

# ***Organising 'non-standard' women workers for economic and social security in India and Australia***

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## **ABSTRACT**

The reported increase in 'non-standard', informal and contingent work in Australia and other advanced industrial economies poses a significant organisational and cultural challenge to the trade union movement. Traditional union strategies forged primarily in the context of a masculine, blue collar, industrial context are neither appropriate nor effective amongst a labour force that is increasingly casualised, fragmented, mobile and feminised. Organising this 'new' labour force requires new strategies.

In this paper I draw on the organising strategies of an Indian all-women's trade union, The Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA), and an Australian community-based labour organisation, Asian Women at Work Inc (AWatW) to outline existing strategies for organising 'non-standard' labour. In my evaluation of these two organisations I identify six key features of successful organising amongst fragmented and contingent workers. These include a focus on common work-life experience; a 'whole person' approach; organising not servicing; re-socialising work-life; the clear articulation of organisational values; and developed external linkages. At both SEWA and AWatW these organisational features promote the visibility and voice representation of marginalised workers seeking work-life reform in a context of enhanced economic insecurity and inequality.

## ***Introduction***

Since the 1980s workers in the advanced industrial world have experienced major changes in the way production and employment is organised. Recent research indicates that these changes have given rise to new forms of economic insecurity and social polarisation (Crompton, Gallie & Purcell 1996; acirrt 1999; Standing 1999). In particular, reforms focused on reducing 'rigidities' in the labour market have given rise to a new 'flexible' employment regime in which an increasing proportion of the labour force is employed in 'non-standard' jobs on a part-time, contract, casual, or piece-rate basis (Allen & Henry 1996; Mitter 1986). While not all of these jobs are poor quality jobs, the increase in 'non-standard' employment contracts has precipitated a rise in work that is formally insecure, precarious and marked by low wages (Herzenberg, Alic & Wial 1998; Martens & Mitter 1994; Portes & Sassen-Koob 1987; Rasell & Appelbaum 1997). And as a direct consequence new forms of social and economic insecurity have developed amongst population groups concentrated in these forms of employment. Some of these forms of insecurity are directly related to the structural features of dependent forms of work. Others are the result of government failure to extend formal modes of social protection to 'non-standard' work. (acirrt 1999:168-170; Carre, duRivage & Tilly 1995:20-22).

It is well documented that women are disproportionately represented amongst the part-time, casual and contingent labour force (Weaver 1997, Carre, duRivage & Tilly 1995; Zeytinoglu 1994). While there are many reasons why women accept employment in the new flexible and fragmented labour regime, participation in precarious, irregular and low paid work has engendered particular forms of economic and social insecurity for women and the families that depend on their income. With limited access to economic security, many workers have become increasingly invisible, powerless and politically inconspicuous. This is especially the case for migrant women engaged in manufacturing home-based work (Jane Tate 1994; HomeNet 1998). The evolving nature of women's precarious labour force participation poses a significant challenge for feminist political economists interested in women's economic status and its affect on women's access to economic security, social security and political participation.

Traditionally, it has been the labour movement that has provided the institutional environment within which issues of work security and worker protection have been addressed. However, unions experienced at organising full-time, bread-winning, male workers have struggled to develop strategies that redress the new and complex forms of economic insecurity experienced by a fragmented, flexible and feminised labour force (ILO 1998:32-37).

Fragmentation of the labour force is driven by a variety of new, coupled with the resurgence of many old forms of flexible production and employment. Guy Standing argues that 'flexibility' is primarily generated through changes to the production process; employment; the work process; and job structure (Standing 1999). Together, these generate flexibility and fragmentation in both the spatial and temporal dimensions of work. Irregular or non-standard hours, in combination with either a casual, short-term or piece-rate employment contracts also leave workers highly mobile, atomised and often located beyond the locus of the mainstream economy, at the interface of the public and private spheres.

Spatial and temporal dislocation amongst non-standard workers leads to worker invisibility. This has significant implications for both worker identity and the ability of unions to engage workers in collective forms of organisation and struggle. Unorganised and unconnected to the labour movement, non-standard workers experience a 'representational-gap' (ILO 2002). Voiceless, they remain exposed to myriad forms of socio-economic insecurity.

