

file Ela Bhatt
d/1-4-96

To
Smt Hillary Clinton,
The First Lady of The USA
The White House,
Washington.

~~Housework~~

Dear Smt. Clinton,

My respectful greetings to you! In Seca,
your visit is still fresh in our minds. The
ground where you sat is known as
'Hillary Maidan' by the people of Ahmedabad!

I have been here in Washington for
convincing the USA Government on an
issue very important for the work and
lives of women in the Informal sector,
all over the world. The issue is the
recognition and protection of home-based
workers - and an ILO Convention on Homebased
thereof.

This issue has been taken up by SEW

for last 15 years. And, now it is on the official Agenda of ILO to finally decide for the Convention. Last year, the US govt had voted against the Convention, therefore I had come to meet the concerned authorities in the Department of Labour and convince them the importance of the Convention and vote for it in the coming ILO Conference in June, 1996.

The ILO Convention when ratified has the force of law. ILO Convention is the mother of all protective labour legislations in our countries.

With this regard, I met to-day Mr. Jack Otero, Head of International Labour Bureau in the Dept of Labour for the purpose. He was very helpful and open and appreciation of the plight of the homeworkers, everywhere.

I have taken liberty to write this note of appeal to you to persuade your government accordingly, as we see you as a world leader of poor women empowering them towards economic self reliance.

I enclose herewith some relevant papers on the subject and the latest status of the ILO Convention.

I very much hope that the US govt will be more positive this time, with your contribution towards the cause.

Wishing you the best, and with warm best regards,



Ela R. Bhatt

SEWA, India.

End. As above

Ela R Bhatt

90.2037870037 (until 6th)

Ch. Rathi, Shreeadhar Tel. 965 2947 & Fax 337 9199 (until Apr 3rd)

HOMEWORKERS

Homeworking

Homeworking is a worldwide phenomena with women doing a variety of work.

The numbers of Homeworkers are mind-boggling with China having 20 million homeworkers and India around 30 million. In reality there are perhaps double that number. There are estimated to be 1.5 million workers in Italy and 1,66,000 in the Netherlands.

Homework exists in almost every sector, traditional and modern-agriculture, livestock, textiles and garments, food processing, electronics, dyes and chemicals, telecommunications, iron works, but their earnings are typically much below those earned by other workers in the other sectors.

Unlike other types of workers these workers have no access to social security, such as health care, child care or old age pension both in the Developed and the Developing countries.

An International Convention

Few countries have legislation to protect the homeworkers, and where they exist they are rarely implemented. Few countries have made an effort to include the homeworker in the mainstream of the economy, to give them social security, to upgrade their productivity or to bolster their earnings. The Representatives of Employers, Workers and Governments met in Geneva at the International Labour Conference for the first discussion on Home Work. At the first reading of the convention and agreed on the form of the instrument would be a Convention supplemented by a Recommendation.

What we need

What we need today is the solidarity and understanding of other Labour Unions and Governments. It is necessary that the Government and the Workers Vote together in favour of the Convention supported by the Recommendation. The US government has a vast following of Developed and Developing countries. If they decide to vote positively, many others too would vote the same way.

We believe that home workers employment rights protection as well as enhancement of their economic condition is the surest way of fighting evils of poverty like, forced migration, contract labour system and child labour.

MAINSTREAMING THE INFORMAL SECTOR WOMEN

Dear Mrs. Clinton,
I thought this may
interest you. - (Not
related to Homework
directly)

Regards,


Ela Bhatt

1-4-96

**Ela R. Bhatt
Bishwaroop Das**



SEWA ACADEMY

KRISHNA BHUVAN, NEAR HARIHARANAND ASHRAM, TOWN HALL ROAD, AHMEDABAD-380 006.

