

## **New Media and Women Empowerment: A Case Study on SEWA**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Education is conceivably the most deliberate area of intervention for the empowerment of girls and women in any society. The usage of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) as an education tool helps in the promotion of women's advancement has immense potential. Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) had several ICT projects for women, including community learning centers, a school of Science and Technology for self-employed women and the Telephone project, where they provide mobile phones to women in the informal sector etc. The study is concerned with the role of new media for women empowerment and how women are educated through SEWA. Target audience for the study is urban women from Ernakulum district. Qualitative analysis method is observed for the study by the researcher. The aim of the study is to analyze and discuss the role of new media and their impact on women empowerment. New media open up new channels of information and create career opportunities for women. Through this study we can find out whether new media education can improve their life and be active participants in the urban development.

**Keywords:** *ICT, Education, Women empowerment, SEWA*

## **I.INTRODUCTION**

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) are denoted to as the assorted collection of resources and technological gear which are made use of to communicate. It also helped in usage to generate, distribute, collect and administer information. ICT is a dynamism that has transformed many characteristics of the way we live. Information and Communication Technologies comprises of the software, hardware, networks, and media for storage, collection, processing, transmission and presentation of information (data, voice, text, images), as well as associated services. New media have compressed on educational practice in education to date in fairly small ways but that the impact will grow considerably in years to come. ICT will become a strong agent for variation among many educational practices. ICT education is increasing very rapidly in various states of India. Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in education is to base choices on technological possibilities rather than educational needs which is considered to be the one of the most common problem. The role of ICT education is becoming more and more important and this importance will continue to grow and develop. Information and communication technology (ICT) is a powerful tool and an enabler of economic growth in underdeveloped areas. ICTs have played significant role in providing opportunities for empowerment and women's development. ICTs have the potential to exchange information and empower marginalized communities. Women empowerment is an important issue of women living in developing and under developing countries. Majority of women are illiterate or low educated. They depend on their male family members to fulfill their needs. As result of this reliance, they are inevitable to follow decisions of male family members. Most of educated women also depend on male members to get permission to use their authorities even in domestic matters. Empowerment means power of authority to do something. This also means to take control over the life and do independent decisions. Gender equality, independence, awareness, good educational status, employment, proper health and control over resources needed for the life are basic needs of women empowerment. Women empowerment is impossible without having awareness about the rights and responsibilities.

In India, SEWA is a national labour union that organizes women workers in the informal economy. It is registered as a trade union and differs from traditional trade unions in a number of ways. First, unlike those that organize workers of one trade, it brings together workers from many different occupations, ranging from urban street vendors to rural livestock breeders. Second, it organizes workers who tend to work in non-factory settings: for example, in their own homes as home-based workers; in others' homes as domestic workers; in fields as agricultural labourers; or in public places as street vendors. SEWA believes organizing is the

basis of development and progress. Self-employed women collectively promote their own development this is allowed in sustainable organizations. These may take the form of trade unions and associations, which promote employment and increased income, or which link women workers or producers with the market; they can be financial organizations that help women build assets through savings and credit; or the organizations could provide social security, such as health care or childcare. They can exist at the village, district or state level, or the national or international level. They can be registered as cooperatives, societies, producer associations, or even remain unregistered. SEWA has become a movement that incorporates many types of organizations. In addition to being a trade union that organizes for higher wages or enterprise benefits, SEWA integrates a development approach to address the needs of its members, who tend to be traditional, deeply rooted poor women.

### **i. New Media**

New media has become a potent force in transforming social, economic, and political life globally. More and more, development strategists see the need for developing countries to embrace new media both as a way to avoid further economic and social marginalization as well as to offer opportunities for both growth and diversification of their economies. Women within developing countries are in the deepest part of the divide, further removed from the information age than are the men whose poverty they share. The gender gap in the digital divide is of increasing concern; if access to and use of these technologies is directly linked to social and economic development, then it is imperative to ensure that women in developing countries understand the significance of these technologies and use them. If not, lack of access to information and communication technologies becomes a significant factor in the further marginalization of women from the economic, social, and political mainstream of their countries and of the world. Without full participation in the use of information technology, women are left without the key to participation in the global world of the twenty-first century. ICT can be a powerful catalyst for political, social and types of empowerment of women.

