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Growing leaders from below: Identity-based worker education and identity-leader ability among self-employed women in India

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Abstract

Informal and unregulated work is the norm rather than the exception in emerging economies. This study was conducted in India where nine out of 10 women are occupied in informal, unregulated work, and are vulnerable to low-wages, exploitation, and interconnected cultural and social-economic injustices. The Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) and their education wing the Indian Academy of Self-Employed Women encourage their members to self-define as “self-employed workers” and facilitate identity-based worker education and leadership training. Drawing on insights from the Social Identity Approach to Learning and the New Psychology of Leadership this cross-sectional study ($N = 300$) explored if this shared social identity significantly predicted participants perceived identity-leadership ability. We further explored if this relationship was partially explained by SEWA norms, values, and beliefs, developed during learning, and measured as “awareness of gendered inequality”, “injustice consciousness”, and “collective efficacy”. A parallel mediation analysis found a direct relationship between “self-employed women identity” and “identity-leader ability” and indirect relationships through “awareness of gendered inequality” and “collective efficacy”. No indirect path was evident through “injustice

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consciousness". The theoretical and practical implications of an identity-based approach to worker education and leader training among vulnerable workers, are discussed.

KEYWORDS

active learning, identity-based leadership, informal workers, social identity approach, worker education

Informal and unregulated work is the norm rather than the exception in emerging economies. In India, where this study was conducted, informal work provides 91% of the employment opportunities for millions of workers and nine out of 10 women work in this vast informal economy (Bhatt, 1989; Hill, 2010). These women work as daily labours on building sites and in fields, as small producers, in textiles, as artisans, as outworkers in their own homes and as vendors in the streets and markets. Due to their intersecting identities as women and informal workers, these women experience intertwined injustices (Boeri, 2018; Fraser, 1995). Cultural and symbolic injustices stem from constraints imposed by deeply entrenched, and dominant, patriarchy in Indian society (Hill, 2010). Similarly, socio-economic injustices stem from lack of protection from employment contracts and labour laws. As a result, these women are vulnerable to low wages, exploitation, insecurity, and extreme social, political, and economic marginalisation (Hill, 2001, 2010).

Since the 1970's the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), an all-women trade union based in the Indian city of Ahmedabad in the North-Western state of Gujarat, has brought large groups of female informal workers together to seek common solutions to their problems. As a first step, SEWA encourage their members to self-define as "self-employed women" as a platform from which to organise, and to improve recognition, respect, and socio-economic security (Bhatt, 1989; Hill, 2010). SEWA's education wing, the Indian Academy of Self-Employed Women (SEWA Academy), provide worker education to develop awareness, consciousness, collective efficacy, and to train a new cadre of leaders to serve the organisation at the community level. As a grassroots movement SEWA has a shared philosophy, vision, and strategy that leadership cannot be imposed from above, it must grow from below and be dynamic, organic, and unified (Bhatt, 1989).

In this study, we draw on the Social Identity Approach (SIA; Tajfel, 1972; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987) to explore the collective foundations of learning through SEWA education, and leader development in SEWA leader training, among SEWA members. The Social Identity Approach to Learning (Mavor, Platow, & Bizumic, 2017) points out that learners are rarely isolated individuals. They are more commonly "students", "psychology majors" or in this case "self-employed women". The approach suggests that learning is a reflexive process of active growth as these relevant social identities change. They are actively constructed, considered, and developed with norms, values, and beliefs of the group. A recent development within the SIA literature the New Psychology of Leadership (NPoL; Haslam, Reicher, & Platow, 2020), argues that effective leadership is an active identity management process derived from a social identity shared with followers. So here in partnership with the SEWA Academy, we examine SIA predictions in a cross-sectional study with SEWA members who have participated in SEWA identity-based worker education and leader training.

This applied study asks if, among female informal workers who are vulnerable to intertwined socio-economic, cultural, and symbolic injustices, a shared social identity as self-employed women, is associated with perceived identity-leader ability? If so, are these processes mediated by knowledge developed during reflexive learning measured by awareness of gendered inequality, injustice consciousness, and collective efficacy? The study makes an important, and novel, contribution to the NPoL, and SIA literature more generally. To date no studies have investigated the role of shared social identity and worker education in the development of perceived identity-leader ability. Importantly, the study is conducted in a non-Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD)

context, which represents a much-needed break in the social sciences (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010; Philip, Bang, & Jackson, 2018).

