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SEWA's Feminism

Eileen Boris

The Gujarati custom of addressing all women as ben, meaning sister . . . seems to instill a latent sense of sisterhood in relationships. SEWA . . . owes much to this common sense of sisterhood in bringing together women of all castes, classes, trades, tribes, and faiths.

—Ela R. Bhatt¹

In late March 1995, Hillary Clinton traveled to Ahmedabad, the Gujarat home of the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), where she talked with some 200 informal sector workers, who “were no longer afraid to organize for better treatment in India’s marketplace and society.” Learning about the struggles of this union of embroiders, *beedi* (cigarette) rollers, rag pickers, produce vendors, and other poor women, she came away impressed by “how this kind of solidarity and effort can change lives.” Since 1972, SEWA had marched in the streets, created cooperatives, developed health insurance and pension policies, lobbied for inclusion under labor law, bargained with contractors and other middlemen, and raised the consciousness of thousands of women through leadership classes and training. However, Clinton’s praise for its “efforts to give women ‘a better life without fear’” focused on another venture: the SEWA bank, a pioneering entry into microfinance—just the kind of program that was most legible to the global feminism that the First Lady exemplified, one that stressed equal rights with men through capitalist development.²

In a neoliberal world that promoted the market and individualism, which the policies of her husband, President Bill Clinton, did so much to foster, SEWA appealed to a wide range of NGOs, international agencies, donor nations, and Western feminists for its practice of self-employment and self-organizing.³ Its empowerment of poor women was radical in the context of Indian politics, economy, and gender systems, but what the *New York Times* in 2009 called its “quest for economic freedom” offered a model for betterment assimilable to other agendas that vied with its own.⁴ While SEWA’s creation of a social protection scheme for own-account workers excluded from state welfare might be considered feeding into neoliberalism by substituting private efforts for public ones, seen from another standpoint, such efforts actually adapted

FIGURE 4.1. Ela Bhatt, c. 2000.

Source: Accessed via Wikimedia Commons: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:MJ-Ela-Bhatt-October-2013.jpg>.

what trade unions often do: develop benefits for members as a step toward raising the overall social wage. In a nation dominated by the informal sector, with caste-based inequalities and village patriarchy coexisting with strong women's movements, self-employment enmeshed women into relations of dependency and debt rather than profitable entrepreneurship. But, under the right circumstances, self-employment could liberate women from economic and social restraints.⁵ SEWA educated its members as workers and as women activists through a multipronged approach that deployed services, social welfare, education, training, negotiation, and cooperatives to generate dignity and daily bread for the nominally self-employed.⁶

Clinton was hardly the first to sing SEWA's praises. This union of poor women gained global recognition during the International Decade for Women.⁷ In 1974 Indian feminist Devaki Jain, "the Gandhian in the midst of ... mostly Marxist economists," visited Ahmedabad, where she met SEWA leader and founder Ela R. Bhatt. Jain soon introduced Bhatt to various New Delhi networks; a year later, she may have had something to do with Bhatt joining India's nongovernmental delegation to the first UN Conference on Women in Mexico City.⁸ Political scientist Irene Tinker from the United States, one of an emerging feminist group of women and development specialists pressuring the US

State Department for gender parity in foreign aid and international decision-making, tapped Bhatt to present on the SEWA bank at a seminar days before the official UN conference in June 1975. Two years later, the Ramon Magsaysay Foundation awarded Bhatt its annual cash prize honoring “greatest of spirit and transformative leadership in Asia.” She used the money to capitalize the Mahila SEWA Trust for member services.⁹

The UN Conference exposed Bhatt to the social justice struggles of women throughout the world: she recalled how it sparked “a new feminist consciousness”—not one based on the sexual politics and legal equality dominating mainstream feminism in the United States and Great Britain, but one located in the resistance of Bolivian mine and Malaysian plantation workers, that is, in the fight for economic redistribution within and among nations that was rocking the UN system with the membership of independent “Third World” nations.¹⁰ In Mexico City, Bhatt came into contact with Ghanaian businesswoman Esther Ocloo, who was seeking to improve the prospects of market women, and US investment banker Michaela Walsh, who, “blown away by the role of women in their local economies,” spearheaded the organization of Women’s World Banking (WWB) to expand access to credit to women globally, much as SEWA was doing locally. Bhatt became one of WWB’s trustees.¹¹

At subsequent UN conferences, Bhatt and other SEWA leaders met feminist staff from the International Labor Organization (ILO). During the 1980s, the ILO would channel monies to the association not only to document working conditions under the new putting-out system, as researchers referred to industrial homework, but also to facilitate SEWA organizing, which the ILO promoted as an example to other grassroots groups in the Global South.¹² SEWA then joined with national and local groups as part of the transnational feminist push for what became ILO convention #177, “Home-Based Labor,” the first international instrument to recognize homeworkers as workers, rather than housewives just earning income on the side, and thus worthy of the labor standards covering all other wage earners.¹³

This is where I came in. In April 1989, funded by the Ford Foundation and the Canadian International Development Research Centre (IDRC), SEWA and the Gandhi Labour Institute organized an “International Workshop on Homebased Workers.”¹⁴ The ILO Office often supported such efforts to facilitate its own gathering of information used to spur the making of global conventions. As a historian of industrial homework in the United States, I was among some thirty “experts” who traveled to Ahmedabad to discuss what we knew about home-based labor and to develop a research agenda. We considered definitions and types of home work, organizing strategies, occupational health, legal contexts, and macro and micro economic trends. During the meeting, SEWA actively shaped our perceptions of the situation. We visited the SEWA Reception Centre, toured the slums of Ahmedabad to observe garment sewers and incense makers in their working and living spaces, and met with grassroots leaders, including women trained as paralegals to defend other members in court against municipal regulations, police harassment, and employer nonpayment. During the final discussion on future research, the meeting minutes recorded:

Since funding is not a problem for her research, and USA is not a developing country, Ms. Boris does not contemplate submitting a proposal [to the ILO for studying

home work]. However, Ms. Boris would be able to facilitate participation (though not travel funding) in the Fourth International Conference on Women's Studies to be held at Hunting [Hunter] College, N.Y., in June 1990, especially for papers linked to household, kinship or gender issues.