MAINSTREAMING

THE INFORMAL SECTOR WOMEN

A vast multitude of women in India work as productive workers in its economy. While they mainly pursue activities in the primary sector, large sections among them also work in its secondary and tertiary sectors, albeit in occupations which are more marginalised and often segregated. Their overwhelming presence in the unorganized sector-characterized by a variety of loose system of production arrangement has made them victims of low and discontinuous earnings, insecure job environment, a near absence of supportive services and social security legislation as well as a woefully inadequate base for collective bargaining. In addition to a vast range of activities which gets dismissed by official enumerations as housework and thereby its economic value sidetracked, women in the countryside and towns work in jobs related to agriculture, forestry, animal husbandry, dairying, fishery, sericulture, mining, handlooms, handicrafts, garment production, food-processing, quarrying, construction, domestic help, recycling, home-based production, cleaning, factories, hawking, vending and a variety of other occupations.

Enumeration

The extent and degree of their participation in work-force have by and large remained underrated and hence less visible in the official statistics owing mainly to constraints related to measurements and value imputations, rigidity of concepts

and definitions, and variations in people's perceptions regarding the meaning of work itself. Evidently thus, upto the 1981 census there has been a gross underenumeration of their participation rate, for unpaid work was not included in the definition rendering them the status of non workers as well as reporting by women themselves as "house wives". In addition there has been a serious lack of information about the diverse sets of occupation and multiple subsidiary jobs carried out by women grouped under 'marginal workers' as well as 'non-workers' - who may have actually been looking for work, but placed outside of the labour force.

In order to obtain a somewhat more realistic picture, question related to the periodicity of work in agriculture and the informal sector, unpaid works at household, farm or family enterprises and a gender-wise data on household heads were introduced while enumerating women's work in the 1991 census. Even while with such modifications there does not appear any substantial increase in the women's overall participation rate in the work-force, what appears significant is that in regions where sustained efforts towards diffusing the meaning of 'work' were made, a substantial increase was witnessed in such rates. An example is that of the Kheda District in the State of Gujarat in India, where during the period of rural female work force participation rate increased by more than 71 percent

for main and 84 percent for marginal workers.¹ It must also be noted here that compared to the census of 1981, the NSS survey records a substantially higher work participation rate amongst women in the country.² This itself calls for adoption of appropriate measures in order to realistically assess the economic and social value of women's work and subsequently improve their direct and indirect productive capacity through appropriate investments and interventions.

Subordination

Besides being engaged in the sphere of homework and multiple sets of continuous and intermittent jobs, a significant point about women's employment in India as also in some other South Asian Nations, is their 'Peripheral' location in the labour market. This is reflected by the tendency of crowding among most women workers in the marginal sectors of employment, specific types of low wage and insecure jobs as well as works in a variety of 'informal' occupations. Reinforced by a process of casualisation, often this marginal status sustains the erroneous impression of their income as supplementary and thereby its being rendered subordinate to men's earnings. Such a impression is also sustained by the patriarchal social context which undervalues women's status and ties her down within a cultural Lakshman

Rekha. This is in spite of the frequently substantiated observation that poorer a family, higher is its dependence on the earnings of a woman. Let us, in this, context take an over-view of sectors and job-types in which women remain engaged in the rural as well as urban areas.

With its least share in the organized industry, female employment rate has always been low in the organized sector. Even in traditional industries such as textiles and jute and activities like mining, their participation rates have fallen. Modern growth oriented and highly capital intensive as well as 'small-scale' technology industries do not employ women except for low-paid assembly line jobs or contract works of repetitive detailing and precision works. It is only certain specific areas in the service sector that one finds a section of educated women employed but that too in tasks associated with its 'lower circuits'. Their placement patterns even within such sectors essentially gets determined by cultural notions about women's role and capabilities. By virtue of their peripheral location even within the organized industry groups, their bargaining strength has been weak and often appropriated by male dominated 'larger' trade union interests. This certainly calls for appropriate modes of addressing their problems by unions and for the working women themselves to get organized for protection of their own rights and interests.

1. Efforts made by **SEWA** (Self Employed Women's Association) has seemingly helped the measurement in this district. For details see, Hirway, Indira, Women's Work in Gujarat - An Analysis of the 1991 Census Data, G.L.I, Ahmedabad, 1994.

