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NETWORK FOR EQUITY IN TRANSITIONS FROM FOSSIL FUELS

CASE STUDY #1

SEWA'S GREEN LIVELIHOOD CAMPAIGN

Transforming Lives and Livelihoods in India

By looking at the work of the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), a union representing nearly two million informal women workers across India, this case study examines gender-transformative approaches to just transitions through grassroots initiatives in the global South. SEWA launched its Green Livelihood Campaign in 2009 with a transformative vision: to position energy access as a tool for women's collective empowerment rather than mere service delivery. This spotlight on SEWA's work offers an important example of how collectively organized ownership and operation of energy infrastructure has strengthened women's bargaining power, economic participation, and community status.



Context and Problem

Energy poverty in India disproportionately affects women, because they often must spend hours collecting biomass for cooking and are subsequently exposed to indoor air pollution. This issue is not limited to India and in fact contributes to 3.8 million premature deaths annually worldwide.¹ The burden of this unpaid labour limits women's access to education, income, and participation in public life. Despite their central role in household energy provision, women remain excluded from governance and control of

energy systems and also lack access to existing and new technologies. In Gujarat's salt farming communities, for example, women share production duties but lack access to diesel pumps used for brine extraction, highlighting how gendered inequalities in technology access shape fossil fuel based systems.² And, despite government efforts to promote renewables, most programmes remain gender-blind and fail to address structural inequalities in access, ownership, and employment.

The Initiative: Building Women's Energy Sovereignty

The Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), a union representing nearly two million informal women workers across India, launched its Green Livelihood Campaign in 2009 with a transformative vision: to position energy access as a tool for women's collective empowerment rather than mere service delivery. Recognizing that energy poverty is both a cause and consequence of gender inequality, SEWA began by conducting village and household-level assessments to identify members' specific energy needs. Building on these consultations, the campaign developed a multi-pronged approach focused on promoting women-owned energy enterprises, delivering technical skill training and establishing collective ownership models, ultimately challenging the male-dominated renewable energy sector by advancing women's leadership across the energy value chain.³

SEWA's Green Livelihood Campaign provides affordable clean energy solutions such as solar cookstoves, biogas, and solar panels to rural women across Gujarat. Notably, the initiative established India's first women-owned solar park in Naradi village and offers tiered training programmes in solar installation, repair and maintenance. In 2022, under the Green Livelihood Campaign, SEWA launched the innovative Surya programme in collaboration with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and ReNew Power, focusing on Santalpur Taluka in Patan district. People in this area mainly work in salt production, relying on diesel pumps, which, over the years, have resulted in higher costs and environmental damage. Under this programme, women salt pan workers in the Rann of Kutch are trained as solar panel and solar pump technicians, enabling them to transition into the renewable energy workforce. Currently, these women save an average of ₹10,000 (USD128) over ten months, while a solar panel technician can earn up to ₹18,000 (USD130) per month.⁴

Key Components and Innovations

• Challenging Technical Hierarchies

SEWA confronted the assumption that rural women lack the capacity for technical work. Training programmes began with basic literacy and numeracy where needed, progressively building to advanced technical skills. Women trainers and peer learning approaches created supportive environments for skill development.⁵

• Addressing Financial Barriers

Recognizing women's exclusion from formal credit, SEWA's cooperative banks provided loans for energy technologies at affordable rates. Additionally, the payments for such loans were designed with women's irregular incomes from informal work in mind. The collective guarantee system enabled women without individual collateral to access credit.⁶

• Creating Safe Spaces

Technical training centres established by SEWA provide residential facilities addressing women's safety concerns and family responsibilities. Childcare support and flexible schedules enable participation. Women-only spaces allow participants to build skills without facing gender-based discrimination or harassment.⁷

• Building Market Linkages

SEWA created women-led supply chains for renewable energy products, from manufacturing to maintenance. This vertical integration ensures women capture value across the energy sector rather than remaining confined to low-skill assembly work.⁸

Gender-Transformative Elements

• Women-Owned Energy Infrastructure

SEWA established India's first women-owned solar park in Naradi village, with 300 women shareholders. The ownership model ensures women's direct control over energy assets and revenues, transforming traditional property relations.

• Technical Skill Revolution

Over 1,000 women received comprehensive training in solar technology, moving beyond basic installation to advanced repair and maintenance. Training methodologies accommodate women's education levels and time constraints while building confidence to enter male-dominated spaces.

