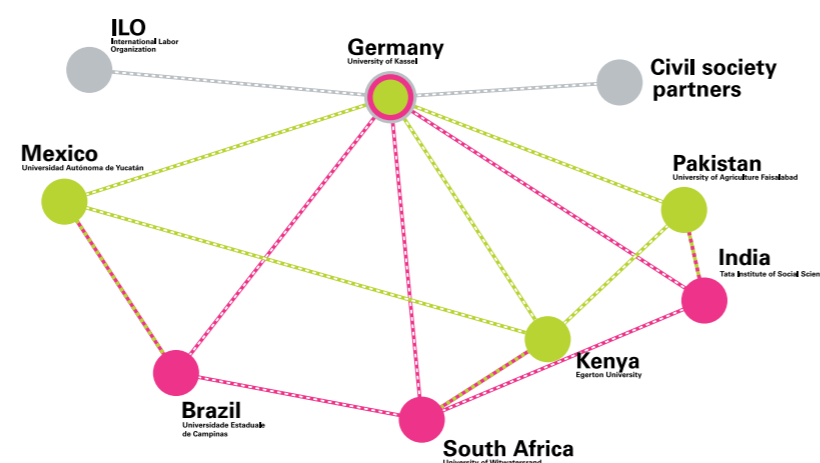


## ICDD WORKING PAPERS

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### The Global ICDD Network



Edward Webster

**Work and economic security in  
the 21<sup>st</sup> century. What can we  
learn from Ela Bhatt?**

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## ABSTRACT

In recent decades there has been a transformation of two central concepts of modernity – labour and the household. Ela Bhatt – the founder of the Self-Employed Women’s Association of India (SEWA), has made an important contribution to this transformation. Through the emergence of unions such as SEWA, the notion of who represents labour is being broadened; the marginalised are finding an institutional voice. Increasingly, the household is being recognised as a site of both production and reproduction. SEWA is not a traditional trade union that aims, through collective bargaining with an employer, to improve its members’ wages and working conditions *as sellers of their labour power*. Instead, it aims to empower women economically in the informal economy by bringing them into the mainstream economy *as owners of their labour*. The union dimension of SEWA builds their collective power through struggle; the co-operative dimension translates their bargaining power into the economic and social development of its members and their community. Besides, Bhatt’s approach to the self-employed was a direct challenge to the ILO’s tripartism when it was established in the early seventies. The first part of the paper provides a short biography of Ela Bhatt, describes the origins of SEWA, analyses a ‘classification struggle’ over how and who is to define what a worker is. In the second part the author considers SEWAs innovative organizing strategy and is rethinking modernity in the labour context. In the conclusion the paper discusses the lessons that can be learnt from Ela Bhatt.



# PREFACE

The Ela Bhatt Visiting Professorship is an integral part of the efforts of the International Center for Development and Decent Work (ICDD) to further research and teaching on how to reach “productive full employment and humane work for everybody” (Millennium Development Goal 1, part 2).

The Visiting Professorship is named in honour of Ela Rameesh Bhatt, founder of the Self-Employed Women’s Association (SEWA), which stands for improving the working conditions and uplifting the self esteem of the myriads of workers outside formal employment. Her organisation and advocacy is an inspiration for the ICDD and we are very grateful to Ela Bhatt for allowing us to name the Visiting Professorship after her.

This first ICDD Working Paper addresses the question of what lessons can be learnt from Ela Bhatt’s guiding principles and achievements for economic security in the twenty-first century. It is written by Edward Webster, the first Ela Bhatt Visiting Professor.

Edward Webster is Professor Emeritus in the School of Social Sciences and a research professor in the Society, Work and Development Institute (SWOP) at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits, Johannesburg, South Africa). Professor Webster has been rated by the National Research Foundation as a leading international scholar in sociology of work. He recently launched the Global Labour Journal and was chair of the Global Labour University (GLU) at Wits. GLU is a global initiative by the International Labour Organisation with campuses in Germany (Berlin and Kassel), Brazil and India. His most recent book, *Grounding Globalisation: Labour in the Age of Insecurity*, won the prestigious American Sociological Association award for the best book published on labour in 2008.

Edward Webster has been a great inspiration to the ICDD, not the least with his astute observation about the early months of the ICDD: “we’re building it, while driving it.” He filled the professorship with life beyond expectation. MA students were encouraged to visit migrant workplaces in the city of Kassel in a very successful effort to teach them “global ethnography.” He challenged the ICDD PhD students to reflect on their observations of working conditions on dairy farms from the perspective of their various disciplines. With trade unionists from around the world participating in the ENGAGE program on Global Economic Governance, he discussed questions such as how labour can gain a voice in global economic affairs. Together with the Indian ICDD partner Sharit Bhowmik, he initiated a research group on “Work, Livelihood Strategies and Economic Security in the twenty-first Century”. This Working Paper is based on his farewell lecture at Kassel University.

