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**UNDERSTANDING SEWA MOVEMENT IN KERALA WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE
TO WOMEN DOMESTIC WORKERS OF SEWA IN KERALA**

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Author Note

I, Arathi Aneesh I.K pursuing M.Phil in Political Science from University of Kerala, India. Gender and unorganised labour is my research area and I submitted the M.Phil thesis on “Understanding SEWA Movement in Kerala with Special Reference to Domestic Workers of SEWA in Thiruvananthapuram” under the guideship of Dr. Samuel Jacob Kuruvilla. I have completed MA in International Relations and Political Science from Central University of Kerala during the 2017-2019 batch.

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Abstract

The Self-Employed Women's Association is almost globally acclaimed for its work in organizing women in India's unorganised sector. Women get exploited in several ways in their unorganised work environment. In 1972 the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in India was formed by Ela Bhat in Gujarat. SEWA is a trade union and movement for women in the informal economy. It has succeeded in empowering thousands of women in the unorganised sector. SEWA has 16 state wings all around the country, in Kerala SEWA has a state wing. They are working in Kerala since 1983. They try to work among the women workers in unorganised sector. SEWA Kerala includes 5 sectors of women workers in the unorganised sector they are domestic workers, reed workers, fish vendors, street vendors and home based workers. Domestic sector is one of the working sectors of SEWA in Kerala. SMSS is the project for organizing women domestic workers under the SEWA movement in Kerala.

Key Words: SEWA, Domestic workers, SMSS, Trade union, Women's movement

Introduction

According to the ILO, work is fundamental part to people's welfare. In addition to providing income, work can make the way for broader social and economic progression, strengthening individuals, their families and communities. Gender is an important impression, under the conditions of decent work.

Women also have the same productivity and efficiency as men, even when they faced discrimination in wages, poor working conditions and insecurity in the work place. The central and state governments have framed certain specific schemes to support unorganized sector women workers but it failed in meeting the real needs and necessities of the unorganized labour force.

The need of trade unions for bargaining rights of workers in the organised and unorganised working sector. The role of women was analysed with respect to trade unions in order to understand that how do women address their issues, in case of problems with respect to their working conditions, sexual harassments and any other women related issues. Women in the organised sector have privileges over women in the unorganised sector.

Trade unionism in India has a history about 100 years. Trade union environments are mainly male dominated. Most of them are ignore the issues of women workers including lack of toilet facilities in the work place, discrimination in the work place, long working hours, low wages etc. Here is the importance of the need of women trade unions, they are working for the certain issues of women labourers in the unorganised sector. Anasooya Sarabhai was the leader of labour movement in Ahamedabad textile industry and formed a trade union in the year of 1920.

In 1972 the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in India was formed by Ela Bhat in Gujarat. SEWA is a trade union and movement for women in the informal economy. It has

succeeded in empowering hundreds of thousands of women in the unorganised sector. Working on the way to achieve its two goals which are full employment and self-reliance, SEWA has helped organize women to create cooperatives along trade union, has helped to arrange vital social services like healthcare, childcare, and access to water, and continues to enlarge its services responding to the needs of its members. Today, SEWA has over 1.5 million registered members all around the country.

Kerala is one of the states in India and the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) is a women's trade union in the informal economy in India. Current study specializing the domestic workers of SEWA in the Kerala region. Gender and labour relations are redefined in the unorganised sector after the globalization of women labour in the neo-liberal period. SEWA is the only trade union working for unorganised women workers in India effectively. Organizing women in the unorganised sector is the risky task other major politically affiliated trade unions are ignore the unorganised sector most of the time. Labour rights are denied and no particular wage scale and unsecure working conditions are the major features of unorganised sector in India. Comparing to male population 90% of the unorganised working spaces are led by women workers in India. SEWA has state wings including SEWA Kerala. They are working here 1983 onwards and SEWA Union situated in Thiruvananthapuram, capital city of Kerala. Now 8 districts in Kerala have the centers for SEWA union works. Their organizing works are mainly concentrated among domestic workers, reed workers, fish vendors and street vendors in Kerala. This study specifically focuses to understand SEWA movement in Kerala with special reference to their domestic workers in Thiruvananthapuram.

Objectives of the study

- To understand the role of SEWA as a trade union and a women's movement in Kerala and analyses its working mechanism among unorganised sector women workers of Trivandrum.
- To understand the nature of unorganised sector in the context of women labourers in the domestic workers of SEWA in Trivandrum.
- To identify and examine the gender consciousness and work for women empowerment of SEWA as a women trade union.
- To identify the need of political struggle apart social and economic struggle of SEWA as a trade union.