1 | THE IMPORTANCE OF IDENTITY PROCESSES FOR LEARNING

Research in the Social Identity Approach began in the late 1960's with related theories, Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1972), and later Self-Categorisation Theory (Turner et al., 1987). A core principle of the approach is that people's sense of self is informed by their internalised group memberships. When individuals embrace a new group membership (in this case, self-employed women), they view themselves and others in terms of this common category. This allows them to act together with a shared sense of purpose (Drury & Reicher, 2005, 2009) and in this way, shared social identities can be a source of power (Reicher, 2011).

To begin, social identity facilitates the development of a psychological connection with the group. The stronger this sense of identification the more group members are inclined to adopt the norms, values, and beliefs of the group (Turner et al., 1987). When this happens group members expect to agree on issues relevant to the group and interact in a way that enhances consensus (Haslam & Reicher, 2012). A shared social identity can also purvey an intimate bond that allows trust, support, influence, and respect to flow between group members, which stimulates a common understanding of group goals and co-ordinated action (Drury & Reicher, 2005, 2009; Levine, Prosser, Evans, & Reicher, 2005). It makes sense then that these influential social identity-processes have been shown to be important in successful learning.

Evidence that learning is predicted by a relevant social identity has been demonstrated in formal education contexts (Mavor et al., 2017), among primary school pupils (Reynolds, Lee, Turner, Bromhead, & Subasic, 2017), and among university students (Bliuc, Goodyear, & Ellis, 2017; Smyth, Mavor, Platow, & Grace, 2017). Yet little is known about the role of social identity in informal education where the pedagogy and approach to learning is quite different. In "worker education" programmes the learning is informal, democratic, and participatory, and learner-centred activities stimulate critical reflection, interaction, and debate (Cooper, 2020; Heidemann, 2019). In worker education mutual sharing about participants' everyday struggles is encouraged (Foley, 1999). In this way, participants study their own experiences of injustice, which encourages critical awareness about the systematic causes of these injustices, and participant's culture, experiences, and perspectives are valued as important ingredients in the production of alternative knowledge (Choudry, 2015; Cooper, 2020).

SEWA Academy worker education is identity-based. This is because SEWA norms, values, and beliefs inform, and are informed by, the alternative knowledge developed during learning. In this study we measure collective efficacy, awareness of gender inequality, and injustice consciousness as outcomes of SEWA education. Collective efficacy is a key, defining feature of SEWA identity, and is encouraged through the understanding that by working together as SEWA members, their efforts to tackle common problems will be more effective (Bhatt, 1989; Hill, 2001, 2010). Equally important, SEWA education focuses on building awareness of the structural nature of gendered inequalities that stem from deeply entrenched patriarchy in Indian society (Boeri, 2018; Hill, 2010). Similarly, injustice consciousness is developed in response to the unfairness of symbolic, cultural, and socio-economic inequality that half of the population, that is, women, experience in their lives (Bhatt, 1989; Boeri, 2018). Once this foundational knowledge is established, SEWA Academy provides identity-based leader training with the intention of empowering members to enact SEWA identity within and on behalf of their communities.

2 | THE IMPORTANCE OF IDENTITY PROCESSES FOR LEADER ABILITY

SEWA Academy leader training has several aims. The first is to develop confidence and capacity among SEWA members through the knowledge that SEWA are behind them. This collective support aims to encourage members to speak, act, and negotiate for themselves within their families, communities, and work-relationships. A broader aim is

to develop leaders who can unify self-employed women, and the self-employed men in their communities, and represent and advocate for them in the wider public sphere. SEWA argue that the inclusion of men in the vision of their leadership training, reduces men's suspicion and mistrust, and allows the women autonomy and freedom. SEWA's intention then, is to empower SEWA members to lead at the community level, with the ability and knowledge to articulate, shape, and inspire the goals of their communities (Boeri, 2018; Hill, 2010). In essence, these communities can be understood as opinion-based groups with SEWA influenced shared opinions about themselves as self-employed workers (Bliuc, McGarty, Reynolds, & Muntele, 2007).

