

Ela Bhatt, founder of [SEWA](#) and a founding member of Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing ([WIEGO](#)), was [awarded an honorary degree](#) at Walsh School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University (May 2012). This document is a transcript of her commencement address.

President DeGioia, Dean Lancaster, Faculty, Students, and Parents,

Thank you for inviting me today. Standing before such bright, young minds, is both heartwarming and reassuring. The world is about to receive an infusion of new energy, and new visions for a better world. I wish each and every one of you the very best in life.

Today, as you get ready to leave the academic world, and enter the world of work, you are well prepared. You have read a lot, you have learned a lot, and I am sure you are impatient to put ideas and theories into practice. If that is true, your university has done its duty. Let me tell you my hope from you. I hope you are leaving Georgetown a little bit unsure of yourself. I hope you are leaving with more questions than answers.

Our lives are shaped by the questions we ask of it. Questions open doors, and they lead us into unknown territory. The answers come, by and by, over the course of our lives, sometimes as simple truths, at other times as a host of partial truths. And if you listen carefully, you will realize that there are no

single answers to any question. Truth takes many forms, and some truths are just questions.

In the early 1970s, when I began working with poor, self-employed women in India, I began to question the definition of work. Here were women who worked from dawn till dark, selling vegetables, rolling cigarettes, sewing garments, making baskets, growing crops, tending cattle--doing hard, back-breaking work, earning money and supporting their families, but in the eyes of the law they were not workers. They were dismissed as non-workers. Why? Because they had no employer. Without an employer-employee relationship, the women were legally not workers, and therefore invisible and ineligible for legal or social protection.

So we organized, and we called ourselves the Self-Employed Women's Association, SEWA, an acronym that happily means to serve. But when we went to register SEWA as a trade union, the government would not register us. Why? Because we were not fighting *against* anyone. We had no adversary. The word union means coming together. So we were not uniting *against* anything or anyone; we were uniting *for* each other! It is by questioning the narrow perceptions of society, the government and the law

that we set in motion a movement of poor self-employed women that is today 1.3 million women strong, and growing.

You will run into many such absurdities in life. Two women from Ghana said to me, We are farmers, but what we produce, we do not eat, and what we eat, we do not produce. The women grow cash crops for export, but what they eat is canned food grown on another continent. In so many countries, farmers who till the land and feed the world, go hungry themselves. World food consumption is rising, but farming is no longer a viable occupation. Countries that have the most abundant natural resources are among the poorest. So I say, keep questioning.

You will notice that where there is poverty, there is injustice. There is exploitation of the individual, of the community and of the environment. Where there is poverty, there is discrimination. Where there is poverty, there is fear and intimidation in the community, in the family, in the work environment. Where there is poverty, we can assume rigid hierarchy and inequality. Where there is poverty, there is enormous vulnerability. To me, poverty is a form of violence perpetuated with the consent of society.

So is poverty just a matter of money? Can poverty be eradicated with money? Not without empowerment. Not without restoring balance. Not without looking after the well-being of people and their environment. Development is not about charity. It is not a project; it is not about building institutions. It is not even about economics. It is about restoring balance.

But today, our world is in a state of great imbalance. Armed with technology and capital, we rush to modernize our world. But we need to pause and think of what we are doing in the name of progress. Urbanization is not development. If it creates imbalances in society, then technology is not a solution. If we make profit the only measure of success, we will turn a blind eye to the exploitation of people and of nature. But if our goal is to build a society where everyone's basic needs for food, clothing and housing are fully met, and where the full potential of every human being is realized, we will need a radically different approach. We will need to get in partnership with our conscience; we will need to get in partnership with fellow human beings, and we will need a long-term partnership with Mother Nature. For that we need an integrated approach. We need to think in correlation.

You are all familiar with the word *karma*. It is generally understood as fate or destiny. In Sanskrit, karma means action. As you head towards the world of work, taking a position in government, in a corporation, in a non-profit institution, or at the UN or World Bank, I hope you will pause and consider the impact of your work, which is action, on life today, but also on future lives.

When I need answers, I ask myself three questions: What impact will my action have on me? What impact will my action have on the people around me and on the global community? And lastly, what impact will my action have on Mother Nature? My action has an impact on your life even thousands of miles away, and your good deeds have an impact on mine. We are bound by mutual responsibility.

As graduates of the Walsh School of Foreign Service, when you venture into this world of imbalances, I hope you will bring a sense of balance, of harmony, of fairness, of justice, and a strong spirit of sharing, to your corner

of the world. I hope you will see your mission as service; service to the common good, service to the weak and the voiceless. Thank you.

- Ela R. Bhatt
May 19, 2012