2. National Sample Survey Organization, Report on the Quinquennial Survey on Employment and Unemployment, Survey Results - All India, 38th Round (Jan-Dec'1983) No.341, Dept. of Statistics, 1987.

Characterized by a serious lack of education, widespread illiteracy and encapsulation within inner quarters of a patriarchal domain, a vast majority of women workers remains located within the rural and urban unorganized sector. According to the estimates of the National Commission on Self-Employed Women, around 94 percent of the total female work force is found in this sector.³ They have an overwhelming presence in the primary sector that includes agriculture, forestry, fishing, plantation and allied activities with the highest proportion working as agricultural labourers and cultivators. The seasonality of work in this sector and lack of other avenues for employment make them vulnerable to a range of exploitative practices. Even within this sector, division of tasks go against women who in addition to the wide range of housework perform a variety of odd jobs like fetching of fuel, fodder, water, leaves and continue to look for other sources of income during off-seasons through jobs like collection of forest produce, casual work in road and other construction activities, dairying, poultry, animal husbandry etc. Even while the productive capacity of such activities is small owing to lack of access to information, market and resources, they emerge as lifeline for the sustenance of most poor households. In activities related to fishery they are found to be engaged in making nets as well as processing and vending of fish.

Displacement and Exploitation

A large section among them has been marginalised by the new technology and market forces and also exclusion from cooperatives. A migratory female labour force coming particularly from poverty stricken rural households in specific regions works as fish processors for the export market. In regions where silk is produced women are engaged in cocoon gathering and reeling of silk thread while in the mining sector they have been largely displaced and further marginalized by the contract system. Next to agriculture, a large segment of workers is engaged in the tobacco processing and beedi making industry where inspite of well meaning legislations they are overly exploited, grossly underpaid and face severe health hazards. Another large segment of the female work force unprotected by any kind of labour legislation and recipient of abysmally low wages is the home-based artisans and piece-rate workers who typically lack access to raw materials, market and working capital. Similar is the case with workers in the food processing, handloom and construction where they receive meagre income and remain unprotected by legal provisions or organizational backing. Among the domestics predominated by women workers, jobs remain insecure with poor wages, loose contracts and strenuous tasks.

3. Government of India, Shramshakti (Report of the National Commission on Self Employed Women and Women in the Informal Sector), New Delhi, 1988.

In spite of being located within different socio-political environs, the status and condition of women workers in most of the South Asian and Third World countries appear similar - especially in terms of the intensity of reportage and recognition of their work, low economic returns owing to the lack of or limited access to required service support systems, lack of legislative protection and dependence on the informal sector. This is evident from various studies on employment, economy and work participation rates in countries like Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Brazil, Kenya, Peru and the like.

Even within the urban context where female work participation rate is lower, women are predominantly placed in the informal and self-employed categories. They work in occupations such as vending and hawking, petty trade, manufacturing, printing, pottery, rubber and leather products, ceramics etc. Often lacking in capital or access to it, they remain stuck in the vicinity or below the critical viability line of an enterprise. Evidently thus the productive capacity of these workers is never fully realized, and pushed into margins they emerge as the most appropriated and exploited segment of the work-force lacking any statutory protection with regard to wages, work-hours and job environment. The process not only ensures subordination of the female work force but more importantly subjugates them into internalizing a status that is perceived as low and marginal.

