

Informalisation of Women's Labour and New Types of Labour Organisations: The Cases of SEWA and SEWU¹

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I. Introduction

Informal economy, which has a historical existence all the way through the development of capitalism, has recorded an unprecedented growth in all parts of the world, particularly in the developing countries, in the era of new global restructuring. Informalisation and feminisation of labour has become one of the most crucial aspects of the changing labour system, which has transformed through decentralisation of capitalist production and the new international division of labour. These processes have simultaneously created new dimensions in defining and organising labour. The exploration of changing patterns of work and accordingly, the emergence of new types of labour organisations, organising informal workers, became crucial for the future of the labour movement. As Assef Bayat (2000:533) argues,

¹ This paper is based on research conducted in 2003 and 2004. It includes semi-structured in-depth interviews and an online interview done by the author. The author also completed an internship and joined some workshops at SEWU in 2003. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 16. ISA World Congress of Sociology, RC 44: Research Committee on Labour Movement, Session 5: Gender and Labour, Durban, South Africa, July 2006. The paper was revisited after the feedback received during the congress and another interview with Pat Horn, the founder of SEWU in September 2006.

a major consequence of the new global restructuring in the developing countries has been the double process of integration, on the one hand, and social exclusion and informalisation, on the other. These processes, meanwhile, have meant further growth of a marginalized and deinstitutionalised subaltern in Third World cities. The new global restructuring is reproducing subjectivities (marginalized and deinstitutionalised groups such as the unemployed, casual labour, street subsistence workers, street children and the like), social space and thus a terrain of political struggles that current theoretical perspectives cannot on their own account for.

The inspiration for this paper comes from the situation of the informal workers as being one of the marginalised groups in the era of new global restructuring. How do the informal workers organise as a response to their marginalisation in the new global restructuring? Though Bayat considers them as deinstitutionalised, this paper focuses on their institutionalised aspects, such as new type of labour organisations that are run by informal workers. My argument is that 'the rise of informalisation of women's labour has created a need for new ways of organising, which is leading to the emergence of new types of labour organisations'.

The informal economy in almost all developing countries is growing. The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) reports that 25% of the world's working population are active in the informal economy and generate 35% of global GDP². In Latin America, more than 57% of all non-agricultural workers were in the informal economy at the end of 2000. The informal economy in Sub-Saharan Africa employed more than 72% of the urban workforce. Particularly in South Africa it rests at 51% of non-agricultural employment. In India, 90% of workers, and in Thailand, 70% are in the informal economy³. A crucial character of the informal economy is

² ICFTU 2004. *The Informal Economy: Women On the Frontline. Trade Union World Briefing No. 2*, March 2:1.

³ World Bank 2001. *World Bank Development Report 2000/2001: Attacking Poverty: Opportunity, Empowerment and Security*. New York: World Bank.

that the vast majority of workers are women. The ILO estimates that 60% of women in developing countries are in informal employment⁴.

Women's labour force participation in the informal economy is an integral aspect of this paper. From the early 1980s onwards, the increasing importance of export oriented manufacturing activities in many developing countries had been associated with a much greater reliance on women's labour. Flexibility of production and the flexible use of labour force increased the informalisation of women's labour. A substantial proportion of sub-contracting in fact extends down to home-based work. Many women became self-employed by doing home-based work or street vending. Briefly, the informal character of women's labour is highly increasing. As women's labour share became one of the main characteristics of the informal economy, its leading role in the new types of labour organizations also became critical.

The changes in the labour market resulted in reducing the size of the formal sector labour force. Accordingly, the organised workforce is shrinking and trade unions are becoming weakened as their numbers decline. What used to be called 'a-typical work'-i.e. part-time, casual, temporary, seasonal, contract, home-based, piecework and unpaid family labour- is becoming increasingly typical in the labour market. The existence of the informal sector is being used as leverage against trade union demands in the formal sector. Trade unions confronted with such problems have tended to concern themselves only with protecting the rights and positions of their existing constituencies in the formal sector rather than attempting to extend their aims and constituencies and addressing the problems and needs of labourers in both sectors. This was a strong reason for the emergence of new types of labour organizations, organising informal workers. There are different ways of organising workers in the informal economy: According to Horn (2001), one way is, still, for formal sector trade unions to change their constitutions by broadening their definitions of workers, so that they include workers in the informal economy in their particular industry, in their scope of organisation. South African Clothing and Textile Workers' Union

⁴ ILO 2001. *Reducing the Decent Work Deficit: A Global Change*. Geneva: ILO.

(SACTWU) is an example to this kind of organisation⁵. The other way of organising workers in the informal economy is to start new organisations specifically for particular sections of the informal economy. Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in India and Self-Employed Women's Union (SEWU) in South Africa are examples for the second type. This paper examines the latter, which reflects the initiative of informal women workers in organising informal workers in new types of labour organisations⁶.

II. Informalisation of Women's Labour

First of all, I agree with leading scholars who argue that the dualistic labour market system is replaced by an informalised labour system, which points out the informalisation process in the totality of the capitalist production system. It is an integral part of global capitalist production and marketing chains (Breman 1976; 2001; 2004, Devey et al, 2006; Gallin 2001). In other words, as Unni and Rani (1999:626-628) remark, informalisation of the labour force takes place broadly in two ways, which cover both informal and formal settings:

- 1) There is an increasing trend towards subcontracting of work whereby work is pushed out of the factories and formal work establishments into small workshops (sweatshops), the homes and informal situations. This has resulted in an increase in informal work, often in home working.

⁵ The Textile, Clothing and Footwear Union of Australia, and UNITE in Canada also organise home-based workers. Timber and Woodworkers' Union and The General Agricultural Workers' Union in Ghana are other examples. Many other unions in different countries also assist informal workers to establish organisations or bargain for them.