SEWA leader training is grounded in the labour movement's ethos that the relationship between leaders and followers is a symbiotic one, where followership is integral to leadership and vice versa (Tinuoye, Adamade, & Ogharanduku, 2022). To explain this, we draw on the New Psychology of Leadership (NPoL: Haslam et al., 2020; Platow, Haslam, Reicher, & Steffens, 2015; Steffens et al., 2014) which understands leadership as an active identity-management process between leaders and followers who are bound together within a specific group. The NPoL is built on the premise that effective leadership is power through others rather than power over them (Turner, 2005). Importantly, although leadership is aided by confidence, leader ability is not a property (such as, charisma or intelligence) within individual leaders, instead it is a process of influence (Haslam & Reicher, 2016; Haslam, Steffens, Reicher, & Bentley, 2021).

This study focuses on participants perceived identity-leader ability, which is novel to the NPoL literature (Haslam et al., 2020). We propose that SEWA leader training facilitates active identity work, allowing participants to expand their "self-employed women" identity to include "community leader" (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016). Such identity work is essential for participants to see and define themselves as leaders, and it enables "community leader" to become a salient component of participants self-concept (Epitropaki, Kark, Mainemelis, & Lord, 2017). Importantly, a recent review of leadership and leader development research, provides evidence that self-reported ability, including self-awareness, and self-understanding, are fundamental components of the actual ability to lead effectively (Day et al., 2014). In this way, self-perceived leader ability becomes the capacity and confidence to push for change from the grassroots, to carry and progress SEWA forward into the future.

Above and beyond a self-definition as community leader, the NPoL argues that leader effectiveness is a recursive process that centres on leaders' ability to think and perform at a collective level. Effectiveness rests on four dimensions, leaders' ability to represent, advance, create and embed a shared sense of social identity in the lives of group members (Haslam et al., 2020; Steffens et al., 2014). As a feminist organisation, a fundamental goal of SEWA education is to create a common understanding of the systematic causes of self-employed women's disadvantage (Bhatt, 1989; Hill, 2001, 2010). These include knowledge that patriarchy is perpetuated by everyone and to achieve progress sexist thought and action must be replaced with thought and action that challenges sexism (Hooks, 1984). It is possible however, that in Indian society where patriarchy is deeply entrenched, or in terms proposed by Social Identity Theory, understood as stable and legitimate (Tajfel, 1972), the injustice consciousness developed in SEWA education, may undermine participants perceived ability to unify their communities. So, while the target group of SEWA leader training is inclusive and transfers benefits to men as well as women, this inclusivity may also have costs for the women. Put simply, it may be more difficult to unify inclusive communities around the belief that inequality between men and women is unjust or unfair.

This point is important because identities are dynamic and flexible, and to be effective, leaders must construct, manipulate, and perform who "we are" and what "we believe in", for unifying purposes (Haslam, Reicher, & Van Bavel, 2019; Reicher & Haslam, 2006). So, while all four dimensions of identity leadership; representing, creating unity, identifying goals, and organising actions, are important for effective leadership (Haslam et al., 2019; Steffens et al., 2014), we suspect that SEWA education will be particularly potent for participants perceived ability to be entrepreneurs of identity. As such, the alternative knowledge developed in worker education, may be a powerful way to instil confidence in participants to articulate the content of the identity. To do this, they must strike a balance and perform as prototypical, exemplary, self-employed community members, to create a sense of unity.

Much of the support for this dimension of identity-based leadership has been developed through observations of political leaders' ability to construct a particular definition of a national community that unifies followers. For instance, Nelson Mandela, Theodore Roosevelt, and Adolf Hitler were all expert entrepreneurs of identity who unified millions of people around a definition of "who they were", and "what they believed in" (Haslam & Reicher, 2016). On the other hand, Haslam et al. (2021), offer an analysis of political leader's success, but also failure, to unify and mobilise populations during the COVID-19 crisis. Failure to unify often rested in leaders' inability to get the public onside, by imposing measures that alienated and created opponents, rather than allies (Haslam et al., 2021).

3 | THE PRESENT STUDY

In partnership with the SEWA Academy, this study explores the social psychological foundations of worker empowerment and leader ability among women who are vulnerable to intersecting cultural and socio-economic injustices of India's informal economy (Bhatt, 1989; Hill, 2001, 2010). An important question is whether an identity-based approach to worker education and agency, is linked to perceived identity-leader ability. The New Psychology of Leadership (Haslam et al., 2020) argues that leadership stems from identity content and process. The aim of SEWA identity-based worker education and leader training is to develop a common organisational consciousness by crafting group values, norms, and beliefs among members and potential community leaders. Here we explore if shared social identity as self-employed women is a predictor of perceived identity-leader ability and if so, if this relationship is explained by knowledge developed in worker education. Specifically, we hypothesise that; self-employed women identity is associated with identity-leader ability and that this relationship is mediated by awareness of gendered inequality, injustice consciousness, and collective efficacy.

