

# Capacity Building through Information Technology Tool for Education and Poverty Reduction

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## Abstract

*How can we use the advantages of information technology in programs to empower women? How can we provide the expensive infrastructure for such a venture in a cost effective manner? How can training in information management empower women in the unorganized sector. These were some of the questions that Asha Yale along with SEWA and The World Computer Exchange have tried to answer.*

## Introduction

In this day and age, the benefits of being computer literate are enormous. One reaps the benefits of information, business and various aspects of social and academic education through this, now ubiquitous, tool. Translate this to a rural setting in India and the effect is staggering. Slowly and steadily, a revolution is taking place empowering people in remote areas with access to information and ingenious ways of problem solving, which was hitherto inaccessible. Be it cyclone warnings to fishermen in Andhra Pradesh or the "hole in the wall experiment" amongst slum children in Delhi, people working with the underprivileged in India have begun to realize the vast potential the computer has for social and economic emancipation.

The Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA), the largest primary trade union with 215,234 members all over India, has performed groundbreaking work in organizing self-employed women who work either as laborers or run small businesses. The members of SEWA are poor, illiterate and vulnerable to exploitation. SEWA has changed the lives of these women by giving them an organizational umbrella under which to function and leverage their potential and thus subvert exploitation. In this process SEWA has made its members conscious of their rights and their possibilities. This has been achieved through adult literacy programs, the formation of a SEWA academy, and vigorous and innovative capacity building activities conducted at SEWA centers.

SEWA now plans to establish computer centers in eleven districts of Gujarat. They have applied to the World Computer Exchange (WCE; an NGO based in Boston) and have been approved to receive WCE's first shipment of computers to India. This shipment will consist of 400 donated used computers. Half of these computers will be deployed in SEWA district centers and villages and the other half will be deployed in selected government schools. The SEWA computer centers will be used for vocational computer training of SEWA members; improved communication within SEWA, administrative and design tasks for SEWA collectives, and computer based education for the children of SEWA members. The computer centers in government schools will be used for computer-based education and to access

the Internet. To facilitate the installation of computers and training of the SEWA members, Asha has committed 6 fellows for a period of one year.

## **Background**

This project is a collaborative effort between three organizations: SEWA, WCE and Asha for Education (Asha). A brief description of each of these groups is given below.

SEWA is a trade union registered in 1972. It is an organization of poor, self-employed women workers. These are women who earn a living through their own labor or small businesses. They do not obtain regular salaried employment with welfare benefits like workers in the organized sector. Members are workers who depend on their own labor for survival. They are poor, illiterate and vulnerable. But they are extremely economically active, contributing very significantly to the economy and society with their labor. Sixty four percent (64%) of the GDP of India is accounted for by the self-employed. SEWA's membership in 1999 was 215,250. In Gujarat SEWA has 147,618 members, out of which 99,001 are rural members. Outside Gujarat, SEWA has a presence in Madhya Pradesh (60,000), Uttar Pradesh (5,400), Bihar (1000), Kerala (600) and Delhi (600).

SEWA is both an organization and a movement. The SEWA movement is a confluence of three movements: the labor movement, the cooperative movement and the women's movement. In addition, SEWA is also a movement of self-employed workers: their own, homegrown movement with women as the leaders. SEWA's main goals are to organize women workers for full employment and self-reliance through the strategy of struggle and development. The struggle is against the many constraints and limitations imposed on them by society and the economy, while development activities strengthen women's bargaining power and offer them new alternatives. Full employment means employment whereby workers obtain work security, income security, food security and social security (at least health care, child-care and shelter). SEWA organizes women to ensure that every family obtains full employment. Self-reliance means that women should be autonomous and self-reliant, individually and collectively, both economically and in terms of their decision-making ability.

SEWA has established the SEWA Academy for its members. This past year about 30,000 SEWA members participated in the educational process, learning about their contribution to the national economy, their roles and responsibilities as women, their organization and the driving force and values of their own movement.

