



SEWA

Women Work & Poverty
Policy Conference on Home Based Workers of South Asia
18-20 January, 2007, New Delhi



PRIME MINISTER INAUGURATES 3-DAY SOUTH ASIAN POLICY CONFERENCE ON HOME-BASED WORKERS

For agarbatthis sold at Rs.100 in market, HBW rolling them receives a meager Rs.2.30 only!

New Delhi, 18 January 2007: Honourable Indian Prime Minister, H.E. Dr. Manmohan Singh, today inaugurated the three-day Policy Conference on Home-Based Workers of South Asia. Being jointly organized by United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) and Ahmedabad-based Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA), the conference is being attended by eminent experts of Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Philippines, Geneva and UK. The conference also has senior representations from the Ministries of Women Development, Trade, and Labour from the South Asian countries. Over 250 home-based workers (HBWs) from all over India also were also present on the occasion.

Although their contribution to the economy is immense, yet home based workers remain invisible and unrecognized. For example, the incense-stick industry in India contributes \$300 million annually to production including an export value of \$56 million. The garment industry in Bangladesh contributes approximately \$454 million to its national income and is the country's largest export earner and fourth largest employer. Pakistan accounts for 80% of the world's match-grade footballs and earns nearly \$50 million in foreign exchange from this industry alone. Eighty percent of all HBWs are women. However, the average daily wages for women HBWs working on piece rate is barely Rs.27/-, as compared to the non home based daily wages which is Rs.58/-. Ironically, whereas most labour laws in India are designed for protection of workers in the organized sector, *there exists no policy for home workers* till date.

Highlighting the progress made till now in improving the status of HBWs, *Ms. Chandni Joshi, South Asia Regional Director, UNIFEM* said, "A very special milestone that this Conference marks is the launch of HomeNet South Asia (HNSA). Formed in 2000 by SEWA and UNIFEM, this is a vibrant network of 600 organizations representing over 3, 00,000 home based workers from five countries - Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Nepal and Sri Lanka. Having evolved as the collective voice of HBWs, it carries their voices to the highest levels, to influence legislation, policies and programmes. A dream ten years ago - it is a reality today. This transformation is the result of collective and dedicated work especially of HomeNets of five countries. This conference is a vignette of UNIFEM's journey with SEWA that began with lobbying with 15 governments in the Asia Pacific region, to adopt the ILO Convention 177 on Home Work. For the first time, it was acknowledged that Home Based Workers were entitled to minimum standards in international law, like other sectors of the workforce."

Elucidating on the objectives of the conference, *Ms. Renana Jhabvala* of SEWA, said, "The objective of this conference is to address other commitments and to bring in policies which could remove poverty of these workers. We plan to discuss what could be a National Policy including social security for home-based workers and to urge Governments to formulate such policies. We plan to discuss trade among our countries and how to sell our goods to each other. We are confident that the outcome of this conference would lead to policies directly benefiting the home-based workers sitting here and the millions of those outside."

Commenting on recent trends in the home-based work, **Ms. Jhabvala**, says “Home based work is increasing. From 35% in 2000, when of all women workers were home based workers, to 51% in 2005. Today, piece-rate home-based workers are engaged even by international chains of production in industries like garments, footwear, electronics, plastic footballs, and also in national or local markets in industries like *bidi*, *agarbatti* and textiles. Craft-work like weaving & basketwork, as also agri-processing, are now being done on a subcontracted basis.” Despite their indispensable contribution to the national & global value chains, HBWs are among the grossly exploited, maintains **Ms. Jhabvala**, adding, “For *agarbatthis* incense sticks sold at Rs.100 in the market, the HBW rolling these *agarbatthis* receives a meager Rs.2.30 only.”

Although demand for many products of HBWs, especially in crafts sector, has expanded considerably due to globalization and trade liberalization, yet the real monetary benefits of these new opportunities do not accrue to these women. Women HBWs are not able to reach new and expanding markets because they remain isolated, dispersed, and have social restrictions on mobility. They also lack access to appropriate marketing mechanism. With no formal contracts or identity cards, they are also exposed to insecurities like lack of credit availability, raw material, infrastructure facilities etc.

Also acknowledging the solidarity shown by supporters during current UN Reform process, by way of proposals for invigorated and strengthened gender equality architecture in the UN System, **Ms. Joshi**, said, “I extend my appreciation to our friends from the women’s movement, who despite several obstacles and barriers, have kept the Beijing flame alive. Thank you for your unflinching support for gender equality and for a stronger UNIFEM. Your commitment is reflected in the one million signatures, which you collected in South Asia. This has contributed to ensuring a more central place for women’s human rights and equality by the High-level Panel on System-wide Coherence.” Reiterating the powerful message contained in the Human Development Report of 1995, she quoted, “Human development if not engendered, is endangered”.

The conference focuses on increasing employment through trade, capacity building of Home Based Workers, their protection and social security. Some of the papers being presented include “ILO Convention 177” by **Mr. Dan Gallin**, *Global Labour Institute, Geneva*; “Social Security for Home Based Workers: South East Asian Perspective” by **Ms. Donna Doane**, *HomeNet South East Asia, Philippines*; “Disaster recovery and Home Based Workers - the Tsunami Experience” by **Dr. Annie V. Kurien**, *Social and Human Resource Development Consultants, Sri Lanka*; “Social Security Bill” by **Dr. K.P. Kannan**, *National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganized Sector, India*; and “Organizing the Unorganized” by **Mr. Lalit Basnet**, *GEFONT, Nepal*. Various ministries of South Asian region will also make their respective country presentations. **Mr. B.K. Chaturvedi**, *Honorable Cabinet Secretary, Government of India* will chair the valedictory session of the conference on the concluding day.

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