

Women, Water and Work

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Capacity Building, Water Harvesting, Sustainable Livelihood

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ABSTRACT: (9 pt)

Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) is a trade union working for improving the conditions of poor self-employed women. It was established in 1972 and has been successfully serving the poor community through organizing, capacity building, women empowerment, social security and poverty alleviation programmes. Today it functions in 14 districts of Gujarat State and 14 States in India with a membership base of 1.75 million. Out its total membership, nearly 2/3rd members belong to the rural sector and so majority of SEWA's activities has been in organising the grassroot level. SEWA works for accomplishing two goals: Full employment and Sustainable living for its members. With its profuse expertise in working with the poor members, SEWA has identified certain elements, which form the basis of its ideology. They are (a) collective and organized strength (b) capital formation (c) capacity building and (d) social security.

The paper discusses how SEWA initiated the water campaign in 1994 following the demand of its members. It further discusses how the integrated water campaign also includes land and water management activities including watershed development as the major occupation of a large number of SEWA's members is agriculture. The water campaign also includes sanitation. Following the climate crises, the members are also educated on the effects of climate change and the changing rainfall patterns and strategies to cope with it.

The paper sums up on SEWA's experience with women, water and work and its recommendations at national level.

ABOUT SEWA

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CURRENT MEMBERSHIP

SEWA has a membership base of 1,735,833 women worker in nine states of India. The majority of SEWA's members 919,712 live in the state of Gujarat in northwestern India.

THE PROBLEM

SEWA started its water campaign at the demand of its rural members who felt that water scarcity was the stopping their development. Women and water are closely interrelated, as women are the main users of the local water sources. In interior part of some villages of rural Gujarat, women still have to spend up to 3-4 hours a day during summer to fetch water. As a result, the health of their entire family suffers because the water is often of an inferior quality. Women lose valuable time and energy that could have been used for income generating activities

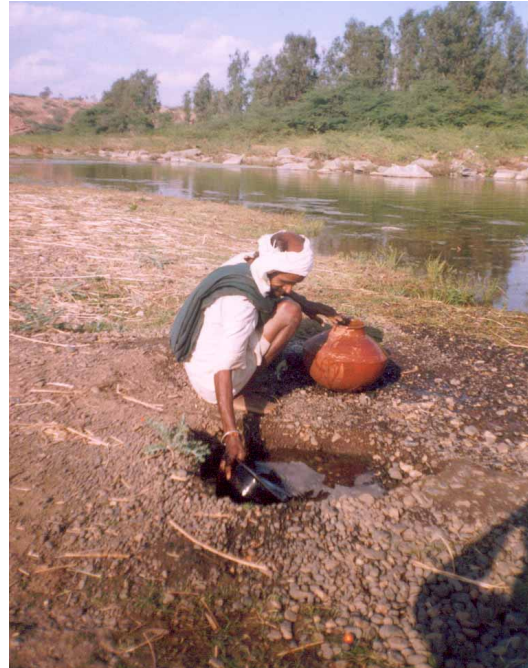


Figure 1 Problem of water

Recall the women of Datarna village in Patan district of Gujarat, “During summer we hardly slept as we had to collect our drinking water from the small virdas (shallow pits in the pond), each of which would take an hour to fill up with a pot of salty water. This would go on for the entire night; during the day the water would evaporate immediately. There were always quarrels over water.”

“When the tanker from water board brings water it is all chaos. People pull and push and fight, beat each other with water pots.” Hasiben Ramsibhai Thakar of Ranmalpur village of Patan district of Gujarat



Figure 2 Nursery

THE WATER CAMPAIGN

The SEWA Water Campaign was launched in 1994. The Campaign's focus is on integrating women, water and work by mobilizing women to manage local water resources, which simultaneously enhances their income and creates new economic opportunities. The campaign seeks to give poor women access to reliable and safe water supply and to build their capacity to become owners and managers of the local water supply. It also promotes local level awareness about water resources, their use and management for drinking and irrigation purposes. In recent years, many communities in Gujarat have come to rely on piped water schemes or tanker truck delivery for their drinking water. Unfortunately, these external water sources are often critically unreliable and expensive. Thus, to promote internal solutions to communities' water problems, SEWA's Water Campaign focused intensively on water harvesting to ensure sustainable livelihood for its members in their traditional occupation and also reviving traditional water sources.