### **ii. Education**

Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world. Information and communications are closely connected to power and the capability to affect change. ICT is an umbrella term that includes any communication device or application, encompassing: radio, television, cellular phones, computer etc. Socially the majorities of Indian women are still tradition bound and are in disadvantageous position. ICTs are emerging as a powerful tool for women empowerment in a developing country like India. As women's education has become one of the key development objectives in the nineties, it is crucial to examine the

assumptions under which policies, programmes and projects are formulated towards this goal. More recently, the concept of empowerment has been tied to the range of activities undertaken by and for women in different areas, education included. Women especially in under developing countries are not empowered in most of fields of life.

### **iii. Women Empowerment**

Women in India mostly work within informal sectors without medical or social security benefits; within the mercy of government authorities, informal money lenders that charge high rates of interests, and families that do not provide them with adequate education or skills. For centuries, Indian women's labor has been invisible within labor markets and their voices have remained silent within main stream adult education literature. Women empowerment is a source of development for not only women but also for the families. It is one of the need and rights of women to bring positive changes in society. It has substantial role to promote awareness among people about every field of life. It is a tool to communicate intended information to people within short period. It is an unconscious way of bringing changes in attitudes of people. It is also a rapid source of educating people to bring required changes in their behaviors. It is popular among people as a mean of information and education. Here are some aspects of life which have a direct influence of ICT especially on women:

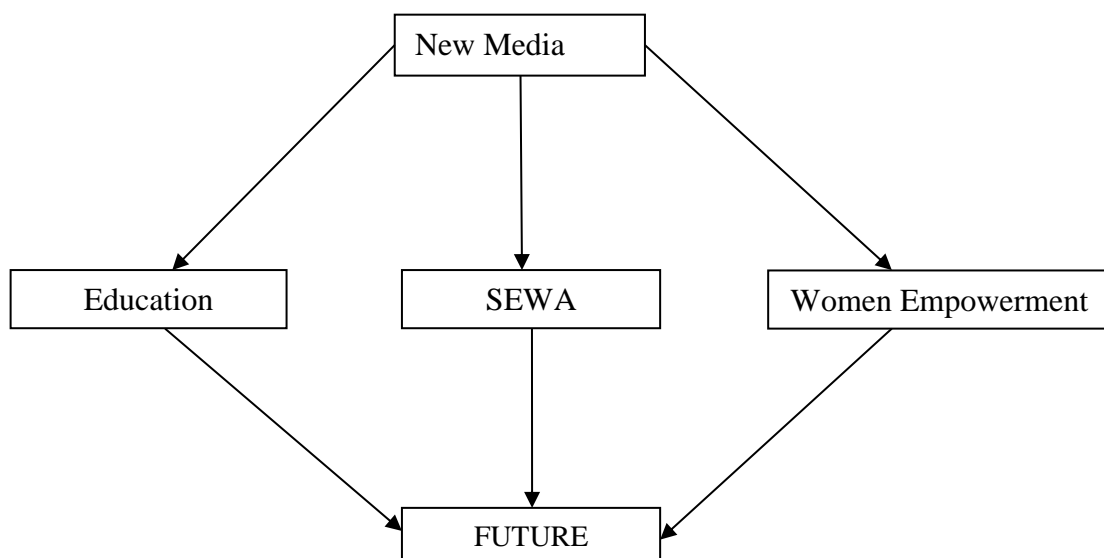
- (i) Women's increased access to job market and improve entrepreneurship using ICT
- (ii) Increase of average household income in villages
- (iii) Women empowerment
- (iv) Shrinking Information asymmetry through ICT
- (v) Improved governance
- (vi) Indigenous knowledge
- (vii) Easy-Family communication
- (viii) Increase social awareness

