# Empowering producer women through peer-learning and mentorship

## Case study: Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) Manager Ni School in India

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## Acknowledgements

This case study was commissioned using a template prepared by the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) for the Forest and Farm Facility (FFF), a co-management partnership between the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), IIED and AgriCord. The FFF is supported by the governments of Sweden, Finland, Germany, Norway, the Netherlands and the United States of America, and the European Union. The case study has been reviewed by Isabela Núñez del Prado Nieto of IIED and revised by the author, copyedited by Holly Ashley and laid out by Ali Logan Pang of IIED.

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Mehta, V (2023) Empowering producer women through peer-learning and mentorship. Case study: Self Employed Women's Association's (SEWA) Manager Ni School in India. SEWA, Ahmedabad and IIED, London.

Cover photo: A group of SEWA members developing content for training © SEWA

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# Acronyms

| | |
|---|---|
| IIED | International Institute for Environment and Development |
| IIM | Indian Institute of Management |
| RUDI | Rural Urban Distribution Initiative Multi Trading Company |
| SEWA | Self Employed Women's Association |
| SMS | SEWA Manager Ni School (School for Managers) |
| STFC | SEWA Trade Facilitation Centre |
| WASH | Water, sanitation and hygiene |

# Preface

I had the privilege to be associated with the SEWA Manager Ni School (SMS) as a consultant several years ago, which left me impressed with their ethos and impact on women's lives. However, it was only while I was researching for this case study that I fully comprehended the model and the intricacies that contributed to those impacts. For that, I am grateful to the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) for planning this research and giving me the opportunity to be a part of the same. I am equally grateful to Smita Bhatnagar, senior coordinator at SEWA and head of SMS, for connecting me with IIED and for sharing with me her journey of the last two decades. During that time, SMS was established and has evolved into the agency that it is today. My heartfelt thanks go to all of the core faculty at SMS (Salma Kagadi, Bhavini Mehta, Sharda Parmar, Bharati Rathor and Radhika Maira) for opening up to my questions and uninhibitedly discussing their journeys with SEWA and SMS; these discussions opened up windows in time through which I was able to glimpse the evolution of SMS.

Interviews with stalwarts leading SEWA institutions such as the SEWA Trade Facilitation Centre (Savita ben Patel) and the district-level associations of 60,000 plus women workers (Manjula Ben) were awe -inspiring and memorable. The nitty-gritty of how trainings are organised, and how the transition from members to master trainers occurs was understood in the course of conversations with Jyotsana Ben, Falguni Ben, Dina Ben and Rashmika Ben, among others. A visit to Ganeshpura (Mehsana district) and interactions with Vaali Ben were immensely satisfying and revealing. Animated discussions with SEWA sisters at the Nandasan office (which saw the participation of Gitaben Macwana, Rekha Parmar, Bhumika Prajapati, Aruna Thakur, Dharmishtha Parmar, Mita Solanki, Geetaben, Varsha Ben, Lalita Macwana, Parveen Ghanchi, Naina Ben and Asha Parmar) was enriching, insightful and informative.

My heartfelt gratitude goes to everyone who contributed to the completion of this report, whether through direct information and insights or by provision of facilitative support. It is hoped that the SEWA movement grows from strength to strength and inspires many other people around the globe to adopt models with women's empowerment at the centre.

Varsha Mehta
19 April 2023
Ahmedabad

# Summary

The Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in India is a registered national-level trade union of women workers. SEWA was built over 50 years and has a membership of 2.5 million. The SEWA Manager Ni School (SMS) – meaning 'school for managers' – was established in 2005 to upskill and capacitate members of SEWA. SMS has the unique mandate of building the managerial and leadership capabilities of women microentrepreneurs in the informal economy. This includes women engaged primarily in agriculture and livestock rearing but also weaving, embroidery, tailoring and a range of other occupations.