• Energy Cooperatives

SEWA established women's energy cooperatives that collectively purchase, manage, and maintain renewable energy systems. These cooperatives provide more than energy access as they create platforms for women's collective decision-making and economic autonomy. Members report that

cooperative participation has transformed their household status and community standing.⁹

• Livelihood Integration

The campaign links energy access to income generation through solar-powered enterprises. Women use solar dryers for food processing, solar pumps for agriculture, and solar lighting to extend working hours for crafts production. By addressing energy needs within livelihood contexts, SEWA ensures that technologies enhance rather than burden women's work.

Transformative Outcomes

SEWA's renewable energy initiatives have catalysed notable economic and social shifts among women members. In Naradi village, 300 salt pan workers co-own a 2.7 MW solar park, generating consistent income and ensuring energy access for year-round salt production, enabling them to improve and sustain their core income-generating activities. Women trained through SEWA's solar programmes have become certified technicians, gaining access to higher-income, skilled employment traditionally dominated by men. These training programmes are designed to accommodate varying education levels and include supportive infrastructure like childcare and residential facilities.¹⁰ SEWA also documents improvements in health and well-being through the adoption of clean energy solutions such as biogas and smokeless stoves, which reduce exposure to indoor air pollution. Collectively organized ownership and operation of energy infrastructure has strengthened women's bargaining power, economic participation, and community status.

Challenges and Future Direction

Despite the successes, there are still challenges that persist. The male-dominated formal energy sector remains resistant to women's enterprises. Policy frameworks inadequately recognize women's energy cooperatives. Scaling requires significant investment in women's technical education and supportive infrastructure. SEWA continues advocating for policy reforms recognizing women's energy rights, expanding technical training programmes across India, and documenting the model for replication in other contexts. The campaign demonstrates that energy democracy requires not just changing energy sources but transforming how they are controlled.

Footnotes

- ¹ World Health Organisation (WHO). 2024. "Household Air Pollution." October 16, 2024. Geneva: WHO. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/household-air-pollution-and-health>.
- ² Nisha. 2025. "Empowering Women Salt Workers with Clean Energy in the Little Rann of Kutch - Wocan." Wocan (blog). May 2, 2025. <https://www.wocan.org/blog/empowering-women-salt-workers-with-clean-energy-in-the-little-rann-of-kutch/>.
- ³ Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) and Jyoti Macwan, Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA). 2022. Annual Report 2022. Ahmedabad: SEWA. URL: <https://www.sewa.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/2022-SEWA-Annual-Report-Final-4.pdf>.
- ⁴ ReNew Power and UNEP. 2022. "ReNew Power, UNEP and SEWA Launch One-of-a-kind Programme to Train Women Salt Pan Workers as Solar Technicians." June 30, 2022. Gurugram: UN India. <https://india.un.org/en/193972-renew-power-unep-sewa-launch-one-kind-programme-train-women-salt-pan-workers-solar>.
- ⁵ ReNew Power and UNEP. 2022. "ReNew Power, UNEP and SEWA Launch One-of-a-kind Programme to Train Women Salt Pan Workers as Solar Technicians." June 30, 2022. Gurugram: UN India, 28-29.
- ⁶ ReNew Power and UNEP. 2022. "ReNew Power, UNEP and SEWA Launch One-of-a-kind Programme to Train Women Salt Pan Workers as Solar Technicians." June 30, 2022. Gurugram: UN India, 11,30.
- ⁷ ReNew Power and UNEP. 2022. "ReNew Power, UNEP and SEWA Launch One-of-a-kind Programme to Train Women Salt Pan Workers as Solar Technicians." June 30, 2022. Gurugram: UN India, 28-29.
- ⁸ ReNew Power and UNEP. 2022. "ReNew Power, UNEP and SEWA Launch One-of-a-kind Programme to Train Women Salt Pan Workers as Solar Technicians." June 30, 2022. Gurugram: UN India, 29.
- ⁹ ReNew Power and UNEP. 2022. "ReNew Power, UNEP and SEWA Launch One-of-a-kind Programme to Train Women Salt Pan Workers as Solar Technicians." June 30, 2022. Gurugram: UN India, 28-29.
- ¹⁰ ReNew Power and UNEP. 2022. "ReNew Power, UNEP and SEWA Launch One-of-a-kind Programme to Train Women Salt Pan Workers as Solar Technicians." June 30, 2022. Gurugram: UN India, 28.

About this Case Study

This case study examines gender-transformative approaches to just transitions through grassroots initiatives in the global South. It was produced by GI-ESCR and UNRISD to demonstrate how centring women's leadership in energy transitions creates more equitable and sustainable outcomes.

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