

GLOBAL CHANGE LEADERS CASE STUDY



Ela Bhatt

Organizing Self-Employed Women in India

Nanci Lee

INTERNATIONAL CENTRE FOR WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP
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Ela Bhatt

Organizing Self-Employed Women in India

Introduction

SEWA women by organising themselves have faced many struggles ...but in the process have attained self-dignity, a slice of power, increased their capability to think, act, react, manage and lead. ...attained courage to stand up and fight. Self-reliance is what they want ultimately. There is no development without self-reliance.

Ela Bhatt, Acceptance speech for Right Livelihood Award

Ela Bhatt is the visionary and activist behind a movement of self-reliance, for which she aptly received the Right Livelihood Award in 1984. Her work has impacted the livelihoods of hundreds of thousands of women over two generations. She is the founding chair of the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), a union for self-employed women, the first of its kind in history. It was Ahmedabad, India, in the early 1970s: a handful of women working as street vendors and traders pooled a quarter of a rupee each to form an association to represent themselves and work for better conditions and services. Four decades later, SEWA has close to one million members in nine states of India with a large network of associations and cooperatives with the same membership¹ (SEWA Bank, 2008). Women themselves are the workers, managers and leaders. The ownership is palpable. When Joti-ben, a SEWA member, spoke at a conference in Thailand, she didn't introduce herself as someone representing an organization; instead, she said, "I am SEWA." She added that anyone else from SEWA would say the same. "Ben" is an expression used in India to describe sister and SEWA exemplifies this sisterhood. Women come together to support one another.

SEWA provides savings, loans, insurance, pension schemes, cooperative supports, linkages to markets, literacy programs, affordable drugs, childcare, health care, insurance and even gold purchases and pensions for their women members. What makes it a movement is its unique organizational structure. It is not an institutional-beneficiary model but organized through member-driven unions, cooperatives, associations and networks. In this way, SEWA has not only provided economic and social security for its members; through organizing and advocacy, it has expanded the rights and recognition of the self-employed worldwide. As important, Ela Bhatt has demonstrated a leadership that is genuinely passed onto others and because of that, SEWA has thrived. This is the story of a labour movement, a woman's movement, a cooperative movement and the groundbreaking leader behind them.

¹ 966,138 members across India according to SEWA's Annual Report 2008

Context

To understand SEWA it is helpful to know what it was like for these working women in Gujarat State in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In her account of SEWA, Ela Bhatt described the conditions of the women in the informal economy when they began in Gujarat State in central India. Women's trades and services made up a large portion of the informal job market in urban Ahmedabad. Some examples included "head loaders" who transported goods from wholesalers to retailers, "bidi" (cigarette) rollers, tinsmiths, quilt makers, idol makers, painters, incense stick makers, construction workers, midwives, garment stitchers, rag pickers. While she emphasized the resourcefulness of these economically active women, she also acknowledged the challenges that they shared in their respective trades.

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, labor-intensive, raw material-processing arm of industry. Even though they exist in large numbers, they are scattered, isolated and unaware of their position in the economy. They have very little bargaining power. (Bhatt, 2006, p. 42)

Bhatt described the lifestyle of Soopa Goba, one of SEWA's original founding members, and her "very first comrade-in-arms." Soopa was a typical self-employed woman at that time. She described Soopa as dark, voluptuous and invariably dressed in a worn purple sari. "A migrant from Kandesh, a poor district in Maharashtra, she slept on the sidewalk at night and during the day carried bales of cloth on her head – transporting goods from wholesalers to retailers, from the railway yard to a warehouse, or from shop to shop in the Dhanlaxmi cloth market. She was paid two Rupees per trip, made an average of twenty trips a day" (Bhatt, 2006, p. 10).

Women's trades and services like Soopa's still make up a large portion of the informal job market in urban cities of India. Their conditions are similarly hostile and unprotected.

Life Journey

Knowing the quiet power of Ela Bhatt today, it may be difficult to imagine her as she described herself in her twenties in 1949, a shy and studious university student. Two men would have a deep influence on her leadership and her early thinking. One was her future husband Ramesh. The other was Gandhi.

