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# The Path to Women's Empowerment: Understanding the Rise of the Self Employed Women's Association

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# The Path to Women's Empowerment: Understanding the Rise of the Self Employed Women's Association

## **Abstract**

Across the developing world, women in the informal economy, unprotected by government provisions and exploited by patriarchal structures, work relentlessly to earn a living for themselves and their families. Within these treacherous conditions, the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) emerged and developed into a powerful force in India and beyond. The question naturally arises – what enabled SEWA to become such a successful social movement? While previous scholars have pointed to various specific characteristics – its leadership, flexibility, values, strategy, governance, or autonomous nature – they have not put forth a theoretical framework through which to understand its rise to prominence. Drawing on social movement theory, I have put forth a three-phase framework that allows us to theoretically understand SEWA's emergence. The three phases – providing selective incentives, creating a common identity and shared purpose, and ensuring continuity – each depend on both organizational inputs and environmental factors. This framework illuminates how the transferability of the SEWA model will ultimately depend on the degree to which the environmental factors exist in the different contexts.

## **Keywords**

Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA), Social Movement theory, Women and Development, Women's Empowerment, Membership Based Organizations of the Poor, India, Social Sciences, Political Science, Rudra Sil, Sil, Rudra

## **Disciplines**

Political Science

**The Path to Women's Empowerment:  
Understanding the Rise of the Self-Employed Women's Association**

Orly May  
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Advised by Professor Sil  
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*“Gender equality will not only empower women to overcome poverty, but also their children, families, communities and countries. When seen in this light, gender equality is not only morally right – it is pivotal to human progress and sustainable development.”*

- State of the World’s Children, 2007<sup>1</sup>

## **I. Introduction**

Women have generally been labeled recipients of development projects – passive bystanders of complex political, economic, and social interactions. Yet women are not only recipients – they are agents of development. Whether at the individual level, in the household, at the workplace, or in the government, their empowerment creates a domino effect of change. Empowered women are more likely to have fewer children and at an older age, marry later and less likely to have HIV/AIDS or die at childbirth.<sup>2</sup> Further, they are more likely to allocate household resources to ensure their children receive proper health care, education, and nutrition. At the national level, empowered women are more likely to create policies that address the particular experiences of women and children.<sup>3</sup> Women’s empowerment is then not only necessary as a way for women to lift themselves out of poverty and experience the rights they deserve as human beings, but it also serves a vehicle for breaking the cycle of poverty and ensuring more holistic development.

Naila Kabeer, a professorial fellow at the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex, offers an insightful explanation of women’s empowerment. Kabeer sees empowerment as “the process by which those who have been denied the ability to make strategic

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF). *A State of the World’s Children 2007*. (New York: 2006): vii.

<sup>2</sup> Grown, Caren, Geeta Rao Gupta, and Aslihan Kes. *Taking Action: Achieving Gender Equality and Empowering Women*. (London: Earthscan, 2005)

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

life choices acquire such an ability.”<sup>4</sup> She expands this understanding by specifying that “choice necessarily implies the possibility of alternatives.”<sup>5</sup> She explains how disempowerment is intrinsically tied up to poverty since a lack of resources limits the ability to exercise meaningful choice. Apart from the debilitating economic restrictions, cultural, religious and political forces often pose additional challenges to women’s empowerment.

The Self-Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) in India, a union and movement for women in the informal economy started in 1972, has succeeded in empowering hundreds of thousands of women. Working towards its two goals of full employment and self reliance, SEWA has helped organize women into hundreds of cooperatives along trade lines, has helped provide crucial social services like healthcare, childcare, and access to water, and continues to expand its services responding to the needs of its members. Today, SEWA has over 1 million registered members.<sup>6</sup> Martha Chen, Professor of Public Policy at Harvard University and the Director of Women in the Informal Economy Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO), explains, “there is simply no other organization in the world that has promoted so systematically and effectively the collective strength and voice of working poor women in the informal economy.”<sup>7</sup> SEWA’s accomplishment is particularly stirring as women workers in the informal economy are among the most exploited members of society, with little voice and minimal resources.

The main difference between workers in the formal and informal economy is that workers in the informal economy lack any form of labor or social protection. Across the developing world women find themselves disproportionately represented within the informal

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<sup>4</sup> Kabeer, Naila. “Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurements of Women’s Empowerment.” *Development and Change*. Vol. 30 (1999): 436.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 437.

<sup>6</sup> “About Us: SEWA’s Structure.” SEWA. [http://www.sewa.org/About\\_Us\\_Structure.asp](http://www.sewa.org/About_Us_Structure.asp) [April 9, 2010]

<sup>7</sup> Chen, Martha. “Self-Employed Women: A Profile of SEWA’s Membership.” (SEWA Academy: Ahmedabad, 2006): 104.

economy. In India 94% of working women are in the informal sector.<sup>8</sup> Women in this sector work relentlessly yet do not see substantial returns from to their labor as they face exploitation at every level. SEWA has worked successfully to counter those trends.

SEWA's remarkable success juxtaposed with the fact that no other organization in the world has been able to do the same, naturally leads to the question – what enabled SEWA to emerge so successfully? Specifically, what organizational or environmental factors enabled SEWA to succeed? Answering this question will shed light on whether the SEWA movement can transfer successfully across borders. And if so, what key lessons can it provide on how to develop a movement of women workers in the informal economy so that women across the globe can reach empowerment.

Drawing on a comprehensive literature review of social movement theory, I propose a three-phase framework to explain SEWA's successful emergence. Critically important was SEWA's ability to 1) provide selective incentives for women to act collectively, 2) create a common identity and shared purpose among its members, and 3) ensure continuity of the movement. Each phase depends on both organizational inputs and environmental factors. In developing this framework, I contend that since SEWA's organizational inputs can be implemented in other context, SEWA's transferability depends on the existence of at least some supportive, or at least not hostile, environmental factors.

The following section, section II, will explore the informal economy, providing the background to understanding the significance of SEWA's success. It will address the discovery of the informal economy, an overview of global trends, women's role in it, and a more specific discussion of the informal economy in India. Section III then offers an overview of SEWA, examining its history, its objectives, the programs it offers, and an analysis of its success. Section

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<sup>8</sup> Chen, *Mainstreaming Informal Employment*, 16.

IV provides a literature review of social movement theory and considers competing approaches on what factors enable a social movement's success. Section V draws on those theories to explain SEWA's success. Specifically, in the section I will propose a three-phase framework that depends on both organizational inputs and environmental factors. Finally, using the framework from the section before, section VI discusses whether the SEWA movement can effectively be transferred to trigger social movements around the world. The section also discusses a weakness of the model along with the critically new perspective the framework offers.

## **II. Background: The Informal Economy**

To understand SEWA and its significance we must first understand the informal sector and women's role within it, both in general and in India. The informal workforce ranges from highly visible in society to essentially invisible. On the more visible side are those working on the streets, including, among others, street vendors, garbage collectors, bicycle peddlers, and rickshaw pullers. Slightly less visible are those working in small factories or workshops repairing bicycles, making furniture, dyeing clothes, tanning leather, embroidering garments, or sorting and selling cloth, paper, and metal waste. The least visible informal workers are those selling or producing goods from their home, the majority of which are women.<sup>9</sup> These home workers include, among others, garment makers, embroiderers, cigarette rollers, kite makers, and paper bag makers.<sup>10</sup> While the activities in the informal economy are incredibly diverse, most informal workers "share one thing in common: the lack of formal labor and social protection."<sup>11</sup>

### *Theoretical Understandings of the Informal Economy*

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<sup>9</sup> Chen, Martha, Joann Vanek, and Marilyn Carr. Mainstreaming Informal Employment and Gender in Poverty Reduction. (London: The Commonwealth Secretariat, 2004): 14.

<sup>10</sup> "Women and Men in the Informal Economy: A statistical Picture." (Geneva: International Labor Office, 2002): 9.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*



Despite the prevalence of the informal sector, only recently did the informal sector become a recognized element of the economy. With the prominence of the Modernization Theory in the 1950s and 1960s, scholars held that with the right policies, traditional economies could be turned into modern ones.<sup>12</sup> In the process of modernization, street vendors, traders, small producers and the like would be fully absorbed into the modern economy and thus disappear. With this understanding classical economists encouraged urbanization in developing countries. However, contrary to what they expected, urbanization led to an increased rate of unemployment as the economy could not absorb the labor force migrating into the cities. Because of the growing unemployment, Keith Hart, a British economist, conducted a study of labor force in Accra, Ghana in 1971.<sup>13</sup> He discovered that “unemployment was a luxury that the poor could not and did not afford” – the “unemployed” were actually earning an income.<sup>14</sup> Unable to obtain jobs in the formal sector, individuals created new means to earn a living. Hart coined this part of the economy the “informal sector.” The International Labor Organization (ILO) agreed with Hart’s concept of the informal sector and proposed a dualist approach to the economy in a study they conducted in Kenya in 1972. The report put forth “the notion that the informal sector is comprised of marginal activities – distinct from and not related to the formal sector – that provide income for the poor and a safety net in times of crisis.” Further, the report suggested that “the persistence of informal activities is due largely to the fact that not enough modern job opportunities have been created to absorb surplus labor.”<sup>15</sup> However, as more people studied the informal sector, the dualist model became recognized as overly simplistic and static.

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>13</sup> Chen, *Mainstreaming Informal Employment*, 16.

<sup>14</sup> Agarwala, Rina. *From Work to Welfare: Informal Workers’ Organizations and the State of India*. (Princeton University Dissertation, 2006): 24.

<sup>15</sup> Chen, *Mainstreaming Informal Employment*, 17.

Accordingly, the structuralist and legalist theories arose to replace it. Caroline Moser and Alexandro Portes proposed the structuralist approach in the late 1970s and 1980s. They argued that “the informal economy produces cheap goods and services that the formal economy relies on for its growth.”<sup>16</sup> So unlike the dualist approach that sees the two sectors as unrelated, the structuralist theory sees them as “inextricably connected and interdependent.”<sup>17</sup> Under this school of thought, the informal sector exists and continues to grow *because* of capitalist development. In the late 1980s Hernando de Soto put forth another approach to the informal sector – the legalist theory. Drawing on his work in Latin America, he argued that government’s labor regulations are structured to favor the elite and exclude the masses.<sup>18</sup> The informal sector, he argued, arose as a creative response to avoid the bureaucratic obstacles of entering the formal sector. Accordingly, the informal sector will continue to exist as long as government regulations are excessively strict and costly.<sup>19</sup> Both structuralist and legalist theories continue to help explain different elements of the informal economy. Indeed, contrary to the earlier beliefs, the informal economy has grown considerably over the years. Today scholars agree that the informal economy is a permanent phenomenon in developing countries and forms an essential component of their economies.<sup>20</sup>

### *The Size of the Informal Economy*

Because of the relatively recent recognition of the informal economy, countries have yet to conduct regular surveys on the informal economy, creating a serious limitation in collecting measurements. However, the data available suggests that the informal sector comprises a major segment of developing countries’ economies. In terms of employment, the informal sector

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<sup>16</sup> Agarwala, *From Work to Welfare*, 26.

<sup>17</sup> Chen, *Mainstreaming Informal Employment*, 17.