Kassel, Jan. 6, 2011

Prof. Dr. Christoph Scherrer

Executive Director, International Center for Development and Decent Work



# WORK AND ECONOMIC SECURITY IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM ELA BHATT?

Edward Webster

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In October 2009 I was appointed the first Ela Bhatt Visiting Professor at the newly launched International Centre for Development and Decent Work (ICDD) at Kassel University. I soon learnt that very little was known of Ela Bhatt in the university community. It was suggested by the Director, Professor Christoph Scherrer, that it would be useful to give a public lecture on Ela Bhatt and why she is a significant figure in our work in the ICDD.

I readily agreed as it was an opportunity for me to learn more about her and the organisation she founded in India, the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA). This paper is an expanded version of the lecture I gave on 23<sup>rd</sup> June, 2010. The paper has benefitted from an extended interview with Ela Bhatt in her home town, Ahmedabad, on 5<sup>th</sup> December and a two day research visit to SEWA on 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> December, 2010.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Renana Jhabvala for arranging my visit to SEWA and the programme of visits and interviews. I would also like to thank Ela Bhatt for generously allowing me to interview her on a Sunday afternoon and her colleagues, Pratibha Pandya, Heena Dave, Reema Nanavaty, Mirai Chatterjee, Manali Shah and Namrata Bali for introducing me to the different aspects of SEWA. I would also like to thank Mona Meurer for ensuring that I explored the Gandhian link.



## 1. ELA BHATT AND THE ORIGINS OF SEWA: GANDHISM AND BEYOND

Ela Bhatt was born in 1933 in Ahmedabad in the state of Gujarat, the home of Mahatma Gandhi after he returned from South Africa in 1915. Her parents were from the professional Brahmin elite. “My father,” she describes in her autobiography, “was a successful lawyer with a thriving practice and a prominent position in society. My mother was more progressive; her father was a freedom fighter who had gone with Mahatma Gandhi on the Salt March”<sup>2</sup> (Bhatt, 2006:5). Her maternal grandfather was a medical doctor strongly influenced by Gandhi. This led him to changing his life style and sleeping the rest of his life on a mat. He was jailed three times for his anti-British activities (Bhatt, Interview, Ahmedabad, 5<sup>th</sup> December 2010). All her father’s brothers were lawyers. She described her father as a “very modern man who appreciated British education and thinking” (Bhatt, Interview, 2010).

She was brought up in the neighbouring city of Surat at a time of high idealism. “While I was at school my country was fighting for freedom. Our teachers taught us the importance of decentralising the economy at the village, local and district level” (Bhatt, Interview, 2010). She went on to study for a BA degree at the University of Gujarat in English literature where she met her future husband, Ramesh Bhatt. “Ramesh opened my eyes to the world. It was 1949, and I was a shy and studious university student, who admired Ramesh at a distance. He was a fearless, handsome student leader and an active member of the Youth Congress. He was collecting primary data on slum families for independent India’s first census of 1951. When he invited me to accompany him on his rounds, I timidly agreed. I knew my parents would disapprove of their daughter ‘wandering in dirty neighbourhoods with a young man whose family one knew nothing about’” (Bhatt 2006; 5).

Her parents were to resist her marrying Ramesh and warned her that she would live the rest of her life in poverty if she married him. To prove her commitment, she lived for a year in a slum in conditions of poverty. In 1955 they were married in what was to become a lifelong partnership. “Ramesh was hardly ever on the scene with me in my public life – he was a private man – but we were partners in life. He was my best friend his insight and analysis were critical in helping me come up with unconventional solutions to old-age problems Ramesh supported me every step of the way; that generosity of spirit allowed me to gain self-confidence and trust in myself” (Bhatt, 2010; 6).<sup>3</sup>

The young Ela Bhatt had become a determined woman, with no doubts as to what to do with her life. In 1952 she completed her BA degree and in 1954 her Bachelor of Laws (LLB). India was a newly independent country at the time.

<sup>2</sup> Gandhi famously led his followers in the Non-cooperation movement that protested the British-imposed salt tax with the 400 km (240 mi.) Dandi Salt March in 1930.

<sup>3</sup> Ramesh Bhatt went on to lecture in economics. They were married for nearly fifty years. Ramesh died in 2005.

