

Synopsis :

LOANS, ONLY FOR WOMEN

A photographic report by

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We must never lose sight that poor women will always be poorer than the poorest men. That is the very reason why they show a greater strength of character than men. Ela Bahtt is the woman who created SEWA Bank, the first bank to offer microcredit to women only. This is how Sewa was born: women organised themselves into 70 interdependent cooperatives, composed of bidie rollers, rubbish collectors, farmers, metal workers, etc. Union is strength, and they understood that they could together acquire, thanks to the collective nest egg deposited in « their » bank, indispensable production tools which would guarantee their financial independence.

Since 1974, 1.5 million women in India have benefited from Sewa loans. This is the largest Indian association of female support, bringing together not only banking, but also medical insurance services, legal advice and cooperative handicrafts made by these women.

“One could think that the relationship with the government and politics in general is in fairly good shape. This is not the case. If politicians do approve the actions of Sewa on the ground, they are reluctant to address the issue of women's minimum wage, the fair price for their manufactured goods, access to bank accounts for illiterate women, the right for all to education and vocational training. They are afraid of us because Sewa has become the most powerful union in Gujarat, with nearly one million members, and it is women-only”, according to Executive Director Jayshree Vyas. “We are a real pressure group, which allowed us to recently push a law on microcredit through Parliament, finally taking account of our requirements, including the fight against the anarchic development of false credit agencies that serve as fronts for usurers.”

However, although it is practically impossible to count them all, we know that hundreds of thousands of tiny “self help groups” dispense microcredit honestly. And if the number of Indians enjoying its benefits is estimated to be 30 or 40 million, 400 million still remain in urgent need. “We urge the federal banks to follow our lead, because we can’t meet the needs of the rest of the country” adds Jayshree Vyas. “The price of success”, adds Ela Bahtt, who loves to repeat after all that “even God works.”