4 | METHOD

4.1 | Research context

This research is part of a larger international, interdisciplinary and inter-sectoral project that included a 6 month placement for the first author with the Indian Academy of Self-Employed Women in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India. Due to the COVID19 pandemic, the placement was cut to 2 months, February and March 2020.

SEWA Academy worker educators use various games and active, participatory learning methods to help trainees understand topics in detail. The aim is to build skills and confidence, awareness, and leadership capacity among the women to represent SEWA and their communities. During SEWA leadership training learners explore the SEWA institution, norms, values and structure, the financial and cultural status of female workers in the informal economy, life events of Gandhi (an exemplary leader), and the qualities and responsibilities of a leader.

4.2 | Participants

The participants were 300 female SEWA members who had participated in SEWA worker education and leader training within the previous 5 years. Their ages ranged from 18 to 75 years (*Mean* = 40.02, *standard deviation* = 13.28). Thirty three women (11%) had no education and were illiterate, 41 (13.6%) had lower primary (age 6-10 years), 38 (12.6%) had upper primary (11-12 years), 118 (39.3%) had high school (13-15 years), and 44 (14.6%) had higher secondary (17-18 years), 20 (6.6%) had an undergraduate degree, and 6 (2%) had post graduate education. Forty

eight women (16%) were single, 235 (78.3%) were married, and 17 (5.7%) were widowed, 231 (77%) had children. Annual income ranged from 5,000 to 3,500,000 Indian Rupees or €57.00–€40,423.00 (*Mean* = 163,117, *SD* = 273,182 Indian Rupees or €1,883.00, *SD* = €3,162.44).

4.3 | Engaged approach

The majority of our sample can be characterised as hard to reach because SEWA members are largely women who are marginalised by caste, poverty, and low levels of education. They experience symbolic and cultural and social-economic injustices in India's informal economy (Ellard-Gray, Jeffrey, Choubak, & Crann, 2015; Hill, 2010). These women however are not passive victims and are actively involved in changing their circumstances through SEWA membership, worker education, and leader training. We took a participatory-engaged approach to the research and partnered with SEWA Academy to develop the questionnaire, for translation, and data collection. The participants were aware that their participation could validate SEWA Academy worker education for other SEWA members and contribute to future funding applications, which was potentially empowering (Kessi & Boonzaier, 2017).

4.4 | Procedure

The questionnaire was developed in English then translated by an Indian colleague into Gujarati. The Gujarati version was back translated into English by another Indian colleague then passed back to the first author and checked against the original English version. The necessary adjustments were made to the Gujarati version. The participant sample was drawn from SEWA Academy records of women who had completed worker education courses and leader training in the past 5 years. A refresher training workshop was given for a team of SEWA grassroots researchers who used the KoboCollect application on their smart phones to collect the data. Responses were collected either by phone call or in person, in the field between December 2020 and April 2021. The questionnaire data were then transferred into an English SPSS file and shared with the first author.

4.5 | Ethical issues

On top of the language issues, the ethical issues inherent in this study were in relation to the pressure to participate among vulnerable, hard to reach participants. The training workshop among SEWA grassroots researchers included an in-depth discussion of power imbalances between researchers and participants. Researchers assured potential participants that they were under no obligation to participate, and that their SEWA membership and access to SEWA Academy education, in no way depended on their participation. Grassroots researchers and participants were all female and participants were assured that their contribution would be anonymous. Where there were literacy issues the researcher read the questionnaire to the participant. All COVID19 regulations to mitigate the spread of the virus, including masks and social distancing, were adhered to during data collection.

4.6 | Measures

All responses were collected on a seven point response format ranging from 1 to 7 (1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *slightly disagree*, 4 = *undecided*, 5 = *slightly agree*, 6 = *agree*, 7 = *strongly agree*).

4.7 | Predictor variable

Self-employed women identity was measured with four items adapted from Leach et al. (2008) measure of in-group identification. Examples items include “Being a self-employed woman is an important part of my identity” and “I feel connected to other self-employed women”. Mean scores created a total score with higher scores indicating higher levels of identity. The alpha was $\alpha = 0.88$.