This would provide a respectable international forum for dissemination of findings and could lead to an edited volume, for which Ms. Boris is willing to share responsibility.¹⁵

I indeed did organize a session for that conference and with political scientist Elisabeth Prügl—then a PhD student—coedited *Homeworkers in Global Perspective: Invisible No More* (1996) with essays from many participants in the 1989 and subsequent meetings of researchers leading up to the ILO convention. Reflecting the transnational network on home work, essays highlighted conditions in Mexico, Brazil, Indonesia, Finland, Philippines, Iran, Pakistan, India, Canada, the United States, and Great Britain.¹⁶

It was uncanny to find this report in the archive nearly twenty-five years later when I returned to the issue of home-based labor and the ILO as a historian rather than as a practitioner constructing knowledge to bolster the argument for an international convention. I thus write this analysis of SEWA and its achievements from the feminist standpoint of engaged scholarship that probes the past to assess the making of transnational feminism across difference. As history, it grounds memory in the archive, fully understanding how partial both memory and archives are.¹⁷

SEWA's achievement and feminism do not fit neatly into Western liberal classifications. Rooted in Gandhian philosophy, its grassroots activism among poor women challenged conventional understandings of trade unionism and provided an alternative to rights-based women's movements that neglect household economic security. In directing collective action and cooperative efforts to enhancing the lives and livelihood of home-based and mobile workers (such as peddlers and vendors), who fall outside of standard employment contracts, the SEWA women's movement contested both male-dominated trade unions and men's power within the household. Development would come through the empowerment of poor women.¹⁸

The birth of SEWA

Ahmedabad was home to Mahatma Gandhi after his return from South Africa in 1915 until 1930; from there he began the Dandi Salt March against British taxation. Once a handloom weaving area, the city had become "the Manchester of India," the center of the textile industry. In the 1920s, with Anasuya Sarabhai, the radicalized daughter from a mill owner family, Gandhi founded the Textile Labour Association (TLA), a union that operated on the principle of cooperation. For Gandhi, "there is no employee or employer ... both are co-trustees of society and the community as a whole."¹⁹ Sarabhai agreed with Gandhi that a union had to address the larger needs of people, building their capacities. By the 1950s, factors impacting manufacturing throughout the nation—night work and other restrictive women-only labor laws,

active campaigning by union men to block women's employment, and employer preference for male over "more expensive" women—also had pushed women out of factories in Ahmedabad.²⁰ Despite the rationales of protecting maternal health and maintaining household domesticity, the elimination of women from the formal sector never meant that women would cease generating income. They formed a pool of pieceworkers that transformed homes into places of income production.²¹ Women became breadwinners. Most self-employed women generated over half of family income. More than 20 percent were household heads, compared to less than 7 percent in the general population.²²

Ela Bhatt came from a respected Brahmin family with roots in the independence movement. Her maternal grandfather, a physician, went on the Salt March, was arrested during the independence struggle, and practiced Gandhian simplicity. Less politically progressive, her Anglophile lawyer father nonetheless supported women's higher education. As a child, she has explained, teachers "taught us the importance of decentralizing the economy, at the village, local and district level." By the time she graduated with a law degree in 1954, Bhatt "saw our task as rebuilding the nation, and Gandhism taught us to look at things from the perspective of the masses," she recalled in a 2010 interview with South African scholar Edward Webster. "Poverty is wrong because it is violent; it does not respect human labor, strips a person of his or her humanity, and takes away their freedom": these lessons she took away from Gandhi's teachings. She would explain, "With SEWA we put into practice the Gandhian principles of self-reliance and collective action. And Gandhi saw the importance of developing rural India." She argued:

The values he advocated and represented are universal and of all times. Truth, peace, non-violence, self-reliance and simplicity. And we all carry these values in us. Think holistically and simultaneously. In your personal life, but also in your public, economic and political life. Whatever activity you do, think how it relates to you, to the community, to society and ultimately to the universe.²³

In 1955 she started working for the legal department of the TLA.²⁴

After time away for childbirth and a stint working at the state Ministry of Labour, Bhatt returned to the TLA in 1968 to head its Women's Wing.²⁵ In the 1950s and 1960s, the Women's Wing provided the wives of unionists with training in household skills and arts; it also offered social welfare to member families. Bhatt had other ideas. She understood that the women needed not home economics but organization as workers. Thus, she proposed to the TLA a separate women's union rather than a ladies' auxiliary. "I wanted ... to organize the women workers in a union so that they could enjoy the same benefits that organized labour received." Indeed, she recognized, "Women do not need to come together against anyone; they just need 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."²⁶

As SEWA recounts its history, informal sector workers—cart-pullers, head-loaders, and used-garment sellers, a good proportion of whom were migrants to the city from surrounding villages—went to Bhatt for aid. She began investigating and

publicizing their living and working conditions. At an outdoor meeting in 1971, the women decided to form their own association that would be a trade union. At first the Registrar of Trade Unions rejected their application because he did not consider them workers. After all, they lacked employers in a traditional sense. Bhatt remembers how her members "were invisible to the policy makers, the census writers and the trade union leaders."²⁷ It took months before the Registrar accepted SEWA's concept of a union as being "for the workers" rather than "against the employer." SEWA was registered as a union in 1972.²⁸

