

Women Home-Based Workers Creating Ties Across South Asian Countries: Experiences of SEWA and HomeNet

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Abstract

In the South Asian region, women can play an important role in peace building activities by connecting to each other through their occupations. The ties women establish through their work within and between communities can resolve the inter-community conflicts. The unique initiative of Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) and HomeNet South Asia (HNSA) has brought together women home-based workers of South Asia to address the livelihood issues and to bring peace to the region.

The bonds and relationships established through work transcend national boundaries to lay the foundation for a sustainable change and positive transformation in a conflict-ridden region. Women are working together towards the common good, and sharing their life experiences and skills for sustainable peace and security. The energy and goodwill of millions of poor women working together is a revolution from the bottom up compelling the South Asian Governments to consider an appropriate policy change.

"If nonviolence is the law of our being, the future is with women..."
Mohandas K. Gandhi

"I am convinced that the women of the world, united without any regard for national or racial dimensions, can become a most powerful force for international peace and brotherhood."

Coretta Scott King

Introduction

Traditional thinking about war and peace either ignores women or regards them as victims, often not acknowledging their initiatives towards peace. The role of

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women is crucial in peace processes. They often work to preserve social order in the midst of armed and other conflicts. Women make an important but often unrecognized contribution as peace educators both in their families and in their societies.

Why women? Women are very good at peace building activities for many reasons. Firstly, they suffer the most, and (along with children), are the main victims of rights violations in situations of violence and conflict. Peace is inextricably linked with economic development and security. Armed and other types of conflicts and terrorism go hand in glove with poverty, hunger, denials of economic, social and cultural rights, religious intolerance and general lack of rule of law. While entire communities suffer the consequences, women are particularly affected. They suffer displacement, loss of home, property, disappearance of close relatives, poverty, family separation and disintegration, terrorism along with lifelong social, economic and psychological trauma of armed conflict.

In a unique initiative by Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) and HomeNet South Asia (HNSA), home-based workers of South Asia are coming together in a collective manner to foster bonds and relationships that transcend national boundaries and lay the foundation for a positive change and transformation in the South Asian region. Women mainly from poor families easily cross both physical and emotional borders through their skills and work. As Safia, an embroidery worker from Sakhar District in Pakistan on her first visit to SEWA in India says:

“When we come together there are no differences between us. And, when there are differences, we have no fear...Working together gives us courage and support, and we as skilled women can come together through our skills. Skills connect us outside the country, just as in our village we connect with each other.”

Women Home-Based Workers as Agents of Change

Home-based workers refer to the general category of workers who carry out remunerative work within their homes or in their surroundings. It is estimated that there are over 100 million home-based workers in the world and over 50 million in South Asia – of which around 80% are women. From traditional embroidery and weaving, home-based work today extends to some of the latest sectors such as computers and tele-work. Despite its contribution to the local and national economy, the true extent and nature of home-based work has not been reflected in the official statistics nor perhaps recognized by the workers themselves. Home-based workers remain invisible and unrecognized and are also unprotected by the law.

The number of home-based workers who are members of the HomeNet Networks currently stands around 3, 26,950 representing 569 organizations of home-based workers (this was as of March 2009). For this reason, the experiences of the home-based workers reach a large number of villages and neighbourhoods throughout the South Asia region. It is person-to-person and community-to-community relationship which lays the foundation of true and sustainable alliances across different nationalities, beginning with poor women workers.

SEWA was born in 1972 as a trade union of self-employed women. SEWA grew continuously from 1972, increasing in its membership and including more and more occupations within its fold. Today, SEWA has more than 1.1 million dues-paying members in nine states of India. SEWA grew out of the Gandhian tradition and believes in the path of simplicity, truthfulness and non-violence.

SEWA members are poor women deeply rooted in tradition who perceive their own lives and needs as a whole and as a continuum. Throughout her life cycle, a woman has multiple needs and faces several risks. SEWA has adopted an integrated approach which attempts to address the needs and the risks faced by its member and attempts to strengthen her, cover the risks she faces and help her to lead a secure life. SEWA, therefore, provides a range of support services and development services and in doing so has developed a host of membership based organizations linked to the Union. All of these economic organizations are owned by the women who are members of SEWA. One of the organizations promoted by SEWA is HomeNet South Asia.