⁶ In the coming sections, the relations between informal workers' organisations and trade unions will be discussed. As it is mentioned here the focus of paper is on the latter, and not includes the organising strategies of the former. Especially on 'social movement unionism' remarks, this focus should be kept by the reader to prevent misunderstandings.

- 2) The workers, who remain in the factories or in formal work situations, are governed by looser contracts and obtain fewer social security benefits.

This goes along with the employment-based definition of informal economy used by ILO (2002). The informal economy is seen as comprised of informal employment (without secure contracts, worker benefits or social protection) of two kinds: the first is informal employment including employers, employees, own account operators and unpaid family workers in informal enterprises. The second is informal employment outside informal enterprises (for formal enterprises, for households or with no fixed employer), including: domestic workers, casual or day labourers, temporary or part-time workers, industrial outworkers (including home-based workers) and unregistered or undeclared workers.

The informalisation of women's labour was most marked over the period 1980 to 1995 in the high-exporting economies of East and South East Asia, where the share of female employment in total employment in Export Processing Zones (EPZs) and export oriented manufacturing industries typically exceeded 70 %⁷. In South East Asia, women have made up a significant proportion of the informal manufacturing industry work force, in garment shops, shoe factories and craft industries. In Thailand it has been estimated that as many as 38% of clothing workers are home-workers and the figure is said to be 25-40% in the Philippines. A substantial proportion of sub-contracting in fact extends down to home-based work. Thus in the garments industry alone, the percentage of home-workers to total workers was estimated at 38% in Thailand, 25-29 % in Philippines, 30 % in one region of Mexico, between 30-60 in Chile and 45% in Venezuela (Chen, Sebstad & O'Connell 1999).

Home-based work provides substantial opportunity for self-exploitation by workers, especially when payments are on a piece-rate basis. Also these are areas typically left unprotected by labour laws and social welfare. In India, 96% of the informal workers are women. Self-employment

⁷ The research of a Washington based coalition of women economists lobbying for Third World women estimates that 70% of the labour in EPZs is provided by women. *Ford Foundation Report, 2000.*

as percentage of non-agricultural informal employment is 52%; women constitute 57% of the self-employed. 44 % of total home-based workers in India are women. In South Africa, women's share of non-agricultural employment in the informal economy is 53% according to the data between the years 1997 and 2000. Women's share of self-employment as percentage of non-agricultural informal employment is 27%. The year 2000 Labour Force Survey estimated that there were 323,000 food vendors and 122,000 non-food vendors in the country. In Durban, 61% of the street vendors were women⁸.

Women workers are preferred by employers primarily because of the inferior conditions of work and pay that they are usually willing to accept. Thus, women workers have lower reservation wages than their male counterparts, are more willing to accept longer hours and unpleasant and often unhealthy or hazardous factory conditions; typically do not unionise or engage in other forms of collective bargaining to improve conditions and do not ask for permanent contracts. They are thus easier to hire and fire at will. More flexible working conditions in which women work on a casual and temporary basis mean that women earn less and forego benefits. When retrenchment of workers in secure, permanent jobs has taken place, often women have been retrenched first. As both men and women have been retrenched from high income secure jobs, it has been largely women who have tried to eke out a living in various ways in informal sector. At the same time, many women have gained employment in insecure, low-paid jobs, particularly in EPZs. As Moser (1993) argues,

It is generally recognized that there has been a feminisation of the labour market as a result of neo-liberal globalisation; however, this has been at the expense of secure high-paid jobs, as low-paid atypical jobs with no security benefits have become the order of the day. As social spending has been rolled back in many countries, women have borne the brunt of this, as they have had to increasingly take responsibility for the care of the sick; the aged and disabled as state services disappear. Having to take on these responsibilities

⁸ See ILO (2002). *Women and Men in the Informal Economy*. Geneva: ILO. This document presents the data in the year 2000.

interferes in women's ability to make themselves available for full-time employment and further relegates them to part-time, casual, temporary, seasonal or other atypical work. Briefly, gender is frequently used as an essential element in the division of labour. In addition to flexible work, with the intense competition in the informal economy women are forced into less lucrative areas.

At this point, the general idea of feminisation of labour/work seems to be recognised by many researchers. But for my concern, the triangle of flexibilisation, feminisation and informalisation processes need to be clarified in order to fill in the gap in the theoretical framework, which may be a significant contribution of this paper. Firstly, according to Mies (1994),

the feminisation of labour that has resulted takes place in four areas: the formal sector in relocated large-scale manufacturing industries in Export Processing Zones; the informal sector in small-scale manufacturing in home-based work, sweatshops, so-called income generating activities such as ancillary jobs for industry; agriculture where subsistence farming is being converted to production for export; the service sector particularly in the sex and tourist industry.

However, in her categorisation, the first category is presented as formal sector, which may be taken as women's labour force participation in the formal economy. But, conversely, I would like to emphasise the *informal* working conditions in EPZs, which refers to the informalisation process in the formal industry. Thus, one point must be clarified: neo-liberal globalisation has not been accompanied by a significant increase in the participation of women labour force in the formal economy internationally. Women's labour force participation has only risen by 2% in 19 years from 39% in 1980 to 41% in 1999⁹.

Secondly, the prevailing 'feminisation' of labour/work is conceptualised by Guy Standing (1989, 1999). His main argument is that the changing character of labour markets around the world had been leading to a

⁹ U.N.D.P. 2001. *Making New Technologies Work for Human Development*. New York: Oxford.

rise in female labour force participation and a relative if not absolute fall in men's employment, as well as a 'feminisation' of many jobs traditionally held by men. The growing labour market flexibility and the diverse forms of insecurity have encouraged greater female labour participation and employment¹⁰. He uses the data from five-yearly Population Census¹¹, where one can find the general female labour supply and interpret the rising labour force participation rate of women. But there is a need to distinguish what kinds of women's labour force are there and which form of women's labour force is leading to this rise. He also says that the informalisation could be expected to be a major factor stimulating the growth of female employment across the world.