A decade later, SEWA broke from the TLA over strategy and focus. It chafed at being told to organize women into traditional trade unions when its membership of "own account" and piece-rate employees needed credit, housing, social welfare, and marketing channels. The break came during the caste-based riots in 1981 that hit SEWA members hard. Their households were starving as all business except government-protected industry shut down; it was unsafe to be on the streets even before curfews, making it impossible for market vendors and peddlers to function. While SEWA sought reconciliation between various ethnic and status factions, the TLA remained neutral. Conflict between its leadership and Bhatt, who defended the "Scheduled and Backward" castes in public, finally led the TLA to expel SEWA from its umbrella. Male-dominated, despite its early leadership, the union viewed these women "as enterprising housewives stepping in to work at a time of crisis."²⁹ It never fully accepted an organization of self-employed women, who appeared as competitors driving down the wages of mill workers, but who actually were attempting to fill the void left by deindustrialization and economic change.³⁰ Like other national trade unions, the TLA still concentrated its organizing on India's rapidly disappearing formal sector, about 11 percent of the national labor force at the time of SEWA's birth.³¹

Expulsion was devastating to a trade unionist like Bhatt, but it actually opened new directions. SEWA would not only organize workers into a union but also into alternative forms of production that could improve upon the going rate of employers by offering competition. Union members created cooperatives "to become owners of their labour." They marketed products, provided services, and bargained with middlemen. There were dairy, livestock, land-based, craft, trading, and service cooperatives (like the bank, child care, and health).³² There were distribution and production cooperatives of vegetable vendors, cleaners, paper pickers, patchwork sewers, block printers, and cane and bamboo weavers. Renana Jhabvala, SEWA's secretary and chief trade union organizer, has observed: "coming together in a cooperative marks the first time in their lives that they [the members] have ever actually owned something of their own and had decision making power over it." Consciousness shifted "from a piece-rate worker to a worker-owner," with a ripple effect of enhancing "women's personal and economic empowerment."³³ These cooperatives generated solidarity as well as efficiencies.

SEWA further deployed membership strength to engage in advocacy, but reinforced lobbying with direct protest. One example was when Gujarati *chindi* (embroidery) outworkers struggled for inclusion in the state's minimum wage. The government ignored their demand, so they marched. "So many women in *burqas* with little children," Jhabvala recalled. "As we shouted, 'We all are one.' 'Give us minimum wages.'

We went past the traders' shops and then we went to the Labour Commissioner's office and demonstrated there. Within the week the government took out the first notice [for legislation]." But industrialists and the officials whom they had bribed delayed inclusion. When the Labour minister suspended the minimum wage rather than extend it, SEWA fought back through publicity; it went to the newspapers, which were more than happy to expose government corruption and collusion. Winning legislative passage was only the first step, however. SEWA then had to strike to get the ministry to enforce the law. At the end, SEWA negotiated with the embroidery merchants independently from the government. It increased wages, but the traders refused to reimburse the price of thread, a cost that kept women from making any profit. Unable to win protection from the rising price of materials, SEWA formed a thread cooperative to wrestle from the market what it could not win outright.³⁴

Social services further developed to meet the daily needs of workers. SEWA pushed for coverage under state social security and welfare provisions, such as health maintenance and housing, but set up its own when government failed. These efforts demonstrated the link between reproductive and productive labor.³⁵ Childbirth had emerged as one of the greatest health challenges faced by the women; to mitigate some of this risk SEWA early on offered maternity benefits in 1978. A decade later, it won inclusion of landless agricultural laborers under the state program.³⁶ As Mirai Chatterjee, who ran the organization's social security branch, explained, "First was childcare, 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."³⁷ Social security was a benefit of membership, not a philanthropic undertaking. It represented the self-help component of self-organizing.

The bank, chartered in 1974, alleviated the real need for credit among headloaders, vendors, peddlers, garment makers, and embroiderers who were taking loans from moneylenders. Terms of repayment by the moneylenders, sometimes at interest rates of 30 percent, kept workers destitute. SEWA challenged banking as usual. The women had nothing for collateral, could not sign their names, and could not go to a bank during the usual business hours. While banking regulators were skeptical that such a bank could succeed, SEWA gave credit on the basis of knowing the women and assessing their uses for the money: approving loans for buying raw materials or improving marketing outlets, for example, but not for a more lavish family wedding. It brought women with similar business needs together to undertake bulk buying and obtain government subsidies. It circumvented logistical problems through substituting photographs for written identification and going to where the women worked rather than having the women journey to the bank. Despite some initial problems with repayment, the bank flourished. Women were able to own tools, pay off old usurious debts, and recover pawned jewelry. A quarter century after its founding, the bank established "five-year fixed loans worth Rs.5,000 each for educating girl children and a saving scheme of Rs.34,000 for the purpose of providing financing for marriages" — accepting the importance of the wedding for its members.³⁸

SEWA became an independent women's organization in the early 1980s. Beginning with nearly two thousand members, on the eve of ILO deliberations in 1995 over the home-based labor convention, its membership had grown to about 145,000 women

from various informal sector occupations, with about 23,000 of them home-based. By 2008, about half of its "All India Membership" of nearly a million resided in Gujarat, its home state. Overall there were ten autonomous SEWA "sister" groups in seven Indian states. By then, some 14.45 percent were home-based workers; the majority of members were manual laborers and providers of services—a section that included domestic and agricultural workers. Also included in the membership were hawkers and vendors. Many members were technically self-employed even if dependent on distributors or suppliers. Though beginning as an urban organization, SEWA expanded in such a manner that its rural branch now dominates, consisting of some 60 percent of the association.³⁹ In 2014, it had grown to 1.8 million members.⁴⁰

Leaders were a mix of college graduates and local women without education. As Bhatt explained, "We needed educated professionals who could speak on behalf of the women when they themselves could not." For example, Jhabvala, who joined the effort in 1977, graduated from Harvard and attended Yale; Chatterjee arrived in 1984 with a public health degree from Johns Hopkins University. Middle-class organizers and researchers, Bhatt insisted, "managed to make the workers' issues their own." The educated learned from the members; knowledge came from the grassroots in what we might name a form of feminist participatory action. As one observer explained, "Lawyers, doctors and managers who believe in the work come to learn from the self-employed the context of their problems. They provide their services while they *pass* on their skills. The idea is holding hands in mutual respect while they shift control."⁴¹ We might argue that they practiced what Chicana feminist theorist Cherríe Moraga calls "theory in the flesh."⁴² At every expansion, women emerged as leaders from the group of workers to rally the others and strengthen the organization.

