

Acceptance speech by Ela R. Bhatt¹ at the Bombay Management Association for Life Time Achievement Award in Social Entrepreneurship on 29th May, 2009 in Mumbai

One wonders why I am enthusiastic to receive Awards.! It is because my women value them. We deeply appreciate the honour and recognition given by the mainstream, an eminent body like Bombay Management Association and feel assured that SEWA is on the right track. While constantly working against many odds, such recognition adds to our courage to face risks. On behalf of SEWA, I accept the AWARD and express our sincere gratitude to the business and management community of Mumbai. Thank you.

Coming from a labour organization, my worldview begins with people. Society is none other than the people who grow the food we eat, who make the clothes we wear, who build the homes we live in, who teach our children—our neighbours, our friends, our families and our coworkers. In the end, I believe we are all coworkers. The work each of us does, impacts others in society—either directly or indirectly. Every action in life has an impact on our own selves, on the community, and also on the environment. This interconnectedness is the reason why we are gathered here today.

The Corporate World

The corporate world with head offices in large cities, where employees are called professionals; who are well-educated and hard-working and efficient, who have the latest ICT to keep connected in half way across the globe...A world of networking and numbers, of information and access, of power and profits.

And there are people all along the way—the corporation is the tip of an iceberg—the real mass is underneath, and it is often invisible. It is made

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up of vendors and suppliers, and the suppliers' suppliers, the wholesalers, the retailers, the producers, the processors, the growers, the gatherers. As we go down this vast pyramid, we start to see poverty, we see more women, we start to see illiteracy; we see diminishing returns and backbreaking labour; we see malnutrition and chronic illnesses, and in the end we begin to see an overburdened mass that is barely holding on.

As you know, this vast (93%) workforce of unorganized labour is not covered either by protective legislation or social security entitlements.

I can think of four ways in which corporations can bring positive energy to our economy and our society. First, include all those who work for you in sustaining your industry and your business, whether directly or indirectly as your own people. Make sure they have access to basic economic services, like banking, insurance and trade links. This is not a matter of “charity towards the poor”, but a matter of mutual-interest. When producers and workers are empowered, the whole industry gains strength.

Second, recognize ‘work’ as central to your plans. For the poor, work—that is, productive work is central to their lives. They are workers and producers and entrepreneurs in their own right, and they take financial risks every day of their lives. They work extremely hard to earn their living, but they need steady employment that pays them a decent living wage. Work without dignity is drudgery, and exploitation.

Third, invest in those local people’s initiatives that have the potential to grow, such as micro finance initiatives or research and development and training initiatives. Having access to economic and informational resources allows small successes to grow to a viable scale where they can hold their own in a competitive environment. Help build the capacity of self-employed worker groups to enter global markets, by sharing marketable skills and knowledge with them—both on an individual as well as institutional level. So often, workers do not know

who buys their produce—the garments they make or the fruits they grow--you may be one of them. The producers do not know the price their products fetch in global markets. Make them partners in a real sense.

The forces of globalization have greater and greater influence on our lives and livelihoods. We are witnessing a clear conflict between local and global economic forces. We can come to terms with global forces if we have both strength and people on our side. Building local institutions and people will better enable us to walk at our own pace instead of being pushed and pulled by outside and unseen forces. How we devise ways of excellence in our local, self-managed community production processes, whether industrial or handmade, and make them an integral part of trade and industry of our country, is going to determine the future of our country. Unless we build a multi-faceted local and national economy, where people are well-informed producers as well as consumers, we will fall prey to destructive forces beyond our control.

They say that a chain is only as strong as its weakest link. In a competitive world, every link in the chain of production and distribution matters. That means that unless the competitive capacity of the weak and poor is increased, a company's competitiveness will not improve. It is like a car running on four wheels, but three of the wheels are bicycle wheels! So, essentially you are 'trotting' on one motorized wheel! The private sector, the public sector and the vast people's sector can certainly work together, on an equal footing. The government can facilitate the process; it cannot take it on. But it can certainly play a positive role in creating a nationwide environment of social entrepreneurship.

Even though the corporate world has a reputation for cut-throat competition and measuring success in numbers and digits, I believe that the corporate world has the gift of innovation. It believes in taking risks, stepping into uncharted territory and investing in the still unproven. I am convinced it is only a matter of time before the viability of the partnership between the people sector and the private sector is proven to

be dynamic and equitable. Active partnership between the big and the small, as equals, may be the answer to sustainability. Let all types of sub economies flourish together in our markets.

My trust in such partnerships is based on SEWA's own experience over the last few years.

About SEWA

At SEWA, we work with women because they are the most vulnerable, today.

At SEWA we meet on the basis of work and create networks. We build unions to meet our work needs, to stop economic exploitation by traders, contractor, 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 loan, 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 crafts across the world. We create schools to build our capacities to manage our affairs and make an impact in the world outside. We keep on struggling sometimes effectively, to intervene at the macro policy level. This is in short SEWA.

SEWA hence is not a project. It is not—a collection of social and economic institutions. It is not even money or power. It is about restoring balance. SEWA is about the self-reliance of the poor woman, her family, her community and her work environment and this world we all women live in.

Women's Leadership

I have deep faith in Women's Leadership. Women's leadership needs to be nurtured since that is the 'only' hope if an inclusive just society and a sustainable environment are to be ensured.

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

In the women's way, there are goals but also there are values which is the process of unfolding and learning from the process. 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. Feminine looks at the whole group or community and tries 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.

Why is this relevant to day?

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. During the Election Campaigns, one was struck by how much more feminine and transformational Obama was, or, say Rahul Gandhi.

Feminine leadership is needed to save the planet from greed in a way that it can be there for our children Feminine leadership is needed to build development solutions by opening spaces so that the poor can find solutions that they own and that have a meaning for them; and respecting time that it will take to get there.

And feminine leadership is needed to balance the very masculine models that abound, which not always produce the world we want.

Women's initiatives worldwide have shown how development is about transformation, and. consolidation and expansion are both about transformation.

Thank you.

BOMBAY MANAGEMENT ASSOCIATION