4.8 | Mediator variables

Awareness of gendered inequality was measured with three items that were developed for this study in consultation with the SEWA Academy. “The way society is organised makes it difficult for women to be successful in work”, “The way society is organised makes it difficult for women to gain financial security” and “The way society is organised makes it difficult for women to earn decent wages”. Mean scores created a total score with higher scores indicating higher levels of awareness of gendered inequality. The alpha was $\alpha = 0.86$.

Injustice consciousness was measured with four items that were developed for this study in consultation with the SEWA Academy. “It is an injustice that women work longer hours than men do, because they do the domestic work”, “It is an injustice that women receive lower wages than men do, for the same work”, “It is an injustice that girls often receive less education than boys do” and “It is an injustice that women own less property than men do”. Mean scores created a total score with higher scores indicating higher levels of injustice consciousness. The alpha was $\alpha = 0.75$.

Collective efficacy was measured with five items adapted from Reicher and Haslam (2006) BBC prison study. Items included “As SEWA workers, we can get better payment for our work” and “As SEWA workers, we will gain more respect in society”. Mean scores created the total score and higher scores indicate higher efficacy. The alpha was $\alpha = 0.85$.

4.9 | Criterion variable

Identity-leader ability was measured with four items adapted from Steffens et al. (2014) Identity Leadership Inventory (ILI). This measure has been adapted previously by Haslam et al. (2017) to assess leadership ability in their longitudinal 5R leadership development program. Each item represents one dimension of a four-dimensional model including; representing “I can represent my community”, advancing “I can promote the interests of my community”, creating “I can create a sense of unity among people in my community” and embedding “I can organise activities that bring my community together”. Mean scores create the total score with higher scores indicating higher identity-leader ability. The alpha was $\alpha = 0.84$.

4.10 | Analytic strategy

As a first step the relationships between variables were explored via simple correlations. Then, using the PROCESS mediation tool (Hayes, 2013), we examined our hypothesis. In a parallel mediation model, we explored whether there was a relationship between self-employed women identity and increased identity-leader ability and if this relationship was mediated by increased awareness of gendered inequality, injustice consciousness and increased collective efficacy (see below).

5 | RESULTS

Preliminary analysis investigated relationships between variables. Correlations and descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1. Inspection of the means show on average participants scores were high, as self-employed women ($M = 6.04$), awareness of gendered inequality ($M = 5.62$), injustice consciousness ($M = 5.85$), collective efficacy ($M = 5.88$) and identity-leader ability ($M = 5.98$). There were significant positive correlations between self-employed women identity and: awareness of gendered inequality $r(300) = 0.43, p < .001$, injustice consciousness $r(300) = 0.32, p < .001$, collective efficacy $r(300) = 0.68, p < .001$, and identity-leader ability $r(300) = 0.64, p < .001$. In addition, there were significant positive correlations between gendered inequality and: injustice consciousness $r(300) = 0.44, p < .001$, collective efficacy $r(300) = 0.40, p < .001$, and identity-leader ability $r(300) = 0.49, p < .001$. There were significant positive correlations between gendered injustice and: collective efficacy $r(300) = 0.23, p < .001$, and identity-leader ability $r(300) = 0.31, p < .001$. There were also significant positive correlations between collective efficacy and identity leader ability $r(300) = 0.72, p < .001$.

Parallel Mediation Model: Self-employed women identity, gendered inequality, injustice consciousness, collective efficacy, and perceived identity-leader ability.

Next, we tested our hypothesis that self-employed women identity would predict increased identity-leader ability and this relationship would, in part, be explained by awareness of gendered inequality, injustice consciousness, and collective efficacy. To test these direct and indirect relationships, we conducted a parallel mediation analysis using Hayes's (2013, Model 4) PROCESS macro. The total effect was significant $c = 0.39, SE = 0.06, 95\% CI[0.28, 0.52]$, and the variance explained by the model as a whole was $77.1\%, F(4, 295) = 107.97, p < .001$.

As anticipated, self-employed women identity significantly predicted higher levels of: awareness of gendered inequality $a^1 = 0.56, SE = 0.07, t(300) = 8.15, p < .001, 95\% CI[0.42, 0.69]$, injustice consciousness $a^2 = 0.35, SE = 0.06, t(300) = 5.86, p < .001, 95\% CI[0.23, 0.47]$, and collective efficacy $a^3 = 0.11, SE = 0.04, t(300) = 2.95, p < .01, 95\% CI[0.04, 0.18]$.

