

A Story Of Courage

—The Lives Of Muslim Women In Ahmedabad

The field workers of SEWA have been actively working with the women in the Muslim section of Dariapur, located in the old walled city of Ahmedabad. Conversations and discussions with these women have told us much about the way they live, their problems, their fears, their struggles, and their hopes. This article describes the lives of these women as they told it to us.*

THE old walled city of Ahmedabad lies on the east bank of the river Sabarmati and is enclosed by fortress walls. The city has grown within the walls. Its streets are narrow and crowded with all manner of vehicles—bicycles, three wheel rickshaws, cycle rickshaws, handcarts, scooters, cars, and buses. Trade flourishes within the city walls. There are big wholesale markets of grain, fruits and vegetables, cloth, timber, sugar, spices, where goods arrive by the truck and train load and are sold to retailers. Many small retail shops exist along with all types of street vendors—male and female—who walk around shouting “vegetables, vegetables”, or “biscuit”, or “handkerchief, one rupee only.” Many labourers who work in the 65 textile mills and other factories, street vendors, and casual labourers live partly in the areas around the mills and partly within the walled city.

* SEWA stands for Self Employed Women’s Association, a working women’s trade union, which is closely associated with the Textile Labour Association, Ahmedabad. TLA is a 1.5 lakh strong union of textile workers, founded in 1917 on Gandhian principles. A number of smaller unions have been sponsored by TLA and are closely associated with it and benefit from its large membership, connections in city and state institutions and its social organisations and activities in the labour areas. SEWA is one such union. Its membership is mostly in Ahmedabad, although it has begun to expand into the rural area. It has about 22,000 members, all of whom are labouring women in the unorganised informal sector.



Dariapur is one such area inside the walled city. It is divided into various sections according to community. There is the patel section, the harijan section, the vaghari section, and the Muslim section. Various other communities are also scattered throughout. The Muslim area is surrounded on all four sides by patel, harijan, and vaghari communities. The Ahmedabad communal riots of the 1940s and 1969, when many Muslims were killed, are vividly remembered. Dariapur Muslims live in fear of their repeated occurrence. Although they are surrounded and enclosed within their area they still do not dare to move out and settle elsewhere.

The Muslim section is constantly growing and is very congested. Few new homes are built; every little space is rented out and costly. Rooms are divided and subdivided; families of eight or nine live in one subdivided room.

Unemployment And Poverty

Men in Dariapur Muslim area work in the mills, mainly in the weaving and processing departments. Many drive autorickshaws while some own small businesses or are petty traders. A few work in government departments as class III or class IV employees. Very few are professionals—teachers, doctors or lawyers.

Male unemployment is high and an unofficial estimate puts it at 25 percent, with an even higher percentage for unemployed youth. The high school or college educated, often the first in their families to get higher schooling, are chronically unemployed. These young men feel their situation is hopeless. They feel discriminated against and are frustrated and angry.

The Muslim area is generally considered a poor one. A mill worker may earn Rs 700 per month, but with the high rents, high cost of food and clothing, and families of five or six children, this income is rarely adequate. Some traders in the area are better off. They earn up to Rs 2,000 to 3,000 per month. But most families struggle to live with Rs 700.

Many families, where the main earner is dead, disabled, or unemployed, or just irresponsible, live near or below subsistence level.

The constant communal fears, feeling of isolation as Muslims, high rate of unemployment, congestion, and poverty in the area all lead to a great deal of tension in the community. Men are always ready to explode at the slightest provocation. They often fight over minor issues. Whenever there are any disturbances—strikes, demonstrations, political rallies, or agitations in Ahmedabad—Dariapur is sure to be affected. Young men come out in gangs, pick fights with the police, throw stones at government offices, and burn buses and police cars. Then Dariapur is put under curfew.