While SEWA is a national entity, it has a decentralised institutional model with autonomous and independently registered associations, often at the district level. The institutional structure at the district level combines the objectives of economic pursuit and movement building, with a shared core staff and representation of members at all levels of functioning. Identifying training needs happens through representative bodies within the institutional structure. Based on members' needs and demand, training modules are designed and developed by multistakeholder teams constituted within SMS. The process of developing a training module is iterative and long drawn, taking up to six months from forming an idea for a topic to becoming a full-fledged, standardised training module. A cascading model is in place for delivery of training to members at the grassroots, who receive the training for free. The key characteristics of the training include easy access to training for members, using flexible methodologies (including use of audio-visual aids), and post-training support and mentorship.

The SMS core team – consisting of the team leader, faculty and selected master trainers – spearheads the strategic planning and delivery of training at the organisational level. Master trainers are the decentralised SMS faculty at the district level, including thematic leaders from the district committees and other lead trainers who may not be regular employees of SEWA. They undergo intensive training and assessment before acting as master trainers, and draw upon their own experiences, which resonates with the trainees. The mandatory training requirement of each mast trainer includes 20 topics, which are generally completed over two years, in short training courses lasting one to three days.

Over the last two decades, SEWA and SMS have systematically developed an efficient and cost-effective institutional mechanism to build the capacities of women entrepreneurs in the informal economy. It has enabled these women to evolve as professionals with specialised skills and values, and the confidence to establish and lead enterprises with operations of varying scales. SMS has successfully developed a talented team of 7,500 master trainers, who have built the capacities of more than 900,000 grassroots rural workers. A key learning from the SEWA and SMS approach is the importance of adopting a holistic approach to learning, which places equal emphasis on mentoring and providing ongoing support to trainees along with imparting training.

# 1 Introduction

The Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) has a presence in 18 of 28 states of India.[1] Its members are all women workers in the informal economy engaged in a wide variety of occupations. They include manual labourers (such as agricultural labourers, farmers and construction workers), service providers (such as cleaners and domestic workers), home-based workers (including garment workers, incense-stick makers and kite makers), street vendors, and small producers (such as artisans) (ILO 2018).

In Gujarat, the state where SEWA has the longest and most intensive presence, the occupations of most rural women are agriculture and animal husbandry, along with a range of other pursuits, such as agricultural labour, *bidi* (cigarette) rolling and weaving. Traditionally, these are family occupations that the women have grown up with and/or married into, and constitute the largest proportion of village professions in the absence of more lucrative alternatives. Most women are by default microentrepreneurs, but they are bereft of the ownership and authority that accompanies the work. More often than not, women provide unpaid labour and are primary responsibility holders, but they are neither perceived of nor do they identify as entrepreneurs. Working in these informal household enterprises, most women are oblivious of their immense contribution to the rural economy.

SEWA's work with these women usually starts with a SEWA *aagewan*[2] approaching them and sharing information about the movement, its history, values and achievements, and the benefits of membership. There is relatively greater acceptance of SEWA sisters in places where the SEWA brand is now well established, as in Gujarat. However, this was not always the case. The situation could be highly challenging, with the men of the households being approached offering resistance and even opposition, and the *aagewans* were often subjected to abuse and insults.

The greatest challenge that women producers face is the recognition of women as entrepreneurs. Through constant dialogue and ongoing engagement with them and their families, enrolling them as members,[3] assisting them in availing benefits from government programmes, and providing them with training on subjects linked with their professions such as agriculture and animal husbandry, SEWA builds the agency and public visibility of its members. An important factor which contributes to members' empowerment is SEWA's belief and guiding principle which ensures that members do not remain just members but become owners and managers of their own trades.

The other major challenges which women entrepreneurs encounter are in terms of access to markets, finance and information. The latter two are addressed in the course of SEWA's work, but access to markets is something that women themselves negotiate with their spouses and families. This is an area where the results depend largely on the nature of their work, the individual member's drive, and whether SEWA, through its sister organisations, offers trade or trade facilitation services in the commodities produced by the women in the area.

Training and capacity building are at the heart of all SEWA initiatives, starting from the 'member education' module for its members through to the technicalities of production to enterprise management and personality development. The emphasis of capacity-building initiatives is on both professional and personal development of members, as detailed in the following sections. An added advantage is the strength of the institutional networks, including facilitative support for access to loans from SEWA Bank, which is one of the main pillars of the SEWA group of organisations.