### **iv. Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA)**

In Ahmadabad (Gujarat), Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) was formed in 1972. Some poor, illiterate women, seasonal migrants from rural areas, approached the Textile Labour Association, one of the oldest unions in India. They were making a meager income as casual laborers, pulling carts and carrying head loads of cloth around between the 100 or so wholesale textile markets in the city. The women's most urgent need was for shelter, but they also knew they were being cheated by the cloth merchants, and seeing the benefits the union had brought for its (mostly male) members in the textile mills, they sought its help. They were

directed to the unions Women’s Wing, and Ela Bhatt. Trained as a lawyer, for some years Ms Bhatt represented the union in court disputes and in policy discussions with government, and later worked for the state Ministry of Labour, before returning to the union as head of its Women’s Wing. Ms Bhatt was much influenced by the example and teachings of Mohandas Gandhi, who lived for many years in Ahmadabad, and had in fact helped to found the Textile Labour Association in 1917. To counter the myriad unfair and corrupt practices that kept these women’s earnings so low and their lives so precarious, Ms Bhatt conceived the idea of organizing them and others who functioned in the informal sector as vegetable and used garment vendors, construction, carpenters, workers, and the like into a union, the Self-Employed Women’s Association (SEWA). The poor and uneducated women who became members of SEWA organized campaigns and peaceful demonstrations to draw attention to their plight, and slowly gained ground on issues such as differential rates depending on cart-pulling distance, the right of vendors to sell on the street, and reduced harassment by police looking for bribes. These achievements added to their self-confidence, and led to new initiatives, which resulted in a growing membership and an expanding field of activities. The movement flows slowly at times and faster at others, it may be deflected around an obstacle, but it always moves in the same direction. SEWA combines three movements: the labour movement, the cooperative movement, and the women’s movement. The movement of self-employed workers: their own, home-grown movement with women as the leaders. As a trade union, its membership is open to self-employed women workers all over India. The annual membership fee is Rs. 5.

## II. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK



**Fig. 1 Conceptual Framework of the Study**

### III. AIMS OF THE STUDY

- The study aims to find out the role of new media education in terms of women empowerment through SEWA.
- The study also aims at analyzing whether new media has opened up new channels of information to create career opportunities for women through SEWA.

### IV. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objectives of the study are to analyze,

- To find out the dissemination of ICT education among SEWA members.
- To check whether any scholarship funds given for the education.
- To check whether new media education had improved the lives of SEWA members.

### V. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

RQ1: To what extent ICT education is prevalent among SEWA members?

RQ2: Are education related scholarships and funds allocated to the SEWA members?

RQ3: Has new media education improved the lives of SEWA members?

### VI. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

*Meena Razvi* (2010), “*SEWA Academy: Leadership Training in Ahmedabad, India*” examines the majority of women in India work within informal, unregulated work sectors earning minimal wages (Rao, 2004). Indian authorities have often discriminated low-income working women by refusing to protect or provide them with necessary permits, imposing unnecessary fines, confiscating their goods, and hindering access to their markets and customers. The Self Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) is a unique multi-trade union that provides an academy to train low-income union members and future grassroots community leaders. This paper presents research results of how SEWA academy conducts leadership training among illiterate and low literate women in India, and highlights important and critical evidence of the need for alternative and innovative learner-centered adult education practices among under educated and illiterate communities within non-western settings.

**M. Chen** (2004) "*Towards Economic Freedom: The Impact of SEWA. Ahmadabad: Self-Employed Women's Association*" concludes that the majority of SEWA members reported that the regularity or security of their work had increased, or that they had diversified their economic activities, following their joining of the Union. Membership had also generally improved the physical wellbeing of the women. SEWA members have savings accounts, to have these accounts in their own name, and to prepare for the future compared to other working class women. A significant share of SEWA members, particularly rural members, reported having made housing improvements in recent years. Chen notes that many members felt more secure than they had prior to joining, and more confident about continuing their current occupation. SEWA's interventions have led to structural changes, which have contributed to the mainstreaming of women's issues in development discourses and planning.

