



The Right Livelihood Award

for outstanding vision and work on behalf of our planet and its people

Self-Employed Women's Association / Ela Bhatt (India)

(1984)



...for helping home-based producers to organise for their welfare and self-respect.

Ela Bhatt

Ela Bhatt was born in 1933, became a lawyer and then a social worker and in 1968 was the chief of the women's section of the Textile Labour Association in Ahmedabad. In this position she became aware at first hand on the conditions suffered by poor self-employed women in the city and elsewhere in South and Southeast Asia.

These women include weavers, stitchers, cigarette rollers, vendors of fruit, fish and vegetables, firewood and wastepaper pickers and road construction workers. Most are subject to high rents for stalls or the tools of their trade and also to routine exploitation or harassment by money-lenders, employers and officials. In Ahmedabad, 97 per cent of these women lived in slums, 93 per cent were illiterate, most were in debt and had to take with them to work some or all of their children (an average of four each).

It was to address this situation that in 1972 Ela Bhatt set up the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA). Within three years SEWA had 7,000 members and was registered as a trade union with the government - a formidable hurdle to have surmounted. By December 1995, its members numbered 218,700, making it the largest single union in India.

Through their organisation and solidarity, SEWA members have acquired a new negotiating power with their employers. They have established health, death and maternity benefit schemes to give them security. They have set up 71 cooperatives of various trade groups to share skills and expertise, to develop new tools, designs and techniques and to engage in bulk buying and joint marketing. The cooperatives have an average of over 1,000 members each.

Most important, perhaps, SEWA in 1974 established its own bank, which today has 70,000 accounts. This has rescued thousands of women from moneylenders and their personal possessions from pawnbrokers, allowing them to accumulate land, small assets and means of production. Its repayment rate on loans is a very impressive 96 per cent.

Ela Bhatt has also taken the struggle for justice and recognition for self-employed women into the national and international areas. SEWA is affiliated to the International Union of Food and Tobacco Workers and to the International Federation of Plantation, Agricultural and Allied Workers. The Association is also campaigning for a convention on Home-based Workers' Recognition and Protection for the International Labour Office (ILO).

Ela Bhatt herself was nominated by the President of India to be a member of the Indian parliament

(Rajya sabha) from 1986 to 1989. She was a member of the Planning Commission of India (1989-91) and has been chairperson and a founder member of Women's World Banking since 1980. In 2010 she was awarded with the Niwano Peace Prize.

Quotation

"From a miserable passive acceptance of all the injustices, SEWA women, by organising themselves, have attained the courage to stand up and fight, the ability to think, act, react, manage and lead. Self-reliance is what they ultimately want. There is no development without self-reliance. But there is no route to self-reliance except by organisation."

Ela Bhatt

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