[1] SEWA is registered under the Indian Trade Unions Act of 1926. It is open for membership to self-employed women workers all over India. In addition, there are district associations registered under the Societies' Registration Act 1960.

[2] *Aagewan* literally translates as 'leader'. Within the SEWA framework, leaders in all positions are referred to as *aagewans*. It is an all-encompassing term, used for women who are leaders at the village level or above; experts in thematic areas such as agriculture or animal husbandry; representatives selected by members to the *dhandha samiti* (trade committees) and/or the *pratinidhi mandal* (trade council); or associates at the district level, including district coordinators and members who form the core team at the district level.

[3] New members are inducted directly into their respective district associations.

## 1.1 SEWA Manager Ni School: the genesis

Around 2001, in the aftermath of the earthquake in Gujarat, where SEWA was involved in relief and rehabilitation operations, there followed numerous projects with elements of training and skill building. Whereas livelihoods training had always been an integral part of SEWA's activities,[4] a demand to focus more intensively on the capacity building of its members was raised during the annual general meeting in 2004–2005. This led to the establishment of SMS in 2005.

The genesis of this demand came from the fact that the SEWA Trade Facilitation Centre (STFC) had been registered as a not-for-profit company. Although it was owned and managed by SEWA members, they found themselves ill-equipped to understand the legal and managerial aspects of the business operations (for example, one of the directors of the company said that while they were expected to sign off the balance sheet, they did not know how to read and interpret it). Prior to the STFC, the collectives had been registered as cooperatives, which did not entail as much paperwork. However, the executive members of the district cooperatives and federations also pitched in, asking for training of members on basic organisation management functions. Around the same time, SEWA and its district federations had started zero-based budgeting[5] following some financial upheavals which had rocked the organisation. Given the necessity of building its member capacities while also being cost effective, SEWA adopted the cascading training model with in-house faculty and training facilities.

The existence and purpose of SMS was thus born out of the need to constantly upskill and capacitate SEWA's members to pursue economic empowerment, personal growth and social solidarity. At the helm of affairs at the time of SMS's establishment were long-term members and employees of SEWA, who were formerly involved in training and finance functions. They continue to spearhead and lead SMS today. Over two-thirds of all SEWA (and SMS) employees are women who have served in the field, at the village and sub-district levels and the majority of them have been members for 15–20 years.

Over the years, SMS has evolved as the capacity building arm of SEWA, offering vocational and managerial training programmes based on the needs and demands of its members to successfully lead their own individual and collective enterprises. The training helps build a cadre of grassroots managers who are well equipped to face and address the challenges that businesses face. What is unique about SMS is that it focuses on building the leadership capabilities of women microentrepreneurs in the informal economy.

## 1.2 Partnerships and support for SMS

The initial phases of the SMS initiative were funded under a World Bank project. Following a field visit, Dr Sheila Jagannathan from the World Bank Institute advised SEWA to standardise its trainings and provided financial support through the institute for the preparation of training modules along with resource persons. SEWA then partnered with the Indian Institute of Management (IIM) Ahmedabad, wherein two batches of about 20 SEWA members received residential training at IIM, and subsequent support from interns in developing training modules and pedagogies for entrepreneurship development.

Since then, it has benefited from funding and technical support from The GAP's Personal Advancement & Career Enhancement (PACE) programme for women garment workers globally, Walmart and others. The major challenge confronting the trainers at that time was their unease at the difference between their welfare-oriented, easy-going and informal approaches and the notion of training as a business, with emphasis on time management, profit making and financial discipline. That was the first step towards internalising the principles of business management within their own attitudes and behaviours.

Subsequently, a qualitative assessment by Professor Pradip N Khandwalla, a former director of IIM Ahmedabad, categorised SEWA microentrepreneurs into three groups based on their performance. He concluded that 'the most salient differences in demonstrated soft skills between the three groups included the capacity to take and mitigate risks, have a learning orientation, innovate, pioneer a

[4] These trainings focus on livelihoods strengthening and are called *jeevanshalas.*
[5] Zero-based budgeting is a budgeting method in which all expenses must be justified for each new period.

business, network, achieve goals, and be resourceful in tight situations' (Khandwalla 2013). This study identified clear directions for future capacity-building measures with a focus on soft-skills development. As a result, a whole range of vocational, managerial, technological and soft-skills training courses are provided by SMS today.

