SEWA Academy: Leadership Training in Ahmedabad, India

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Abstract: The majority of women in India work within informal, unregulated work sectors earning minimal, unsustainable wages (Rao, 2004). Unable to access formal job markets where they are discriminated because of their lack of education, skills, and low caste, females within low-income communities throughout India (both urban and rural) are forced to participate in poorly paid self-employment. 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.

Introduction

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 mainstream adult education literature.

Western concepts of gender equality and empowerment have not penetrated successfully into Eastern cultures. An Indian woman’s positionality is dependent upon complex social and economic factors that hinder poverty alleviation and empowerment within low-income sectors (Razvi, 2007). A critical shortage of formal jobs in India combined with gender disparities marginalized the female workforce forced to earn subsistence-level incomes within unregulated informal sectors.

This study combines gender, economic, and social development as an epistemological lens to explore the status of Indian women within informal work sectors and their struggle towards the transformation of a hegemonic society. An interdisciplinary conceptual framework influenced the examination of poverty alleviation of marginalized women: Gandhian ideology of community, self-reliance, and nonviolence; feminist theory; and National Human Resource Development. For a full description of the theoretical basis for this study see Razvi (2007).

Grassroots leaders at SEWA challenged dominant social and economic structures to promote the status of low-income women, proving that poor women are capable of banking, union membership, and other privileges previously reserved for the formal and middle-class sectors (Rose, 1992).
Linkage of Research to Practice

This research study links adult education theory and practice within one non-formal, non-western context using research methods that include: digital photographs, journaling, observations, and interviews with SEWA staff, trainers, and eight grassroots leaders.

The following critical questions were used to explore the strategies and resources SEWA Academy uses to promote empowerment, gender equity, and sustainable development:

- How does a non-governmental organization (NGO) educate illiterate/under educated rural/urban community grassroots leaders?
- What strategies and resources are utilized by SEWA Academy trainers?
- What strategies are used for retention/transfer of knowledge?
- How does SEWA Academy feed/house/transport rural leaders for four days of training?
- How does SEWA Academy reach trainees at offsite and rural areas to conduct other programs?
- What equipment/resources/planning are required?
- How do SEWA trainers promote participant engagement during programs with trainees that are nervous and very shy?
- What are the outcomes of SEWA Academy’s intervention in the lives of poor working women?
- Importance to Adult Education Research and Practice: Capacity Building Through Training Programs

SEWA

The Self-Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) is a unique trade union for low-income self-employed women founded in 1972 by Bhatt, a female Gujarati lawyer. SEWA’s objective is “economic regeneration and the social uplift of self-employed women” (Patel, 1995, p. 135). SEWA was the first organization to declare that self-employed women were important contributors to the national economy. Because larger trader unions refused to accept low-income women as union members, SEWA emerged as a women’s wing under the larger Textile Labor Association (TLA). The TLA was founded in 1917 by Mahatma Gandhi who influenced Bhatt’s vision to organize self-employed women within informal work sectors to gain visibility for the plight of poor working women in India (Rose, 1992). SEWA’s affiliation with the Gandhian philosophy was influenced by Mahatma Gandhi and encourages low-income women to take control of their lives. SEWA’s membership consists of low-income self-employed women from various backgrounds and religious beliefs working within multiple trades and services (Rose, 1992). SEWA classifies the informal sector into four categories:

- Vendors and hawkers
- Home based workers
- Service providers and service contractors
- Producers (Raval, 2001)

SEWA is both an acronym and a Gujarati word that means service. As SEWA became more popular, during a dispute in 1981 the male executives of the TLA ousted SEWA for refusing to curtail its feminist activities. As a result, Bhatt declared that SEWA would be organized as an independent trade union staffed by females to protect itself from additional male influence or exploitation (Rose, 1992). SEWA organizes women from multiple trades, classes,
castes, and ethnic divisions into a powerful union and political force to educate and empower working women in India. With its headquarters based in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, SEWA grew to become an important social, economic, and political union and social movement that creates culturally specific pedagogies.

One branch of SEWA provides an academy for training female union members into future grassroots community leaders (mostly on a voluntary basis with a minimal daily stipend dependent upon number of members recruited). Observations of a four day leadership training program and one movement training program form the basis for this paper.

