

CASE STUDY

Conducted under the Project

“Mutually reinforcing the role of women in habitat based livelihood services”

– Researching the Case of India

SEWA Nirman



Keywords – Empowerment, Organised, Equality

FACTS

Context

The State of Gujarat went through a massive earthquake in 2001 measuring up to 8.1 on the Richter scale. Many houses were razed to the ground and livelihoods of many poor people were lost. This traditionally agricultural and rain-dependent community had not only lost their residences, but their livestock, and storage spaces for surplus agricultural produce. The government was quick to respond with relief packages, and then people responded with greater speed. At that time, several women, who were then involved with SEWA at the Self-Help group (SHG) level approached the organization to help them rebuild their homes. At that point of time there were no skilled masons. Thus, trainings for masons was initiated, construction work was started, which was completed in 2006. This was the Naya ghar initiative (See Box), which ultimately led to the formation of SEWA NIRMAL in 2008.

Both men and women from various villages that SEWA was already involved in, were trained in masonry and were handed the task of constructing naya ghars¹ across the villages. In course of time, the work expanded and the masons trained by SEWA received a reputation of superiority in quality. They were being approached for other assignments as well, and more women were trained in the work. Finally, in 2008, a need was felt to set up an organised forum to become self-dependent and SEWA NIRMAL Private limited was born.

SEWA NIRMAL is a private construction worker company, which is headed by SEWA. The people who worked as labourers and masons are also the shareholders in this company. As shareholders, there is almost a 50–50 mix of men and women of 700 shareholders, but as workers in the company women are less than men. The company has a capital of up to 2 crores. It is a construction company by and for the construction workers. SEWA NIRMAL generates sustainable livelihoods for its members while addressing the issue of climate change by organizing and training semi-skilled workers, and thus freeing them from exploitation. SEWA NIRMAL works for infrastructure development across the country, focusing on rural development, benefiting the construction industry and the entire nation at large².

Scale

Since the Nayaghar initiative, more than 700 women and men have been trained in Gujarat, specifically in the Patan and Kutch districts in brick making, pre-fabricated door and window frames, repair and assembly of solar lamps, and building houses. Some of these trained women went to Rajasthan to train the local women in those areas in house construction.

SEWA NIRMAL initially provided the work to the masons within the company, but today many of these masons, due to their work, are able to source work outside

Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA)

SEWA is a trade union registered in 1972. It is an organization of poor, self-employed women workers. These women earn a living through their own labour or small businesses. SEWA's main goals are to organize women workers for employment.

SEWA is both an organization and a movement. It is actually a confluence of three movements: the labour movement, the cooperative movement, and the women's movement, which has enhanced its character even further.

NAYA GHAR

Naya ghar initiative was started by SEWA after the Gujarat earthquake of 2001. It was a major reconstruction effort, wherein, permanent and semi-permanent houses were built. The work got completed in 2006. During this initiative, women were trained in masonry and carpentry, to help rebuild their houses. The design of the houses was also identified with the help of the community, of which women were a major part. **Addressal of the gender needs was ensured through the formation of the naya ghar committees**, which consisted of seven women and four men. By the end of the initiative, there was a large body of skilled and semi-skilled workers.