World Computer Exchange (WCE) is a non-profit organization officially started July 1st, 2000 with the mission of alleviating the digital divide through transferring donated internet capable computers from the U.S. to developing countries and also facilitating educational-cultural exchanges between students of donor and recipient countries. WCE has established contact with organizations in 35 countries. Three of the first 12 shipments from the WCE are destined for India.

WCE brokers donations of working, surplus, Internet-accessible computers and monitors from large U.S. companies. It asks their help in packing the computers in shipping containers for ocean shipment along with their maintenance histories and inventories. WCE works via education ministries, NGO's, and universities that distribute the computers to the participating schools, and help them with connectivity issues and maintenance.

Asha For Education is a non-profit organization started in 1991 at UC--Berkeley with chapters now all

over the U.S. and in India, Singapore, England, and Canada. ASHA is an action group that attempts to improve access to basic education in India by supporting projects that are secular and apolitical in nature. Run by volunteers, with no overhead costs and a flat structure, clearly identifying, researching, owning, funding, and sustaining projects has formed the core of Asha activities. Asha supports over one hundred projects with more than \$500,000 raised each year through the dedicated action of over 300 active volunteers. Asha acts as a network for various grass-roots workers and volunteers and non-governmental organizations, and has focus groups currently working on quality curriculum, hardware, and teacher training materials. Year 2047 has been proposed as a checkpoint for quality universal education for every child in India.

## **Why Asha & SEWA**

Studies on economic returns on education suggest that female education have higher economic returns than male education. As in other countries, economic returns to education in India are estimated to be higher than the returns to other investments, highest at the primary level and higher for female than for male education. An educated mother is more likely to send her own children to a school so that the benefits of education are compounded across generations. Literacy, for instance, is almost universal in Urban Kerala. Mass literacy - and in particular female literacy - is an essential facilitator of Kerala's achievements in the spheres of health and demographic change (Probe Report, October 1998).

Lokshala, initiated in March 1995 by Bharat Jan Vigyan Jatha, an all-India people's science network with academic support from Delhi University's Department of Education also supports the importance of female literacy. Some of the basic principles of the Lokshala approach are that education is a subset of society (not an independent identity) and women provide the initiative and leadership for social intervention.

India has one of the highest female-male gaps in literacy rates in the world. Female literacy rates are much lower in India than in sub-Sahara Africa. One of the reasons why children are never enrolled in schools is the lack of parental interest in schooling. Even when parents do enroll their children in school, they often find it difficult to evaluate what goes on in the classroom, to actively participate in the education of the children. Frequently, they end up blaming themselves or their children for the failures of the schooling system.

An argument can be made for ASHA to achieve its goals of universalizing primary education in India, it needs to work in collaboration with organizations like SEWA that engage in capacity building and educating women.

## **Computer Usage For Poverty Alleviation**

In a large spread-out union such as SEWA, integration and synergy between all sections of the membership and SEWA's various activities are crucial. SEWA plans to use computers and Information Technology to linkup all the 977 villages in 11 districts of Gujarat and strengthen the work efficiency of its members, grassroots managers and their economic organizations.

Thereby link up poor women and their economic organizations with the outside world. The poor have access to information and market and are able to put it to their best and appropriate use as per their need and at their pace. The ultimate aim is to increase economic self-reliance with better managerial and

financial capabilities and reduce poverty.