Without the TLA’s constraints, SEWA flourished, membership increased and SEWA developed female-friendly objectives, multiple strategies, and services such as SEWA Bank, workers’ cooperatives, SEWA Academy, social services, and insurance programs (Patel, 1995). Each of these entities are formally independent but fall under “the umbrella of the SEWA union and are managed by the same top leaders” (Patel, p. 144). SEWA’s approach is to highlight female workers as important contributors to the economic development of India.

**SEWA Academy**

SEWA Academy began in 1991 (SEWA, n.d., p. 3) to offer non-formal training programs, conduct research, and prepare grassroots leaders. Seven SEWA trainers in the Academy conducted approximately 12 to 13 training sessions per month for members. SEWA staff worked a six-day week from Monday through Saturday.

**Charwar Taleem (Movement Training).** Study participants reported that self-employed women’s awareness of their social inequalities and legal rights were barely or completely nonexistent. Because awareness is a prerequisite towards social transformation, SEWA membership entitles women to a two-day Charwar Taleem (movement training) provided by SEWA trainers who built awareness of patriarchal attitudes that inhibited women’s development. Many women believed that their informal incomes did not classify them the right to be called working women and often self-classified as nonworking or housewives during census surveys.

SEWA trainers presented pie charts about gender disparities in order to surface covert methods of gender exploitation and income and asset disparities. Trainers explained how men owned 99% of all assets although women often contributed to the household income. Critical reflection helped women to value their unpaid household labor and self-employed incomes as important contributions to society. SEWA trainers explained how women coerced into submission and isolation could learn to speak out against oppressive practices with activities designed to promote awareness such as rights to a minimum wage, quality education for females, equal share in assets, equal pay for equal work, and how to obtain microloans from SEWA Bank. Instructors encouraged women to value their experiences as useful knowledge and to use that knowledge to increase their sense of self-worth. Reflection of personal experiences facilitated an understanding of the truth regarding gender inequalities.

One powerful activity taught women to break the cycle of submission and silence by learning to speak out. Instructors encouraged women to speak their own names in public (perhaps for the first time) by prompting, “bolo ben” (speak sister). As one instructor pointed out, “baira, ben, dikree, wav, sasu (women, sisters, daughters, daughters-in-law), we have many roles as women” (personal communication, M. Parmar, January 22, 2004). Because women often lacked the confidence to speak their names in public through conditioning designed to hide their identities, instructors encouraged each trainee until she could speak out her full name. This powerful exercise was captured on a video camera and replayed to the class.
during the second day to reinforce their transition from the shadows of social invisibility into asserting their presence as valuable citizens. Movement training posited the need to change perceptions about access of education for females. The following excerpts reflect the evolution of participants’ awareness and confidence during training:

Instructor prompts shy women by saying, “bolo ben” (speak sister). Many women are too shy to say their own name. Instructor continues probing: Kekloo bharnela cho? (how much education do you have?), Kekla varash SEWA ma? (how many years in SEWA?). (M. Parmar, personal communication, January 22, 2004).

Can you clap with one hand? asks the instructor. What if all the women in the village get together and talk to the sarpanj? (Council of five elders). If something is broken or there is no water, or road problem, you can join and work together. People will listen to you and you can speak with one voice. If we women stand together and protest against bad treatment people will pay attention. (M. Parmar, personal communication, January 22, 2004).

Charwar Taleem was a powerful tool that promoted cognition of social inequalities and the power of organization. Students practiced in a safe environment with careful coaching from experienced trainers who facilitated their awareness and solidarity as union members. Powerful chanting of phrases like “hum sub ek hain” (we are all one) promoted solidarity and empowerment. Informal education was critical for women’s perspective transformations regarding gender discrimination.

Kadam Taleem (Leadership Training). Rural female farm workers attended one interactive four-day onsite program at SEWA Academy in Ahmedabad called Kadam Taleem (Leadership Training) that was initiated in 1993 to recruit and train local grassroots leaders. The goals of leadership training are to:

1. Stress the importance of one’s identity and value as a woman
2. Increase group awareness
3. Understand Gandhian ideology
4. Comprehend SEWA’s goals and the place of working class women in Indian society (SEWA, n.d.)

Trainees in Ahmedabad were housed at an offsite lodging facility owned by SEWA and provided daily transportation to SEWA Academy. For local offsite sessions, trainers traveled in vehicles owned by SEWA; out of state sessions required travel by train and overnight lodging. Trainers took all necessary supplies such as charts, graphs, TV, and a video camera to each session. All meals were provided by SEWA.