Ramesh would change Bhatt's relationship to poverty and the slums in India. She recalls him as a fearless, handsome, student leader and active member of the Youth Congress. He was collecting data on slum-dwellers for the census of 1951. Bhatt was, at first, reluctant because she knew that her parents would disapprove of their daughter "wandering in dirty neighbourhoods with a young man whose family one knew nothing about" (Bhatt, 2006, p.5). Her father was a successful lawyer with a prominent position in society who had gone with Mahatma Gandhi on the Salt March. She described her mother as even more progressive than her father. "However, when it came to her daughters - my younger sister Rupa and me - my mother was progressive and conservative." Bhatt grew up not far from Maynafalia slum of Surat but, she recalls that in material terms, it was worlds apart with one-room houses and mud floors. Tiny backyards functioned as common bathing, washing and defecating grounds.

Through Ramesh and his work, she came into closer contact with poverty than she ever had. She contrasts her own awkwardness with the ease with which her husband interacted with the slum dwellers:

I, however, had never seen anything like this at such close quarters, and was uncomfortable. I was paralyzed and passive, frustrated with my inability to step out of my shell. All the same, learning about “how the other half lives” was a liberating experience, and it made a deep impression on me. (Bhatt, 2006, p.6)

She combined on-the-ground experience with wide and deep reading. Ramesh gave her the writings of Gandhiji and J. C. Kumarappa about the economics of self-reliance and they read and discussed them avidly. He also provided critical insights in early stages of SEWA. He was an intellectual sparring partner but also gave her the support and space to lead. Even when they disagreed, his support and generosity of spirit gave her the confidence to trust in herself (Bhatt, 2006).

It was the Ahmedabad of the 1960s and Mahatma Gandhi held the heart of newly independent India in his hands. Gandhi had spurred the young and educated to think about living and working with the poor in “village republics” as a base for India’s new democracy to prosper. The emphasis was on national unity, local production and cooperation. Bhatt recalls her excitement for a politics that had the power to inspire and stimulate action. She was drawn particularly to “his emphasis on simplicity – the idea that adding complexity is not progress; ...on the dignity or even the sanctity, of labour; on the importance of human values – that nothing that compromises a person’s humanity is acceptable...” (Bhatt, 2006, p. 8).

In 1955, she completed her studies and was offered a position in the legal department of the Textile Labor Association (TLA). One of the most powerful trade unions in India, the Textile Labor Association had been created by Mahatma Gandhi and Anasuyaben Sarabha. By the 1960s, TLA had become a strong and large presence in the country owing to its philosophy of trusteeship, a large member base and peaceful negotiations. Bhatt described her early days as a lawyer as challenging and tense, as she was young and still building confidence and experience.

Then events in the textile industry spurred her to deepen her analysis of women’s work. By the 1960s, the textile industry was beginning a period of gradual decline. In 1968, two major textile mills were closed and thousands of workers were left jobless. She was asked by the TLA to survey women in the families of the thousands who had been laid off in plant closures. There she learned what it meant for women to be self-employed; they had resorted to selling fruits and vegetables in the streets. A great many children had stopped going to school to help their mothers make ends meet. She realized that she had to look beyond the confines of her legal education: “They were jobs without definitions. I learned for the first time what it meant to be self-employed. None of the labor laws applied to them” (Bhatt, 2006, p. 9). Ironically, her first understandings of the informal sector came from working in the formal sector.

In 1968, she was assigned the task of first Convenor of the Women’s Wing in the Textile Labor Association. A year later she was sent to Tel Aviv to experience an Israeli desert kibbutz and to study. “I was excited by everything! But what interested me the most was the idea that unions and cooperatives could work so well together” (Bhatt, 2006, p. 9).

She returned to the TLA full of ideas about the potential of unions. She thought that if the self-employed women were organized, they could experience the same benefits that organized labor received. “In the process, I came to a simple realization - a union is about coming together. Women did not need to come together against anyone, they just needed to come together for them-

selves. By forming a union - a bond - they affirmed their status as workers, and as a result of coming together, they had a voice.” For Bhatt, organizing served practical purposes such as access to services, but also provided a collective base for advocacy and political change.