I try to emphasise, instead, is that the informal character of women's labour force is explaining the current phenomenon of feminisation of labour. It is not an aspect that can be left aside but obviously the primary aspect of the women's labour force in this regard. *The contemporary concept should be informalisation-centred, since the growth in female employment is mainly due to the growth in women's work in the informal economy.* According to Casale & Posel (2002:2-12)

the continued feminisation of labour in South Africa is associated with rising rate of female unemployment and feminisation of low-paid insecure forms of employment. More than half of the growth in female employment between 1995 and 1999 can be attributed to the growth in women working in the informal economy. The number of informal self-employed women has increased 173,5 % between these years.

Thus, I prefer to use 'informalisation of women's labour' instead of 'feminisation of labour/work' in order to understand the process precisely. Furthermore, he explains global feminisation through flexible labour. Hereby, we see a kind of direct relationship between flexibility and

¹⁰ This does not mean that only women effected from the flexibilisation process. But this paper focuses particularly on women's labour.

¹¹ See Casale, D & D Posel 2002. The Continued Feminisation of the Labour Force in South Africa. *South African Journal of Economics* 70,1: 156.

feminisation. However, *informalisation should be included in the whole process, since flexible production leads to feminisation through informalisation*. Neetha (2002) takes a similar position - that flexible production leads to the feminisation of work through the informalisation of the production structure and casualisation of the labour process. Departing from flexible specialisation, Balakrishnan (quoted in Neetha) uses a 'pull-push' framework to elaborate feminisation of labour through informalisation of production. Banarjee (1999) also remarks that increased feminisation in India is a part of the general increase in the size of the informal workforce following the flexible specialisation process which is central to the export led development. Briefly, the informalisation of women's labour is one of the most important aspects of the informal economy debate that is an integral part of globalised capitalism. As the women's labour share has become one of the main characteristics of the informal economy, its leading role in the new organizations of labour is critical as well.

III. New Types of Labour Organisations

It is important to mention that new types of labour organisations in this paper refer to informal workers' organisations, despite the fact that traditional trade unions have started to change their structures in order to include informal workers. Although this debate, to some extent, has been developing within the sphere of 'social movement unionism' in order to reorient or restructure traditional trade unions, it is crucial for the informal workers to legitimise their call for recognition and broader definition of needs of 'broader working class'¹².

¹² The relations of informal workers' organisations with trade unions will be held in the later section. Nevertheless, some assumptions on social movement unionism can be discussed here: It may be assumed that 'social movement unionism' already covers the interests of a 'broader working class' or multi-issues. This theoretical perspective mentions that trade unions in South Africa struggled against apartheid in alliance with community organisations, or in other terms, social movements. This includes not only a focus on workplace issues but also broader needs of communities. This can even be traced back to Industrial Commercial Workers Union (ICU) in

The new organisations in the informal economy are called 'membership-based organisations' (MBOs) by Jhabvala (2003). MBOs, which have been successful, tend to be different from traditional trade unions in that their agenda is 'multi-issue and multi-activities' (p.214). They are intensively involved in the core issues affecting informal workers, i.e. unemployment and earnings, but at the same time, they also take up other social as well as economic issues. They tend to be multi-faceted, dealing with multi-issues and intervening both in the economy at various levels as also in social and political processes. Furthermore, they employ methods of struggle as well as of development. One of the most important of these issues is the empowerment of women. There is a fact that women workers and

1920s. Though this argument is accepted by many intellectuals – including myself – it is questionable whether trade unions in South Africa are still following this perspective fatefully. First, it will be misleading to think that there is no need for other types of organisations, since the trade unions have social movement unionism perspective. Secondly, informal workers are missing in this conceptualisation. They have neither been mentioned significantly within the labour movement side nor other social movements' in 'social movement unionism'. Despite the fact that informal workers and their organisations are promisingly bridging the unions and social movements, i.e. 'World Class Cities For All Campaign' launched by StreetNet International in 2006, COSATU has still no clear policy on organising them or building an alliance with them. If this conceptualisation gives them space to consider informal workers either in labour movement or as a social movement, informal workers and their associations will most probably appreciate it. But their bridging role between the two needs noteworthy attention. Whatever the case may be, informal workers continue to open up the space for themselves and their organisations independently, whereas believing that they are part of the working class. Moreover, they carry social movement unionism may be more than the traditional trade unions.

For 'social movement unionism', see Lambert, R and E. Webster 1988 'The re-emergence of political unionism in contemporary South Africa?', in Cobbett, W. and Cohen, R (eds). *Popular Struggles in South Africa*. London: James Currey.

leaders in the trade unions have been marginalised. Despite some efforts to change this situation from the trade unions themselves, the trend largely remains the same as the larger political sphere continues to be patriarchal. MBOs controlled and run by the women workers themselves; moreover, their concern is wide ranging from employment and wages, to health, childcare and redistribution of land, etc.

Horn (2001) calls the new organisations as 'the new unions specifically for particular sections of the informal economy'. In Kannan's (1999) categorisation, they are the 'empowerment groups among rural and urban poor'. According to Kannan (1999:765), what differentiates these empowerment groups from conventional trade unions are quite critical from the point of articulating a common agenda for the labouring poor. These are:

- Their simultaneous engagement in what Bhatt (1997:214) calls 'joint action of struggle and development' thereby advancing their bargaining power through, among others, enhanced staying power,
- The conscious attempt to bring together a cross section on the labouring poor irrespective of their work status (casual, regular, piece-rate, waged or unwaged),
- A conscious attempt to organise the poor labouring women by addressing their specific problems and situations,
- A conscious effort to overcome the organisational segmentation by not aligning with specific political parties and refusing to become 'their' organisations.

In this frame of new types of labour organisations, I focus on SEWA in India and SEWU in South Africa.

Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA)

The SEWA was born in 1972 as a trade union of self-employed women. It grew out of the Textile Labour Association (TLA), India's oldest and largest union of textile workers founded in 1920 by a woman, Anasuya Sarabhai. In 1981 SEWA became independent from TLA. SEWA moves in the direction of two goals: Full Employment and Self Reliance. Full employment means employment whereby workers obtain work security,

income security, food security, and social security (at least health care, child care and shelter). SEWA organises women to ensure that every family obtains full employment. By self-reliance they mean that women should be autonomous and self-reliant, individually and collectively, both economically and in terms of their decision-making ability. SEWA organises workers through the strategy of struggle and development to achieve their goals of full employment and self-reliance.

The struggle is against the many constraints and limitations imposed on them by society and the economy, while development activities strengthen women's bargaining power and offer them new alternatives. Practically, the strategy is carried out through the joint action of union and cooperatives. Gandhian thinking is the guiding force for SEWA's poor, self-employed members in organising for social change. They follow the principles of satya (truth), ahimsa (non-violence), sarvadharmā (integrating all faiths, all people) and khadi (propagation of local employment and self reliance). Thus, SEWA is both an organisation and a movement. The SEWA movement consists of the labour movement, the cooperative movement and the women's movement. The following 11 points are of SEWA's vision of a new society: *Employment, Income, Nutritious Food, Health Care, Child Care, Housing, Asset, Organised Strength, Leadership, Self Reliance, and Education*. SEWA members are workers who have no fixed employee-employer relationship and depend on their own labour for survival. They are poor, illiterate and vulnerable. They barely have any assets or working capital. But they are extremely economically active, contributing very significantly to the economy and society with their labour. SEWA has a membership base of 704,166 women workers in seven states of India. The majority of SEWA's members 469,306 live in the state of Gujarat in North-western India and almost two third of SEWA's members come from the rural areas of India. In Gujarat, 4.76% of members are producers; 9.11% are hawkers and vendors; 22.47% are home-based workers; and 63.66% are manual labourer and service providers¹³. SEWA movement consists of cooperatives, DWCRA (rural producers') groups, social security organisations, saving and credit groups, and federations.

¹³ A detailed membership profile can be found in SEWA Annual Report 2003, available at www.sewa.org/annualreport

SEWA has adopted Campaign Approach for organizing; and through the campaigns, it has so far organized self-employed women from 74 trades. While organising women and supporting them in building their own workers' organisations, the need for mass mobilisation through campaigns became evident. This mass mobilisation strengthens the SEWA movement and at the same time highlights their own pressing issues. SEWA has been being part of many national and international initiatives, such as National Centre For Labour (NCL), National Alliance of Street Vendors in India (NASVI) and Women in Informal Employment: Globalising and Organising (WIEGO), HOMENET, STREETNET. In 1985 SEWA became a member of the IUF (International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations) and some years later of the ITGLWF (International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers Federation) and the ICEM (International Federation of Chemical, Energy, Mine and General Workers' Unions). As a turning point in 2006 it has been admitted as a member of ICFTU (International Confederation of Free Trade Unions). There has been a long and fruitful relationship with both these Global Federations which were in the forefront in SEWA's efforts to pass the Home Workers Convention in the ILO in 1996 and the Resolution on the Informal Economy in the ILO in 2002.

Self-Employed Women's Union (SEWU)¹⁴

SEWU is an independent trade union that represents the self-employed and survivalist women engaged in the informal economy in South Africa. With the inspiration from and assistance of SEWA, SEWU was launched in 1994¹⁵, originally in the Durban region, and later as a national organisation. SEWU was registered as a non-profit organization, although it operates very

¹⁴ In August 2004, one year after my research, SEWU was liquidated following a financially crippling lawsuit.

¹⁵ It is the same year as South Africa took its first democratic elections. In other words, this is exactly the time of political transition in the country, which opened up possibilities for SEWU to shape the transition process through its own agenda.

much like a 'general workers'¹⁶ union that organises across different sectoral activities in the informal economy. As SEWU writes in its pamphlet,

the trade union is not a small business development scheme. It is a union to make women workers strong through their unity. The union is run by democratic structures which are controlled by the members themselves.

SEWU defines street vendors and home-based workers as workers as their work is survival and they don't have access to key productive resources. SEWU aims, primarily to build unity between women whose work, which they do for a living, is not recognized, and to develop their collective self-empowerment; to make visible the work which women are doing in the economy; to secure for women working outside the formal economy an entitlement to all powers, rights and benefits which are due to workers in the formal sector of the economy, and to secure social justice for women workers engaged in all kinds of economic activity; to inculcate a spirit of trade union unity and solidarity among members of the Union and among all women workers, and to build leadership among women in the lowest strata of the wider working class. SEWU is a membership-based organisation whose constituency is composed of women in both urban and rural sectors of the informal economy.

It has a vision, which recognises the importance of women as key agents of change in South African society. SEWU's activities are aimed at providing the means for the self-empowerment of women in the informal sector, so that they may realise their potential and activate change in their lives and in society. It also functions as an outreach programme for female workers in the informal sector who are excluded from South Africa's national economy. SEWU is both a women's organisation and a trade union – it adopts trade union strategies, such as building unity and collective bargaining, in order to empower women economically. SEWU is committed to peace, and promotes non-violence in building unity and a common

¹⁶ Quoted from Mark Bennett 2003. *Organising in the Informal Economy: A case study of the Clothing Industry in South Africa. SEED Working Paper*, Geneva: ILO, p.38.

purpose between women across political divisions. A survey done by Lund et al. (2000:12-13) shows that 75% of the members are the main breadwinners of their household; 50% are married and 33% have no other earners at home. Half of the members of SEWU who are over 65 years old have no formal education, but one in five under 35 years has never had formal education.