Box 1: SEWA's Accomplishments

- SEWA Bank was India's (and perhaps the World's) first micro-finance institution in 1975, and today SEWA Bank and other Finance co-operatives serve more than 400,000 women.
- SEWA started the first micro-insurance program for its members and today covers more than 200,000 women with an integrated insurance program.
- SEWA Trade Facilitation Centre, Gram Haat and Gujarat Co-operative Federation provide design and marketing services for over 50,000 women.
- SEWA has carried out many successful advocacy campaigns which have resulted in important international, national and state-level policies. These include the ILO convention on Home workers, the National policy on Street Vendors in India and State level boards for construction workers.

Source: www.sewa.org

HomeNet South Asia is a network of organizations of women home-based workers.³The members of HomeNet South Asia are national organizations in India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Nepal and Bangladesh. It is working towards making the home-based workers visible in South Asia. Built on the concept of strength and solidarity, HomeNet has been structured on an empowering agenda, which is demand responsive, democratic and representative. The strength of HomeNet lies in its grassroots' membership. HomeNet is a member based network where the members are both managers and beneficiaries of their own organizations. It is extremely gender sensitive taking particular care of the needs of the women home-based workers and addressing the issue of feminization of poverty by providing women a civil society forum at the regional level.

The process begins with bringing home-based worker leaders together who then design events and programmes in which larger number of home-based workers from the region can interact and work together through combining their creative energies and getting to know each other. Ultimately, as the sense of solidarity and commitment of women to work together spreads. In this process, they have found that women come together very naturally in spite of the tensions that exist between their countries. Many of the women have never been outside their villages and they are often warned by their relatives and friends against travelling to the neighbouring countries. However, on return to their homes, these women share their own insights and experiences and become sources of knowledge for their communities and peace builders in their own right.

Launching a Revolution from the Bottom Up

The energy and good will of these millions of poor women have moved the Governments to support them and their movement. In the year 2000, the South Asian Governments representatives and home-based workers and their organizations came together in Kathmandu and despite the differences between the Governments, they unanimously supported the "*Kathmandu Declaration*". The Kathmandu Declaration recommended the formulation of a national policy and urged SAARC to address the issues of home-based workers in the region and take measures to enable them to deal with the risks and opportunities of globalization. Earlier in 1996, the International Labour Organization had adopted the Convention on Home Work – the first comprehensive standard in favour of home-based workers.

This went further in 2007 when the Prime Minister of India, Shri Manmohan Singh inaugurated a Regional Conference which was attended by the women home-based workers from India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka.

³It was set up after the Kathmandu Declaration, formulated in an international conference convened in Nepal in year 2000. The formal launching of HomeNet South Asia was held on January 17, 2007. www.homenetsouthasiain.net

Padma Kumari Gurung, a handloom weaver from Nepal greeted the Prime Minister, saying “I learnt to weave as a little girl and it has given me my living. Today my weaving has brought me to meet many sisters in other countries and the Prime Minister of a neighbouring country. I am inspired to do great things with the support of so many people.” The Prime Minister responded by saying, “I do believe that women’s empowerment should be a major objective of our social, political and economic policy in the South Asian region as a whole. Most home-based workers happen to be women who... have waited for long to secure equality in all senses of that term. ...Our Government will be happy to take forward the National Policy for India as well as to facilitate the programme for countries of South Asia.”

The SAARC, whose mandate is to build a South Asian neighbourhood, too recognized the value of women as peace-makers for integrating communities. In 2008, HomeNet South Asia was recognized as the nodal agency of home-based workers in the region. SEWA and HomeNet South Asia were asked to work towards eliminating poverty in the region through empowering women.⁴

Empowering Women and Changing Communities

In most South Asian communities, women tend to be restricted to their homes, restricted in their movements and restricted in their opportunities. When they join an organization, it opens their energies, creates opportunities and leads to empowerment. Although, the restrictions continue, they begin to build up support leading to changes in their families and their communities. As Shahida Begum of Sakhar District (Pakistan) noted, in a recent Skills Training Programme hosted by HNSA and SEWA, “One woman from my village came to my home and told my husband, ‘How can you allow her to go? It would be the first time anyone from this village would be going out of the country – and that, too, to India! You know the situation there.’ But before I could answer, my son said, “Someone has to be first, and I’m proud that it’s my mother.”