From early on, Bhatt encouraged organizing within the Textile Labor Union women. Under the auspices of the Women’s Wing of the TLA, Ela Bhatt decided to organize a public meeting for the head loaders in the cloth market to discuss their problems. SEWA grew from this turning point. Rather than elicit their feedback, she encouraged the women to organize into a group. They each contributed a quarter of a rupee and founded an association. She supported them through letters to the local newspaper. When cloth merchants denied the allegations, the TLA Women’s Wing reprinted the merchant’s claims of fair treatment on cards. These they distributed to the head loaders association so that they could use them to hold the merchants accountable (Sebstad, 1982, in Chen, 2008). After this victory, a group of used clothing dealers approached the TLA Women’s Wing. Again, Ela Bhatt called a public meeting where over a hundred women (used garment dealers and others) came. During that meeting, SEWA was born:

A woman from the crowd suggested that they form an association of their own. Thus, on an appeal from the women and at the initiative of Ela Bhatt and the TLA Women’s Wing, the Self-Employed Women’s Association was born on 3 December, 1971 (Chen, 2008, p. 182-183) and registered as a trade union in 1972.

Within two years, the women realized that the union would need an economic base to support its activities, so they created SEWA Bank, a cooperative bank in 1974. Both SEWA and SEWA Bank continued to operate within the Textile Labor Association.

A little under a decade later, differences between SEWA and its umbrella union became more dramatic. The TLA considered SEWA its offspring but found it difficult to control the pace and direction in which SEWA was growing. SEWA, in turn, found TLA management increasingly “top-down.” These tensions came to a head during an incidence of communal violence.

Following caste-class violence related to a proposal to provide dalits (lower-caste) with reserved seats in medical schools, SEWA supported the dalits. The TLA leadership did not appreciate such a political women’s wing but Bhatt and SEWA stood their ground. In 1981, SEWA was asked to leave the TLA. At that time, Bhatt was not sure that they could survive without the TLA. They had only 4,900 members, a small cooperative bank, an office building, a rural centre, one vehicle and a few typewriters (Bhatt, 2006, p. 14-16). While Bhatt was concerned, it was a blessing in disguise as it allowed SEWA to flourish as a highly political union focused on the rights and interests of self-employed women. In hindsight, she realized that SEWA could never have taken the political direction that it now uses if it were under the TLA.

Today, SEWA has grown to become a family of dozens of associations, cooperatives and producer groups offering everything from social security, medical clinics and pension schemes to a trade facilitation centre. SEWA’s Cooperative Bank is fully registered under the Federal Reserve of India and has been profitable since its inception. They began with smaller localized service cooperatives and producer groups. As they expanded to member needs and interests, they discovered a need for literacy, pharmaceuticals and improved marketing for the trade of products.

Vision of Self-Reliance

Bhatt and the founding members of SEWA saw a world where women who work out of home and in the street (informal economy) would be recognized and supported in their work, not only in terms of their services but in terms of their voices. In her humility, Bhatt acknowledges that she didn't begin with a vision, exactly, but she had good instincts and challenged the labels attached to the self-employed:

To lump such a vast workforce into categories viewed as “marginal,” “informal” “unorganized” “peripheral” “atypical,” or “the black economy” seemed absurd to me. Marginal and peripheral to what? I asked. Such diversity and adaptability signified [their] strength!”(Bhatt, 2006, p. 10)

She saw the informal sector as a practical alternative in a context of shrinking opportunities for formal employment. Further, she acknowledged the strength and dignity in their work that grew out of traditional, inherited skills that were able to adapt to the needs of the times. These were resilient women.

All these realizations came later for Bhatt. Though she had only a vague notion of definitions of the informal sector and self-employment at that time, she knew injustice when she saw it and understood how to use capacity as her starting point.

Bhatt put the capacity of women at the centre of all levels of leadership within SEWA. Today, the General Assemblies of SEWA are a sight to behold with more than 2,000 elected representatives and union leaders sharing food, lively debate and making decisions for their union. Grass-roots leaders, many of them illiterate, represent dozens of trades in decisions at the highest level of SEWA.

Even at the beginning, she was able to step back and allow others to take ownership. Jayshree Vyas, now Director of SEWA Bank, recalls the early days of SEWA when the Cooperative Bank, the Union, and the Federation of Cooperatives were each becoming their own organizations. It would have been easy to hold tightly to such a new organization that she had helped to create. Some of the new leaders and managers were more educated. It would have been easy to feel threatened. But she was able to pass ownership and get fully behind the other leaders with all of her support. It is part of her belief in every woman's potential.

Vyas describes how Bhatt instinctively brings out the best qualities of those around her and fosters the talent in others. First, you have her full attention. Whether a national policy issue or a small problem, she treats every concern with the same level of attention and respect. Second, she will focus squarely on your capacities. Vyas remarks, “She almost ignores your limitations. She will never mention them to you. Not once. She will focus on your strengths” (personal communication, 2011). Finally, she leads through dialogue. No major decisions are taken at SEWA without many conversations reviewed from all angles.