In October 2003, SEWU had 2295 members; approximately 1200 of them are manufacturing clothing and 90% of these members are in Durban. As most of its members are self-employed, SEWU differs from more traditional trade unions in that it does not use the conflictual employer-employee relationship as a primary recruitment tool. Instead, SEWU stresses a different category of benefits that will accrue to workers who are members of the organization. This can be called as organising through services. SEWU has developed a number of programmes to attract and retain members. These programmes aim at: building solidarity between women whose income-earning work is not recognised; developing negotiating skills; assisting women with legal advice; assisting women to solve problems in issues such as childcare, access to credit, and lack of benefits (maternity, sickness, disability); developing lobbying skills; developing leadership skills among women who work outside of the formal economy.

In terms of relations with the traditional trade unions, Pat Horn, the founder of SEWU, specifies that the reaction of unions operating in the formal sector, towards SEWU, was very uneven. She mentions two aspects of trade unions' negative stance. Firstly, trade union movement had some very bad experiences with organisations formed by the government that were in many cases used against them. Although SEWU is an independent union, the particular structure and aims of the organisation created negative prejudices against SEWU. Secondly, trade union movement strongly believes that the state should create job for its citizens. This rigidity of some members of trade union movement implies dissatisfaction towards the organisation of the informal economy.

To counter these reactions SEWU keeps on encouraging members of the trade unions to support their movement. On one hand, SEWU has the specific experience of creating women's leadership that the labour movement does not have. Thus it has a strong strength in terms of human resource capacity. She further points out the importance of a probable merge

of SEWU in trade union movement, which would be beneficial for both sides. On the other hand, labour movement can also assist SEWU with its critical mass of members. SEWU has partnership and close relationship with, National Women Coalition, - STREETNET, some COSATU affiliates, KwaZulu Natal Government, University of KwaZulu Natal, and with WIEGO, HOMENET, STREETNET at the international level.

IV. Creating a Room for the New Type of Labour Organisations

The main discussion on the new type of labour organisations, including SEWA and SEWU is on the identity of these organisations, whether they are trade unions, or NGOs. The challenge is to create a room for defining new organisations between the two, since their structure is based on trade union forms, while their activities has a developmental scope. Moreover, their struggle refers to 'movement type struggles'. This form is also creating more questions on the perspective of these organisations whether it is 'class' or 'community' based. Chowdhury (2003:4) argues that these organisations occupy a space in civil society that is distinct from both the so-called NGOs sector and traditional trade unions. NGOs which work with deprived or disadvantaged sections typically do so with a conception of benefits rather than of rights. Functioning methodology of NGOs, most often, is project based, engaged with time-bound programmes of opportunity creation in specific spheres. Secondly, most NGOs work closely with and are dependent for funding upon state agencies, international development agencies and multilateral organisations. Thus although many NGOs have a critical understanding of the impact of globalisation on the lives of the poor, at the level of functioning there is a certain sharing of the dominant developmental paradigm, rather than a questioning of it.

New trade unions on the other hand, have a defined focus on the issue of rights, and often use movement type struggles. These organisations claim to create entitlements where previously, there were none, and thereby to change the rules of the game. Insofar as their struggles frequently pitch them against private capital or against the state, these organisations are positioned to challenge dominant developmental practices. Kalpagam (1994) notes that worker-related activism which adopts a non-conflictual mode, and

develops outside the factory, is an emerging phenomenon. Kalpagam's study of the discourse and practice of informal sector politics remarks that for both SEWA and Working Women's Forum (WWF) in India, the fundamental philosophy is a distancing from political parties, a developmental approach (that is thrift, entrepreneurship, and credit) rather than a confrontationist approach, belief in a self-help approach, and using credit as an entry point for mobilization.

In another research, Chowdhury (2004:1) argues that a studied distance from political parties characterise the activities of new unions, such as SEWA. Their activism is frequently expressed around issues that do not have the sharp edges of the capital-labour conflict. Thus, the emphasis is on a range of issues, not only employment and wages, but housing, health, education, street lighting, water, sanitation and so on. One significant feature of this activism then is that the community, rather than class, has become protagonist and the potential recipient of welfare. Also, in the context of casualisation, where employment is scattered, decentred and frequently self-generated, it is the state, rather than private capital that becomes the sole target of welfare activism. One important reason for this change has been that a large number of women in the informal sector are self-employed, and as such the exploiter-exploited relationship is not obviously visible. It has underlined, on the one hand, trade union indifference to the informal sector. On the other hand, this understanding has to an extent, justifies the use of developmental activism rather than confrontational struggles.

At this point, it is crucial to mention that distancing from political parties is also related to their relations with formal sector trade unions. In SEWU case, COSATU (Congress of South African Trade Unions) affiliates are mostly ANC oriented, and for the collectivity of their members, SEWU cannot be directly ANC oriented, though its founders and many members were involved in the struggle against apartheid through ANC. It is one of the barriers before SEWU to be a COSATU affiliate¹⁷. In SEWA case, some of

¹⁷ In the last year, COSATU's leadership involved in big discussions about their relationship with the ANC (in the real sense ANC leadership), and the tripartite alliance. It divided the COSATU leadership into two according to their support to different ANC leaders. This is related to 'social movement unionism' debates held in different pages of the paper. It can be strongly

the constituent units of the NCL, are affiliated to a trade union, which is close to the CPI (M), Communist Party of India-Marxist. However such unions are frequently unable to get the support of unions that represent regular workers within the same firm. Thus their ties to the parent party remained unformed. Briefly, distancing from political parties results in distancing from formal sector trade unions.

It is interesting that SEWA is a registered trade union, but is an 'association' by name, and SEWU is not a registered trade union, but a non-profit organisation, having 'union' by name. However, throughout my research, the leadership of both organisations clearly stated their trade union identity, and stressed that they are not NGOs. Jhabvala, the national coordinator of SEWA basically mentioned structural aspects, such as elected representation, and embeddedness of the leaders in SEWA institutions, which is not the case in NGOs¹⁹. She further emphasised that the cooperative movement aims the worker ownership of the means of production, which fits to the perspective of the historical labour movement. SEWA believes that employment created through cooperatives not only provides women income, but also becomes a very important part of their identity. She argues that when trade unions first started, their strategies were very similar to SEWA's; the trade union and cooperative movements were interlinked; trade unions offered a variety of services to their members, in a form of 'friendly societies'. Trade unions also organised the community; they advocated for full employment and self reliance just as SEWA does.

