

Human Rights and Responsibilities : Ending Poverty¹

- Ela Bhatt²

I have been for long years organizing the working poor and particularly women for self reliance. One thing that I have learnt while organizing them is that poverty and loss of freedom are not separate. Therefore, I consider SEWA Movement as a Journey to Economic Freedom.

The women's way to freedom, I learn is freedom from want, a freedom to want, a freedom to work with skill and dignity, a freedom to enjoy fruits of their labour, a freedom to bargain, a freedom to belong and take pride in their caste and community and a freedom to bond with sisters from other castes and communities – locally, nationally and internationally.

Here are the most frequent expressions that I have heard from SEWA women in response to what freedom means to them?

“having lots of work on hand”

“being able to work uninterrupted”

“my own money”

“more money”

“stepping out of the house”

“having old age pension”

“being able to wear clothes, washed everyday”

“having a door to the bathroom”

“getting respect from older men in the family for my skills and knowledge”

“having a cell phone”

“sending kids to school with my earnings”

“having bank account” And, my favourite one is

“looking at a policeman in the eye”

Call them ‘freedom,’ call them ‘rights’. What they ask is right to work, right to working condition, right to earn, to own asset, right to mobility, right to water sanitation, right to privacy, right to skills, right to children's education, right to communication, right to social security – and, right to democracy, right to human dignity.

The poor and women, basically most importantly, want Right to Work. They want their livelihood activities to continue may it be in normal times, or after disasters or even during conflicts. No work, you go hungry. To survive, they ask for work not charity. Not that they are not working – a forest woman in Bengal had once said to me, *kaaj nahi, kaaj kori maroo*, meaning “There is no work, the grind of work is killing me.” By work they

¹ Speaking at the Opening of the 60th Anniversary of the Convention on Human Rights and its implications for Development : New Visions to End Poverty, organized by InterAction, USA dt. 6-5-2008.

² Founder, Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA), Ahmedabad, India. Tel. 0091-79-25511430-32, Email : mail@sewa.org

do not mean cheap labour and sweatshops. They mean work that brings income to support the family, to build the future. Food coming in the home through work brings dignity, keeps the family together. Work gives them basis to organize and associate, to bargain and negotiate. Work is fundamental to their being.

Most of the poor work in the informal economy (in India 93% of the workforce is in the informal sector, half of them are women—homebased workers, petty vendors, providers of services including manual labour. They are contributors to the growing national income. They are not burden to the country's economy. The fact is that, worldwide, the informal sector is growing, while the formal sector is shrinking.

It is only now that, after 30 years of struggle that the Informal Sector is to an extent recognized by the unions, and governments. We formed Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing, (WIEGO) global research network to show the world the contribution of the women in the informal economy that brings visibility and some recognition, by now.

Right to work leads to Right to Capital.

This massive active workforce, why should they remain poor despite working so hard? Why should farmer remain hungry? Why should weaver remain half clad? Because they are still out of the national formal financial system. 70% of the population do not have a basic bank account, in India. They have no safe place to save, to borrow, to invest. When the country prospers at 9% Growth rate the capital is formed, not at the grassroots level. They remain indebted for ever. Of course, Micro credit is an excellent example, but why not in the mainstream financial system the working poor have right to access capital so as to fight poverty. The poor, illiterate though, women have proved their credit worthiness. They have run their own SEWA Cooperative Bank profitably since 35 years, have distributed 12% to 15% dividend, every year. The poor can run Bank of their own is a proven fact.

Right to Work leads to Right to Capacities

SEWA women build capacity through skills, new and upgraded, through information, technical assistance such as making business plans, developing products, market strategy – exposure to new technology – to be able to stand firm in the competition.

One major factor that created dramatic change in SEWA women has been upgradation of their existing skills. Training of salt farmers in producing from ordinary salt to industrial salt, training of garment makers in modern cutting and sewing, trainings of the cooperatives/self help groups in new skills to make budgets, women farmers operating tractors and power tillers, repair and maintenance of agricultural implements, hand pumps, operating computer and doing video production, construction labour trained in multiskilled masonry village midwives training in safe delivery of child, measuring blood pressure, blood sugar. Right to capacities is integral part of Right to Work. All working

poor are ready to learn new skills, methods, ideas but where are the investments for them to build their capacities

Right to work also means Right to Markets.

