

Inclusion of Urban Young Women in the Cooperative Structure: A Case Study of Srujan Cooperative

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Introduction

A significant portion of India's workforce, aged 18-35, plays a crucial role in the economy. However, young women in the informal sector face challenges such as lack of education, unemployment, and social barriers. Youth-centric cooperatives can address these issues by fostering innovation, expanding income opportunities, sharing best practices, enhancing credibility and participation in the cooperative movement. On the occasion of India's 75th year of independence, the Ministry of Cooperation was established to strengthen cooperatives as a key driver of socio-economic development, aligning with *Aatma Nirbhar Bharat* and rural growth. Inclusive cooperative models incorporating capacity building, education, and skill training can ensure sustainable cooperative development, balancing economic, social, and environmental goals. The Coop Connect programme, launched by the National Cooperative Union of India, promotes cooperative models among youth through education, training, and faculty development. The literature on youth and cooperatives highlights global perspectives from the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA), SEWA Cooperative Federation, India's institutional initiatives, and incubation efforts led by the National Skill Development Council.

Context

The Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) has been a pioneer in uplifting informal women workers through livelihood interventions tailored to their needs. For the past 32 years, one of the sister organizations of SEWA, the SEWA Cooperative Federation (referred to as SCF in the document) has focused on supporting cooperatives and collectives for informal women workers for their sustainability and making them resilient. These cooperatives are founded on values of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity, and solidarity. During the COVID-19 pandemic, it was evident that the cooperative structure enhanced resilience and strengthened solidarity.

The SEWA Cooperative Federation has been a flagbearer in promoting³ cooperatives and initiating cooperatives based on the needs of the time and catering to the demands of the market. To attract younger generations especially women to the cooperative structures, the SCF endeavours to organize young women into cooperative structures through the 'Srujan Program' as initiated in the year 2022. To understand the ground situation, SEWA community leaders

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³ International Labour Organisation, (2024), Strengthening women's cooperatives: The experience of SEWA Cooperative Federation & International Labour Organisation, (2018), Advancing cooperation among women workers in the informal economy: The SEWA Way

known as 'Agewan' adopted a method of mobilizing and organizing young women through area meetings. During these meetings, young women expressed their ambitions to explore new areas of work and showed interest in developing their career with digital technology, photography and basic social science research work.

About the Program

During the area meetings, it was found that hopes and aspirations of the young women especially in the lower socio - economic social groups are different from the traditional sectors of work the informal women workers are engaged in. They were not eager⁴ to continue with the traditional work/trade and wanted to explore contemporary areas of work i.e. technology-based - white collar - desk jobs. At the same time, they have a different perspective towards informality, work and cooperative movement. Based on these observations, the SCF explored non-traditional alternatives for livelihood opportunities for the younger generation.

The Srujan Program was initiated to build a cooperative of hope, aspiration, and empowerment of young women in the city of Ahmedabad, Gujarat. Initially it began with research and communication training, keeping in mind generating livelihood opportunities with digital technology. Accordingly, the training sessions, technical sessions, exposure visits and marketing/social media collateral were developed. The program structure has adopted a dynamic approach taking into consideration the needs and aspirations of the members. The communication training sessions were intended to incubate young women from the grassroots, empowering them with sector-specific skills that offer them an opportunity for a sustained livelihood, the skills and tools, and a medium to own and tell their own stories, of their communities i.e. women informal workers from the grassroots in their voices.

The trainings focused on organizing young women from local communities, builds capacity in grassroots journalism, mobile photography, reel making and empowers them to report stories from the ground through a dedicated online channel that they will help design, creating a skilled women-led technology focused cooperative that will work as a digital agency for other social enterprises, and possibly other organisations in the public and private sectors.

In addition, considering the need for ongoing research within public and private-sector organisations, it was considered to train young girls as grassroots researchers to extend their support for research and documentation activities. They were trained in conducting online and offline surveys, data entry, transcription from Gujarati to Hindi and English, basic qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection, and report writing.

Methodology

This paper focuses on the possibilities of integrating youth into the cooperative movement. It gathers detailed subjective experiences from program participants and employs triangulation of these narratives with the concepts of cooperatives, skill enhancement, and livelihood creation. The subjective experiences were captured through participant observation, interaction with the participants, in depth interviews and group activities conducted during the training sessions.