In terms of the class dimension, she thinks that classes are not clear like in the 1960s. Production happens through a chain of contractors. The challenge is to identify who has economic control. In SEWU case, the founders had Marxist standpoints and trade union backgrounds while establishing the union. They have been eager to become a part of the entire labour movement in the country, and have had relationships with formal sector trade unions. To register as a non-profit organisation was only for practical reasons, mainly because of financial benefits.

argued that COSATU's perspective is becoming closer to 'political unionism' than to 'social movement unionism'.

¹⁹ Communication based online-interview, conducted by myself in January 2004. The following statements from Jhabvala are based on this interview.

The struggle aspect in SEWU is internalised by the leadership. SEWA mentions the need of formal sector unions' support, but it seems that practically, they are not willing to come together. This is mainly because of the political party links of trade unions. SEWA is following the Gandhian ideas that suggest community as the beneficiary. This is also an ideological barrier and it has an influence on the movement and its scope. The South African recent history is also influential in terms of SEWU's circumstances, since post-apartheid period has been targeting a 'rainbow society' that eliminates all discriminations. SEWU leadership follows this ideological perspective along with challenges to be integrated in the entire labour movement.

As an example to these challenges, SACTWU, a COSATU affiliate, attempted to organise home-based workers without cooperating with SEWU. Unfortunately, this attempt hasn't become very successful. SACTWU has ignored the existence and organising experience of SEWU, and this became one of the reasons of declining power and membership of one of the strongest unions in the country. The former leadership of SACTWU regrets and questions the union's decision as a failure, but the present leadership still doesn't seem to do so. Moreover, in the last years COSATU has declared its intention to organise informal workers more strongly. In 1997, the September Commission on the Future of the Unions recommended that the federation commit itself to organising informal workers and begin a process of interacting with existing organisations in the informal economy¹⁹. In 1998 the federation launched what they called the 'Autumn Offensive' to organise the unorganised, but it appeared that the campaign did not target vulnerable workers but instead unorganised core workers (Webster, 2005:392). COSATU's 2000 National Congress identified the recruitment and organising of informal and atypical workers as a major and necessary challenge. It committed each affiliate to develop a strategy for recruitment of informal and atypical workers²⁰. In 2005, COSATU held the Informal Economy Organising Workshop with the participation of representatives of some COSATU affiliate trade unions, STREETNET International,

¹⁹ See Goldman, Tanya 2003. *Organising in South Africa's Informal Economy: An Overview of Four Sectoral Case Studies*. Geneva: ILO, p. 37

²⁰ Goldman, Tanya. i.g.e. p.38.

researchers and former leadership of SEWU. It was proposed that a project should be established towards the establishment of a new union-to be launched in June 2006. But nothing appeared on this date. It is thought that this union could be an associate member of COSATU rather than an affiliate. In COSATU's approach, informal workers must not be organised in a general workers' union²¹ structure. It must be rather a particular union for

²¹ This debate is linked to footnote 10 on social movement unionism. Throughout my research it came out that some unionists and academics have an understanding of unidirectional development of trade unions. They believe that South Africa has reached industrial unions and can not go back to general unions. Hypocritically, when it comes to social movement unionism or the multi-issue agenda of trade unions, people can even go back to ICU to support the strength of traditional unions. When it comes to transition of general unions towards industrial unions, the ICU becomes an old experience of general unions, and that kind of model is not acceptable anymore. First, in the 1970s and 1980s, throughout the formation of FOSATU, and then COSATU, general workers unions brought the connections with the popular movements to the federations. At times, industrial unions in the federations tended to focus mostly on workplace issues, keeping distance with the community struggles. This caused also exclusion of general workers unions from the federations. The more the industrial unions needed to move towards an alliance with the community organisations, the more they included the general unions. This has significance when we discuss social movement unionism. Building industrial unions has developed not only by transforming the general unions, but also adding their power into federation structures. General unions developed simultaneously as well. Secondly, it should not be misunderstood that I support general workers' unions against industrial unions, but it must also be answered what industrial unions today can give to the informal workers? If it is a technical matter of organising in a sector, i.e. street vendors will fall under the retail sector – what does SACCAWU, or any other retail sector union have to give informal workers? Do they have any organising strategy focused on informal workers? Or what can a general workers union do for informal workers in our time? Therefore, what will be the following type of trade unions in South Africa?

the particular sections of the informal economy, i.e. street vendors. The problem at the core is to find the best way for such unions to fit into the COSATU structures²². In fact, after the ICFTU membership of SEWA, COSATU shouldn't be sceptical anymore.

Unlike COSATU's developing approach to informal workers' organisations, the membership process of SEWA has been challenged by Indian trade union federations both in India and within the ICFTU. A Mission from ICFTU visited SEWA and discussed the objections²³. These objections are actually a good summary of trade union approach on new types of labour organisations. The first objection was that SEWA is a trade union of small employers. They explained that their members do not employ others. They either work for contractors or employers directly or indirectly; or they are own-account workers, like street vendors or marginal farmers. The second objection was that SEWA does not partake in collective bargaining. SEWA executive committee members listed 102 collective bargaining agreements that they had undertaken with *bidi* manufacturers, incense manufacturers, tobacco processing factories, municipal corporations, forest corporations and many more. The third objection was that SEWA organised only in one state of India and not truly national. In response, SEWA executive committee members from Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh talked about their extensive membership and activities. The Mission asked about SEWA finances, whether they are truly sustainable. They showed them that over 55% of their total costs were covered by membership fees. Grants and donations accounted for the other 45% which were used mainly for education and publications. At times financial matters seem to be very challenging for these organisations. Both SEWU and SEWA survive with the help of international donors. According to SEWA Annual Report 2003, 60.61% of SEWA's funds were from institutional donors, most of which are international. In spite of the fact that SEWA is the largest informal workers' organisation, its income from own fund is only 5.24%, and increased to 8.05% in 2004, which seems contradictory to the information presented to the ICFTU. SEWU's self fund is also 5%. SEWA has 7.49%

²² Interview, Pat Horn, September 2006.

