

**Women's Voices in the Informal Economy:  
A Consultation of the United Nations Secretary General's  
High-Level Panel (UN HLP) on Women's Economic Empowerment (WEE)  
Ahmedabad, India: August 4 and 5, 2016**

**Closing Remarks, Ela Bhatt**

Chair Rebecca Tavares, Deputy High Commissioner to India, British High Commission,  
Distinguished Panelists,

Thank you for the opportunity to be among you, and to share some of my views from my SEWA experience. Thank you, Renaben, for bringing your colleagues on the Panel. Renaben's main role in SEWA is to make us think, think clearly, effectively.

Welcome to SEWA.

I grew up in those years when India was fighting for freedom and becoming an independent nation. As young people, we had pledged to rebuild the nation, to reconstruct our lives so that every Indian is able to enjoy **freedom**. Mahatma Gandhi had shown us the way. He would think of individual cleanliness on the same level as political freedom. To him, cleanliness in lavatories and the village ponds, was as vital as spiritual salvation. We had learnt to see the economy from the perspective of the masses. His thoughts have been the source of guidance for me and for SEWA. Specifically, he influenced the way we value four principles in our work.

One is simplicity because we recognized that adding complexity is not progress. The second is non-violence. Violence fundamentally is inconsistent with freedom. The third is dignity of labour, sanctity of labour. Labour is the law of nature, and its violation is the central cause of the present economic muddle. And, the fourth is human values- nothing that compromises a person's humanity is acceptable....*On these four cornerstones of simplicity, non-violence, sanctity of labour and human values – we were guided to build India's economy.*

Because the human being is central in the thinking, we in SEWA gradually understood the view of development as *holistic* and *integrated*. By understanding development, we call it constructive work, in all aspects, we co-relate each of our activities with the impact on our own self, on the society and the world and thus become responsible world citizens. Such linkages have been the basis of our SEWA and SEWA movement.

However, closest to my heart is WORK. I would put WORK as central to man's life: '*karma*'. We all work. It is the work, productive work that leads to development and growth. As we have seen while working with poor women, work is central to their lives. Work gives meaning to their lives. Work forges an individual's identity. Work provides livelihoods that produce goods and services, and thus builds a society, a nation. But, poverty breaks down the balance. We see exploitation at every stage: of the individual, of the community and the environment, nature.

In *poverty*, we assume discrimination at every stage either based on class, caste, colour, religion, land ownership, gender, language. Consequently, we have vulnerability of all kinds: economic, social, mental, spiritual. People lose their faith and they cling to misguided faith. Poverty is violence perpetuated with the consent of society. Poverty and loss of freedom are not separate. A country can enjoy freedom only to the degree to which its poorest citizen is able to exercise his or her right. This is the conclusion based on my experience with poor, working women.

However, in the leadership of women, we see the breakthrough.

At SEWA, the women we work with would be the most vulnerable, but for the strength of the collective.

We meet on the basis of work and create networks. We build unions to meet our work needs, to stop economic exploitation by traders, contractors, our governments, the global community and the 'system' and 'structures'. In SEWA, we have come together to build a Bank to meet our financial needs – to save, to borrow, to lend, to build assets, to tap resources, to improve the material quality of life. We have come together to build cooperatives to get integrated into the production process of our country. We build a social security network for our maternity needs, health and life insurance. We have been trying to forge bridges to local and global markets through a trade facilitation network of women farmers and craftswomen across the world. We create schools to build our capacities, to manage our affairs and make an impact in the world outside.

SEWA is not a project. It is not an institution. It is not even about economics or money. It is about restoring balance between the haves and have-nots. It is about self-reliance, individually and collectively, financially and taking decisions individually and collectively. That's the path towards empowerment.

At the global level, let me frankly mention the times of MDG, Millennium Development Goals. Sometimes our biggest quarrels are with our friends. We debate fiercely about what is closest to us, quarrel over what we agree. The goals are the same but the means may vary and the narrative in each case is different.

For example, all the countries of the UN had pledged to fulfill the **Millennium Development Goals** by the year 2010. The world has not fulfilled even half of them. All the eight goals were basically addressing issues of poverty or related to it (Poverty, Hunger, Primary Education, Empowering Women, Child Mortality, Maternal Health, HIV/AIDS, Environmental Sustainability, Global Partnerships.) Sadly, as usual, employment was left out!

My sense of the MDG's has been that they are alien to most communities, not as a vision, but as a way of communicating. The development language doesn't resonate, I think we need a different kind of language for the development goals to be part of the people. It is the language of power that does not address powerlessness. Poverty is a form of powerlessness. It is a symptom of a people who have no control over decision making or access to resources. The powerlessness of poverty is redeemed by participation or consultation only to a limited extent. It is truly redeemed by actual control over life decisions. Once poverty is seen as a form of powerlessness, we see a method by which it can be resolved. Power must return to communities, especially to women, to

let them decide about work, livelihood, health, education, urbanization, refugees, peace and the future. The missing term in such manifesto of nations is *community*. Both economics and the economy must be claimed by the people. Otherwise development and livelihood become parallel and contradictory forms of life.

