

## **Personal Reflection on the Exposure Dialogue in Ahmedabad, January 2013.**

**By Marlese von Broembsen**

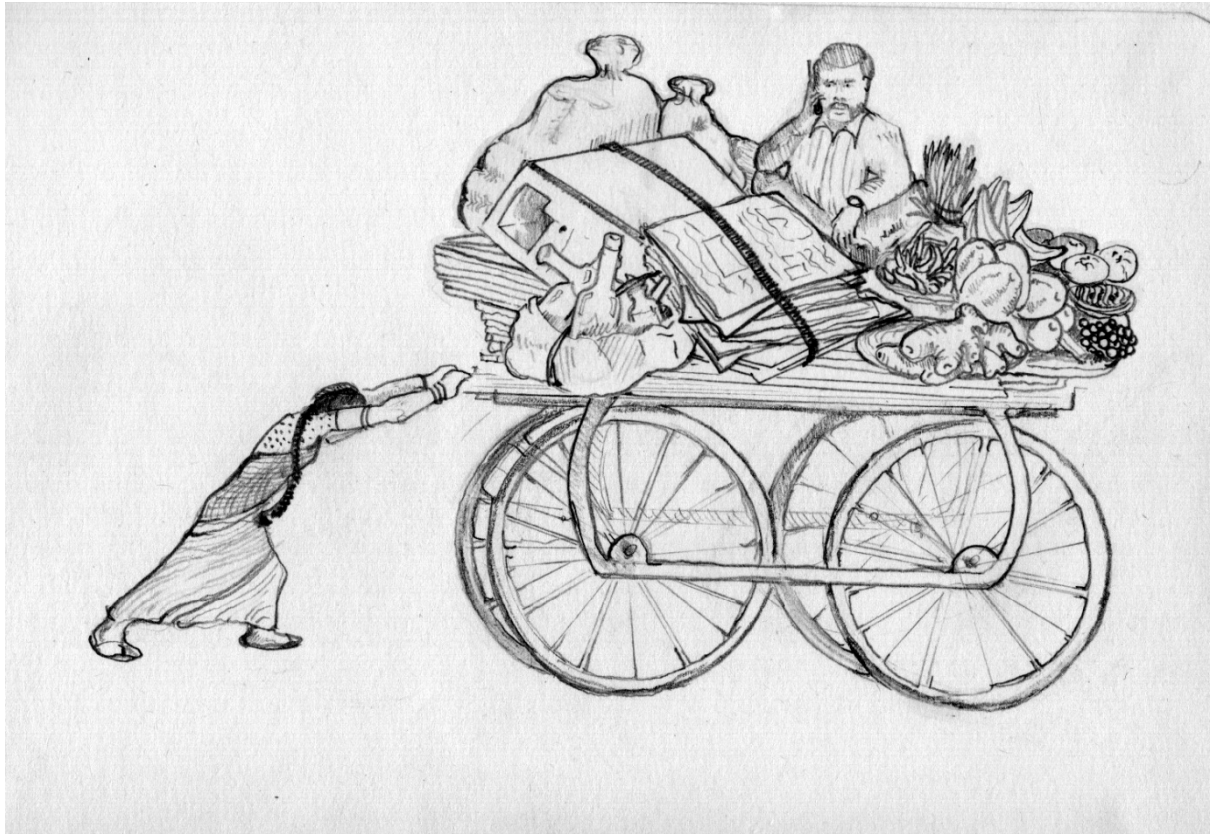
Lilaben greeted me with a warm, shy smile at the SEWA centre and immediately I felt some kind of bond – a shared commitment to this undertaking, I think.

Lilaben is a slight woman – about 5 foot 2 inches in height and small boned. Her job involves much manual labour – daily she pushes her vegetable cart several kilometres – so despite her diminutive stature, she is strong and muscled. She has fine features and a dark complexion, and when I met her the first day in a bright pink sari, was quite beautiful. She belongs to one of the scheduled castes and self-identifies strongly with it, as it came up several times during our stay.

Lilaben is married and has a daughter of 17, Dimple. Fifteen years ago she left her husband, as he 'is a drunkard' and returned from his village to live with her mother. The family lives in a three- storey dwelling. Each storey comprises a one-bedroomed living area and a small outside washroom. Lilaben's mother lives on the bottom floor, her sister and family on the second floor, and Lilaben built the third floor for her and her daughter. The chawl in which they live, comprises about five streets which are sandwiched in between a middle class suburb.

