



Image: Women from SEWA's homecare cooperative



Image: Women from SEWA's health cooperative - Lok Swasthya Mandali

Supporting Women's Collective Enterprises

An adaptive evaluation of an enterprise support system formed by SEWA as an institutional mechanism to promote the financial sustainability of its collective enterprises and support SEWA's members

The Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA), a trade union founded in 1972, represents 2.9 million informal women workers—from farm workers to street vendors and artisans

SEWA has also formed ~153 women collective enterprises (WCEs) to enhance livelihoods, 60% of which are active. These WCEs face various challenges in core functions, such as, branding, compliance, HR, etc. To address this, SEWA designed an institutional innovation for its context, the Women's Enterprise Support System (WESS)

The goal of this project was to understand the design and functioning of the WESS, including its role in the financial sustainability of SEWA's WCEs, and the lives of its women members



WESS has many service modules, 8 were covered in this project:

1. Branding, Communication
2. Digital Marketing
3. Capacity Building
4. Legal & Tax Compliance
5. Investments Support
6. Human Resources
7. Mentorship
8. Business Development

Services to 8 WCEs working across 5 sectors in 5 states have been evaluated



Summary of Results



WESS standardized a suite of service modules that were largely effective in helping WCEs improve their core business functions



5 out of 8

enterprises are on a path to financial sustainability



Most women work only part-time with WCEs, but they report significant contributions to non-income measures of well-being and agency



We see WESS as a solid proof of concept that worked across sectors and regions in India - a model ready for transition to scale outside SEWA

Five enterprises are on a path to financial sustainability

Megha Mandali, Gujarat (Agriculture)

- Faced major **organizational and market challenges**
- WESS offered a wide range of support, including **pivot into new activities** with promising revenue growth and low grant dependence that **helped keep it afloat**
- Still **tackling issues on leadership and organizational capacity**

BCC, Bihar (Finance)

- Was in an **existential crisis** because of a regulatory compliance issue
- SEWA Bharat WESS **provided legal advocacy and strategic mentorship, revitalizing BCC's leadership structure** and restoring governance and operational stability
- BCC is now on a **recovery path**

LSM, Gujarat (Health)

- LSM was profitable from the project's outset, with **WESS pivotal in driving its expansion into B2B and Ayurvedic** product markets
- Innovated on its **Sakhi (commission agent) model**, driving further growth
- WESS provided **focused mentorship, financial support, and agile support**

Homecare, Gujarat (Domestic Work)

- Badly hit during the Covid-19 pandemic
- WESS was pivotal in Homecare's turn-around, offering **mentorship, financial support, and addressing operational gaps**
- Financially sustainable and on a **growth trajectory**

DCC, Delhi (Finance)

- Operational challenges and low market reach led to **high defaults and losses**
- Underwent **significant transformation with WESS**, including new leadership, branding, and capacity-building
- DCC is now **growing its customer base and is profitable**

SEWA has **phased out WESS support for Homecare and DCC**, marking their **graduation due to strong performance** and completion of program goals

Three enterprises are on a longer-run but more uncertain path to sustainability

Karn Bhumi, Bihar (Agriculture)

- KB has had to transition from a **project-focused to a business-oriented mindset**
- Continues to operate in a **low-margin market with low profitability**
- Faces **organizational challenges in finding leadership** in rural Bihar

SEWA transitioned KB to an NGO (distress exit)

Sarthak, Uttarakhand (Finance)

- **Expanded during the pandemic** as banks leveraged the business correspondent model
- Has been **overtaken technologically** with the dominance of digital payments
- Working to pivot to new partners and products but faces **significant challenges**

SEWA terminated Punjab operations due to low profits (partial distress exit)

Ruaab, Delhi (Artisanal)

- In a potentially profitable area, but **revenues declined** post-pandemic
- Core challenges have been **organizational and leadership**
- WESS support and cost cutting has slowly **improved profitability**

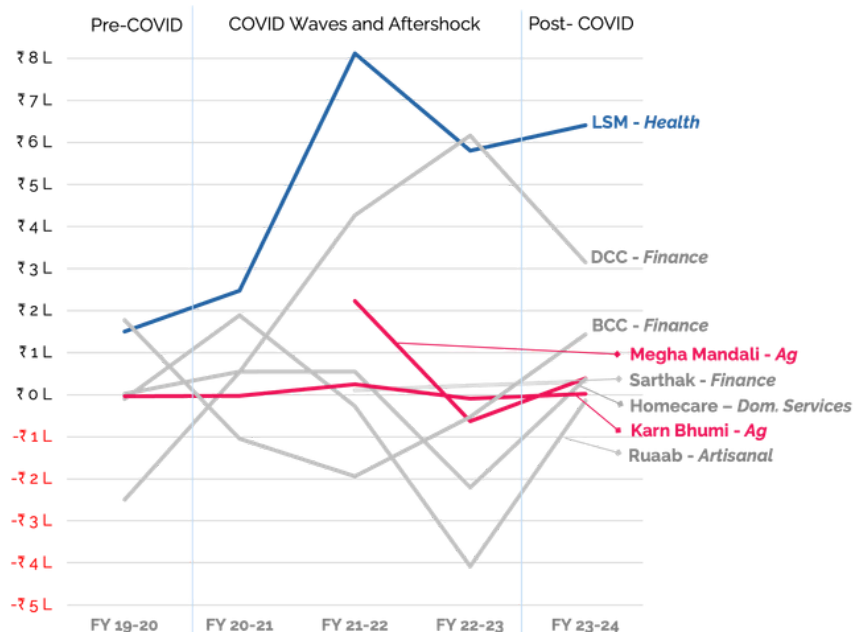
Established WCEs finding their next source of growth