**S.V Sethuraman, Jacques Charmes** (2001), "*SEWA, Self-Employed Women's Association Case Study*" examines self-employed women workers who earn a living through their own labor or small businesses. They do not have salaried employment and thus do not enjoy the welfare benefits that those in the salaried sector. This sector represents ninety four percentage of working women in India. SEWA's two stated goals are full employment and self-reliance for its members. In pursuit of these goals, SEWA organizes these women for full emploreliance, including work security, income security, food security, and social security.

**K. Rose** (1992), "*Where women are leaders: SEWA movement in India*" is a narrative history of the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) the 40,000-strong union of India's poorest women which has increasingly become an inspiration to and living example of a new development model relevant to low-income women worldwide. SEWA's unique organizing tactics focus on the poorest and most vulnerable women in Indian society, those who are self-employed or working in the informal sector and who have been marginalized by mainstream development strategies.

## **VII. METHODOLOGY**

The study implements qualitative method and information is gathered through in-depth interviews from SEWA members in Ernakulum district of Kerala. The study relies on opinion of the SEWA members to understand whether new media education is imparted for women empowerment through these associations. Twenty five women were interviewed through

SEWA to find out its purpose, challenges, Management System, achievements, benefits, educational benefits etc.

## **VIII. RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

In-depth interview with SEWA members helped to get detailed picture of the various areas the organization focuses on. The information gathered from SEWA members are discussed below:

### **i. Strengthening self-employed women through SEWA**

SEWA's labour forces are from the most vulnerable section of the society due to their lack of access to income, work and food. SEWA addresses the needs of a large majority of India's labour force and self-employed workers are also more prone to exploitation. Self-employed women were in particularly precarious social and economic conditions because they were largely illiterate, unaware of their rights, and were often harassed and exploited by authorities. Self-employed women from diverse backgrounds needed to be organized "*not against anyone*", but "*for themselves*"; and to use their collective strength to attain social justice and improve their conditions of work and life. Its approach is largely to involve rather than intervene. According to the opinion of SEWA members, majority of them are comfortable to work with SEWA due to factors such as security, salary and type of the work allocated to them. There are both full time and part time workers in SEWA. Earlier SEWA started in Ernakulam for the uneducated women who lives near seashores and for their welfare. The salary is given monthly to each member according to the area of the work they chose. Majority of the women are above fifty and no members of SEWA are below thirty. Out of twenty five women interviewed, 21 are from Ernakulam district and four are from other districts. Currently 7647 self-employed women are working in SEWA. Yearly, the General Body conducts public meetings for SEWA members that include medical aid help, awareness programmes, seminars, educational scholarships etc. The SEWA members are also given an opportunity to nurture their skills and talents. From January 2018, the salary of the SEWA members has been increased to 15,000.

### **ii. Purpose of SEWA**

SEWA's vision is to influence, seek and improve the lives of marginalized social groups. "Full employment" refers to means through which women can gain work, income security, food and social security (at least health care, child care and shelter), while "self-reliance" implies individual and collective autonomy in decision-making. The goals of SEWA aim at



day-to-day work of the organization, namely: organizing, asset building, and empowering self-employed women. The purpose of SEWA is to attain full time and secured job, income and security that make women self-reliant. The type of work they work on is baby care, patient care, cooking, delivery, and cleaning, all according to their preference. Life time full employment is offered through SEWA and age, caste and place are not barriers to getting employment when it comes to SEWA.