Diagram 1: Cyclical Representation of SEWA NIRMAL's Initiative

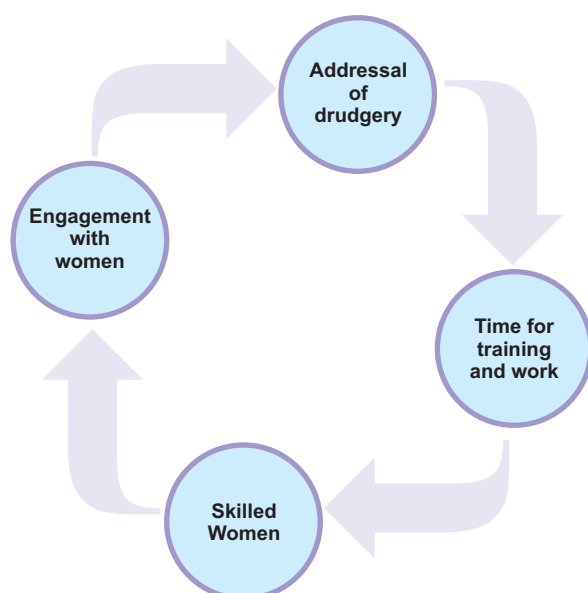
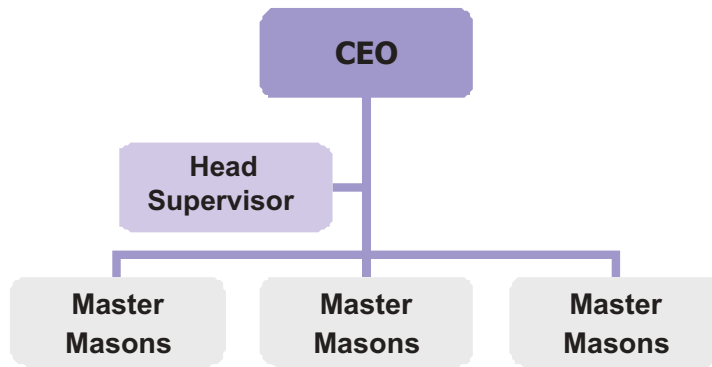


Diagram 2 Organisation Chart



the company as well. However, majority of the work is done within the company. The women are able to source the raw materials and ensure its quality. Over time, the women masons are able to travel outside of their villages on their own for work and for buying materials.

Although, today SEWA NIRMAN is making neither any profit nor loss, it is still dependent on the mother organization (SEWA) for support. The focus of SEWA NIRMAN for the next few years is to develop into a self-sustainable company, which can earn profits. Currently, there are two managerial level people in the organization and they have a team of 20 men and women master masons to coordinate the work in the various villages where it is operating.

FEATURES

Innovative approaches

A company that includes a 50–50 mix of men and women as shareholders indicates gender equality at a certain level (these men and women are either skilled or semi-skilled masons). In the establishment of the naya ghar committees, there was a mix of seven women and four men. It is ensured that in the committees there is a representation of all the communities (representing all castes and tribes). The members of the communities can discuss and suggest changes in the traditional features of the construction of houses to suit their needs and include conflict resolution (if any). The villagers select the members of the naya ghar committee. Over time, in a sector like construction, the men have come to recognize the women as their peers in the company, as claimed by the SEWA NIRMAN Staff. In fact, some of the men claim, “jo hum kar saktein hain, who toh yeh kartein hain par joh yeh kartein hain who hum nahi kar sakte”³. The inculcation of such sentiments is a major achievement of the organization. In a group, more women are in production as compared to construction. However, in the toilet construction and installation work both men and women work together. The group mentioned clearly that while working together they do not face any problem at all in terms of any kind of discrimination.

SEWA NIRMAN actually indicated that the women in the state are more empowered than in other parts of the country due to cultural factors. Moreover, given SEWA is a women's organization, they get that space to make decisions (in terms of family expenditure and savings, education etc). Also, it was observed that women were being allowed to voice their opinion within the organization as well as in the village. However, this factor could be limited to the SEWA women.

The local based production in the villages is a major innovative aspect, as this allows the women to balance their domestic responsibilities as well as work side by side. This is not to say these women do not travel for work, which they do if the income is good. However, on a daily basis it is convenient for the women's to work within the village boundaries.. The women are primarily involved in production materials like bricks and door and window frames. When working outside their villages they construct rainwater harvesting structures and

Banjariya Tribe

The Banjariya community is a nomadic tribe and these people were very poor and marginalized. One of the SEWA officials indicated that in Bandhavad village earlier the people of this community did not have any place in the village they resided in kuchha (weak / semi permanent) houses without any facility of water and sanitation at the outskirts of the village. Since they did not have a house and stability, they did not have any regular options for earning a livelihood. One of the older women in this tribe by the name of Jadi ben took the initiative and organised women so they could have a house and livelihoods in the village through the formation of a group. They put this across to the gram sabha (village level governance meeting), and they got allotted land in the village to build their houses. The process took time but finally this group of 20-25 families under the nayaghar initiative were able to have pucca (permanent) houses with toilet facilities in a hamlet inside the village and access to well from where they could fetch water. Now the women very proudly said that hamare ghar mein tanka (water storage structure) hai aur latrine bhi hai (we have a rain water harvesting structure as well as a toilet in our houses). The women of the tribe lively and vocal and compassionate. When they were in need of water the people in the village did not provide them with any. Now since they have water they happily give it to the other villagers. The women said 'hum paani ki zaroorat samajhte hain' (We understand the need for water). Today these women are earning a livelihood by working with SEWA Nirman as masons or by taking loans from SEWA.