Reegi Khadgi from Nepal recollected her transition from a mere home-based worker to an organized home-based worker and how much empowered she feels today while participating in the Regional Conference on “Change and Impact on Home-based Workers”⁵. “When I was just a home-based worker, I had very limited awareness and publicity about my work and, thus, restricted to a marginal income and recognition. When I was organized through HomeNet Nepal, I got exposure to the outer world, thus, getting knowledge of market demand, quality control and publicity of my work. Which helped me in improving my work and now I am getting good price of my product and more importantly I am getting recognition for my skill.” She added “I feel the most

⁴ “SAARC Seminar on Home-Based Worker” 2008 (www.homenetsouthasia.org)

⁵ Organized by HomeNet South Asia and Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, India, September 2009

important thing is awareness along with hard work and organizing strength which could empower women and, thus, bringing a change in the communities.”

Jeitunben Seikh, a home-based worker from India exclaimed, sharing her own experience, “I see the changes in my life and feel myself empowered and capable enough after joining SEWA. It is better to work in an organized way rather working alone at home. Visibility is much more important today along with hard work. We get visibility only when we are organized and empowered. Now, my lifestyle has changed, I know how to behave and speak in public. I motivated all women in my family and my locality to become member of SEWA and to work in an organized way. Now they are all empowered.”

Building Responsive Organizations

Since its inception, HNSA has been organizing home-based workers and strengthening their networks. The stronger the organizations at the base, the more powerful will be the lobbying and alliance building at different levels. HNSA encourages the home-based workers’ associations, groups and unions to raise their voice, demands and concerns and increase their bargaining power. The strength of organizing will enable them to bargain for better wages and more secured work arrangements. Moreover, it will give them a greater ability to negotiate to access credit, improved technologies, training programmes and other resources which can improve the quality and delivery of their products and thereby contribute to their family’s livelihood.

Today, HNSA has emerged as a dynamic and vibrant network of 600 organizations representing over 3, 00,000 home-based workers from five countries in South Asia. It has evolved as a focal point and the collective voice of the home-based workers of the region.

Table 1: HomeNet Network Membership (as on March 31, 2010)

Numbers	Bangladesh	India	Nepal	Pakistan	South Asia
Member Organizations	116	31	159	120	426
Home-based Workers	29044	85074	22851	15954	152923

The setting up of HNSA as a regional network of respective national HomeNets has brought home-based workers (HBWs) together on a common platform, giving them strength in being united for a common cause of the region, and also the opportunity to learn and enrich each other with their experiences and expertise.

SAARC Business Association for Home-Based Workers: Women Entering Mainstream Markets Together

Recognizing the imperative to address poverty related issues and to suggest strategies and measures to alleviate poverty in the region, the SAARC Leaders, at their Sixth Summit (Colombo, 1991) established an Independent South Asian Commission on Poverty Alleviation (ISACPA). The Commission, while reporting to the Seventh Summit (Dhaka, 1993), provided a conceptual framework for poverty alleviation through social mobilization and empowerment in South Asia.

The Seventh Summit welcomed the report and expressed its commitment to eradicate poverty from South Asia through an agenda of action which included a strategy of social mobilization and a policy of decentralized agricultural development, village re-awakening, small-scale labour-intensive industrialization and human development. At the thirteenth SAARC Summit (Dhaka, 2005), the SAARC Development Fund (SDF) was launched as the umbrella financial institution for funding regional projects in SAARC.

SEWA and HNSA have jointly undertaken a project on “Strengthening Livelihood Initiatives for Home-Based Workers in the SAARC Region” that would contribute to poverty alleviation and women’s empowerment in the region. The project aims at self-sustained income and employment generation in keeping with the SAARC objectives, commitments of the Member States and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

The objectives of the project are: to build a strong supply chain; to generate employment at each stage of the supply chain; to build up a social business organization in each Member State; and to make it sustainable and capable of further expansion so as to generate increased employment. It is also aimed at strengthening marketing power through collective marketing and branding efforts; promoting development and inclusive growth through sharing experiences and learning from each other’s success; and building a model of empowerment of women through crafts making and marketing, which could afterwards be replicated in other sectors. This would deepen relationship among the SAARC Member States based on learning and sharing. It was decided to set up SABAH ⁶ (SAARC Business Association of Home-Based Workers – a business organization.

After conducting a research and undertaking visits to the countries, it was decided that each SABAH would focus on particular products. SABAH,

⁶SABAH is a noun in Urdu language, whose dictionary meaning is early morning breeze, which also denotes freshness.