Mahatma Gandhi's spirit encouraged the youth to live and work with the poor, to build 'village republics' as basic units of a foundation on which Indian democracy could 'prosper.' "We saw our task as rebuilding the nation and Gandhism taught us to look at things from the perspective of the masses" (Bhatt, Interview, 2010). "Politics," she wrote, "was idealistic; it had the power to inspire and stimulate action. Ramesh gave me the writings of Gandhi and of J.C.Kumaarappa on the economics of self-reliance and we read and discussed avidly" (Bhatt, 2010:6). It was these Gandhian ideas on the simplicity and dignity, or even sanctity of labour that were the decisive influence on the early Ela Bhatt. It was logical, therefore, for her to join in 1955, the legal department of the Textile Labour Association (TLA), a union founded by Gandhi in the twenties.

### **Bhatt and the TLA**

Ahmedabad had become a powerful centre of the textile industry by the middle of the twentieth century. It was, the local inhabitants proudly announced, the 'Manchester of India.' By 1959, there were sixty mills employing 141,884 textile workers (Breman, 2004:82). The TLA was hegemonic in the industry. It had been deeply influenced by Gandhi's corporatist notions of industrial relations where class struggle was rejected in favour of 'trusteeship.' As Khandubhai Desai, the first Secretary General of the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) said to the International Confederation of Free Trade unions (ICFTU) in Berlin in 1962:

"The employers and the management, in these days of democracy and freedom, are only an appendage of the economic apparatus. As Mahatma Gandhi, who was also a great trade unionist, used to tell and preach to us, there is no employee or employer. The principles that we must place before ourselves are that both are co-trustees of society and the community as a whole. In order to create that psychology he used to tell us that workers should have the sensation and psychology of working as co-owners in industry, while the management or employer should orient their minds to think that they are co-workers in the field" (Quoted in Breman, 2004:82).

The young Bhatt was welcomed into the legal department of the TLA in 1955 and soon made her mark as a diligent and innovative union lawyer. She helped devise the gratuity scheme which gave members the right to a bonus payment for every year they had worked in the mill (Bhatt, Interview, 2010). But by the mid-fifties most of the women workers in the textile industry had been, in the view of the TLA, "expelled from the mills in their own interests" (Breman, 2004:110). From the perspective of the male dominated TLA and their Gandhian mission of elevating the lives of workers to a higher plane, these women "should devote themselves to looking after their husbands and children. Their exemption from paid work, allowed them to perform all kinds of tasks in the household that they had until then not had time to do" (Breman, 2004:110-111). As Breman observes, what at first sight appears to be a sympathetic goal

of improving the living standards of workers was actually grounded in a dogmatic and patriarchal view of the social role of women (Bremar, 2004:111).

In the course of her legal work Bhatt soon began to realise that the work being done by the wives of the textile workers was not only unpaid domestic work; these women were also performing crucial economic activities. These activities, such as street vending, embroidering from home, recycling and various labour services were not only crucial sources of household income, they were also a major contribution to India's GDP. This became clearer when the TLA asked her to set up a women's department inside the TLA (Bhatt, Interview, 2010). She discovered that the women did not need counselling on how to run their households; they needed instead help in defending their interests as paid workers as they were not protected by any of the labour laws.

In 1969 she was sent by the TLA to live on a kibbutz in Israel and do a course on Labour and Cooperatives (Bhatt, Interview: 2010). This exposure to co-operatives for the first time proved to be a decisive event. When she returned to India she persuaded the TLA president that the wives of the mill workers needed a separate women's union inside the TLA<sup>4</sup>. "I wanted," Bhatt wrote, "to organise the women workers in a union so that they could enjoy the same benefits that organised labour received. I came to a simple realisation- a union is about coming together. Women do not need to come together against anyone; they just needed to come together for themselves. By forming a union – a bond – they affirmed their status as workers, and as a result of coming together, they had a voice" (Bhatt, 2010: 9). In April 1972, the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) was launched.

### **SEWA and the Classification Struggle<sup>5</sup>**

Initially SEWA's claim to be a union was rejected as their members were not seen as workers as they were self-employed. "When I am asked what the most difficult part of SEWA's journey has been, I can answer without hesitation: removing conceptual blocks. Some of our biggest battles have been over contesting pre-set ideas and attitudes of officials, bureaucrats, experts, and academics. Definitions are part of that battle. The Registrar of Trade Unions would not consider us 'workers'; hence, we could not register as a 'trade union.' The hard-working *chindi* workers, embroiders, cart-pullers, rag pickers, and forest produce gatherers can contribute to the nation's gross domestic product, but heaven forbid that they be acknowledged as workers. Without an employer, you cannot be classified as a worker, and since you are not a worker, you cannot form a trade union. Our struggle to be recognised as a national trade union continued until we succeeded in 2007" (Bhatt, 2010:88).