Changing the Concepts

Two significant points emerging from the preceding paras are that within the 'mainstream' labour market the female work force remains essentially marginalized, and that no economic value is assigned to the 'unpaid' tasks carried out by them at the household and/or the extra household level. The former is an outcome of a 'cumulative causation' of factors like culturally perceived notions regarding the role of women, their displacement from specific market segments owing to technology changes, enhanced possibilities of their being maximally exploited in jobs they are 'compelled' to crowd in, lack or absence of legislative protection, hazardous working condition, absence of social security and lack of access to resources as well as ongoing process of their subordination by market forces. The latter stems from the fallacy of the macro economic theory itself, which only recognizes growth within the context of market and profit maximization. The process not only retards the possibility of individual well being but nearly eliminates its chances within the context of an economy that generates and perpetuates class and gender inequality. What thus becomes absolutely important is to realize and integrate the productive capacity of individuals and households with the 'mainstream' economy and at the same time recognize the economic value of jobs in the 'non-market' spheres. And since women are essentially the prime movers and producers within the households - they and their works need to be appropriately incorporated within the

overall economic framework. This is not only the key approach to be emphasized and adapted in order to mitigate poverty especially in the Third World nations, but probably the only alternative to save the world from losing an enormous amount of human resource and productivity - something which we just cannot afford to ignore.

Implied in such a proposition is an appeal to contextualize the economy with a different perspective - a perspective with growth and full employment where realization of the human resource potential instead of the macro economic growth becomes the paramount aim. This also calls for giving new meanings and alternate shapes to programmes related to poverty alleviation and employment generation. Far from visualizing them as relief measures, such schemes would need to be woven into the growth strategy itself. Needless to say that attempts towards realization of such a strategy is the very basis of a rational economic model. In this context it would be pertinent to thwart the negative effects of structural adjustment programmes at the level of especially the poorer strata of households in rural as well as urban areas. More specifically, effects of such policies on the marginalized sections of the labour force must be avoided by incorporating household production with the mainstream economy and the market. While in general this calls for increasing the access of poor households to resources and institutions that would link them to the ultimate objective of full employment, in particular the women will need to be brought forward, for economic sustenance

and the overall quality of life within household depends largely on their productive and adjustment capacities. This would necessitate a re-examination of the macro economic policies with regard to their effects on women and the household, as well as rejection of approaches which tend to label women as passive recipients of 'safety-net' benefits and consequently relegate their productivity to the back-stage of the economy.

A New Economic Model

The central focus of this model then should be creation of productive employment where state and its institutions will need to work towards creating conditions and a socio-political context that would enable every individual to participate in productive work. Specifically, this would call for developing policies and programmes to expand work opportunities, constantly enabling people through imparting appropriate skills to respond to changing technology, market and modes of resource use, economic and social empowerment of women and other marginalized sections, reducing the negative impact of macro-economic stabilization or adjustment policies, deliberately opting for labour intensive investments, according due priority to the formation of viable and responsive co-operative ventures and adoption of an appropriate technology system.

At the ground level it will be absolutely necessary to introduce policy changes that would help the activities in the informal sector in a manner so as to complement the formal sector. This would

also call for the removal of administrative and legal obstacles and increasing access to the factors of production and market to the self-employed and micro enterprises. Availability of required and timely credit as well as its accessibility along with other financial supports to women in such sectors is a key variable which can enable them to respond and complete within the market effectively, and simultaneously contribute towards national economy and the well-being of individual households. Efforts will also be required to create space for occupations and workers who cannot be integrated in the 'mainstream' labour market, through effective social security measures and by gradually channelizing their productive potential through skill and access upgradation. The government would also need to redesign its investment policies in order to develop social infrastructure particularly in favour of the poor and marginalized communities.

Within the contemporary context of the national economy, a shift is needed from the welfarist orientation of poverty alleviation programmes to raising the productivity and income of the poor in a phased but sustained manner. In other words an aggregated production system derived from a multitude of decentralized 'self-reliant' units should shape the structure of the economy with its macro institutions facilitating the realization of their fullest potential. And in order to improve as well as ensure the well being of especially the poorer households, an effective way would be to raise the

productive capacity of women in the rural as well as urban areas. The legitimacy of this approach stems from the fact that the hitherto ignored intensity and extent of their work participation rate certainly needs a reassessment and the observation that their work participation and relative contribution total family income are higher in households with lower economic status.⁴