What strategies are there for the labour movement to organise an increasingly flexible, fragmented and feminised labour force, in which the prevailing social relations of production de-socialise work and undermine workers' individual and collective identity? It is a critical question given that if contingent labour is left unorganised, the institutional mechanisms through which working conditions, economic and social security can be improved will remain illusive and leave workers economically, socially and politically vulnerable.

This paper explores ways in which the labour movement can reorientate itself to organise and respond to the particular needs of non-standard and contingent workers. An examination of the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA), in India, and community-based labour organisation Asian Women at Work (AWatW) in Sydney to organising 'non-standard' workers provide stimulating points of reflection and learning for policy makers, academics and labour activists concerned with the rise of precarious and contingent employment and its impact on women's economic status. The examples of SEWA and AWatW not only provide practical guidance on the 'how to' of organising non-standard labour, but also highlight the critical role organising plays in promoting democracy, citizenship and economic development in a context of economic inequality and insecurity.

### ***The Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA), Gujarat, India***

The Self Employed Women's Association is an Indian trade union of women employed in the informal or 'unorganised' sector. Workers in this sector of the economy are typically exposed to unregulated and often irregular processes of production and employment relationships in which they are denied access to fair wages, decent working conditions, protective labour laws and social security. Approximately 100 million women, or ninety six percent of the female labour force are employed in the informal economy (Deshpande & Deshpande 1997:546).

SEWA was established in 1971 at the instigation of a group of head-loaders, cart-pullers, vendors and clothing workers. Their aim was to establish an all-women's union that would specifically address the interests of women workers. The goals of SEWA are to organise vulnerable and highly exploited women workers towards full-employment and self-reliance.

SEWA members represent a variety of trades and services, including *home-based workers* such as weavers, potters, bidi rollers, agarbatti rollers, dry food makers, tailors, handicraft artisans, agricultural produce processors; *vendors and traders* who purchase goods such as vegetables, fruit, fish, other food items, household items and clothes from wholesalers and sell them in different parts of the city; *labourers and service providers* including agricultural labourers, construction site workers, handcart pullers, head-loaders, dhobi wallahs, and cooks; and *small producers* who invest in their own labour and capital to do business, such as gum collectors, salt workers, embroiderers, and dairy workers.

SEWA is based in Ahmedabad, and has affiliates in several other states, including Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Kerala, Bihar and Delhi. The largest membership is in Gujarat. In 2002 there were 535 674 SEWA members in Gujarat, and 689 551 across India (SEWA 2002).

## ***Asian Women at Work (AWatW), Sydney, Australia***

AWatW was established in 1993 by social worker, Debbie Casterns. As a community-based labour organisation AWatW's aim is to empower Asian women migrant workers to fully participate in Australian society. Members of AWatW are employed in factories, restaurants, shops and as industrial outworkers in their homes. The AWatW 'network' includes approximately one thousand Asian women workers. Two-thirds of these are formal members of the organisation, while the other third participate in AWatW activities, but for a variety of reasons are uncomfortable about becoming formal members. While the mainstream labour movement in Australia has largely failed to organise Asian women workers, AWatW has developed an innovative model of labour organising that is responsive to the spatial, temporal and cultural dislocation of migrant women workers.

### ***Organising fragmented and vulnerable women workers***

While the scale and scope of organising activities and strategies vary enormously between SEWA and AWatW, the two organisations share some common features. Both SEWA and AWatW seek to unite workers from a broad range of trades and service backgrounds by accentuating the common work-life experience of members. Both organisations treat workers as 'whole people' whose work-lives are directly affected by both traditional industrial issues and non-industrial issues. And both have a commitment to organising and not merely servicing workers as passive recipients of assistance. At the heart of the two organisations is a commitment to building worker visibility and voice. This is a direct consequence of membership and its capacity to re-socialise the work-life experience. Finally strong organisational values and external institutional linkages contribute to successful organising and work-life reform. These six features go some way to explaining the relative success of SEWA and AWatW in organising vulnerable and fragmented workers.