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<sup>4</sup> Forming a union inside the TLA was relatively simple as the TLA was a federation of different trades.

<sup>5</sup> I have drawn the idea of a classification struggle from Jennifer Chun's use of Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic power, the power of naming. She uses the idea of a classification struggle to discuss debates over how to define an employer and how to define a worker in her study of Korean golf caddies and Californian home workers (Chun, 2009).

From the beginning Bhatt challenged this narrow view of work and argued that the self-employed were also workers. Ironically, she said, the self-employed were the backbone of the economy of India, in which formal jobs constitute just 7% of the total (Bhatt, 2010:42). She argued that the “self-employed are engaged in numerable trades they perform manual labour as agricultural workers, construction workers, movers, loaders, and cart pullers. They provide services as domestic workers engaged in cooking and cleaning. They are home-based workers who have skills like garment stitching, *bidi* rolling, junk-smthing, or basket making, and they are vendors and hawkers who sell fresh produce, recycled garments, or articles of everyday use” (Bhatt, 2010:42).

Bhatt argued persuasively that, “the self-employed share certain characteristics. They are all economically active. They rarely own any capital or their own tools of production or trade. They have no access to credit. They are exploited by middlemen, who are an integral part of their work life. They are the unacknowledged, low-tech, labour-intensive, raw material-processing arm of industry. Even though they exist in such large numbers, they are scattered, isolated, and unaware of their position in the economy. They have very little bargaining power” (Bhatt, 2010:42).

### **SEWA Breaks with the TLA**

SEWA grew rapidly in the seventies. In later years, it became even bigger than the TLA. In part this was because the membership of the TLA was shrinking as mills began to close down from 1980 onwards in the face of technological change and a loss of competitiveness (Breman, 2010:144). It is estimated that approximately 85,000 regular workers were retrenched in Ahmedabad from the late seventies onwards (Breman, 2004:254)<sup>6</sup>. This process of informalisation was sanctioned and encouraged by the growing liberalisation of the economy with its emphasis on flexibility in the labour market. The mill workers had won, in the course of the twentieth century, permanent jobs with the accompanying benefits that characterise ‘decent work’ in the formal economy. Now they were being squeezed by two processes; on the one hand, work was being pushed out of the factories and formal work situations into small workshops and homes through subcontracting. On the other hand, those that remained in the factories found themselves working harder, with fewer benefits and growing insecurity (Breman, 2004:232-293). The result was a rapidly expanding informal economy, with growing poverty and tensions over competition for jobs. In 1981 these tensions erupted in communal rioting.

The communal riots of 1981 were the trigger that led to SEWA being ‘booted out’ of the TLA (Bhatt, Interview, 2010). In a mass meeting during the riots Bhatt had come out in support of the continuation of the reservation policy, a package of measures intended to protect and promote the upward mobility of workers belonging to the ‘Scheduled and Backward’ castes. Ostensibly she had breached the TLA policy of not taking sides in these communal conflicts. Her forceful opinions, writes Breman, were not shared by many of the TLA leaders

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<sup>6</sup> Bhowmik estimated an even greater number – 170,000 – were dismissed from the textile mills of Mumbai during a similar period (cited in Breman, 254-255).

and in 1981, after she expressed support for the continuation of this public policy in a mass meeting, she fell into disfavour (Breman, 2004:283)<sup>7</sup>. While a hero in the marginal communities, Bhatt had become a villain in the eyes of her neighbours and relatives, who 'boycotted' her (Bhatt, Interview; 2010). In fact neighbours started throwing stones at their home and they had to leave for her father's home for three months.

SEWA's split with the TLA was a turning point in the history of Indian labour. But was it inevitable?<sup>8</sup> Bhatt is sceptical whether a broader programme was possible at that time as the TLA "did not understand that these (the informal workers) were workers. They were invisible to the policy makers, the census writers and the trade union leaders" (Bhatt, Interview, 2010). As Breman argues, an alternative broader-based programme was possible, but the trade union movement had neither the imagination nor the political will to take this risk: "The sustained policy of the Indian trade union movement not to mobilize informal sector workers should be judged as a historic blunder. Timely acknowledgement of the organic links between the formal and the informal sectors of the economy would have made it possible to co-opt the labouring poor in the struggle to promote the right of all segments of the working class in a balanced manner. A broader-based programme than the one which continued to focus only on a small and shrinking segment of the total workforce could have prevented the agents of organised labour from becoming helpless bystanders to the on-going onslaught of informalisation which has eroded whatever political strength they might have had in the past" (Breman, 2004:285).