SMS has collaborated with various organisations in its evolution. Apart from those mentioned previously, it has partnered with organisations including Imago Global Grassroots, Coady International Institute, Indians for Collective Action, SP Jain Institute of Management and Research, and Rai Institute in its efforts to train women from the informal sector in rural and urban areas to become managers, leaders and owners of their enterprises with the necessary vocational, technical and soft skills. In the process, it has also enabled and fortified relationships that SEWA and its members have with private-sector organisations (Shylendra *et al.* 2022: 29).

# 2 About SMS's mentorship and peer-to-peer learning services

SMS's functioning is enmeshed with its parent organisation SEWA. To understand the SMS model, it is important to first understand the structure and functioning of SEWA, which is briefly described in the following sections.

## 2.1 The institutional structure

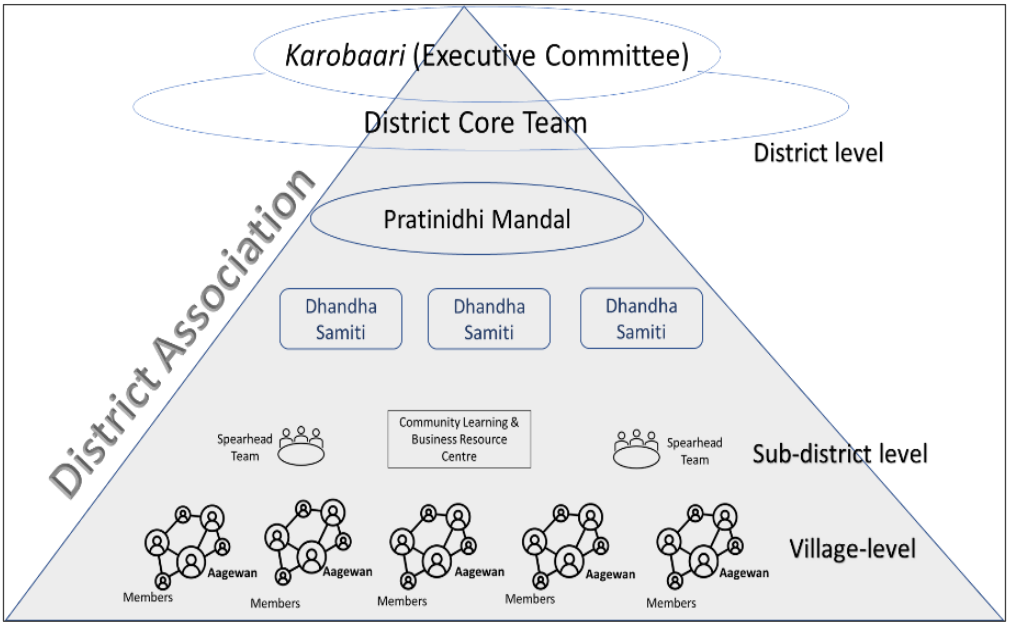
At the district level are independently registered associations, which federate at both state and national levels.[6] It is these district-level associations that members of SEWA are registered with and pay annual membership fees to.[7] The enrolment of new members is an ongoing process as community leaders (*aagewans*) and senior members strive to include more women. There is usually an influx of new members whenever members are seen benefiting from the facilitative and training support provided by SEWA leaders. The district-level association is led by a district coordinator, who manages a team of 6–10 associates, who together constitute the district committee or the district core team (Figure 1). This team is responsible for leading the capacity building of its members, with each team member having a core thematic or functional area of expertise (such as agriculture, animal husbandry, or digital finance and accounting). Every member of the district team is both a member and an employee of SEWA, responsible for providing leadership, imparting skills training, managing project implementation, and being the interface between the village- and state-level leaders and activities of SEWA.