Strategies

It is within this perspective and context that the role of women's labour should be recognized, for an appropriate utilization of such work-force is central to the overall development of most Third World Nations and a potential antidote for breaking out from barriers of acute and perpetual poverty. In order to attain such a desired economy and society, the cardinal position of women at levels ranging from household at the micro and global at the macro, should be accorded its due position. This perhaps is the only way to harness the productive potential of the massive work-force in India as well as other similar economies in the most effective manner. Within the Indian context some strategies towards improving the position and status of women in the economic as well as social spheres are:

1. Sources of women's livelihood should be protected through choice of technology and institutions that do not displace or marginalize them from occupations they have generally been associated with. There is an urgent need

4. The World Bank, Gender and Poverty in India (A World Bank Country Study), Washington D.C. 1991.

to shift from the development paradigm of 'Northern' nations that defines employment mainly within the macro context of market and industrial growth. A definite focus on growth with sustainable employment is a must and calls for strategies that do not downgrade the existing labour force and at the same time creates space for full and effective use of the existing human potential. In order to increase the productivity of activities located in what can be called the 'people's sector', it would be imperative to increase their access to market and capital, better terms of trade and exchange and more effective organizational and managerial capacities. They should also be provided with appropriate training, credit and market facilities and encouraged as well as supported to organize themselves in co-operatives to be able to respond effectively to the institutional and technological changes. In addition, organizing women in the work areas that they have traditionally been associated with as well as the 'male-centric' sectors is essential, for such efforts would change their self perception and create newer vistas and space for their entry. Though in terms of its texture such a strategy appears to be sector focussed, it would certainly go a long way in strengthening women's position in the economy and society. It is through such economic empowerment that the women's participation in the workforce and their productive capacity can receive a meaningful expression.

2. An essential step in improving their position would be to (a) increase their access to property and resources like land and dwellings, (b) reduce the extent of

their drudgery and exploitation in various job sectors through appropriate legislative measures and an effective legal machinery, (c) increase their productivity through introduction of new and upgradation of existing skills, and (d) ensure creation, acquisition and ownership of assets for the enhancement of household income and diversification of its resource base. Here we can draw from our own experiences in SEWA, where members have been able to own assets and increase their earnings - be it through acquiring a hand-cart, sewing machine, loom or a work-shed. SEWA has also helped women farmhands by imparting knowledge about the use of modern technology in agriculture and new techniques of water harvesting in dry regions. Through sustained efforts of its health workers co-operatives, SEWA has also been able to introduce and sustain aspects related to community health and medicine. Successful as they are at the micro level such experiments provide scope to integrate their essential elements into macro level policy and programme framework.

3. Given the potential and vibrancy of the informal sector and an overwhelming presence of women in it, production strategies can be modified to incorporate specific occupations with support institutions and market structure of the formal sector. Not only such links need to be developed with the manufacturing and service sectors within 'urban' locations alone, but also these must be fitted appropriately in the rural context. Linking rural 'productivity' with the urban market through specific protections will increase their income generating and reinvestment

capacity leading to an overall well being of their households.

SEWA has found that employment opportunities are enhanced several-fold when the people's sector is directly linked with the mainstream markets. For example, the women in the Santalpur desert area had intermittent employment and were earning a pittance when picking gum off trees and selling them to traders. But when these women formed their own co-operatives and linked up with the licensing and selling agent, the Forest Corporation, they had steady employment. By forming co-operative village dairies and linking with the marketing federation, livestock owners were able to get a steady and fair price for their milk. The embroiderers could turn their occasional sale of product into a full-time employment earning opportunity when they acquired their own shop in the city. Bamboo workers could buy bamboo at one half the price when they went to another state and purchased in bulk.