SEWA initiated participatory micro-watershed development projects through its Watershed Development Teams as a part of the Integrated Land and Water Management Campaign. SEWA worked directly with the Watershed Committees (WCs) to plan and implement village-level soil and water conservation activities.

The campaign is build around three main strategies:

- Water harvesting,
- Building community capacity to manage and maintain water systems
- Education and awareness building.



Figure 3 – Gramsabha



Figure 4 – Awareness Rally

The SEWA's Water Campaign has encouraged women to successfully construct plastic-lined ponds and roof rainwater harvesting tanks. Repairing unused wells, desalting of tanks, and building of check dams are other activities. Women have formed water committees and set up water funds for the maintenance of community water structures. In some areas, women have taken the lead in water management and trained as **'barefoot technicians'** to repair and maintain hand pumps.



Figure - 5 Hand pump Repairing work

The results of SEWA's Campaign are tangible. Women have benefited from the local opportunities generated and are employed in artisan work, handicrafts, gum collection and salt manufacturing in naturally hostile terrain. Their productivity has increased, which in turn has led to enhanced incomes and increased savings. Women's health has improved and there is little migration. Safe water has resulted in safe motherhood, safer childbirth and lower infant mortality, increasing the social security

of the mother and child. Augmenting local water sources has also ensured food and fodder security. SEWA's Water Campaign shows that future water sector activities must build on the collective organized strength of women workers and water users, facilitate capital formation at the grassroots level, build the capacity of women's organizations, and promote social security to fight disease and disaster.



Figure -6 Training - Technical Trainings Water testing & Handpump Repairing

A SEWA member speaks, "It takes so long to get water, where is the time to take up income generating activities? Irrigation is important, but first we want drinking water for ourselves and our cattle. If we get water closer to our homes, we can undertake animal husbandry, craftwork or other income generating activity. How can tired and weak women even think of undertaking any income generating activity?"



Figure 7 Income generative activities (Nursery & Salt farming)

OBJECTIVE OF THE WATER CAMPAIGN:

- Access to clean drinking water is the primary right of every human being as it is basic necessity of life, livelihood, health & progress.
- Creation of new water resources
- Revival of old dry local water resources
- Up gradation of water management tools
- Ownership of water resources for women
- Alternative employment option for women in Arid areas
- Development of sustainable resources for natural disaster prone villages

DEMANDS & MESSAGE:

Demands : We want to develop sources of drinking water in every village. Local women should have control over and manage our water sources. We want to collect and save rain water.

Message : Clean water is our basic right, we cannot live without water, without water we cannot be healthy, our employment is severely affected because of lack of water, we migrate with our families and animals, leaving home and health, because without water we cannot survive.

IMPACTS OF THE WATER CAMPAIGN

The water campaign has had a large scale and significant impact on the quality of the local water supply: almost **3957** roof rainwater harvesting structures have been built; **73** community tank, **225** village ponds renovation and **171** wells have been cleaned and recharged (upgrading and installing lock stopper pulley); **5000** soak pits are being used by the communities, **6** plastic lined ponds have been constructed; grassroots women have taken over the operation and maintenance of 1 piped water supply scheme that serves **4** villages, **21** washing ghats, **3** bathing ghats, **28** cattle trough and **2366** latrines have been constructed. In addition, more than **25,000** women participated in training and awareness programs on saving water and hygiene. **700** Water Committee exists and are responsible for the coordination and other water related issues at the village level. Since 1999, every year barefoot women technicians repair and/or maintain **3848** handpumps



Figure 8. Well with Pully



Figure 9. Cattle trough

“SEWA initiated ‘water movement’ in the villages. The causes of problems were found out. If the hand pumps in the villages are out of order, who bothers to repair them? Women being illiterate could not do much and had to tolerate the inconvenience and carried on household responsibilities bearing the strain of fetching water.