Two types of representative bodies exist at the district level: the *dhandha samiti* (trade committee) and the *pratinidhi mandal* (trade council). Whereas the trade committee is specific to each trade that is practiced by SEWA members in the district, the representative board (also known as the trade council) ensures that members from all geographical areas in the district are represented at the district level and inform its activities and policies. The number of representatives in the representative board at district level is determined by the membership strength, with one representative for every 1,500 members elected for a term of three years. The *kaarobaari* or executive committee consists of 25 individuals from among these representatives.[8]

The institutional structure thus combines the objectives of economic pursuit and aspirational development (through the trade committees) and strengthening SEWA as a member-based organisation. Thus, there are separate mechanisms for business education and institution building, with a shared core staff at all levels of functioning.

[6] This case study does not explore how the national-level federations functions as it is separate to the functioning of SMS.
[7] At the time of this study (February 2023), the annual fee was 10 rupees per member.
[8] To give an example of the numbers involved, the Ahmedabad district association consists of 60,000 members. Its *pratinidhi mandal* therefore has 40 representatives and the executive committee of 25 is elected from among them.

**Figure 1. Diagram of SEWA's membership forums at the district level**




## 2.2 Village-level training

*Aagewans* closest to the village level engage with the members in the village and form 'clusters', with each cluster consisting of 50 members. Typically, each *aagewan* is responsible for 4–6 clusters (200–300 members). These clusters may all be located in a single village or across several villages, depending on the geography, size of the villages, and the membership base. Village-level training for members is conducted by the *aagewans*, with the number of participants in any session ranging from 15 to 20 members. Each training has the following distinguishing features:

**Accessible training content and format:**

- Other than the basic member-education training, all other trainings that are offered are in response to the expressed and/or identified needs of members, with the aim to enhance returns from their economic activities.
- Training sessions are kept relatively short, and include key messages that are repeated several times in different ways. Typically, a session lasts about 1.5 hours, and seldom exceeds two hours. Most training sessions are conducted in the afternoon when members are free to participate. The trainer is a peer and usually comes from the same socioeconomic background as the trainees. While this lends a degree of comfort by itself, it also signals the possibility that the trainees can also aspire to become trainers someday.
- A mix of methods and audio-visual tools are used, including role play, demonstrations, videos, posters and discussions, which provide an opportunity for the trainees to engage more proactively with the content. After the COVID-19 pandemic, SMS has improvised its pedagogies and offers hybrid trainings (a combination of online and offline) as self-learning modules via the SMS online portal.

**Ensuring members have access to training:**

- For members, the training is free and conducted in an informal setting in a village, where resident women are most at ease. The time and venue are mutually agreed upon between the trainer and the trainees (democratic decision-making).
- Trainings are conducted in the local language and dialect, with examples that the trainees can easily relate to.
- The model places the onus on the trainer to impart knowledge and skills to their trainees; they are expected to provide monthly reports in terms of the number of members coached. Members who are unable to join any session are provided with information and coaching on a one-on-one basis by the trainer.

**Designing and developing training modules:**

- The training modules are developed with participation of *aagewans*. All modules are piloted, revised, finalised and continually revisited for further improvement with the involvement of grassroots leaders.

**Offering post-training mentorship:**

- Trainers provide post-training follow-up and hands-on support in the field, as well as ongoing mentorship. In general, this continues until the completion of the production cycle for the commodity/trade which forms the subject of the training.
- In addition to the training and mentoring received from trainers and leaders, members also learn from each other ('sister-to-sister' or peer-to-peer learning).
- Trainees have easy access to trainers, not only for the specific training received, but for all other aspects as well, such as access to government offices or information about ongoing schemes. With the advancement of technology and their familiarity with it, much communication is now done through mobile phone apps, such as WhatsApp. This continued association over time contributes towards building cohesiveness among members. The networking possibilities through SEWA and its leaders also open up new opportunities for its members.

## 2.3 District and subdistrict-level training

At the district and sub-district levels, training is conducted for the *aagewans* by thematic leaders in district teams and/or by the master trainers, who agree on monthly training targets with the SMS Core Team, based on the training plan and their own abilities. These trainings are conducted primarily by the district teams and master trainers from within the district.[9] They are usually conducted at locations within the district, such as in community learning and business resource centres (CLBRCs), or at one of several SEWA offices at block or district levels, depending on the location of trainees and the facilities available at the location.