<sup>18</sup> Agarwal, *From Work to Welfare*, 25

<sup>19</sup> Chen, *Mainstreaming Informal Employment* 17.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

accounts for 50 to 75 percent of non-agriculture workers, with sub-Saharan Africa and Asia on the higher end of the range and Latin America and North Africa on the lower end.<sup>21</sup> Another element to understanding the importance of the informal economy is its contribution to Gross Domestic Product (GDP). While data is not widely available and numbers vary, the informal sector seems to make up somewhere from 25 to 60 percent of GDP.<sup>22</sup> Even though these statistics are already high, Martha Chen, Professor of Public Policy at Harvard University and Director of Women in the Informal Economy Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO), argues they should probably be higher since official statistics often ignore much of the market work women do from their homes.<sup>23</sup> Understanding the magnitude of the informal sector is particularly important as “there is a link – although not a complete overlap – between working in the informal economy and being poor.”<sup>24</sup> Understanding the informal sector is then critical to combating poverty.

### *Women in the Informal Economy*

In the developing world, women form an integral part of the informal economy. According to WIEGO, “other than in the Middle East and North Africa where 42 percent of women workers are in informal employment, 60 percent or more of women workers in the developing world are in informal employment (outside of agriculture).”<sup>25</sup> Breaking it down by region, in sub-Saharan Africa 84% of female workers are in the informal sector compared to 63% of male workers; in Latin America 58% of female workers compared to 48% of male workers, and in Asia 73% of female workers compared to 70% of male workers in the informal

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<sup>21</sup> “Women and Men,” 17.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>23</sup> Chen, Martha. “Women in the Informal Sector: A Global Picture, the Global Movement.” *SAIS Review*. Vol. 21, no. 1, (2001): 72.

<sup>24</sup> “Women and Men,” 14.

<sup>25</sup> “The Global Workforce: A Statistical Picture.” *Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing*. [http://www.wiego.org/stat\\_picture/](http://www.wiego.org/stat_picture/) [April 9, 2010]

sector.<sup>26</sup> Further, while the informal sector already consists of mainly poor workers and has a disproportionate number of women, the sector itself is segmented by gender. The men working in the informal sector generally have the higher earning jobs, while the women are left with the least profitable ones. Further, even when both engage in the same work, men tend to earn more than women.<sup>27</sup> Chen suggests possible explanations for the difference:

Men tend to have better tools of the trade, operate from better work sites/spaces and have greater access to productive assets and financial capital. In addition, or as a result, men often produce or sell a higher volume or a different range of goods and services... This is also because men are more likely to be heads of family businesses, while women are more likely to be unpaid contributing family members.<sup>28</sup>

Nitya Rao, a senior lecturer in gender analysis and development at the University of East Anglia, further suggests that the gender division in the informal sector has to do with the division of labor in the household.<sup>29</sup> She argues that this division restrains women's time as well as control over resources, thus limiting the opportunities women have. While, as noted above, a link exists between work in the informal sector and poverty, the segmentation of the informal sector makes that link much stronger for women.<sup>30</sup>

### *India's Informal Economy*

To better understand the context in which SEWA emerged, we must understand the specifics of India's informal sector, or the unorganized sector as it is called there. Just as in the rest of the developing world, the informal sector plays a critical role in the Indian economy.

When agricultural workers are included, 93% of the labor force (370 million workers) is in the

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<sup>26</sup> "The Global Workforce: A Statistical Picture." [http://www.wiego.org/stat\\_picture/](http://www.wiego.org/stat_picture/)

<sup>27</sup> Chen, *Mainstreaming Informal Employment*, 39-40.

<sup>28</sup> Chen, *Mainstreaming Informal Employment*, 40.

<sup>29</sup> Rao, Nitya. "Empowerment through Organisation: Women Workers in the Informal Sector." *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* Vol 3, no. 2 (1996): 172.

<sup>30</sup> "Women and Men," 14.

informal sector.<sup>31</sup> Further, the informal sector is responsible for around 60 percent of India's net domestic product (NDP).<sup>32</sup> Both in terms of employment and production, the informal sector is indeed a critical and central component of India's economy.

While the informal sector is central to India's economy, informal workers fare considerably worse than formal ones. Informal workers have a much higher illiteracy rate (30 percent compared to 7 percent for formal workers), and while 60 percent of formal workers are covered by the Provident Fund, India's social security, only 4 percent of informal workers are. Most strikingly, according to one study, on average a formal sector worker earns four to five times more than worker in the informal sector.<sup>33</sup> Accordingly, as suggested above, a strong overlap between work in the informal employment and poverty likely exists.

#### *Women in India's Informal Sector*

As in other developing countries, women play an integral part of India's informal sector. Of the women in the labor force in India, 96 percent are in the informal sector.<sup>34</sup> On the other hand, 92 percent of the male labor force is in the informal sector, showing a disproportionate representation of women in the sector.

While women working in the informal sector have seen returns to their labor, their work is generally harsh and insecure, making them increasingly vulnerable. Rao discusses the wretched conditions women face in home-based work in the informal sector in India:

They receive low wages, have long and erratic working hours, and form a fragmented workforce, isolated, with no bargaining power, no effective legal protection and no recognition as workers. They are cheated by middlemen, given damaged, under-weighted

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<sup>31</sup> "Women and Men," 34.

<sup>32</sup> "Women and Men," 36.

<sup>33</sup> Bhowmik, Sharit. "India: Labor Sociology Searching for a Direction," *Work and Occupation* Vol. 36, no. 2 (2009): 128.

<sup>34</sup> "Women and Men," 34.

materials, lack mobility and are prone to occupational health hazards, especially eye, hip and lung ailments.<sup>35</sup>

Women workers in the informal sector face constant risk and instability. Further, women workers in the informal sector lack access to credit, restricting their opportunities to invest in capital for their enterprise. Women's lives are indeed difficult in the informal sector – much more so than in the formal sector.

While work in the informal sector is grueling, women face major obstacles if they want to move into the formal sector. Firstly, due to cultural inequalities, women's human capital is significantly lower than men's (evidenced by the disparities in average schooling and literacy rates), giving women fewer qualifications for entering the formal workforce. While there are some training opportunities to increase women's human capital, they are limited and where they do exist, women often do not have the time or resources to participate. An additional challenge women face is the gendered division of labor which forces women to manage all their childrearing and household responsibilities in addition to their participation in market work.<sup>36</sup> This leaves much less time for them to participate in a full-time, outside of the home, job. Additionally, a structural barrier to enter the formal sector is the bureaucracy that informal enterprises must go through to become recognized.<sup>37</sup> Workers in the informal sector generally only have a basic education and would not have the tools to navigate through the paperwork. Further the process comes with transaction costs and when workers in the informal sector have no access to credit, it becomes too expensive to carry out.<sup>38</sup> So while women may want to move into the formal workforce, significant cultural and structural barriers prevent them from doing so.

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<sup>35</sup> Rao, Nitya. "Empowerment through Organization," 172-173.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 175.

<sup>37</sup> Sethuraman, S.V. "Gender, Informality and Poverty: A Global Review." A study with the World Bank and WIEGO. <http://www.wiego.org/papers/sethcontents.html> [April 9, 2010]

<sup>38</sup> Sethuraman, S.V. "Gender, Informality and Poverty: A Global Review."

Unable to move into the formal workforce, women are stuck in the informal sector and powerless to change their conditions within it.

### *Barriers to Organizing*

In 1988 the National Commission on Self-Employed Women and Women in the Informal Sector, appointed by the Prime Minister, published the *Shramshakti* which for the first time detailed the lives of women in the informal sector. In it the Commission recognized the need to organize:

The National Commission has observed that the lack of organization in the informal sector is the root cause of exploitation of women workers... Individually women are not in a position to fight against low and discriminatory wages and exploitive work conditions as they lack bargaining power. Laws will also not be so flagrantly violated if workers are organized.<sup>39</sup>

Rao agrees with the finding and adds that “it is difficult for one woman to bring lasting change, but if whole groups of women begin to demand change, it is much more difficult for society to reject them altogether.”<sup>40</sup> While organizing can potentially provide poor women workers the power to tackle the exploitive conditions of their employment, significant barriers to organizing exist. Partly, “women’s double burden, patriarchal control, and exploitation as cheap labor” makes it difficult to for them women to organize.<sup>41</sup> Additionally, women lack resources and knowledge of legal entitlements.<sup>42</sup> Lastly, “women find it difficult to bargain for fear of losing whatever little they get.”<sup>43</sup> These barriers, among others, have generally inhibited women workers around the globe from organizing. Yet, SEWA has risen above the barriers and

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<sup>39</sup> National Commission on Self Employed Women. *Shramshakti: Report of the National Commission on Self Employed Women and Women in the Informal Sector.* (New Delhi: The Commission, 1988): 294.

<sup>40</sup> Rao, “Empowerment through Organization,” 174.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

effectively mobilized over 1 million women and successfully worked to improve the conditions of women in the informal sector.

### III. Case Study: The Self Employed Women's Association

In 1972 Ela Bhatt founded the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) as a trade union of self employed women. In registering as a trade union, SEWA faced major resistance because the Labor Department felt that since members had no employer SEWA did not fit the model of a trade union. After arguing that a union is not only for struggles against employers, but more importantly it is for the unity of workers, SEWA was finally registered as a trade union in 1972 with 320 members. Among its countless accomplishments, SEWA has organized hundred of cooperatives, including a bank, has helped provide better health care, child care, housing, and access to water, and has trained women to be leaders in their communities. SEWA has grown and expanded tremendously since its beginning more than 35 years ago. Today, it has 1,256,944 members spanning across 12 states in India.

#### *SEWA's Objectives*

SEWA's mission is to empower women by achieving the two goals of **full employment** and **self-reliance**. In this vein they focus on "eleven points" – seven focusing on full employment and four on self reliance. The issues they focus on come from their idea that –

FULL EMPLOYMENT requires that each woman has *employment* which generates sufficient *income* for living with security and dignity. This, in turn, requires *ownership* of productive assets; sufficient *nutrition*, and the fulfillment of other basic needs such as *health care, housing, and child care*. SELF-RELIANCE of each woman is achieved through *organizing* in groups, achieving *leadership* as a SEWA member, and *self-reliance* as a group aided by *education*.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Chen, Martha. "Towards Economic Freedom: The Impact of SEWA." (SEWA Academy: Ahmedabad, 2005): 3.



SEWA's goals are indeed broad and far-reaching, covering all aspects of women workers' lives, and intended to come together to achieve women workers' true empowerment in society.

### *Programs*

As discussed above, women workers in the informal sector face constant hardship – from poor access to health care, to increasing debt, to exploitation by contractors, to harassment by police. In order to confront the broad range of issues, SEWA helps organize women workers by trade, provides financial and social services, and advocates on behalf of SEWA members to local, national, and international officials.

*Organization.* SEWA helps organize women workers into trade groups, often helping them create cooperatives. They further help build their members' capacity through training on technical skills, leadership, and product development. These organizing services help empower working women by allowing them to demand higher wages, better prices, and better work conditions, and also by increasing their productivity.

*Financial and Social Support.* SEWA provides its members with both financial and social support. Through SEWA's cooperative bank (governed, owned, and run mainly by the members themselves) SEWA provides its members with access to low interest loans, the ability to develop savings accounts, and the opportunity to buy into various insurance schemes. Through several cooperatives and in some cases coordination with the government, SEWA offers its members a variety of social services, such as health care, child care, literacy courses, better housing and access to water.<sup>45</sup> By providing both financial and social support, SEWA helps increase their members' assets and therefore minimize their risk and vulnerability.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Chen, "Towards Economic Freedom," 5.

<sup>46</sup> Chen, "Towards Economic Freedom," 5.