⁴ Observations of the Program Manager, Srujan, dated May 15, 2024

Genesis of the Srujan Program

- a) **Preparatory Phase:** The Srujan program began in January 2022, with continuous mobilization and organizing efforts. Area meetings were held in selected localities of Ahmedabad, focusing on SEWA's second-generation members. By September 2022, 100 young women were organized and trained in soft skills, research, and communication, boosting their confidence and encouraging others to join. Participants received livelihood guidance, and some were linked with livelihood agencies. By December 2022, the program expanded to 340 women, trained in technical, soft skills, and leadership programs, with 12 successfully placed in livelihood programs.
- b) **Development Phase:** To enhance communication, a WhatsApp Broadcast Group was created for participants and mentors. Health awareness training was provided, and 10 women enrolled in computer skills training at the government-run Institute of Technical Training (ITI). The SEWA Cooperative Federation (SCF) also connected participants with government schemes. Community engagement efforts helped build trust among families. By September 2023, the program had trained 522 women in leadership and cooperative management. The goal was to equip them for financial independence and cooperative governance. Selected participants gained hands-on experience by attending Annual General Meetings (AGMs) of SCF and SEWA sister organizations.
- c) **Reorientation Phase:** To enhance outreach, marketing materials, including patrika, brochures, and social media content, were developed. Collaborations were established for livelihood opportunities. Exposure visits helped participants understand cooperative structures, management, and governance. A technical training session further strengthened their cooperative knowledge. In March 2024, exposure visits to SEWA sister cooperatives deepened their understanding, while concurrent training and technical programs created livelihood linkages, resulting in six new partnerships in Ahmedabad.
- d) **Mature Phase:** By June 2024, 33 training sessions were conducted with 478 participants, generating ₹1,80,873 (USD 2,134) in livelihood income. A cooperative business workshop was held, and engaged participants attended AGMs of SEWA cooperatives. Some young women were inducted as interns at SEWA Cooperative Federation, strengthening their skills and contributing to the organization.

Impact of the Program

From January 2022 to June 2024 a total of 774 young women were mobilized. Among them, 42 are linked with livelihood opportunities i.e. transcription, fieldwork i.e. data collection, data entry, documentation, archival work, and community mobilizers, etc. A total of 3, 28, 598 Indian Rupees (3, 877 US Dollars) were generated during the period. In September 2024, 26 of the members were enrolled in a year-long paid financial Fellowship Program run by one of the city-based philanthropic organizations. By the year's end, all the participants of this fellowship programme will earn approximately 46, 80, 000/- Indian Rupees (55, 216 US Dollars).

Analysis

- a) **Organisational Mobilization as a technique:** The previously mobilized areas and the locations where our SEWA members are located were the initial points of mobilization. Area meetings have been the stepping stone for the mobilization of the program. The

localities having the presence of SEWA sisters and the activities initiated in these localities are considered to start for the same. The incubation team contacted the listed prospective candidates and discussed employment and livelihood opportunities with them. Accordingly, area meetings were scheduled and the prospective candidates were invited for the meetings. However, during these area meetings, it was realized that the young women were not confident about coming out of their localities and exploring new and contemporary work opportunities. The young women and their parents were invited to the area meetings. A series of patrikas/pamphlets have been prepared for the wider reach of this program.

b) Peer Mobilization as an intervention: In the second phase, trained participants led mobilization efforts, conducting sessions in identified localities and building trust within communities. Some participants joined the SEWA Cooperative Federation and Srujan Program's mobilization team, engaging young women in discussions about training programs and livelihood opportunities. The process began with 8-9 existing members conducting outreach. A key challenge was limited computer skills among young women. To address this, the program connected them with an Ahmedabad-based NGO and enrolled 11 participants in government-run ITI centers. These skills enabled them to secure data entry, archival, and survey assignments. Key strategies that were adapted include rigorous mobilization, skill training, livelihood linkages, task-based assignments, exposure visits, and participation in cooperative activities.

c) Skills learned

i) **Computer Skills:** All the participants are trained in basic computer skills and related tasks, such as creating Google documents, filling Google Forms, data entry, utilizing data collection tools like Kobo Tool, transcription, research, and other similar tasks. Two of the trainees have been recruited by a tech company based in Ahmedabad.

ii) **Domain specific skills and expertise:** Each member of the group was given specialised capacity building training according to the preference of the members. The courses were basic journalism, digital media, graphic design, photography and new media, or research methodologies, and data collection. Besides, soft-skills training in leadership, entrepreneurship, and cooperative education was provided to the incubated women. In pursuit of mentoring them, the women were assigned to the experts of the Federation. Further, exposure visits to local and national organisations in the relevant fields were included/planned for them.

iii) **Cooperative Management and leadership:** Training sessions about collective formation and cooperative governance and management were conducted by experts along with exposure visits were planned to get first hand experience of the same. Selected participants were invited to attend Annual General Meetings (AGM) of the SCF and SEWA Sister organization, participation in the Women's Day Celebrations. A few of them were inducted as the Board of Directors (BoD) of SEWA Cooperative Federation's sister cooperatives. These engagements are planned to include the youth in the cooperative movements and getting soaked in the leadership positions.

d) Ownership & Trust building: Initially the young women were hesitant to take the lead in research, communication, or any other tasks. They were not ready to grab the opportunity because of social norms, confidence of traveling alone and staying on-site.

They were motivated, provided mentorship and given the ownership of the work to take up the assignments. The Federation team members travel along with them for field work, providing equal opportunities and handholding to excel in their work. The enabling factors like the ownership and trust building exercises have been one of the constant motivating factors throughout the mobilization process.

