

Ela Bhatt

The 'gentle revolutionary'; a pioneer in women's empowerment and grassroots development, founder of the more than 1 million-strong Self-Employed Women's Association in India.

- Founder of the [Self-Employed Women's Association](#) in India
- Founder of India's first women's bank, the [Cooperative Bank of SEWA](#)
- Member of the Indian Parliament 1986-89
- Gandhian practitioner of non-violence and self-reliance

"There are risks in every action. Every success has the seed of some failure. But it doesn't matter. It is how you go about it. That is the real challenge."

Work with The Elders

Ela Bhatt was a founding member of The Elders from 2007 until 2016. Profoundly influenced by Gandhian thinking, she advocated for local, grassroots solutions for those who are poor, oppressed or suffering the effects of violent conflict.

She joined her fellow Elders to encourage peaceful Palestinian protest and self-reliance during The Elders' two delegations to [Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories](#).

One of India's foremost women's rights activists, Ela Bhatt welcomed the Elders to India in February 2012, where the group lent their support to young people in the state of Bihar campaigning to end [child marriage](#) in their own communities.

"We are poor, but so many"

Ela Bhatt was one of the world's most remarkable pioneers and entrepreneurial forces in grassroots development. Known as the 'gentle revolutionary', she dedicated her life to improving the lives of India's poorest and most oppressed women workers.

In 1972 she founded the [Self-Employed Women's Association \(SEWA\)](#), a trade union for women workers in India's huge informal sector, who make up 94 per cent of the female labour force and yet have never enjoyed the same rights and security as those in formal employment. Today SEWA has more than 1.2 million members across nine Indian states.

“We may be poor, but we are so many. Why don’t we start a bank of our own? Our own women’s bank, where we are treated with the respect and service that we deserve.” – Chandaben, SEWA member

The following year, Ela Bhatt founded the [Cooperative Bank of SEWA](#). The bank helps women to gain financial independence and raise their standing in their families and communities - and puts into practice the Gandhian principles of self-reliance and collective action.

Empowering women workers

Among the organisations Ela Bhatt has created and inspired, she founded and chaired:

- [Sa-Dhan \(the All India Association of Micro Finance Institutions in India\)](#)
- [The Indian School of Micro-finance for Women](#)
- [Women’s World Banking](#)
- The International Alliance of Home-based Workers (HomeNet)
- [Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing, Organizing \(WIEGO\)](#)

She also served as a trustee of the Rockefeller Foundation for more than ten years.

In recognition of her work to improve the status of women and the working poor in India and elsewhere, Ela Bhatt was awarded the Indira Gandhi Prize for Peace, Disarmament and Development, the first-ever Global Fairness Initiative Award, the Ramon Magsaysay Award, the Right Livelihood Award, the George Meany-Lane Kirkland Human Rights Award and the Légion d’honneur from France. She also received honorary doctorates from Harvard, Yale and the University of Natal.