Recognition and assistance from international organizations, both NGOs like OXFAM and global labor federations like the IUF (International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, and Allied Workers' Association) and ICFTU (International Confederation of Free Trade Unions), offered the material basis for independence from the TLA. The progressive IUF, dedicated to improving conditions for low-waged workers, first recognized SEWA as a labor organization and thus provided access to global union deliberations; it remained a staunch supporter. Funding further came from the governments of the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden and from the ILO, which asked it to run the "Participatory Action Research Project on the Development of Effective Monitoring Systems and the Application of Legislation for Home-based Producers" in 1986. Such monies paid for the land and building of the SEWA Reception Centre in the heart of Ahmedabad, the location of the SEWA bank, cooperative store, offices, and meeting rooms. Donors facilitated the purchase of transport vehicles, materials for income generation projects and embroidery, spinning, weaving, and dairying cooperatives, the construction of a center and classroom for the rural wing, and the holding of training sessions and clinics.⁴³ Their aid allowed SEWA to stand on its own and forge "a Third World Model" of a union devoted to the informal sector where the workspace as well as the work is fluid, the employer obscured or nonexistent, and the worker under the radar of official notice.⁴⁴

This model challenged the conventional form of unionization in which employees in a shop or an entire industry band together to wrest better conditions and higher wages

from a distinct, single employer. Jhabvala explained that the cooperatives softened the image of the trade union as antagonistic, “hard,” or conflictual; the cooperative attracted allies.⁴⁵ Likewise, since the women participated in makeshift economies, combining various income-generating activities that include self-employment, contract work, and temporary hiring from multiple employers, SEWA located collective action not in the workplace but in the occupational sector. Rather than traditional collective bargaining, SEWA won tripartite boards of government, labor, and employer representatives that set the rules to “govern” various entities, like the Ahmedabad cloth market. It demanded macroeconomic and environmental changes, including resource distribution, housing, and clean water, as well as “political empowerment”—to better the health and welfare of individuals while promoting social transformation. Women learned that government “is not a super power and the workers should not passively wait for government assistance to come. They can go to the rural and urban administrators and their MPs and discuss their problems and grievances and seek help.” SEWA engaged in these issues strategically from the perspective of long-term change.⁴⁶

Empowering women

SEWA saw itself as part of the women’s movement, but not all Indian feminists agreed with this classification. According to scholar Elisabeth Armstrong, Asian feminism has been divided into three types. Shaped by former colonial relations, “social reform feminists” sought to improve women’s position through uplift, including “better access to education, health care, social welfare, and modernized cultural and religious practices.” They did not challenge existing power hierarchies, but rather sought to alleviate the suffering generated by inequalities. Nationalist or state feminists “sought equal rights for women in independent nations and women’s full participation in public life.” These feminists focused on political inclusion, especially equal rights before the law. Finally, left feminists, connected to mass party formations, sought fundamental political, social, cultural, and economic restructuring.⁴⁷ SEWA represented another way, empowering poor women to seize control over their lives that incorporated elements of all three types.

However, for historian Radha Kumar, SEWA stood apart from the new feminism of the late 1970s and 1980s, which protested rape, dowry murder, and other forms of violence against women. Like left women’s organizations, SEWA targeted the working class but also appealed to rural and village, that is, peasant, women. While some of the left groups had roots in the Second World War-era antifascist resistance and remained connected to anti-imperialist organizing, SEWA came to its transnational work for a much more pragmatic reason; it moved into the global arena to win ILO standards to pressure the Indian state, which had refused to take up legal changes that Bhatt introduced to Parliament as a private member’s measure in 1988.⁴⁸ Given its attempt to impact public policy, feminists influenced by the Communist or Maoist Left judged SEWA, rooted in nonviolence and cooperation over class conflict, reformist. SEWA, in turn, rejected such groups as disconnected from the daily struggles of poor women.⁴⁹

While noting nineteenth-century philanthropic and religious reform that saw Indian women as objects of their largesse, SEWA traced its genealogy to the early years of the independence movement, "when, under Mahatma Gandhi," according to Jhabvala, "women actively participated in the freedom struggle and became active in their own liberation."⁵⁰ Nonetheless, Bhatt noted, independence from colonial rule needed a "second freedom":

The right to vote was not enough . . . As poor people, they wanted to come out of an existence defined by day-to-day survival. As women, they wanted equal and ample opportunities to learn and to act . . . They wanted a voice and visibility. This was not possible without access to and ownership of economic resources by the poor women, and their overcoming exploitation by men, society and state policies.⁵¹

SEWA has presented a feminist twist to Gandhian self-sufficiency updated for an era of structural adjustment and neoliberalism. In the Gandhian mode, SEWA believed that if field organizers became "one" with village people, "all the barriers that prevent women from active participation in development are gradually broken down and it becomes possible to introduce new ideas and programmes for better living conditions."⁵² Jhabvala often has quoted the nationalistic exhortation of Gandhi: "women have to take *leadership* to solve the problems of the country. Women should widen their family to the whole country." As she insisted during a 1989 study tour for grassroots organizers, one form of leadership development undertaken by the association, "If women organize there are many ways to solve the problems of rural women." Because the participants were "women working and being from the rural areas," they knew "the problems of rural women," even those who dressed differently, spoke another language, and ate other kinds of food. A common purpose could emerge from common problems: "drought, floods . . . non-payment of minimum wages, domestic problems, health problems due to work, child birth." Asked what to do, attendees replied, "The only way to solve the problem of rural women is through organizing," which required "education, work and food." Reflecting the participatory democracy and autonomy at the center of the SEWA approach, the women insisted, "rural women have to come together and organize themselves." From meeting village women elsewhere, one attendee learned "the power of love and unity," a lesson taught as a prerequisite for expanding into a national movement.⁵³