Challenges and Learning

- **Challenges from the Programme Perspective:** It is felt that the mobilised members require continuous engagement. The young members belong to the volatile age groups. It has been a tough task to engage the young minds especially in an urban setting. There are challenges in building trust in the low socioeconomic areas of the city. The mutual trust and social capital which SEWA fraternity enjoys could be used to a certain extent but it could not be leveraged in keeping the members glued to the program for the entire duration of the training. It is to remember that incubation is a time consuming process and requires strategic planning, handholding support, constant engagement of the members and incubation teams.
- **Constant Engagement:** One of the pressing challenges of the program was to motivate the members to attend the programs regularly and encourage them to work at the grassroot field assignments. The members of the cooperatives are not interested in working at the grassroots level. The ‘parents - mobilisers’ meetings are organised to increase the members participation level. Along with this area meetings have to be planned rigorously to motivate and convince the prospective members and their parents. Continuous mobilization and motivation are required to keep these women interested in this program.
- **Evolving program structure:** The program was planned to initiate two cooperatives based on skill-based knowledge economy. However, looking into the retention and diverse interests of the participants, the scope of the program was relaxed and young women with lesser educational qualifications and other career interests were included in the program. The passion and rigor required to be a grassroots professional were found to be missing. The need for incubation comes from the ‘needs of members’ and the ‘needs of society’⁵. One of the senior members handling the cooperative governance at the SCF opines that “SEWA works on the issues of the sisters on the ground level, and the changing needs of the society . Hence, the needs of the participants and market to be taken into consideration while planning the cooperative for the urban youth”. Their hopes, aspirations, and career goals need to align with the market requirements. This two way understanding laid the impactful beginning of the process.
- **Participants Perspective:** The young women face resistance from their families and parental compulsions to participate in the training programs. Married women have to provide childcare and home care before traveling for the training sessions. The opportunity costs, lack of an enabling work environment, exam timings overlapping during the incubation, and unsatisfactory hand-holding system are cited as a few reasons for nonparticipation in the program. To keep the members engaged and motivated for the

⁵ In depth interview with Jayaben Vaghela, consultant, SEWA Federation and pioneer of cooperative governance dated 10 August 2024.

cooperative structure requires constant hand-holding, initial seed amount, strategic planning, a detailed business model, regular work opportunities, skill updation, and upgradation, etc.

Learnings

- The younger generation is attracted to experimenting with new technology and eager to pursue the same as their career path. Some of the participants expressed their desire to be ethical hackers and learn drone photography. They are open to learning and experimenting with photography, videography, and editing software. Technology based cooperatives can attract them.
- Where ‘thoughts become their capital and creative energy as the channels of expression and the technological know-how as the tool to present their thoughts to the world’, the SCF needs to function as an accelerator and catalyst in fulfilling the hopes and aspirations of the youth.
- Regular engagements, exposure visits to the cooperatives and communities, and community-based programs in collaboration with public and private organizations can enhance the skills and strengthen the cooperative entities.
- As a member-based organization where members and leaders are crucial in the effective functioning of the cooperatives, co-creating a leadership cadre accelerates the process. We need to take note of the fact that incubation is a time-consuming process that requires patience, perseverance, and persistence from the organization and the incubatees.
- The training sessions can be bifurcated into two separate groups i.e. research and communication domain/categories based on their interest and skills. This can enable the trainees to best utilize their educational and professional skills to create sustainable livelihood opportunities. Inability to locate/contact young women/girls to stay on for a longer duration of time for training purposes.

The Way forward

The first and crucial steps of incubating a cooperative like *Srujan* is to organize and mobilize more active young women to the cooperative structures. It has been the endeavour of the SEWA and SCF to provide platforms to the informal women workers. The leadership traits of the emerging members are to be tapped and the sense of ownership need to be inculcated among the mobilised group. After the effective organizing and mobilization drive, and creation of a cadre of leaders is proposed. The SEWA Cooperative Federation will facilitate and provide the required support to the mobilized members to register a cooperative in the district of Ahmedabad. Throughout the process, the SCF will provide required governance and compliance-related support to the members. The priority is to create a strong and capable Board of Directors (BoD) and to keep compliance-related documentation in place. Training sessions on initial account keeping and audit processes would be conducted to strengthen the member’s capacity. Planning interactive sessions with young cooperative leaders would help the young aspiring corporators with first hand information about the operational aspects of cooperative management. These interactive activities enable them to visualize the positive outcomes of being associated with the cooperatives. The ethos of youth inclusion in the post-pandemic era lies in introducing young women to the sustainability aspects of cooperatives i.e. economic empowerment, social inclusion/support/solidarity, and a way of self-expression.

The State of Gujarat is known for the trader communities, the state has a culture of cooperatives, and the business mindset is ingrained in the socio-cultural ethos of their lives. Capitalizing this, workshops on cooperative mindset and business plans are planned to provide clear business plans. The creation of a database of the members, a market study for the profitable business, and linkage for livelihood are also planned. The learnings of the incubation process will be documented and serve as a knowledge hub and resource for prospective cooperatives and incubators.

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