toilet blocks. Senior members of the group are also involved in creating traditional household articles called 'kothi', which are large bins for the storage of grains (taught to them by SEWA women).. These members also act as catalysts in bringing younger women into the fold.

Another major innovation of the company is the tools and equipment library. This is more of a bank than a library wherein members have ready access to the tools and equipment that they need to start work on a site. They have to pay a nominal amount as usage charges. Many-a-times, members are able to solicit work on their own by posting their own tenders. However, they lack the equipments to handle that kind of work. Thus, SEWA NIRMAN provides them with a library of tools and equipments to start the work without any delay to the entire project.

Skill enhancement

Before understanding the techniques of training/skill enhancement used by SEWA NIRMAN, it is important to note that most of the women trained were illiterate – that is they had never attended any kind of school, while the men still had some basic education. SEWA NIRMAN has a unit called Sew NIRMAN Academy, which arranges for the trainings to suit the requirements of the masons. This is mostly done with the help of the experts in the area, such as Mahindra Escorts and few others. Men and women were trained together by SEWA NIRMAN at two levels. These trainings were initially developed to meet the requirements of the members and had progressively enhanced to suit their composite needs. The training contains theory section and then a practical learning section. In the theory section, pictorial modules were incorporated to help the otherwise illiterate women easily understand the training programme. The masons were taught skills in quality control as well. This had set the base for learning soft skills such as building confidence, taking risks, negotiations etc. Skills in management and finances were also taught, but as the majority of the women were uneducated, this posed to be a problem. They thus built upon their current knowledge and spent some time teaching these women basic mathematical skills.

It was also realized that if these masons have to work with outside agencies and companies they should also be equipped with soft skills. As most of them are not literate this becomes bit tricky, but it is done by making them conversant with the words and terminology (related to technologies) that are used in the construction sector.

The trainings cost ₹ 6000, out of which, 50 per cent is paid by the trainees in lump sum and 50 per cent in instalments⁴. And once the masons are trained their income increases from ₹ 2000 to ₹ 5000. It was assumed that the masons would be able to recover the cost soon after the training (which they did). In fact, SEWA NIRMAN is regularly undertaking such trainings. Currently, a group of women within the age of 25 to 40 are being trained in masonry and carpentry. Once they start earning after trainings, they will submit 10 per cent service tax to SEWA which forms a revolving fund.

In the process of building rural infrastructure and dealing with aspects of climate change, the rural women are working on as how to use solar energy to make their day-to-day life easy. They were making solar lights

selling them as a business venture. This work is mostly done in Bhilwada and Doongarpur area of Rajasthan (where availability of electricity is almost zero) and Surendranagar area of Gujarat. These solar lamps come in two sizes and are neat looking with a bright light. They have a battery of 6 volts and of 12 volts (either led or CFL). The 12-volt lamps are sold for ₹ 3000. The women even charge their mobile phones using the battery of the lamps. Earlier they had to travel long distances to get their mobile charged, as electricity supply is erratic in their village.

SEWA NIRMAN trains the women for a period of six months. The women assembled the lamps and even took up the soldering work. The group has itself decided that if a woman makes one



Building made by women construction workers

lamp a day she can earn ₹ 50 a day, and if she makes two she earns ₹ 100 a day. As a group they sell and earn a profit of ₹ 200 on each lamp, which goes to the group and the distribution is done after a year. Supposedly, the women are able to earn up to ₹ 8000 a year. The trained women slowly become trainers themselves.

One of the women Santokh Ben builds energy-efficient smokeless cookers called 'nirdhoom chulha', which is widely appreciated and used by these women. The process is on to make it more affordable and efficient. Regarding biogas plant, it was shared that earlier the model was developed for the government but now this is part of SEWA NIRMAN for which Government of Gujarat not only gives subsidy of 45 per cent, but also help masons in getting trained and in providing linkages for the market.



