

Acceptance Speech by ELA BHATT on receiving

“The First Global Fairness Award”, Washington DC, Nov 15, 2010.

I am deeply honored to receive the first Global Fairness Award, which I humbly accept on behalf of my sisters at the Self-Employed Women’s Association.

I want to express my gratitude to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who has given me, and SEWA members much encouragement over the years. My sincere thanks to the founders of the Global Fairness Initiative— Mr. Jose Maria Figueres, Mr. Caleb Shreve, Karen Tramontano, Sally Painter, Reema Nanavaty and others for organizing this event; to Jeff Zucker, and Andrea Mitchell at NBC for hosting this event. And I thank His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales, for sharing your vision and the film we will see today. The vision we all share, of a fairer, and more equitable world, encompasses the hopes and aspirations of so many people on earth who need our support.

Because 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. Consequently, where there is poverty, there is also enormous vulnerability. Poverty is a form of violence; it does not respect human labor, it strips a person of humanity, and it takes away their freedom.

In the early 1970s I began working with women who were vegetable vendors, rag pickers, cart-pullers, and cigarette rollers in India. We formed the Self-Employed Women's Association, or SEWA, which is a trade union of poor, self-employed women in India. Our fight is for fairness through self reliance. We have come together to form a union to stop economic exploitation; we have formed our own bank to build assets, to save, to borrow, to improve the material quality of life. We have built trade cooperatives of women farmers, crafts workers and artisans, and a trade facilitation network connecting local and global markets; we have built a social security network for our maternity needs, health and life insurance. Today SEWA is more than a million members strong. We have sister SEWAs in South Africa, in Afghanistan, and Sri Lanka.

Every action of ours not only has an impact on our own self, but also on the world around us. It is time to consider: What impact will my action have on me? What impact will my action have on the environment and the people who live in it? And how will it affect future generations and the human spirit?

For example, as urban consumers, when we buy local handicrafts, or agricultural produce, we are making a clear statement with our money. We are saying we support the poor village craftswoman and her empowerment. We are saying we support non-polluting, environmentally friendly, local, sustainable development. We are saying we value the rich cultural heritage of our country. We are saying we see alternatives to the current industrial modes of production. Our view of what constitutes economic success, sustainable development, poverty removal, and empowerment changes. The removal of poverty through fair and sustainable means is the way of the future. Thank you.