Leadership development and skill building was a precondition to empowerment and essential to creating what some global feminists at the time called "concientization."⁵⁴ SEWA recognized that "unless women acquire the ability and confidence to participate equally with men, the situation will not change."⁵⁵ So it created "awareness classes" that addressed the entire woman, her spiritual, physical, and social conditions, as a prerequisite to raising labor standards.⁵⁶ The transformation of work required the transformation of people. As Bhatt announced the impact of unionization, "For the first time, the women realized that they were workers, even though society perceived them as mere housewives and mothers."⁵⁷

As ILO feminists in the Programme on Rural Women and the ILO's Indian regional office recognized, "for SEWA organizing does not simply mean joining SEWA."⁵⁸

Organizing meant "Generating Awareness,"⁵⁹ that is, empowering often illiterate and always "spread out" or isolated workers through gatherings, called camps, that allowed such women "to move out of their home, visit SEWA, meet other workers and learn about their rights."⁶⁰ These were the women that Jhabvala portrayed for ILO consumption as confined to the home from "social taboos" and the preferences of male kin, women who were "the bearer and rearer of children and the servicer of the family," who could be seen "breast-feeding her child and rolling the hand-made Indian cigarettes" or conveying, in potter families, "water from the well both for the family and for the clay." They kept their daughters close by, rather than sending them to school, to help with the housework and the home work. The majority labored longer than factory counterparts for lower wages when they received work, which was intermittent throughout the year. Combined with their family labors, they worked nearly continuously and suffered from myriad health problems, including back pain, eyestrain, and anemia.⁶¹

SEWA constructed its leadership camps to enable women responsible for earning enough for family survival to "draw a clear picture of their lives and their problems as working women" and provide "a better awareness of their roles in society, their rights to earn a respectable livelihood." To target the whole person, the camps began with prayer, song, and yoga; covered self-care, sanitation, nutrition, and health; fostered self-confidence, leadership, cohesion, and group decision-making through games and role-playing; taught about legal rights, occupational safety, unionization, and cooperatives; and visited factories, shrines, and medical clinics.⁶² Participants heard that "employers can fire one woman but they cannot do it to a thousand!" Learning the power of collective action, they had opportunities to practice such lessons in arguing for state protection.⁶³

Eager to support projects that combined standard-setting with technical cooperation (giving of advice on enforcing labor standards and related issues), the ILO financed such camps for generating a bridge between legal training and organizing. At one such camp for *beedi* workers, for example, the women listened to experts speak on social protection currently available. But the women were skeptical that they would ever receive benefits from the Provident fund established for their trade, a joint employer-employee enterprise that until 1985 had not covered unorganized home-based piece-rate workers. Even after the courts ruled that the law included the home workers, employers resorted to all kinds of illegalities to avoid paying benefits (like creating false names for workers and switching names on payment records every couple of weeks). They also withheld the ID cards that were necessary for state-funded health care and school scholarships.⁶⁴

All the camps allowed participants an opportunity to speak out, discover commonalities, and develop demands for better living and working conditions. Some women testified to personal change. Said one attendee in 1989, "When she started work with SEWA she was not bold enough to come out of the home. Now she works and travels from village to village." She learned that "even illiterate people can work and help themselves to fight against exploitation."⁶⁵ Presentations relied on visual and oral communication; these included posters with graphs on women's wages in relation to men's, charts on benefits and working conditions, and films depicting demonstrations

and other SEWA activities.⁶⁶ In encouraging the women to speak, organizers pushed against religious blinders and socialization that "inhibits them to mix freely with one another."⁶⁷

At a May 1986 camp that drew forty garment workers from Ahmedabad, the women shared stories of wrongs in a process of being informed about their rights. These women lived in the contained space of their neighborhood and subject to male power within the family. Responsible for the cost of electricity, sewing machine, thread, and transport to pick up and deliver goods, at daily earnings of Rs.6–7, the women obtained only a pittance of what merchants and middlemen kept as profit. They complained about those merchants who demeaned "the quality of their stitching and harassed them about the rates and invariably held back part of the money due to them." The "more aware" shared experiences of being retaliated against for protest activities, such as marching against low piece-rates or airing grievances on a television program.⁶⁸

Facilitated by the SEWA discussion leader, the women offered suggestions for improving their lives that drew upon the understandings produced by those previously dismissed as exploited victims. The organizer may have guided discussion, but the resulting list reflected the women's hardships and aspirations:

- Removal of prevalent, hindering social customs.
- Equality of women—on par with men and between themselves—Hindu or Muslim.
- Creating and demanding respect for women.
- Right to education for women.
- Demanding proper housing and sanitation facilities.
- Fighting for minimum daily wages.
- Importance of nutritious food for their children.
- Education for their children.
- Dedication from teachers and people involved in their issues.
- Demanding better health facilities— proper and timely medical attention particularly in case of emergencies.
- The importance of hygiene cleanliness in the home surrounding and child rearing.