*Advocacy.* Additionally, SEWA advocates on behalf of its members to local, national, and international bodies demanding changes in laws to take into account self-employed women's critical role in the labor force. In order to effectively achieve this goal, SEWA has extensive research and communications bodies. Their research body works on making connections between development or national policy and the individual lives of working women, as well as working to mainstream the often invisible work that women workers do in the informal sector do.<sup>47</sup> Their communication body – through newsletters, magazines, videos, and the radio – works to illuminate audiences on the lives of self employed women workers.<sup>48</sup> Additionally, they have developed Exposure and Dialogue Programs (EDPs) to show and discuss the problems facing India's women workers' to influential global development leaders. Participation in an EDP, led Judith Edstrom, the Sector Manager for Social Development at the World Bank (at the time of her participation), to say, “up until now I felt that Gender Development is a part of Social Development, but I have understood that gender development is a *means* to social development.”<sup>49</sup> Indeed the World Bank consulted SEWA as a valuable stakeholder when it prepared its 2009-2012 Country Strategy.<sup>50</sup> Through its advocacy efforts, SEWA has played an influential role in shaping local, national, and international laws and structures.

### *SEWA's Success*

Eve Crowley provides a useful framework through which to evaluate the success of a membership-based organization of the poor. She suggests that key indicators of an organizations' success include achieving its stated objectives, growth in membership, and

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<sup>47</sup> “About Us.” SEWA Research. <http://www.sewaresearch.org/aboutus.htm> [April 9, 2010]

<sup>48</sup> “About Us.” SEWA Communication. [http://www.sewaresearch.org/Communication/About\\_us.asp](http://www.sewaresearch.org/Communication/About_us.asp) [April 9, 2010]

<sup>49</sup> “Exposure and Dialogue Programs: A Grassroots Immersion Tool for Understanding Poverty and Influencing Policy.” (SEWA/World Bank, 2003): 14.

<sup>50</sup> “Helping Poor Women Producers Access Markets.” The World Bank. <http://www.worldbank.org.in/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/SOUTHASIAEXT/INDIAEXTN/0..contentMDK:21053736~pagePK:141137~piPK:141127~theSitePK:295584,00.html> [April 9, 2010]

improving the well being of its members.<sup>51</sup> According to these indicators measurements, SEWA has indeed achieved tremendous success as an organization.

*Achieving its Objectives.* In reaching its own goals – to empower self-employed women workers through *full employment* and *self reliance* – SEWA has succeeded. In 2005, Chen conducted a comprehensive evaluation of SEWA’s efforts in which she demonstrates the remarkable impact SEWA has had. The study goes through each of SEWA’s “eleven points” showing how SEWA members have benefited in that area. With regards to women’s full employment, the data showed that, 50-75 percent of members reported increases in the regularity or security of work, 66-82 percent reported increases in income, members had twice the rate of savings as all non-SEWA women, ten times as many SEWA members had health insurance compared to the general population, and most members who leave children in SEWA day care centers reported increases in their children's health, and 93 percent of women who leave their children in SEWA day care centers experienced increased income.<sup>52</sup> In terms of SEWA’s goal of its members’ self reliance, the data demonstrated that 60 percent of members reported significant increases in self-confidence after SEWA trainings, and members felt an increase of 10 – 25 percentage points in household decision making power.<sup>53</sup> Evidently, SEWA succeeded with the first measurement.

*Membership Growth.* With a starting membership of 320 in 1973, SEWA’s numbers have increased tremendously.<sup>54</sup> By 1981, SEWA’s membership had increased by almost 20

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<sup>51</sup> Crowley, Eve, Stephen Baas, Paola Termine, John Rouse, Pamela Pozarny and Genevieve Dionne. “Organizations of the Poor: Conditions for Success.” *Membership-Based Organizations of the Poor*. (Routledge: New York, 2007): 25.

<sup>52</sup> Chen, “Towards Economic Freedom,” 55.

<sup>53</sup> Chen, “Towards Economic Freedom,” 56.

<sup>54</sup> “SEWA’s Structure.” SEWA Website. [http://www.sewa.org/About\\_Us\\_Structure.asp](http://www.sewa.org/About_Us_Structure.asp) [April 9, 2010]

times its original size, with 6,087 total members.<sup>55</sup> Further, in the past three five-year periods, their annual membership growth rate has averaged around 25 – 35 percent.<sup>56</sup> In 2009, it had 1,256,944 registered members across India.<sup>57</sup> Explaining its growth patterns, SEWA’s website explains:

While the overall trend is upward, there have been periods of fluctuation over the past decade. Membership increases occurred as a result of campaigns which developed into mass movements in some rural districts, concrete gains from organizing of some categories of workers like vendors and home based workers and also because of support during crises.<sup>58</sup>

While 50 percent of its membership is based in the starting state of Gujarat, the other 50 percent are dispersed across 11 states.<sup>59</sup> Therefore, along the second measurement SEWA has also succeeded.

*Members’ Well-Being.* Apart from the statistics discussed above that indicate an improvement in well-being along certain factors, the vast amount of positive testimonies from members demonstrates SEWA’s role in improving members’ well-beings. One member, Hansa-ben, described the change in her life after joining SEWA:

My life, which hitherto was like poison, is suddenly worth living. I am honored and respected as a SEWA member wherever I go. I am also respected in my own house. Whereas earlier I was only Bhikha Moti's wife, I am now the authoritative Hansa-ben who takes major family decisions and has even managed to influence my husband to give up his vices.<sup>60</sup>

Hansa-ben’s experience is by no means unique. At SEWA, “when women are asked about the most important difference in their lives, they mention loss of fear, self confidence, speaking in

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<sup>55</sup> “Annual Report 06: Self Employed Women’s Association” (Shree Mahila SEWA Trust: Ahmedabad, 2006): 2.

<sup>56</sup> Blaxall, John. “India’s Self Employed Women’s Association: Empowerment through Mobilization of Poor Women on a Large Scale.” (The World Bank Group: Ahmedabad, 2004): 1.

<sup>57</sup> SEWA Bharat Annual Report 2008-2009. (10)

<sup>58</sup> “SEWA’s Structure.” SEWA Website. [http://www.sewa.org/About\\_Us\\_Structure.asp](http://www.sewa.org/About_Us_Structure.asp)

<sup>59</sup> “SEWA Bharat Annual Report 2008-2009.” 10. <http://www.sewabharat.org/annualreport.pdf> [April 9, 2010]

<sup>60</sup> Chen, “Towards Economic Freedom,” 39

public and holding their head held high.”<sup>61</sup> SEWA has indeed improved the lives of so many women workers and through its continued service provisions and advocacy work will continue to do so.

*Looking Beyond its Members.* Another measurement of SEWA’s success looks beyond the lives of its members, to examining the betterment of the lives of the families and communities belonging to SEWA women. Sumanben, a Datan Vendor, shares her story:

I had six children and brought them up selling *datans* (sticks for brushing teeth). But it was only when I was a grandmother that I learnt about our bodies and how to stay healthy...No one told us how to be healthy when I was young, but I share what I have learnt with my family, my neighbors and other SEWA members like myself.<sup>62</sup>

Her desire to teach, not only her children but her surrounding community, about nutrition is indicative of the domino effect that her empowerment could have for future development.

Similarly, Chanchiben, an agricultural laborer, shares her story:

All we women know is work, work, work. Whatever has happened to us has happened. We can't change what we've been through. But we dream of better life for our children. That's why these crèches are so important for us. We leave our children at SEWA's crèches and go out to work with peace of mind, knowing they are safe. At the crèche my children have learnt many new things: they have learnt about animals and flowers and also new games. My eldest child is beginning to read. And, they are given things to eat that we cannot afford. Because of the crèches we can earn more and buy dal (lentils) and vegetables for the first time. We eat better.<sup>63</sup>

Here, a combination of factors could lead to sustainable development – the children’s educations, the children’s health, Chanchiben’s financial security, Chanchiben’s health, and Chanchiben’s empowerment in general. By providing the space for her empowerment, SEWA, has helped her children have better lives. While no study exists yet demonstrating SEWA’s rippling effect in

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<sup>61</sup> Narayan Deepa and Soumya Kapoor. “Beyond Ideologies: Creating Wealth for the Poor.” (Arusha Conference. *New Frontiers of Social Policy*. 2005): 11.

<sup>62</sup> Chen, “Towards Economic Freedom,” 39

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 30

numbers, these anecdotes demonstrate how SEWA's efforts have had a far-reaching impact. Changing the lives of women has meant bettering the lives of families and communities.

*Understanding SEWA's Success.* SEWA's remarkable success is indeed unique. SEWA was not only the first union of informal workers, but remains the largest today.<sup>64</sup> Chen ultimately puts it best when she states "there is simply no other organization in the world that has promoted so systematically and effectively the collective strength and voice of working poor women in the informal economy."<sup>65</sup> So, what enabled the SEWA movement to emerge and achieve such success? Previous scholars writing on SEWA have pointed to a variety of specific characteristics. John Blaxall in his report for the World Bank, points to four key factors in explaining SEWA's success – its leadership, flexibility, values, and organizing strategy. Rekha Datta in her 2003 article on SEWA attributed SEWA's success to the working women finding suitable strategies for themselves.<sup>66</sup> Nitya Rao in her analysis lists 14 factors from its training to how it handles internal conflict. While they all point to strategies that were very influential in SEWA success, they do not posit a framework through which to understand these strategies. In the next section, I will explore the literature on social movement theory which provides the tools through which to develop a theoretical framework for understanding SEWA's success.

#### **IV. Theoretical Framework: Social Movement Theory**

To tackle the question of why poor women working in the informal sector effectively organized in India through SEWA, it becomes helpful to understand when and how people mobilize to affect change. Since the 1960s social movement theory has been trying to answer

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<sup>64</sup> Chen, Martha. "A Spreading Banyan Tree: The Self Employed Women's Association, India." (Canada: Coady International Institute, 2008): 26.

<sup>65</sup> Chen, Martha. "Self-Employed Women: A Profile of SEWA's Membership." (SEWA Academy: Ahmedabad, 2006): 104.

<sup>66</sup> Datta, Rekha. "From Development to Empowerment: The Self Employed Women's Association." *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society* Vol. 16, no. 3 (Spring 2003): 365.

precisely these questions. While scholars began with a seemingly rudimentary understanding of social movements, they have made tremendous strides in the last five decades. In particular, scholars have developed a thorough understanding of which macro-level conditions lead to movement emergence and which micro-level conditions lead to individual participation in movements. Separately, Chen has worked to answer what factors enable a membership based organization of the poor (MBOP) to be effective. Together, social movement theory and Chen's framework provide the necessary tools to deconstruct and analyze the effective mobilization of the SEWA social movement.

### *Structural Grievance Models*<sup>67</sup>

When scholars first began to discuss the emergence of social movements they believed that they were caused by conditions of strain. More specifically movements were seen as “by-products of rapid social change and disintegration triggered by wars, economic downturns, disasters and the like, that in turn, give rise to mounting tensions and frustrations that are vented through social movements.”<sup>68</sup> If a significant tension arose in society, then a movement would arise in response. Ted Gurr in 1970 argued from a psychological perspective that the frustration that arises from relative deprivation, meaning the “perceived discrepancy between value expectations and value capabilities,”<sup>69</sup> will cause people to rise up. The greater the discrepancy, he argues, the greater the frustration and likelihood of mobilization. Neil Smelser in 1963 and Turner and Killian in 1972, also early theorist, differed from Gurr in some ways, but agreed that structural grievances were central to the rise of social movements.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Also called the psychofunctional approach, breakdown theory, convergence theory, or the hearts and mind approach

<sup>68</sup> McAdam, Doug and David A. Snow. *Social Movements: Readings on Their Emergence, Mobilization, and Dynamics*. (Los Angeles: Roxbury Publishing Company, 1997): 2.

