

Girl child carrying water, Indore, May 2016



Empowerment Programming and Unpaid Care Work: Learning from 30 years of the Self Employed Women's Association in Madhya Pradesh (SEWA MP)

Programmatic notes for Women's Economic Empowerment Policy and Programming



Institute of Social Studies Trust (ISST)

August 2017



Self Employed Women's Association
in Madhya Pradesh (SEWA MP)



Institute of
Development Studies

Part of the research project **Balancing unpaid work and paid work**, generating new knowledge about Women's Economic Empowerment.

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PROGRAMMATIC NOTES

Context of the research

This note examines the work of the Self Employed Women's Association in Madhya Pradesh (SEWA MP) to understand how women's economic empowerment (WEE) policy and programming can generate a 'double boon' – paid work that empowers women and provides more support for their unpaid care work responsibilities. The research was implemented in 2016, in the districts of Indore and Ujjain in Madhya Pradesh (MP), India. The research adopted a mixed-methods approach, with primary data consisting of quantitative and qualitative data, which were collected from women from low-income families who were engaged in paid work and had at least one child under the age of six, and their families. 60 per cent of these women were SEWA members.

Brief history of SEWA MP

In Madhya Pradesh, SEWA began its work in 1985 by initially mobilising *beedi* workers (local cigarette makers) to procure better working conditions and social security benefits through the Central Board that was set up for them. Since these early beginnings in Indore district, SEWA has expanded its work to include other workers such as *agarbatti* (incense sticks) rollers, *tendu* leaf¹ pickers, street vendors, and stitching and smocking, construction, agricultural and domestic workers. Currently, SEWA MP has the second largest union membership in the national union. From a mere 250 members in 1985, the membership of the union now stands at 500,000 workers. SEWA works in 40 blocks,² 850 *gram panchayats*³ and 3,000 villages in rural areas, and 1,004 *bastis* (settlements) in 10 towns of 15 districts of the state.⁴

SEWA aims to provide an enabling environment for women's inclusion into economic growth processes. Through membership of a trade union, SEWA mobilises workers to claim their rights and entitlements from the state and employers. It also promotes livelihood generation through skills building, vocational training and by enabling market linkages. Further, it promotes financial self-reliance by offering training on financial skills and connecting women workers to the SEWA cooperative for savings and loan facilities.

SEWA's *sanghataks* (community organisers), along with *aagyawans* (women leaders elected from the community) set up *soochna kendras* (information centres) in each *basti* that SEWA members live and work, in order to facilitate regular contact with members and resolve their problems.

VISION OF SEWA MP

- Recognition of unorganised sector workers as workers
- Unionisation of women workers, including leadership building
- Promotion of livelihood generation and increased employment opportunities
- Promotion of financial self-reliance
- Accessing social security benefits through better access to information
- Making the state accountable for public services

These *soochna kendras* provide information on women's rights and entitlements and enable women to claim social security and health benefits from the state. Another structure is of the *mohalla samiti*, a community-level committee comprised of trade committee members who are each elected by 100 ordinary members of SEWA. The *mohalla samitis* meet to resolve issues relating to social security schemes and play a watchdog function to hold the government accountable for public services. Similarly, vigilance committees called *nigrani samitis* at the village *panchayat* level are formed in rural areas. The *nigrani samitis* have the same role as the *soochna kendras* and *mohalla samitis*.

Recognition of unpaid care work by SEWA MP

Very early on, both with its work with *beedi* workers, and with construction workers, SEWA recognised the close relationship between unpaid care work and paid work by mobilising for maternity benefits. It had early success on this issue with *tendu* leaf pickers and *beedi* workers and more recently with construction workers, where it has also managed to secure paternity pay for men for 15 days. SEWA's incorporation of the importance of



women's unpaid care work begins with the recognition that the provision of childcare directly by SEWA would be insufficient. SEWA's vision lies in setting processes in place to make the state accountable for supporting women's unpaid care work. As explained by a senior SEWA staff member, SEWA played a pathbreaking role in operating *anganwadis* (childcare centres under the Integrated Child Development Services – ICDS) for children aged 3–6 years old until 1996–7 when the government took on this task. Keeping to its role of a union, instead of running a parallel structure of *anganwadis* SEWA redirected its efforts to lobbying with the government to expand the reach of *anganwadis* and other public services.