**1. ORGANISING AROUND COMMON WORK-LIFE EXPERIENCE:** Unlike most trade unions, SEWA and AWatW organise women workers from a variety of trade and industry backgrounds. Organisational unity and institutional solidarity is therefore not established on the basis of common trade, but upon the foundation of common work-life experience. This includes voicelessness, exploitation, harassment, social and political isolation, economic marginality, vulnerability and insecurity.

For Indian women engaged in informal labour the social and institutional relations of production, exchange and reproduction produce deeply entrenched forms of social, economic and political insecurity, poor health, inadequate housing, isolation, fragmentation and voicelessness. The structural characteristics of work include dependence on middle-men and contractors for the supply of raw materials and the sale of finished products; insecure and exploitative 'terms' of employment; lack of social security; spatial isolation and lack of information, and low and irregular wages. These are the common experiences around which workers unite at SEWA and organise for socio-economic security and political voice.

For Asian migrant women in Australia the work-life experience can be uncannily similar. Isolation is often cited by workers as an impediment to work-life reform. Isolation is typically associated with home-based industrial outwork, but Asian women workers in Sydney employed at low wages and under oppressive conditions, including long hours of work also cite time constraints as a critical determinant of their ability to engage more fully in society. With little time left after completing long hours of work and family duties, women find it difficult to find the time to retrain, improve their language skills or look for alternative work. Language and other cultural barriers also constrain the opportunities these workers have to participate in the political economy. These work-life experiences transcend trade and industry and form the foundation upon which workers are collectively organised.

The focus on common work-life experience does not however negate the role that both trade and location play in the practical task of organising workers. Both SEWA and AWatW also organise workers on the basis of common location and common trade. At SEWA organising workers within the areas in which they live and work is partly a means by which they manage the organisational constraints associated with a fragmented workforce that is spatially dislocated.

SEWA organisers are assigned to the various urban and rural areas and are responsible for co-ordinating union activities implementing policy and addressing the specific needs of workers in her area. This layer of 'geographical unionism' serves both a practical and strategic purpose. At a practical level area-based organising reduces the cost and time taken to organise workers spread over large distances. Close interaction between union organisers and regular members facilitates both efficient communication between organisers and regular members, as well as coherent action amongst large groups of workers. It also enhances members' sense of ownership of the union since they know and trust the local women who are union organisers. This has a strategic impact as a high rate of worker interaction helps to build solidarity and increase the bargaining power of what has become a very effective movement of poor self-employed women.

Trade-based organising is the final tier of SEWA's organising approach. SEWA's Trade Committees, Trade Councils, Tripartite agreements, Trade and service cooperatives are occupationally specific modes of organising designed to achieve trade specific outcomes and have most in common with more traditional forms of union organising. However, the bargaining strength of SEWA lies in its ability to collectively organise across trades and across geographical distance to build a union of over 500 000 members. In a context where labour is fragmented, isolated and atomised, interventions for positive change in the political economy require a large and united, collective voice. Without this, the bargaining power of a fragmented labour force is limited.

Like SEWA, AWatW also organises workers on the basis of common location and trade. Amongst clothing outworkers, AWatW has found that local area support groups have been a critical organising tool and provided a strategic means by which workers who are isolated in their homes identify with other workers, share information and provide support. English classes and other educational seminars run in specific locations for local workers have also facilitated successful organising. Industry and workplace based organising strategies add a final 'layer' to AWatW's organising strategy.

Implementation of a diverse organising strategy that focuses on common work-life experience, but includes a geographical and trade centred element facilitates both SEWA and AWatW to organise a diverse labour force and promote a collective voice. These two examples suggest that in order to meet the voice representation and income security needs of a fragmented, heterogeneous and non-standard labour force, unions need to think beyond the boundaries of trade-based organising. Instead trade specific organising needs to be set within a broader conceptual and organisational framework that gives primacy to the structural and institutional roots of worker socio-economic insecurity. This will require unions to think differently about work, workers and organising.

**2. 'WHOLE PERSON' APPROACH:** Setting SEWA and AWatW apart from mainstream trade unions is their 'whole person' approach. While the focus is very much on a member's status as a 'worker', both SEWA and AWatW have developed a sophisticated understanding of the complexity of workers lives, their multiple responsibilities, and needs. This means that wages and conditions are not the only issues around which SEWA and AWatW organise. Instead, the strategy at both organisations is predicated upon a sophisticated analysis of the strategic relationship between the public and the private, and between economic and social security.

