

Women and Poverty :

The Hidden Face of Violence with Social Consent¹

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Respected President, Dear Dr. Rama Singh, Faculty, Students and Friends at McMaster University,

I am honored to be invited to deliver the 15th annual Mahatma Gandhi lecture. The relevance of Gandhi today is no less than it was a hundred years ago, and it is increasing as more years pass. Gandhiji's ability not only to see through the complexity of man-made problems to the truth and simplicity in human life, but also to act on it has made him a thinker whose ideas continue to inspire and empower us.

I appreciate and hold high regard for McMaster University that has been reviving Gandhian thought and practice every year in Canada and in India. The link between Gujarat Vidyapith, and McMaster University is itself quite a noteworthy step in the right direction.

I am happy to be in Canada. Canada's commitment to promote diversity and the integration of people coming from different parts of the world contributes to Canada's cultural richness and peaceful outlook. Again, thank you giving me this opportunity to express some of my thoughts on poverty as a form of violence.

I grew up during a time when my country was fighting for independence, so my generation was greatly influenced by Gandhian ideas and practice. Gandhiji enumerated four basic principles to guide the development of a free India. They were: simplicity, non-violence, dignity of labour, and human values. Apply these measures against not only economic thought, but also to broader thinking today, and I believe we will find them to be powerful and useful in seeking solutions.

Let me now come to the subject of today's talk.

It is sometimes said that poverty is in the eye of the beholder. Poor in the eyes of one may be rich in the eyes of another. And the answer varies widely from country to country, culture to culture, people to people and from time to time. Even those living on a dollar a day--which is a widely accepted measure of poverty--live vastly different lives on that one dollar. There are poor who go hungry, but there are also one-meal a day poor, two-meals a day poor, and three-meals and still poor, across the world. Some meals are nutritive, some are little more than junk food, and some eat just one type of grain, like rice day after day. The degree of poverty ranges so widely, that measuring it has long been a challenge. Part of the problem is that in measuring poverty, statistics and numbers do not tell the whole story. They especially do not help us tell multiple stories, because in life there is never just one story.

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So who are the poor? What are the indicators of poverty, and how do we recognize them? What is the common thread that runs through the lives of the poor of the world? Our perceptions of the poor focus on what they lack. Of course, the definition of the word 'poor' itself means lacking, or deficient. And it is true; the poor do lack the means to buy food, or other basic necessities of life like housing, work, healthcare or education. And most certainly, they lack money.

But tied in to that sense of lack in resources are our own attitudes because there is a tendency to believe that poor means faulty or inferior, and especially, lacking moral fiber. By implication poverty is seen as a character flaw. If they are poor, it is their own fault. If they are poor, it must be because they are lazy, and dirty, and uncouth and uneducated or they belong to a lesser caste or race or religion. One must eye them with suspicion; one must be wary of the poor because they cheat, and swindle and want what others have without paying for it. At the other extreme is the attitude that the poor are worthy of pity and charity; that they are helpless and incapable and in dire need of direction and guidance from saviors like us who know better. Somehow, we fail to associate words like strength, resiliency, resourcefulness or dignity with the poor.

We can agree that where there is poverty there is also exploitation and inequality, injustice and vulnerability, and a constant battle over resources. Add to that poor governance, and flaws in the distribution of resources and services. But these are human problems arising out of conflicting and dominating self-interests that disregard the interests of others. Poverty is not God-given; it is most definitely man-made. No one is born poor; society makes one poor.

Gandhiji called poverty a moral collapse of society, and he believed its roots lie in what he called the seven social evils. He named them: Wealth without Work, Pleasure without Conscience, Knowledge without Character, Commerce without Morality, Science without Humanity, Worship without Sacrifice, and Politics without Principles. Let us keep in mind, Gandhiji wrote this in 1925.

And indeed, what is poverty but a passive form of violence? A chronic abuse of human dignity that strips away a person's humanity, and corrodes the human spirit? When a woman does back breaking work for ten hours a day but cannot feed her family with her earnings, society has scorned her labor. When construction workers build housing complexes but they remain homeless and migrants, society has snatched away their right to safety and a sense of belonging. When a woman dies in childbirth, society shows no regard for her life. When a farmer grows food for the world, but goes hungry himself, society is callous. Such are the ways in which society gives its social consent to let the situation continue. For this reason, I say that our silence is violent. Our looking the other way is a form of consent. It is our moral failure that we still tolerate poverty.