While there is evidence, thirty years later, that the Indian trade union movement is beginning to broaden the base of its organising strategy by organising workers in the informal economy, SEWA has proved convincingly that it is possible to organise workers in the informal economy. Today SEWA has 1.2 million members amongst the marginalised workers of the informal economy and operates in nine Indian states (Jhabvala, 2010). However, its success lies in its ability to adapt and innovate traditional modes of trade union organisation to a different type of work and a different type of worker. It is to SEWA's innovative organising strategy that I now turn.

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<sup>7</sup> In January 2010 I visited the Textile Labour Association in Mumbai, where the aging leadership described Ela Bhatt as "a social worker, not a trade unionist."

<sup>8</sup> Three months after the public spat with the TLA leadership, Bhatt quietly left the TLA and set up SEWA as an independent trade union. The first of many awards came soon after the split when Ela Bhatt was given the Ramon Magsaysay Award, the equivalent of the Nobel Prize for Asia. Fortunately the Dutch trade union federation, the FNV, came to SEWA's aid with financial help.

## 2. SEWA's INNOVATIVE ORGANISING STRATEGY

SEWA is not a traditional trade union that aims, through collective bargaining with an employer, to improve its members' wages and working conditions as *sellers of their labour power*. Instead, it aims to empower women economically in the informal economy by bringing them into the mainstream economy as *owners of their labour* (Interview, Pratibha Pandya, 2010). As any other trade union, SEWA does this by mobilising and organising women to come together *collectively* around their work issues. The union, she says, "is for collective solidarity. Poor workers individually are too weak. They need to come together on a basis of work. Women then see themselves as workers. I would not have thought of trade unionism if I had not had a background in the TLA" (Bhatt, Interview, 2010).

The difference with traditional trade unionism is that the women then form, once recruited, trade cooperatives in an effort to become owners of their labour. As a result, Bhatt suggests, SEWA "straddles the realms of both union and cooperative" (Bhatt, 2010:87). SEWA has nearly a hundred different cooperatives – rural and urban- some built around products, others around services. "There are vendors' cooperatives as well as midwives' cooperatives, rag pickers' cooperatives as well as weavers' cooperatives. There are as many trades as there are facets to a country's economy, and self-employed women can be found in every one of them" (Bhatt, 2010:87).

A second crucial difference with traditional trade unionism is that SEWA's members do not engage in only one economic activity; they engage in several income-generating activities. "Since the income of poor women from any one type of work is usually not enough to make ends meet, they must have several income-earning occupations. In fact, 80% of SEWA members are engaged in multiple types of work" (Bhatt, 2010; 88).

It follows from their multiple economic activities, that SEWA members will not have one employer. In fact, Bhatt argues, there may not be a specific employer-employee relationship (Bhatt, Interview, 2010). "Our members perform many different forms of work. They may have been sub-contracted to do some work and may not know who the principal employer is. They may own a small farm of half an acre but also work during the harvesting season as a labourer on a neighbouring farm. You cannot categorize them as belonging to a single occupation and neither can you conceptualize the employer. The idea of a single employer has come from the conception of work in industrialized countries" (Bhatt, Interview, 2010).

To achieve the goal of economic empowerment, SEWA has set itself two central goals: *full employment* through greater work security, income security and access to social security (health care, child care, insurance and shelter)



and *self-reliance* through asset creation, leadership development, self-sustainability, and individual and collective decision-making.

SEWA adopts an integrated approach to its members. By stressing the importance of creating employment opportunities through entrepreneurial activities, SEWA overcomes the notion of these workers as simply victims. Importantly, the activities of SEWA deal with workers as a totality, not simply as producers, by creating child care facilities, credit facilities (including the SEWA bank) and a range of social security benefits (Mirai Chatterjee, Interview, 2010). The key role of social security for the members emerged in our interview with Mirai Chatterjee, head of social security in SEWA. “The need for social security emerged organically. First was child care, then health care, followed by water, sanitation and housing, then social insurance and finally pensions. Work and social security are two sides of the same coin” (Chatterjee, Interview, 2010).

How then does SEWA identify, recruit and maintain its members? The first step in the recruitment process involves a survey, run through the SEWA Academy, of approximately 500 households, usually those involved in a particular trade (Bhatt, Interview, 2010). Essentially the survey is designed to identify household income and the problems the household faces. A meeting is then called both as a consciousness-raising activity as well as a collective discussion on what action can be taken. Members then form a group of fifteen to twenty members, local leaders are identified, the most pressing issues are identified, and action is taken.