Just as, within the area, some people are poorer than others, so also, within a family, some members are poorer than others. If a man does not get enough to eat, a woman gets even less. If a man's clothes are torn, a woman's are in rags. If a man is often ill, a woman is not only ill due to disease but also suffers from poor health as a result of repeated childbirths. If the man has to suffer the effects of congestion, the woman who stays home all day suffers even more. In the family where there is a male earner, the man may be poor, but the woman will be even poorer.

The Ideal Woman

Why are women poorer than men? Part of the reason lies in the way they view their roles within the family.

As one of the women, Mehboob Bibi, put it: "God has made women dependent on men. It is our duty to serve our men, to look after their house, to cook and clean for them, to bear their children and to look after the children. We must obey their wishes and if they are displeased with us we must bear their beatings. In return, all that we ask is that the men should feed and clothe us. Our children should be fed and clothed and sent to school. He should be responsible for us and our comforts. He should be fair and

just towards us."

The ideal woman serves her man and is obedient to his wishes. The ideal man is responsible for the wellbeing of his family. The ideal woman does not need to earn money but only takes care of the house and children. The ideal man is capable of earning enough to keep his family in comfort. Most families, however, fall short of this ideal.

Reality Is Different

Sidar Bibi has six children. Her husband earns Rs 600 as a mill worker. For six people, the food bill alone comes to Rs 400. Little is left for rent, clothes, medicines, education.

Hamida Bibi has nine children. Her husband refuses to work. He is the youngest of four brothers and ever since he was young his mother spoiled him. He never got the work habit and now just spends his time gambling.

Rashida Bibi has two children. After their second child, her husband ran away, taking with him all the pots and jewellery her parents had given her. She was left alone to support her children.

Usman Bibi's husband owned a garage and two rickshaws and was earning enough to keep his wife and seven children in comfort. Then he got TB. One by one, all the possessions were lost as he became too weak to get out of bed and there is no other earning member in the family.

Latifa Bibi's husband married a second wife. He earns Rs 600 per month but says he does not have enough to support both families in comfort, and he gives Latifabibi only Rs 100 for herself and her two children.

The reality falls very short of the ideal. Most men do not or cannot entirely support the family. Most of the women have to earn. In some cases, like Sidar Bibi, they earn a supplementary income. In other cases, like Bilkis Bibi, they are the sole supporters of the family.

Women's Work

Muslim women in Ahmedabad do a wide variety of jobs. Most women work in their homes but some go out to work.

The women who work at home generally work for traders or manufacturers in the area. They are given raw materials which they process and are paid for the amount they produce. Some women buy the raw materials themselves and sell the finished products to the traders.

Many women have sewing machines and make readymade clothes of all kinds, patchwork quilts, pillowcovers and bags. Some women have paper cutting machines and they make boxes for different uses, bookcovers, envelopes. Some have machines to wind string while others make toys of all types. Still others make kites, bangles, and sweets. *Bidi* making is another common trade, as is button making. Women's intimate things, such as pads and powders, are made at home by women. Dyeing and block printing engage large numbers of women.

Domestic work in their own areas, such as washing pots and pans, cleaning, cooking, also provide employment as do the printing factories and cement trade establishments, where women sew cement bags. Some do construction work; others are petty traders moving from place to place, selling clothes or quilts.

This is only a partial listing of the work women do. The variety is as endless as human ingenuity.

Strenuous Work

These jobs are by no means light work. They often require hard physical effort. Khaja Bibi, a construction worker, says: "I carry 16 bricks on my head up three flights of stairs and I have my baby under my arm." Noor Bibi, who sells frocks, says: "I walk around the city for six hours with 15 kilos of cloth on my head." A block printer, Saira Bibi, says: "The block weighs a kilo and I have to lift it up, put it in the paint, lift it up, print the cloth, lift it up, and put it back in the paint. In one hour we lift that block up and put it down at least a hundred times. It puts a lot of strain on our arms and shoulders." Cutting cardboard or wood also strains the arms and shoulders.

