

India: Transport in the lives of SEWA Bank's clients (IFRTD)

These case studies are being compiled to draw lessons from the experience of a wide range of organizations. They are considered as works in progress and will be updated periodically. Comments on the cases are welcomed, as are suggestions on additional cases which could be included in the series.

Thanks to the International Forum for Rural Transport and Development (IFRTD) for making the report available on which this case study is based.

MY DAILY ODYSSEY: Transportation in the lives of SEWA Bank's clients

This case study presents evidence regarding the pressing transportation issues faced by SEWA (Self Employed Women's Association) women in and around Ahmedabad, India. These women experience acute access restrictions and transportation constraints, and the format of the study, which includes 'stories' of six of the women's daily lives gives clear insights into how these issues convert into daily drudgery for the women themselves.

At the outset the study presents a fundamental paradox: that while the SEWA Bank clients' lives are some of the most adversely affected by transport related problems, the women themselves are not even aware of transportation as a 'separate aspect' of their lives, despite the fact that their lives revolve around it. Concepts such as 'distance traveled' have little meaning for the women, who tend to think in terms of 'time spent' on tasks as having much more relevance to their daily lives.

The study examines what form of transportation women are using for income-generating, leisure and social purposes- It asks: "Why are these transportation decisions made? In other words, to what extent are women's transportation decisions affected by economic, cultural and gender-based considerations? ".

The authors use three mechanisms to obtain their evidence: secondary research (mainly SEWA background information), six case studies about individual women (clothes/utensils peddler, pull-cart laborer, bidi roller, sweeper, ragpicker and farmer) and survey data collected from questionnaire responses from 79 of the SEWA Bank's clients, who were selected by location because of early problems in locating all of those from a randomly selected list. The authors argue that this 'deviation from the random sampling method' does not decrease the authenticity of the report and its snapshot-like portrayal of transportation in SEWA Bank's clients' lives.

The report is presented in four sections. The first details the methodology as described above, while the second gives geographical and demographic background and detailed research findings.

All the women respondents are workers in the informal sector of the economy, and their monthly income ranged between Rs. 0 to Rs. 5000, with an average of Rs. 1300. Both urban and rural workers are represented in the sample. They each work, six or seven days a week in income generating activities and household chores combined, and those days are long (up to nineteen hours), Women carry headloads of up to 40Kg and walking is the main mode of transportation, with many of the women interviewed walking anywhere even remotely accessible to cut transportation costs'. This certainly applies to all the women featured in the fourth section, containing the six women's 'travel diaries'.

Other modes of transport, such as bus or rickshaw, are secondary to walking, and buses, the second most important form of transportation to the women, are only used in emergencies (such as for health reasons) or where the income earned by the woman is sufficient to stand the use of a bus occasionally. On average, fractionally under thirty per cent of the women's income is spent each month on transportation, and despite many of the women suffering physical problems as a result of up to ten hours per day moving around, the highest percentage (more than eighty per cent) complained of high public transport costs as a difficulty, before the lack of a vehicle, long waits for public transport or physical strain. It was also noted among the

respondents the use of public transport for health reasons for a family member was more likely than the women using one themselves for their own health.

The women's suggested favored solution to improve their transportation difficulties include a significant majority believing that a new vehicle would help them (58.22%). This figure includes 100% of home-based workers felt a new vehicle would 'help them significantly', while 92.86% of primary producers (farmers) felt this. Depending upon the nature of business, this might be a bicycle or push cart (rather than headloading or hiring a cart); a rickshaw (most useful to the vendors), or a bullock cart (farmers). This latter, rural category however were the most hesitant about using one themselves, based on gender/cultural based limitations (which also exist in the city to varying extents).

In the third section the authors then tie in their study with one by the Ahmedabad Municipal Transport Service (AMTS) which brings in the wider considerations of traffic congestion and pollution in Ahmedabad itself, which also adversely affects the women respondents, and which it is realized at policy level needs to be addressed urgently. The AMTS study finds that only 29% per cent of its passengers are female. Why? This study finds that 'women save money at the expense of time and health', and that the major deterrent to taking a bus is cost. As the AMTS is hoping to restructure to attract new customers, the authors suggest there may be scope for SEWA to negotiate a concession for members using public buses.

The authors also suggest other areas for future study and possible assistance to SEWA members, bringing transportation much more to the fore in SEWA investigation and policy-making- "Transportation is not often considered as a separate issue in the surveyed women's lives, yet our study demonstrates that [it] plays a vital part in both the professional and personal lives of our respondents".

(Source: "My Daily Odyssey: Transportation in the lives of SEWA Bank's clients" By Sangita Shrestova and Rekka Barve. *Case study presented at the International Forum for Rural Transport and Development workshop in Sri Lanka. June 1999.*)