Master trainers are SEWA members who have undergone rigorous training on all the core topics and who have practiced being a trainer by training others under supervision and in collaboration with senior trainers from SMS. Potential master trainers are identified by either the district core team or the central SMS team while members are undergoing or imparting training. Their performance is reviewed quarterly, with the evaluation based on oral tests, written examinations and training delivery. Based on the results, master trainers are placed in one of three different categories (either gold, silver or green). Those in the gold category receive the highest daily remuneration for their work. Master trainers identify themselves first as *aagewans* and secondly as SMS trainers.

In addition to their role as thematic training leaders at the district level, members of the district team also serve as mentors to village-level *aagewans*. As trainers at SMS, they also conduct training in or outside the state and/or country.

For new topics and emerging issues related to members' occupations, external resource persons are also invited, such as experts from agriculture universities, Krishi Vigyan Kendra (an agricultural extension centre) or dairy experts. The training modules are vetted, and trainers' suitability assessed to ensure that the trainings are fit for purpose and oriented towards building capacities of SEWA members at the grassroots. For all managerial and personal development aspects, the mandate of capacity building rests with experts from SMS, who are based in Ahmedabad, the state capital of Gujarat.

[9] In situations where master trainers are not available within the district or not in adequate numbers, then master trainers from other adjoining districts are invited to carry out the training.

**Figure 2. The training ladder: core training topics for master trainers**

The training ladder

(core training)

The training ladder is a concept that represents the growth of an individual through a series of structured trainings aimed at making her a master trainer who is the key link between the central training team and the community leaders. The aim of these trainings is to internalise key concepts, mould attitudes, and impart knowledge and skills through rigorous practice and feedback.

## 2.4 Identifying training needs and developing modules

Training needs identification happens through both channels within the institutional structure at the district level (trade committees and representative boards). Occasionally, village-level *aagewans* are also in direct contact with the district team for emergent issues.

Training modules on leadership and managerial aspects, the domain of SMS, are centrally designed and developed[10] in a participatory manner by the SMS faculty along with a team of master trainers and experts in the field. The process of developing a training module is iterative and takes time.

Initially, when SMS began to standardise its training and develop training modules, it took up to two years to finalise each training module, although that timescale has now reduced to about six months. SMS has introduced the concept of a 'training ladder' for its master trainers with three broad categories within it: core training, specialised training and vocational training. The last category is specifically for members of the trade organisations that have been established under the SEWA umbrella, including the Rural Urban Distribution Initiative (RUDI) Multi Trading Company, Kamla and STFC.[11] The core category consists of 20 training courses with a total duration of 34 days, as summarised in Figure 2. Completing all the training sessions outlined therein is mandatory for any member to qualify as a master trainer and takes almost two years, with about three days every month. This includes receiving training inputs, imparting training, performance assessment, feedback and repetition of the cycle until the trainer has perfected the delivery of training, which includes knowledge, information, skills and pedagogy. In addition, depending on their own occupation and/or abilities and interests, members can also undergo specialised training in their subject areas, as indicated in Table 1.

[10] There are other teams in SEWA responsible for technical trainings related to processing and trade etc.
[11] RUDI is a multi-trading company that procures and trades food staples and spices. Kamla is the brand name for the food-processing arm of SEWA for catering, restaurants and bakeries. STFC specialises in tailoring and making garments.

**Table 1. Training topics for master trainers relating to marketing and selling**

| Training topic | Duration of programme |
|---|---|
| Rural marketing skills | 3 days, 8 hours |
| Marketing process | 1 day, 4 hours |
| Selling process | 1 day, 4 hours |
| Customer service | 1 day, 4 hours |
| Product demonstration | 1 day, 4 hours |
| Visual merchandising | 1 day, 4 hours |
| Store layout | 1 day, 4 hours |

While SMS is responsible for the design, development and delivery of managerial trainings, there are other organisations under the SEWA umbrella which specialise in trade-specific training, including:

- Sewa Trade Facilitation Centre (specialises in tailoring and garment making)
- Shree Shramshakti Vividhlakshi Mahila SEWA Sahkari Mandali Limited (specialises in weaving)
- Sewa Gram Mahila Haat (brand name Kamla; specialises in food processing), and
- RUDI Multi Trading Company (specialises in retail marketing, provides training on agro-processing).