These women often work long hours—10 to 12 hours a day is quite common. "I sit down at my sewing machine at 10 a.m. after preparing the morning meal. I sew till 5 p.m., then I cook for the evening. After dinner, I sit down again at 8 p.m. and sew till 12 or 1 at night", says Sidar Bibi.

Not only are these jobs physically straining but they are often hazardous to health. The chemicals in the paint of the printers and the dyers injure the skin and cause peeling, rashes, and boils. The cement in the cement bags cause respiratory diseases. The tobacco in *bidi* making leads to heart and respiratory diseases.

Accidents often occur on the construction sites. Women who cut boxes and wood sometimes cut their hands or fingers. Sewing long hours on the machine in poor light weakens the eyesight of most women and after eight to 10 years of sewing, they can no longer see well enough to thread a needle.

Women "Do Not Work"

Women work hard at jobs which require strength and skill and which strain the health. Yet their work is neither recognised nor respected. Since the ideal woman need not work, the actual work a woman must do and does is often not recognised.

Sidar Bibi's husband says: "My wife does household work and looks after the children. That is all. She does not do any job." We had to remind him that she also spends about eight hours a day on the sewing machine.

Fatma Bibi, who dyes cellophane paper to make sweet wrappers, says: "We women are not fit for any work." The result of this attitude is that a woman is handicapped even before she starts working.

No training is given to a young girl to prepare her to work. Many families do not send their girls to school, so when the time comes for her to take a job, she is fit only for the lowest paying and most menial position. Many women are not mentally and emotionally prepared to

work and would rather starve even when work is available. As Usman Bibi says: "I and my daughters have led a comfortable life. My husband used to earn about Rs 1,000 a month. We never sent our daughters to school. We rarely went out of the house and never did any work except household work. Now my husband is dead. He left us nothing. My daughters and grandchildren are hungry. There is no food in the house, but we feel too ashamed to go out and look for work. One trader offered to give us cloth to sew into quilts, but I feel ashamed to walk about the streets with a bundle on my head. My daughters are young women. How can I let them go out? So we have no work and we have no food."

Even when the woman herself is prepared to work, often the family would rather see her hungry than damage their honour. Hamida Bibi's husband refuses to work and support his wife and nine children. But he believes strongly in the *parda* system and does not let Bismillah Bibi go out to work either. Although she could earn Rs 10 a day, selling frocks, Hamida Bibi must be satisfied with jobs she can do at home which pay only Rs 3 to 4 per day.

No Jobs, No Rights

When a family does permit a woman to work, she will find that very few jobs are available to her. Most factories and mills do not hire women; government and public institutions prefer not to give them jobs. In most places, the male workers unite to keep out women.

When a woman does get a job, whether inside or outside the home, she finds that she gets no protection of any kind from society and is exploited by her employer. The Minimum Wages Act often does not cover the work that women do. Even when they are covered by the Act, the Act is not implemented.

Most of the trade unions do not bother about the rights of these women. The result is that for all the effort these women expend they receive very little. The quilt and clothes stitchers, for example, get paid Rs 5 to 6 per day for 10

hours of work. The button makers get about Rs 4 per day for eight to 10 hours. Printers and dyers earn Rs 5 to 6 per day. *Bidi* makers earn about Rs 4 to 5 per day.

The initial cost of their machines and other tools, as well as of repairs, are borne by the women. They have no accident insurance, no provident fund. If they do have an accident, not only do they have to pay for their own medicines but they lose many days' work and risk losing their jobs altogether. They have nothing to support them in their old age

will, she must endure everything he may choose to inflict on her.

Muhammad Husein had to work a double shift at the mill. He came home exhausted and went to sleep. His wife would not let him sleep, but kept waking him up to ask him for this or that. Muhammad Husein became angry and in his anger he threw a pot of boiling water at his wife, burning her face and chest.

In the Muslim working class areas, there is a lot of anger and tension

stand in front of him, his father and brother, and do 200 sit ups. Whenever she got tired he would beat her with a stick.