<sup>69</sup> Gurr, Ted. *Why Men Rebel*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970): 37.

<sup>70</sup> McAdam, *Social Movements*, 2.

### *Resource Mobilization*

While structural grievance models began as the prevailing perspective in social movement theory, it soon encountered considerable opposition. Mancur Olson argued that individuals, as rational actors, work to maximize their own benefits.<sup>71</sup> Since social movements generally work to obtain public goods (which by definition will then be available to all regardless of participation in the movement), individuals will not automatically participate in social movements even in conditions of strain. He argued that individuals require “selective incentives” to participate in a movement – they need the promise of significant personal benefits. Working off Olson’s theory, in 1973 and again in 1977, John McCarthy and Mayer Zald published articles challenging structural grievance models. They argued that grievances are ubiquitous to societies and so alone cannot explain the emergence of social movements. In order to explain why only some social movements arise given the continuous conditions of strain, they turn to the “interaction between resource availability, the preexisting organization of preference structures, and the entrepreneurial attempts to meet preference demand.”<sup>72</sup> More specifically, they shift their focus to social movement organizations (SMOs) and the organizations’ ability to effectively aggregate resources (money and labor) to achieve their desired goal. They call their framework *resource mobilization*. In their approach, they argue that a social movement will arise if SMOs can mobilize their resources effectively to attract movement supporters (adherents) and movement activists (constituents) by minimizing the costs and risks of individual involvement and support.

### *New Social Movements*

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<sup>71</sup> Olson, Mancur. *Logic of Collective Action*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965): 51.

<sup>72</sup> McCarthy, John D. and Mayer N. Zald. “Resource Mobilization and Social Movements: a Partial Theory.” *American Journal of Sociology* Vol 82, no. 6 (1977): 1236.



While the resource mobilization model was gaining ground in the United States, the new social movements approach was becoming popular in Western Europe. Scholars there were intrigued by the different nature of the social movements in the 1960s and 1970s compared to those in the past.<sup>73</sup> While they saw the older social movements as mainly labor movements, the new movements concerned a broad range of topics from the environment, to women's rights, to peace. The new movements' values were "antimodernistic," breaking from the values of a capitalist society, and their constituencies were not defined by class and largely consisted of educated youth. Western European scholars argued that the new wave of social movements in Europe were a "reaction to structural changes in western industrialized societies."<sup>74</sup> In a generation where material needs were being met, new post-materialist values arose leading to the formation of groups founded on their new expectations toward society.<sup>75</sup> Those collective expectations allowed individuals to rise up and demand reforms. So the new social movements approach, like the traditional one, focused on structural elements in society that gave rise to movements.

### *Combining the theories*

Throughout the 1970s and most of the 1980s American and European scholarship on social movements developed independently. Recognizing the limits of developing scholarship separately, in 1986 and 1987 Klandermans and Tarrow organized conferences for American and European social movement scholars to discuss their distinct approaches. While they recognized the strengths and weaknesses of each model, they realized that neither approach explained "how

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<sup>73</sup> Klandermans, Bert and Sidney Tarrow. "Mobilization into Social Movements: Synthesizing European and American Approaches." *International Social Movement Research* Vol 1 (1988): 7.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> Shigetomi, Shinichi and Kumiko Makino. *Protest and Social Movements in the Developing World*. (Cheltenham: Institute of Developing Economies, 2009): 4.

structural change is transformed into collective action.”<sup>76</sup> To fill that gap, three distinct approaches have emerged: political opportunities, framing, and social networks.

### *Political Opportunities*

The political opportunities paradigm, developed by Tilly (1978), McAdam (1982), and Tarrow (1983), established the link between institutionalized politics and social movements recognizing that movements “are shaped by the broader set of political constraints and opportunities unique to the national context in which they are embedded.”<sup>77</sup> Tarrow, among the strongest proponents of the political opportunities paradigm argues that not only are political opportunities and constraints factors in movements, but they are “the most important incentives for initiating new phases of contention.”<sup>78</sup> More specifically she argues that:

Contention is more closely related to opportunities for – and limited by constraints upon – collective action than by the persistent social or economic factors that people experience... When institutional access opens, rifts appear within elites, allies become available, and state capacity for repression declines, challengers find opportunities to advance their claims. When combined with high levels of costs for inaction, opportunities produce episodes of contentious politics.<sup>79</sup>

The availability of political opportunities leads to movement formation only when challengers perceive the opportunities, because only then will they see an increasing potential for success and decide to act.

### *Framing*

While social movement theory expanded substantially, it still did not fully address Olsen’s concerns of why individuals choose to participate in movements. Further, the approaches mistakenly treated “meanings or ideas as given, as if there is an isomorphic

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<sup>76</sup> Klandermans, “Mobilization into Social Movements,” 9.

<sup>77</sup> McAdam, McCarthy, Zald 1996.

<sup>78</sup> Tarrow, Sidney. *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998): 7.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

relationship between the nature of any particular set of conditions or events and the meanings attached to them.”<sup>80</sup> More specifically, they disregard how grievances can be interpreted differently across individuals and therefore the critical issue is not whether a grievance exists, but how individuals interpret those grievances. Recognizing this weakness, David Snow and Richard Benford (1986, 1988, 1992 and 2000) developed another critical addition to social movement theory: framing. Snow and Benford explain how they understand frames:

The term ‘frame’ (and framework) is borrowed from Goffman (1974:21) to denote ‘schemata of interpretation’ that enable individuals to ‘locate, perceive, identify, and label’ occurrences within their life space and world at large. By rendering events or occurrences meaningful, frames function to organize experience and guide action, whether individual or collective.<sup>81</sup>

They argue that individuals’ participation depends on how they perceive the world around them, and as such depends on how SMOs frame their movements. This approach holds that social movements are not simply carriers of ideas and meanings that inherently arise from situations, nor are movement actors merely acting upon a society. Rather, “movement actors are viewed as signifying agents actively engaged in the production and maintenance of meaning for constituents, antagonists, and bystander observers”<sup>82</sup> – they “frame the world in which they are acting.”<sup>83</sup> Specifically, SMOs work to produce a collective action frame – “action-oriented sets of beliefs and meanings that inspire and legitimate [their] activities and campaigns.”<sup>84</sup> To develop a collective action frame, movement actors have three core tasks: diagnostic framing, prognostic framing, and motivational framing.<sup>85</sup> Diagnostic framing includes identifying the

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<sup>80</sup> Snow, David A. and Robert D. Benford. “Ideology, Frame Resonance, and Participant Mobilization.” *International Social Movement Research* Vol. 1 (1988): 198.

<sup>81</sup> Snow, David A., Robert D. Benford and Rochford E. Burke, eds. “Frame Alignment Processes, Micromobilization, and Movement Participation.” *American Sociological Review* Vol. 51 (1986): 464.

<sup>82</sup> Benford, Robert D. and David A. Snow. “Framing Process and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment.” *Annual Review Sociology* Vol. 26 (2000): 613.

<sup>83</sup> Snow and Benford, Frame Alignment Processes, 466.

<sup>84</sup> Snow and Benford, “Framing Process,” 614.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 615.

problem and who is responsible for it; prognostic framing consists of proposing a solution to the problem and a plan to achieve it; and lastly, motivational framing provides the rationale for engaging in collective action.<sup>86</sup> In tackling these framing tasks, movement actors engage in both ‘consensus mobilization’ and ‘action mobilization’ – “the former fosters or facilitates agreement whereas the latter fosters action, moving people from the balcony to the barricades.”<sup>87</sup> They also note that “the more the three tasks are robust or richly developed and interconnected, the more successful the mobilization effort.”<sup>88</sup> In addressing the core framing tasks, movement actors must also ensure that their overall frame is credible. Credibility depends on the frame’s consistency with the SMO’s actions, the frame’s empirical credibility, meaning it has testable claims and events or situations can serve as evidence, and lastly, the perceived credibility of those presenting the frame.

However, framing is not just a one way mechanistic process that happens “among a passive, nonsuspecting population.”<sup>89</sup> Rather, the effectiveness of a frame ultimately depends on its *salience*, whether the frame fits with the specific society or at least with the targets of mobilization. In deconstructing how to achieve salience, Snow and Benford identify three important factors. The first factor, *centrality*, refers to how central the movement’s values are in the larger society’s belief system. Societies generally have a hierarchy of values and beliefs, so “the more central or salient the espoused beliefs, ideas, and values of a movement to the targets of mobilization,” the greater frame’s salience.<sup>90</sup> The next element that can affect a frame’s salience is its *experiential commensurability* – whether the frame actually resonates with the everyday experiences of the potential constituents and is not too abstract or distant. The last

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<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 615-617.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 615.

<sup>88</sup> Snow and Benford, “Ideology,” 199.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

<sup>90</sup> Snow and Benford, “Framing Process,” 621.

factor that can effect how the frame's salience is its narrative fidelity – the “degree to which proffered framings resonate with cultural narrations, that is, with the stories, myths, and folk tales that are part and parcel of one's cultural heritage and that thus function to inform events and experiences in the immediate present.”<sup>91</sup> Simply put, narrative fidelity addresses whether “the framing strikes a responsive chord in that it rings true with existing cultural narrations.”<sup>92</sup> If a frame is both credible and salient, it will have greater resonance and therefore a greater likelihood of mobilization. Ultimately, Snow and Benford conclude:

Mobilization depends not only on the existence of objective structural disparities and dislocations, the availability and deployment of tangible resources, leaders' organizational skills, political opportunities, and a kind of cost-benefit calculus engaged in by prospective participants but also on the way these variables are framed and the degree to which they resonate with the targets of mobilization.<sup>93</sup>

Their work suggests how complex participant mobilization is and how framing requires SMOs to work diligently and take into account a multitude of factors. But SMOs can only do so much; ultimately their frame must resonate with the larger society, and particularly potential constituents.

### *Social Networks*

Apart from political opportunities and framing, another major contribution to the literature has been the affect of social networks on social movement participation. The literature actually dovetails on the framing scholarship, examining one of the main avenues through which frames are transmitted. While scholars have looked at networks of organizations and networks of events, the bulk of the research has focused on networks of individuals and thus this will be my focus here. In this context, social networks are individuals linked by a direct or indirect

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<sup>91</sup> Snow and Benford, “Ideology,” 211.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 211.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 213.

relationship and “delimited by some specific criteria.”<sup>94</sup> The literature developed from an observation that often, “prior social ties operate as basis for movement recruitment and... locus movement emergence.”<sup>95</sup> Evidently, friends, relatives, and colleagues can affect individuals’ decision to participate in a movement, but exactly *how* do social networks encourage participation? Passy (2003) argues that social networks foster involvement through three distinct functions: socialization, structural-connection, and decision-shaping.

The first function of social networks, socialization, happens before an individual becomes a movement adherent and involves an individual accepting the movement’s frame. People engage in movements because of identities and “since identities are created and shaped through social relations, networks play a crucial role.”<sup>96</sup> Social networks “build and reinforce the identities of individuals and provide them with a political consciousness that allows them to get ideologically closer to a given political issue.”<sup>97</sup> Within this function, social networks can serve as the avenue through which a movement’s frame is accepted or even produced. Passy explains, “the social networks in which actors interact convey meanings that build and solidify identities and shape the actors’ cognitive frames, thereby enabling them to interpret social reality and to define a set of actions that involve them in this perceived reality.”<sup>98</sup> So the socialization function of social networks gives individuals an avenue through which to develop or accept a movement’s frame.