An innovative initiative of SMS is the digitisation of selected content from the pool of training modules developed over the years. Key messages from some of these are compressed and disseminated to master trainers and grassroots members in the form of audio clips, short videos, and attractive e-posters, which serve as a ready reckoner for them. This saves the use of both time and data, while the use of imagery is more engaging.[12]

## 2.5 The training team

SMS core team consists of the senior coordinator who leads SMS, five faculty members or training coordinators, and eight master trainers. Together, this core team is responsible for spearheading and strategic planning at the organisational level, developing training modules, testing, revising and finalising training modules, and preparing audio-visual training material. Master trainers form the decentralised SMS faculty at the district level, including *aagewans* from the district committee and other lead trainers who may not be regular employees of SEWA.

SMS's current pool of 7,500 active master trainers regularly conduct training courses in topics such as business planning, financial management, leadership training, and micro enterprise development. Trainers are constantly striving to expand the repertoire of courses that they can offer and improve their performance, which is assessed quarterly by the SMS core team.

The decision to send master trainers for further training to Ahmedabad is taken by the concerned district association. Similarly, if SMS wishes to engage the services of any master trainer, it puts in a request for her to the concerned district association, and also pays service charges to the same. There are set rates for different grades of master trainers, based on their knowledge and quality of training delivery.

# 3 Outcomes and learnings

It has been 50 years since SEWA was established and SMS has been formally spearheading its training initiatives for over 17 years. Many new members are the third or fourth generation relatives of SEWA's initial membership. SEWA now has 2.5 million members and rising. Annual membership renewal rate is between 80 and 90%, which is an indicator of how highly its members value SEWA, primarily due to its capacity-building measures and networking initiatives. Similarly, there is a growing cadre of empowered women leaders at the grassroots, who are enabling the expansion of SEWA membership to new areas.

There are many anecdotal stories and case studies that have been documented and shared within SEWA – these abound across occupations, geographies and age groups. There are stark differences

[12] For more information, see www.sewamanagernischool.org

visible between SEWA members and non-members, in terms of how they organise their work and responsibilities, and in areas such as their personal development, communication skills, and interpersonal skills. SEWA has for long been evaluating changes in women's lives using a set of 11 questions, which measure progress through self-assessment on criteria such as employment, income, assets, nutrition, health, housing, childcare, organised strength, leadership, self-reliance and education (see Box 1).

**Box 1. SEWA's set of 11 questions for self-assessment**
Have we created employment?
Have we increased income?
Have we ensured better health and nutrition?
Have we safeguarded health?
Have we provided childcare?
Have we created or improved housing?
Have we generated assets?
Have we increased our organisational strength?
Have we generated workers' leadership?
Have we become more self-reliant, individually and collectively?
Have we learnt to read and write?

## 3.1 Impact: numbers of members trained

The scale of outreach and impact is visible from the number of members trained and the number of active master trainers. Through its work, SMS has successfully built the capacities of more than 1.8 million members, trained by a pool of 7,500 talented master trainers (Table 2). Trainings have been delivered in India and neighbouring countries of Afghanistan, Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Bhutan, covering a wide range of areas including leadership, managerial, technical and vocational skills, banking, agribusiness, textiles, garments, food processing, renewable energy, water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), health and nutrition, ecotourism and insurance.

