

## INDIA

### INCREASING WORKING WOMEN'S INDEPENDENCE IN AHMEDABAD CITY

*Poor, self-employed women in the informal sector frequently find it almost impossible to access credit to invest in, and improve, their livelihood activities. NGOs can serve a vital function in tailoring credit systems to meet the needs of such women.*

SEWA, the Self Employed Women's Association, was formed in 1972 and registered as a trade union in Gujarat, with the main objective of strengthening its members bargaining power to improve income, employment and access to social security.



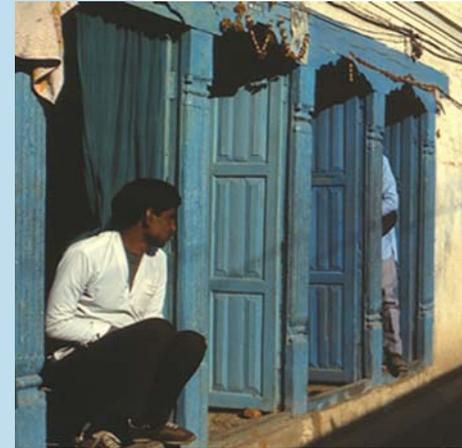
SEWA sees itself not merely as a workers organisation, but as a movement. A branch of the SEWA movement is The Shri Mahila Sewa Sahakari Bank, a bank of poor self-employed women workers. This bank operates primarily in Ahmedabad City, Gujarat, where, in order to address the problem of the vicious cycle of debt, the members of SEWA came forward with their own solution: 'a bank of their own'. Four Thousand self-employed women, including hawkers, vendors, and home-based workers, established the initiative in 1974. The women own the bank, and their own elected board make its policies. Today it has 51,000 depositors and working capital of US\$ 2 million.



SEWA bank's main objectives are to: instil a saving habit in poor, self-employed women; provide credit to further the productive, economic and income-generating activities of the poor, self-employed women; rescue their mortgaged / pledged assets from money lenders and to help them create their own assets. The Bank has adopted systems and procedures that are customised for its members, for example, photograph and thumb impression for identification, door-to-door services for members, flexibility in timings and simple loan procedures.

The SEWA Bank is providing badly-needed banking infrastructure that can serve the self-employed, and those running small businesses. A large number of the members now have their own handcarts, sewing machines, looms and tools for carpentry and blacksmithery. Many of them have upgraded their skills, developed more business and increased their income.

The SEWA bank has been a catalyst for many changes in laws and practices in addition to the changes in institutional arrangements and processes. It was the first bank of its kind in India and demonstrated that poor women do save, use loans productively and repay loans in a timely manner.



Ms. Ela R. Bhatt  
SEWA Reception Centre  
Opposite Victoria Garden  
Bhadra  
AHMEDABAD 380 001  
India

tel: +91 79 550 6444  
fax: +91 79 550 6446  
mail@sewa.org

Smita Ghatate  
Housing Finance Co-ordinator  
SEWA Bank &  
Mahila Housing SEWA Trust  
psmita@icenet.net

for further information:  
[www.bestpractice.org](http://www.bestpractice.org)  
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