category includes small and marginal farmers, salt farmers, cattle rearers, artisans, gum collectors, cooking and vending etc.

#### SEWA's membership

Direct membership of SEWA	809544
Affiliate's membership	924651

*Note - Data is according to 2017 annual report.*

#### Four pillars of SEWA

1. Organizing
2. Capacity building
3. Social security
4. Capital formation

#### 2.4 SEWA Homecare Mahila Sahakari Mandali: an initiation of Social Entrepreneurship & Women Empowerment towards Achievement of SDG

SEWA Homecare Mahila Sahakari Mandali is a sister unit of SEWA Cooperative federation and part of the SEWA's women empowerment movement. It was registered in 2010 under cooperative society act to address the collective needs of domestic workers in accessing livelihoods and social securities.

The main objective was to provide employment to women in the informal sector. As per policy of SEWA a beneficiary service provider will be a

member of this SEWA Homecare Mahila Sahakari Mandali. SEWA began to search and organize such workers who wish to do such jobs but face difficulties in finding as well as continuing the job due to various reasons. SEWA offers an opportunity to unite them on the basis of cooperative principles, values and philosophy. They were not only shareholders but also active business managers who took part in policy making, operation and monitoring the business activities. They were not only employees of SEWA but also the owner of this Mandali. It empowered them by taking the responsibility of the business as well as the authority of a member of Board of Directors. They had leadership qualities which worked in the interest of the group. They had practiced work individually and in team. They work towards strengthening their own Sahakari Mandali by denoting small contributions from their wages. The Mandali had provision to train their members as per the need of the customers.

The story behind starting this service cooperative connected to SEWA was to promote social entrepreneurship. The purpose of this Mandali has welfare concern in the interest of needy and helpless group. They expect decent care which is affordable by the common man. There was demand to take care elderly aged persons, some of whom were alone and seeking such service, while some patient segment were also demanding for 24 hours care services from SEWA. In the present circumstances, there was lack of reliability and faith from the client side while on other hand there were various types of exploitation, conservative working conditions and work environment, lacking of fair and regular wages, uncertainty of work etc which were creating problems for the service providers.

SEWA worked on humanitarian grounds to bring suitable solutions for such needy segment of society. SEWA built a bridge to meet the gap for both the care takers and care givers, by assuring better service for needy segment of society and exploitation free healthy work environment for workers as members of SEWA. Thus, SEWA homecare Mahila Sahakari Mandali came in existence with the following basic services.

- Child care
- Old age care
- Patient care
- Housekeeping
- These services

They also provide service for occasions and festivals. Time wise these services categorize 8 hours, 10 hours, 12 hours and 24 hours services. On an average, the wage is INR 10,000/- INR 12,000/- 12500/-for 8-12 hours and INR 18,000 for 24 hours per month.

## 2.5 SEWA Homecare on SDGs :

Sustainable Development Goals-2030 consist of 17 goals. The basis of these goals is self-sufficiency, empowerment of women or weaker section of society, peace and justice and love. SEWA Homecare Mahila Sahakari Mandali directly and indirectly contributed to the following SDGs:

1. **No Poverty** - reduction in poverty level thorough potential economic activities
2. **Zero Hunger** - it become reduce after sufficient income
3. **Good Health & Well being** - cooperative structure support health and other family welfare activity besides employment opportunity
4. **Quality Education** - members become able and conscious about the quality education after join with such cooperative organization
5. **Gender Equality** - joining the Mandali is an initiation towards gender equality economically and socially.
6. **Reduces inequality** - by empowering the women and respect at workplace as well as their contribution in family income, they become able to participate in main stream. It ultimately reduces inequality.

Besides this, indirectly they are able to contribute to other SDGs like clean water, affordable energy, community participation etc due to awareness efforts. The approach of SEWA is entirely on Gandhian philosophy of Swaraj, Self-sufficiency, Swadeshi for Self-respect and Self-confidence. These are very close to SDGs which reflect in each and every project / Cooperative Society of SEWA. Constructive work and bread labour concept were adopted by SEWA from Gandhain thoughts which Gandhiji addressed in eleven vows. It is the guarantee of fearless society with social harmony, peace and prosperity which is ultimate goal of realistic development as well as empowerment of weaker section or women. It provides food, health, society security through work for all and potential livelihood as well as betterment of living assuring sustainability of environment.