Women's experiences of SEWA MP

Participants in this research mainly included women who were young mothers, some of whom had migrated to Indore or Ujjain after marriage from other areas in MP or even from neighbouring states such as Gujarat. Those respondents who had been living in Ujjain or Indore prior to their marriage and had seen their mothers participate in SEWA held a better understanding of long-term benefits accruing from SEWA in comparison to those respondents who were relatively new to SEWA.

Overall, women said they joined SEWA for better employment opportunities and in pursuit of an

improvement to their working conditions – mainly in securing a higher and more secure income and better employment opportunities. There was a sense amongst many of the women we spoke with that they benefited through SEWA. This was especially by gaining a better understanding of their entitlements, and through accessible information on and access to identity cards, ration cards and state welfare schemes designed for these workers: 'They provide many services, any information we want, we can get it from them!' (Shashikala, Ujjain, April 2016).

Women also spoke of learning to make savings even with their nominal incomes, and of learning to access banks and use ATMs and deposit and withdrawal slips. They described benefiting from training courses on tailoring and beautician courses and of becoming computer-literate. Food street vendors (both men and women) were also supported by SEWA to obtain government-supported training through a hotel management institute, focused on hygiene in food preparation, presentation, and tips on enhancing the taste of food. This initiative from SEWA vastly improved their businesses, with feedback from the participants that their businesses were running better.

Some of the more established members of SEWA acknowledged the long-term benefits of their associations with SEWA; these were women who had seen a real change in their lives through, for instance, buying a sewing machine obtained through a loan provided by SEWA, and moving away from a difficult life in the brick kilns.

A community leader shared her journey from being a home-based tailor who stitched clothes on a hired sewing machine to owning her own business after a loan from SEWA. Now she even trains other women in this skill and contracts out work to them. Another member, Shashikala, worked as a domestic worker, but through SEWA she recently found an office job that she much prefers.

SEWA members benefited in terms of the recognition of the value of work that women do, and the efforts that SEWA makes to improve working conditions. The support women receive from SEWA in keeping a good record of their *mazdoor* (worker) diaries is one such instance, which enabled them to cross-check and verify the information against the logbooks of their contractors. As a SEWA staff member explained,

when we go to the factory to collect the raw material, the factory owner did not maintain a proper record... We then got their correct/proper logbooks made with information that this person is a beedi worker, her place of work, entry of daily work, and family details.

Ujjain, April 2016

Some women also acknowledged the more intangible benefits that they received from being associated with SEWA in terms of a supportive environment, readily available information, and having a liberating experience on joining SEWA. This also translates to a broader sense of empowerment emanating from the recognition of and value accorded to women's paid work.

In many places in the state, SEWA has been at the forefront of efforts to make the government accountable by demanding the provision of basic facilities such as access to water, electricity, sanitation, etc. which have vastly improved the conditions of women's lives. Especially in areas where SEWA MP has been working over many years, an elderly respondent noted,

earlier there used to be lot of problems, but after SEWA's intervention, road was constructed, and electricity connection was provided. We even have piped water for each house.



A woman carrying water from across the railway tracks, Ujjain, February 2016

Actions to engender a ‘double boon’ – aspirations from the field

Aspiring for decent work

Interviews with older women or women who have witnessed SEWA’s work over many years reflected a shift in aspirations for the younger generations. Mothers-in-law preferred other work options for their daughters and daughters-in-law. They explained that they preferred the younger generation of women to have decent work options that would not require them to undergo the hardships in paid work that they themselves had to experience. The younger respondents showed similar aspirations, preferring formal and regular employment or self-employment in their own small businesses.

SEWA currently connects its members and their children to available training opportunities from the government or other non-governmental organisations or runs its own training depending on the availability of funds. The training currently provided includes stitching/tailoring, beautician courses, cooking/baking, bag making and computer courses. Except for the computer courses and bag making, the majority of training courses available to women were quite gendered and stereotypical in nature – offering a limited range of options against the changing requirements of the market. In view of the aspirations of the younger women, expanding the range of their training presents an opportunity for SEWA to move towards more unconventional courses for girls and women, even if they are more technical in nature. This will not only break the glass ceiling but may also improve women’s employability and open entry into more regular and formal work.

Changing gendered norms on women’s paid work

The majority of respondents from Ujjain and Indore expressed a desire to be respected for their paid work:

if our husband believes in us and in-laws let us go out and earn... a woman who goes and work is looked down upon in our community... this should change.