**Table 2. Number of women trained by SMS**

| Sector-wise training programmes (2005–2022) | Master trainers trained | Trainees |
|---|---|---|
| Building management skills (including soft-skills development and retail management) | 3,900 | 700,000 |
| Textiles, garments and weaving | 1,300 | 100,000 |
| Digital and financial literacy | 500 | 750,000 |
| Agriculture, animal husbandry, dairy management, seed banking | 900 | 200,000 |
| Food processing | 400 | 20,000 |
| WASH | 300 | 40,000 |
| Ecotourism | 200 | 10,000 |
| **Total** | **7,500** | **1,820,000** |

Source: Based on information provided by SMS (2022)

## 3.2 Lessons learnt

There have been many lessons learnt during SMS's long journey as it has built the capacity of SEWA's members and evolved as an institution. Through an iterative process of feedback, reflection and action learning, many of the lessons have been integrated into organisational systems and functioning and have become internalised in the model described in this case study. The most significant learnings include:

- **Trainees value receiving certificates:** This is critical for mobilising new members and their enrolment in fee-based courses. Trainees are keen to receive certificates as recognition of their newly gained knowledge and skills and for use in job applications. It is also important for SMS to be able to provide such certificates for establishing the credibility of the courses it offers.
- **A holistic approach to learning is essential:** The emphasis on mentoring and providing ongoing support to trainees is as important – if not more so – than imparting training per se. In terms of programme planning and budgeting, capacity-building plans need to take into consideration the time and resource requirements necessary for building a comprehensive 'learning ecosystem', where trainers are approachable and available to provide ongoing support to trainees for the necessary duration.
- **For enhancing outreach and expanding its activities** in new areas, it is important to document and showcase the impact of SMS's work, especially through audio-visual media.

Going forward, SEWA intends to build lateral links across SEWA's collectives for cross-learning by sharing market information, as well as improving supply-chain management, sales and marketing, risk management, and strengthening the governance of these collectives (Shylendra *et al.* 2022).

**Box 2. Jyotsana Ben's story: from part-time cook to computer teacher**

Jyotsana Ben is delighted when passers-by wave and tell her how grateful they are for what she taught them, helping them land jobs at stores or in offices. She recognises some faces, but having trained some thousands over the years, it is hard to recollect them all. Having played a meaningful role in so many lives and lived a life of dignity, Jyotsana Ben is a contented soul and a committed member of SEWA. She is recognised as a top-category master trainer in Ahmedabad district.

Fifteen years ago, Jyotsana Ben was working as a temporary cook after losing her job with a private company. She joined SEWA after she was introduced to the organisation by some acquaintances. Soon after, she enrolled for a SEWA basic computer training course at Sheth CK High School in Sanand, and since then, Jyotsana Ben has not looked back. She paid a nominal fee for the one-month basic course and while she was still learning, Jyotsana Ben was asked if she could manage the computer centre temporarily as the current manager was taking leave. Subsequently, Jyotsana Ben received a 50% subsidy from SEWA for a four-month training at a professional computer centre in Ahmedabad. She received a certificate of successful completion and access to a network of experts who she could reach out to while training students back at the SEWA centre.

As she learnt, Jyotsana continued to offer a wider range of courses to students at the centre, such as Tally (an accounting software used for small and medium businesses), desktop publishing, hardware basics and web designing). In the process, she deepened her own understanding and developed detailed training notes. She soon became a well-known figure in the area, so much so that teachers from nearby schools also used to approach her for advice or to pick up new skills.

From 2009 to 2017, Jyotsana Ben continued to work as a computer teacher. In 2013, she was awarded the Champaben Paniben Paritoshik trophy by SEWA, in recognition of her excellence in training. During 2017, she started maintaining the membership database for the SEWA district association, which is linked to the main SEWA Management Information System.

Jyotsana Ben also still provides training and maintains a record of all trainings in the district. As a master trainer par excellence, she has had opportunities to travel to other states and cities, including Sikkim, Lucknow, Indore, Delhi and Meghalaya. Her ambition is to deliver the training in English, and she has started making efforts for the same.

# 4 Concluding findings

Over the last two decades, SEWA and SMS have systematically developed an efficient and cost-effective institutional mechanism to build the capacities of women entrepreneurs in the informal economy, enabling them to evolve as professionals with specialised skills, values and the confidence to establish and lead enterprises with operations of varying scales. This is evident in the variety and multiplicity of initiatives that have mushroomed under and alongside the SEWA umbrella. A systematic impact assessment study which includes data from members' self-assessments based on SEWA's 11 questions is being planned and maybe available soon.

# References

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