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<sup>94</sup> Diani, Mario and Doug McAdam. *Social Movements and Networks: Relational Approaches to Collective Action*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003): 6.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>96</sup> Passy, Florence. “Social Networks Matter. But How?” Diani, Mario and Doug McAdam. *Social Movements and Networks: Relational Approaches to Collective Action*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003): 23.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

The second function of a social network, structural-connection, involves helping introduce movement adherents to the actions of the movement.<sup>99</sup> As just agreeing with a movement's goals does not automatically trigger participation, this second function of social networks refers to their ability to structurally connect individuals to specific opportunities to participate in movement activities.

Lastly, the third function of social networks, decision-shaping, involves social networks helping potential movement constituents decide to actually participate in the movement. Unlike rationalists who see participation in social movements as fully dependent on individuals' agency, and structuralists who see participation as fully dependent on structural conditions, Passy argues that participation depends on the framing process which happens through social networks.<sup>100</sup> Overall, social network literature develops an understanding of a critical avenue through which framing occurs and through which information and opportunities can travel rather quickly and ultimately facilitate social movement formation.

### *Social Movement Theories in Developing Countries*

Just last year, Shinichi Shigetomi and Kumiko Makino, research fellows at the Institute of Developing Economies in Japan, published a book exploring social movements in developing countries. They argue that recent scholarship in social movements has focused on Western movements and have therefore ignored a lot of the realities of social movements in developing countries. Mainly they suggest that theories have emphasized organizational agency at the expense of environmental factors and therefore, "there is a need to bring the environmental

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<sup>99</sup> *Ibid*, 24.  
<sup>100</sup> *Ibid*, 25.

factors back into analysis.”<sup>101</sup> While perhaps not all theories overlooked external forces, their attempt to reexamine environmental factors is an important one.

### *Chen’s Framework*

While Martha Chen is not a social movement theorist, her work on understanding the key indicators of success for a membership based organization of the poor (MBOP) membership will prove helpful in understanding SEWA, a MBOP. Particularly, McAdam and Snow identify movement dynamics after mobilization as an important stage of social movement development but they admit that they do not know as much about this area of social movements.<sup>102</sup> Chen’s framework mainly enlightens that gap, focusing heavily on the importance of good governance. Chen argues that an organizations’ success depends on both internal and external factors. In terms of internal factors, she indicates six essential ones:

- Democratic governance structures whose operation keeps leadership accountable to members;
- Significant role of membership dues, in cash and kind
- Sufficiently homogenous membership along key dimensions (poverty, occupation, gender, and so on);
- Capacity to manage the running of the organization;
- The use of federated governance structures as the organization expands;
- A strongly internalized “code of moral conduct” that guides actions of the organization and of individuals in the organization.<sup>103</sup>

Looking closely at those factors, they all essentially have to do with the governance of an organization. Ultimately Chen is suggesting that the organization should have federated, democratic governance with capable and moral leadership who ensure that the membership stays sufficiently homogenous and that membership dues always play a significant role. For external factors, she points to five different ones:

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<sup>101</sup> Shigetomi ,*Protest and Social Movements*, 2.

<sup>102</sup> McAdam, *Social Movements*, 407.

<sup>103</sup> Chen, Martha, Renana Jhabvala, Ravi Kanbur, and Carol Richards. *Membership-Based Organizations of the Poor*. (Routledge: New York, 2009): 16-17.



- Supportive community power structures
- A broadly enabling legal, political, and policy environment;
- Sympathetic individuals in government and bureaucracy;
- External funding and support from NGOs and donors that does not subvert internal democratic procedures and the objectives of the organization;
- Diversified sources of external finance.<sup>104</sup>

In bringing Chen's framework to better understand movement dynamics and juxtaposing it with the other elements of social movement theory we now have a rather holistic understanding of social movements and the tools to analyze SEWA's remarkable success.

### **V. SEWA Analysis: Three- Phrase Framework**

Now, equipped with an understanding of social movement theory, we are ready to explore the central question: what enabled the success of the SEWA movement? As social movement scholars have noted, relying on one social movement theory to understand the emergence of a movement proves insufficient. Accordingly, only by combining the theories can we begin to understand the root of SEWA's remarkable achievements.

Yet, some key differences exist between the SEWA movement and the movements recent theorists have analyzed in developing their approaches. Namely, SEWA is a poor peoples' movement and it is not solely a movement against the government. This fact minimizes the usefulness of three of the approaches developed in the previous section: structural grievances, new social movement theory, and political opportunities. Though self employed women across the globe face considerable grievances (as demonstrated in section II), only SEWA has emerged so successfully. New social movement theory deals with movements that cut across class lines, yet the SEWA movement remains tied to the poor. Lastly, Tarrow's political opportunities model does not exactly apply either. SEWA is not a movement solely organized against the government, most of its struggles do not take the form of protest, and it does not *require* political

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<sup>104</sup> Chen, *Membership-Based*, 17.

allies for success. However, I should note here that in discounting Tarrow's approach, I do not discount the importance of the political realm. The realm indeed plays a critical role, but I will lean on Chen's framework in guiding my analysis of it. The remaining social movements theories – resource mobilization, framing, social networks, Chen's framework, and the insight provided by recent literature on social movements in developing countries – will substantially inform my following analysis of SEWA.

While social movement theories have indeed created multi-phase theories to account for the variety of theories, the uniqueness of the SEWA movement entails a fresh look at them, and requires the creation of a separate framework. In this context, I propose a three-phase framework that I believe encapsulates the roots of SEWA's success. Before I explain the phases though, I must note that while in many ways the phases can be seen as an incremental process, where one step leads to the next, the phases are fundamentally intertwined, each simply reinforcing the effectiveness of the others. The three phases are: 1) providing selective incentives to women workers; 2) creating a common identity and shared purpose; and 3) ensuring continuity. As reflected in the recent work on social movements in developing countries, the success of each phase depends on both organizational inputs and environmental factors. SEWA's success in the three phases is due to its unique model coupled with supportive, or at least not stifling, environmental factors which enabled SEWA to emerge as a powerful movement.

#### *Phase 1 – Providing Selective Incentives: Resource Mobilization*

A major difference between the SEWA movement and the social movements studied by Western scholars is that the SEWA movement, as noted above, is a movement of extremely poor women workers. Working with impoverished communities poses a unique set of challenges.

Particularly, “unorganized workers are mostly disparate as well as illiterate, unexposed, powerless and have a low self esteem. They are not aware of their individual or collective potential to change their lives.”<sup>105</sup> Additionally, poor women work relentlessly every moment of the day, juggling both market and family work. They barely have time for themselves, let alone time to dedicate to other activities. Undoubtedly, these women are rational actors concerning their time. Without economic or social incentives, it is unlikely that poor women workers with minimal time or resources would come together to form a social movement. As Kapoor explains, “informal workers are best rallied at the local level around a single economic activity or a ‘sub-sector,’ and/or around a common issue such as housing, insurance, child care or savings and credit.”<sup>106</sup> Accordingly McCarthy and Zald’s resource mobilization approach, drawing on Olson’s emphasis on selective incentives, provides a powerful theoretical framework to understand SEWA’s success in initiating collective action. Internally, SEWA mobilized resources through an organic, sector-focused approach to help women attain social and economic benefits through collective action. Drawing from Chen’s framework, in terms of environmental factors, a “broadly enabling legal, political, and policy environment” which includes “sympathetic individuals in government and bureaucracy” prove critical to SEWA’s ability to provide selective incentives for its members. Also important are “supportive community power structures” and social networks. Ultimately the combination of SEWA’s organizational inputs and the environmental factors, allowed for SEWA to provide selective incentives (social and economic) to self employed women upon organizing, thereby initiating collective action.

### *Organizational Inputs*

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<sup>105</sup> Kapoor Aditi. “The SEWA Way: Shaping Another Future for Informal Labor.” *Futures* Vol. 39 (2007): 561-2.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*

In taking an organic, sector focused approach to organization SEWA was able to provide selective incentives (economic and social benefits) to self employed women. Resource mobilization as mention in section four involves the “interaction between resource availability, the preexisting organization of preference structures, and the entrepreneurial attempts to meet preference demand.”<sup>107</sup> SEWA’s entrepreneurial efforts recognized that distinct preference structures existed across trades and so it decided to take a sector-focus approach to their organization efforts. As Bhatt explains, “Work is their priority. If we bring these women into the movement on the basis of work it is strategically the most effective way of organizing large numbers of women according to issues which are relevant to them.”<sup>108</sup> Moreover, to better understand the preference structures within each trade to know how best to mobilize resources, SEWA involves the women themselves at every level of organization. Therefore, through its entrepreneurial efforts to fully understand the preference structures of the different trades, SEWA is able to mobilize its resources to help the women within each trade organize effectively around the social or economic issue that matters most to them.

*Resource Mobilization for Economic Incentives.* SEWA shows women how organizing will benefit them financially. For the headloaders and cart pullers who came to Bhatt in 1971, the benefit was higher pay per trip. The headloaders and cart pullers worked in the cloth market and transporting bales of cloth “from wholesalers to retailers, from the railway yard to a warehouse, or from shop to shop.”<sup>109</sup> Previously, merchants paid them only 10-15 paise per trip and they never earned more than three rupees a day (around 30 cents at the time).<sup>110</sup> Moreover, half their income went to the contractor who brought them from their villages to the city. Bhatt

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<sup>107</sup> McCarthy, “Resource Mobilization and Social Movements,” 1236.

<sup>108</sup> Rose, Kalima. *Where Women are Leaders: The SEWA Movement in India*. (New Delhi: Vistaar Publication, 1992): 36.

<sup>109</sup> Bhatt, Ela *We are Poor But So Many*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006): 10.

<sup>110</sup> Rose, *Where Women*, 41.

called a meeting for the headloaders and cart pullers, and with the hope of better pay, they organized.<sup>111</sup> Their efforts were effective and their pay increased by 30 percent.<sup>112</sup>

After hearing about Bhatt's work with the headloaders, Chandu Papu, a street vendor, approached Bhatt about stopping the police from extorting bribes from street vendors. Papu explained to Bhatt that according to the law vendors like her were "illegal enroachers" by selling on the street.<sup>113</sup> The police took advantage of this law and went through the markets harassing the women and threatening to confiscate their goods unless they paid a small "fine."<sup>114</sup> For women already earning very meager salaries and with considerable debt, police brutality made it that much more difficult to earn a living. With Bhatt's help, the women held a meeting with around 500 vendors and invited the Police Superintendent. In hearing the women's plights, the Superintendent agreed to allot some land for street vending. Afterward, Niruben Jadav, the Secretary of SEWA and former garment stitcher, stood up the police. When a policeman was extorting bribes, Jadav grabbed him by the arm and threatened to take him to the Police Superintendent. With that he stopped. Other women saw Jadav's success, and they too began resisting the police knowing they had the backing of the Police Superintendent and SEWA.

For the rural women in villages in northern Gujarat, the financial incentive was having regular work in their own village. Before SEWA's involvement, they depended on temporary relief work in droughts for which they had to walk six kilometers each way.<sup>115</sup> After surveying the women, SEWA realized that 80 percent of the women were skilled embroiderers. Embroidery was part of the women's every day life. All of their clothes, shoes, shopping bags, and bedspreads were embroidered and their work lined the mud walls of their homes. According

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<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>112</sup> Bhatt, *We are Poor*, 10.