"My husband is highly educated," says Jalida, "He is studying for MA but he often gets angry with me and then he takes his pen and pokes it into my neck and face. Once he filled chilli powder in my nose and eyes. It was unbearable."

Mehboob Bibi's husband was trying to sleep but their baby kept crying. He became angry, grabbed the baby by the arm, and swung it around. Mehboob Bibi caught the child before he could throw it on the ground but its arm was broken.

When the anger cannot find a human victim, it turns to objects. Often, a man will smash the things in his house, and most of the things in a poor family's house are necessities. Their destruction causes much hardship.

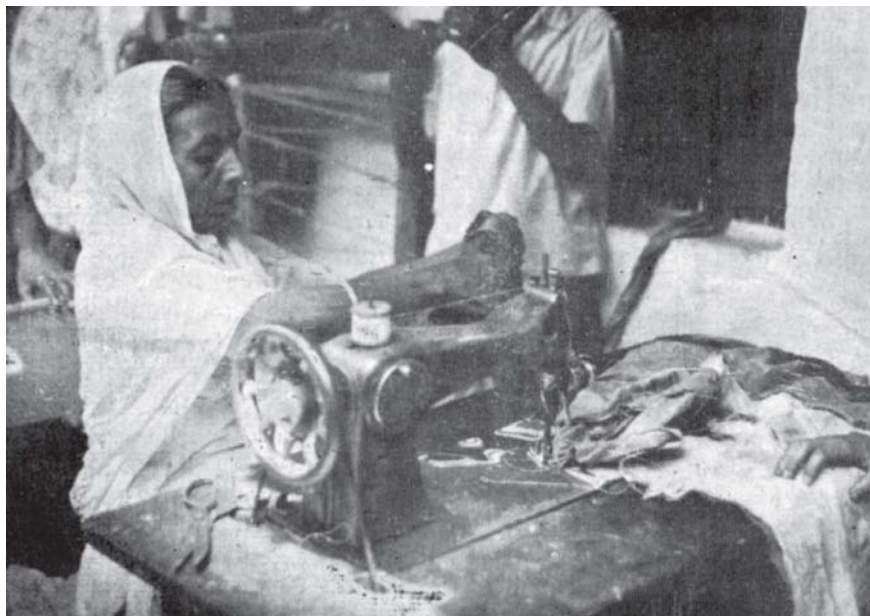
"My husband just gets angry for nothing", says Bismillah Bibi. "One day, in his anger, he picked up my sewing machine and banged it two, three, and four times on the ground. It was completely destroyed. Rs 400 of my hard earned money was lost."

Women Under Stress

The woman is often under great physical and emotional strain. She is responsible for looking after the children and the home and at the same time, she must work long hours at jobs that are physically taxing, sometimes hazardous, and always low paying. Each of these responsibilities is demanding at the best of times. In conditions of poverty, they are all the more difficult.

"My husband is dead and I am the sole earner for myself and my six children. Often, my children cry because they are hungry. They say: 'Ma, my stomach is hurting. I want food. I do not want dry *roti*. Can't I have a little vegetable?' It breaks my heart to hear my children cry for food."

"I want my son to study so that he can earn well when he grows up. But he refuses to go to school because I cannot give him new clothes and the other boys make fun of him. What can I do? We do



Working to support the family

except their own savings.

Fatma Bibi chops sticks to make toys. One day she chopped off her thumb. She had to rush to the doctor to get it sewn on again. The expense for the doctor, and medicines was Rs 150 and she lost two weeks' work.

Sufara Bibi has been sewing quilts all her life. Now she is old, cannot see, and sews no more. She lives with her daughters and son-in-law. Since she cannot earn they are not kind to her and do not feed her properly. She has no savings and no other support.