Consistent with our hypothesis, awareness of gendered inequality $b^1 = 0.13, SE = 0.03, t(300) = 4.09, p < .001, 95\% CI[0.65, 0.19]$ and collective efficacy $b^3 = 0.44, SE = 0.05, t(300) = 9.56, p < .001, 95\% CI[0.35, 0.53]$ were positive significant predictors of higher levels of identity-leader ability. Injustice consciousness however was not a significant predictor of identity-leader ability $b^2 = 0.04, SE = 0.03, t(300) = 1.21, p = .23$.

We found significant indirect relationships of increased self-employed women identity on increased identity-leader ability: through increased awareness of gendered inequality $c^1 = 0.07, SE = 0.03, 95\% CI[0.03, 0.13]$ and through increased collective efficacy $c^3 = 0.31, SE = 0.05, 95\% CI[0.21, 0.43]$ but the indirect path through injustice consciousness was not significant $c^2 = 0.01, SE = 0.01, 95\% CI[-0.01, 0.04]$. The direct relationship between self-

TABLE 1 Zero order correlations between self-employed women identity, awareness of gendered inequality, injustice consciousness, collective efficacy and identity-leadership ability

	Mean	SD	SEW identity	Gendered inequality	Injustice consciousness	Collective efficacy	Leader ability
SEW identity	6.04	0.89	—	0.43**	0.32**	0.69**	0.64**
Gendered inequality	5.62	1.16		—	0.44**	0.40**	0.49**
Injustice consciousness	5.85	0.98			—	0.23**	0.31**
Collective efficacy	5.88	0.91				—	0.72**
Leader ability	5.98	0.81					—

Note: $p < .001$ **.

employed women identity and identity-leader ability was significant, $c' = 0.19$, $SE = 0.05$, $t(300) = 3.89$, $p < .001$, 95% CI[0.09, 0.28] (Figure 1). A contrast analysis of the indirect paths found that there was no significant difference between the indirect paths through awareness of gendered inequality and injustice consciousness. However, the indirect path from self-employed women identity through increased collective efficacy to identity leader ability was significantly stronger than that through awareness of gender inequality $B = 0.24$, $SE = 0.06$, 95% CI[-0.36, -0.13] and injustice consciousness $B = 0.29$, $SE = 0.06$, 95% CI[-0.42, -0.19]. Post-hoc estimated power for detecting these indirect relationships with three mediators (Schoemann, Boulton, & Short, 2017) was $(1 - \beta) = 0.96$ (1,000 replications with 20,000 Monte-Carlo draws), assuming a type-I error of $\alpha = .05$ (two-tailed).

Taken together these results show that identifying as self-employed women was a solid platform for SEWA Academy worker education to build new mobilising knowledge. Thus, self-employed women identity was a predictor of participant's awareness of gendered inequality, injustice consciousness, collective efficacy, and identity-leader ability. In turn, self-employed women identity also predicted identity-leader ability through awareness of gendered inequality and through collective efficacy. In contrast, however, there was no indirect path from self-employed women identity to identity-leader ability through participant's injustice consciousness.

