

Title : THE JOURNEY FROM INSPIRED TO INSPIRING: A Study of the Contributions of Elaben Bhatt and SEWA

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Abstract

Elaben Bhatt was one of the pioneers of women empowerment in pre and post-independence India. To understand her influence on women's empowerment, I began by researching her early life and the motivating factors which shaped her outlook on the position of women in society. I have sourced material from various online platforms, portals, books, and interviews which give me an understanding on her initiatives which influenced & continues to influence millions of women across India.

Elaben Bhatt was a stalwart in women's empowerment in India. She founded the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in 1972. Through this research, I explored the deep impact created by her on women through SEWA. She implemented an all-inclusive strategy covering microfinance, skill development and healthcare. SEWA, under her leadership, provided economic opportunities, fostering self-sufficiency among women in the informal sector. These small-scale enterprises are now successful businesses and employ approximately 2.9 million women in different capacities across all the businesses. This abstract highlights her influence, emphasizing the importance of her empowerment model in addressing the diverse needs of women in India.

Keywords: Self-reliant, Informal, Women's Empowerment, Economic, Women

Introduction:

Elaben Bhatt, born on 7th September 1933, in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, was a prominent social activist and was the founder of the Self-Employed Women's Association. She dedicated her life and work to empowering the lives of women who worked in the informal sector and was a leading advocate for their rights.

Elaben Bhatt's contributions to women's empowerment in India have a significant importance and have led to a great impact on the lives of women working in the informal sector and those marginalized in the society.

This research paper provides detailed insights into the life of Elaben Bhatt, the founding of SEWA and its impact on women working with the association and the wider implications of her work on women's empowerment through SEWA.

Discussion

Elaben's childhood & upbringing – Elaben was born in Ahmedabad. Her father, Mr. Sumantrai Bhatt was a successful lawyer, while her mother, Mrs. Vanalila Vyas was very active in the pre-independence women's movement and was a secretary of the All-India Women's Conference. She was a middle child of three sisters, she spent her childhood in Surat.

Educational background and early influences – She completed her schooling from the Sarvajani Girl High School in 1948 after which she enrolled for her bachelor's in arts degree in English from the MTB College, Surat. Following her graduation, she enrolled in the L A Shah Law College (GLS), Ahmedabad to pursue her degree in Law receiving a gold medal for her work on Hindu Law. Her principles of social activism were highly influenced by Vinobha Bhave, a prominent follower of Gandhiji, during the Bhoodaan Movement.

Formative experiences shaping Elaben's commitment to social change – Elaben started her career by teaching English for a short time at the SNTD college, Mumbai. In 1955 she got the opportunity to join the Textile Labour Association in their legal department. TLA is one of the oldest textile labour unions in Ahmedabad, India. In 1968, she was asked to head the TLA's women's wing. She received the International Diploma of Labour and Cooperatives in 1971 from the Afro-Asian Institute of Labour and Cooperatives, Tel Aviv, Israel.

The Birth of SEWA – While working for the TLA, she became aware of the plight of thousands of female textile workers who worked odd jobs or worked as street vendors, agricultural labourers, or home-based workers to supplement the family income. The state laws existing then did not protect these self-employed women. In 1972, Elaben founded the Self-employed Women's Association with the co-operation of Mr. Arvind Buch, the then president of the TLA with the intent of organizing these women and providing them a platform for advocating for their own rights. Built on the principles of atma nirbharta and the idea that employment is an important dimension of women's empowerment, Elaben envisioned an organization that addressed economic issues for these women and focused on the overall well-being of women in the informal sector. She served as the general secretary of SEWA from 1972 to 1996 where she played a major role in the formation, structuring and establishing the founding principles and philosophies of the organization. (Yadav 2)

SEWA's Organizational Structure – SEWA is organized as a trade union of women working in the informal sectors of industries in India. The organization is structured in such a way that it empowers the members of the organization. It is led by elected leaders who are from the ranks of its members. SEWA works through cooperatives focusing on the sectors of agriculture, street vendors, artisans, and other sectors in the informal economy where these self-employed women work. SEWA has a very strong grassroot presence with local offices which help the members with their specific needs and any challenges they face. SEWA also collaborates with other national and international organizations making a bigger impact in advocating for the rights of women in these informal sectors of employment. (SEWA Website- SEWA's Structure)

SEWA's Philosophy – SEWA's basic philosophy is empowering the members of the organization by giving them a collective voice, representation, and skill-development. It is committed to social and economic justice for these women by addressing the issues that make these women vulnerable. Its policy of skill enhancement & education includes training/improving the vocational skills of the members and financial literacy. It has made great contributions to educating the children of these self-employed women. (Jabaal)

SEWA's Economic Empowerment Initiatives – SEWA's economic empowerment initiatives cover many activities which help the members in availing the necessary benefits for their businesses and everyday lives. The SEWA Bharat Mahila SEWA Bank, formed in 1978 was established with the purpose of providing these self-employed women a supportive and inclusive financial environment. It provides the members with various financial aspects like savings, investments, insurance, pension, and loans wherever and whenever required. (SEWA Website- SEWA's Services)