How are leaders identified? Leaders, Bhatt argues, are easily identifiable as they exhibit “a certain restlessness, a sense of dissatisfaction and some spirit to change” (Bhatt, Interview, 2010). If possible they should be literate; honesty with money is essential<sup>9</sup>. Honesty is best established by asking the group whom they trust and who has the time to devote to being a leader.

To observe this process I accompanied the organiser to the offices of a Community Learning Centre in the Surendranagar District of rural Gujarat. The district covers twenty five villages and the 30,000 SEWA members are mostly small farmers (14, 000) producing some cash crops such as cotton, castor oil, cumin seed and crops for their own use such as wheat, millet and gram, or chickpea flour (Heena Dave, Interview, 2010). They also keep some livestock such as buffaloes and cattle. Some also obtain additional income working on the nearby salt pan.

I was struck by the strategic way in which SEWA is intervening in the supply chain in a way that adds value to the products that their members sell. This emerged very clearly in the case of the Rural Urban Distribution Initiative (RUDI) where the branding and packaging of the products is not only benefitting the consumer but also the producer, i.e. the worker, by cutting out the ‘middle man’ (Heena Dave, 2010). As the district co-ordinator remarked:

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<sup>9</sup> Out of the eighteen rural organisers I met at the Community Learning Centre only four were literate. However, they were all able to sign their names.

“Through RUDI farmers get a fair price for their product, and consumers get a good quality product at their doorstep” (Heena Dave 2010).

SEWA's intervention in the supply chain is quite simple but effective. By establishing RUDI as a trading company owned by a trust with SEWA members as the majority, it gives producers influence over the price of their product. It provides SEWA members direct access to the market by distributing and marketing their products. At the beginning of the year, RUDI approaches potential buyers and says: we will only cultivate the product if you give us, for example 180 rupees per ton, we will then sell only to those buyers who are willing to pay the 180 rupees. This enables the producers to influence the price of their product by intervening at both ends of the supply chain and by removing the middle man in the process.

A similar strategic approach of intervening in the market took place with the salt workers who have been able to add value to their product through SEWA's research on shifting from edible salt to commercial salt. This not only upgrades the supply chain economically but also socially by improving the price of their product. As the district coordinator explained: “Salt farming was dominated by big merchant traders. But we could not fight them directly so we did a survey of their economic activities. They used to cultivate edible salt but the price was lower than commercial salt. SEWA provided them with training to cultivate commercial salt. We persuaded the government to establish a research laboratory to improve the quality of the salt – the Salt Marine Chemical Research Institute - in which we also participated. Initially we chose five members, those who were willing to work hard and were disciplined, on a pilot basis to train to produce industrial salt. At first the traders were annoyed but eventually they accepted our product and our members expanded into industrial salt. It was necessary to invest in diesel pumps to drain the water. SEWA helped one hundred of our members with credit, which they had to pay back at 2% interest” (Heena Dave, Interview, 2010).

This is the innovation in SEWA's approach to trade unions. The union dimension of SEWA builds their collective power through struggle; the co-operative dimension translates their bargaining power into the economic and social development of its members and their community. The members had been receiving 80-90 rupees per ton for edible salt; now they were getting 250 rupees for industrial salt. With their superior product and upgraded skill they were able to intervene directly in the supply chain, cut out the middle man, and increase their demands on the traders.

The organisers explained how they used their new source of bargaining power. “When the traders were not willing to pay the increased amount, thirty to forty women went to his premises to protest. They surrounded him and demanded their money and said, ‘We will not leave until we have our money’. They proceeded to sit-down. The trader became frightened and called the police. When the police arrived and heard the women's story, they told the trader to



pay up immediately, threatening him with prison if he did not” (Pratibha Pandya, 2010).

As the organisers emphasized: “We do not have many skills, neither are we working in large factories. We do not have much strength. Our only power is to be honest and to stick together” (Meeting with rural organisers, 2010). Unlike the trade union which targets the employer and demands better wages and working conditions, informal workers target the purchasers of their goods and demand a fair price. They also, as Agarwala argues, target the state and demand job cards and the right to payment on the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGA) (Agarwala, 2006). Above all, it is a demand for what Bhatt calls ‘the old Gandhian idea of community’ (Bhatt, 2010:9i). “The community that I am talking about,” Bhatt continues, “is beyond the identity of caste, village or ethnicity. My sense of community centres around work, but work defined not as an occupation, a job, a career, but as a livelihood. A livelihood is a chain of being. It connects work to ecology, to a sense of community with nature. Livelihood has implicit in it two forms of access: access to nature as a commons and also to the means of production, consumption, distribution and renewal. Renewability involves all three processes: production, consumption and distribution. In recycling livelihoods, you recycle both nature and community. Thus we sustain both over time” (Bhatt, 2010:91).

