SEWA Bharat and Street Vendors in Delhi

As a livelihood, street vending in Delhi is often a vicious trap of poverty, especially for women workers. It is often defined by low income, physical strain, harassment, exploitation, and continuous struggle for space and recognition.

Women vendors earn less than men and their profits are meagre, depending on location, mobility, and type of goods. In order to obtain space to sell, they often have to bribe authorities or other vendors. They also lack access to capital to expand their business and are dependant on moneylenders who charge exorbitant fees.

Vendors often live a great distance from the markets where they sell, incurring high transportation costs. Licenses for vendors are precarious, and those who vend without licenses face fees, confiscation of their goods, violence, and arrest. They are also under constant threat of eviction, not only from markets, but also from their homes.

Vendors face health issues include lack of access to water and sanitation and severe weather conditions. There is little social security, and vendors lack organization due to poverty, illiteracy, cultural barriers, and discrimination.

What Changed

The problems street vendors face stream from inadequate organization, government policies, the lack of legal protection, the internal dynamics among vendors, and the absence of social security.

SEWA adopted a strategy of advocacy, struggle, and development, so women vendors would develop and lead organizations of their own to bring forward the issues fellow members face.

At a national level, SEWA was integral in the development and passage of 2009’s National Street Vendors Bill and the landmark 2014’s The Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act (see above).

But SEWA also worked with vendors and cities on the ground as it has fought to protect natural markets. It fought the eviction of the Qutub Road Market and the Book Bazaar—and won. In 2009, it worked extensively with an architectural firm and a city to re-create the Vellodrome Market beneath a new overpass. SEWA now has permission to run the market and deal with its attendant challenges, particularly with exploitative trade unions.

SEWA has also created an innovative new market—the Ladies Market—for 200 women vendors, who pay vendors fees to the city. Here, SEWA liaises with vendors, city officials, resident welfare associations, and other stakeholders to run and publicize the market.

Finally, SEWA offers a holistic approach to worker empowerment. Through a cooperative, SEWA provides loans to vendors and helps with savings and deposits. It has provided health camps and conducted non-formal education classes. SEWA also links members to government programs such as old age and disability pensions.

Policy and Legal Environment

Until the enactment of The Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014, there was no common law regulating street vending and hawking in India. Various other laws and acts determined the nature of street vending. The National Policy on Street Vendors in 2004 and 2009 led to the introduction of the Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Bill, 2012, in Parliament. The salient features of the act include registration, town vending committees, restrictions around eviction and relocation, maximum fines for violation, dispute resolution processes, and the provision of civic facilities like solid waste management, electricity, drinking water, storage, protective cover, parking, and cleanliness.
Results
As a result of these multi-pronged efforts:

- By 2014, 6,000 women street vendors were organized;
- Trade committees, market committees, and market associations were formed;
- Women street vendors in the Qutub Road Market saw a cumulative increase in income, including government benefits, of 133 per cent;
- In the Vellodrome Market, 1,200 vendor livelihoods were secured;
- Because of advocacy efforts, five lakh vendors will not fall under the “illegal” vendor label, which will prohibit unscrupulous middlemen from functioning in the markets.

Suggestions for Future Efforts: What Made It Work?

- A commitment to organizing, to strengthening unions and leadership, and increasing bargaining power with authorities;
- Working with municipal authorities collaboratively, but not fearing pointing out deficiencies;
- Using legal measures to advocate for vendors’ rights;
- Taking an integrated approach that includes health, education, and other services like linking to government benefits;
- Advocating through media;
- Networking with other organizations.

About WIEGO: Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing is a global network focused on securing livelihoods for the working poor, especially women, in the informal economy. We believe all workers should have equal economic opportunities and rights. WIEGO creates change by building capacity among informal worker organizations, expanding the knowledge base about the informal economy and influencing local, national and international policies. Visit www.wiego.org.

SEWA Bharat has demonstrated mechanisms through which the informal economy can be included in city planning and development.