Pakistan is focusing on developing textile based embroidery intensive products while SABAH, Bangladesh on textiles, weaving and kantha embroidery. SABAH, Nepal focuses on natural fibres and weaving based products. It is also proposed that SABAH, Nepal would promote food processing and spice based products. It is not difficult to envisage a common 'Made in SAARC' phenomenon soon emerging with product tags proudly stating this by-line.

The establishment of SABAH as a company with relevant physical infrastructure, facilities, equipment and systems forms the core of the activities under this initiative. SABAH is now registered and operational in Nepal and Pakistan and will soon begin operating in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. Producer groups and HBWs are encouraged to take up the ownership, charge and management of the company.

Struggling for National Social Protection Policies

Social security is a crucial need for all home-based workers. Extending social security to the home-based workers is not merely a matter of extending existing organized sector schemes to new groups but also to complement them with specially designed schemes to meet the needs of the workers. The International Labour Organization passed Convention 177 in 1996 for the protection of home-based workers. Two of the most important sections of the Convention call for national policies on social protection and HomeNets led by SEWA have been working in this direction.

Box 2: South Asian Regional Plan of Action for Home-Based Workers
(New Delhi, January 20, 2007)

In order to promote the growth and prosperity of our region we need to address poverty by focusing on the issues of women, work and poverty. We, therefore, support the formulation of National Policies on Home-based Workers, in consultation with all stakeholders. The key components of these policies should include the minimum protection, social protection, access to market and economic resources, and Voice and governance.

Source: www.homenetsouthasia.net

HomeNet has been acknowledged by SAARC as the representational body of home-based workers in the region working toward the formation of policies, implementation and monitoring of programmes concerning all aspect of home-based workers lives and their work. Each of the HomeNets in their respective countries has been working towards national policies for their countries. Constant exchange and discussions among the HomeNets in the South Asian countries ensure that the national policies in each country are on the same lines.

HNSA supported a regional study on “Home-Based Workers and their Social Security Needs” which sought to understand the risks and vulnerabilities faced by home-based workers in several different situations and the coping mechanisms that they use. Another initiative worth mentioning is the one taken by SADHNA, a member organization of HomeNet India. The organization has arranged health insurance as a social protection measure for its member HBWs.

Visibility and Recognition

The home-based workers’ social and economic standing has been raised visibly. There is a growing support from national and international institutions that have become aware of the importance of home-based workers for their families’ and communities’ well-being. A number of institutions and agencies – local, national and international – have begun supporting informal workers’ organizations, including networks and organizations consisting primarily of home-based workers.

HomeNet South Asia, for example, has been supported since its inception by UNIFEM (United Nations Development Fund for Women) and SEWA (their home-based workers are a part of HomeNet South Asia through the national network HomeNet India). In addition, over the years HomeNet South Asia has worked closely with and received support from WIEGO (Women in Informal Employment Globalizing and Organizing, an international network of researchers and activists), FNV (the well-respected Dutch trade union), the ILO (the International Labour Organization of the United Nations), FES (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung of Germany, a supporter of informal and other workers), the Global Labour Institute of Switzerland, and many others.

Building Ties and Integrating Across Regions

Since HomeNet South Asia works closely with HomeNet South East Asia, the home-based workers learn from experiences and innovative programmes within and outside the SAARC region. HomeNet South East Asia is the sub-regional network that coordinates country-level networks of home-based workers in Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, the Philippines and Thailand (with partners in Vietnam and Timor-Leste).

The women find that the home-based workers’ organizations in each country have their own particular strengths – for example, several years of work experience on occupational health and safety for home-based workers in Thailand, fair trade marketing and design in Cambodia, participatory (neighbourhood women-based) disaster management in Indonesia, and many other types of expertise that involve meeting the needs of very low-income

women workers. All of their insights and experiences can be compiled and the home-based workers can learn and be inspired by each other. In the process, they also learn a great deal about the wider world, and how it can be integrated through collective efforts and the close friendships.

Within SAARC one of the key concerns is to build cooperative ties across the Member Countries of the region. To date, efforts towards the cross-country integration of SAARC have taken place at a number of levels: government-to-government, business and professional associations (e.g., of journalists, doctors and lawyers), cultural exchanges (music, films, and dance), and many other types of exchanges, often involving the elite groups. In contrast, the types of exchanges that take place through organizations like the HomeNets and SEWA, involve those who are near to the bottom of social and economic hierarchies. Though, this regional integration through poor women is slow but steady. Their friendships and alliances produce much stronger bonds – with deeper and wider effects – than diplomatic efforts alone could ever hope to achieve.