Traditional trade unions typically focus on the public sphere of paid work and pay little regard to the private sphere where labour is reproduced. In contrast, SEWA pays close attention to the relationship between the reproduction of labour and labour's productive capacity. The strategic relationship between reproductive and productive activities is emphasised in the union's 'whole person' approach. In this approach affordable, accessible and good quality healthcare, shelter and childcare are posed as critical issues for SEWA members that directly contribute to worker productivity and income security. The provision of affordable, quality childcare is a key feature of SEWA's strategy to enhance women's' economic security. In the absence of child-care, informal working women have no option but to combine the task of caring for small children with their work. This limits the mobility and availability of a worker and reduces their productivity. This is reflected in low wages. In the 'whole person' approach worker needs, such as health, shelter and childcare are reconceptualised as productive resources and entitlements around which the union organises members.

AWatW also takes a strongly 'whole person' approach to organising. Like SEWA the focus is on a woman as a worker. But the framework within which the 'worker' is conceptualised is broad and moves beyond wages and conditions. In the context of workplace visits AWatW organisers will provide workers with information on occupational health and safety *and* women's health and domestic violence; information on vocational education and training courses *and* local English classes. Special worker 'kits' in community languages also provide information about Australian society, law and welfare. AWatW runs periodic courses, seminars and workshops that include both worker and citizenship education, as well as hobby groups and cultural events that celebrate both significant Australian, international and ethnically specific festivals. The 'whole-person' approach has both practical outcomes and strategic ones as it addresses the full range of worker's needs, and opens up new ways of connecting with and organising workers.

A 'whole person' approach is also supported in the literature on organising non-standard workers. In a study on the Domestic Workers Association in Los Angeles, most of whom are Latinos, Hondagneu-Sotelo and Riegos argue that '[Organisations which] combine expressive or cultural events with self-help seminars and consciousness raising, along with direct action and advocacy, may be well-suited to the new structures of a post-fordist work' (1997:76). While the language of 'self-help' is not common amongst trade unions, AWatW have certainly found that self-help seminars in combination with consciousness raising, civics education, cultural celebrations and traditional forms of worker education together provide an organising framework that is relevant to a diverse and marginalised labour force.

**3. ORGANISING NOT SERVICING:** Both SEWA and AWatW organise workers, conceptualising them as active agents in their own development, not passive receivers of services. While the SEWA strategy does include many members services, such as the Bank, the health, childcare and housing cooperatives, legal services etc., these are delivered by members to other members who together own and run the services. AWatW's commitment to organising workers and not servicing is strong, however success has been uneven. Members who are clothing outworkers are very active through their Chinese and Vietnamese outworker support groups. Factory and restaurant workers however, have not developed the same levels of confidence and activism and tend to rely more heavily of AWatW staff.

At SEWA the focus on organising and collective participation is resolute with union members systematically included in every aspect of union activity. Members are directly responsible for organising workers, running meetings, developing agendas and formulating union policy. This member-based, member-centered form of organising achieves multiple outcomes for the union. Firstly, the integrity of the struggle is maintained, as the agents of change are those who are fundamentally affected. Secondly, Government officials, employers and judges are genuinely confronted by the personal presentation of workers' difficulties. Thirdly, it produces the skill and leadership development amongst union members that informs the collective strength and bargaining power of the union. Finally, SEWA's grassroots, representative organising model works to raise workers' consciousness and empower them politically. This member-based organising strategy sits in contrast to traditional union organising strategy, in which workers share a common target and a successful campaign is mounted when many workers unite against this common target. Organising non-standard labour where there is no shared employer, no shared work site and no shared co-workers requires non-traditional approaches. Organising non-standard labour tends therefore to look a lot like community organising (Martens and Mitter 1994; Carr, Chen and Jhabvala 1996). Indeed unions in the United States have drawn directly on the community organising techniques developed by community organisers such as Saul Alinsky and the Industrial Areas Foundation, the civil rights movement and the new left community organising of the 1960s and 70s in order to hone their techniques and rediscover grassroots organising in a union context.