Bhatt was instrumental in shaping SEWA's vision, which concentrated on the self-reliance of women. Her premise was that women affect change; they simply need supportive conditions:

Women can and do build strong, vital organizations around issues that are relevant to them, find viable solutions out of their own experiences, and in the process change our society... (Bhatt, 2006, p. 5)

The essential element is the self-organizing: that women themselves are building the organizations to suit their interests. This provides economic and social security, but also, in the process, builds capacity and voice, which ensures security over the long run. SEWA demonstrates not only what women can achieve when they come together around particular issues, but what a leader can achieve when she steps back and allows others space to lead.

SEWA, a Network of Associations and Movement

Under Ela Bhatt's leadership, SEWA is a powerful example of citizen-led organizing that has led to changes in the public sector in India and internationally. It was unprecedented to have a union of self-employed workers. Usually unions are made of employees working on their behalf against an employer. In the case of SEWA, the union was not organized against anyone. Women came together for themselves to provide services and as a result, had a voice (Bhatt, 2006).

From its inception in the Women's Wing of the TLA, SEWA became a small union in 1972. In 1974, the members realized that they needed their own economic base to survive and created SEWA Mahila Cooperative Bank, a cooperative and fully registered financial institution with the Reserve Bank of India. It began as one of the first experiments in microfinance in the world along with Grameen Bank. In this case, however, the profits and decisions return to the members.

The early 1980s saw the first of many successful advocacy campaigns for head loaders, street vendors and waste pickers to improve their conditions of work, reduce harassment and ensure fair bargaining. Beginning with an urban base, over the years SEWA grew to represent rural members and associations. As it grew, it continued its dual focus on services for its members and advocacy for particular trade groups facing challenges (Bhatt, 2006).

Originally based in Gujarat state, SEWA organizations have been established in nine other states over the last 20 years (SEWA, 2011). Now SEWA represents more than 900,000 women in an umbrella of hundreds of associations including producer, marketing, social and financial service groups. SEWA has contributed to ground-breaking policy changes for self-employed at both the national and international levels.

SEWA's impact is not limited to India. An international movement emerged around the informal economy and home-based workers through the inspiration of SEWA. SEWA also helped to inspire national and regional networks of home workers in the 1990s (called HomeNet) in South and Southeast Asia, national networks in India and Kenya, and an international alliance called Streetnet International. SEWA, along with Harvard University, also collaborated with a global team of activists and researchers to form Women in Informal Employment Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) in 1997. WIEGO aimed to improve the status of women in the informal economy and to generate the research required for policy change at national and international levels. In 1996, these combined networks advocated and won an International Convention on Home Work, acknowledging the rights of home-based workers (International Labor Organization, 2011).

SEWA Structure and Governance

Because it is self-propelled by its members and grown to their needs, SEWA has been described as a movement. One of its largest organizations is SEWA Bank, a profitable cooperative bank that offers short and long-term savings, health and life insurance, short and long-term loans, pension schemes, ATMs and smart cards with pictorial images for illiterate women in both urban and rural

areas. The following chart provides the scale of complexity of services offered to its members in Gujarat where more than half of SEWA's membership is located

Figure 1: SEWA member-based associations and their membership, Gujarat State, 2008

Associations	Nature of Membership	Numbers of Women
Union	All SEWA members (access to literacy training, pharmacies, all other associations)	519,309
Cooperative bank	Individual savers and shareholders; Approx. 4,000 savings and credit groups	307,558 accounts 60,720 members
Marketing associations	9 district federations; a craft association; Trade facilitation centre	114,802 members
Rural associations	Approx. 4,300 producer groups	67,858 members
Cooperatives & federations	Over 100 SEWA cooperatives: producer, marketing and service (childcare providers, health care providers, office cleaners)	63,477 members

(Chen, 2008); (SEWA, 2008)

Associations range from large marketing associations with more than 100,000 members to small rural groups of 20-25 women; from sophisticated financial services that would match any bank worldwide to social services such as medical clinics and literacy training.

From the start, SEWA has been helping its members to form and participate in one or more of these associations according to their needs and location. While they vary, all share the following characteristics:

- They are owned and managed by the self-employed women workers.
- They are democratically run.
- They aim towards self-reliance, both financially and managerially

(SEWA, 2008, p. 12).

