



Video as a Means of Training and Organising: The Experience of SEWA

by Namrata Bali

The **Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA)** in India was established in 1972 with the purpose of organising poor and self-employed women. Since its establishment, it has organised women into trade unions and cooperatives to fight for fair wages, improvement of legal protection for women workers, and the improvement of women's access to materials and market.

Other than organising women to fight for their rights, SEWA provides supportive services to its members such as the SEWA Bank which provides loans to its members, childcare services, community health services and legal aid. Video SEWA is part of the SEWA Academy which coordinates and implements the training activities of SEWA.

Video SEWA was established in 1984 as a means to provide training to the members of SEWA and to motivate, mobilise and strengthen the existing membership of SEWA through the use of video recordings and tapes.

SEWA's organising efforts often begin with worker's education classes. These generally involve one week of training and discussions in which the goal is to raise awareness among a particular trade group of self-employed women workers.

The one week training usually begins with a session in which the participants introduce themselves - their names, where they live and where they work. During this session, each participant has to repeat the names of at least five colleagues. This whole session is recorded on video tapes which are shown to the participants on the next day. At first, on seeing themselves on the screen, the women would burst out laughing. Then a self-evaluation will start in which the participants will observe the way they stand, the way they introduce themselves next time. The video encourages them to perceive and motivate them to think.

During this one week training, the women workers would also have a chance to learn from their leaders on the video. They would see a number of SEWA organisers and leaders who have, through their own struggles, overcome social and economic difficulties and succeeded to organise unions or cooperatives and emerge to become leaders. After watching

this video, the participants would analyse and bring out the qualities of a group leader.

Understanding the strength and power of collective action comes slowly to the grassroots women who participate in the training of SEWA. For many, it is a completely new idea. Videos which record the demonstrations of the women workers, such as poor women marching on the streets of Ahmedabad chanting their demands, would raise the spirit, inspire confidence and solidarity and illustrate the power of collective action.

Once we took this tape of the garment workers' procession to Lucknow where we are organising the women who do *chikan* embroidery. They are the worst paid that I have seen anywhere and they are Moslem. We did some training with them and talked about organising, coming out of their homes and not wearing *purdah*. On the last day, we showed this tape to them. They were so excited that they jumped up to plan out the route of their own procession. In reality, they were nowhere near the stage where they could take out a procession, but this enthusiasm was helping them to get organised. When women actually see that



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others like them have succeeded through organising, it makes a really big difference.

Video activities have also proved very helpful in supporting other organising work, especially on legal actions.

Self-employed women workers often have no formal employer-employee relationship.

They must, therefore, turn to the courts to settle their disputes with their contractors or to establish their rights to a minimum wage. In these cases, the self-employed women workers have to attend the court hearings and to give evidence, and the outcome often depends solely on the women's testimony.

However, the atmosphere in the court is very intimidating for the SEWA members. The lawyers try to cut their evidence into pieces and call them liars. This is very difficult for the women to deal with and they sometimes change their statements. In these cases, videos are used to prepare the women workers for court hearings. For example, when a group of *bidi* workers (women who roll the native cigarettes) were preparing to testify in court, a mock court with a judge, witnesses, plaintiff and defence lawyers, a bailiff and a court

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audience was set up. The proceedings were recorded on tape which was seen and reviewed by the women who had to testify. The SEWA lawyer then had a discussion with the women. This helped the women a lot as the process was very effective in building their confidence and in preparing them to stand up for themselves in court.

Watching video tapes helps SEWA members to feel a connection with a larger movement. The tapes give members of SEWA an opportunity to see and understand issues pertaining to their own and other women workers. For example, the issues of piece rate workers are similar everywhere and in different trades. Tapes produced by SEWA convey this effectively.

Seeing women like themselves who become leaders in the movement help new members of SEWA to feel more connected to the movement as they identify with women on SEWA tapes. Some village women watched an interview with Chandaben, a used clothes dealer and a senior SEWA organiser. They were delighted to see that even Chandaben takes snuff and speaks very quickly like they do. Moreover, they are delighted to see that women like themselves are leaders.

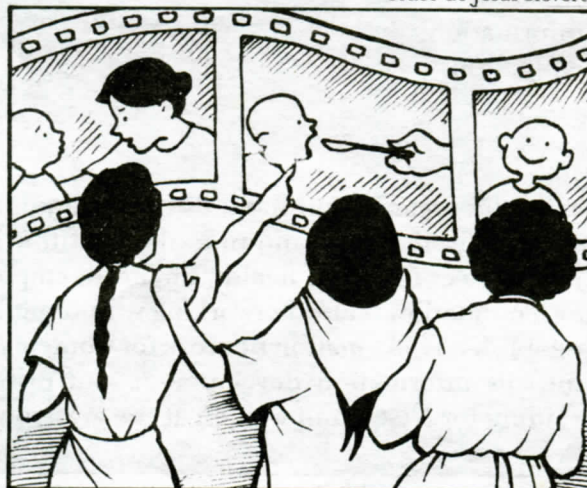
Some video tapes of SEWA are made to fulfil more formal training. For example, in SEWA's health and childcare programs, a tape that explains the causes of

diarrhea and the way to prepare the oral rehydration solution is regularly used. SEWA members, many of whom are illiterate, have also gained valuable knowledge from video tapes on how to build a smokeless stove, reason and training of immunisation. SEWA trainers themselves are involved in the design and production of their training videos as the tapes fulfil their needs more precisely than outside materials ever could. Videos produced by the trainers help to reinforce the identification of the members and the organisation. Video SEWA members, that is, the producers of the videos of SEWA also help in leading and facilitating group discussions and programs in which their tapes are used. In this way, the producers of SEWA's videos become involved in and are responsible for the impact of their work.

Since 1984, Video SEWA has produced countless tapes and more than a hundred programs of organising, training and advocacy. These tapes reached villagers and slum dwellers in Gujarat as well as policy making in Delhi and Washington. Gradually, video has become an

integral part of SEWA's activities and also for all the ongoing work. For women workers and the members of SEWA, SEWA tapes are a source of information as well as inspiration.

Grace de Jesus-Sievert



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