**4. RE-SOCIALISING WORK: PROMOTING VISIBILITY AND VOICE:** AWatW and SEWA provide isolated and fragmented workers with their own institution, a place and a space at which workers can meet, talk, plan and implement strategies for work-life reform. For workers who typically suffer low self-esteem, poor self-confidence, and little self-respect, the opportunity for social interaction, recognition and respect is a powerful and strategic one. Worker organisations re-socialise the work-life experience and provide the social foundations of worker agency upon which work life reform is pursued.

SEWA members report that union membership delivers a positive change in their psychological well-being, including self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem. Moreover, it is this positive relationship to the self that provides marginalised workers with the psychological integrity critical to their engagement in (public) strategies for work life reform. Worker agency therefore has social foundations (Hill 2001). SEWA has found that until workers are able to conceptualise themselves as workers, and understand their role and contribution to the economy, they lack the personal self-definition and solidarity essential to the struggle for economic and social security.

Members of AWatW also report a growth in their self-confidence, esteem and respect as a direct result of their participation in AWatW. Recognition and respect are identified as important personal resources they receive from their work sisters and the collective confidence they gain through collective activities. Many also report a newfound capacity to negotiate with and challenge mendacious employers and officials (AWatW 2001; AWatW 2004)

Resocialising work is a critical strategy for the protection and voice regulation of non-standard labour. Standing notes that the decline in statutory regulation that accompanies increased flexibility, means that strong voice regulation is required in order that 'participants in the labour market have a secure capacity to bargain and influence the character of employment, [and] to have an adequately strong 'voice' to ensure that distributive justice is pursued. Without that, all other forms of labour security will be jeopardised (Standing 1999:388). Reflecting on the labour conditions and social insecurity in trades and locations where workers are denied their right to freedom of association, provides a stark reminder as to both how critical strong voice regulation is, and how far wages and conditions can fall when it is not present.

**5. ORGANISATIONAL VALUES AND ETHOS:** SEWA's and AWatW's success at organising highly fragmented and vulnerable labour has not just been about sound strategy. The status and bargaining power of both organisations has been enhanced by strong organisational values that have delivered internal structural and strategic coherence, as well as astute linkages to external institutions.

SEWA is a Gandhian trade union whose organisational ethos and social philosophy is driven by Gandhian values. The Gandhian roots of the union provides the philosophical framework against which the work-life experience of informal working women is redefined and reconstructed. As a Gandhian trade union, SEWA advocates an alternative to the individualistic, metropolitan and industrial future that lies at the centre of mainstream development policy and planning. A Gandhian moral code values instead the working classes, rural labour, women, traditional forms of work and trade unions, all of which are allocated a central role in the future of the Indian nation. Workers are expected to raise their consciousness and organise for unity as a matter of personal and corporate dignity.

Gandhi's message of liberation through economic independence is especially suited to SEWA's poor, self-employed membership. Gandhi was forthright and radical in his views on women and their role in politics and the economy. He advocated women's independence and their right to resist physical and mental oppression. Gandhi also expressed great faith in the inherent leadership and strength of women, and expected women to play an important role in the world of work and social change. It is this belief in the leadership capacities of women that serves as the source of SEWA's strength.

At a structural and strategic level, the Gandhian principles of *satya*, *ahimsa*, *sarvadharmā* and *swadeshi* provide the key coordinates of SEWA's organising framework and practice of militant but non-violent trade unionism. These principals are not mere ideals, but a practice. Satya is the practice of being truthful and honest. Ahimsa is the practice of non-violence and non-violent protest most famously expressed in the Gandhian concept of *satyagraha* which translates as truth-force or love-force. Gandhi's vision was to resist injustice through moral fortitude, not brute force: '[satyagraha] is the vindication of truth, not by infliction of suffering on the opponent but on one's self' (Fischer 1997:103). Satyagraha is therefore a peaceful process of non-violent resistance that seeks to honour and trust the humanity of the oppressor by confronting them with the humanity of the oppressed with a view to ultimate reconciliation. This is not passive resistance, but the assertion of moral character and discipline designed to effect grand political change. SEWA has adopted this practice and in all negotiations with employers and officials.