Research question

SEWA registered as a central trade union in India and it is the one and only women's trade union working in the unorganised sector. Today SEWA working in 16 different states for the welfare of women workers in the informal economy. Here is the study titled "Understanding SEWA movement in Kerala with special reference to domestic workers of SEWA in Kerala". SEWA how to organize the women unorganised sector workers in Trivandrum? And how to work for their rights in the working place? Domestic workers of SEWA spread around the rural and backward parts of Trivandrum and how to SEWA mobilize them and create understanding among them to domestic worker is a worker in the unorganised sector? And how to create awareness among them to "your homes are our working place is the motto of domestic workers"? Finally to rise a new consciousness of "rights of a domestic worker" in the latest ILO Conventions, in this situation how to SEWA work for the gender consciousness among the informal sector labourers and how to develop a uniform working culture among the domestic workers of SEWA and stand against the any kind of violence and sexual harassment at workplace among domestics workers in Trivandrum?

Methodology

The study is concentrated in the women workers of unorganised sector in the Trade union named SEWA, mainly located in Thiruvananthapuram, State of Kerala. Both quantitative and qualitative aspects would be helpful in completing the study. The respondents mainly are the women domestic workers of SEWA. Primary data will obtain from SEWA's women domestic workers and SEWA programme coordinators in Trivandrum. Attended Vanitha Vedis, which are the collectives of domestic workers of SEWA and collected data by using focus group discussions from there. The secondary data will obtain from: SEWA Research Centre, newspapers and periodicals, Published research articles, books, reports and literature available in website The secondary data is obtained from: Newspapers and periodicals, research articles, books, reports and literature available in website.

Sewa Kerala

The SEWA Movement in Kerala emerged in the mid-1980s, exact year 1983 to start with the aim of collectively organise unorganised women workers of Kerala. SEWA Kerala located in Trivandrum and other 8 districts are part of the SEWA movement in Kerala. The women labourers of SEWA coming from the rural population they are from the fishing, agriculture and reed worker communities. Therefore they were dependent on natural resources for their livelihoods. They are struggled to recollect these livelihoods when access to natural resources declined, several of them were also in need of alternate livelihood options. Single mothers and widows are trying to sustain their livings through day to day struggles. SEWA Kerala hopefully trained them for their supplementary economic activity in their lives and pave the way for creating their working culture as a well-trained manner.

As there were no other platforms/unions addressing the issues of women workers in the unorganised sector, Smt. Aleyamma Vijayan and Nalini Nayak, inspired by Ela Bhatt, to create SEWA in Kerala to decide to promoting women labourers in the unorganised sector. The initial stage of SEWA Kerala was very difficult. By 1986 onwards the movement began to take root. Alternate employment creation is the need for the hour, when the informal poor workers lost their livelihood and they are go to the service sector. The creation of workers union in the unorganised sector was the primary challenge.

Even though there was a sense of difficulty in entering into a new field of work, the founders of SEWA Kerala were very confident about the possibility of women being trained to perform as domestic workers in the homes and nursing assistants in hospitals. At first the women refused, they were insecure about working with sick and old age people. The major challenge was they were not ready to work in other people's homes. They were coming from the marginalized communities and they were skeptical about the treatment of house owners because most of them were coming from fisher community or from Dalit communities. But all these objections were undertook through discussion in the training sessions and built self –confidence in the minds of women workers in the unorganised sector.

SMSS (Swashreya Mahila Sewa Sangam): Wing of Domestic Workers of SEWA

SMSS is the collective of women domestic labourers of SEWA Kerala. The members of SMSS meet in every months in certain regions, this collectives are called Vanitha Vedis. Vanitha vedis are the smallest village unit of in the particular working sector. The organization of domestic workers is the very first initiative of SEWA Kerala to professionalize women workers in the domestic sector. SEWA give training for different skills and take up the women workers in the

domestic sector as professionals in that unorganised sector. SEWA's domestic workers providing works including:

- Nursing assistance for the sick and old age people
- Child care
- Post-natal care
- Cleaning and cooking assistance

Their services are managed by SEWA's office in Ayurveda Collage, Trivandrum. Smt. Sheena is the current programme coordinator of domestic workers of SEWA in Kerala.