Care Marbles participatory tool, Ujjain, February 2016

While targeting only women for membership in the union is a conscious decision taken by the organisation so that women are able to enjoy a free and open space without men (key informant interview, April 2017), including men in SEWA’s dialogues could be one way to change gendered perceptions about women’s work. SEWA MP already includes men in their conversations when offering loans to women, so men can take on the responsibility of paying back the loan. Similarly, SEWA MP could include men in its discourse by inviting them to meetings and conducting gender-responsive training

programmes. Over time these efforts could achieve some shifts in perceptions that the wider community holds about working women and open up better opportunities for women.

Supporting women with unpaid care work responsibilities

Besides the limited availability of training, women with young children with no childcare support in their family could not participate in these training opportunities as there was no separate childcare arrangement for their children: ‘If there is some [training] we could take up... how do we go leaving our children behind?’(Shaila Pathan, Ujjain, April 2016). While SEWA has been conscious of the childcare needs of families, particularly of women workers, through advocacy for implementation of the Integrated Child Development Services, there are instances where, during their own meetings and training, there is no support provided for unpaid care work and women do not always feel comfortable taking young children along. SEWA MP could further demonstrate its support to women with young children by creating childcare arrangements within its own structures, initiatives and programmes.

Implicit to explicit recognition of care work

SEWA implicitly recognises that if women can access wider public services, then there will be a reduction in women’s unpaid care work burdens. This is reflected in their struggles for making the state accountable for providing basic facilities such as water and sanitation. This implicit recognition, however, does not necessarily translate (especially amongst the field staff) to an explicit recognition of how women’s unpaid care work could be redistributed more widely, including a fairer redistribution in households as well. Our findings show that men’s participation in care work is minimal in household chores; however, men are involved in childcare provision. There are constraints on men’s participation in unpaid care work, including time pressures emanating from the nature of the work they are involved in as well. An explicit focus on unpaid care work in SEWA’s leadership training, and in *mohalla* (neighbourhood) meetings, as well as in their dialogues with men could lead to a deeper understanding and recognition of women’s unpaid care work responsibilities, as well as the constraints faced by the community in seeking a fairer redistribution of care work, both in the family, and with the employer and the state.

Notes

1. Tendu leaves are used to make beedi (cigarettes).
2. Administrative sub-divisions at the intermediate level in panchayat raj institutions (PRI). They are a link between the village and the district council.
3. Institutions of self-government constituted at village level under article 243B of the 73rd Constitution Amendment Act 1992, for rural areas.
4. These include: Indore, Bhopal, Dhar, Jhabua, Ujjain, Ratlam, Shajapur, Dewas, Sagar, Damoh, Chhatarpur, Khandwa, Khargone, Burhanpur and Mandsaur.

Credits

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Balancing unpaid care work and paid work carried out qualitative and quantitative research in India, Nepal, Rwanda, Tanzania across 16 sites. This research explores how women's economic empowerment policies and programmes can take unpaid care work into account, in order to enable economic empowerment to be optimised, shared across families and sustained across generations. It focusses on the social

organisation of care in low income households, and at the role of families, state, private sector and not-for profit sector.

Ultimately it aims to identify measures that can lead towards a 'double boon', creating paid work that empowers women and provides core support for their unpaid care work responsibilities.

The Balancing unpaid care work and paid work project explores the successes, challenges and lessons for Women's Economic Empowerment programmes and policies.

Creating and sharing new knowledge on the balance between paid work and unpaid care work

Advocating for decent paid work, providing support for unpaid care work responsibilities and removal of barriers to entry and retention in paid work

Resulting in women's economic empowerment that is optimised, shared across families and sustained across generations

LOW PAID WORK

INDIA



Research was undertaken in 2016 in four sites in the Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh regions of India

Udaipur

Ujjain

Dungarpur

Indore

PROJECT LEAD:



Institute of Development Studies

RESEARCH PARTNERS:



Institute of Social Studies Trust

UPTAKE PARTNER:



Alliance for Right to Early Childhood

For more project background information, publications and access to datasets and case studies, visit interactions.ids.ac.uk/wee

Balancing unpaid care work and paid work is part of the global Growth and Equal Opportunities for Women programme (GrOW) bit.ly/1PbKwAd



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