

# *Self-employed women*

**T**he Gauteng Self-Employed Women's Association (GASEWA) was formed in March 1994.

Its aim was to develop the building blocks for a trade union for self-employed women in Gauteng.

GASEWA was preceded and influenced by the development of two well known organisations which aim to empower women through collective action - the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) based in Ahmedabad, India and the Self-Employed Women's Union (SEWU) based in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal. SEWU has been a particularly important model for GASEWA and continues to be today.

Between July and September 1996 GASEWA employed two researchers. The second researcher served as a full-time organiser. Her main task was to organise and recruit women to GASEWA. A second organiser was employed in December of that year.

The challenges presented to the GASEWA organisers were enormous. Self-employed women have been exploited to such a degree that they find it difficult to trust anyone.

To be effective, the organisers have to break through protective walls and convince women that their concern for their needs is genuine. GASEWA presently has 200 paid-up members and 27 elected shopstewards.

*by Sibongile Masangwane*

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## **Self-employment**

Women turn to self-employment because they cannot find jobs in the formal sector of the economy. Factories are closing down because of the cheap goods coming into South Africa from the East. Others are retrenching. Those women who have jobs are losing them.

As a result of apartheid education, women have low levels of education. They do not have the skills which will enable them to find jobs in the factories.

South Africa is part of the global economy. Goods are moving from one country to another, and so is production. A big shoe company from overseas, for example, brings leather to South Africa. It employs women who used to work in shoe factories in this country to sew the shoes from home. When the shoes are finished, they are taken back overseas, painted and labelled as though they were made in that country. The company gets rich through using self-employed women. They pay low wages, and they do not have to pay for benefits such as medical aid and pension.

GASEWA members can be divided into broad categories:

- street vendors selling fruit and vegetables;

Pic: Kally Forman



*Graduates celebrate, February 1998.*

- sewing groups;
- women selling cooked food at factories and schools;
- women selling second hand clothing and knitting jerseys;
- beauticians.

We also have members who buy brass and shoe products in large amounts from Durban and sell in Johannesburg and those who hire telephones from Telkom and provide services to the public. Some members do catering and baking of cakes.

### Problems

Self-employed women face many problems, including:

- lack of information about their rights or how to improve their skills;

#### **GASEWA Branches exist at:**

- Johannesburg City Centre
- Springs City Centre
- Alexander Township
- Soweto
- Vosloorus
- Tembisa Location
- Spruitvlei
- Kwa-Thema Location

- lack of access to credit. The bureaucrats in the banks have a negative attitude towards self-employed women;
- high prices from suppliers.

### Achievements

GASEWA believes that the empowerment of women starts in small ways. So far we have managed to assist women to access training offered by the Department of Labour on education, catering and woodcraft. Women organised by GASEWA are

assisting each other, and learning from each other.

### Empowerment

Last year, the Ford Foundation sponsored GASEWA members to attend a five-week course offered by the Foundation for Economic and Business Development (FEBDEV).

Seventeen GASEWA members have successfully completed the diploma course. They graduated on 17 February 1998. The key speaker at the graduation was the Minister of Welfare, Population and Development, Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi.

### Trade union

On 20-21 March 1998 GASEWA launched itself as a trade union. This will enable GASEWA to be more effective in its fight for the rights of self-employed women. It will also make the organisation more accountable to its members. ★

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