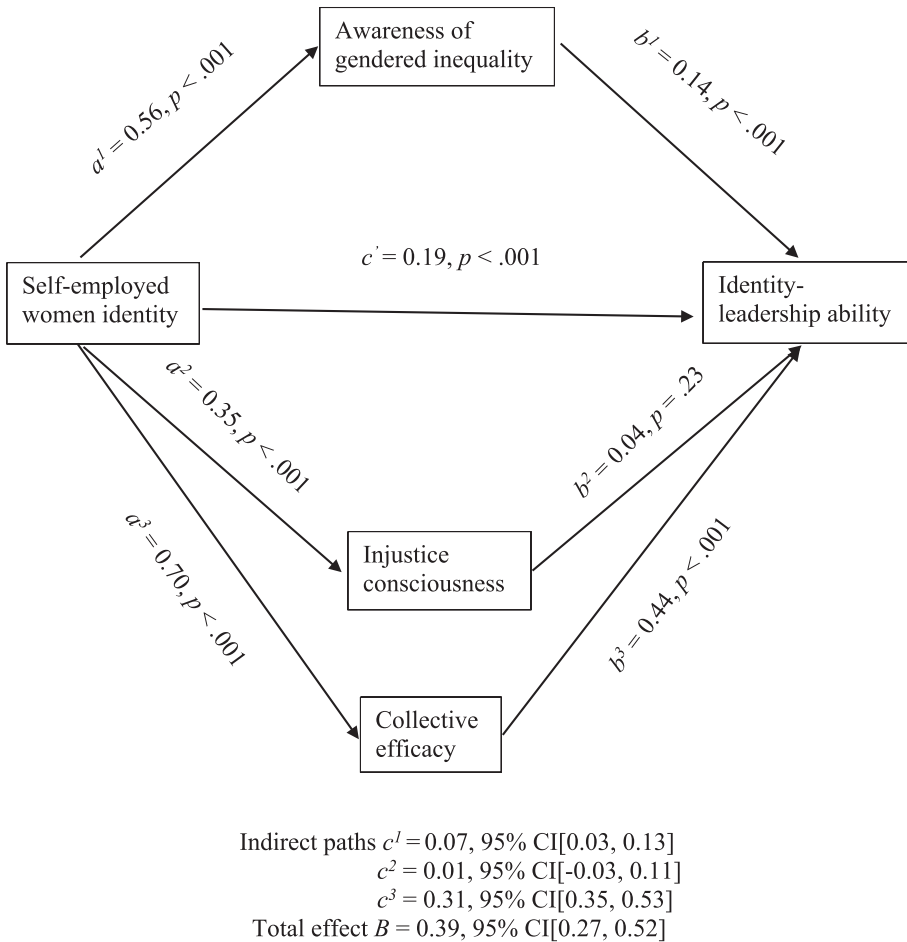


FIGURE 1 Conceptual representation of parallel mediation model. An outline of the relationship between self-employed women identity and identity-leadership ability mediated by awareness of gendered inequality, injustice consciousness and collective efficacy

6 | DISCUSSION

The aim of SEWA identity-based worker education and leader training is to develop a common organisational consciousness and potential community leaders by crafting group values, norms, and beliefs among SEWA members. The aim of this research was to examine whether a shared social identity among SEWA members, who are vulnerable to intertwined socio-economic, cultural, and symbolic injustices in India's vast informal economy, could empower them through worker education and identity-based leader training. We found that a shared social identity as self-employed women was associated with learning measured by awareness of gender inequality and collective efficacy, and this was related to perceived identity-leader ability. This research was conducted among a hard-to-reach sample of female informal economy workers who experience social, political and economic marginalisation in rural and urban India (Hill, 2001, 2010). While the literature exploring the New Psychology of Leadership as an identity-management process is in its infancy (Haslam et al., 2020), this is the first study to demonstrate how a member-based grassroots trade-union of women workers in India, is using worker education and identity-leader ability to build capacity.

The current study makes an important contribution to knowledge, lending support to both the Social Identity Approach to Learning (Mavor et al., 2017) and the New Psychology of Leadership (Haslam et al., 2020; Platow et al., 2015; Steffens et al., 2014). We offer novel theoretical, applied, and practical insights. Consistent with the idea that shared social identity is an important antecedent to learning (Bliuc et al., 2017; Smyth et al., 2017) in this study a shared social identity as self-employed women, appears to facilitate awareness of gendered inequality and a sense of collective efficacy, developed through peer-to-peer and active learning in informal worker education. This identity-based learning ultimately connected to participant's increased perceived ability to lead their communities effectively.

Drawing on conceptual insights from the Social Identity Approach to Learning (Mavor et al., 2017), this study extends previous work by examining if the connection, influence, and bonds that are afforded to people through a shared sense of social identity with a valued group, was empowering for a devalued, vulnerable, exploited group in an emerging economy. We provide evidence of these associations. Specifically, participants intersecting female and informal economy worker identities result in their vulnerability to cultural, symbolic, and socio-economic injustices (Bhatt, 1989; Fraser, 1995; Hill, 2010). This study found that identification as a self-employed woman was linked to awareness of gender inequality, injustice consciousness, and collective efficacy as SEWA members. In this case, embracing a shared and valued social identity had positive effects on these workers development of critical awareness about the structural causes of the injustices in their work and lives and a powerful sense that together they can tackle them (Choudry, 2015; Cooper, 2020).