<sup>113</sup> Rose, *Where Women*, 43.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>115</sup> Bhatt, *We are Poor*, 143.

to the women, “embroidery serves us in happy times, and it sustains us in the hard.”<sup>116</sup> During times of economic hardship, the women would sell their work to passing traders. With no knowledge of the true market value of their work having rarely left the village and in desperate need for money, the women sell their work for whatever price the traders offered. SEWA informed the women of the fair market value of their work and helped them organize into embroidery groups. Bhachiben, one of the embroiderers, recalls “we formed the group for one simple reason. We wanted the work.”<sup>117</sup> As Bhatt explains, “as long as there was work and payment in cash, the women were ready to join anything.”<sup>118</sup> Whether the women were headloaders, street vendors, or embroiders, they initially organized because of the financial incentives.

*Resource Mobilization for Social Incentives.* While generally the women initially organize because of the economic benefits, sometimes they come together because of the social benefits – healthcare, housing, water, or childcare. For the women working on the tobacco and salt farms, the incentive for them was having childcare, or crèches. Shardaben, an agriculture laborer, explains: “when our children are small, we workers face a terrible dilemma: should we stay at home with them and starve, or go out to work and earn our bread, but leave our little ones uncared for? If only there were a proper crèche – oh that would be a different story!”<sup>119</sup> Faced with this impossible question, the women farmers would often take their children to work. At the tobacco farms, the children would inhale the nicotine and play with the tobacco that was lying around. Similarly, at the salt farms, the children would walk in salty water in the extreme heat and play in hot sand. Both conditions were extremely hazardous for the health of the

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<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>119</sup> Dayal, Mala. *Towards Securer Lives: SEWA's Social Security Programme*. (Delhi: Ravi Dayal Publisher, 2001): 6.

children. Further, when the women would bring their children to work, they were not able to fully concentrate on their tasks and their employers would yell at them for not leaving the children at home. SEWA, recognizing the need for crèches, mobilized resources to be able to provide them to the women. SEWA got funding from the government as well as from the women's employers on the farms and they were able to find crèche teachers. While at first the women were hesitant to leave their children at the SEWA crèches, they did so out of need. When the women realized that their children were receiving proper meals, health care, and an education, they started trusting SEWA and more women, upon hearing about the crèches, began leaving their children also.<sup>120</sup> They paid 15 rupees a month for the crèches.<sup>121</sup> SEWA holds monthly meetings with the crèche teachers and mothers to discuss issues.<sup>122</sup> These meetings, in effect, produce a collective of women. While often from different communities, castes, or religions, they have come together because of their shared need and appreciation for the crèches.<sup>123</sup>

#### *Environmental Factors*

While SEWA mobilized its resources effectively to provide selective incentives for women to get organized, its efforts were successful in part because of several external mitigating factors, namely a broadly enabling legal, political, and policy environment and the existence of social networks.

*Broadly Enabling Legal, Political, and Policy Environment.* India's constitution and many of its laws are incredibly pro-women, pro-poor, and pro-workers giving SEWA the structure through which to mobilize resources to provide selective incentives for women. India's

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<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 10, 18-19.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 13

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

constitution states that gender equality is a fundamental right and grants the state the power to enact policies “neutralizing the socio-economic, educational, and political disadvantages that women face.”<sup>124</sup> Further, “state rhetoric in terms of its concerns for the poor and the disadvantaged has never been lacking.”<sup>125</sup> Bhowmik explains how after independence, the government sought to rectify the pro-employer policies that existed under colonialism, and enacted several pieces of legislation protecting workers.<sup>126</sup> The laws recognized unions as essential in India, introduced minimum wages for workers, and curbed employers’ rights.<sup>127</sup> Though government actions have by no means been pro-worker, as Bhowmik explains they have actually mainly sided with the employers, the existence of the laws is important in itself. So though, as Rao explains, “a favorable policy on paper is not enough – there has to be struggle from the ground to get it implemented,” the favorable policy provides SEWA somewhere to start its efforts.<sup>128</sup> Even in those situations, Rao continues “it becomes virtually impossible to make headway without at least some positive government support.”<sup>129</sup>

The government, while by no means always supportive of SEWA’s efforts, has been relatively willing to work with the organization. This relative cooperation has increased SEWA’s ability to mobilize resources and thus provide selective incentives to women. At the basic level, the government has given SEWA the freedom to enact critical programs and it has sometimes even provided funding for them. When SEWA decided to start a bank cooperative to allow women to take out low-interest loans, the government resisted but ultimately allowed SEWA to register the bank.

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<sup>124</sup> Subramaniam, Mangala. “Translating Participation in Informal Organizations into Empowerment: Women in Rural India.” (Dissertation for University of Connecticut, 2001): 5-6.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>126</sup> Bhowmik, “India: Labor Sociology Searching for a Direction,” 55.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>128</sup> Rao, “Empowerment through Organization,” 190.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*



Within six months of deciding to start a bank, SEWA had mobilized its resources, gathering an initial capital of 71,320 rupees collected from 6,287 members.<sup>130</sup> Yet, when SEWA tried to register the bank, they were denied. Bhatt recalls how the Register of Cooperatives rejected their bank “because the applicants were women, poor, illiterate, ‘in scattered occupations,’ and of ‘lower community.’”<sup>131</sup> As none of those reasons were in the law, Bhatt knew that “the real block was just the middle-class, bureaucratic mindset.”<sup>132</sup> The registrar even took Bhatt aside and genuinely said to her “Elaben, consider me your elder brother, and believe me when I tell you to forget this bank idea. These poor ladies will never repay your loans.”<sup>133</sup> He also noted that illiterate women would not be able to sign their names to do banking. Bhatt persisted and suggested that the women could use photographs of themselves instead of signatures for identification. In the end, Bhatt was successful and he registered the bank.<sup>134</sup> The existence of laws supporting cooperative banks formed a crucial framework informing the registrar’s decision. The government’s eventual cooperation in this case allowed SEWA to use the 71,320 rupees it had collected to provide selective incentives for women – low-interest loans to slowly help them climb out of debt.

Another example where the government’s non-financial support helped SEWA provide women with incentives, was the aforementioned case of the Police Superintendent who designated a portion of the city for lawful street vending. As discussed above, SEWA had helped organize the street vendors and they had decided to fight the policemen’s abuse. At the rally they held which brought 500 street vendors together, Bhatt invited the Police Superintendent. He not only came, but after hearing the women’s stories, became empathetic to

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<sup>130</sup> Bhatt, *We are Poor*, 101.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

their plight and designated a portion of the city for lawful street vending. His support allowed the women to begin successfully resisting the police bribes.

In some cases, the government has gone even further by providing SEWA with resources to carry out programs. In 1974, the Government enacted the National Policy for Children which stated that “it shall be the policy of the State to provide adequate services to children, both before and after birth and through the period of growth, to ensure their full physical, mental and social development.”<sup>135</sup> It also indicated that one of the measure’s priorities was to create “crèches and other facilities for the care of children of working or ailing mothers.”<sup>136</sup> While state governments did not back SEWA’s crèches immediately (and sometimes even created procedural obstacles), they ultimately supported SEWA’s efforts and provided funding under their Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) and Central Social Welfare Board (CSWB).<sup>137</sup> While on average SEWA covers 45 percent of the cost in urban areas and 88 percent in rural areas, the government has provided considerable financial support, though it varies by region. The government covers most of the cost in rural Surendranagar and Banaskantha, 43 percent in Ahmedabad, and a mere 5 percent in rural Kheda. Though SEWA developed and implemented the ideas of the crèches and crèche cooperatives, the government’s support has allowed it to provide the service more thoroughly and for more women.

Another area the government has provided SEWA with financial support is in health care. This case study, however, reveals the halfhearted nature of some of the government’s support. While the government has supported women workers’ maternity benefits for a long time, passing two Acts (1948 and 1961) to ensure its provision, the acts excluded women in the informal sector,

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<sup>135</sup> National Policy for Children. 1974. Article 3. <http://nicp.nisd.gov.in/pdf/npc.pdf> [April 9, 2010]

<sup>136</sup> National Policy for Children. 1974. Article 4, section d. <http://nicp.nisd.gov.in/pdf/npc.pdf> [April 9, 2010]

<sup>137</sup> Dayal, *Towards Securer Lives*, 10-11, 18.

meaning it excluded most women.<sup>138</sup> While SEWA was unsuccessful in getting the government's Life Insurance Corporation (ILC) to provide maternity benefits, once it started its own maternity benefits scheme, the government did help fund the program.<sup>139</sup> The program ran successfully for six years between 1975 and 1981, but after government funding became irregular the women lost faith in it and the scheme fell apart.<sup>140</sup> In 1984, they organized the women once again around a maternity benefits scheme, but when the program grew too much, they persuaded the government in Gujarat to help fund the program. While the program went well for awhile, the government was often late in sending the benefits to the women and then it began requiring the women to be at least eighteen and use contraceptives in order to obtain benefits. The realities on the ground, excluded a lot of women from the benefits. In 1992 SEWA developed its own maternity benefits scheme under its wider social security insurance program. The program continues to run with great success.

*Social Networks (structural-connection and decision shaping function).* Apart from the structures that either enabled or at least did not inhibit SEWA's ability to mobilize resources to provide women with material incentives, the existence of social networks increased SEWA's ability to provide selective incentives as well. In the initial effort to organize, the women's social networks served as the structural-connection and decision shaping function. In the case of the street vendors, Chandaben knew the other street vendors well from working alongside them every day. After her initial meeting with Bhatt where they decided to organize the vendors, Chandaben went through the streets to get women to come to a meeting. She often brought Bhatt along and introduced her to the other vendors.<sup>141</sup> They held the first meeting within a week with

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<sup>138</sup> Dayal, *Towards Securer Lives*, 47.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>141</sup> Bhatt, *We are Poor*, 13.

over 100 women. Here, Chandaben's social network allowed her to structurally connect her fellow vendors with the opportunity to organize through SEWA. Without that network, it would have been exceedingly difficult for the organization to take place. The street vendors' social network served the decision-shaping function as well. After their first momentous success resisting police abuse, Rajiben, one of the vendors, said that "after this incident, I walked to every market in the city to bring new members to the union."<sup>142</sup> So the social network not only helped simply connect the women to the organization effort, after some success it also helped shape women's decision to join. By helping gather a critical mass of women, the social networks allowed SEWA to provide benefits for the self-employed women.

SEWA's work on crèches also exemplifies the importance of social networks. While mothers were at first reluctant to leave their children at the crèches, after some women did and had successful experiences, they spoke about it with the other workers in the salt and tobacco farmers, which encouraged them to also leave their children there. Even women from different villages who had originally not know about the crèches, began asking SEWA to start a crèche near them. Once again, the women's social networks both structurally connected the women to the organization and helped them with their decision to join. That in turn, made it possible for SEWA to provide the women the self-employed with the benefits that came from the crèches.

Phase 1 – providing selective incentives for women – required both internal and external elements. Internally it depended on the ability of SEWA to mobilize resources effectively, which required focusing on sectors individually and including the women workers in the discussions of what to fight for and how to fight for it. Externally, the legal framework, level of government support and social networks influenced SEWA's degree of success in its efforts to provide women with selective incentives and benefits. While providing trade-specific social and

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<sup>142</sup> Rose, *Where Women*, 47.

economic benefits brought women workers into SEWA, it did not generate a movement. Practically speaking, in terms of their daily lives, rural salt farmers share little in common with urban street vendors. More broadly, the women are sprawled across occupations, regions, castes, communities, and religions. As Rao puts it, “Economic motives provide women with visible incentives to participate in the organizational effort. However... the organization may not be sustainable without the capacity for struggle, and a political agenda.”<sup>143</sup> Without a unifying ideology, women will remain confined to their individual sector’s interest, leading to the importance of phase 2.