Lilaben's mother is a potter. She makes pots that are used during traditional celebrations, such as weddings. One of her six daughters decorates the pots. Lilaben explained that one cannot sell pots at the market, and that she accordingly decided to sell vegetables. She decided to concentrate on potatoes and onions 'as these do not go off'. It seems though that there are combinations of vegetables that are the norm, since there was at least one other vendor who sold potatoes and onions in the market, and other vendors who sold a great variety of vegetables did not sell potatoes or onions. Later when we visited the wholesaler, it transpired that the wholesaler sells only potatoes and onions.

After depositing our bags at her home, we headed off to spend the afternoon and evening at the vegetable market. The trailer, laden with onions and potatoes was parked in the spot on the street where Lilaben sells vegetables in the mornings.



(A drawing of Lilaben by Federico Parra <federico.parra@wiego.org>)

Another trader was taking care of it in her absence. Lilaben piled some more potatoes on from a 20 kg hessian bag, and off we set to the market. Lilaben pushed her cart in the very busy traffic. At times she pushed the cart facing three lines of oncoming traffic. She seemed so vulnerable, but was absorbed and confident in her task of manoeuvring the cart and getting to the market. I pushed the cart with her and later in a group session she commented on the significance of my feeble attempt to help her.

The market is a bare patch of ground, to which around 70 vendors have apparently been allocated places from which to trade. It was fairly deserted – around 40 traders were present – the reason for which became evident later. We arrived at around four and stayed till nine. As it became dark, vendors put on lights. There were no toilet facilities, no shade and no running water. We were plied with chai and coffee and I relished being back in India.

We stayed until 9pm, bought vegetables from other traders to cook for dinner and left the market to make supper. After a delicious dinner Lilaben, Geetaben (a SEWA lawyer) Kalindiben (our facilitator), and I settled down to sleep cheek by jowl on the tiles. Mahendra Chetty, a fellow South African, slept on a bed on Lilaben's sister's patio. Lilaben rose at 5, washed clothes and prepared herself and her daughter for the day. Lilaben is determined that Dimple should have a better future, and has invested heavily, with great self-sacrifice, in her education. Dimple finishes school this year. Lilaben explained that Dimple will have an arranged marriage to someone

from her caste. Her education would improve her chances of a good marriage, but her in-laws will decide whether or not she is allowed to work.

Every morning, Lilaben stations her cart on the corner of a side street that intersects with a busy shopping street. It is illegal to sell vegetables here, but police only patrol in the afternoons and evenings, so she is safe. The sales here are more than double what she makes at the designated market.

Today we visit the potato and onion wholesaler. This is a male world and so the arrival of a group of females is unusual, and a white woman a curiosity. Eventually Lilaben explains that her caste rules forbid her to buy directly from a wholesaler. That would 'bring dishonour on the men', so she has to buy from a broker at an additional 2%. I'm interested that neither she (who has no father, brother or husband) nor any of the SEWA staff seem critical of the gender implications of this caste norm.

Later we are taken to a 'model road' where Lilaben and other vendors from the market used to trade. The implications of Ahmedabad's designation of 5 roads as 'model roads', which involved 'clearing' roads of something in the order of 5000 vendors is the key issue raised by all vendors we encounter. The night before, a group of male vendors addressed Gitaben when they realised she was a lawyer with SEWA.

Gitaben's mother is a bidi roller and her ability to identify with the lives and struggles of vendors moved me. Our facilitator, Kalinidben, had not been exposed to life on the streets in the same way and experiences like going on a shared rickshaw were new to her. She cried when she heard from the men the hardship endured as a result of being moved from roads to this market place (which SEWA fought for), which attract few customers and generate a third of previous earnings. I was struck by the reality of how precarious the livelihoods of the vendors are, and by the gratitude towards and the faith in SEWA expressed by these men.

A good way to end my reflection is with a comment by Gitaben, which has stayed with me. Gitaben, who sensed my struggle with accepting such generous hospitality from someone with so little, reassured me 'for us, a visitor is God'. I understood this to encapsulate the greeting "Namaste" – the God in me greets the God in you – and continue to be humbled by it. The EDP will no doubt permeate my work and life years to come.