*My plea to the UN Panel on Women's Economic Power is the following : one, to put poor women in the centre of any economic reform particularly in key basic employment sectors viz food, water, clothing, housing, primary healthcare, education and banking. Two, to recognize 'work' as central to any reform that addresses poverty. Three, invest adequately in those initiatives by the poor that have potential to grow to a viable scale. Four, develop and spread holistic social security cover for all the working poor. We need to realize that economic structure, in each case, is closely connected with the social structure. And, five, build the grassroots self employed women's capacity to enter mainstream markets local and global.*

*My plea is for a gentler economy, also I mean economy of nurturance. Nurturing of one's self, her community and the Universe.*

Who will do it?

In my experience, women are the key to rebuilding a community. Focus on women, and you will find allies who want a stable community. The woman wants roots for her family. In women, you get a worker, a provider, a caretaker, an educator, a networker. She is a forger of bonds—in her, essentially, you have a creator and a preserver. I consider women's participation and representation an integral part of our peace process. Women will bring constructive, creative and sustainable solutions to the table.

Moreover, if women are at the centre, woman's productive work is the thread that weaves a society together. When you have work, you have an incentive to maintain a stable society. You not only think of the future, but you plan for the future. You can build assets that reduce your vulnerability. You can invest in the next generation. Life is no longer just about survival, but about investing in a better future. Work builds peace, because work gives people roots, it builds communities and it gives meaning and dignity to one's life.

Of course as I said before I have put my utmost emphasis on WORK. By work we do not mean factory jobs; we do not mean sweatshops and indecent cheap labour that leaves a person a slave to a manager of industry, and that is yet another kind of exploitation. By work, we mean the production of food and access to water. It means the upgrading of existing and traditional skills that people have possessed for thousands of years--agriculture, animal husbandry, fishing, housing, textiles and clothing. This work feeds people and it restores man's relationship with himself, with fellow human beings, with the earth and the environment and with the Great Spirit that created us all.

The challenge before us today, is to look for business opportunities in uncharted assets. Let us find ways to make tree plantation more profitable than cutting down forests; and make recycling more profitable than new manufacturing, water harvesting more profitable than pumping ground water deeper and deeper. Let us encourage communal ownership of assets in addition to building private

assets. Given a fair chance, the spirit of cooperation is just as likely to lead us to profit as a dose of healthy competition. With change in our thoughts, we will also need to change our vocabulary. To my mind, SEWA Bank is far more successful in its mission if it reaches thousands of small savings and self-help groups as a district level bank than if it were to become a national bank with large assets. I am sure my colleagues agree.

It is economic freedom, which will bring peace. Ceasefire is not peace. National election completed by the country dictator is not peace. Political freedom is incomplete without economic freedom. It is when the people have both, that we will get lasting peaceful stability.

I do see women making a breakthrough. Women's leadership needs to be trusted, nurtured, since that is the only hope, if an inclusive just society and a sustainable environment are to be created.

Women have been so long used as resource, cheaply available, always available. But, NO. The world has to be made to realise that women are an asset. Women are not permanent shock absorbers in good times and bad. Women must feature not as absorbers but as partners.

In the women's way, there are goals but also there are values, the process of unfolding and learning from the process. I have seen this process per se is empowering. The feminine has a different sense of time: the work may take whatever time is needed. SEWA has taken 30 years to reach a million people. Women look at the whole group or community and try to include the whole, waiting for those left behind, even if it means delaying the group or the process. The feminine aims at: inclusion instead of domination, at process more than end-goal, group over individual, integration over fragmentation. These are not the superlatives that I am listing. I say what I have learnt from my continued experience with SEWA sisters.

Why is this relevant today?

The world today needs more feminine leadership, because we face one of the most challenging tasks of transformation of our times. And the feminine is needed not just in the form of more women leaders but also in the form of men honouring the feminine within them.

I am sure, recommendations of your Panel will be very relevant to the times, today. I believe that implementation will not take years to get to the ground. I believe, the distinguished Panelists will put their best in activising your Recommendations from wherever you will be, since you understand the urgency and perhaps hopelessness of the poor today. Your panel report will have sharp and direct focus on all poor women worldwide, and will be on a very large scale. The neo-poor working women are waiting lest they get thrown out of the present economy. We have faith in this panel since you have traveled to Ahmedabad slums and met with, face to face, to SEWA women, urban and rural. We wish you good luck in your very important mission.