Novel to the New Psychology of Leadership (Haslam et al., 2020), this study found that identity processes (identification with a valued and respected group) and identity content (awareness of gendered inequality and collective efficacy, developed during worker education), predicted perceived ability to effectively lead their communities. However, it is important to note that participant's injustice consciousness did not predict their perceived identity-leader ability. It is possible that learning about, and focussing on, the structural injustice of gendered inequality was disempowering because patriarchy and cultural constraints remain deeply entrenched and difficult to challenge in Indian society (Boeri, 2018; Hill, 2010). According to Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1972) this type of entrenched unfairness may be understood as stable and legitimate with group boundaries that are impermeable. As a result, we suspect that although the community level target of SEWA leadership training clearly has benefits for self-employed women's autonomy and freedom. It also has costs, the reduced ability to instil injustice consciousness in the definition of who they are at the community level. Importantly, injustice consciousness is present among our participants as demonstrated by a high mean score (5.85 on a 7-point scale). It is plausible however, that including injustice consciousness in their attempts to lead would alienate, rather than unify.

Collective efficacy was the strongest predictor of participants responses to four dimensions of the ILI (Steffens et al., 2014), the ability to represent, advance, create and embed a common sense of community as an identity-management strategy. As a grassroots movement SEWA has a shared philosophy, vision, and strategy to grow

leadership from below that is dynamic, organic, and unified (Bhatt, 1989). This study lends support to the SEWA Academy identity-based approach to leader development, to take the organisation forward. We show that identity-based leader ability requires a balanced approach towards the content of the community identity that SEWA target. While injustice consciousness was not a norm that self-employed women and men could coalesce around, collective efficacy, and, to a lesser extent, awareness of gendered inequality, were. In this way, these findings offer important contributions to identity-leadership theorising and principles.

The practical implications of this research are important because informal work is increasingly the rule rather than the exception in emerging economies, and there is a need for evidence-based approaches to worker agency, education, and leader development. Informal workers are unprotected by regulations, contracts, and laws and are isolated and vulnerable to injustice, exploitation, and marginalisation (Bhatt, 1989; Hill, 2010). One of the aims of SEWA and their sister SEWA Academy, is to empower workers who are vulnerable. The current results suggest that encouraging the workers to take-up the shared and meaningful social category has the transformative potential to promote learning and is a platform from which to organise and lead. This evidence is a theoretical advance and offers practical guidelines for the labour movement, in their desire to revitalise worker education for the millions of workers who face increasing precarious and insecure work (Choudry, 2015; Cooper, 2020).

6.1 | Limitations

The cross-sectional design and nature of the data undermines our ability to say with certainty that the alternative knowledge that we present as mediators, was gained in SEWA Academy education. Similarly, the cross-sectional sample undermines our ability to make claims about the causal order of the mediation model. Also, although evidence of underlying pathways was found, these design issues impede any conclusive causal interpretation. Though the current findings are in line with the predicted directionality guided by previous theoretical and empirical evidence (Haslam et al., 2020; Mavor et al., 2017), further studies incorporating longitudinal designs with comparison groups are recommended to make more concrete claims and determine and support causality. Although there are obvious problems with a mediation analysis that implies a causal order in a cross-sectional sample, continuous predictor variables are acceptable to include in mediation analyses when the proposed model and indirect effect(s) are informed by theory, as was the case for this research (Hayes, 2013). Beyond statistics, the theoretical framework and plausibility of our model is central. As a result, while acknowledging this limitation of our research, we believe that our applied study provides valuable insights and an appropriate basis to build on identity-education and leader research.

6.2 | Conclusion

In conclusion, valued and respected shared social identities have the ability to facilitate social psychological bonds that underpin agency, learning and leadership (Drury & Reicher, 2005, 2009; Haslam & Reicher, 2012). Indian, female, informal-economy, workers are vulnerable to intersecting cultural, symbolic, and social economic injustices as well as social and political marginalisation (Hill, 2001, 2010). This study offers promising evidence that identifying with a new and valued social identity as self-employed women, allowed these workers to gain agency from identity-based worker education and leader training. Although injustice consciousness was not a precursor to perceived identity-leader ability, awareness of gender inequality and collective efficacy as SEWA workers was. This identity-based knowledge may be particularly powerful for participants to perform as prototypical community members and create a sense of unity, with confidence, in their communities. This knowledge can then be channelled into effective leadership that hinges on the capacity to mobilise the energies of their communities in the form of followership (Haslam & Reicher, 2016). These findings add to the accumulating research that shows the transformative power of belonging to valued groups and offers theoretical support to the Social Identity Approach to Learning and the New

Psychology of Leadership. The evidence that identity-based worker education among informal workers can build capacity through gendered awareness and collective efficacy and grow leader ability from below, is timely and needed.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in Open Science Framework at <https://osf.io/hwb6u/>.

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