Women Victimised

A woman may be a worker in her own right, but in the home she is just a woman. Subordinate to the man, obedient to his

amongst men, which often breaks out in violence. This violence usually explodes in the home. Men come home with anger and frustration inside them and they release this on their wives. The most brutal expressions of anger are inflicted on the family and the victims of the violent outbursts are the docile, passive or helpless and weak members—the wife, daughter-in-law, sister-in-law, or children.

When Fatma Bibi's husband came after being scolded by the foreman in the mill, he was in a bad mood. Fatma Bibi had not bathed and appeared dirty to him. He became furious, calling her bad names and saying that it would be better if she was dead. Then he made her

not have enough money to spend for clothes as well as for our other expenses.”

The strain of working under conditions of poverty and lack of proper nourishment is often debilitating. “I sew *khols* for 10 hours a day”, says Fazroonisa, a young woman of 25 years. ‘My hands and feet hurt all day. By the end of the day it is so painful that I can hardly move.’ Common complaints are: “My back hurts, especially at night.” “I feel very tired all day.” “I often feel dizzy and have to lie down.”

Sometimes, it is impossible to manage both responsibilities at once. As Mehroonisa put it: “It is very difficult for us to look after the children and also work at the same time. For example, I sew clothes at home. When my children were small they would not leave me. They would crowd near my machine and pull at the pieces of cloth and put their hands near the pedal and the needle. With all this pulling and crying I could not work. I would hardly earn Rs 2 a day. Also I was afraid they would hurt themselves on my machine. So I would feed them opium and they would sleep the whole day. I think opium is not good for children, it damages their brain. It is our bad fortune that we have to treat our children like this.”

“My daughter is often ill”, says Rashida Bibi. “But I do not want to take her to hospital because if they admit her there, then I will have to stay with her and who will earn the money for the family? We cannot afford to miss even one day’s earning.”

To be able to fulfil all the responsibilities of home and work under conditions of poverty requires a woman to have great emotional strength. She badly needs the support of others—her husband, family, relatives, and neighbours. Instead of getting this support, she is abused and ill-treated. Her strength of character is not built up but broken down by humiliations and violence inflicted on her by her husband.

When a woman finds the strain too much, she cannot fulfil her responsibilities. She has neither the

emotional nor the physical strength. Life seems desperate, the mental tension becomes unbearable. Occasionally, this tension cannot be contained but breaks out in the form of violence, often expressed as self abuse.

“Sometimes”, says Haji Bibi, “I do not know how to bear it. I have six children. My husband gives me only Rs 200 per month so I have to sew quilts in the house to earn money to feed the children. The children want attention all the time. My employers do not pay me properly and cheat me when they can. The food shop merchant does not give me credit any more, and then my husband comes home and starts beating me. I think I must have gone mad. I started screaming and banging my head against the wall. Then I pulled out my hair—two handfuls of hair came out. All the while, I was shouting curses at my husband, my children, myself and at the whole world.”

Zahroonisa has to support her five children because her husband has left her. She sews *khols* with the help of her daughters. She thinks her eldest daughter, aged 12, does not work hard enough, and is often angry with her. One day Zahroonisa came home and found that her daughter had left the cooking pot on the fire and gone to play with neighbourhood girls while the food burned. She screamed, then picked up a knife and began to stab herself, screaming: “I will kill myself.”

Sometimes, the tension is taken out on the children. “My little daughter got into a fight with some other children. The children’s fight sparked off a fight between myself and the other people in the *chawli*. I had been sewing all day. I was tired. I became furious with my daughter. I picked up a stick and beat her and beat her. Blood started coming out of one of her eyes. Later, I felt very sorry, but at that time I could not control myself.”

“I was chopping wood with an axe. My little son kept coming to me and saying, ‘Ma, I want to go to my uncle’s house.’ Every time I said, ‘No, you

cannot go’, because

I do not want him to mix with his uncle’s children who are ruffians. But he kept bothering me and not letting me work. Finally, I got so angry that I threw the axe at him and shouted ‘Go away, you son of a dog and never come back.’”

