Summary Report of the Exposure Visit of WISA Team

I. Duration of Visit: 2nd February – 7th February, 2015

II. Background of Participants:

There were 9 participants from WISA (Women’s International Solidarity Australia) organization. WISA (Women’s International Solidarity Australia) was born out of a desire to help women of the world to empower themselves and their community. They offer financial, organisational, political and personal support to assist women from Afghanistan in their quest. As a collective, WISA stands in solidarity with the women of the world in their unceasing efforts to secure peace, freedom, democracy and women’s rights.

Four among the 9 participants, four are from Melbourne, Australia who has worked in the foundation of WISA organization. The 2 participants are from Afghanistan origin who has settled now in Australia with their families and are now part of WISA team. The other 3 participants were the teenage girls from villages of Afghanistan. They are brought to India to observe and learn various activities done by women in SEWA and how they can put into action those learning from the organization into their country.

III. Objective of the Program: The main objective of the visit includes the following:

1. Observe, understand and learn the various activities of SEWA including the functioning of Savings groups, group management, leadership and explore the possibilities of using for the women in Afghanistan.

2. Understand the functioning of sustainable social enterprises in SEWA formed and managed by the women workers themselves

3. Enhance the capacity of women
4. Learn new skills to support the efforts in poverty reduction through creating employment in rural regions
5. Understand the need based and demand driven approach of SEWA and its strategy using collective strength, struggle and development.

IV. Summary of the Exposure Visit: The program was designed reverberating to the objectives of WISA team visit. During the 6 day program, the participants have visited Motaben Exhibition, SEWA Trade Facilitation Centre, a company owned by artisan members and Hansiba Museum in Radhanpur formed by the artisan members, Community learning centers and weaving and agro processing centers in Anand, Eco tourism center in Ganeshpura and attended training on Leadership and Group Management at SEWA manager Ni School.

In the introductory session, Pratibhaben, Administration Coordinator of SEWA and Smitaben, Senior Coordinator of SEWA Manager Ni school, explained the origin, growth and structure of SEWA. There was a film on SEWA as well. The team was also joined by Manishaben, Coordinator of RUDI and manger of SEWA’s work in Afghanistan. Pratibhaben explained how an organization which was started 42 years ago with 135 members became a banyan tree of several women’s organizations with a membership of 19.2 lakh members. Pratibhaben and Manishaben explained the team that how they have established the centers in Afghanistan. It was very difficult to collaborate with women in Afghanistan, understand their situation and then design the program accordingly. The political and general situations are different for Afghanistan than in India. There were also discussions on linkages with government and local panchayats, the need based approach, the process of organizing small farmers and linking them with credit, technology, input and markets, functioning of credit cooperatives, skill up gradation training etc.

The team introduced themselves and about their motive behind the formation of WISA. They explained that very rarely they could get the fund from the sources. And if they receive the fund, they are constraint to use for the specified purposes, rather than the required purposes. They were at the initial stage of the organization building. The team was very keen to know about the methods to make their organization stable, in regard of monetary, supportive, working and also I regards of strengthening.

The introductory session was followed by site visit of various women cooperatives of SEWA. In the Motaben Exhibition, the participants were provided the history of Motaben, her struggles, ideologies, her background and her role behind the formation of SEWA. The delegates were awestruck
by the sacrifices Motaben made and knowing how high spirit woman she had been. Knowing about Motaben gave the participants a sense of confidence and determination. WISA team works for the upbringing of woman in Afghanistan mostly. They got lot of confidence in seeing a woman of so high background, yet so humble and who have sacrificed her living for the development of other women.

The SEWA Trade Facilitation Center – the unique venture of SEWA artisans- was indeed a surprise to the participants. The participants were exposed to the working of the center, account system, master trainers etc. They were keen to know about the supply chain, profit of STFC, shareholders benefits and above all the sustainability of the entire concept. All the functionality was articulated by the CEO of STFC who has been with SEWA from the beginning times. The participants also visited the retail outlet of Hansiba.

On second day training on Leadership and its management was conducted by one of the master trainer from Ahmedabad district. WISA team was explained that how important it is to form the saving group for the members from backward sector along with the importance and role of leadership. The trainings were conducted by showing certain videos, performing certain activities and playing games.