Mid-stage WCEs in a crisis or inflection point

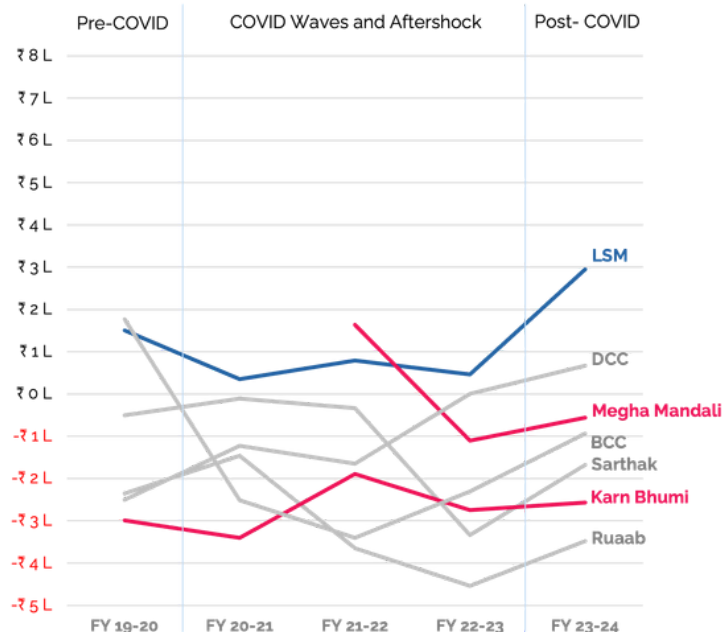
Young WCEs majorly disrupted by pandemic

Financial Snapshot of the 8 WCEs in the project

Net Profit **with Grants** (in lakh)

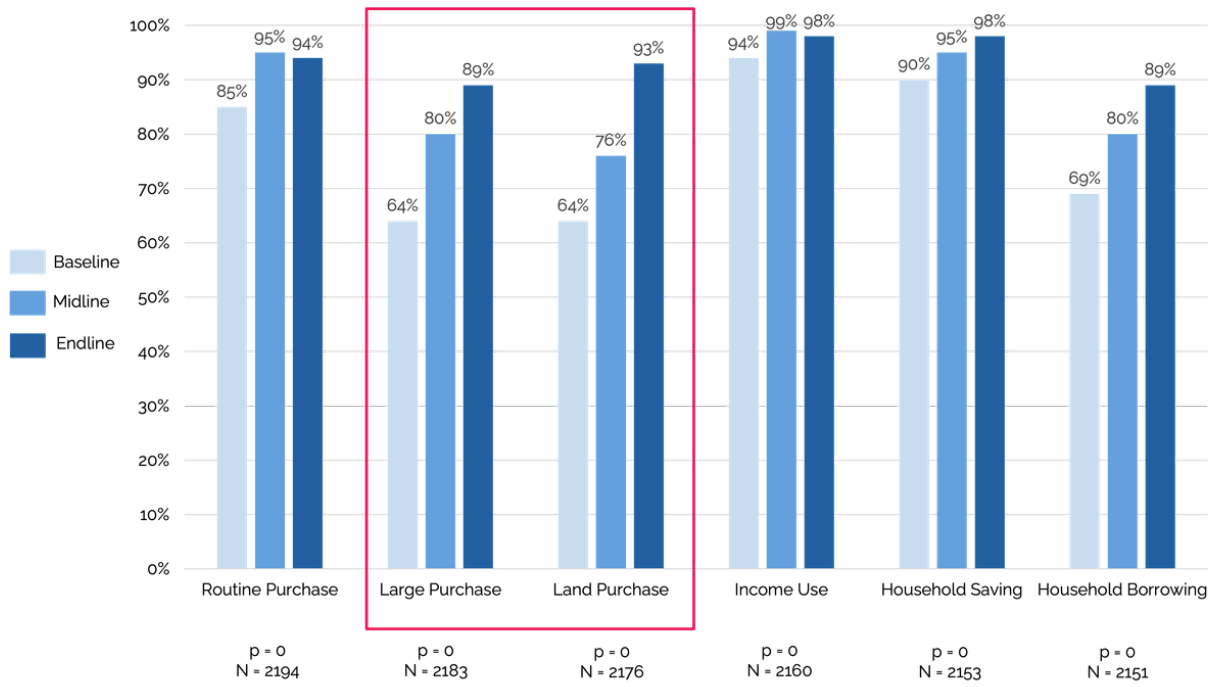


Net Profits **without Grants** (in lakh)