Open work area constructed by women workers for themselves

Similarly, women masons make antique style grain storage bins called as 'kothi' with mud, cement, gravel, and sand. These are made in different sizes, at times very beautifully decorated with mirror work, and colour designs.

SEWA imparts training not only in the area of construction but also on issues related to day-to-day life and basic needs like water, energy etc. According to Santokh Ben, “earlier when we did not know anything about water quality and testing, we used to drink the water which was available to us not realising its effects. But now as we have got training we have become aware. Now, we know that if water quality is bad it will affect our health and it needs some treatment.” Today these women are able to talk to the government regarding the quality of water supplied and demand good quality water.

The work environment

On the work sites, SEWA NIRMAN takes sufficient safety measures. Safety gears such as gloves and helmets are provided. The women in these rural areas work in their traditional attire. They do not find the attire cumbersome. However, the masons working on constructing houses do find the attire cumbersome, but are still unwilling to give up their traditional clothes as traditional culture plays a big role in their day-to-day lives. Moreover, it was realised that the women are not comfortable with migration, hence where the manufacture of items are concerned; the company provides the equipment to the women in their villages. Here the women organise themselves in a group to manufacture the items. They have a chain established. For instance, in the Bandhwad village of Patan district, women were making mud/cement bricks in a group of 15. These women had made their own daily schedule, thus they could do the work as well as take care of the household chores.

In constructing houses and toilets, men and women work side by side, and the women work at par with the men. In recent past no gender discrimination or harassment has been reported.

LIVELIHOOD BENEFITS

The SEWA NIRMAN women are independent and can sustain themselves without the support of their husbands. This self-sufficiency has helped elevate

Santok ben

Santok Ben is a master mason with SEWA NIRMAN. She first got involved with SEWA in 2001, after the earthquake under the naya ghar initiative. The initiative was highly opposed in her village. However, she single handedly motivated others to be a part of the naya ghar committee, and was the head of the committee herself. She designed her own house, which has a room, toilet and rainwater harvesting system. This was despite the opposition she faced from her son who could not accept having a 'well' (rainwater harvesting structure) inside the house.

Today, she is a grandmother of six children all of whom are being educated, and is still training and motivating other women to join the company. Her work is so well recognised that United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) chose her and another woman mason, Mainaben, to travel around the country to evaluate construction work in rural areas.

their confidence level. These women now travelled to different villages for work and were willing to travel to Ahmadabad for work.

The phrase used by these women is “ab majboot ho gayein hain”⁵. One of the women mentioned, “pahle jub hum SEWA ki meeting men chale jate the to hum ko peehar bhej diya jata tha. Radhanpur ki do behno (Saira aur Mumtaj) ne ghar ghar jaakar samjhaya tab mamla suljha”⁶. Another woman said, “pahle jab mujhe kaam par kahin bahar jana hota tha to mera aadmi apni do bahne mere sath karta tha ab voh aisa nahin karta aur mein akele bahar aati jati hoon”⁷ The women were earning enough to sustain themselves, and make savings. Their monthly income was close to ₹ 2000 to 2500. Skilled women charge close to ₹ 300 per day for masonry work, which is at par with men.

An increase in the income has helped increase the awareness level among the women. The children of these women were now not working to sustain the households. One of the women said, “pahle to bacchho ko bhi nahin padha sakte the ab pote poteon ko bhi padha rahein hain”. The other one said that mere bacchho ne kabhi bal mandir nahin dekha tha ab kaksha 6, 7, aur 8 mein padh rahein hain”. The children are educated and the overall concept regarding education of both the male and the female child is seen growing among people, which was not the case prior to these interventions. These changes were a manifestation of the social recognition that the women were capable of doing work at par with the men and have role in decision making at house hold level.