SEWA coordinated with the government department and organised training’s for women for hand pump repairing. In Vata village, the trained women mechanics went to repair the hand pump. Men in the village mocked at them. But when women opened the hand pump, repaired it, fixed it again, and water started coming, the men were flabbergasted they could not look eye to eye with women. This is the capacity of women and society must recognize it”.

Jashiben Amrabhai Parmar, Sabarkantha district, Gujarat.



Figure 10. Roof Rain Water Harvesting Tank

As a result of the community and individual tanks constructed, Total **8,17,80,000** liters of water is being stored in the individual and community tanks alone. This also provided employment to the masons and labourers for construction work and they earned an income of Rs. **1.9 crore**

“Water has always been a problem in our village. Each household made shallow pits or virdas for themselves. Women collected the water. During the night, the men would go with them for protection and during the day children would come with them so children would miss their classes. This went on for many years.

The year SEWA started working in our village; we used to go to drought relief sites because it was a drought year. At that time, we used to go to a nearby village, Eval to fetch water. Then the Sarpanch—elected village leader—applied for water tankers from the government. We got the tankers but when the tanker would come there always would be fights.

Then SEWA initiated the water campaign and introduced the concept of rainwater harvesting. Now, there are 20 roof rainwater-harvesting tanks in the village and the rainwater that we could harvest solved part of our problems. Now we can work during the day, we don’t have to leave our houses in the night to fetch water. Our lives have improved a lot.”

Dohiben Ajabhai Ahir, Craft worker and SEWA Grassroots leader



Figure 11 Craft Work

These short-term impacts have improved the quality of life of the rural poor in a number of ways and have contributed to SEWA's goal of achieving economic self-reliance for the poor. Specifically, the water campaign has the following long-term impacts:

- The quality of the local water supply has improved; hence, women need to spend less time and energy on fetching water. Since, the water campaign is combined with micro-enterprise development women were able to use the time saved for income generating activities. In addition, women's drudgery of fetching water decreased and the health situation of her household improved.
- The capacity to cope with drought periods have improved and families no longer need to migrate in search of water.
- Women have grown from mere users of the local water supply into owners and managers of the local water supply. This transformation has been possible because the water campaign always focused on building the capacity of the women, increasing their self-confidence by actively engaging them in all kind of activities, and improving gender relations in favour of the women.

INTEGRATED LAND AND WATER MANAGEMENT

In the dry, desert and drought prone areas, agriculture is risky due to insufficient and irregular rainfall. The small & marginal farmers are forced to sell away land or work as labourers. The frequent droughts, saline land compounds, agriculture and related activities further. In order to strengthen the major, primary occupation, SEWA has initiated ILWM activities covering 40,000 small and marginal farmers in 400 villages.

Lack of moisture at the root zone is the main limiting factor for agricultural productivity. Different activities are undertaken for land improvement which include farm bunding for soil and moisture conservation and reduce salinity in soil, Check dam and other water structure for rain water harvesting for the minor irrigation. Farm ponds for supplementary irrigation in dry period. Land leveling is a practice in agriculture whereby the land slope is brought to almost nil (0.2%) by cutting the areas of higher elevation to lower elevation. Land leveling will help to check on the wastage of rainwater during the monsoon. Other activities include construction and repairs of check dam and recharging of the water structures.



Figure 11



Figure 12, Farm Pond

SANITATION

Sanitation in rural Gujarat, is perhaps one of the most neglected areas. It wouldn't be uncommon to find a number of houses in a village without latrines and bathrooms. The question of sewerage system naturally doesn't arise. Ancient practices of going out in the fields continue even to this date.

SEWA Water Campaign has constructed more than 1000 toilets in the rural areas. Trainings on creating and raising awareness on hygiene are also done in the villages.