²³ For more details see SEWA's electronic Newsletter *We the Self-Employed*, No.8, July 2006. <http://www.sewa.org/newsletter/enews8.htm>

income from the central government, and 24.3% from the state government. This characteristic opened the way to criticisms indicating the potential of these organisations to be dependent on international organisations and operate like NGOs.

Another characteristic of these organisations is that the local authorities are the main negotiation partners of informal workers' organisations. The achievements of both organisations show us that these have been possible through negotiations with the local authorities. Instead of negotiating with the central state or the capital, or pursuing collective bargaining with employers, they negotiate with other authorities, such as municipal, police, traffic etc. SEWA and SEWU act, in this regard, primarily at the local level for the rights and benefits of the informal workers.

We can also interpret this aspect in relation to workplace change. The traditional understanding of labour organisations is based on an employer-employee relationship. Beyond this relationship, 'the workplace is traditionally the site of labour organisation. It is often only in the workplace of the employer that labour rights can meaningfully be exercised' (Theron 2005:304). Who controls the workplace? The answer of this question explains the changing concept of work and workplace for the informal workers. The workplace ceases to be the factory. It is rather home and streets. The street vendors' workplace is public space, the streets, which are under the control of the local authorities. It can strongly be considered in this frame that the new type of organisations are organising in the public space, hence negotiating mostly with the local authorities. They do also collective bargaining and having these local authorities as their counterparts.

Locality of these organisations can also be discussed in relation to community, which is to a great extent rural. SEWA Annual Report 2002 shows that rural membership has been developing significantly. In the early 2000s in fact the majority, 69% of SEWA's membership was rural. Organising in the rural areas for SEWA has an aim to make cooperatives working with their own resources and creating their own leaders in their locality. But this seems that a new organisation in a new village means only one more organisation in another locality. Though they come together in the structure of federations, these federations basically provide marketing facilities in a larger geography. In terms of struggle and power of informal workers it does not appear to be increasing the power of the union as a

labour organisation at the society level. The biggest cooperative, SEWA Bank is very helpful in providing financial resources to its members. However, socio-economic benefits have reached 150,000 members out of 120 millions as the total informal employment for women in India. It means that SEWA Bank has reached only a small amount of the total women's informal employment in India, and this is mainly in Gujarat, where SEWA organises. It should be mentioned that SEWA knows its limitations at this moment, and aims to go forward. It is valuable to remind Petras's (1997) emphasis in this context, since there is always a danger of *NGOisation* of these new organisations:

The local nature of NGO activity means that 'empowerment' never goes beyond influencing small areas of social life, with limited resources, and within the conditions permitted by the neoliberal state and macro-economy.

The main challenge of the new unions is how to bring the livelihoods of the poor at a common ground with the working class perspective. Hereby, a basic question appears: what is the aim of organising informal workers? In SEWA's broad agenda, the livelihoods of the poor have been improved through services provided by cooperatives. Cooperative ideology is presented as an alternative form of work by SEWA, but it reminds us of the debates in early phases of the European labour movement. Thus the question, 'community' or 'class' stays. SEWA's main argument is the change of 'work', and they think that their strategy is a response to this change. It can be said that community is obviously SEWA's choice. In the last analysis, SEWA seems to create its own 'SEWA welfare-state' for the community. Livelihoods are connected to the workers' perspective within this context. SEWA seems to have a little interest with the rest of the labour movement. It may be discussed in a way that SEWA's connections with organisations in the international level support its position, since their agenda on women and poor, etc. coincide. Hence, community at the local level is the main beneficiary.

Therefore, it cannot be surely said that SEWA's developmental agenda challenges dominant developmental practices. Accordingly, Padilla (2004) indicates the problem of independency of these organisations. She

shows the link between government's developmental actions and SEWA's programmes, some of which are also supported by World Bank, and some institutions, such as Ford Foundation. In addition, the work of the SEWA Bank is also bounded to government rules; interdependency more likely exists. Being independent from political parties is not enough to be also independent from the government.

However, Jhabvala stated that SEWA's approach to working with the government is straightforward. SEWA is autonomous (it is not affiliated with any political party) and does not endorse any party. However, SEWA will work with government programs to benefit their members. While it is true that governmental policies and regulations have favoured more often industry than the non-desirable informal sector, SEWA's policy work and programmatic work tries to change these to become more amenable and effective for the informal sector. In SEWU case independency is put in another context.

According to Pat Horn²⁴, the founder and the former general secretary, to remain independent as an independent union with a small number of members is not viable. This could change if SEWU become part of the wider labour movement, without disappearing. South African society is in a period of transformation, in which SEWU also takes the responsibility for the new vision of society. SEWU's cooperation with the government should be considered in this condition.

In terms of organising informal workers, both organisations have some challenges. Since the informal economy is not a homogenous entity some difficulties are present such as the type of work and the location, the gender, the culture or the race of the workers, the income of the workers or even the political orientation of the trade union can be seen as difficulties to recruit members and to organise the informal economy.

As Bennett (2003:26) states,

the demands of informal workers are far greater than those of formal workers. The issues are not that big, but the demands are more intensive that the union has to deal with it immediately; if not, informal workers quickly lose interest in their membership.

²⁴ Interview conducted by myself in October 2003.

The legitimate question asked by potential recruits is 'what can my membership to your organisation do to improve my situation?' SEWU's response with services also becomes the way of organising these workers. But without an ideological background that makes members aware of their power to bring social and economic change in the society, short-term benefit packages increase the pragmatism of the informal workers. If the organisation cannot provide them a stall to sell their products, they can easily have a tendency to withdraw their membership.