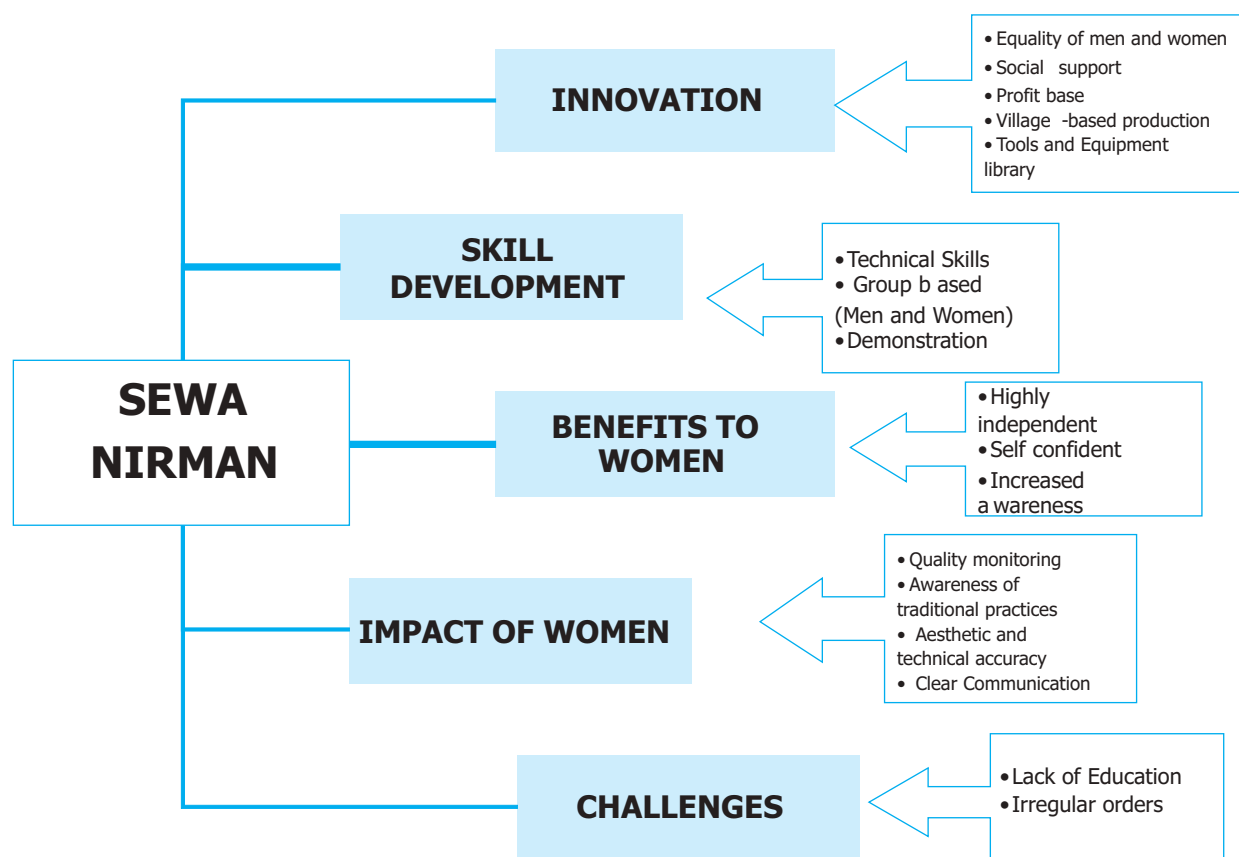
At the end, the women involved in 'technical work' feel more empowered, as they feel a sense of achievement in doing the work that was traditionally part of a man's domain. These women have gained confidence and do not remain silent on various social and developmental issues. They say, “pahle chup rahte the par ab aisa nahin hai”⁸, now they go to the panchayat meetings and raise their voice. One of them clearly stated, “pahle majdoori karte the SEWA se jud kar kaam seekha, aur ab kaam karke maza aata hai”⁹.

WOMEN'S CAPABILITIES AND ACHIEVEMENTS

The women took up the challenge of working in a male dominated area and were actually working at par with men. In fact, some of the women took up managerial positions at the construction sites due to their seniority and quality of work. These women handled the construction at the sites, guiding both men and women in construction activities, as well as managing problems at the site..