Violence by tacit social consent has many faces. First are the faces that the poor can actually see. That face may be of a hard-hitting policeman, a cold-hearted employer, or a vicious contractor. Then there are the faces of a system that doles out humiliation, and injustice, like the government labour department, the municipality, or the court that takes years to deliver judgement. The poor see the second set of faces only after they have gained awareness. The third and the most distant faces belong to policy and law makers who are more likely than not, in complete disconnect with the realities of the poor, and are responsible for the outdated, irrelevant, impractical,

unenforceable and at times, out and out exploitative laws and policies. It takes time for us, and for the poor, to recognize these faces as perpetrators of poverty.

When India plans for an 8% GDP growth, but makes no provision for at least an 8% rise in income for the poor, it is consenting to perpetuate the pyramid. When the G20 meets to discuss the global economic slow down, but makes no mention of the declining or destroyed livelihoods of millions of rural poor, particularly of women, is it not violence by neglect and denial? Federal banks regulate fiscal policy and interest rates to stabilize a country's economy, but they leave out of consideration those who are still unreached, unserved by the banks. About two thirds of the population of India does not have a primary savings bank account. Women are the best savers in India, as elsewhere, but it is women who predominantly get excluded from the financial system. During peace discussions and conflict resolution between countries or borders, poverty is rarely on the agenda. Women are rarely at the negotiating table, and poor women certainly are not. The rapidly increasing gap between the haves and have-nots is not even a sub-section of the Agenda of discussions. Yet the scarcity of resources which are the root cause of so many conflicts, affect the poor most directly. How effective can peace be without the people's participation?

One reason solutions are elusive is that poverty is useful. Without the working poor to lift the heavy loads, our economies would not function. We appear to need that bottom of the pyramid to remain at the bottom to keep our economic and social pyramid stable and wealthy. Without the poor who hope for a better life, we could not win elections with anti-poverty slogans. Eradicate Poverty would be a winning slogan in any country. Without the anti-poverty rhetoric, but pro-poverty actions, we could not maintain a convenient status quo whether economic growth is accelerating or slowing down. Even if the intention is noble, reality is something different. When reality becomes inconvenient, denial has become a very convenient response. Some leaders just make the poor disappear from national statistics, economic data, and five-year plans. If one denies their existence, there is no need to acknowledge their contribution to the nation's GDP, or to distribute the nation's wealth and resources fairly. If they do not exist, their voices can be silenced or ignored. Even the most benign state engages in a concerted effort to promise while at the same time containing the expectations of the poor.

The multi-faceted nature of poverty raises many questions. What kinds of structures or systems cause or perpetuate poverty? How can they be dismantled or transformed? What are the factors that render the poor vulnerable and open to exploitation? And how can the poor empower themselves so they can confront injustice? These are not academic questions, but questions that the poor confront in their daily lives.

In academia, as elsewhere, we have come to believe that once we identify the cause of a problem, a solution is bound to follow. If only that were always true! The gap between those who identify and analyze problems, and those who implement solutions is wide. The thinkers and the doers have different motivations and different understandings of both the problems and the solutions. But what is vitally important is for the people with the problems themselves to come up with their solutions. This does not mean that poor should not reach out to others nor that others should not reach out to the poor.

Even in dealing with answers to poverty, perceptions genuinely differ. Both academics as well as activists are in debate about who are the poor and how to reach them. One approach is to view poverty solely as an income problem. By raising incomes and creating income generating opportunities, the poor can be empowered. The other approach is to see it as a vulnerability problem. The vulnerability approach leads to social programs such as education, child care and health care. Both approaches are needed, and both need to work in an integrated way. Since poverty is connected to both economic and social structures of society, we need a deeper understanding of where the poor are placed within those structures. And when we work with the poor, we come up with multiple different combinations of the two approaches.

Let us look at women for example. All that is said about the poor, is even more true for poor women: among the poor, there are more women than men, and their exploitation is more acute and of longer duration. Women are the most frequent and direct recipients of hidden violence in society and in the economy. Yet in my experience, poor women are also the most potent and peaceful force to address poverty. More importantly, women are more likely to face violence, not with matching violence, but with actions that are non-violent, inclusive and mutually beneficial. So over the past 40 years, while working with the women of SEWA, I have developed a great faith in the leadership of poor women in building a non-violent and prosperous society.

So let me tell you about our experience at SEWA.