Struggle For Change

Although women sometimes break down under the tension, more often, they keep up the struggle for survival. Often, the combined strain, tension, contradiction and confusion within the women’s minds act as a spur for change. As they experience the utter unbearability of the way they have to live, they realise that this cannot go on, that something has to change. They realise that the traditional ways of life, thinking, and ideals of women must change to become more in keeping with reality. New ways of living must be created as well as new relations within the family and within society.

Such change comes in response to the situations in which women find themselves and requires a high degree of creativity. Tension must be contained and not allowed to burst into violence. The energy created by the tension must be channelled into constructive solutions. A woman must do something she has never done before, finding new and original solutions. It requires strength. It requires a lot of courage to act against one’s upbringing and traditions, and to experiment with new and unknown ways of behaviour.

The women of Dariapur often show great reserves of creativity, strength, and courage. In their behaviour, way of life, and even in their thoughts, they have opposed and challenged the traditional ways. However, the values and ideals which oppress these women pervade the whole society in which these women live. A lone individual cannot struggle against a whole society.

When a woman tries to overcome her inner tension by changing her lifestyle and values, those with whom she has relationships will either help or hinder her. Those who disapprove of what she

is trying to do will use their relationship to stop her.

"My husband used to beat me a lot", Fatma Bibi says, "He would also hit our little girl until 'I was afraid he would kill her. Mostly for the sake of my daughter, I wanted to leave him but everybody discouraged me. My parents did not want me to come home. They love me very much but I felt that no one would look after me when they died. My mother would cry every time I talked about my husband. So I would feel bad about causing her pain. My brothers felt that if I came home their honour would be at stake. They would fight with me and scold me when I talked about leaving my husband. My neighbours and relatives all explained to me that it was the duty of a woman to stay with her husband. They said a woman cannot support herself. They felt sorry for me, but if I had left him they would have condemned me and said I was a bad wife. The elders of the community said to my father, 'We must have harmony in our community and we must uphold the traditions. Tell your daughter that if the man beats her a little she should hold her tongue and endure it. If your daughter leaves her husband it will reflect badly on our community and we will hold you responsible.' I respect my father very much and would feel very bad if because of me he could not hold his head up in the community. So I stayed with my husband and endured his beatings."

Support Crucial

It is only when a woman gets support from others that she can change her situation. Change in people's lives occurs through the joint action of the individual and the people surrounding them. Both are necessary.

For example, while women are mentally unprepared for work, they must find employment under the pressure of poverty and overcome this barrier. Old ideas about roles have to be changed and new ways of acting emerge. This requires a lot of personal courage. The family, friends, and community may help by reassuring a woman that what she is

doing is morally correct and by giving her courage.

"In my father's house, I was always very protected", says Rashida Bibi. "I hardly ever went out of the house and when I did I always wore a burkha. When my husband deserted me, I had no income. I realised that I should go out to work. My mother and my neighbours encouraged me. I was very scared but they said that it was no shame to go out. They said it is all right for a woman to go out for work when she has no bad intentions. The neighbours said I could sort *chindi* for a local trader. I had never talked to a strange man in my life. In our family, it was considered very bad even to let a man see your face. When my

skills or training. They have to acquire these skills through their own ingenuity and initiative and with the support of others.

Women in Dariapur have made the following statements. "After my husband died, my sister taught me how to sew readymade clothes. I used to sit late at night, practising." "My neighbour taught me how to wind thread." "I went to the factory and the *mukadam* taught me how to print cloth." Women themselves acquire the training that society denies them.

Training however, is not enough. These women must have work. When society does not care to give these women jobs, it is through their



Developing inner strength

neighbour took me to the trader, I was so frightened I kept my eyes lowered all the time. He asked me if I wanted to work. My voice choked. I could not speak. My neighbour said, 'Say yes, Rashida.' Twice he asked me and finally with a great effort I said yes."