Similar to my research findings Bennett (2003) and Lund et al. (2000) point out that one of the first difficulties is the economic situation of the workers. Since their income is precarious, time necessary to organise and sustain organisations, is a synonym for the potential loss of income. This factor is major obstacle for a lot of workers to get involved in the organisation and if they do, their presence at meetings and other gatherings is not regular. In order to respond to this problem, SEWU, through negotiations, succeeded to convince some workers to hire an assistant that will watch over their business whenever they attend an activity. A second barrier to recruit membership is the previous experience of certain workers. The common experience of unscrupulous 'fly-by-night' organisation has been a major incentive for a lot of street vendors or home based workers to avoid any future membership to any kind of organisation.

Furthermore, a trade union in the informal sector has a lack of resources to sustain the organisation and to serve the members since the income of the organisation is based on a low fee. Full-time organisers are the key to the maintenance and the growth of the organisation; since new members need to be recruited and existing members need to be serviced. But the extreme low income of certain organisation through membership fees makes it difficult to expect any financial self-sustainability. In addition, the location of activities is one main problem that some organisations encounter. A secure and quiet place close to the workers' workplace or home is needed. In some cases the local authority creates a hall in the heart of the trading community where traders can have access to organize their meetings. Finally, the political orientation of the trade unions can be an obstacle to enrol new members. For instance, the conflict in KwaZulu Natal between the ANC and the Inkatha Freedom Party has created a real fear among street vendors, in the sense that SEWU would exclude one side.

The role of women in new labour organisations is a proper criterion to emphasise their particularity. In traditional unions, feminisation of work started to reflect on the union structures. The most common solution has been to set up women's committees and separate structures for women, but the question is whether it helped. As SACTWU organiser Rachel Visser (1992:78) remarks, these committees have been only advisory committees; therefore they lack the power to influence policy effectively within the unions. Women's problems and building campaigns around these issues have been discussed in isolation in women's committees rather than in the decision-making bodies of the unions and federations.

These issues have been treated as side issues and not as important as the real trade union issues. But in the case of new labour organisations, such as SEWA and SEWU, the profile is different. What should be emphasised is not to be at the leadership position, but to be able to create and maintain women leadership. Gender issues are at the bosom of their structure and aims. This is not because of having only women members, but of taking it as mission and purpose.

A very good example to women leadership is former SEWU KwaZulu Natal Regional Secretary Thandiwe Xulu. She was a self-employed dressmaker when she joined SEWU. Her experience in praxis brought her to the leadership of the organisation. SEWU was closed in 2004, but Thandiwe didn't stop her organising activities. She started a poultry project and founded SILWA NOBUPHOFU²⁵ Co-Operative in her neighbourhood. She is leading the cooperative voluntarily and using her house as an office. Her project got a grant from the Department of Social Welfare, and attracting even international institutions for cooperation. Similar to Thandiwe Xulu, Pat Horn a former COSATU trade unionist, then the founder of SEWU, is now the international coordinator of STREETNET. Their maintaining leadership also reflects how these organisations created a stable room for organising informal workers. Thandiwe and Pat visited Stanger on the North Coast of Durban in South Africa, to see the situation of their former members two years after the closure of SEWU. It was amazing to see that their former members still continue to organise themselves under the name of SEWU. In SEWA case, every local cooperative creates its own

²⁵ It means 'Fight against poverty'.

leadership as well. In other words, SEWA and SEWU have the specific experience of creating women leadership that the labour movement doesn't really have. Thus, the position of women in these new organisations may help all the other unions to define clearly the mission and purpose of gender structures. This is a persuasive reason for traditional trade unions to work together with informal workers' organisations.

V. Conclusion

In this paper I argued that the rise of informalisation of women's labour creates new ways of organising, which leads to the emergence of new types of labour organisations. I suggest that the contemporary concept should be informalisation-centred. This results in moving from the conceptualisation of *feminisation of labour/work* to the *informalisation of women's labour*; since the growth in female employment is mainly due to the growth in women's work in the informal economy.

Through the experience of SEWA and SEWU, I underlined that the new type of labour organisations have been creating a room for themselves with their own ways of organising. This room is neither outside the entire labour movement, nor the other social movements of the marginalised. But it is far from NGO or business type associations. Hence, traditional labour unions should think about restructuring themselves in order to include informal workers. The form of their inclusion can still be open to discussion. But it must be understood that this is a necessary part of their respond to the needs of the working people in a changing labour system. In such a process, the unions will benefit from the experiences of new organisations in the informal economy, especially from the power of women workers and their leadership, and their ties with the movements of the marginalised. The traditional labour unions have the historical experience and necessary resources to organise the broader working class. In fact, the new organisations need their cooperation to have sustainable democratic structures and activities. Similarly, the community-based new type of labour organisations should be more open to issues of the entire working class. The demands of the broader working class have the necessary power to break down the political party barrier. In the new structure, multi-issues can be dealt with without leaving the working class perspective out.

Informal workers are creating a new social movement themselves—both as being the most vulnerable workers and as the poor. Their vulnerability brings their demands close to those of other social movements. They are both at the workplace and in the community. Public space, street is workplace for them as their home is both a place of production and reproduction.

Trade unions should rethink their 'social movement unionism' agenda. I believe that informal workers can be a bridge between the social movements of the marginalised and the labour movement, namely the trade unions. This link provides a very valuable reason for further research.

This era of making livelihoods in various forms of informal economic activities is called by Sitas (2001) as 'new hunter-gatherer type societies'. I think livelihoods struggle seems to proceed in a polarised way. In an analogy of his conceptualisation, women continue their gathering activity in an informalised labour process and try to make their living. Men are mostly, in declining numbers, in formal labour systems and try to do hunting. Is there still something left to hunt?

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