### *Phase 2 – Creating a Common Identity and Shared Purpose: Framing the Movement*

In providing selective incentives, phase 1 fulfilled the crucial task of creating a critical mass of women. Phase 2 unified them. In effectively framing their work, and then promoting that frame extensively, SEWA unified the women across their differences behind a common identity, struggle, and ideology. Indeed, as Snow and Benford demonstrated, framing a movement is critical to its success. Frames ascribe meaning to daily experiences and thereby allow for the creation of a common identity, ideology and struggle. For a frame to be effective, both organizational inputs and environmental factors play a role again. In terms of organizational inputs, as Snow and Benford explained, movement actors create frames that address the three core tasks (diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational framing) and have credibility. In terms of environmental factors, the frame’s salience in society and the availability of social networks help ensure the frame’s success.

#### *Organizational Inputs*

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<sup>143</sup> Rao, “Empowerment through Organization,” 183.

Snow and Benford indicate three core framing tasks that movements must complete: diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational framing. In this process, movement actors must also ensure they develop a credible frame, meaning that it is consistent with the movement's actions, it has empirical credibility, and that the articulators of the frame are credible. SEWA developed a powerful frame at every level and through meetings and trainings has been able to promote it extensively.

*Core Framing Task 1: Diagnostic Framing.* SEWA's overriding view is that the self employed women are in every way *workers*, substantially contributing to the economy and providing for their families, and yet society does not recognize them as such and therefore they face continuous exploitation. Bhatt explained, "our underlying approach is to see the poor as workers and producers, rather than just as income-deprived or vulnerable people."<sup>144</sup> She adds, "we say that we are also workers, we also contribute to the economy."<sup>145</sup> A World Bank report, written after spending time with SEWA, similarly observed that "SEWA has always kept its focus on one overriding reality – that poor women are above all *workers*" (emphasis in the original).<sup>146</sup> However, "the economic activities (of the self employed) have been described by various names, such as unorganized, unprotected, unregistered, marginal or informal, a more recent term being the black economy. It is contradictory to describe such a vast, active workforce in terms that relegates it to a peripheral position, while in reality it is central to the economy."<sup>147</sup> These ideas are rooted in Ghandi's ideas, specifically, Bhatt explains, his ideas "on the dignity, or even the sanctity, of labor; on the importance of human values – that nothing that compromises a person's humanity is acceptable; that poverty is wrong because it is violent;

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<sup>144</sup> Bhatt, Ela. "Approach to Poverty." SEWA. [http://www.sewa.org/Archives\\_Poverty\\_Removal.asp](http://www.sewa.org/Archives_Poverty_Removal.asp) [April 9, 2010]

<sup>145</sup> Dayal, *Towards Securer Lives*, 1.

<sup>146</sup> Blaxall, "India's Self Employed," 4.

<sup>147</sup> Chen, "Self Employed Women," 1.

it does not respect human labor, strips a person of his or her humanity, and takes away their freedom.”<sup>148</sup> Encouraging the women to see themselves as workers is indeed a critical part of member education, as the SEWA Academy website indicates, “through the training, members learn to identify themselves as women workers and come to... understand the contribution of women in the Indian Economy.”<sup>149</sup>

*Core Framing Task 2: Prognostic Framing.* SEWA asserts that to become recognized as workers and end the continuous exploitation, they must *organize*. The Social Movement Training course, which for a long time was offered to every member, holds a “discussion of the importance of group solidarity and collective organizing.”<sup>150</sup> Specifically, SEWA promotes organizing into a union and cooperatives. As Bhatt explains, “SEWA straddles the realms of both union and cooperatives. The union mobilizes and organizes the women to come together around their work issues. The women then form trade cooperatives in an effort to become owners of their labor.”<sup>151</sup> SEWA illustrates this strategy by invoking the image of a banyan tree:

Over time, the branches grow vines that reach for the ground and take root, becoming trunks themselves; in this way, they become a sprawling forest within the same, ever-expanding tree. Each one is independent and autonomous, both financially and in the decision-making process. At the same time, new growth draws strength from the old.<sup>152</sup>

SEWA also promotes the “joint strategy of Struggle and Development” in organizing. SEWA’s website explains that “the struggle is against the many constraints and limitations imposed on them by society and the economy, while development activities strengthen women’s bargaining

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<sup>148</sup> Bhatt, *We are Poor*, 8.

<sup>149</sup> SEWA Academy. <http://www.sewaacademy.org/training/programmes.htm> [April 9, 2010]

<sup>150</sup> “SEWA Movement: Training Evaluation Study.” (Ahmedabad: SEWA Academy, 2006): 5.

<sup>151</sup> Bhatt, *We are Poor*, 16

<sup>152</sup> Bhatt, *We are Poor*, 18

power and offer them new alternatives.”<sup>153</sup> Further, again drawing on Gandhi, SEWA emphasizes their non-violent approach to struggle.

*Core Framing Task 3: Motivational Framing.* SEWA’s “call to arms,” as described by Snow and Benford, is driven by the aspiration that members will achieve full employment and self reliance through organization. Apart from the practical benefits of engaging in organization, they also point to Ghandi’s philosophy again as rationale for action. During the introductory Social Movement Training,

The link is made between Gandhian philosophy and SEWA’s ideology and values, especially truth, nonviolence, self-reliance, equality and simplicity. The purpose is to inspire and motivate the women to organize collectively, and to fearlessly, courageously and continuously struggle for their rights and entitlements, equality and social justice, even in the face of opposition.<sup>154</sup>

SEWA’s motivational frame is then both practical and ideological, providing a truly holistic rationale for engaging in collective action.

*Ensuring the Frame’s Credibility.* SEWA’s frame met the three elements of credibility indicated by Snow and Benford: it is consistent with the movement’s actions, has empirical credibility, and its articulators are credible. Every element of SEWA’s actions aligns with its frame. From giving the women a voice in its meetings and encouraging them to indicate the work they do, to successfully helping organize hundreds of cooperatives, to often singing Gandhi’s 11 principles at the start or end of meetings. Empirically, the label of “worker” is completely in-line with their daily lives where they are constantly working and the exploitation that SEWA describes happens to them on a daily basis. Lastly, the self-employed women found the women presenting SEWA’s frame credible. An evaluation of the Social Movement Training,

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<sup>153</sup> “About Us: Introduction.” SEWA Website. [http://www.sewa.org/About\\_Us.asp](http://www.sewa.org/About_Us.asp) [April 9, 2010]

<sup>154</sup> “SEWA Movement: Training Evaluation Study,” 5.



found that 96% of participants found the trainers' language "clear and easy to understand."<sup>155</sup> In order to explain the SEWA movement to women in rural areas, "barefoot trainers" use the videos produced by VideoSEWA, which give the image of "a big, serious organization" and then "give women confidence in SEWA because they can see for themselves that SEWA takes an interest in their problems."<sup>156</sup> So through their style and the strategies they employ, frame articulators are perceived as highly credible.

*Promoting the Frame.* Snow and Benford's theory regrettably falls short of explaining SEWA's critical success in framing their movement. Snow and Benford stopped their analysis of the framing process at the development of a strong and credible frame; yet, for a frame to ultimately influence a movement's trajectory, its' actors must work to promote it. This allows the application of resource mobilization to the framing process as well. In addition to developing a strong and credible frame, SEWA recognizes the frames' role in unifying the women across sectors. SEWA also mobilizes resources to aggressively promote the frame to its members. When SEWA's membership nearly doubled between 1990 and 1991, "it no longer became possible to educate all members about the vision and purpose of SEWA through its organizing efforts as it once had."<sup>157</sup> Moreover, with the growth, "the membership became more diverse, making it necessary to bring members together -- across geography, caste, trade barriers."<sup>158</sup> The expansion of the organization forced SEWA to find a new way to promote their vision. And so SEWA Academy emerged. Through its two basic courses, Member Education and Social Movement Training, SEWA has effectively continued to promote its frame. SEWA describes Member Education as:

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<sup>155</sup> "SEWA Movement: Training Evaluation Study," 13.

<sup>156</sup> Rose, *Where Women*, 157-8.

<sup>157</sup> "SEWA Training: About Us." SEWA Academy Website. <http://www.sewaacademy.org/training/aboutus.htm> [April 9, 2010]

<sup>158</sup> "SEWA Training: About Us." SEWA Academy Website. <http://www.sewaacademy.org/training/aboutus.htm>

A means for SEWA to create a sense of unity and direction, awareness of SEWA's values and ideology.... By building identity, unity and an understanding of collective action among SEWA members, the program plays a central role in creating the deep roots that makes the SEWA movement strong.<sup>159</sup>

Further, when SEWA expanded beyond Gujarat and started the umbrella organization, SEWA Bharat, it again faced an expanding membership. Accordingly, "the first concern of SEWA Bharat has been to build a national identity for SEWA."<sup>160</sup> SEWA Bharat works toward that end through

frequent meetings of the multi-state board of SEWA; continuous exposures and trainings for leaders from each SEWA and, most effectively, through Shramik Mahotsav, where women from all SEWAs come together and come to know each other, by talking, playing games and dancing and singing together. An important national identity comes from the newsmagazine *Anasuya* published from Bhopal. However, the most effective link is established by building a common ideology, common programs and common values.<sup>161</sup> Ultimately, promoting its vision "is the means by which SEWA unites its large and diverse membership through common ideology, thus building our movement - the SEWA movement."<sup>162</sup>

So while phase 1 mobilized women and created a critical mass, phase 2 created the movement.

#### *Environmental Factors*

While frame development and promotion is mainly an internal process, several external forces mitigate the success of a frame. Specifically the centrality of the frame's values to the society's belief system and the frame's narrative fidelity are critical. In the case of SEWA, the values are central because of their narrative fidelity so I will discuss them together.

*Salience: Narrative Fidelity and Centrality.* The values of the frame, grounded in Gandhi's philosophies, are consistent with the narrative of the country and central to society's belief system. Indeed, the ideas behind SEWA's frame even extend beyond Gandhi as Bhatt explains, "the Gandhian principles that lie behind SEWA are age-old, and embedded in Indian

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<sup>159</sup> "SEWA Training: Member Education." [http://www.sewaacademy.org/training/tr\\_memberedu.htm](http://www.sewaacademy.org/training/tr_memberedu.htm)

<sup>160</sup> SEWA Bharat Annual Report 2008-2009, (9).

<sup>161</sup> SEWA Bharat Annual Report 2008-2009, (9).

<sup>162</sup> "SEWA Services." SEWA Website. [http://www.sewa.org/Services\\_Capacity\\_Building.asp](http://www.sewa.org/Services_Capacity_Building.asp)

culture and traditions – as Gandhi himself freely acknowledged.”<sup>163</sup> The women in SEWA are only one or two generations after India’s independence movement, so the image and ideas of Gandhi still hold considerable weight.

The reach of Gandhi’s influence is evident in India’s constitution. As discussed above, India’s constitution and many of its laws are incredibly pro-women, pro-poor, and pro-workers. Not only are the frame’s values central to India’s narrative and belief system, but the strategies SEWA’s frame advocates, its prognostic framing, are central as well. As Agarwal points out, “India has a rich history of labor organization.”<sup>164</sup> India’s union movement dates back to before independence in 1918. In that year Gandhi actually helped start one of the first unions, the Textile Labor Association (which Bhatt worked for).<sup>165</sup> Today, India’s union density is higher than the United States’ and Japan’s and just slightly lower than Germany and Australia’s. Apart from its rich history of unionizing, India also has a strong cooperative movement. Inspired by credit unions in Germany and perhaps also the cooperative movement which arose in the United Kingdom, a British officer suggested introducing agricultural credit cooperatives in India.<sup>166</sup> In 1904, the colonial government passed the Cooperative Society Act which allowed cooperatives “to get a direct legal identity.”<sup>167</sup> Ever since then and through Indian independence, the Act has been continually expanded to include more types and sizes of cooperatives.<sup>168</sup> Today, cooperatives span across India and together have approximately 230 million members.<sup>169</sup> Further, “the cooperative credit system of India has the largest network in the world and

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<sup>163</sup> Blaxall, “India’s Self Employed,” 15.