Two years later, Rashida Bibi had broken through the mental barrier so completely that she would go all alone to printing factories, eight miles away at 11 p.m., to work on the night shift.

Not only are women mentally unprepared to work but they have no

perseverance, creativity, courage and ambition that they manage to get work. They often get support from the family and neighbours As Rashida says, "I have done many kinds of work. I have sorted *chindi*, sewn *khols* and cement bags, sold vegetables and cloth, filled water for people, washed dishes, worked in a factory and worked in a mill. I have changed to a better job whenever I got an opportunity. I have always tried to better myself. I could only do all this because my mother who lives with me has always supported me. She looks after

the children and whenever I feel the burden is too much, she gives me courage.”

Women Support Women

Women as a group face many common problems. Often, when a woman tries to change her situation she will face opposition from others such as her husband or employer. As an individual, a woman will not have the strength to face this opposition but when women gather as a group they can help each other.

Hamida Bibi says: “My husband would not earn and would not let me go out to earn either. One day a woman in our area said, ‘Why don’t you go out and sell frocks? You will earn a lot of money that way’. I said ‘My husband will beat me.’ So she said, ‘Don’t be afraid. Go, we will take care of your husband’. I went that day to sell frocks and earned about Rs 10. When I came home, I saw my husband sitting outside the house with a big stick. I went to the other women and said, ‘I am afraid to go home.’ So all the women got together and came with me to my husband. They scolded him and said, ‘Are you not ashamed to starve your family like this? If you cannot support your family, you must let your wife earn. Put away the stick. We will not let you beat her.’ So my husband did not beat me, and since that day I have been going out to sell.”

Occasionally, the women will unite on an economic level. One woman told us: “In our area, 11 women sew quilts for local traders. These traders pay us very little for our labour. About five years ago they were paying us only 50 paise per quilt. We were dissatisfied. We would often talk about it and we thought we should be paid at least 60 paise. Then one day, while we were complaining, a woman said, ‘Let us tell our trader to give us more.’ So we all went to him and said, ‘Give us ten paise more per *khol*.’ He refused and we went on strike. Then the women who sewed for the other traders also went on strike. For one week we did not sew on the machines. Then the traders gave in and raised our wages though not as much as we had asked.



“Last year, a similar thing happened. Prices had risen so much but the traders gave us no increase.

This time we asked a local trade union, SEWA, to help us organise ourselves against the traders. Most of the women joined SEWA and elected their representatives to speak for them. The representatives spoke boldly for the women in front of the traders and even made their case in front of the labour commissioner. The traders reacted by cutting off the work of the weakest and poorest women. We were all very upset. We tried to help these women by giving them a little of our work. Then we insisted that through SEWA which had some money, we should buy *chindi* ourselves and give it to ‘these women to sew, so that they would have some income.’”

Individual Change

There are a few cases where individual changes have occurred in women’s lives. When Hamida Bibi was first married, her husband would not let her go out of the house to work. The women of the community came to her aid and forced him to let her go. Now, after 30 years of married life, Usman Miyan actively supports his wife’s

working. He tries to find lucrative jobs for her. When she goes selling, he sometimes goes with her and helps her and when she has to go to work early, he brings her lunch in a tiffin carrier.

Rashida Bidi lives with her two children and mother in a working class *chali*. She alone supports the family. She first moved to this *chali* after her husband deserted her and she had to start earning. At first, the *chali* people treated her as a “deserted woman.” They felt sorry for her and would help her with food and money, but were also contemptuous of her position. They would order her about, not letting her speak, and also tried to reconcile her with her husband. Seven years later, she has proved that she can support her family alone. The *chali* people now treat her as a ‘head of household.’ She is consulted in joint decisions that affect the life of the *chali* and people come to her for help with their problems.

While scattered instances point out that new values are possible and that they can be accepted, the question is how this may become more widespread.