Observations and Results

Visited SMSS Vanitha Vedis in Kattakkada and Thiruvallom in Thiruvananthapuram. SEWA's Domestic workers collective called Vanitha Vedi conducting meetings in every month, most probably the third Sunday of the month. 30 members are the SEWA's women's domestic workers in the Kattakada region. They are belongs to Panniyodu, Chemboor and Pattakulam. And another 30 members are included in the Thiruvallom Vanitha Vedi of SEWA. They discussed their issues in the working environment to SEWA coordinates in this meetings. In SEWA Kerala, they have around 400 working domestic workers in the different parts of Trivandrum. After the Corona Pandemic near to 200 workers had lost their job.

Majority of them belongs to sambava converted Christians, SC, ST communities, fish vending community and financially backward and lesser educationally qualified women labourers. They are working for their family wellbeing and giving support to their children's education. Widows are working as SEWA's domestic workers. In Thiruvananthapuram there is 10 vanitha vedis divided 10 different regions of domestic workers all around the district. The different kind of works

done by the women domestic workers including nursing assistance for the sick and old people, child care, post-natal care and cleaning and cooking assistance.

Major findings of the study

- SEWA Kerala is a trade union organise women's domestic workers in the unorganised sector in Trivandrum, Kerala one of the states in India. It's not only a trade union a women's movement and a self-help group in different ways. SEWA is the one and only trade union and platform among unorganised sector working women of Kerala working actively for the betterment of women labourers in the unorganised sector.
- Vanitha Vedis are the platform for reconnecting women domestic workers and SEWA Union regularly. Vanitha Vedis formulate a small amount of savings from members every month and SEWA union collects Monthly contributions from workers to their welfare fund. Vanitha vedis are the platforms for developing gender consciousness among women domestic workers.
- Caste and racial discrimination in the working environment visibly identified in the domestic sector of Kerala.
- SEWA try to empower domestic women workers in various ways for example making gender consciousness among women workers and addressing sexual harassments and gender related issues in the work place etc.
- SEWA has not find any political affiliation to the major political parties in Kerala that identified as the one of the reason behind the incompleteness of SEWA's movements in the unorganised sector. Because the rights of the workers generally gained through lobbying or pressurize the political parties.

- During the pandemic domestic workers are faced financial issues and lost their jobs for the reason they are coming from backward and unhygienic places.
- There is no right to use inside attached toilets by the domestic workers. They can use toilets in the outside of the households. And there is special plate and glass for the domestic workers in the households.
- Issues faced in their working conditions, 8am to 5pm is the working time, and they are doing more than 8 hours work. And they have huge work load. SEWA took initiative to bargain better working condition for domestic workers and meet every working households once in 3 months.
- There is not essential wages for their day to day work. Most of them travelling large distance to reach their work place. Every time SEWA involved to increase the salary scale of workers through bargaining. Recently after the lockdown the salary scale of the SEWA's domestic workers increased through wage bargaining.
- There is another issue find that women have periods not preferable by some households for domestic work. Because the reason behind it is the religious practices and beliefs in their households.
- During work time there is no proper break time for domestic workers or there is lack of proper rest rooms at the work place. Physical and mental health difficulties are reported as a serious health issues among women domestic workers.
- Women workers are not much aware about government Institutions, Acts and Policies favouring women workers in the workplace. The lack of awareness campaign by SEWA Kerala in this specific areas are identified in this study.

- Women workers generally afraid about workplace sexual harassment, mental pressure, and safety issues. SEWA try to aware and empower women labourers in this particular matters. But the lack of legal support and awareness about certain laws among domestic workers are very visible.
- SEWA's domestic workers are seems like independent and courageous at the work place but more gender sensitive campaigns are needed from the SEWA's side to empower women in the unorganised sector for arguing their gender rights.

Suggestions

In the light of the study findings, a number of recommendations are suggested to improve the social welfare and quality of life of the women labourers in the domestic sector.

- Gender, caste, class and racial discriminations at work place are consider as the very serious issues at the unorganised work place and government should take necessary steps to campaign against this social evils in our social system.
- It is very much essential to create awareness among women workers about the institutional support available them to protect their rights.
- SEWA must try to give essential training for skilled labours. Becase a trained worker in particular sector can get more demand and wage in the domestic sector.
- Every trade unions must be ready to recognize unorganised sector labourers and take initiatives for their welfare and raise their voice for the rights of women labourers in the unorganised sector.

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