It is a unique governance structure. It is not one organization trying to do many things at different levels. Rather, it is a host of associations created by members for their purposes, including the size and location that suits them best.

In this way, the associations are like the roots of a banyan tree, which acts as SEWA's organigram. Not only does the banyan tree metaphor describe how SEWA has evolved historically, it also demonstrates the bottom-up values inherent in the association. All parts of the organization are equal: "Each one is independent and autonomous, both financially and in the decision-making process. At the same time, new growth draws strength from the old" (Bhatt, 2006, p. 18). It is an enormous union with a relatively flat structure of hierarchy; its clusters of groups and associations have grown from its base and keep expanding as the needs arise.

SEWA's structure is flat to give governance power to its members. Its membership is comprised of 124 trades and occupations, including those previously mentioned: vegetable vendors, waste collectors, cigarette rollers, construction workers and midwives. Each trade elects its representatives proportionate to the size of trade and then meets quarterly. As well, 25 members are elected

from the trade representatives to form an executive committee that meets monthly. This is the highest decision-making body (Bhatt, 2006).

Making decisions in such a highly decentralized and democratic system of associations is no easy task, particularly given the base of women who are largely illiterate. SEWA is able to achieve broad outreach and success in its initiatives through two very different types of leaders. Bhatt describes them:

While the elected leaders have the decision-making power and are in constant contact with the executive committee, union organizers have wider contacts across the organization and sometimes possess a better perspective on issues that span different trades. The members humorously refer to this power play as “mother-in-law/daughter-in law problems”. (Bhatt, 2006, pp. 18-19)

Both are essential to SEWA’s form of organizing but synergy between the two can be challenging. Mary Coyle, former director of the Coady International Institute, found that the key to Bhatt’s leadership was her ability to foster both types of leaders:

She is the pivotal point around which both of those types of leaders evolve. She appreciates what both groups bring, but helps create synergies between them and broker those relationships. (Coyle, personal communication, 2011)

It is a delicate balancing act. Grassroots leaders provide the conscience and relevance to SEWA. They ensure compliance with the original values. Whereas young educated professionals have greater access to information and formal management skills, they may not have personal or grounded history in SEWA’s purpose. SEWA’s vitality is reflected in its ability to ride these tensions and leverage both kinds of leaders with neither type of leadership style holding too much power.

Many are skeptical that illiterate women would genuinely have a say. Having worked with SEWA for several years, I (the author) have seen first hand their decision-making power in action and women in the community do have the power to hold their educated sisters accountable. There are several examples of where the membership-at-large overrode management’s preference on a decision. For example, I have seen Ela Bhatt in planning sessions gently remind managers not to plan too far ahead without members’ input. She (Ella Bhatt) said, “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves. If it’s a good idea, bring it back to the members and see if it takes root” (Bhatt, personal communication, 2003).

Lessons Learned

Critical Enabling Factors

There were many critical factors that led to the success of SEWA and the movement. Timing was surely one. SEWA was born in newly independent India when Gandhi’s influence made it ripe for change and collaborative models. Nevertheless, context is not enough to explain SEWA’s success. Ela Bhatt played a critical role in leveraging those early opportunities at every turn.

Perhaps the most important influence she had on SEWA was to create a culture based on an unwavering focus on the self-reliance of women. As Vyas observes, “She is very clear about her focus - the women and the poor. In this way, she is not just focused but brave. She will not fight for

everyone and everything” (personal communication, 2011). She is large in her vision and not easily distracted by side issues or opportunities.

In this environment, organizing flourished and women at all levels stepped forward to lead. They were able to create a decentralized and highly member-driven governance structure that has allowed SEWA to grow and thrive. The organizing is an end in itself, so already there is success. Also, this ownership ensures that the women are able to hold the process accountable and steward the organizations over time. There is some confidence that the leadership has taken hold and will continue for generations.

This level of ownership is tied to another critical success factor, that of looking to the long term. The organization is not a project on a limited time frame. The members, in their various associations, talk about supporting women from birth to death and on to the next generation. There are now second and third generations of women working in SEWA.

It took years of planning and advocacy and patience for members to establish the union, the bank and all of the systems and services, including laws to protect the self-employed. To achieve such accomplishments requires a real view to the long term. It also requires leadership that can anticipate the future and Bhatt was particularly good at that. As Vyas remarks, “She can see 20 years ahead. Whatever she predicted is already happening” (personal communication, 2011).