### **iii. Challenges faced by SEWA members**

Despite its phenomenal growth and expansion, SEWA continues to face some important challenges. One of the important challenges they face is the lack of rehabilitation centers for SEWA members who have no one to take care after them in their old age. Hence, they started a rehabilitation center at Kodanad for providing food and shelter for women working in the organization, especially who are helpless. Though the organization has always been clear about its intention, they faced suspicion and resistance when it came to expanding it to various districts of Kerala. Hence, SEWA needs to gain their trust and cooperation at the same time give self-employed women confidence to become leaders and decision makers. The members of SEWA also faced problems at work place such as insufficient food, misbehavior from people, whom they look after, restricting them to use rest rooms outside the house etc. However, the members of SEWA can always come back to the organization if they are not comfortable with the given work or members of the family where they work.

### **iv. Management system of SEWA**

The SEWA movement has been spreading to various districts in Kerala. SEWA seek to promote leadership and decision-making among its self-employed women members as a means to empower them. The SEWA Committee also includes 5 senior members from SEWA's management staff and a few invited Chairwomen who have played a key role in SEWA's past. It elects 7 of its members to the posts of President, Vice-Presidents (2), Secretaries (2) and General Secretary (2). The positions of Secretary and General Secretary are reserved for administrative and management officer's where in at least 1 of the secretaries must be a working class member. The full time self-employed women who are paid wages on a monthly basis have to stay back and work but part time SEWA members only have to work from nine to three and thereafter they can leave to their houses.

## **v. Achievements of SEWA - General Achievements**

SEWA is now the largest primary union, with a membership of 7647 self-employed women that work both in full time and part time at Ernakulam district .Growth of organizations has been considerably successful in achieving its primary goal of organizing self-employed women into numerous structures and organizations. It functions with setting up economic structures to ensure “full-employment” and “self-reliance” to its members. Most programmes use SEWA’s own funds, constituted by its members’ annual fees. SEWA’s social security organizations for childcare, healthcare and insurance require additional fees from members using these services. Its sizable achievements and expansion across Kerala, especially the recent project of rehabilitation centre at Kodanad, illustrate the feasibility of organizing urban workers, even in the most marginalized communities, and the strength of collective action, cooperation and advocacy in changing their lives. Apart from this, the SEWA members celebrate Women’s Day, May Day and World Fisheries Day during which awareness classes and seminar by eminent resource persons are conducted for the members.

## **vi. Benefits for SEWA members**

SEWA intends to strengthen its numerous programmes and organizations and increase its influence across the country. Through SEWA, the lives of members are made secure and independent hence in future they are able to get benefits such as education and marriage loans and provident funds which are key components to improve the lives of urban workers. However, SEWA members are able to have good some of money as savings and hence they get the loans whenever they need especially for marriage and educational purposes. The provident funds of SEWA members can be used for meeting needs for medicines, food etc, once they receive the amount on leaving the association or during old age.

## **vii. Educational benefits received by SEWA members**

When we check the education status of SEWA members, ninety percentage of SEWA members that comes below the tenth grade. Out of twenty five interviewed, the educational qualifications of 22 members are below tenth grade and the rest of them completed the twelfth grade. In yearly wise, the son or daughter of the members of the SEWA got educational scholarship of rupees 500 those who seek education in tenth and twelfth grade. Almost all self-employed women are familiar to use mobile phone and they are aware of the activities initiated by SEWA.

## **XI. CONCLUSION**

From the study, it is clear that there is new media education happening through SEWA for its members but not as expected. There is lack of training programmes in terms of new media education to improve the status of self-employed women and empower them to become active participants in urban development. The numerous possibilities of new media to open up new channels of information to create career opportunities for self - employed women remain untapped by SEWA. Since majority of the SEWA member's educational qualification is below tenth grade, it is also a difficult task for SEWA to implement ICT education among self-employed women in Ernakulam district. The only benefit enjoyed by SEWA members is scholarship funds given yearly for education if their sons or daughters are studying in tenth or twelfth grade.

## **X. RECOMMENDATIONS**

- Regular training programmes on ICT should be conducted for SEWA members and participation should be made mandatory.
- There should be adequate media coverage for SEWA initiatives and activities.
- A detailed study can be conducted on SEWA academy to understand analyze the role of new media in education and women empowerment.

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