The Self-Employed Women's Association, is a trade union of poor, self-employed women in India. We have come together to form a union to stop economic exploitation; we have formed our own cooperative bank to build assets, to tap resources, and 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 1.7 million women strong. We come together not in opposition to anyone, but 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, or as Gandhiji called it, swaraj. But Mahatma Gandhi also said, Swaraj, or Freedom cannot be given; it is generated within one's self.

A little 'irregular' thinking has allowed us to find an approach that looks at what the poor are rich in: their large numbers. My SEWA sisters invariably remind me--We are poor, but we are so many! Their awareness of a collective strength has allowed us to focus on building with hitherto unrecognized strengths, untapped skills, and with non-monetary assets. Our goal is to use work; meaningful, decent work, to build lives, assets, and community.

In the formal sector, employment is created through the creation of jobs by firms, and this employment is generally regular, full time, protected employment, with a clear employer-employee relationship. However, in the informal sector there are no 'jobs'. Employment is a combination of self-employment, or own-account work, some wage employment, some casual work, or part-time work with a variety of employment relations. At any one time a poor person could be working at a number of different employments. For example, a small or marginal farmer also works as a weaver or basket maker; or an agricultural laborer would also have cattle and be a milk producer, or a construction worker would return home and roll bidis, or cigarettes

with her family at night. Sometimes the work is seasonal. A salt farmer may be an agricultural worker during the monsoon season, or a rag picker may make kites during the kite festival. Multiple forms of work are the norm among the working poor, and this risk distribution is key to their survival. Though managing many types of work has its own challenges, it reduces risk, and provides opportunity to rearrange work and life as it unfolds.

Creating employment is not a matter of creating jobs in the formal sector, but of strengthening the workers and producers who are already working in the informal sector to overcome structural constraints and enter markets to maximize their potential. Needless to say that those constraints and markets are created by society and such constraints and markets let the poor remain poor.

As a labour union our underlying approach is to see the poor as workers and producers, rather than just as income-deprived or vulnerable people. The first structural issue is their place in the economy. Where do they fit into the economy? What is their contribution to the economy and what do they receive from the economy? What are the economic barriers they face?

Our economic structures are closely connected with social structures. Barriers for example, are closely connected with gender, caste and class. Furthermore, social needs such as health, child-care, education and housing are all linked to economic capabilities, but also to the provision of social security by the state. Thus market and state structures have the ability to determine both poverty as well as the well being of the people.

The interrelated nature of these structures emerges quite forcefully in our daily work. In dry rural areas for example, the provision of drinking water is closely linked to the capability of women to enter the labour markets, so that when we try to intervene to link the embroiderers with markets, we find that we have to also take up the drinking water issue with the Gujarat Water Board and devise better drinking water schemes for the women. Similarly, while organizing women workers for better wages in tobacco processing plants, we were faced with the need for child care for their children who otherwise would be spending their days playing in tobacco heaps, breathing tobacco dust, while their mothers worked. SEWA Bank is one of the pioneers of micro-credit. Very early on, we discovered that without helping the small entrepreneurs to deal with changing markets and policies, we could not expect the loans to work towards poverty reduction.

Since the economic and social structures are so interrelated, the solutions too have to be integrated. This means that there is no one formula for poverty reduction; rather, it has to be an approach which addresses the various economic and social factors which cause and perpetuate poverty. Hence SEWA's approach has been an integrated approach, enfolding multiple approaches, where various inputs are needed not one after the other, but simultaneously. Our strategy of poverty reduction is a joint action of struggle and development. We strongly believe that the identification of barriers and hidden structural biases must come from the poor women themselves. Essentially this process itself is one of self-empowerment.

At SEWA we come together as workers and producers. We believe that productive work is the thread that first weaves the family and eventually 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 can 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 bring constructive, creative and sustainable solutions to the world.

Based on my experience with the working poor in India, I would like to see an economy so well integrated with society, that a human being's six primary needs are met with resources from a 100 miles radius. I call it the 100 mile principle. If food, shelter, clothing, primary education, primary healthcare and primary banking are locally produced and consumed, we will have the growth of a new holistic economy, that the world will sit up and take notice.

When we put the human being at the centre, we begin to get a more holistic and integrated view of development. We begin to co-relate our activities with its impact on our own self, on the society we live in, and on the universe we live in. And in this way we restore balance and harmony in the world.

Thank you.