

Ahmedabad, India: Nothing about Ela Bhatt gives any hint of the vital role that she has played in the lives of millions of people – or of the place she occupies on the world stage.

Her home, in the teeming western Indian city of Ahmedabad, is a modest bungalow noticeably smaller than the villas that surround it.

There is no evidence of her stack of national and international awards, the way she works shoulder-to-shoulder with global luminaries such as Nelson Mandela and Kofi Annan, trying to find ways of easing human suffering.

Only her nickname, the “Gentle Revolutionary”, offers a clue to the benefits her life’s work has brought to a multitude of impoverished working women.

Nearly four decades ago Dr Bhatt, now 76, founded what has become India’s largest and most unusual trade union. The members are waste-pickers, street vendors, incense stick rollers, construction and agricultural workers, and home-based workers. They are the so-called informal economy workers - women at the bottom of the ladder who have no job security or social safety net.

The organization Dr Bhatt started to help them, Self-Employed Women’s Association (SEWA), now has more than a million members, half of them in her home state, Gujarat.

Dr Bhatt – a lawyer by training - conceived the idea for SEWA in 1971. She was working for a large textile union in Ahmedabad and began to worry about the large number of workers who, since they were informal workers, were non-union.

She saw that these people had no contracts with their employers, no sick benefits, no protection against harassment, and no guaranteed minimum wage. “I looked around and saw a huge mass of workers in the informal sector – some 84 per cent of the total work force - that had no safety net at all. When you work for 10 hours and you don’t get your dues – that is gross injustice”.

“Creating the conditions and mechanisms that allow workers to organize is key to lifting them out of poverty,” said Leyla Tegmo-Reddy, Director of the International Labour Organization’s Subregional Office for South Asia. The ILO is the UN agency that deals with work and workplace issues. “The fact that poverty is closely linked to a lack of fundamental rights as well as a lack of income is often overlooked. If workers are organized they are no longer invisible, they can make their voices heard and begin to claim these rights”.

These links between poverty alleviation, worker’s organization and the importance of a social safety net are among the ideas highlighted in the ILO’s current year-long Global Gender Campaign, which is focusing attention on the importance of gender in these and other areas of working life. The campaign will culminate with an international debate between the 3,000-plus delegates due to attend the ILO’s annual conference in Geneva in June.

Since its formation SEWA has grown in both size and scope. As well as gaining a voice its members now have access to medical programmes and child care schemes. They can get health and life insurance policies

for themselves and their families. They can get start-up loans for small businesses and borrow money to build a home. They can also join savings and pensions schemes.

Dr Bhatt remembers accompanying women to banks to try to open savings and loan accounts only to discover that they were not welcome. "There was so much prejudice against this class, the illiterate and the poor. They weren't even offered a chair," she recalls.

The women in the union eventually decided to set up their own cooperative bank. It now has 350,000 depositors and an impressive 97 per cent pay-back rate on loans. This does not surprise Dr Bhatt. "Women know the value of money and they know how to handle it," she says, "All they need is a safe place to put their savings and a safe way to borrow."

One of the bank's clients is Usha Ranjitsingh. She squats on the pavement outside her home, making incense sticks. It is back-breaking work, often carried out in searing heat. In an hour she can roll 1,000 sticks for which she is paid eight rupees - equivalent to just 16 US cents.

Yet Ms Ranjitsingh says her business is expanding. A loan from the SEWA bank has enabled her to buy wholesale the sticks, incense and tar-like glue, which she supplies to the other women working on the pavement around her. This way she earns a small commission. It is not much – but it helps.

Just as importantly, through the efforts of SEWA incense stick rollers like Usha Ranjitsingh are now represented on the welfare boards which provide various forms of social security to workers.

SEWA has also gone into the insurance business after discovering that insurance companies would not provide cover for India's poor. This scheme now has 100,000 members and has become a model for the Indian government, which is piloting similar schemes in 12 other states.

SEWA's campaigning has brought some significant policy changes. In 2004 the government agreed a national policy protecting the rights of street vendors. Last year, after 20 years of lobbying from SEWA and others, parliament approved social security legislation for informal workers (although it has yet to be signed into law).

Dr Bhatt says that getting from policy to implementation is "the most frustrating issue faced in life", and much remains to be done. The informal sector is growing and nine out of ten Indians now work in it, most without any form of legal protection.

"We have the best of the laws in India. We have the best laws for women and for labour but the implementation is very poor", she said.