

Empowering Grassroots Women Leaders

Learning Journey Report of Cohort I | SEWA Federation's Fellowship Programme



The SEWA Cooperative Federation¹, a state-level cooperative with over three decades of experience in cooperative management and governance has initiated a programme for grassroots leadership development. This was designed based on the realization that grassroots leaders of women-led collectives and cooperatives are challenged with a lack of training and exposure opportunities to strengthen their leadership skills to effectively run and grow their enterprises².

The Federation launched its Grassroots Leadership Fellowship Programme in September 2024, with the first cohort in Gujarat. The programme is designed to empower potential women leaders and board members of cooperative and collective enterprises in the informal sector, helping

¹ <https://www.sewafederation.org/about-us/#mission-vision>, as accessed on 24 October 2025.

² Observations of 'Delhi Declaration for Women Cooperators - 2022' organized by the SEWA Cooperative Federation, the SEWA Bharat, the National Cooperative Union of India (NCUI), and the International Cooperative Alliance, Asia-Pacific (ICA-AP) in the year 2022.

them govern and lead their collective businesses effectively. This report highlights the learning journey of the first cohort of fellows.

I. Programme Objectives:

- To strengthen the capacity of ‘women-worker-leaders’ who are in, or have shown potential to be in leadership roles within Women Collective Enterprises (WCEs).
- To equip them with the skills to manage governance and regulatory functions, while inculcating a business mindset.

II. Programme overview

The fellowship has been designed as a residential programme, spread over 22 training days and 1 day for convocation ceremony, over the course of a year.

Participants are trained in: i) Governance and leadership, ii) marketing and business development iii) digital skills iv) soft skills and developing the confidence to represent their collectives in public and policy spaces. The curriculum is tailored to help fellows develop the required mindset and competencies for building solidarity for collective action, balancing individual growth with organizational success, driving profitable enterprises, establishing strategic connections, setting financial goals, strengthening second-line leadership, and team building.

Participatory training sessions are supplemented with exposure visits, peer learning strategies, and structured feedback to enable continuous reflection and growth. Remedial or repeat sessions were conducted for fellows who needed extra support, or who had missed specific sessions.

III. Profile of participating fellows

Name of the organisation	Type of Organisation	Number of fellows	Trade
Sabar AART Farmer Producer Company	All-women Farmer Producer Company from Khedbrahma district. Currently has 4000 shareholders working in Poshina and Danta blocks	2	Agriculture
Atapi Seva Foundation	Mahila Vikas Maha Mandal, Jambusar. Works on social and developmental issues of women across 69 villages of Jambusar block with 3000+ members	2	Social and developmental issues

Cohesion Foundation	Ujas Mahila Khedut Sangathan (A Women Farmers' Collective), a community-based organisation comprising 52 women farmer groups with 3000 members	2	Agriculture
Atapi Seva Foundation	Ujjas Mahila Bachat Dhiran Grahak Sahakari Mandali Limited (Women's savings and credit cooperative), a savings and credit group	2	Savings and credit
Mahila Vikas Hastkala Audhyogik Sahakari Mandali Ltd.	Women's handicraft cooperative, based in Wadhwan block, Surendranagar district; engaged in Bandhani (tie and dye) work. Currently has 55 members	2	Handicraft
Action Aid	Ekal Nari Shakti Manch, works on social security, property rights, breaking social taboos, and employment-related/livelihood initiatives for single women	2	Social development, social security, property rights and livelihood generation
Cohesion Foundation	Self-Help Groups in Kheralu block, Mahesana district, engaged in employment activities such as making snacks (pakoda, pani puri) and home-made organic soaps	2	Micro and nano enterprises
SEWA	National Insurance Vimo SEWA Cooperative Ltd. provides insurance products for working women to ensure social security	2	Social security through insurance products
Total participants		16	

IV. Assessment

The fellows' journey was systematically mapped through structured assessment tools to gauge improvement on the following core competencies:

i) Awareness and knowledge-building, ii) Self-discovery and belonging, iii) Teamwork, iv) Networking and engagement, v) Resource enhancement and reflection, and vi) Digital skills and productivity.

Assessments were done through the following exercises:

- **Pre and post assessments:** This was done at the beginning and end of the fellowship through a structured questionnaire comprising of both open-ended questions and items measured on a five-point Likert scale (5 - strongly agree, 4 - agree, 3 - Neutral, 2 - disagree, 1 - strongly disagree)
- **Month 1:** SOAR (Strength - Opportunity - Aspiration - Results)
- **Month 3, 7, 11:** 'Kaizen' exercise, which involved objective, topic and skill-based assessments, as well as self-reflection.
- **Month 11:** SWOT (Strength - Weakness - Opportunity - Threat) analysis which was a self-reported reflective exercise
- **Continuous qualitative assessments** and feedback are given to support continuous learning and re-learning

V. Learning Journey

Most fellows reported improved skills in networking, forming strong partnerships, teamwork, building accountability, being adaptable, problem-solving and digital skills. However, managing work-life balance emerged as a challenge across fellows. These findings suggest a newly acquired lens and mindset change on the need to prioritize self, and for continuous self-discovery, while recognizing strengths and weaknesses.

The evolutionary process of personal growth, enhanced confidence and self-awareness will continue as fellows leverage opportunities for exposure, upskilling and take time to reflect on their choices and decisions – both personally and professionally.

