Acceptance speech by Ela R. Bhatt¹ at the Simon Fraser University for The Thakore Visiting Scholar Award on 2nd October, in Vancouver.

President of Simon Fraser University Smt. Deviben Thakore, Prof. Jezlov, Respected Consulate General Shri Das, Respected Mayor of Burnbay, Vancouver and distinguished ladies and gentlemen. It is my priviledge and great honour to accept humbly, on behalf of my SEWA sisters the Gandhi Peace Award and Thakore visiting scholar Award at the Gandhi Commemorative Programme, today. On the Gandhi Jayanti Day I do recognize the fact of history that this is the land of explorers. I thank Simon Frazer University, the Thakore Foundation and the India Club for appreciating SEWA's lifelong struggles and constructive work. I express our gratitude again, for the Prize that is associated with the name of that great man who walked on this earth. We have hardly done anything to serve his ideals, however the Prize gives reassurance of our work.

I grew up in those years when India was fighting for freedom and becoming an independent nation. As young people, we had pledged to rebuild the nation, to reconstruct our lives so that every Indian is able to enjoy freedom. As youths, we had no confusion in our minds about our career path. Mahatma Gandhi had shown us the way. His life itself was a clear message to us. He had thought and practised every small detail of building a nation and its people. He would think of individual cleanliness on the same level as political freedom. To him, cleanliness in lavatories and the village ponds, was as vital as spiritual salvation. His thoughts have been the source of guidance for me and for SEWA.

We, as youths, had realized that the people of India had lost their political freedom and their economic freedom as well. We had learnt to see the economy from the perspective of the masses.

We had since then learnt that Economics is simplicity', that adding complexity is not progress. Then, non-violence. Violence fundamentally is inconsistent with freedom. Then, dignity of labour, sanctity of labour. Labour is the law of Nature and its violation has been the central cause of the present economic muddle. And, then, human values- nothing that compromises a person's humanity is acceptable. We were guided to build India's economy in this way.

We also gradually understood that human being is central in all our thinkings, that the worldview in that respect is holistic and integrated.

However, closest to my heart, always has been, WORK. I would put WORK as central to one's life: '*karma*'. As the Bhagavad Gita says, "*If one eats fruits of the earth rendering no gift of toil,*

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that thief steals from this world." In other words, one who eats without putting in work is a thief...... It is the work, productive work that leads to Development and Growth.

As we have seen while working with poor women, work is central to their lives. Work gives meaning to their life. Work forges an individual's identity. Work provides livelihoods that produce goods and services, and thus builds a society.

But, poverty breaks down the balance. In **poverty**, we see vulnerability of all kinds: economic, social, mental, spiritual. People lose their faith and they cling to misguided faith.

Gandhiji's message of non-violence is a message against poverty. Poverty is violence against individuals, society and the Nature. Poverty and loss of freedom are not separate. A country can enjoy freedom only to the degree to which its poorest citizen is able to exercise his or her right.

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If there was not a Gandhi Peace Prize at this University, would there be the need to create one?" "Yes"

"Why?"

To transform the world."

The world is torn with conflicts, violence and hunger. Millions living in this world in refugee camps, uprooted from their own homeland, we cannot today feel proud of our mankind.

In my experience, women are the key to rebuilding a community. Focus on women, and we will find allies, who want a stable community. The woman wants roots for her family. In woman, we get a worker, a provider, a caretaker, an educator, and a networker. She is a forger of bonds—in her, essentially, you have a creator and a preserver. I consider women's participation and representation an integral part of our peace process. Women will bring constructive, creative and sustainable solutions to the table.

Moreover, if women are at the centre, woman's productive work is the thread that weaves 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 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.

Of course as I said before, I would put my utmost emphasis on WORK. By work we do not mean factory jobs; we do not mean sweatshops and indecent, cheap labour that leaves a person a slave to a manager of industry and is yet another kind of exploitation. By work, we mean the production of food and access to water. It means the upgrading of existing and traditional skills that people have possessed for thousands of years--agriculture, animal husbandry, fishing, housing, textiles and clothing. This work feeds people and it restores one's relationship with self, with fellow human beings, with the earth and the environment and with the Great Spirit that created us all.

It is economic freedom, which will bring peace. Ceasefire is not peace. National election completed is not peace. Political freedom is incomplete without economic freedom. It is when the people have both, that we will get lasting peace.

Gandhi saw in women a breakthrough. I do see women making a breakthrough. Women's leadership needs to be nurtured, since that is the only hope, if an inclusive just society and a sustainable environment are to be created.

Women have been so long used as resource, cheaply available, always available. But, NO. The world has to be made to realise that women are an asset to the world. Women are not shock absorbers in good times and bad. Women must feature not as absorbers but as partners.

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In SEWA, we meet on the basis of work and create networks. We build unions to meet our work needs, to stop economic exploitation by traders, contractors, our government, the global community and the 'system' and 'structures'. In SEWA we have come together to build a Bank to meet our financial needs – to save, to borrow, to lend, to build assets, to tap resources, to improve the material quality of life. We have come together to build cooperations to get integrated into the production process of our country. We build a social security network for our maternity needs, health and life insurance. We have been trying to forge bridges to local and global markets through a trade facilitation network of women farmers and artisans across the world. We create schools to build our capacities, to organize, and to manage our own affairs and make an impact on the world outside. We keep on struggling, sometimes effectively, to intervene at the macro policy level. This is in short SEWA.

SEWA is a membership organization, a million strong. But SEWA is not the number, not a project. It is not an institution. It is not even about economics or money. It is about the togetherness wellbeing of the poor woman, her family, her work, her community and the world we all live in. It is about freedom, self reliance. As Gandhi said, Freedom is not given, it is to be earned, generated within one's self.

For us, it is yet a long way to go. But, the path is liberating us at every step. Thank you for holding our hands on the walk.