

We the Self-Employed

SEWA'S electronic newsletter

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The Financial Crisis and SEWA's members

The crash in world markets has reached the furthest corners of India and SEWA members have begun suffering its impacts. In a small indicative survey carried out on SEWA members we found that in many sectors incomes have declined, days of work available decreased, prices have fallen and livelihoods disappear.

One of the worst hit sectors world-wide due to the current crisis is the recycling sector. This sector includes some of the poorest and most vulnerable groups such as the rag pickers and waste collectors who earn their livelihood by collecting waste paper, metal, rags, plastics etc. from the streets, neighbourhoods and industrial areas and sell it to contractors who send it to industry for recycling. There has been a crash in prices as follows:

Prices of Waste Received by waste collectors in Ahmedabad

Items	Price in Rs/kilo April 2008	Price in Rs/kilo Jan 2009	% decrease
Waste Steel	6	3	50%
Steel Sheets	10	5	50%
Plastic bags	8	5	37.5%
Newspaper	8	4	50%
Hard Plastic	15	7	53%
Soft Plastic	10	4	60%
Dry Bones	4	2	50%
Waste hair	1000	300	67%

SEWA's waste collector members in Ahmedabad say they compensate for lower prices by have spending more hours to collect the waste. They used to go in the morning at 5:00 am but now they start their work at 3:00 am with the mentality that 'some one else will come early and pick it up, instead I will take it first.' Earlier, women member in the family would go to pick up the waste, now they prefer to take more members especially children of the family so that more waste is collected. As they are now unable to pay the fees and other expenses for education they have taken them out of school and started to involve the children in waste collection as well as sending them for other income earning activities. They have also started to do other , low-paying, mainly home-based work, such as sticking bindis or cutting threads.

Ranjanben Ashokbhai Parmar who stays in Rabari Vasahat at Odhav is a long-time member of SEWA. When I visited her house during the area meeting, she started to cry, when I tried to explain her that is just a phase and every thing will be fine again, she started to cry harder and said, "Who sent this recession! Why did they send it?" I was speechless. Her situation is very bad, her husband is sick, she has 5 children, she stays in a rented house, she has to spend on the treatment of her husband and she is the sole earner in the family, how can she meet her ends. When she goes to collect scrap she takes along her little daughter, while her husband sits at home and makes bundle of wooden ice-cream spoons, from which he can earn not more than Rs. 10/- a day when he prepares bundles of 10 spoon each for 20-25 kgs of such spoon.

Construction Workers

SEWA has organized 1,82,520 women construction workers of informal economy in India, but due to financial crisis construction work has reduced considerably. This is due to the high increase in the cost of raw material. Secondly the construction work has drastically reduced because the rates of land are highly increased and the builders have blocked their money in share market so due to shortage of funds they cannot invest in new construction schemes. The main sufferers in this crisis are the construction workers, whose days of work as well as earnings are reduced considerably.

The effects of the economic crisis began to really be felt for construction workers after Diwali 2008. We asked the workers about the differences they had experienced before and after Diwali. The following impacts emerged from our indicative surveys in Indore (MP), Ahmedabad (Gujarat) and Surat (Gujarat):

Decline in days of work available

In Indore:

Before November 2008, 100% of the women had more than 15 days of work, of which 85% had more than 20 days of work. In January 2009, 10% of women had no work, 89% had less than 20 days of work.

In Surat

Before November 2008, 100% had more than 20 days of work In January 2009 45% have no work 40% have less than 20 days of work.

In Ahmedabad

Before November 2008, 80% had more than 10 days of work, of which 23% had more than 20 days of work. In January 2009, 23% had no work, 67% had less than 10 days of work.

At the same time there is a decline in rates. The masons earlier used to get Rs. 250-300 daily and the manual workers got Rs. 125-150 per day. However, following the economic meltdown the masons get Rs. 200-250 and the manual workers get Rs. 90-120.

This combination of lower rates and drastic decline in work days has led to considerable suffering in these families as the decline occurs for both the men and women who are working in the same trade. Women try to keep the family income going by any means; taking loans doing any other work. In Indore 67% of the women say that have taken loans at 3% to 5% per month: In Ahmedabad and Surat women say that they have started doing other work such as collecting waste, domestic work, small cleaning jobs etc. However, the males in the family are having great difficulty adjusting and many of them have turned to drink causing additional hardships in the house.