During kadam taleem women learned how to organize, discuss gender identity, and learn strategies to counter gender inequalities. Encouraged by the instructor, one 30 year old farm worker spoke out her full name: Valiben Naranbhai Choudhri (personal communication, January 28, 2004). Class participants were often extremely hesitant to speak their husband’s name so referred to them as their “mister.” One instructor explained the meaning and strength of a trade union: “individually, they [poor women] cannot demand their rights because they have no union” (J. Vaghella, personal communication, January 29, 2004).

Deep-rooted traditional customs that drained the resources of the poor and restricted women were openly questioned and discussed during class. Instructors promoted alternative socially-equitable solutions to existing issues such as high costs of marriages and dowries; and
gender, religious, caste, and class discrimination. Das (2001) believes that economic growth will weaken the old caste system and lessen the “occupational rigidity” that is so pervasive in India (p. 154). SEWA instructors helped women build interpersonal communication skills so they could speak out against such social injustices and recruit women as SEWA members. Trainees were encouraged to take a leadership role in their communities to initiate social change. As one instructor explained, “If one woman does it, others will follow” (M. Parmar, personal communication, January 30, 2004).

Several SEWA executives and senior staff made periodic presentations to this class to reinforce the importance of civic action. Shaikh, Secretary of SEWA, exhibited confidence and solidarity during a guest presentation by stating, “We can make changes. You are leader sisters (R. Shaikh, personal communication, January 30, 2004).

Most of the trainees had rarely stepped outside of their villages, yet traveled long distances of up to four hours by car to prepare for grassroots leadership. Several class participants became anxious about the enormous task ahead of them, but Shaikh provided reassurance by saying, “You have to be patient. You are a leader… Kadam means “step” (R. Shaikh, personal communication, January 30, 2004). Another guest speaker echoed, “Action is a footstep” (M. Parikh, personal communication, January 30, 2004). Instructors provided practical information such as how to plan and conduct effective meetings, how to gather and recruit SEWA members, and how to provide information about SEWA to community members. Other activities inspired women to build critical thinking skills by describing their lives before and after joining SEWA.

Learning for illiterate participants presented a challenge of recall and retention because of their inability to write notes during class. Instructors facilitated retention by frequently asking attendees to verbally summarize what they had learned at the end of each session. Non-formal instructional strategies such as role-plays, field trips, games, discussions, and case studies also helped to build retention.

Training illiterate women presents challenges but SEWA instructors use interactive learning methods suited to the abilities and contexts of their trainees. Because SEWA does not provide training for every possible instance, grassroots leaders rely upon learning on the job. If leaders are unable to resolve an issue by themselves, they ask their supervisors for advice. As they continue to work leaders become exposed to various gender issues and through experience and guidance from SEWA staff, learn the best strategies for action.

Contributions to Knowledge and Practice

Research results show 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. SEWA Academy reaches out to isolated women within low-income communities of India to provide non-formal and informal training at onsite and offsite locations at no charge to participants. SEWA Academy, one branch of the organization, recruits, trains, and empowers poor women with the help of SEWA trainers who deliver membership and leadership training within urban and rural communities throughout India. In addition, both staff and members at SEWA participate in local, national, and international conferences to spread the results of their efforts towards improving the social, political, and economic status of poor working women in India.
Important implications include leadership capacity within low-income communities, strategies for training illiterate and under-educated working women, knowledge and resources to reach poor women in rural and urban areas, and the results of SEWA Academy’s efforts in empowering low-income women in India. SEWA academy’s innovative training practices promote sustainable development of under-educated adults to help develop critical thinking, social, and political consciousness regarding their socio-economic status. As a result, working women are empowered with the capacity to improve their status in the home and the workplace while also sharing their knowledge with community members through voluntary grassroots leadership to promote national human resource development.

Breaking the cycle of long established gender biases in India will require continued practice and patience among each additional generation of women. Exposure to SEWA Academy’s teachings combined with grassroots leaders’ sustained efforts to bring awareness and empowerment among isolated females throughout India indicate that a non-Western feminist model has the power of sustainable development for low-income working women in India. Scholarly debates continue regarding whether and how low caste and low-income working women can gain access to much needed formal job markets that are critical to the social and economic development of the national workforce in India laboring within informal and unregulated job markets. SEWA Academy provides evidence of practical applications to promote and sustain gender equality in India through learner centered adult education practices. Conclusions recommend that sustained efforts from government, non-government, public, and private sectors are critical for national workforce development in India.

References


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