

Why the 27th Niwano Peace Prize is being awarded to Ms. Ela Ramesh Bhatt

Ms. Ela R. Bhatt is the founder and former secretary general of the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), a women's labor movement and organization formed in 1972 and based in Ahmedabad, India. With a membership of 1,200,000 poor and self-employed women workers, SEWA seeks to organize other women workers and their families to obtain full employment and economic self-reliance. Ms. Bhatt has made a major contribution, especially in India, to the empowerment of women through self-reliance and self-respect in terms of financial self-sufficiency, self-management and decision-making. Her work has a religious spirit, based on a Gandhian philosophy of promoting economic independence and organizing for social change.

Ms. Bhatt is a woman who knows the social position of women in India and has recognized the necessity for economic and social change. She has educated women to be the leaders in their own movement, where women become strong and visible. She believes that women should take the leadership for social change. "In a fight for equity and social justice, where love and nonviolence are the weapons, women are the natural leaders of such a fight" (By Margareta Bergen, editor of *Urban Age* and Patralekha Chatterjee, Asia correspondent for *Urban Age* and a New Delhi based journalist who specializes in development issues.) She has worked for over thirty years for poor women in India by creating a worker-owned organization whose micro-loan bank has given access to credit to thousands of the self-employed women.

Ms. Bhatt says, "Gandhian thinking is the guiding force for SEWA's poor, self-employed members in organizing for social change. We follow the principles of *satya* (truth), *ahimsa* (non-violence), *sarvadharm* (integrating all faiths, all people) and *khadi* (propagation of local employment and self reliance)". She once asked, "Has any problem in the world been solved by violence? As soon as you lift a stone to hit your opponent, it turns into a law -and-order problem and ceases to be a public cause, and you lose public support." She says, "Employers prefer the SEWA union to other unions because it is truthful. SEWA goes on strike or stops work only as a last resort when all channels of negotiation are totally closed. We invariably inform our opponents before we take any direct action. Our demands are minimal and carry moral weight. These are practices of Gandhian principles."

Ms. Bhatt has worked for cooperation among different sectors of society. Her practical strategy is carried out through the joint action of union and cooperatives. The SEWA movement is enhanced by its being a *sangam* or confluence of three movements: the labor movement, the cooperative movement and the women's movement.

Ms. Bhatt has a beautiful personality, seemingly coming from her firm practice of non-violence. For the poor, she is a good listener and a compassionate woman. Her character and self-control come from her religious training. She is among the few who knows how to get her way without being overly aggressive.

For these reasons, the Committee is pleased that this great woman, Ms. Ela R. Bhatt, has been selected to receive the 27th Niwano Peace Prize. We wish, in the words of the mandate of the Prize, “to make the achievements of such an individual known as widely as possible the world over and to stimulate the emergence of still more people devoting themselves to world peace.”