On the third day, the participants visited Anand district. They have visited the RUDI processing unit in Pij village, Anand to understand the innovative and sustainable model of agricultural supply chain encouraged by SEWA. The entire RUDI chain ranging from producers to market was explained by the SEWA team and they were able to see the processing of RUDI products in the center. The district association members briefed about the activities in the district level, history of SEWA in Anand, its organic growth, campaigning and struggle to increase wages, establishment of child care centers etc. As Anand has the highest number of SEWA members the membership trends and strategies were also discussed. The participants asked many questions about savings and loan activities of SEWA and its operating system including
interest rates, documentation etc. When they asked the women about the reason for forming saving groups they replied that savings provides a sense of ownership and assets. Also, the entire loan supply chain structure was explained to the participants. They have interacted with the loan beneficiaries to understand the extent to which the loan was benefited in their lives. Team visited the branch of SEWA Bank of Anand district where they were told about the functionality of how the money is collected in the district. Participants also purchased scarf, pillow covers, and bed sheets from the center manufactured by members of SEWA. The team was very delighted in seeing the quality work done by the manufacturers. Participants were explained about the various linkages that are done by SEWA, to support farmers and other members of the association. Trainings on computer, stitching, etc are introduced that has more involvement of younger generation.

In the fourth day, the participants visited Hansiba museum in Radhanpur – the first community museum in the state developed by SEWA. There was a meeting with the district association members to understand the structure and functions of the associations. The team was explained about the role of responsibilities of the members of the district association. There was also meeting with the artisans to understand their struggles, their collective strength and their long march towards building their own sustainable institutions under SEWA. Participants were impressed with the working of the associations and they asked many questions about their functioning. One of the representatives asked about the impact felt after and before joining SEWA. The women members replied that before joining SEWA their life was confined to the four walls of their house and now they can lead a life of their own with social status and economic security. Secondly, SEWA had provided several skill building training which has lead to increase in income and livelihood security of the poor women. The wages have increased from 500 rupees to 5000 rupees now. They are supplying products internationally as per the demands and arrange exhibition in America and Africa. The area faces extreme problems regarding scarcity of water due to very less rainfall. It is difficult to practice irrigation in the district due to which SEWA put an initiative to promote the artistic skills of women in the area and get them proper wages for it. This has also helped in reducing 95 percent of migration in the district.
On the fifth day, team got an opportunity to attend the program organized for the celebration of 10 years of RUDI, in Gram Haat. They were highly impressed seeing the hard work of the members and their devotion to the work. It was also an exciting moment for the team to meet Elaben, the founder of SEWA. The RUDIbans from different villages of the various districts gathered and welcomed Rural Development Director of SEWA, Ms. Reema Nanavaty. She was accompanied by Ms. Jyoti Mccwan, the General Secretary of SEWA, Ms. Uma Swaminathan, RUDI Director, Ms. Savitaben, CEO of SEWA Trade Facilitation Center and Ms. Rehanaben, SEWA Secretary.

In this meeting, the RUDIbans shared how they were initially apprehensive of being able to sell RUDI products. But today they are so confident and comfortably sell RUDI products worth several thousands of Rupees; all this because of the confidence that RUDI is their own company. They were provided continuous guidance and support by the Rural Director, SEWA. They were provided with several trainings as well. In this meeting, the top three district farmer group federations that made highest sales were felicitated and awarded. The RUDI women were also given their commission cheques. It was a proud moment for all the RUDIbans and farmer group members.

Following the RUDI meeting, the team had session on Group management. They were shown videos about the extreme struggle of women in a village and how she can transform her life by making small savings. Games were played to describe the group effort and coordination. This training continued for the next day as well. Participants were at the end made to revise the learning they have received in the trainings.

In the wrap up session on the last day, team was joined by Ms. Reema Nanavaty, Director, Rural Development, SEWA. The team thanked her for having them to the SEWA and for all the trainings and exposure visit. The team had certain questions pertaining to their organization for which they expected SEWA’s guidance in future.

1) Sister Onnie mentioned that for them it is important what they plan next. They wanted the information on SABAH related to fund, resources, machinery, etc.

In the answer they were told that at first they select the master trainers and they are trained in India. They started Trade Facilitation Center after that in Afghanistan. Machines, clothes, threads and other required things were brought. SEWA also provided trainings on capacity building until the team in Afghanistan became viable and self sustainable.
2) Sister Freya wanted to know about the funding of SEWA. Does SEWA get funds externally? Is there top down investment or money come within the organization and how does the funds move?

