

SEWA — The Union That Refused to Choose Between Labour and Sisterhood

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Women Empowerment

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In 1972, Ela Bhatt attempted to register the Self-Employed Women's Association as a trade union in Ahmedabad. The labour commissioner refused. Unions, he explained, were for workers who had employers. Self-employed women — home-based piece-workers, street vendors, agricultural labourers, domestic workers — were not workers in any legally recognised sense. They had no employer to bargain with, no workplace to organise, no contract to enforce.

Ela Bhatt argued that this was exactly the problem. The labour law framework that excluded self-employed women from union rights was the legal expression of a broader social assumption: that women's economic contribution, because it was informal, was not really work.

SEWA — the Self-Employed Women's Association — was eventually registered, became the largest union of informal workers in India, and changed how the world understands women's economic roles.

Who They Are

SEWA is simultaneously a trade union (registered in 1972), a bank (SEWA Bank, established 1974), and a broader movement that includes cooperatives, producer groups, and an academy. Their constituency: self-employed women in India's informal economy — home-based workers, street vendors, agricultural workers, domestic

workers, and waste pickers — who are both workers and owners, both producers and market actors, and who have been excluded from the formal protections available to organised sector workers.

SEWA's membership has grown from its Ahmedabad origins to over 2.6 million women across 18 states of India. They are the world's largest union of informal workers.

Their organising principle is summarised in their own framing: the twin goals of full employment (full-time, year-round work at a living wage) and self-reliance (individual, family, and community-level economic independence). These goals, SEWA argues, cannot be achieved separately — economic security without agency is not liberation, and agency without economic security is fragile.

SEWA Bank: Credit as the Entry Point

SEWA Bank — established in 1974, two years after SEWA — is one of the oldest microfinance institutions in India and the institutional innovation that preceded the SHG-Bank Linkage model by a decade. SEWA Bank was established because SEWA's members — poor, informal, female, without collateral — could not access the formal banking system.

The bank's founding design choice was specific: it would be owned by its members (each member buys a share), managed by a board that includes member representatives, and designed to serve the specific financial needs of home-based and street-trading women rather than forcing them to conform to loan products designed for male formal sector workers.

By 2024, SEWA Bank had served over 400,000 members with a range of financial products including production loans, emergency credit, insurance, and pension savings. Their repayment rates have historically been among the highest in the microfinance sector — a function of the social accountability that membership in a union creates, and of the genuine fit between loan products and members' actual financial needs.

The Ahmedabad Earthquake Response

SEWA's documented disaster response work — particularly after the 2001 Bhuj earthquake and multiple subsequent disasters — demonstrated that women's economic collectives are among the most effective disaster resilience and recovery institutions available. SEWA members had social networks, financial resources (savings and credit access), and organisational skills that non-SEWA women in the same communities lacked.

The earthquake response documentation showed that SEWA Bank members accessed credit within days of the earthquake for home and livelihood reconstruction, while non-member women waited months for government compensation. The pre-existing institutional infrastructure — membership, bank relationship, group solidarity — converted immediately into disaster resilience.

This is the same insight that underpins SEWA's approach to climate change: that the institutions built for women's economic empowerment are also, inherently, institutions for climate adaptation. A woman who has a savings account, a credit relationship, a peer group, and skills training is better positioned to navigate an agricultural drought or cyclone than a woman who has none of these.

The Trade Union As Policy Actor

SEWA's advocacy contributions to Indian policy are documented and significant. Their campaigns contributed to the Unorganised Workers Social Security Act 2008 — legislation that for the first time created a framework for extending social security to informal workers. They contributed to the design of MGNREGS provisions for women. They engaged with the National Policy on Urban Street Vendors that recognised street vending as a legitimate livelihood. Their founder Ela Bhatt served on the National Commission for Women and international bodies including the MacArthur Foundation and the UN Commission on Sustainable Development.

This combination — union organising on the ground + policy advocacy at national and international levels + financial services through SEWA Bank + producer organisation through cooperatives — is what makes SEWA a movement rather than an NGO. Each component reinforces the others: bank members become union members; union members have better access to bank credit; cooperative members have markets for what they produce; advocacy changes the policy environment that all of them navigate.

The SEWA Academy

The SEWA Academy provides training and research on issues related to SEWA's constituency — home-based workers, street vendors, agricultural labourers. Their training programmes have reached tens of thousands of women leaders within SEWA and across India's broader women's movement. Their research on home-based work, informal employment, and women's economic contributions has influenced both academic understanding and policy documentation of the informal sector.

Why This Matters for Odisha

Odisha's tribal women — in the informal economy as NTFP collectors, agricultural labourers, street vendors, and home-based producers — face the same structural exclusion that SEWA was founded to address. Mission Shakti's SHG architecture provides the basic financial infrastructure; SEWA's next-generation approach — combining financial services with union organising, producer cooperatives, and policy advocacy — shows what that infrastructure can become when it matures.

For Odisha's NGOs working on tribal women's economic empowerment, SEWA's documented evolution from microfinance to comprehensive economic citizenship is the most relevant long-term trajectory available in the Indian evidence base.

Contact and Further Reading

Website: sewa.org | **SEWA Bank:** sewabank.org | **SEWA Academy:** sewaacademy.org | Ahmedabad, Gujarat

Key evidence:

- SEWA website: sewa.org — membership figures, programme documentation, history
- SEWA Bank: sewabank.org — financial services reach and product documentation
- JaBaSu Org Spotlight: SEWA (first batch) — earlier spotlight with foundational history
- National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector: SEWA contributions to unorganised worker social security policy

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