

Women, Work and Peace

- Ela R. Bhatt*

Ela R. Bhatt met with SFU affiliated people and Vancouver community workers on October 1, 2009 at the Wosk Centre for Dialogue in Vancouver. The following is the transcript of her presentation, prior to open discussion.

Those who must lead the world today are challenged by one rather fundamental, and global issue. There are fewer and fewer resources and there is greater and greater competition to get access to them. Prevalent economic theory guiding corporate and national management says that healthy corporations and nations must keep growing their revenues and GDPs and that within them individuals must keep earning more and more. This drive to produce more and consume more is driving us to fight over increasingly scarce resources. We are literally swallowing up our earth.

We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking that brought us to these problems. Therefore it is high time we questioned the value of economic and management models based on an inherently false and destructive concept.

When there is unfair distribution of resources, there is unrest. When people cannot enjoy the fruits of their labors fairly, we have the basis of an unjust society. When governments cannot ensure the happiness of its people, they must resort to silencing them. For where there is violence and conflict, we invariably find poverty. We find an acute struggle for resources, unemployment, widespread anger against injustice and inequality, governments who resort to repression.

Poverty is a society's disrespect for human labor. Poverty strips a person of his or her humanity, and poverty takes away their freedom. Nothing that compromises a person's

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humanity is acceptable. Poverty is wrong because it is violence perpetuated with the consent of a society. Where there is violence, we will find hunger; and hunger takes many forms—it is not just a lack of food. Violence cannot lead to freedom.

Moreover, no nation in the world, even if it is politically independent, will be able to enjoy freedom unless it invests in its people. And a country can enjoy freedom only to the degree to which its poorest citizen is able to exercise his or her every right. Freedom springs from constructive work. If we want to build a non-violent, peaceful society in the nations of the world, there is no alternative but to engage in constructive work. Constructive work is nation building.

So yes, let us begin with Conflict Resolution because it is essential to diffusing tensions and negotiating an end to death and destruction. But let us not stop there with the cease-fire; because an end to violence is not peace. Peace is about restoring balance in society; only then will it be lasting peace. In my view, Restoration and Reconstruction of society is an essential and key component of the peace process.

For this, the involvement of a civil society is crucial. Civil groups like NGOs, women's groups, trade unions, cooperatives, guilds, church groups are all essential to building peace. Only people can build peace. Without the involvement of the people, without their voices, without their communication, participation and representation, we will have only done part of our work, because these are all essential to the peace process.

And where do we start? In my experience, women are the key to rebuilding a community. Focus on women, and you will find an ally who wants a stable community. She wants roots for her family. You get a worker, a provider, a caretaker, an educator, a networker. A forger of bonds—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.

Secondly, in my experience, if women are at the centre, her productive work is the thread that weaves a society together. When you have work, you have an incentive to maintain a stable society. You can not only see the future, but you can plan for the future. You can build assets that can 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.

By work we do not mean factory jobs; we do not mean sweatshops and cheap labor that leaves a person a slave to 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, textiles making. This work feeds people and it restores man's relationship with himself, with fellow human beings, with the earth and the environment and with the great spirit that created us all.

We can help local producers build links to mainstream markets. We can help them find access to financial services, technological services. We can ensure that their voice is heard at the policy-making level. We can prove to the world that the right kind of economic development is a vital path to peace.

So along with our demand to Put down your weapons, and Hold general elections, let us also demand that we listen to voices from civil society, and especially from women. We can empower the local—the local people, local economy, local resources. We can give voice to them and we can make sure that the poorest are heard. It is economic freedom, which will bring peace. Political freedom is incomplete without economic freedom. It is when the people have both that we will get lasting peace.