SEWA's Social and Educational Endeavours – As a part of the social and educational endeavours of the organization, SEWA has been involved in healthcare initiatives which include health camps, awareness programs and improved access to healthcare services for these women. SEWA also runs education and literacy programs for its members and their families and provides support in the form of childcare services or initiatives to facilitate better balance between work and family life. It conducts vocational training programs for its members where they are provided training in various aspects of their work, e.g., women working in the agriculture sectors have been trained to operate heavy agricultural equipment like tractors, hand pumps, etc.(SEWA Website- SEWA's Campaigns and SEWA's Services)

SEWA's Advocacy for Women's Rights – SEWA is actively involved in advocating for women's rights, both at the workplace and in society. The organization is committed to addressing the unique challenges faced by women in this sector and advocating for policies and practices that promote gender equality and empower women economically. SEWA engages in dialogue with policymakers, government agencies, and other stakeholders to influence policies that impact women in the informal sector. This includes participating in consultations, providing input on proposed legislation, and collaborating with other organizations with similar goals.

Elaben Bhatt's leadership philosophy – Elaben, known for her visionary leadership rooted in the principles of justice, equality & commitment to the empowerment of women in the informal sector, strongly believed in the power of collective action. SEWA under her leadership was a platform for women to unite and advocate for their rights. Her leadership philosophy involves acknowledging the value of the work performed by women in the informal sector and advocating for their rightful place in the economy. Bhatt's approach was grounded in practical and sustainable solutions focusing on implementing initiatives that were feasible and had a

lasting impact on the lives of women. She believed that all women must know the importance of communication, networking and self as well as community help. (Khare)

Challenges Faced and Overcome by Elaben Bhatt - Elaben Bhatt faced many challenges in her undertaking of establishing SEWA. The biggest challenge faced was in organizing the members in the form of a union. All the members belonged to different religions and castes, and in that post-independence era, getting them to look beyond their caste and religion, and nurturing in them a feeling of togetherness and sisterhood was difficult. Another task was getting other organisations or individuals to trust and believe in the ability of the SEWA members. The banks and moneylenders, especially, thought that these women were incapable and were not ready to provide them loans. To tackle this problem, Elaben Bhatt established the SEWA Bank, to aid them monetarily. Availing legal recognition for the women working in the informal sector was another task, which was tackled by lobbying with policymakers and participating in legal campaigns to secure rights and recognition for these women.

Accolades & Awards – Elaben Bhatt, for her contributions to the society and her impact on women's empowerment was awarded the following awards and accolades.

1. The Ramon Magsaysay Award for Community Leadership (1977)
2. The Right Livelihood Award for Changing the Human Environment (1984)
3. Padma Shri(1985)
4. Padma Bhushan(1986)
5. George Meany-Lane Kirkland Labour Rights Award, AFL-CIO, US
6. Légion d'honneur, France.
7. Madrid Creatividad Award
8. CGAE Human Rights Award, Spain
9. Indira Gandhi International Prize for Peace, Disarmament and Development(2011)
10. The Freedom from Want Medal by Roosevelt Institute of Netherlands (2012)
11. In addition to this, she has received honorary doctorates from Yale, Harvard, Natal, McMaster and M.S. Baroda and other universities. (Elaben Bhatt, founder and visionary leader of the SEWA movement in India passes away – ICA)

Legacy and Continued Impact – Elaben had an immense influence on Women's Empowerment in India. Her ideologies of self-reliance, equality and justice started a wave of reform in Women Empowerment in India and radically changed the lives of many women who inhabit the rural parts of India. Her global impact can be measured by the work done by her as a member of "The Elders", an international group consisting of independent global leaders working together for peace, justice, human rights, and a sustainable planet. She passed away on November 2nd 2022 in Ahmedabad at the age of 89. (Purwar)

SEWA continues to work on her principles and is thriving as an organization today. SEWA's membership today stands at 2.9 million women members from 18 states across the country working in different trades and speaking diverse languages. SEWA currently operates through 4000 Self-Help Groups, 110 Cooperative organizations, 15 economic federations and 3 producer companies. Their current focus is on climate change and making clean energy available to their members and reducing the carbon footprint of the members of their organization. They are also focusing on the promotion of reuse and recycling through their brands like Geetanjali and Hansiba. She has given many influential speeches and has in many of her interviews discussed the future plans of SEWA tying up with large scale companies to introduce their members to a more formal set up and to connect these companies to the suppliers of the raw materials for their finished products. (Jones)

In a follow-up to the research carried out by me across various articles and publications as listed below in the citations, I also carried out an online survey to understand the perception of Elaben Bhatt and SEWA amongst those known to me. The link to the survey responses is as below. The statistics from the survey carried out are as below.

Conclusion:

Elaben Bhatt's contributions to India and its women have been remarkable through the years. She understood that the growth in the informal sector will have a greater impact not only on the economic growth of the women from the marginalized sections of the society but also on the overall growth of the nation's economy. Her understanding that the mindsets of the policymakers and other influential players in the society was a significant barrier to the economic freedom for these marginalised women. Her legacy continues to inspire global leaders and organizations who are committed to addressing the challenges faced by vulnerable and marginalized communities. Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and

organizing, a sister group co-founded by Elaben under the Hauser Centre for Non-profit organizations, a department of Harvard University produces extensive research on self-employed women at a global scale. The SEWA academy conducts such research at a national level. These research organizations also have a global & national impact on policy making.

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