Therefore, their production remains undervalued, unsold. Why markets are left out of Human Rights discussions, in peace making processes, in conflict resolutions? Are they not the cause of unrest? The working poor need their right to stand firm in the competitive markets, local and global, real and virtual. Eg. Right to water is recognized by the UN but water itself is privatised. What good is this Right?

If the women are to remain self employed (where are the regular jobs?) and hold on their own in an increasingly global economy, they need a marketing network so they can work on that scale the current economy demands.

SEWA's experience of establishing her own production and marketing network has been encouraging despite the unsupportive macro policy environment. Our cooperatives trade across the globe. Why not? Today when trade is increasingly global, when capital can fly easily across the borders, and technology advances so rapidly, it is important for the workers and producers to also organize globally. They have to right to a level playing field, globalization is not for the benefit of multinationals alone. The working poor also have to bring benefits of globalisation to each other. Today SEWA embroiders reach out to their sister counterpart in Mexico, in Istanbul and in Afghanistan. But where are the Partners, risk-sharers when the poor take initiatives? Why do we not use resources to invest in partnership with the institutions of the working poor.

Lastly, within the Right to Work is inherent the Right to Social Security that includes food security, child care, health, insurance, old age protection, disaster rehabilitation. Social security and work security are the two sides of the same coin. Social Security or social protection is fundamental to their life. Please do not call it safety net – they are not doomed to fall down and therefore need a 'net' to 'save' them. The working poor rightfully are entitled to social security.

In essence, we are talking of every human's right to live happily, securely on this earth.

Human rights have to be guarded by the markets, market institutions, market forces local, particularly global. Governments have to recognize this although the power of Government is declining, when the open markets systematically undermine the Rights of the grassroots producers.

We need to think and rethink our present approaches, theories, practices.

Those who must lead the world today are challenged by one fundamental and global issue – that is, there are fewer and fewer resources and there is greater and greater competition to get access to them. The economic theory guiding corporate and national management says that healthy corporations and nations must keep growing their revenues and GDPs

and within that framework individual must keep earning more and more. This *mantra* of produce more, consume more, we must keep earning more and more that is success. This is driving us to fight over increasingly scarce resources. We are literally swallowing up our Earth. We all do know that in her Books, the debits are always like the credits.

Now, we cannot solve our problems with the same thinking that brought us to these problems. We cannot accept the existing concepts and practices. So, one, we question the value of economic and management models based on inherently false and destructive concepts.

Secondly, going back to Human Rights, the working poor asks what about Human Responsibility? Is it that one has to demand rights when the other fails to perform Responsibility. Rights have no meaning without Responsibility. We all have Rights as well as Responsibilities. There is no 'they' and 'we' – as my Gandhian thinking goes.

Human Rights of the citizens are effective only when the state, civil society, the markets, we all perform our Human Responsibilities.

There is a strong correlation amongst the three of us : I as an individual, the community and the universe. Every deed of us does influence and impact all the three of us. There is no escape. The world should realize that we all are responsible to the life of each other, because we are related, because the consequences are correlated. We need to explore more of this concept of Human Responsibility so my second suggestion is that perhaps it is time to think about Universal Human Responsibility – along with Human Rights.

These are the insights learnt from my SEWA sisters, world wide.

Today we are to deliberate on the future vision to end poverty from this world. After all, poverty is political. It is not God-made. It is man-made. It is society's disrespect for human labour. It is not a destiny. So, I do believe that end to poverty is an achievable goal by us. So, what do we do? My final plea is to convince the world that woman is the breakthrough. Women are the key to a stable, peaceful, constructive society. She wants roots to her family. In woman, you get a worker, a provider, a caretaker, an educator, a networker – a forger of bonds. A woman is the past, present and the future. I consider women's lead role is crucial in our Development process. She will be the leader of change where non-violence is the Way.

Thank you.