Most significantly, organizer Bina Sharma recalled, "while putting forth these suggestions it gradually dawned on them that they, themselves, individually and collectively, should make efforts toward achieving their ideals." She proudly noted, "Some of the more forthcoming women were even proud of themselves (and rightfully so) that they could be the instruments through which new socio-economic conditions could come into being." From feeling "lethargic," fatalistic, and "helpless," they "felt they could achieve a lot if they united and set their minds to fight for better privileges."⁶⁹

SEWA gathered data on working conditions, compensating for neglect of this population in official statistics—a lacuna that India shared with nations worldwide. When it came to occupational health and safety, the women themselves provided the basis for establishing ergonomic standards. They were able to redesign tools, like a

FIGURE 4.2. Ela Bhatt with *beedi* makers in Rakhial, c. 1985.

Source: Credit: SEWA.

collecting stick for paper pickers. Moreover, as staff health expert Mirai Chatterjee explained to Anita Kelles-Viitanen, a Finnish staff person from the ILO's India office, they relied "on the participatory approach." Chatterjee was skeptical of the "objectivist epistemology of epidemiological studies, pointing out that this would not be appropriate for a participatory organization like SEWA." In contrast to such outsider evaluations, her "study reflects workers' reality." Kelles-Viitanen lamented "that no thorough clinical examinations of women workers were taken at this stage nor control groups studied." She later sent Chatterjee to an occupational health workshop in Helsinki, but SEWA never abandoned its participatory method. Knowing what to improve depended on the experiences and perceptions of the workers themselves.⁷⁰

From such knowledge came action. *Beedi* legal camp workers prioritized an agenda: gaining a holiday bonus, ID cards, and the necessary raw materials to roll their cigarettes. SEWA would send letters to employers and government officials, and the women planned a follow-up mass meeting.⁷¹ The garment worker camp concluded that flooding the authorities with complaints, unionizing, or creating a cooperative offered viable counteractions to employer withholding of benefits and minimum wage. Attendees presented demands for increased wage rates and more extensive inclusion in minimum wage legislation to the Labour Commissioner, "who promised to look into the matter" but by himself could not do much. Part of "awareness," then, was gaining the courage and know-how to transform embodied knowledge into public actions. While still at the camps, SEWA instructed the women in techniques for lobbying.⁷²

But it wasn't only the state or the male-dominated unions that SEWA challenged. Organizers discovered "that when men attended meetings, women either became silent

observers or left altogether." Women especially withdrew when their own male family members were around. Village men resisted seeing women "as organisers, trainers and group leaders," the new roles SEWA cultivated that were disrupting traditional gender dynamics. "In the poorest families, any extra income was welcome to the males and to that extent they supported the union's activities," the ILO noted. "But at the community level, the men found it very difficult to accept equal status for women." Indeed, "when women persisted, the men might even become unbalanced and assault them."⁷³

Empowering women meant enhancing their power within households. SEWA's aims included: "To make all possible efforts to advance their morals, to remove the evil effects of old customs, to prevent their exploitation in any form, to promote women's self-respect . . ." Not only did women from rural areas lack literacy, which could restrict information, but they also had inordinately heavy workloads, combining farm labor with family and domestic labor. Those in urban areas similarly undertook both family labor and income-generating work. Exacerbating the situation, inadequate dowries could lead to desertion by husbands, expulsion from the household, or even death. As one ILO researcher asserted, "Women do not hope to be treated as equals by the men and expect male domination to continue . . ." Religion, custom, and family values promoted male power.⁷⁴

Two important decisions reflected the organization's commitment to building the capabilities of its members, even if they were poor and not literate: SEWA restricted membership to women and the bank protected earnings from husbands. Self-reliance, gained from governing SEWA and controlling her own resources, increased a women's power within her household. After involvement in SEWA, by the 1990s, Bhatt reported members having a higher status within families. A third had a say in obtaining household assets or arranging the marriages of their male as well as female children. They "all have dealt directly with either the police, the municipality, the government and panchayat [village council] officials, while only 4% of their men have done so."⁷⁵

Restricting membership to women enhanced individual and collective growth. At the first meeting after being kicked out of the TLA, the assembled women resolved to be an all-women's organization: Previously the President of TLA had served as the President of SEWA, with Bhatt as General Secretary. Now "there was such a sense of liberation that there was no man heading the meeting and telling us what to do or think. There was no one we had to be careful not to hurt if we did not pay him enough respect," one observer reported. "It felt like a daughter's righteous struggle. We had left the nest."⁷⁶ SEWA members persisted in using kinship and domestic metaphors like this one in discussing the organization and their involvement. They were not only sisters, but also confronted "mother-in-law/daughter-in-law problems" between elected leaders and organizers.⁷⁷ Women said, "SEWA is my mother"; "The bank is like my mother;" and "When we have a difficulty, we go home to SEWA."⁷⁸

Given "the chauvinistic attitudes of men who think that women in general are inferior, unintelligent, illiterate and cannot understand the proceedings of a meeting and the traditional roles of women which take up most of their time that they cannot attend meetings or are too tired to attend," organizers sought spaces where women could flourish, "where women find common problems and set up machinery to tackle

as a group.” SEWA thus turned to the house meeting to engage in conversation with each family and encourage women’s participation.⁷⁹ In addressing women’s health, it could gather women together for such meetings without threatening community norms.

The SEWA bank also was “a woman’s space ... ‘the village well,’ a place to come together and talk with other women about their work,” Jhabvala has recalled. To maintain control over their earnings, the women learned to put their saving account in their own names as well as to own their tools and “to have their land or home registered in their own name (or at least jointly with their husbands).”⁸⁰ They kept passbooks in a bank safe to keep knowledge of their funds from husbands, some of whom would demand the cash for their own use. According to Bhatt, “a pressing need for a safe place to save money” was also a reason for the bank. The women “no longer wanted to hide their earned money under the mattress or in their clothing.”⁸¹

Consciousness transformed

Over the years, Ela Bhatt, Renana Jhabvala, and other leaders have taught through anecdote. Telling stories about brave women who stepped up to protest allowed them to convey both the conditions faced by India’s informal sector workers and also to suggest that embodied knowledge offered the basis for analysis and action. One story Bhatt told a *New York Times* reporter in 2009 illuminated the shift in consciousness that SEWA cultivated. Questioning the women “what ‘freedom’ meant to them,” she shared:

Some said it was the ability to step out of the house. Others said it was having a door to the bathroom. Some said it meant having their own money, a cellphone, or “fresh” clothes every day.

