



## Ela Bhatt, the Gentle Revolutionary

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### Abstract:

Elders since the group was founded in 2007. Profoundly influenced by Gandhian thinking, she advocates local, grassroots solutions for those who are poor, oppressed or suffering the effects of violent conflict. She joined her fellow Elders to encourage peaceful Palestinian protest and self-reliance during the Elders two delegations to Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories. One of India's foremost women's rights activists, Ela Bhatt welcomed the Elders to India in February 2012, where the group lent their support to young people in the state of Bihar campaigning to end child marriage in their own communities.

**Key words:** vulnerabilities, working mothers, handiwork

*"Why should there be a difference between worker and worker, whether they are working in a factory, or at home or on the footpath?"* **ELA BHATT**

### Introduction

Forty five years ago in Ahmadabad once thriving textile town, Ela Bhatt fought for higher wages for women who ferried bolts of cloth on their heads. Next, she created India's first women's bank.

Since then, her Self-Employed Women's Association, or SEWA, has offered retirement accounts and health insurance to women who never had a safety net, lent working capital to entrepreneurs to open beauty salons in the slums, helped artisans sell their handiwork to new urban department stores and boldly trained its members to become gas station attendants — an unusual job for women on the bottom of India's social ladder.

Small, slight and usually dressed in a hand-spun cotton sari, Mrs. Bhatt is

a Gandhian pragmatist for the New India.

At 86, she is a critic of some of India's embrace of market reforms, but nevertheless keen to see the poorest of Indian workers get a stake in the country's swelling and swiftly globalizing economy. She has built a formidable empire of women-run, Gandhian-style cooperatives — 100 at last count — some providing child care for working mothers, others selling sesame seeds to Indian food-processing firms — all modeled after the Gandhian ideal of self-sufficiency but also advancing modern ambitions.

She calls it the quest for economic freedom in a democratic India. Her own quest offers a glimpse into the changing desires of Indian mothers and daughters, along with their vulnerabilities. Tinsmiths or pickle makers, embroiderers or vendors of



onions, SEWA's members are mostly employed in the informal sector. They get no regular pay checks, sick leave or holidays. Calamities are always just around the corner, whether traffic accidents or crippling droughts. Without SEWA, they would be hard pressed to have health benefits or access to credit.

Born on 7th September 1933, Ela has a long list of achievements to her credit. Born into a privileged Hindu family in Ahmedabad to a lawyer father and an activist mother, Ela grew up with the ideals of Gandhi.

She graduated in English Honours and studied law. In 1972 she founded the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), a trade union for women workers in India's huge informal sector, who make up 94 per cent of the female labour force and yet have never enjoyed the same rights and security as those in formal employment. Today SEWA has more than 1.2 million members across nine Indian states.

"We may be poor, but we are so many. Why don't we start a bank of our own? Our own women's bank, where we are treated with the respect and service that we deserve." – Chandaben, SEWA member.

The following year, Ela Bhatt founded the Cooperative Bank of SEWA. The bank helps women to gain financial independence and raise their standing in their families and communities - and puts into practice the Gandhian principles of self-reliance and collective action.

WITH 500,000 members in western Gujarat State alone, the SEWA Empire also includes two profit-making

firms that stitch and embroider women's clothing. More than 100,000 women are enrolled in the organization's health and life insurance plans. Its bank has 350,000 depositors and, unlike most microfinance organizations, the repayment rate as high as 97 percent. Loans range from around \$100 to \$1,100, with a steep interest rate of 15 percent. "We don't have a liquidity problem," its manager, Jayshree Vyas, pointed out merrily. "Women save."

The work that she has done through the Self-Employed Women's Association is not only about finding solutions to the problems of poverty. At its most basic level, Ela's work is about fairness, about giving every person the chance to achieve his or her dreams, to make the most of his or her God-given potential' no matter how rich or poor, no matter whether they work in a factory or a home or on the side of a road.

Even in places where it is most stark, people still should be able to develop their ambitions and direct them toward building better lives. And Ela and SEWA have proven that. Ela Bhatt has upended the old ways of thinking and compelled all of us to raise our collective ambitions about what we can do to.

#### **Awards & Recognitions:**

In recognition of her work to improve the status of women and the working poor in India and elsewhere, She was awarded the Right *Livelihood* Award in 1984, the civilian honour of Padma Shri by the Government of India in 1985, and the Padma Bhushan in 1986. She was chosen for the Niwano Peace Prize for 2010 for her work empowering poor women in India and Indira Gandhi Prize for Peace (2011),



Disarmament and Development. The first-ever Global Fairness Initiative Award (2010) was presented to her by USA. On that occasion Hillary Clinton, Secretary of State at the award ceremony held at the Kennedy Center said "she (Bhatt) has helped not only women in India but women in South Africa, in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and inspired so many others to find their own way forward to overcome long legacies of inequality and unfairness. She has helped us imagine and then work toward a fairer world. So for her contribution to India and particularly the women of India, and to the global community, it is my honour to present the first Global Fairness Award to my friend, Ela Bhatt".

She also won The Ramon Magsaysay Award (1976), the George Meany-Lane Kirkland Human Rights Award and the Légion d'honneur from France. She has also received honorary doctorates from Harvard (2001), Yale and the University of Natal (2012).

#### **Work with The Elders:**

Ela Bhatt has been a member of The Elders since the group was founded in 2007. Profoundly influenced by Gandhian thinking, she advocates local, grassroots solutions for those who are poor, oppressed or suffering the effects of violent conflict.

She joined her fellow Elders to encourage peaceful Palestinian protest and self-reliance during the Elders two delegations to Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories.

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to end child marriage in their own communities.

In November 2016, Ela Bhatt stepped down from her front-line role as a member of The Elders. Praised by Chairman Kofi Annan for her "compassion and empathy" and being "an example for us all", she remains an Elder Emeritus.

Ela Bhatt is one of the world's most remarkable pioneers and entrepreneurial forces in grassroots development. Known as the 'gentle revolutionary', she has dedicated her life to improving the lives of India's poorest and most oppressed women workers. Not only that she is a great Humanist.

Ela Bhatt in her book *"ANUBANDH: Building Hundred-Mile Communities"* appealed for building holistic and mutually beneficial communities that are mindful of the impact that our acts of daily living have on the land, and on the people. It is my belief that if the six basic needs of daily life—food, clothing, housing, health, education, and banking can largely be met with locally, within a hundred-mile radius, people will find diverse, innovative solutions to the problems of poverty, exploitation, and environmental degradation. The reduced distance between the consumer and producer, and the producer and raw materials will empower the people to begin the process of restoring economic and political balance in the world. This is but one possible solution to the troubles of the world around us. My hope is that our sense of ANUBANDH will guide us towards a path of communities that are local, sustainable, and in harmony with the natural environment. Perhaps each of our 100-mile communities will be linked one day to give us a world without



hunger, poverty, exploitation or environmental degradation. As our 100-mile communities spread, grow, and overlap like oceanic circles, they will create peaceful relationships worldwide. That is the world we can build; as individuals, as a family, as a society, and as spirits embracing all creation.

**Conclusion:**

However, even after all the efforts by women like Ela Bhatt in India, it continues to have one of the most distorted sex ratio, poor and security less working conditions for women, lower pay, low female literacy rate, low female labour participation, low health indices with half the Indian women anemic, lower percentage in state assemblies and national parliament when compared with even its South Asian neighbors, especially Bangladesh.

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