### 3. Need & Objectives of the Study :

SEWA has completed 51 years of women empowerment movement through legal support, awareness building and cooperative economic activities model for their inclusive development. SEWA Homecare Mahila Sahakari Mandali has completed 12-13 its years working. So, it will be interesting to know the challenges that they have faced, their experiences, benefits enjoyed by members and future direction. Thus the study carried following set of objectives -

1. To observe the level of understanding of members about cooperative philosophy and assess their faith in cooperative business module or economy system.
2. To understand the impact of SEWA Homecare Mahila Sahakari Mandali on their standard of living,
3. To comprehend the problems faced by the members of cooperative society,
4. To recommend measures for strengthening the Mandali as per future requirements.

### 4. Research and Methodology :

The population comprised of 108 permanent members of SEWA Homecare Mahila Sahakari Mandali. A sample of 20% sample of the population was selected on random basis. Thus, total numbers of respondents were 22 and were working in Ahmedabad and nearby. They were located in Vadaj, Chandkheda, Shapur in Ahmedabad and Nadiya, Kheda out of city. The study was undertaken with primary and secondary data both. To collect primary data, the researcher used telephonic interview with structured schedule. In Chandkheda, the researcher has used personal meeting and observation techniques. Researcher has also organized interview with ex and present officials of this cooperative society. For data mining, basic statistical tools have been used as per requirement of the study.

### 5. Results and Discussion :

It was observed with respect to age group that :

- 50% of the respondents belonged to 41-50 years age group,
- 30% are from 21-30 years
- 20% are from 51-60 years age group.



With respect to level of education, marital status and place of work, it was observed that:

- 50% respondents have up to primary level education,
- 30% completed up to 8th and rest 20% qualified 10th standard.
- 50% respondents were married
- 50% were widows.
- Area wise 80% of respondents were concentrated Shahpur, Chanlodiya, Vadaj for work while 20% worked outside Ahmedabad in Nadiyad and Petlad by providing 24 hours service.

The family size of respondents and work experience of respondents revealed that :

- 40% respondents have up to 3 members in the family,
- 50% have 4 - 5 members
- 10% have 6 members in the family.
- 50% respondents have 1 work year experience and rest 50% have near about 10 years working experience other than SEWA homecare society. Their work experience was in the following sectors: (Table 1)

**Table 1 : Work Experience (Sector wise) of Sample Respondents :**

<b>Type of Work</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
Cooking	7
Domestic Helper	8
House keeping	14
Hospital	2
Childcare	10
Old age person care	4

*Note- Respondents had one and more trade working experience.*

It was observed from the data collected that 90% responds have joined SEWA Home care Mahila Sahakari Mandali directly while rest 10 percent have joined with reference of sister in law, relative and friends. About 62.5% respondents had about 6 to 10 years of work experience.

About 60 % of respondents got job within 2-6 km radius of their residence. Only the respondents who provided 24 hours service to the customer as old age care took work which was at a distance of 24-59 km. from their residence.

60% respondents are satisfied with their salary and happy with their present livelihood. Rest of the respondents who are not satisfied were in search of higher paying work. 70% respondents said that their income has improved after joining SEWA. The impact of the Mandali can be observed from Table 2.

**Table 2 : Impact of SEWA Homecare Shakari Mandali**

Sr. No.	Responses	Response on the Scale				
		Very bad	Bad	Average	Good	Very Good
1	Increase in employment opportunity				15	7
2	Increase in choice of work and work place				20	
3	Increase in bargaining Power				12	
4	Increase in decision in decision making at work and for sustainable living				8	
5	Increase in Socio-economic status				20	
6	Increase in capacity ability and work efficiency			14	6	2
7	Increase in business and work credibility				22	
8	Increase in self-confidence and self-respect			14	6	2
9	Increase in faith about team spirit and cooperative system			8	9	5
10	Increase in voice of their fundamental rights			14	6	2
11	exploitation free work environment					
12	Easy reach in various development schemes			18	2	2
13	Increase in active participation in national democracy			17	3	2
14	Improvement in healthcare of self and family			16	4	2
15	Increase in feeling of real swaraj and fearlessness to manage routine affairs of life.			13	6	3