Women Isolated

The women within the Muslim community are isolated from other communities and from the activities outside the community. A striking example of this is the language they speak. Ahmedabad is a Gujarati speaking city and most of the men in Dariapur come in contact with other communities at work in social or political gatherings, or by just roaming around the city. They are fluent in Gujarati. But the women neither understand nor speak Gujarati. They speak a peculiar mixture of Urdu, Hindi and Gujarati with an accent that is uniquely their own. A person outside the community finds it difficult to communicate with them.

Given this extreme isolation, the women do not know the opportunities that may be available to them or the laws that could protect them. It is difficult for them to know about job opportunities or training programmes outside Dariapur, or about the rights to which they are entitled. They do not know, for example,

that their wages are determined under the Minimum Wages Act, or that they may be offered police and legal protection in cases of brutality. Laws relating to ownership and divorce outside their community are unknown to them. Nor do they know about various voluntary and government agencies which could help them or at least give them moral support.

These women are invisible to the rest of society. Their existence is not acknowledged by any government agency. No job opportunities are kept open for them. No wage protection is given to them. The brutality with which they are treated is ignored by the rest of society.

Despite their isolation, women do get together in informal groups and support each other to find solutions to their common problems. However, these groups are subject to a lot of pressure. They have not support outside the community, and from within, powerful interests invoke orthodoxy and tradition to keep them down. When the women united to fight for higher wages, for example, the traders tried to break the union both by economic and social pressures. They cut off the work of the most active women and then tried to make it look as if these women were injuring the family and community honour. Many husbands then forbade their wives to take an active part in the agitation.

External Agencies

Under these circumstances, external agencies can play an active role. Their most important function would be to provide women with link outside the community. This would give them additional support groups, help strengthen the already formed informal groups and provide creative outlets for their entergies.

Women are willing and eager to work. An outside agency can tell women about employment opportunities and help them take advantage of various training and education courses. Alternatively it can get in touch with various employers and agencies which run training courses and apprise them of the women's problems

and special needs. It can go one step further and help women organise employment schemes of their own within the community. In this case, it would serve mainly to provide women with capital, knowhow and contracts with external markets.

An outside agency may also help women fight for justice by informing them of their economic and social rights and putting them in touch with various government or voluntary agencies. When the Dariapur women agitated for higher wages, SEWA made sure that they knew the wages to which they were legally entitled and then put them in



Breaking barriers

contract with the government labour office.

When Mariam Bibi was beaten by her husband and thrown out of the house, Jyoti Sangh, a local women's organisation, helped her file a case of criminal assault against him.

Outside agencies can give women moral support by acknowledging that the problems women face are substantial. They may help them to learn that other women face similar problems, that they are morally justified in asking for

solutions, and that solutions are possible.

Finally an outside agency can use its contacts and its social standing to influence other groups within the community. When the women united in SEWA to fight for higher wages, SEWA was able to use its close connections with the Textile Labour Association to persuade the local labour leaders to help the women.

Jahroonisa's husband became angry with her one day and divorced her for no reason. None of the local elders were willing to help her. Jahroonisa complained to SEWA and when the elders heard that SEWA might get involved, they went to the husband's house and persuaded him to take Jahroonisa back.

Women Must Act

An external agency, however, can only help women to find their own solution. Only when they are ready and willing to work outside the home can an external agency be useful in making contact with prospective employers. Only when women are willing to fight for higher wages, to unite and to suffer the consequences of retaliation can trade unions help them take advantage of the law. Only when a woman is willing to oppose the brutality of her husband can an external agency help her get police protection.

In the final analysis, it is the women themselves who must unite and together constructively change their society.

As Bilkis Bibi says: "I have suffered a lot in my life. I do not want my daughter to suffer as I do. I want her to be educated, to get a good job, and to be independent. After that, if she gets married she will be safe. We Muslim women must work together to make a better life for our daughters. We must not quarrel over little things. We do not have to suffer brutality. We too can work and earn. It is only when we help each other, and support each other, that we can oppose out oppression. We must unite." □