The following section presents thematic areas of growth that have emerged from various assessments.

Active participation

- Majority of participants had 90% attendance, while three participants had 100% attendance.

Vision-building

- All the participants were able to articulate and recall the dream/aspiration or ‘*sapana*’ they had envisioned for themselves as leaders, in the first month of the programme.
- Participants also realized that dreams evolve with knowledge and experience gained and by developing new skills and competencies. The training sessions have also enabled fellows to map the steps they need to take to fulfil their dreams.

“Samay ke saath mera sapana badaltha jata hey ... Mera sapna hai ki beheno ko apne hak miley. Over time, my dreams keep changing... I dream that members of my sanstha (collective) get access to their rights.”

- Sumitraben Sachinbhai Pawar, Ujjas Mahila Khedut Sangathan

Another participant shared that her dream was to become a manager. However, she could not take steps to fulfill this, so she changed her dream.

“Now, I want to train the villagers/women/members about organic farming. That’s my dream. Currently, I am producing organic/ayurvedic medicines”.

- Hasuben, Mahila Vikas Mahamandal

Confidence and assertiveness

- All participants shared that the learning sessions have helped them evolve their working style at their *organisations* and at home. One fellow shared *“the members of my organisation have started believing in my leadership abilities ... I am feeling confident”*.
- Veenaben Vasubhai Rathod, Sabar AART Farmer Enterprise (SAFE) Producer Company Ltd.
- Fellows also shared that they can be more assertive while expressing their perspectives and ideas on exploring business opportunities and reinventing business tactics

Prioritizing professional work commitment

- In order to attend training sessions, participants reported completing household chores, managing family commitments as well as agricultural work, and caring for the cattle.
- Some participants also reported completing their organizational assignments and drafting reports for their managers, about their participation for two day training in Ahmedabad.

Mobility

- Majority of the participants were traveling outside of their districts independently for the first time. This was also their first time using intra-state GRTC buses, staying in hotels, enjoying the hospitality of the city, exploring the city, and shopping for themselves, and their children. They reported increased confidence in travelling and navigating such spaces. The opportunity to travel with colleagues (from the same locality and organization) was helpful.

Digital skills

- All the participants reported learning how to access WhatsApp messages in Gujarati, and can use specific features such as broadcasting groups, and WhatsApp poll/voting option and sending google locations. They have also learnt **how to use Facebook**, and were familiarized with the 'do's and don'ts' for various digital platforms and they reported exploring ways to use these platforms for marketing.

Networking skills

- The fellowship has been designed as a platform for peer engagement, lateral learning and knowledge sharing between grassroot leaders. Additionally, exposure visits to successful enterprises run by grassroot leaders in a different state (Maharashtra) were organized to inspire, and to learn from their entrepreneurial trajectories. Fellows reported learning the importance of forging connections and networking.

“Networking ‘kala’ bahut zaruri hey apni business chalane ke liye. Pakodi ki business chala ne ke liye networking karna padata hey. Kabhi kabhi sanstha mein aachi networking ho tho aacha kaam/bussiness milta hey. Pachele mein aachi networking ki tarike nehi janti thi, sahabhagi sikhani ka program se mujhe networking benefits ke baare mein pata chala. Abhi tho, mein networking karti hu”.

“The ‘art’ of networking is very important to run any business. Even for selling panipuri or pakodi, one requires networking. When there is a good networking system within the

organisation, we receive good work and opportunities to secure business. Earlier, I didn't know how to do networking. Now, I have realized the essence of networking skills and I use the same for my work".

- Sumitraben, Ujjas Mahila Kedut Sangh

Building a 'second-line' of workers and leaders

- This has been a key learning outcome for fellows, to invest in building a cadre of potential leaders for the sustainability of their enterprises. Below are quotes from four fellows:

"Earlier, while I was working in the village, despite my best efforts, I was unable to train other women members as leaders. Whereas after attending the fellowship program, I feel I can train 'aagewans' well. I have learnt to offer incentives to potential leaders for this."

- Bhagvatiben Sukhdevbhai Dave, National Insurance Vimo SEWA Cooperative Ltd.

"If the existing leadership is not working well, it's my duty to prepare the second-line leaders to take charge. Collectively, we must move forward and progress in our work and lives."

- Sonalben Mahipatsinh Gohil, Shree Mahila Vikas Hashtakala ane Ayduodik Sahakari Mandali Ltd

"Through this fellowship program, I have become capable of training members as leaders. Being a leader, I am capable of preparing upcoming leaders in the Sabar AART Company."

- Chokhliben Ajitbhai Gamar, Sabar AART Enterprise Pvt. Ltd.

"I will now observe the working style of successful leaders in our sanstha, to prepare a second-line of leaders. If the aagewan (leader/ front line worker) is good and capable of counselling family members of a potential leader, we can (have family support) to build a cadre of second-line leaders."

- Taraben Bakaji Thakor, Ashrivad Self Help Group, Kuda

VI. Way forward

The SEWA Cooperative Federation plans to extend support to fellows for the next one and a half years, with regular opportunities for feedback, discussion and mentoring. Additionally, follow-up trainings will be organized every 6 months. The fellows will also be given priority for any future training programmes organized by the Federation.



The next cohorts are currently being organized in other Indian states. We hope to engage all of our alumni as part of a peer-learning network for continuous lateral learning and skill sharing.