With respect to personal agency, the project found high fractions of women shared decision-making in the household, with substantial increases in large purchases and land purchases over the course of the project

Agency over financial decision making



Graph developed in collaboration with IDInsight

WCEs contribute about half of women's personal income, but only a small share of household income. However, qualitative insights reveal substantial contributions to women's dignity, agency, security, and sense of self. This was of great importance during the Covid-19 pandemic when WESS played a major role in supporting members



Image: Women at SEWA's Delhi Credit Cooperative

"I was able to let go of the tradition of wearing a veil. Lifting my veil, standing tall, and finding my voice is a very big thing for me"

"Karn Bhumi is a company for women where the shareholder is a women and not a man which gives me hope that we women can also do something"

"I have been able to visit many places like Patna, Indore, Bhopal, Ahmedabad, because of my association with SEWA"

Sita joined SEWA in 2004 and became affiliated with **Bihar Credit Coop (BCC) in 2012**

She is a BCC board member. She earns no fixed incentive but gets travel cost allowance. She is an account holder and has secured four loans primarily used for her children's higher education.

SEWA's contribution to her life has been life-changing — she was **motivated to study further and complete 10th grade** after joining.

Sushila joined SEWA in 2017 and became affiliated with **Karn Bhumi in 2019**

She is a **Board of Director at Karn Bhumi**. Her family owns a 0.04 acre of land, and she is a marginal farmer with serious financial struggles. Previously, she was also **working as an Aagewan**.

Her engagement with SEWA has **empowered her to challenge the patriarchal norms existing in her household**. She has been able to access a smartphone for work, participate in online meetings, and use WhatsApp.

Gita joined SEWA in 2004 and became affiliated with **Karn Bhumi in 2023**

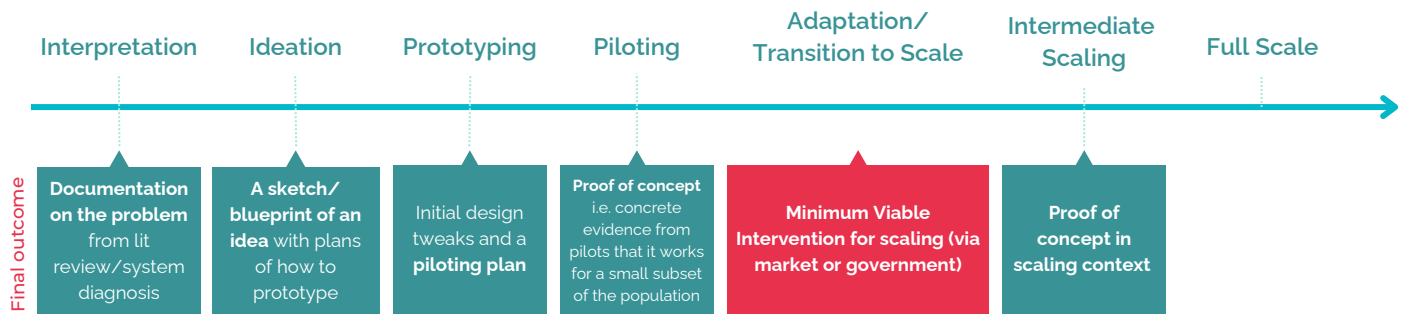
She is a KB Krishi Sakhi. She earns INR 2500 a month – a significant portion of her total household income.

SEWA's contribution to her life has been immense — she had to leave an active role in SEWA in 2013 due to health reasons and **KB has recently given her a chance to earn a stable income** in face of financial instability.

Major themes on the role and significance of WCEs in the lives of women members	SEWA provides gender focused trainings and meetings in the rural communities which helps break norms and biases that prevent women from participating in the workforce	
SEWA provides a women-only safe environment to work	Albeit small, the income is fixed and stable. This can help build long-term savings	The women develop strong bonds, creating a network of mutual support during crises and emergencies
Women are "seen" as leaders and equal contributors to household income	Women often need to look at other income-generating activities to complement WCE's work to run their households	Working in WCEs has enhanced women's mobility, providing them with valuable opportunities to travel for work

SCALING LEARNINGS

The Women's Enterprise Support System has a solid proof of concept ready for transition to scale



For impact at scale, the most appropriate scaling pathway is via replication to a new institutional context that already has a set of women-owned collective enterprises

To take the model to scale in a new system the following steps need to be followed:

- 1 Identify the **environment/system** to scale
- 2 Effect system-based adaptation to the original organizational and service-based proof of concept for the new environment, leading to a **Minimum Viable Intervention**
- 3 Undergo another round of prototyping in the new system to **check, verify, and modify adaptations**
- 4 Have a phased **intermediate scaling** with the administrative resources and processes in the new system, before going to full scale



Image: Artisans at work in Ruaab Centre