Figure 13, - Sanitation



Figure 14, – Sock pits

CLIMATE CHANGE

Over the last few years, the rainfall pattern has changed. There is a delayed monsoon followed by flooding and also less and irregular rainfall. It is the poor farmer who is affected most by the effects of climate change. Availability of drinking water has become a major concern due to receding water table. SEWA undertakes the various activities like educational programmes to increase awareness of climate change issues, organizing national level policy dialogues, identifying mitigation and adaptation policies, organizing round tables to equip the communities to stand in the scenario of climate change and global warming.

THE BLUE FUND

As a result of the Millennium Water Campaign, A greater number of rural women now have access to water regularly and without having to travel long distances. As a result of this time saved, economic activities have been developed in areas such as salt farming, forestry and artisan work. Portions of the income generated from these enterprises have been pooled as a revolving fund, the Blue Fund, whereby loans, Blue Credit, will be disbursed for the members livelihoods and other water related activities, including household small-scale roof rainwater harvesting tank, small-scale farm water retention and bunding, setting up village water and other enterprises and reconstructing village wells with lock stopper pulleys. This fund is known as the Blue Fund and the loans disbursed, as Blue Credit.

SEWA'S EXPERIENCE:

- It is necessary to give equal wightage to community needs as well as family needs of water. This implies that individual water tanks and rain water harvesting systems should be facilitated.
- Women are worst effected in the situation of water shortage. Only they should be developed as owners and managers of water resources.
- Capacity building of women in water management can give best rewards. This would also lead to socio-cultural empowerment of women. In SEWA's experience, women can also be developed as water technicians. This can solve problem of repair and maintenance of water equipments; and can also become source of revenue for them.
- Water management can be handled by village development committees and SHGs of women engaged in water related activities.
- Water Finance is usually considered in the context of huge water projects, distributions and management. Usual focus is on urban areas. There is need to put greater emphasis on water issues related to poor; particularly in the context of women.
- Over the years, SEWA has been working to provide access to clean drinking water for its members in the rural areas and access to water for agriculture. Access to drinking water near to the house is available to the members. However, what needs to be studied is whether sufficient and good quality water is available to the communities. Sufficient water means that the communities have access to water for sanitation, in the fields and to maintain a good hygiene.
- Availability of water near the house has improved over the years in the rural areas of Gujarat. However, it is restricted to a few sources within the village. Eg. One handpump within the village provides access to about 100 families in the village. This means that the women still have to spend time in collecting water. Therefore there is a need to ensure that water is available at the time and place where it is needed to ensure effective utilisation of time for livelihood related activities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ✚ The state has to recognize and enshrine the right to water as a human right that entitles everyone to safe, adequate, and physically accessible water for personal and domestic uses.
- ✚ Clear financial allocations for the following:
 - capacity building, gender sensitization and community management for grassroots communities (priority for women), government, NGOs and other stakeholders in the water sector
 - awareness camps mostly at the grassroots level on issues relating to degradation of environment with a focus on water
- ✚ building local water source structures and its distributive systems
- ✚ Local communities should own, control and manage their water resources, in which women's participation should be at all levels decision making, implementation and management.
- ✚ Local water resources should be built and strengthened by creating new catchments and using the existing ones such as roof rain water, spring water, conservation and augmentation of water resources (old wells, tanks and ponds).
- ✚ A multi-source approach should be adopted for domestic and drinking water supply.
- ✚ All water policies and programmes (state and the national level) should be examined from the gender perspective and provisions made to address gender differentiation and social inequalities among different communities.
- ✚ Wherever women's groups and women's water user's organizations are effective in managing local water resources, the state should develop a long term partnership and not a annual contract and tender system.
- ✚ There should be a holistic approach to water resource management with a view to coordinate among different departments such as watershed, drinking water, agriculture, forestry and

environment, health, rural development and urban development. Drinking water department may take the lead in coordination.

- ✚ Special attention need to be given to sanitation and hygiene integrating the component of safe drinking water.
- ✚ Appropriate representation from civil society, particularly women's organizations working in the area of water in decision-making bodies of water management at the state and the national level.
- ✚ Establishment of National Water Resource Centers, easily accessible to all stakeholders.