Bhatt attributes the diversity of their membership as key to their success and emphasizes flexibility: “The issues we face vary with our changing membership; each new member brings with her a new set of problems, a new set of solutions and a full set of expectations. The process itself is our teacher. Our strength is our ability to find solutions by staying flexible” (Bhatt, 2006, p. 19). SEWA’s success is its ability to stay true to the voice of its members and to invest in long-term, slow processes that are not always successful. Given the nature of the organization and the diversity of its membership, the women were constantly facing new challenges.

Strategies for Overcoming Challenges

Challenges have attended the development and growth of SEWA. Scale has attracted political attention that is not always positive. Bhatt once commented that when the organization was small, the moneylenders were the enemy: those who lent to self-employed women at exorbitant interest rates. As SEWA grew in size and influence to become the largest trade union in India, and possibly the world, its obstacles became larger, including various governments and bureaucrats that made SEWA a political target.

Diversity has been another challenge. The women of SEWA are by no means homogenous in their poverty. They profess a variety of religions, and they come from diverse situations, ranging from urban centres to rural hamlets. Most of the members are vulnerable to various risks, some of which affect large numbers, such as drought, floods or even human conflicts, such as communal violence.

However, SEWA’s very structure helps it to respond to these challenges. The decentralized and diverse nature of the groups and associations make SEWA well positioned to act: “Because SEWA promotes local organizing and develops local teams to carry out all of its activities, it has decentralized grassroots intelligence and response systems in place” (Chen, 2008, p. 203).

SEWA has even worked with the government to establish fodder security schemes, rainwater harvesting and plantations for drought prevention. During the communal violence in Gujarat, Hindu and Muslim members came together to find solutions (Chen, 2008). So, while their scale and diver-

sity presents them with a wider range of challenges, it is the same diversity that helps to tackle them.

When asked, Bhatt asserts that the biggest challenge has been people's mindset about the poor and the self-employed. It has taken decades and still SEWA is working against preconceived ideas and attitudes of officials, bureaucrats, experts and academics about work, employment and unions. Even some of the women working with SEWA who don't have prior experience with poverty need to address their own misconceptions. To work toward self-reliance, people need to genuinely believe in the women's capacity. There are programs within SEWA that allow staff and others to spend extended time in members' homes to see how they live and better understand their challenges and resourcefulness. These are small attempts to address the larger issue of mindset. In all it does, SEWA attempts to redress the way we understand poverty and work. Perhaps the best education is the demonstration of what the women have been able to achieve.

Perspectives on leadership

Ela Bhatt has been a powerful force for self-employed women in the world. Much can be learned from her approach to leadership. First and foremost, she has been a model. She led by showing what was possible, ranging from her unwavering belief in the capacity of others, her ability to dialogue and her willingness to step back and allow others to come to the fore. All those who work with her admire her integrity and commitment to values.

Her leadership cannot be reduced to the nuts and bolts of running organizations. Nor was it simply due to her expertise. She provided the moral and visionary foundation on which others could build. No longer the active head of SEWA, she is still described as its conscience and yields powerful influence. The effectiveness of her leadership and vision for women leaders is evident in the self-perpetuation of the movement. Women came to the circles and networks because they believed in the causes and in their own capacities. Ela Bhatt was instrumental in creating the conditions, primarily with regard to attitude but also in terms of the institutional, economic and political conditions whereby women could organize for themselves. This included the ability to recognize and foster different types of leaders. Above all, she showed that one of the most powerful ways to lead is to build leadership in others.

Final Message

Ela Bhatt once said that projects cannot bring change. This is quite a statement, considering the millions of projects worldwide attempting to work for lasting changes in people's lives. Projects, in her view, are too external, too short-term.

Bhatt's legacy is her life-work, which demonstrates the power of organizing to bring about lasting change. SEWA demonstrates that it is critical to consider not only what you do, but how you do it. In a recent speech at the United Nations, she challenged us: "Will it make the individual and the collective more self-reliant? And will the leadership emerge from... among the very people whose lives it affects?" (Bhatt, 2011, p. 3).

Ela Bhatt realized a vision to support a system of self-reliance and leadership of women at various levels. In doing so, she has created a movement that will sustain itself beyond her because it is truly owned by the women themselves. They, indeed, are SEWA.

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