

# Acceptance Message by ELA BHATT on receiving the Niwano Peace Prize, 2010, Tokyo

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## *WOMEN, WORK, and PEACE*

I am deeply honored to receive the Niwano Peace Prize, which I humbly accept on behalf of my sisters at SEWA, the Self-Employed Women's Association. As I see, this Prize has created a bit of a stir among the peace community as you are redefining what is Peace. Thank you very much for understanding us and our efforts. We have firmly linked peace with non-violence. Peace is non-violence, and lasting peace cannot be achieved without non-violence. Peace achieved through war lasts only as long as it takes to start another war. SEWA finds that being non-violent in day-to-day affairs is as good as going out to build peace where it does not exist. Keeping poor people poor is violence and so it is not peace. Peace and poverty cannot co-exist. There may not be war but sure there is a hidden war possibility where poverty is allowed to continue. SEWA strives a way to build peace through poverty eradication.

We believe but have not said in so many words that peace is not only matter of State or foreign policy, but a day to day matter, and women, poor women, do help build peace, piece-by-piece, through remaining non-violence. And this can be done at the ground level, through day-to-day processes though global processes can only help this more. Peace is not out there, but within us, in us. Any positive, constructive act of love and care builds peace. And when millions take these actions, peace spreads. prosperity follows. Now this is not new. This is as old as Gandhiji, or Christ, or Buddha. This is in our heart. But somehow we forget this, set this aside, when we take up matters of importance.

My own experience in SEWA shows me that peace can be built by work, having income and livelihood. Peace is built by doing what one does on daily basis, for one's income, for family. Peace builds bottom up, day-to-day brick by brick, woman to woman, man to man.

In SEWA we have tried to democratize Peace and, made it everybody's business, which is what Gandhiji taught us in so many ways.

My story and philosophy can be said in three simple words—*Women, Work and Peace*. They each represent a biography of the universe.

Let me elaborate what I mean to say before this august body.

Our world today is in turmoil. There is a widening divide between nations, between peoples and between governments and its own people. Where there is an unfair distribution of resources, there is unrest. Peace is under threat. When people cannot enjoy

the fruits of their labors fairly, we have the basis of an unjust society. Peace needs protection. When governments cannot ensure the happiness of its people, they must resort to silencing them in the name of peace. For where there is violence and conflict, a struggle for resources, unemployment, widespread anger against injustice and inequality and, governments who resort to repression, we invariably find poverty. Poverty is peace about to be broken into pieces.

Poverty is a society's disrespect for human labor. Poverty strips a person of his or her humanity, and poverty takes away their freedom. Nothing that compromises a person's humanity is acceptable. Poverty is wrong because it is violence perpetuated with the consent of a society. Poverty means agreement to dislocate peace.

Violence today is often abstract. It is not the violence of the state or the local bully. Violence is the destruction of ways of life which are at right angles to the official world of bureaucracy. Women's work is often not legally recognized. Women's work does not fit official classifications. Women's work is often not eligible for certification. The struggle of women's work is against the violence and indifference of official classification. Reworking the official has been one strand of SEWA's work for peace. When the official excludes a vast majority of working poor in the country, it creates marginal worlds which need to survive. Women's work is that guarantee of survival, survival of women, their families, and the peace they hold dear.

To resort to violence is immoral. Violence is even less effective means of achieving laudable goals. Peace is natural to humanity. A human begins his life seeking love, truth, trust, a kind touch which is natural. Hence peace is a serious force in itself, the fact that has never failed us so far. And of course, it is not a rare or a revolutionary idea. It is not a threat to the established order. Peace is the concept accepted by all religions, every religion.

According to the *Bhagwad Gita*, the way to liberation is *karma*. *Karma* means action; *karma* means work. Just as love and truth are fundamental to human being, I believe, work is central to human life. I admit, work is too limited a term for all it invokes. By work I do not mean sweatshops and cheap labour that are yet another kind of exploitation. Work is better understood as livelihood. Livelihood is always linked to life, lifecycle, lifestyle and life world. Livelihood invokes life values and life vision. Livelihood evokes the language of a biomass and informal economy, people's economy. When you erase a livelihood,—a memory, a competence, a community and the culture are destroyed. By work, I mean essentially the production of food and access to water. It means upgrading of existing and traditional what people have possessed for thousands of years—agriculture, animal husbandry, fishing, forestry, housing, textile making, recycling. Such work feeds people and it restores one's relationship with self, with fellow human beings, with mother earth and with the Great Spirit that created us all.

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.

In my experience, women are the key to building a community. Focus on women, and she will grow roots for her family, and work to establish a stable community. In a woman, we get a worker, a provider, a caretaker, an educator, and a networker. She is a forger of bonds—she is a creator and a preserver. I consider women's participation and representation an integral part of the development process. Women will bring constructive, creative and sustainable solutions to the world. I have great faith in the feminine way of transformation of the world.

SEWA is a trade union of poor, self-employed women. We have come together to form a union to stop economic exploitation; we have formed our own bank to build assets, to tap resources, to improve the material quality of life. We have built trade cooperatives of women farmers 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. SEWA is more than a million members strong spread across six states of India, and beyond. We come together in support of each other. Our goal is the wellbeing of the poor woman, her family, her work, her community and the world we all live in. We are in pursuit of self-reliance and freedom. We realize what Mahatma Gandhi said that Freedom is not given, it is generated within one's self. My experience says that women's work is that guarantee of freedom coming from within.

It is evident that political freedom is incomplete without economic freedom. It is only when people have both, political and economic freedom that we will get lasting peace. Civil groups like NGOs, women's groups, trade unions, cooperative, guilds, church groups are all essential to building peace. Diplomats and armies can negotiate peace. But can they build peace? Only people can bring peace; without the involvement of the people, without their voices, without their communication, participation and representation, there can be no peace. Peace is about restoring balance in society. Peace is not a separate way of life. It is intrinsic to life and living. Peace is not the absence of war or a cease fire or a mere conflict resolution or national elections completed. Peace is not made by states. Peace is a way of life in harmony with our bodies, Nature and our selves.

Peace derives from need not greed. Peace is the sense of limits, the feeling of generosity that shares the last piece of *roti* or bread. Peace begins before state making and continues long after it. I consider, in essence, to separate peace from work and Nature is an act of violence. Peace is the whole that makes life and work life giving.

This then is my philosophy. It can be said by reciting the story of SEWA. SEWA may be a local story or a South Asian story. It is a local struggle but it has to meet global questions. The local and the global have to combine in new ways and new communities. SEWA or translations or interpretations of SEWA will be invented elsewhere. In that sense I recognize the gift of Niwano Peace Prize as a challenge for us. The challenge today is to see SEWA as it can meet the challenge of Darfur, Afghanistan or Sri Lanka. The challenge now is to see how women's work and women's idea of community and Nature can create the new commons of peace.

In that sense, accept my speech as a prayer, a woman's work for peace.

We have a long way to go. But, the path is clear, and liberating at every step. Thank you Niwano Peace Foundation, for holding our hand on this journey.

*Aum Shanti! Shanti! Shanti!*