Sarvadharmā is the practice of integration and equality of all faiths and all people. At SEWA this is practiced through the saying of prayers and singing of pledges derived from all faiths – Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Parsi, and Jain. It is with this affirmation of the equality of all faiths and all people that union meetings begin. And it is this principal and practice that acts as the 'glue' that holds a union of workers from diverse trades, religious, geographical and language backgrounds together in a unified whole.

Swadeshi is the propagation of local livelihoods, local economic development and the promotion of self-reliance, best expressed in the union's trade and service cooperatives, and in union member's boycott of industrial fibres and their commitment to wearing Khadi, a traditional cotton weave.

Finally, the Gandhian culture of SEWA is a powerful tool in the macro struggle for economic and cultural justice because it is indigenous. Its capacity to redefine the economic and cultural landscape within which the informal economy and women workers are constructed is significant because it 'speaks into' an established culture, history and psychological space. Workers respond positively to Gandhi's valuation of the individual, the political participation of women, the worker, the traditional, the rural and the poor. Government officials and employers, while they might disagree or resist, also have a cultural framework within which they can interpret SEWA demands. The challenge posed by SEWA's Gandhian ethos to unions organising vulnerable workers in the developed world, is that values matter – both in terms of defining a unifying vision, and in terms of providing a fragmented labour force with a clear organisational framework.

AWatW also has a shared set of values. These revolve around a belief in the inherent power of women, that migrant women deserve a 'fair go' and that collective action is the most effective way of breaking down worker isolation and increasing the resources of marginalised working women. While these values are implicitly shared by staff and members, and shape the organisations strategy and modus operandi, they are not clearly articulated. Few nations can boast of a Gandhi. However perhaps unions need to look into their history to find people and campaigns that can become their own local and indigenous organising tools that provide disenfranchised workers with inspiration, vision and a practical guide to collective grassroots action.

**6. EXTERNAL INSTITUTIONAL LINKAGES:** Both SEWA and AWatW have been astute at developing a range of formal links with external institutions. These have delivered both leverage, status and funding. SEWA grew out a strong established union called the Textile Labour Association (TLA) from which it drew its first Executive Committee. This delivered SEWA significant expertise and organisational power from the very beginning. Since then SEWA has been developed a number of linkages and affiliations with representatives of the international labour movement. The 2002 Annual report lists organisational relationships between SEWA and eight international organisations including the International Union of Food, Beverage, Restaurant, Agricultural and Allied workers (IUF); The International Union of Chemical, Energy and Mine workers (ICEM); the International textile, Garment and Leather Workers federation (ITGLWF); the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA); The international cooperative and mutual insurance federation (ICMIF); (Women in Informal Employment, Globalising and Organising (WIEGO); Streetnet; HomeNet. They also have developed relationships with the ILO and a number of international research foundations (Ford Foundation and Aga Khan).

AWatW has been similarly proactive at developing good relationships with migrant, labour, government and community organisations. They are well connected to the ethnic media, key migrant community groups, the NSW Labour Council, individual unions including the Textile Clothing and Footwear Union, Government Departments for women, migrants and industrial relations at both the state and federal level, local governments and a number of religious and community organisations. They also have loose affiliations with two international networks, the Committee on Asian Women in Hong Kong, and Homeworkers World Wide.

Each of these linkages provide SEWA and AWatW with important external sources of information, opportunities for information exchange and skill development of union leaders; and opportunities for collaborative research and collective, global action. These external relationships are important because they contribute to the development and institutional strength and bargaining power of each organisation. They also provide valuable funding sources.

## Conclusion

The organising strategies developed by the Self Employed Women's Association in India and Asian Women at Work in Australia demonstrate the strategic role that labour institutions play in redressing the economic and social insecurity associated with contingent non-standard forms of work. They also demonstrate that it is possible to organise women workers who are spatially isolated, lack a strong worker identity, and are employed in a range of precarious employment contracts that leave them marginalised from both the mainstream economy and society. As a greater proportion of the global labour force is employed in non-standard jobs, unions must find ways to organising these workers and redress the entrenched forms of social and economic insecurity commonly associated with non-standard labour.

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