Informal Women Workers lead COVID-19 Recovery in India

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The Informal Economy in India

93% of total workforce and 94% of female workforce is informal

Contribution of the informal economy:

- 50% of India’s GDP
- 55% of national savings
- 47% of exports
Informal Economy: Nature & Characteristics

- No work and income security
- No social security, social protection – insurance, sick leave, maternity leave, child care
- Few laws, poor enforcement
- No fixed employer – employee relationship; no work security
- Large segment are self-employed
- No voice, visibility – uncounted, undercounted, undervalued
- Overlap between informality, poverty and gender
The Self-Employed Women’s Association

• National trade union of 2.1 million informal women workers, in 18 states
• Founded in 1972 by Ela Bhatt in Ahmedabad, India
• Inspired by the values of Mahatma Gandhi
• Organises women through joint strategy of union and cooperatives
• Formed 150 women’s cooperatives and collectives
• Promoted more than 5000 membership-based organisations
SEWA Cooperative Federation: an enterprise support system

110
Cooperatives promoted

300,000
Informal women workers impacted

6
Sectors of work

Capacity building · Business development · Market linkages · Communications · Research & Policy Action · Digital inclusion: exploring platform cooperatives
Major Findings from the COVID Studies

At member level

- 70% Lost livelihood and 65% reduction in income
- 82% Faced financial crisis and Food security
- Lack of access to health resources
- Loss of lives and livelihood, specially during 2nd wave of COVID
- Vaccine hesitancy among members

At Cooperative Level

- **Agriculture Sector**: Crop sold out at very low rate, supply chain disruption, sold produces are very low rate
- **Service Sector**: Reduce demand for service cooperatives, workspace closed, lack of public transport,
- **Manufacturing and handicraft sector**: Difficulty in procuring any raw materials, Raw material and transportation costs increased, Difficulties in delivering raw material to Home-based workers
- **Finance sector**: A strong risk of defaulting, non-payment of loans, affecting cash flow of enterprises, 12% increase in overdue loans, Volume of withdrawals from the bank increased
Actions taken by the Cooperatives

- Livelihood support to over 50 informal workers through mask & sanitizer production
- Negotiation with employers for salaries; One month salaries through Cooperative Reserve Fund
- Distribution of nutritious food through childcare centers
- COVID Insurance Policy developed by Insurance Cooperative
- COVID-19 Awareness through Whatsapp groups, SMS, conference call
Our Emergency Response

SEWA Cooperative Federation is one of the many social entrepreneurs/initiatives on the World Economic Forum’s listing of Top 50 COVID-19 Last Mile Responders.

Health
- 884 Community Health Kits
- 2.6 Lakhs Masks Distributed
- 34,356 Health Kits distributed
- 5070 Sanitary Packs
- 674 Teleconsultation Calls with doctors facilitated
- 132,976 Informal workers and their household insured during COVID 19
- 587,714 Women informed about social protection schemes

Food
- 165,107 Ration Kits distributed
- 5.9 Lakh Cooked meals distributed through childcare centers and SEWA centers
- 8 Business pivots enabled for revenue and outreach stabilisation
- INR 10 Mil. Working Capital Support to Social Enterprises
- 3795 Seed Kits to farmers

Social Protection
- 659 Women Community Leaders (Aagewans) trained to provide relief, health awareness and rapid referral
Digital training of trainers for COVID-19 awareness: trained 50 master trainers for the digital training which includes WhatsApp and conference call, that made more than 36,000 villagers aware of COVID and its precautionary measures.

Provided seed capital of Rs. 5 lakh to the Megha Cooperative of the agriculture sector, where members availed money to purchase seeds on small and flexible EMIs.

Financial support: working capital provided (INR 10 lakhs) for mask and sanitizer production
  ○ With 45-50 women artisans, our handicraft cooperative produced more than 3 lakhs masks and distributed in the urban as well as rural areas whereas the healthcare cooperative manufactured 25,000 of good quality hand sanitizers.
Organising and building membership-based organisations (MBOs) like cooperatives is key; focus on women, youth

Decentralized approach---bottom-up re-building; decision-making, control in local hands

Innovating, pivoting, expanding to new sectors

Investing in MBOs: working capital, flexible financing

Market linkages - online and offline

Capacity-building - technical and skill trainings, management, exploring alternative livelihoods

Digital inclusion – digital literacy, enabling use of tools and technologies, infrastructure

Ensuring universal access to social security: health care, child care, insurance

Women’s ESS enables recovery, rebuilding and resilience of women’s cooperatives/collectives, communities and our economy