In the chalis of Ahmedabad men have started drinking. They say, 'In the morning we look for work, nowadays we cannot find any so we feel very tense and we go to the (illegal) liquor shop and start drinking. It makes us feel better'. Their wives say, 'there is no money in the house and they spend Rs. 20 or more a day on liquor. Then they come home in the evening and are violent with us and the children'.

Some women say that their husbands have disappeared. They say that they could not bear to come home every day without work and first they got very depressed, and then one day vanished.

Small Factories

Our survey covered small factory workers in Gujarat. These small scale factories include Iron furnaces, Plastic factory, Winding, Power looms, Spinning, making of wooden bobbins, tube light starters, surgical items, food items, etc As a result of the financial crisis, many small scale factories are decreasing production or closing down, temporarily or in some cases permanently. The reasons told to us were first, that there was lack of working capital, second that some of the factories which export products have no orders and thirdly, there is a slowing down of domestic demand also. In particular, 80% of the iron furnaces have closed down.

Some information we got in the focus group discussions was:

-	Closure of a towel factory in Sanand block of Ahmedabad District have affected employment of 100 family members of SEWA members.
-	One of the tile producing factory in Kadi block of Mehsana district had around 2000 - 3000 workers had gradually started retrenching the employees and presently it is totally closed.
-	One of the iron spare parts producing factory in Borsad Taluka of Anand district wherein 200 worker were working but presently they are getting work for only 15 days in a month - which has resulted into decrease in the family income making the livelihood of this workers difficult.
-	800 - 900 workers have lost there employment due to closure of sugar factory.
-	Closure of lignite mine in Pantro village of Dayapar block of Kutch District, wherein earlier daily 3000 trucks were loaded and sent to other states. Instead of 3000 trucks presently only 700 trucks are loaded which has resulted into loss of employments for the truck drivers as well as workers working for loading the trucks.

Homebased workers

Over 50% of the women (non-agricultural) workers in the country are engaged in working from their own homes as home-based workers. About 1.5 lakh SEWA members are home-based workers. Of these many are in textiles, as garment stitchers or handloom weavers or embroidery, chikan and zardosi workers.

It was found that the days of work for the garment workers had reduced, but no one had become totally unemployed, due to this their incomes had decreased.

In November 2008,	50% workers earned between Rs. 1000 to Rs. 2000
	50% workers earned between Rs. 2000 to Rs. 5000
In February 2009,	50% workers earned less than Rs. 1000
	31% workers earned between Rs. 1000 to Rs. 2000
	19% workers earned between Rs. 2000 to Rs. 5000

The women in the focus group in Lucknow told us that their products were for export market or for the more luxury market of big cities. They said that the products were stock piling up in the go-downs and both the amount of work available and the piece rates had come down. They said that whereas earlier they would get Rs. 10 for a dress, now it was reduced to Rs. 8. And for a good zardozi sari, they would get Rs. 4000 to Rs. 5000 for a month's work, but now they could get only Rs. 1500.

Agriculture

More than 60 % of SEWA members come from the rural areas and majority of them are small and marginal farmers and agricultural labourers. The current situation of crises has major direct and indirect effects on the lives and livelihood of these families dependent on agriculture.

Effect of the economic crisis has been reducing other sources of income and in increasing the supply of labour in the rural areas. As mentioned, agriculture alone cannot sustain families and so family members diversify their sources of income by working in small industries in surrounding areas, or migrating to industrial towns. The crisis has caused a major loss of income as the small industries close down or reduce days of work. Furthermore, those families who had migrated to other cities are forced to return. Many rural families in Gujarat had migrated to Surat, Kambhat and other areas to earn an income in diamond polishing. Also, in many areas small diamond polishing units had been set up to feed the Surat based companies.

The workers who return to their village find that there is little work available and they are not welcomed by the village. The landless

villagers say that with the return of so many people, there is no work for the agricultural labourers as the returnees are doing the farm work on their own land or on that of their family members. They say, when work is available it is at very low rates.

