

The pulse of the city

For over three decades, Sewa (Self Employed Women's Association) has been working tirelessly to protect the rights of women workers in the unorganised sector

At the humble Sewa (Self Employed Women's Association) office in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, a group of local women clad in colourful sarees animatedly describe, in Gujarati, their tribulations and triumphs during Sewa's over three-decade-long struggle to save the livelihoods of poor vendors in the city. Most of the women are vendors themselves; others are Sewa employees. Much to their credit, all have shown great determination, grit and perseverance in their endeavour.

"We used to be petrified whenever we saw the police or the municipal truck coming our way. We would run away and hide our produce and weighing equipment to prevent them from being destroyed or confiscated," says Shantaben Parmar, a vendor, who is now a vice president at Sewa. "Often we were beaten up and had to spend hours at the police station, and pay heavy fines to retrieve our items," she adds.

Shantaben's story is that of thousands of uneducated vendors from the unorganised sector in urban cities in India who have, for several years, fought against eviction threats and atrocities perpetuated

against them by the civic authorities and the police. The vendors are often perceived by the authorities as obstacles in their plans to create 'world-class' cities.

However, the reality is that they fulfil several bottom-of-the-pyramid economic necessities: as a form of livelihood, an alternate and informal (yet strong) distribution network, and a low-cost retail source for many. Sewa puts the vendor population in Ahmedabad as high as 10-12 per cent. Faced with figures like these, urban policy planners are gradually beginning to recognise the need to factor their existence into city planning.

Sewa began mobilising women workers in an effort to protect their rights as far back as 1972. This has now grown into a national movement of trade unions across India and consists of women members from four categories — vendors, home-based workers, labour and service providers, and producers.

The Mahila Sewa Trust (MST) is the Ahmedabad chapter which deals with the problems of vendors in the city. With unplanned urbanisation, mushrooming of



With a little help from Sewa, women vendors in Ahmedabad feel safe to carry on with their daily business

supermarkets and malls and increasing migration from rural to urban areas, such communities have become even more marginalised and vulnerable. They risk losing their only means of livelihood.

Recognising this and the connection between urban and rural poverty, the Sir Dorabji Tata Trust (SDTT) and Allied Trusts perceived the need for intervention in this area. Under its fairly new portfolio of urban poverty and livelihoods, the trust has undertaken to support several such projects.

One of the aims of this initiative is to help reduce the vulnerability of informal sector groups such as ragpickers, construction workers, home-based workers, vendors, domestic workers, etc.

Emphasising the importance of working in this area for the betterment of the economy and society in general, Sugandhi Baliga, programme officer, SDTT and the Allied Trusts, says, “The informal and unorganised workers are an exploited lot and need protection and an opportunity to earn a decent income in a dignified way. They play an important role in the economics of any city and provide essential services which are convenient and cheap.”

MST is one such project that has received support and funding from the Jamsetji Tata Trust. The trust granted MST an amount of Rs10.79 million in March 2008, for three years to support their core activities as well as for the setting up of a much-needed documentation and resource centre.

MST’s efforts and the training imparted by it have helped women like Shantaben, Rajiben and Savitaben to become empowered, aware of their rights and confident of tackling the authorities. They no longer run away from the police but display leadership skills and help other

vendors to sort out problems more amicably, both at police stations and at the *lok adalats* (people’s courts).

MST also advises the women on hygiene, the importance of sitting in an organised manner at the markets so as not to obstruct traffic, cleanliness, how to better display their produce and how to maintain good customer relations.

MST’s perseverant lobbying, advocacy and public interest litigations and petitions have helped in considerably reducing the harassment and atrocities inflicted upon the vendors. Its biggest achievement has been the favourable order passed by the High Court of Gujarat in favour of 57,110 vendors. The Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation (AMC) agreed to form a city vending committee and grant all 57,110 vendors registered status.

“Registration of the vendors is important as it provides them legal identity,” says Shaliniben Trivedi, a lawyer and the policy coordinator at Sewa. “These people have been vending for several years in the natural market areas; if they are moved to some other location they will risk losing their regular customers and their income will decrease drastically.”

However, MST still faces major roadblocks in spite of the favourable court order. It has not been very successful in getting the AMC to implement the livelihood models and schematic plans for markets developed by Sewa with the help of architect Rushank Mehta. The organisation has tried to sensitise the AMC to the plight of the vendors and create awareness about the synergistic nature of these vendors in the larger scheme of urban life. Natural markets spring up when there is a need and demand on part of customers for ready access to essential commodities.

Several solutions have also been proposed by MST in terms of developing the natural markets by providing basic amenities like wooden platforms for the vendors to sit on and water and bathroom facilities in the market areas, which could help integrate and regularise the vendors. Discussions and negotiations are underway but it is a slow process.

However, team leaders like Manjulaben Parmar, an employee of Sewa for over 25 years, has not lost hope. She says, “We will continue our struggle till we get justice.”

Adds Champaben Patni, a vendor, “This is a question of our livelihood and our family. Most of us are not educated and we need to have a regular source of income so that our children have a secure future.” It is a sentiment that is echoed by the women vendors and one that drives Sewa in its efforts to ensure their rightful place in society. ●

Jai Wadia



Finding ways to earn in a dignified way