Then she told of her favorite. Freedom, one woman said, was “looking a policeman in the eye.”⁸²

A Bhopal *beedi* worker off to attend a union meeting “dropped her burkha forever”; a leader of the embroiderers from Dariapur “openly confronted her own brother who represented the employers while negotiating a wage rise in the Labour Commissioner’s office.”⁸³ Such gestures manifested SEWA’s feminism.

Though SEWA shared much with other Indian grassroots economic development formations and with women who protested high prices and marched for environmental sustainability, in the competition for Western NGO funding, it was among the best in publicizing its enterprises and gaining attention. With Dutch and British activists, it built HomeNet as a transnational network among home-based workers and organizers that led the final campaign for the ILO convention. It later would help form WIEGO (Women in Informal Employment, Globalizing and Organizing), a Harvard University think tank that has maintained SEWA’s presence before the larger NGO, academic, and donor communities.⁸⁴ But it also joined with others in the Global South through DAWN (Development Alternatives for Women in a New Era), founded in 1984 at the end of the UN Decade for Women. It aided organizing elsewhere, as in South Africa.⁸⁵ It has continued to fight for ILO action

on the informal sector as well as to document persistent exploitation of home-based workers worldwide.

SEWA has captured attention because of its achievements, not just because its videos, writings, and tours appeal to Western feminists. It offered an authentic example of women working collectively for development. Its method—surveying the women involved to transform into makers and subjects those who too often stand as objects of development—was in keeping with the new women's studies epistemologies of self-reflectivity that questioned top-down meanings. Its success has come from bridging the local and the global.

Notes

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- 2 "Hillary Clinton Talks to Poor Working Women in India," *New York Times*, March 31, 1995, A7.
- 3 On Bill Clinton, Michael Meeropol, *Surrender: How the Clinton Administration Completed the Reagan Revolution* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998); Inderpal Grewal, "On the New Global Feminism and the Family of Nations: Dilemmas of Transnational Feminist Practice," in Ella Shohat, ed., *Talking Visions: Multicultural Feminism in a Transnational Age* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998), 501–20; see also, Victoria Bernal and Inderpal Grewal, "The NGO Form: Feminist Struggles, States, and Neoliberalism," in *Theorizing NGOs: States, Feminisms, and Neoliberalism*, ed. Victoria Bernal and Inderpal Grewal (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 1–10.
- 4 Somini Sengupta, "An Empire for Poor Working Women, Guided by a Gandhian Approach," *New York Times*, March 7, 2009, A6.
- 5 For overviews, Samita Sen, "Toward a Feminist Politics? The Indian Women's Movement in Historical Perspective," Policy Research Report on Gender and Development, Working Paper Series No. 9 (Washington: The World Bank, April 2000); Bharati Ray and Aparna Basu, eds., *First Independence Towards Freedom: Indian Women since 1947* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999); Elisabeth Armstrong, *Gender and Neoliberalism: The All India Democratic Women's Association and Globalization Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2014).
- 6 I borrow the phrase "dignity and daily bread" from Shelia Rowbotham and Swasti Mitter, *Dignity and Daily Bread: New Forms of Economic Organizing among Poor Women in the Third World and the First* (New York: Routledge, 1994).
- 7 S. Selliah, *The Self-Employed Women's Association, Ahmedabad, India* (Geneva: ILO, 1989), 16.
- 8 Devaki Jain, "Passion: Driving the Feminist Movement Forward," *Journal of Women's History*, 24 (Winter 2012): 202; Bhatt, *We Are Poor but So Many*, 12.
- 9 Avronne S. Fraser and Irene Tinker, eds., *Developing Power: How Women Transformed International Development* (New York: The Feminist Press, 2004); Jocelyn Olcott, "From the Time of Creation: Legacies and Unfinished Business from the First International Women's Year Conference," in *Women and Girls Rising: Progress and Resistance Around the World*, ed. Ellen Chesler and Terry McGovern (New York: Routledge, 2015), 21–31; Kalima Rose, *When Women Are Leaders: The*