4. Since in the absence of adequate access to financial resources, economic empowerment of women cannot be achieved, it is pertinent to lobby in their favour and link them with the banking system. Experience of organizations like SEWA, FWWB, WWF and MYRADA in India, GRAMEEN in Bangladesh, CASHPOR in Phillipines etc. have shown that women are disciplined loan repayers and savers. There is a growing need to support such institutions in order to facilitate credit accessibility to the vast multitude of poor women producers and entrepreneurs. In addition, effective

mechanisms must be developed to increase their access to market information and thereby enable them complete favourably in the market. It is important for the government to recognize the market potential of women's labour and while creating space for extensive growth of their micro enterprises they need to be also linked with commercial banks. It is significant to note here that formal banking institutions should use the space and environment created by successful NGOs by enlarging their support portfolios. Expansion of training and support programmes on access to and management of credit to various Self-Help Groups by voluntary agencies can strengthen their productive and risk taking capacity further. Such efforts obviously cannot be widened unless the government as well as external finding agencies are sensitive towards market adjustment programmes favouring women and are able to perceive the advantages associated with them.

5. In order to strengthen women's bargaining power at the policy level they need to be organized around a variety of common issues and interests. Such efforts alongwith helping them gain tangible benefits like access to water, fuel, health facilities, resources, credit, market-space etc. would also increase their self-confidence and provide them with opportunities to share and learn from a variety of experiences of struggles and strategies across the country. Role of NGOs in organizing women's self-help groups and co-operatives becomes very crucial in this sphere, for through such organizations women can break out of the gender barrier and expand their work

horizons. SEWA for example has been able to institutionalize co-operatives of artisans, rag-pickers, agricultural workers and vegetable growers and sellers. It has helped its members to form economic organizations and supported a wide variety of organizational forms depending on the area, activity and capacity of members. Urban members who are more literate and have higher access to services, have formed registered co-operatives. So have the milk producers as they could fit into an already existing co-operative infrastructure. Service providers-health-care and child-care workers have formed co-operatives of a new type. These co-operatives have now come together to form a state level women's co-operative federation which provides its members training, policy support and marketing services. In order to amend the skewed gender balance against women, it is pertinent to ensure their representation at various levels in federations and co-operatives which has hitherto been the domain of men-folk. SEWA itself is a trade union which gives voice to its members and struggles and lobbies for their rights. Notwithstanding the limitations of such microlevel efforts, these are significant pointers towards attaining an environment where women can be confident about their economic capabilities and organized strength. This will also give them a political visibility - so very necessary for negotiating with various manifestations of gender discrimination at the micro as well as macro levels and work as pressures to seek favourable changes in policies and programmes aimed at their improvement.

6. The people's sector can only flourish if the policies and economic environment give it the space to do so. The significance of its role in the socio-economic well being of a nation must be recognized and the activities in it fostered through creation of an environment that can enhance employment, earnings and more control of producers over their own economies. This would require (a) introduction of liberal laws allowing growth of a variety of co-operatives and ensuring that their control is vested on their members; (b) reduction of bureaucratic controls especially in the use and management of resources like water, minor forest products etc; (c) increasing the accessibility of land, forest water bodies and common property resources to people's, worker's and artisan's groups; (d) provision of substantial budgetary investments for management supports and infrastructural development aimed at improving household productivity and (e) recognition of the vast size and employment potential of this sector and its people centered enterprises.

Despite some pitfalls and failures in organizing women by NGOs and concerned groups there has been a string of success stories in varying regions within the country. Experiences from such struggles need to be documented and incorporated in policies and policy research so that they can be replicated in similar situations. Full realization of the productive capacity of female workers through appropriate policy adjustments would go a long way in improving the economic security of poor households and link them

to the product and labour market effectively. Sharing work together in an increasing range of occupations will provide women with platforms that would help in raising their consciousness and forming an identity - so very necessary for breaking the narrow boundaries of caste, creed and sect. Such a rising solidarity will also act as a liberating force from a system perpetuated so far by a patriarchal society. Through sustained efforts towards attaining such a goal, we will be able to form a stage where a 'society for all' can emerge through accommodating a diverse set of interest and productive capacities at the grassroots level. We must strive towards promotion of equality of opportunity and respect for diversity, for in the absence of it human potential will be subsumed by strong market forces and 'inhuman' institutions.