

## **Kamlaben, Jetunben and Savitaben get together at SEWA**

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Kamlaben, Jetunben and Savitaben had never met as a group. And so we brought them together – to share their experiences with the EDP process and to tell them that their life stories are soon to be published. Soon their lives will inspire and strengthen more than the handful of us with whom they shared their experiences, honestly and with so much trust. Their simple, moving testimonies will now reach generations of development planners, policy-makers, researchers, activists and others who make common cause with the poor, and especially women workers.

We began our discussion by reminding ourselves of the purpose of the EDP methodology. What began as a unique bridging between different worlds – of poor, self employed women and policy-makers – has also evolved into an important capacity-building tool within SEWA. Our young and new colleagues in SEWA, now understand poverty through the first-hand experience of sharing in the daily life and work of a SEWA sister. Our colleagues reaffirm that this is a pivotal experience, encouraging us to examine the various facets of poverty and insecurity. And by living with our sisters as we do, sharing in their work, learning of their struggles and dreams, we understand our own work and our lives. We obtain the insights, direction and inspiration needed to deepen our commitment to our members and to the SEWA movement. We also ‘break bread together’: cooking and sharing meals with our sisters. In our society, this is a powerful symbol of unity and solidarity.

Kamlaben immediately spoke out, “Since you all came and lived with us, life has changed. My whole neighbourhood and community gives me deep respect. They say: ‘Kamlaben, you are indeed special. Why else would these people come and be with you?’.”

“And I’ve been having only ‘good days’ since you all came,” added Savitaben. “There were some problems at home. Now my daughter-in-law and I have a good rapport. She said she now understands me and my work. And I also have changed my attitude towards her! What’s more, my son Baldev started up a hair-dressing shop in Ahmedabad. I gave him Rs 15,000 as working capital from my savings and took out a



loan of the same amount from SEWA Bank. It was his late father's wish that he do this. And it all materialized after the EDP!"

Nashemanben, one of our new colleagues in SEWA Insurance added, "After the EDP, I had one of the most moving experiences of my life. Savitaben and Arunaben her daughter-in-law, both came to visit me as I was ill. Arunaben gave me Rs 21, insisting I take this as a blessing. She said, you are my nanand (sister-in-law), and in our tradition, when we visit our nanand, we give her this chandlo (gift or offering)."

"Well things haven't gone so well for me since the EDP", said Jetunaben. "I fractured my hand and was out of work for weeks. I could not roll agarbattis (incense sticks) as I usually do. And then my daughter's young son died of pneumonia. We tried our best to save him. I also had to go to Mumbai at considerable expense, in connection with the court case following my son-in-law's murder there last year. I am passing through hard times ..."

When asked whether they felt comfortable about their personal life stories now reaching a wider audience, all three women had no qualms.

"Let people know the reality. We struggled but emerged – and thanks to our own organisation, SEWA," said Savitaben. "Besides these stories will be in English.... Now if they were in Gujarati, I might have asked you to remove some parts!"

"My family and I passed through very hard times. We went to bed hungry – often just plain black tea and biscuits for my children. I would just drink water. Let people know this and how we came out of it," added Kamlaben.

"For years we lived on one meal a day", Jetunben confirmed. "We all have been hungry, but always adhered to our principles – that saw us through the hard times."

"Yes we've all been hungry and struggled to survive. But all three of us lived according to our principles – honesty, faith in God, never hurting others and saving regularly – thriftiness," reflected Savitaben.

"I remember when Elaben first came to our neighbourhood and encouraged us to save. She asked, 'Who will collect all the women's savings: one rupee per week?' 'I will', I said at once. We started with one rupee per week and now my sisters save one hundred rupees a month, sometimes more!"

Then our colleagues spoke of their families and the "up's and down's" there too.

“As for our families, there is sorrow there too. I had twelve children – and lost five of them,” explained Jetunben. “It was terrible”. It turns out that Savitaben too had lost one child and now has six. Kamlaben has eight children and lost three.

“In those days, we did not know how to be healthy, what we could do for ourselves and our children. Now we know and our daughters and daughters-in-law have learned too,” said Kamlaben.

As we shared experiences of over lunch, Savitaben, Kamlaben and Jetunben spoke of the common threads running through their lives. And especially how SEWA had brought us all together as one family, organising for a just and peaceful world. “There is so much more to learn about each other, about SEWA and the world outside. Let’s meet in my village next time,” suggested Savitaben. There was a chorus of approval and we agreed to meet soon – and with our colleagues who could not be with us today.