SEWA's plan of action for computerization is as follows

- To create and maintain an online database of its 200,000+ members. To have complete record of its members, their family details, address. Give code number to its members, which then becomes their permanent membership number every year. This will help SEWA monitor its membership profile.
- To maintain a database of all its meetings and programs on day to day basis, at all its regional centers and its centers within Ahmedabad. This will enable better co-ordination and time management at any given time.
- To set up a computer training center, at its headquarters to train its cadre of organizers and grassroots leader on use of computers in their routine (SEWA plans to train 2000 organizers and grassroots leader over a period of 3 years).
- To set up a computer training center at its employment cell, to train its younger members and their daughters and sons, in basic computer (SEWA plans to train 1000 children over a period of 3 years).
- To promote the economic organizations of SEWA members, such as the co-operatives (cleaning, catering, vegetable, artisans, etc.) and their federations and associations to use computers for
  - Record keeping
  - Business plan data and monitoring
  - Marketing and e-commerce
  - Stock details
  - Training the group leaders, executive committee members in use of computers for the above functions.
- To enable social security program of SEWA to maintain
  - Data on health training
  - Record of health camps (check up of poor women and children)
  - Medicine sales and purchase records
  - Childcare center records on weight of children, training, meetings etc.
  - Insurance records
  - Membership code and profile

The health and child care workers, insurance workers, and grassroots organizers will be trained on use of computers for the above functions.

- To enable SEWA Academy in worker's education and capacity building by
  - Developing interactive training module, with multimedia, for its ongoing leadership training, SEWA movement training and barefoot researchers training (in application of computers in research)
  - Analyzing data gathered by its grassroots researchers, to quantify the qualitative achievements of the SEWA movement.
  - Creating literacy programs (understanding of the value-add by the members in the socio-economic chain, ability to read numbers and sign names, etc.) for SEWA's membership
  - Helping Video SEWA communicate through print and electronic media so that the members can learn about each other's struggles and experiences. Video SEWA will create a video library on computers by converting the videocassettes into CD. This will increase the life

span and usage of video cassettes

- To linkup all the computers within the various SEWA organizations amongst themselves and to the Internet. This facilitates quick and timely communication from SEWA Academy to its members. In addition the link would ensure that SEWA members are both seen and heard by the world outside.
- To form a virtual alliance of organizations and groups of people in similar situation around the world.
- To facilitate e-commerce for the village entrepreneurs with direct access to global marketplace.

## **Tasks Accomplished**

- SEWA has defined the objectives of this project. The use of the computers is stated above
- WCE has arranged for a corporate donation of 400 used computers
- Customs clearance has been obtained by SEWA with the aid of the Chief Minister of Gujarat
- SEWA, WCE, and Asha representatives meet once a month in New Haven, CT to coordinate the details of the project
- WCE has arranged for the shipping of these computers to Gujarat.
- Raised funds to support 3 Asha Fellows in India (Asha has committed to provide six Asha Fellows for training and technical support for one year. Funding for the Fellows will be provided by Asha-Yale. The Asha Fellows are being selected jointly by SEWA and Asha)

## **Work In Progress**

- Selection of SEWA centers/villages and government schools to receive computers (the government schools will be selected so that they are in close proximity to SEWA centers/villages to facilitate maintenance, technical support, and oversight)
- Procuring of funds for 3 Asha Fellows, adjunct equipment (UPS's and printers) and software
- Recruiting Asha Fellows in India
- Site assessment and preparation to receive computers
- Requirements gathering and software development to meet the objectives outlined above

## **Challenges**

- Obtaining custom clearance from the Government of India to import used computers duty-free
- Recruiting Asha Fellows in India who have the right attitude and the mindset
- Obtaining computers from corporations
- Detailing computer hardware requirements for installation in rural India
- Fundraising for shipping, hardware, fellows, etc
- Management of the project amongst three NGO's (SEWA, WCE & Asha)

## **Conclusions**

A successful collaboration between SEWA, WCE and Asha has been forged. The task of deploying 400 computers in Gujarat is well within our grasp as planning and major task implementation has been achieved. This is a large-scale project, one with enormous potential benefit. An understanding of the creation of computer centers in rural India will be achieved, and this information should allow

replicating the same in all the villages with SEWA membership. Already underway, alliances are being struck with various other NGO's who have expertise in similar areas of work. This sharing of knowledge will smoothen the process further, be it procurement, deployment, training or curriculum selection. Hopefully setting of a chain reaction of SEWA movement resulting in the greater good for all.

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