- SEWA Movement in India* (London: Zed Books, 1992), 55–46; “The Ramon Magsaysay Award,” http://www.rmaf.org.ph/newrmaf/main/the_foundation/about, accessed January 27, 2016.
- 10 Bhatt, *We Are Poor but So Many*, 13.
 - 11 Rose, *When Women Are Leaders*, 52; “Michaela Walsh,” <http://www.womensworldbanking.org/about-us/our-team/board/michaela-walsh/>, accessed January 18, 2016; Amy Duffuor, “In conversation with Michaela Walsh, Women’s World Banking,” *impact quarterly*, October 13, 2014, <http://impactquarterly.asiaix.com/in-conversation-with-michaela-walsh-womens-world-banking/>, accessed January 18, 2016.
 - 12 Renana Jhabvala and Jane Tate, “Out of the Shadows: Homebased Workers Organize for International Recognition,” *SEEDS* 18 (1996): 14, http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PNACG556.pdf, accessed July 15, 2015.
 - 13 Elisabeth Prügl, *The Global Construction of Gender* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999). By focusing on SEWA in the quest for an ILO instrument, I recognize that I am contributing to the historical amnesia of other organizations, like the National Group on Homeworking and the Yorkshire and Humberside Low Pay Unit in Britain, PATAMABA in Thailand, and the union-based Vrouwenbond FNV’s Home Work Centers in the Netherlands. See Ursula Huws, *Action Programmes for the Protection of Homeworkers: Ten Case Studies from Around the World* (Geneva: ILO, 1995); Annie Delaney, “Organising Homeworkers: Women’s Collective Strategies to Improve Participation and Social Change,” PhD dissertation, School of Management, La Trobe University, June 2009, in author’s possession.
 - 14 C. Dumont to EMP/RU and LEG/REL, Minute on International Workshop, March 29, 1989, WEP 10-4-04-21-1-33-02, Jacket 5, ILO Archives, Geneva [ILOA hereafter].
 - 15 Memo from Andrea M. Singh to Gisela Schneider de Villegas, April 26, 1989, with attached copy of Working Group Reports, pp.14–15, WEP 10-4-04-21-1-33-02, Jacket 5, ILOA.
 - 16 Eileen Boris and Elisabeth Prügl, eds., *Homeworkers in Global Perspective: Invisible No More* (New York: Routledge, 1996).
 - 17 I didn’t remember my remarks but I did follow through on both proposals. Good thing I haven’t relied on self-reporting through oral recollection. On the archive as a site of memory but also of knowledge construction ripe with power relations, Anjali Arondekar, “Without a Trace: Sexuality and the Colonial Archive,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 14, 1/2 (January/April 2005): 10–27; see also, Antoinette Burton, ed., *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005); and Nupur Chaudhuri, Sherry J. Katz, and Mary Elizabeth Perry, eds., *Contesting Archives: Finding Women in the Sources* (Champaign-Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010). On writing contemporary history, Eileen Boris and Jennifer Klein, “When the Present Disrupts the Past: Narrating Home Care,” in Claire Bond Potter and Renee C. Romano, eds., *Doing Recent History: On Privacy, Copyright, Video Games, Institutional Review Boards, Activist Scholarship and History That Talks Back* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012), 249–74.
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- 19 Quoted in Edward Webster, "Organizing in the Informal Economy: Ela Bhatt and the Self-Employment Women's Association of India," *Labour, Capital and Society* 44, 1 (2011): 105. For the political economy of the region, Jan Breman, *The Making and Unmaking of an Industrial Working Class: Sliding Down the Labour Hierarchy in Ahmedabad, India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004).
 - 20 M. V. Shobhana Warriar, "Gender, Class and Community in the Mobilization of Labour: Cotton Mills in the Madras regions, 1914–1951," unpublished paper at the First Conference of the European Labour History Network, Turin, Italy, December 16, 2015, in author's possession; Rose, *When Women Are Leaders*, 36–8; Bhatt, *We Are Poor but So Many*, 15.
 - 21 Bhatt, *We Are Poor but So Many*, 9.
 - 22 Selliah, *The Self-Employed Women's Association*, 3.
 - 23 "The Great Power of Ela Bhatt's Gentle Revolution," May 15, 2012, <https://www.upsides.com/interview/the-great-power-of-ela-bhatt%E2%80%99s-gentle-revolution/>.
 - 24 Webster, "Organizing in the Informal Economy," 103–4; Bhatt, *We Are Poor but So Many*, 8. See also, Rose, *When Women Are Leaders*, 39–40.
 - 25 Her husband Ramesh, whom she met in college, was a like-minded activist who became an economics professor.
 - 26 Quoted in Webster, "Organizing in the Informal Economy," 106.
 - 27 Webster, "Organizing in the Informal Economy," 109.
 - 28 Rose, *Where Women Are Leaders*, 45; Webster, "Organizing in the Informal Economy," 107.
 - 29 Bhatt, *We Are Poor but So Many*, 9.
 - 30 Rose, *Where Women Are Leaders*; Renana Jhabvala, "SEWA's Programmes for the Organization of Home-based Workers—India," in *Action Programmes for the Protection of Homeworkers*, 17–18, http://www.sewa.org/About_Us_History.asp, accessed August 17, 2014; Memo, S. Selliah to C. F. Poloni, "SEWA Rural Study," April 21, 1988, 38, WED 31-0-33-3, Jacket 1, ILOA.
 - 31 Ela R. Bhatt, "Towards the Second Freedom," in Ray and Basu, eds., *First Independence Towards Freedom*, 36.
 - 32 Webster, "Organizing in the Informal Economy," 110.
 - 33 Jhabvala and Tate, "Out of the Shadows," 7.
 - 34 Renana Jhabvala, "Self-Employed Women's Association: Organising Women by Struggle and Development," in Rowbotham and Mitter, *Dignity and Daily Bread*, 126–7.
 - 35 Jhabvala, "SEWA's Programmes for the Organization of Home-based Workers—India," 20–2, 25–6.
 - 36 Jhabvala and Tate, "Out of the Shadows," 8.
 - 37 As told to Webster, "Organizing in the Informal Economy," 111.
 - 38 Rose, *Where Women Are Leaders*, 54–5; "India: Silver Jubilee of SEWA Bank," *Maharashtra Herald*, September 7, 1999, reprinted in *WIN News*, 25–4 (Autumn 1999), 24.
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 - 41 Bhatt, *We Are Poor but So Many*, 13, 16, 63, 126; Rose, *Where Women Are Leaders*, 29.

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- 44 Rose, *Where Women Are Leaders*, 16.
- 45 Jhabvala, "Self-Employed Women's Association," 133.
- 46 Bhatt, "Towards the Second Freedom," in Ray and Basu, eds., *First Independence Towards Freedom*, 36–9; Oda van der Kemp, "Report of Mission to Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh," September 24–26, 1987, 6, WEP 10-4-04-21-1-33-02 Jacket 3, ILOA.
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- 76 Rose, *Where Women Are Leaders*, 80.
- 77 Bhatt, *We Are Poor but So Many*, 19.
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- 84 Delaney, "Organizing Homeworkers," 78-97; Bhatt, *We Are Poor but So Many*, 213-14.
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