### **Rethinking Modernity: Who Represents Labour?**

Bhatt’s approach to the self-employed was a direct challenge to the International Labour Organisation’s (ILO) tripartism when it was established in the early seventies. The ILO’s notion of tripartism was under direct attack inside the organisation at the same time for excluding women working in the household from the definition of labour. It also excluded small farmers, own account workers and the unemployed (Cox, 1971). This lack of representation of the marginalised workers of the developing world had become more visible in the ILO when large numbers of developing country delegates arrived in the sixties for the annual ILO congress in Geneva. In most of these countries only a small percentage of the labour forces were in formal employment. As a result, unions in these developing countries were weak and employer organisations hardly existed.

The ILO came to refer to the lack of adequate representation of these marginalised workers as a *representational gap*. As Harrod argues: “The labour force of these (developing) countries bore no resemblance to the foundational concepts of the ILO which was based on workers in industry and employed in agriculture” (Harrod, 2007:9). Furthermore, and contrary to the expectations of modernisation theory, there had been little transition to formal work in the city. Instead, the cities of the developing world were generating a range of livelihood strategies, in what was to be identified in the early seventies as the informal sector (ILO, 1972; Hart, 1973).

In 1971 Robert Cox was directing an ILO project on the *Future of Industrial Relations* focusing on the neglect of the marginalised workers of the developing world. He argued that tripartite industrial relations was only one amongst many forms of regulating production<sup>10</sup>. He identified eleven other forms of production, which included the self employed as one form of production (Cox, 1971; Cox and Harrod, 1972). As Standing argues in his hard-hitting critique of the ILO: “The organisation (the ILO) is a testament to the past century of labourism trying to protect employees in standard employment relationships. Like it or not, in the early twenty-first century, labour is a commodity. And the ILO cannot do much about it” (Standing, 2008:382).

However, while the ILO was debating the limits of tripartism, Ela Bhatt was making tentative steps to empower these marginalised workers by forming SEWA in 1972. It was to become what we called in Part One a ‘classification struggle’ over how and who is to define what a worker is. Bhatt was eventually to win this battle when first the Indian trade union movement in 2007 and then the international trade union movement, the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), accepted SEWA as a legitimate voice of labour.

A crucial insight of Bhatt’s was that the household was not simply a site of reproduction; it was increasingly becoming a place of production, of income generation. “Over the past three decades,” she wrote, “we found an increasing trend toward garment production in women’s homes. During the *chindi* workers’ struggles we witnessed that the traders maintained their competitiveness in the market by lowering their labour cost, especially in labour-intensive industries like garment making. The employers push for home-based production so they can exploit the women’s preference for working from home to their advantage” (Bhatt, 2006: 70).

Her focus on the household encouraged the successful fight for an international convention on home work. Bhatt argued at the ILO Meeting of Experts in 1990 that home-workers were “not demanding charity but their rightful place in the labour movement.” The definition of a worker should include, she said, “whoever contributes to the economy of the country or the household.” The Fordist category ‘worker,’ styled as a dependent employee labouring under the supervision of an employer, could not encompass the needs of SEWA members: their desire for flexibility, their preference for working at home, and their need to integrate productive and reproductive activities (Cited in Prügl, 1999: 206-7).

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<sup>10</sup> Cox was forced to resign from his post in the ILO’s International Institute of Labour Studies over his critique of what he saw as the ILO’s corporatist approach to industrial relations and the dominant position played by the United States in the policies of the ILO. “This structure of power,” he wrote in 1977, “has prevented the ILO from confronting effectively the real social issues of employment–creation, land reform, marginality and poverty in general. Initiatives that have been taken to deal with such issues have all ultimately been diverted into programs consistent with the hegemonic ideology and power relations” (Cox, 1977:385).

Reflecting on Bhatt's contribution to the feminist struggle around changing the gendered rules of home work, Elizabeth Prügl wrote: "In attacking rules, feminist activists change institutions. Households in which men no longer are the undisputed breadwinners can no longer uphold men's authority on the presumption that they ensure household survival" (Prügl, 1998: 143).