**6. Qualitative Observations :**

An interview with respondents and SEWA home care ex and present officials Hasumatiben, Bharatiben, Jayaben, and Kushumben who were associated with the organization in the beginning, very useful and important information was observed about the society. Notably, it was revealed that most of the women are happy to join. They understood well the significant role of cooperative organization in removing the exploitation and hurdles in employment opportunities and income generation. The women join SEWA after complete document verification and same practice was carried out in the verification of client or customer. This serves as a safeguard measure to care givers as well as care takers. Members feel more respected at workplace comparatively. Some major findings are as follows-

- Before joining this society, they were working as domestic helpers or housekeeping at below minimum wage and got exploited. SEWA provides them a platform to work and get the wages they deserve.
- The Society gives them an opportunity to work and earn money for their own livelihood rather than being dependent on others. Working as SEWA members provides these women a stress free environment to work. Every woman who joins SEWA gets trained about the work they are supposed to do. They do not need to go out and find a job for themselves; instead SEWA does this for them.
- After joining SEWA they experienced capacity building, and self confidence, and self respect. They found a place in society to meet their personal, family and social needs.
- There were few women who provided 24 hours of childcare and old age care in Ahmedabad. It seemed that they were satisfied with their work and they were also well trained about their work.
- SEWA women workers also received other facilities such as awareness about new and old government schemes, housing facilities, strong support from the other members, insurance policies etc.
- SEWA members have gained confidence, communication skills and courage to interact with people and organization.
- They have more opportunities and choices of work for themselves. As they had no choice of work when they were not a member of SEWA.

- After analysis of the primary information, the researcher has strong opinion that women who joined SEWA obtained better experience and confidence rather than when they were working alone. SEWA is a platform which gave voice to many voiceless women and helped them for their upliftment and progress.
- It was been observed that some members tend to leave the organization when they get sufficient experience, in order to seek higher wages. However, this indicates that their bargaining power has increased after joining SEWA and they have also developed some skills due to cooperative efforts.
- It was noted that other than permanent members, about 40-45 temporary members also joined the society. They organize meetings at local level to increase membership. They conveyed the benefits of joining a cooperative and inspire them to join them. The number is gradually increasing and touched 82. The progress of leaders presented in monthly meeting of the society which is normally held on 4th Saturday of the month has helped to increase membership.
- Executive committee members are 11. The presence of 7 members is compulsory for a legal meeting in which they take business decisions.
- The Society has a fairly large Reserve fund i.e. INR 62.5 Lakh collected from the member's contribution. The members are planning to build up own office at a well located place viz Vadaj near Ahmedabad city from where they can get better business. This is therefore progressive thinking to scale up the SEWA Home care Mahila Sahakari.Mandli.
- The officials of the Executive Committee indicated that some members are active in the meetings. Likewise some members felt that the environment must be more conducive for work. Some members who are engaged in 24 hours job must be granted 4 days leave in a month instead of 2. There is also need to create opportunities for more work. Members also leave the organization due to lack of interest in the nature of the work.

## **7. Conclusions :**

Gandhi truly said that cooperatives must be successful. For him, it was one of major pillar of Gram Swaraj or sustainable development i.e. Panchayat, Schools and cooperatives. Cooperative is the symbol of financial democracy

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and unity of strength for weaker section of society. It is the strong base for decentralizing the economy. It is the strength of unorganized women workers that play a significant role for their better living and family welfare.

In this study of cooperative society, it was proved that the voice of women against the unfair system exploitation has been raised. Cooperatives have fetched them the livelihood opportunity for self-sufficiency and self-confidence which equips them to face the challenges and strengthen their capacity and ability. There exist huge opportunities for their self and family development in this organized cooperative effort. Such social entrepreneurship initiation may well serve the society with human and moral values.

In this manner, just a small service provider may feel proud as owner of cooperative organization where she enjoys the freedom of decision making in managing the business. It makes her really powerful to contribute in nation building with deserved regards and respect. Cooperative societies can be strengthened by :

- More organized marketing efforts.
- Conducive and motivated environment for meetings to reduce the communication gap.
- Continuous watch on leadership style of chairperson of the society.
- Training should be focused on professional, smart & polite behaviour of the members.
- Organization stability instead of increase in contribution rate.
- Strong networking by using digital technology with feedback.
- Association with other cooperative societies that may be helpful in entire inclusive development of the members of home care society and their families.
- Need of planned focus on member's family welfare strategies.

If the above measures are implemented, cooperatives will play a major role in promoting the socio-economic development of vulnerable women.

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