<sup>164</sup> Agarwal, *From Work to Welfare*, 15.

<sup>165</sup> Bhowmik, 132.

<sup>166</sup> Das, Banishree, Nirod Kumar Palai, and Kumar Das. “Problems and Prospects of the Cooperative Movement in India under the Globalization Regime.” (XIV International Economic History Congress, Helsinki 2006, Session 72): 2.

<sup>167</sup> Das, “Problems and Prospects,” 2.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

cooperatives have advanced more credit in the Indian agricultural sector than commercial banks.”<sup>170</sup> Therefore, not only were the values behind SEWA’s frame central to India’s narrative and belief system, but the strategies advocated for within the frame were too.

Importantly, the salience of SEWA’s frame in the Indian context allowed SEWA’s members as well as the rest of the population, including government officials, to identify with the movement. This salience then affects officials’ willingness to work with SEWA – an external element of phase 1. SEWA’s success in fostering a common identity and shared purpose among all the self-employed women has arguably been the most important part in ensuring the sustainability of the movement and the reason it can even be considered a movement and not simply an organization. Indeed it is what ensured the commitment of thousands of women.

### *Phase 3 – Ensuring Continuity: Democratic Governance*

Apart from providing financial and social benefits to self-employed women and uniting them behind a common identity and struggle, SEWA has achieved continuity as a movement through its organizational dynamics. Drawing from Chen’s framework to analyze the movement dynamics, SEWA’s success in terms of external and external factors becomes clear. Most importantly, the internal factors include a federated democratic governance structure with capable leadership. The main external factor for ensuring continuity is external funding and support from diversified sources that does not subvert the objectives of the organization.<sup>171</sup>

#### *Organizational Inputs*

SEWA indeed has a federated democratic governance structure with capable leadership. Its federated democracy is evident through its three governing bodies. At the lowest level are the

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<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

<sup>171</sup> Chen, *Membership-Based*, 17.

Trade Committees, *Dhanda Samities*.<sup>172</sup> With no fixed proportion of representatives to members in the trade, the size of the Committee varies between 15 and 50 members.<sup>173</sup> The Committees role is to “discuss the problems of their trades and possible solutions to them.”<sup>174</sup> The Trade Committees then elect representatives (*Pratindhis*) to a central Trade Council, the second level of governance. There is one representative for every 200 members in a specific trade.<sup>175</sup> Trade Council representatives are responsible for “motivating and supervising the local leaders in their respective trades as well as negotiating and lobbying on behalf of their trade.”<sup>176</sup> The Council representatives then elect 25 members to the Executive Committee that must reflect the proportion of membership in each trade. The main role of the Executive Committee is to “provide overall direction to the SEWA Union as per its vision and mission. This includes planning, monitoring, reviewing, and evaluating the activities of the Union.”<sup>177</sup> Additionally, the Executive Committee elects a General Secretary and two Secretaries from among SEWA’s paid coordinators to “help manage and implement its decisions.”<sup>178</sup> SEWA holds elections for each level of governance every three years and each body meets once a month.<sup>179</sup> The federated system ensures that growth will always be possible and that programs can be implemented easily with no need to get approval from the central governing body.<sup>180</sup> The frequent elections, the fact that the representatives are local, and the fact that membership dues comprise a significant part of SEWA’s budget, helps ensure SEWA’s leadership is always accountable for its actions and decisions.

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<sup>172</sup> Chen, “Profile of SEWA Membership,” 101.

<sup>173</sup> “SEWA’s Structure.” SEWA Website. [http://www.sewa.org/About\\_Us.asp](http://www.sewa.org/About_Us.asp) [April 9, 2010]

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>175</sup> Chen, “Profile of SEWA Membership,” 101.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>180</sup> Blaxall, “India’s Self Employed,” 16.

Further, SEWA works hard to ensure that its leaders have the ability to manage their responsibilities. Throughout the organization process, SEWA coordinators look for strong leaders within the different trades and encourage them to get further training through SEWA Academy. Through their Academy they offer members Basic Leadership Training, Advanced Leadership Training, Training of Trainers as well as more technical training including Communication Training and Financial Services. Through the training SEWA leaders truly develop their skills as well as become immersed in SEWA's ideology.

### *Environmental Factors*

SEWA has indeed received substantial financial support from external institutions and donors. Apart from the government's financial support, in 2004 for example, SEWA received 3,338,182 dollars from institutional donors and 70,948 dollars from individual donors.<sup>181</sup> Further, the support has come from a wide variety of organizations including, UNICEF, the Ford Foundation, USAID, the International Labor Organization, Unitarian Universalist Church's India Fund, the Consultative Group to Assist the Poorest (CGAP), the International Finance Corporation (the private sector arm of the World Bank), and the International Fund for Agriculture Development (IFAD).<sup>182</sup> SEWA recognizes the potential challenges of receiving outside support and so it is "cautious about the substantive partnerships it enters into, but has no qualms about engaging in dialogue with parties sometimes considered controversial."<sup>183</sup> Indeed because of external support SEWA was able to withstand the attacks it received from the Gujarat

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<sup>181</sup> "Annual Report 2006." SEWA. [http://www.sewa.org/Annual\\_Report2004\\_Part\\_B\\_Sewa\\_Accounts.asp](http://www.sewa.org/Annual_Report2004_Part_B_Sewa_Accounts.asp) [April 9, 2010]

<sup>182</sup> Blaxall, "India's Self Employed," 16. "SEWA, Self Employed Women's Association Case Study." (International Conference on Achieving Connectivity for the Rural Poor in India, Baramati, India, May 31 - June 3, 2001): 3. <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTPOVERTY/Resources/335642-1124115102975/1555199-1124741378410/sewa.pdf>. IFC. <http://www.ifc.org/ifcext/lac.nsf/Content/SelectedPR?OpenDocument&UNID=7F66B313E3F3E86B85256F5D00708484> [April 9, 2010]

<sup>183</sup> Blaxall, "India's Self Employed," 16.

Government in 2004 and their subsequent decision to terminate funding for SEWA's programs. The incident with the government in Gujarat actually highlights the importance of diverse sources of funding as SEWA was not crumpled when a major donor pulled out.

#### *Looking at the Phases Together*

SEWA was able to emerge very successfully because it provided selective incentives to self employed women, fostered a common identity and shared purpose between the women, and ensured its continuity through democratic governance and diversified sources of funding. While internal factors are of primary importance, even the best institutional strategies will likely fail to produce a movement without at least some favorable environmental conditions.

### **VI. Conclusion: Is the SEWA Movement Transferable?**

Across the developing world, women in the informal economy, unprotected by government provisions and exploited by patriarchy, work relentlessly to earn a living for themselves and their families. Within these treacherous conditions SEWA emerged and developed into a powerful force in India and beyond. The question naturally arises – what enabled SEWA to become such a successful social movement? While previous scholars have pointed to various specific characteristics – its leadership, flexibility, values, strategy, governance, or autonomous nature – they have not put forth a theoretical framework through which to understand its rise to prominence. Drawing on social movement theory, I have put forth a three-phase framework that allows us to theoretically understand SEWA's emergence. The three phases – providing selective incentives, creating a common identity and shared purpose, and ensuring continuity – each depend on both organizational inputs and environmental factors. With this framework in hand, the question now becomes: is the SEWA movement transferable?

I propose that the degree to which the external factors exist in the different contexts will dictate whether the SEWA movement can emerge in a different region. Though how well an organization executes them will vary, the internal elements of each phase are evidently transferable. In theory, any organization can work to mobilize resources to provide selective incentives, work to frame their movement, and work to create a federated, democratic governance structure with capable leaders. However, movement actors clearly cannot ultimately ensure their wider environment will have the elements that will allow them to succeed in the three phases. Yet, movement actors can work to influence their wider environment through lobbying at local, national, and international levels, working to foster social networks, framing their movement considering their society's belief system and narrative, and writing grants to (or fostering partnerships with) external sources of funding. Realistically though, even a movement executing the internal elements of each phase perfectly, will only have the ability to influence their wider environment up to a certain point. Therefore, in the end transferability will depend on the degree to which the external facilitating factors exist in the region.

The three phase framework, however, glosses over one important factor: leadership. While it outlines the importance of structures that develop strong leadership, it does not do justice to the initial leader of SEWA, Ela Bhatt. Bhatt, an educated union lawyer and granddaughter of a man who marched alongside Gandhi, recognized the exploitation of women in the informal sector and initiated the movement to help them organize. Drawing from her training course in Israel which taught her the power of combining unions and cooperatives, she made that the centerpiece of SEWA's organizing efforts. Throughout SEWA's development, Bhatt continued to play a pivotal role; indeed, every element of SEWA's work reflects her insight. However, as social movement scholars themselves have noted, leadership has not been



properly developed in the literature. Regrettably, my framework reflected that missing piece. As the literature on leadership emerges, I look forward to improving my framework.

Despite the framework's neglect of initial leadership, ultimately, the frame highlights how SEWA developed an incredibly successful *model* that is indeed transferable. So while there were many conditions unique to India that facilitated, or at least did not inhibit, mobilization, the core of the work is indeed transferable. Although previous scholars writing on SEWA have referred to the SEWA model and outlined some of its key characteristics, they have been unable to provide a holistic theoretical understanding explaining *what role* those features play in SEWA's emergence and growth, and how they come together to create a *movement* because they failed to analyze SEWA within social movement literature. In this way, the three-phase framework provides depth to the current understandings of SEWA's success. Understanding the underlying role of the key features of SEWA's structures and strategies shifts the focus to accomplishing that underlying role. Practically, this allows for greater flexibility in transferring the SEWA model.

Perhaps more importantly than the frameworks' addition of depth, the three-phase framework highlights the *indispensible* role of framing in SEWA's success. While previous scholars recognized the importance of SEWA's values and noted SEWA's success in fostering a common identity, they failed to take into account the critically active role that SEWA played in actually fostering the movement's values and identity. In general, scholars have seen these as by-products of the organizing efforts. While that holds some weight, as organizing creates social networks which through their socialization function help spread SEWA's ideology, it overlooks SEWA's active role in the process. As shown in my analysis, from the beginning SEWA has recognized the importance of promoting the movement's frame to its member and has attended

to that task vigorously, through training courses at SEWA Academy and sending trainers to villages. It then further strengthens the frame's influence by integrating the frame's ideas into daily movement activities (for example by singing Gandhi's eleven principles at meetings) and developing social networks between members in different trades. The frame as we then saw fostered conversion and ultimately commitment. Without SEWA's well developed and promoted frame, SEWA would likely have remained a union divided by trade, caste, religion, and community.

So ultimately, why does it matter if we understand the reasons for SEWA's success? Simply put, SEWA has empowered hundreds of thousands of women in India, which not only grants them the dignity they deserve and which has been neglected to them throughout their lives but further ensures that their children will grow up with better conditions, better health, a better education, and a chance to break out of the cycle of poverty. Only by truly understanding why the SEWA movement emerged and developed can we work on successfully implementing the model across the globe, and thereby, through women's empowerment, create a more just and equitable world.

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