Bhatt's challenge to the notion of the standard employment relationship as the only definition of the worker and representative of labour has implications for how we understand the welfare state. The welfare state emerged in Western Europe in the context of Keynesian full employment and the standard employment relationship (Esping-Anderson, 1990). It was based on the equal contribution of three pillars- the state, the market and the nuclear family (Hermann and Mahnkopf, 2010). While full employment has been eroded in the developed world and the state is being 'hollowed out', in the developing world welfare has always been predominantly based on the household, the community and the village.

We have seen a different type of welfare regime emerge in countries such as India and South Africa. Ian Gough and Geoff Wood (2010) describe this different type as an Informal Security Welfare Regime. In this regime, they suggest, the household, community and village are the central sources of welfare. Income is derived from multiple livelihood strategies, not from standard employment. For Ela Bhatt "the caste system continues as a source of security and solidarity in times of insecurity and individualization for much of the poor of India." She does not see the Indian state being able to develop a formal welfare regime for its people anytime in the near future and insists therefore on the caste system as being an important source of security for many Indians (Bhatt, Interview, 2010).

### 3. WHAT LESSONS CAN WE LEARN FROM ELA BHATT?

I have argued that through her organising and advocacy work Ela Bhatt has contributed to a transformation in the way we look at two central concepts of modernity – labour and the household. She has done this by redefining the concept of work. I have argued further that the reconceptualisation of these concepts has implications for how we understand economic security.

Through the emergence of unions such as SEWA, the notion of who represents labour is being broadened; the marginalised are finding an institutional voice. Increasingly, the household is being recognised as a site of both production and reproduction. Although the state plays a less central role in the informal security welfare regime than the traditional European welfare state, innovative responses to welfare are emerging in what are now called the IBSA countries (India, Brazil and South Africa).

South Africa recently introduced a Community Work Programme (CWP) that it intends to extend to all its municipalities by 2014. This will guarantee two days of work to anyone wishing to work (Philip, 2009). India has already introduced the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee (MGNREGA) which guarantees 100 days of work for every rural household (Pankaj, 2010). Brazil has introduced the Bolsa Familia that gives grants to families whose children attend school (Machado, Fontes, Antigo, 2010). The aim of a global social floor is, many now believe, an attainable goal.

The lesson I draw from Bhatt is the need for an alternative developmental path grounded in the distinct work and livelihood strategies of the developing world. She illustrates this through the process of recycling:

‘The rag picker picks recyclables from the garbage, sorts them into broad categories, and sells them to the dealer...this material is sold to manufacturing units, which are part of the formal sector. They in turn produce new products for the market from the recycled stuff. By recognising every worker at every stage of the production process as integral to the industry and the economy, we can begin to build equitable, democratic and participatory systems that are the key to eliminating poverty’ (Bhatt, 2006: 58).

Her long-time colleague, Renana Jhabvala, describes this alternative as a ‘peoples economy’ (Jhabvala, 2010). We need, she suggests, to think of alternative institutions of the economy, not only of large-scale corporations such as Unilever and Monsanto. A people’s economy is not driven by pure profit. This is not its driving force. We need to think in terms of co-operatives, of what the Brazilians call the ‘solidarity economy’ (Jhabvala, 2010).

This raises many questions.

- How effective is SEWA in challenging historic inequalities such as the relationship between caste and work?

- How can the kind of jobs being created be reconciled with the notion of decent work?
- What role can Northern labour social justice activists play in building this movement?
- Is SEWA a special case of organising workers in the informal economy?

Policy discussions on economic security have tended to focus on the role played by the dominant institutions of global governance, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organisation (WTO). Insufficient attention has been paid to the changing world of work. Any attempt to revisit the out-dated ILO convention on social security (No 102 of 1952 based on formal employment and a male breadwinner), must take as its point of departure the precarious forms of work emerging worldwide.

I concluded my interview with Ela Bhatt with a question. “How,” I asked, “does SEWA deal with the power of corporate capital in the age of globalisation?” “It’s a losing battle,” she replied pragmatically in the spirit that defines her life and that of SEWA. “We are poor,” she said, “but we are not destined to be poor. You cannot rob us of our collective strength” (Bhatt, Interview, 2010).

The lesson I draw from Ela Bhatt is that economic security in the twenty-first century will only be realised once the dignity of the work of marginalised women and men is recognised and given an institutional voice.

## INTERVIEWS

Interview with Ela Bhatt, Ahmedabad, 05.12. 2010

Interview with Pratibha Pandya, Ahmedabad, 06.12.2010

Interview with Heena Dave, SEWA Office, Surendranagar District, 06.12.2010

Interview with Mirai Chatterjee, SEWA Social Security Offices, Ahmedabad, 07.12.2010.

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