"I returned to my village", says a young man, "As my diamond factory closed down. I am willing to do any work. My family members say that I am no good at field work, they send me out to graze the cattle. I have to keep hearing taunts from them---why have you come here to burden us. Go back to your city"

May Day

May Day Rallies were carried out in Bhopal and Delhi. 40% of SEWA Madhya Pradesh's members are agricultural labourers. SEWA MP has been working to promote the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, yet in a recent study, SEWA found that over 75% of members were not aware of the scheme. Worse, of those who did avail of the scheme, over 60% of people were forced to pay a bribe for the benefit. On this special occasion, cultural team of Sewa MP presented a play named Rozgar ka Adhikar (Rights of Employment) on malpractices of NREGS. The members passed a proposal on following points.

-	There is need for awareness campaign for NREGS member to get all benefits from scheme.
-	Job card should be given to all workers.
-	Panchayat should provide assistance to fill up the forms/ applications for getting employment through NREGS.
-	Wage should be disbursed on time.
-	Working days and wage should be properly recorded in job card.
-	Proposal of works under scheme should be put up in the Gram Sabha (Village Meeting) and sanction by majority of workers.

Construction workers, street vendors and forest workers were also in the Bhopal Rally They wanted the Construction workers Board to be decentralized and for a State Policy on Street Vendors.

SEWA Delhi organized a protest march and Dharna in front of Labour Commissioner's office to protest against not giving any benefits to the Construction workers from the welfare fund which has more than Rs.200 crore in its kitty presently. The Labour Ministry was unresponsive to the demand and instead of a positive hearing an official said "Should we stand on the street corner and hand out this money?" However, today's dharna generated much awaited enthusiasm among SEWA members to get their dues from the board and the struggle will carry on.

Teach India : Teach every child

Teach India, a campaign by the Times of India, promotes service to promote literacy for India's children. In the spirit of Gandhi, citizens donate their time to teach children at 71 centers across Ahmedabad. SEWA is a partner to the program. We have seen industrialists, doctors, and scientists come to teach 3,500 of SEWA members' children. Some volunteers have adopted centers to pay for fees, books and uniforms. SEWA is proud to watch our members' children finally receive the education they have sought, while more citizens participate in service.

SEWA at the Indian Labour Conference

SEWA shared the experiences of unorganized sector workers at the Indian Labour Conference this year. Construction workers in particular have suffered from the economic crisis. State and national welfare boards for construction workers have accumulated hundreds of crore rupees, yet the benefits have yet to reach workers. SEWA put forth a demand for a package scheme for workers, which could include a revolving fund and risk protection for unorganized workers. Skill development useful to the market is also critical.

WHO Commission on the Social Determinants of Health

The World Health Organisation released the report of the Commission on the Social Determinants of Health in 2009. SEWA participated in the development of the report, which sets out the basic principles to achieve better health for all -- particularly to remove discrimination and improve basic living conditions. Special attention to children under six, water and urban development, and social security are key recommendations of the report. Eleven health ministers across South and South East Asia, along with Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh, pledged to review and translate the findings into national health policy.

Training Construction Workers in Delhi

As the metro of Delhi continues to expand, construction workers are in great demand. At the same time, residents in slum areas are displaced for urban development, and left without employment opportunities. SEWA's Karmika School has initiated construction training for displaced workers in remote metro localities of Delhi, to ensure that they too benefit from the city's growth.

Awards and Special Events

-	SEWA is among the eight non-profit organisations to have been named the recipients of the 2009 MacArthur Award for creative and effective institutions.
-	Gangaben Vaniya received an expert masonry award from the Construction Industry Development Council. (Vishvkarma Award)
-	The Chankya Education Society conferred a Marketing Excellence award to SEWA in Pune. (Indira Award)
-	SEWA launched its book "SEWA na Chand," with Elaben Bhatt and renowned writer Indubhai Jani.
-	SEWA Bharat's traveling photo exhibition continues across India, with recent shows in Mumbai and Madhya Pradesh.
-	Elaben received Award " Real Heroes" by CNN-IBN T.V. Channel.

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