Another major facet of the construction process was that the women could monitor the quality of products

Diagram 3: Thematic Analysis of SEWA NIRMAN



and materials with greater accuracy than men could. There were instances when men mixed the raw materials into the pre-fabricated doors and since the proportions were not accurate, the doors literally fell off. In trying to unlock as to why this happened, it was a woman's observations and interpretations that helped them make the accurate conclusions and amendments.

The women masons, when making rural houses contribute to the design process as well. They are more aware of traditional practices, ensuring these are incorporated into the design processes. The design of the naya ghar was established based on the need of the women. It was argued that the men could never understand the needs of a woman and the women helped set up the design. Even the sanitation facilities and the layout of the roof rainwater harvesting systems were incorporated into the design based on the recommendations of women.

According to the head engineer, the plans brought out by women always take into account the needs of the entire family, along with being aesthetically and technically accurate. In the Patan district of Gujarat, which is a semi-arid region, the inclusion of roof rainwater harvesting systems were included into the design of the houses in order to enhance the functionality of women and reduce the time that they have to spend in just fetching water for the house. Sometimes, women have to walk up to 5 to 10 km just to fetch water. Now, all of them have ready access to water right at their doorstep..

He further added that the women are much more observant and can communicate much better than men. In case of a problem, they listen, observe, judge, and only then make recommendations, whereas the male masons usually respond without judging the situation. The women make efforts to reuse waste material, realizing the value of the products and the materials used.

Their work is not only recognised by the Gujarat government and by the nation, but also by other nations within the SAARC region. Some of the women from a village called Bhilwada were supposed to go to Sri Lanka to give training in masonry.

CHALLENGES AND RESPONSES

In this area, the women were not willing to let go of their traditional attire. Moreover, the women were hesitant to leave their villages for any work. However, through motivation practices and initial help, the women have acquired the confidence to leave their villages to take up specific well paying assignments.

Another challenge is in terms of banking and management of finances. The women are mostly uneducated, and thus usually have to depend on either one member of their group, or on a hired individual. This increases the chance of deception. SEWA NIRMAN, in this case, is now including basic mathematical skills in the trainings to overcome this challenge.

The irregularity of orders due to its seasonal nature tends to vary the wages and the amount of work. This is a challenge the company is still grappling with. However, even in the down months the women are able to find work for about 7 to 10 days. This problem is more acute for the women working in the area of material manufacturing. Some of these villages are very remote and during the monsoon seasons, they are completely cut off from rest of the world. Neither raw material reaches them nor are they able to sell their products to the vendor. Thus, many of the women are involved in alternative activities to earn a living, like traditional art and crafts, balloon making and packaging and sale of agricultural products etc.

Unskilled women masons were still getting wages at a much lower rate than unskilled male masons. These women are still lagging behind in terms of empowerment indicators. This is the reason that SEWA NIRMAN constantly engages with the women to train them in higher skills, which can free them from exploitation.

-
1. Literally meaning 'New House'
 2. SEWANIRMAN Website
 3. The work that we do, they can do (skilled labour in measurements, moulding etc) but a lot of the work that they do we cannot' (referring to head loading and mixing of materials and more sharp eye for precision).
 4. This held true of the skill enhancement of the women, and not for the women who were initially trained in naya ghar initiative
 5. We have become strong.
 6. Initially when we wanted go to the SEWA meetings, our families would send us to our natal homes instead. Then two SEWA women from Radhan pur – Saira ben and Mumtaz ben – went from door-to-door to talk to the families, only then did the problem got solved.
 7. Initially, when I had to go out for work, my husband would send his two sisters with me, now he doesn't. Now he has no problem when I want to go out on my own.
 8. We used to stay quiet, but not anymore.
 9. Earlier we did unskilled work, now thanks to SEWA, we have learnt to work and we enjoy our work.

Development Alternatives

B-32, Tara Crescent, Qutub Institutional Area, New Delhi-110016, INDIA
Tel: +91-11-26134103;2689 0298 Fax: +91-11-26130817
E-mail: mail@devalt.org; Website: www.devalt.org

International Development Research Centre

PO Box/BP 8500, Ottawa, ON, Canada K1G 3H9 (250 Albert Street)
Tel: (1-613) 236-6163 Fax: (1-613) 238-7230
Website: www.idrc.ca