

Roosevelt Freedom Award – Freedom from Want
Middleburg, May 12, 2012

- Ela R. Bhatt¹

Your Majesty, Your Royal Highness, Mr. Prime Minister, Excellencies, Distinguished Laureates and friends, I am honored and humbled to receive the Freedom from Want Award for 2012, which I accept on behalf of the women of the Self-Employed Women's Association and sisters across the globe who live in poverty and want, but face them with courage and dignity, with self-reliance and hard work.

President Roosevelt's vision of a world without fear, and without want; a world where there is freedom of speech and freedom of worship, unfortunately still remains a vision. Mahatma Gandhi said political freedom is incomplete without economic freedom. He was right; it is only when people have both, that they can begin to build a free, just and peaceful society.

But today, our world is in a critical state of imbalance. Farmers who till the land and feed the world, themselves go hungry. Countries that have the most abundant natural resources are among the poorest. The working poor are the backbone of every nation's economy, and yet they go hungry. What is poverty, but a society's disrespect for human labor? Poverty is a form of violence perpetuated with the consent of society. Poverty strips a person of his or her humanity, and poverty takes away their freedom. Nothing that compromises a person's humanity should be acceptable. Peace is about restoring balance in society.

We have not addressed simple human needs like food, and water and shelter for all, even though we are exhausting our natural resources at an alarming rate. We assume technology will solve our problems, but we forget that if technology creates imbalances, it is not a solution. It is time to reconsider our approach. After all, one cannot solve problems with the same thinking that brought us these problems in the first place.

If profit is our only measure of success, we will turn a blind eye to the exploitation of people and nature. So long as our goal is limited only to maximizing production and consumption, we are embracing both imbalance and inequality, and perpetuating a world full of wants. But if our goal is to build a society where the full potential of every human being is realized, we will need a radically different approach. We will need to get in partnership with our conscience; we will need to get in partnership with all fellow human beings; and we will need a long-term partnership with Mother Nature.

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So what is our alternative? Mahatma Gandhi saw the village economy as the key to nation building. He believed that by closing the distance between producers and consumers, by meeting local needs with local skills, one strengthens the economy, one strengthens the community, and one lays the foundation for a society that is fair and equitable because it is accountable at every level. I consider women's participation and representation an integral part of the development process. Women can bring constructive, creative and sustainable solutions to the world.

At the same time, work is the thread that binds a society together. When I visit troubled areas, whether it is in the slums of India, or violence ravaged Afghanistan, or the West Bank, the people I meet have one basic request. They ask for work. No matter how miserable their condition, as victims of hunger, or violence or natural disasters, they don't want charity; they want work that will sustain their families, give them stability, allow them to build assets that reduce vulnerability, and help them plan for a future. Decent work isn't found in sweatshops or special economic zones. Only meaningful work builds roots, and gives meaning and dignity to one's life.

My own vision is of a society where six of our primary needs—our daily staple food, shelter, clothing, primary education, health services and banking services can be found within a hundred mile radius. We need to address three fundamental issues of creating livelihoods, building the local economy and feeding the world.

Finally, when the world committed to the Millennium Development Goals, we were in fact pledging to become partners with the poor. Let us place the development goals squarely in the center of our National Plans and the National Budget. Furthermore, let us make sure that fulfillment of the Millennium Development Goals are on the UN Agenda in its every Peace building process. They are powerful tools with which to build peace within and between nations. President Roosevelt was prophetic in his call for the Four Freedoms. After all, ceasefire is just the end of war; it is work, food, and shelter that are the true elements of Peace.