SEWA is not funded externally. The funds are generated through membership fee. The amount has been doubled so that the association can meet the majority cost. The different economic activities sources of income are:

- Share capital
- Loan, equity investment
- Revenue generated through sales

3) What are the basic costs?
- Training cost
- Unit cost for setting up a center (in a province).
- Cost of hand holdings of Association.

All the cost details of Baghey Khazana Association could be shared with WISA team to give them basic idea to set up a center in Afghanistan.

Reemaben explained that it takes atleast 3 to 5 years to get the shape of the organization and 5 to 7 years to become sustainable. We at SEWA emphasize that the services are Not Free! We believe in contributory program that can be in the form of time, labour, kind or cash. If things are given for free, people tend to not value it. It is important that members are explained the entire needs and issue; this helps in indulging a sense of responsibility and ownership in a member. 80 percent of the organizers come from the members. The very reason is that they are involved in ground deal. SEWA does not give salary. The advantage we have here is that the people work with passion. The disadvantage felt is that sometimes we do not get the right talent. In other organisation there is gap between organizers and members at times. In SEWA members just do not become members, they become organizers and owners.

Why do some groups sustain while some do not?

Some groups are still fumbling in SEWA but here we do not tend to give up so easily on them. Proper analyzing is done on the issues and difficulties, on the mistakes and what to be work upon them to rectify it. At
the most 10 to 15 years are devoted for the rebuilding and reorganizing of the group. If it still does not work out, it is left after that.

Afghan sisters were very inspired seeing the women in villages of Gujarat. Issues are similar in their country as it is in India. They wanted to adopt the same model in their country. They also mentioned that members are our biggest source of encouragement. It is so evident that even though they are suffering, they are so optimistic, encouraged and always smiling.

V. Feedback from Participants:

Sister Farida said, “I really liked the 6 days in India. We went to the villages and practically saw how it was all working. Thoughts came to be that how things would have been for the members had SEWA was not there. I want to start this in Afghanistan. You could see so many projects in our country on paper but there is nothing practically done. SEWA is what Iimagined!” “Men who work out of their cities keep sending money to their families. Therefore we can see that the families in the villages have become lazy. It is important that we teach them to start their own small work.”

Sister Freya said, “I am really inspired by the good values given to members by the organization. The members are organized and practical. There is a wonderful synchronization between people in the organization which you get to see very rarely.” “I can imagine my involvement and I feel really big changing experience within me.”

Sister Onnie said, “We have seen many community development programs going wasted. The money spent in those sectors is on top rather than at bottom. We think in Australia that the development for females should be from bottom to top.”

Sister Velli said, “We have been so inspired with the way SEWA works. People are always calm in this organization. I would like to say for the young Afghan girls who have come with us that from the day we met and till today, I see a huge transformation in them. They will surely become good leaders and help other women.”
Sister Julie said, “Thank you for calling us here. It has been our extreme pleasure to meet SEWA members. The stories we got to know about their struggles and transformation has been really inspiring and I am deeply moved by it. I would only like to say, ‘In other world, it is Possible!’”

Sister Drukshan said, “I want to say thank you to SEWA for empowering so many women. I learnt a lot here. In Afghanistan women face several financial problems because they are always suppressed by men there. I saw many confident women here. I can now pass the message and encourage women in my country to involve with men in their work. Special thanks to WISA team because of who we are here.”

Sister Shaheen said, “We have learnt many things after coming here. I have got better ideas and learning now. I want to give special thanks to Australian team who brought us with them. This visit has been very beneficial for us. I hope to try my best to follow path of SEWA and do something for women in Afghanistan. I could feel the situation has been same for both the countries where women are suppressed by men.”

Sister Nagin said, “Thank you team WISA, SEWA to have us together. The good thing I understood that men and women are all same. They have the same capacity. After I saw women in the villages of India, I could see them so confident. I wish for women in Afghanistan to become the same. I want to teach them be confident.”

VI. Way Forward

- Sharing of guidelines by SEWA for the establishment of the similar model in Farah and Herat, Afghanistan by WISA team
- Collaboration on any future ventures for the development of Afghan women
- Capacity building of women in Afghanistan by giving them trainings
- Encouraging women to start saving and also form saving groups