

**WIEGO General Assembly**  
**Welcome Address**  
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Why is it that Durban draws us again and again towards it? I know what it is. The connection is the struggle for second freedom as I call it. The roots of street vendors' liberation struggle is here. The roots of India's freedom movement is also in Durban. We see young Mahatma Gandhi arriving here as a young man of 23, a semi-Englishman and leaving from Durban station passing his apprenticeship test in Mahatmaship as Dr Fatimaben Meer has said in her book.

Today, not only street vendors but organisations of poor women self-employed in many other trades from many countries are meeting here at the instance of the WIEGO conference.

Who are we? We are women, working women, we are many. Our number is growing. Our contribution to our national income is also growing. Our earnings come from the informal sector of the economy. In many cases, our families survive only on our incomes.

WIEGO is a worldwide coalition of grassroots organisations, academic institutions, international development agencies. In WIEGO, activists, scholars, policymakers – we meet together to gain our visibility and voice. Better statistics, research, policy analysis are the tools of our struggle. I use them a lot. Through WIEGO, we strive to stand firm in the globalised economy as equals. We will strive to arrive in a bargaining position to mitigate the negative effects on our lives and livelihoods because of the globalisation, organization and such other trends. We organise but we also need to organise at global levels.

Let me first tell you how WIEGO came to life – how a bidi roller working for a contractor for the past two generations lost her work. The labour courts could not give her justice because as a bidi worker did not come under the definition of a worker. She worked at home. She had no workers' rights.

But SEWA was waging a struggle for labour rights for home-based workers. (Now this has become an international struggle!) SEWA affiliated with the IUF, brother Dan Gallin supported and guided the struggle as home workers were not only an issue for India or developing countries. The issue of home based workers we brought on the agenda of the ILO.

In 1995 they decided to have a convention of home based workers. It took 16 years for a local issue to become international. During the debate, an ILO employers and government's group asked: Who are come workers? Where are they? How many are they? The home workers group did have an estimate of the number, but they wouldn't believe them. On the last day of voting, we won but with a very small margin. We felt dejected.

Dr Martha Chen of Harvard University, an old friend of SEWA, happened to pass by from Geneva. I asked Marty to get us the figures of how many. The next year, Marthy produced a document that was heavy with facts, figures and had a Harvard stamp over it.

We were right in assuming that facts and figures would speak to governments far louder than the pleas of poor people. Our first collaboration was so dynamic that we formed WIEGO in 1996 to demonstrate the contribution of women in the informal economy to the global world.

WIEGO will be completing 10 years next year. WIEGO has done a good job in influencing international bodies like the United Nations, ILO, World Bank, Unifem and some donor organisations on the issues of women in the informal sector. In four years, we have brought out three books. The content / figures are widely quoted by policy makers while responding to international organisations.

In this conference, we shall be discussing many subjects – global markets, urban policies, statistics, social protection. They are all our issues, women's issues, at a global level.

Based on my experience in SEWA, let me address one key issue – that is, why the poor women are not included in and benefit from the globalisation process that is encompassing every one everywhere in the world.

The poor are spread far and wide across rural and urban areas, across sectors of the economy, across levels of access to formal financial services and across a range of industrial processes. In the textile sector, they are dispersed across contract labour and small businesses. In the clothing sector, they are spread in various piece rate production sites and homebased work.

In the agricultural sector, the poor are spread across non-farm and on-farm activities, across cash crop and food production and agriculture related activities such as farm irrigation and seed production. The process of globalisation is bringing more suffering than opportunities or benefits in every activity that I mentioned, in textile and agriculture, for example.

The process of globalisation – including integration of financial markets, labour markets, consumer markets, leaves the poor out. The work opportunities by-pass the poor. The global investments neglect the poor. The global consumers sideline the products the poor and women make. They have no access to better agricultural technology to serve the global market, not even a power tiller. The garment workers do not have access to textile tools such as seamless stitching machines.

The poor work in farms for eight to twelve hours per day but their production or output is small in quantity and lower in quality. So, their earnings are low, uncertain and intermittent. Also, they face several natural disasters, small and large. Their health remains weak and they are exposed to occupational hazards and low nutrition related

illnesses. They have limited access to public health systems and private healthcare is far in terms of distance and affordability. Their economic and social problems are closely inter related. Work security, food security, social security are affected by the globalisation process.

The poor who work and build – for example, their small readymade garment enterprises – do not know their markets directly. Unlike in earlier times when they knew their consumers and traders by face, now they do not know who buys or wears the garments they make nor do they know the price their products fetch in global markets, nor how long the design or fabric in their hands will remain in demand.

Their understanding of global markets is filtered with middle-interests. Their flow of information of global opportunities is guarded, cleansed. Governments, well meaning sometimes, try to help but their interpretation of the markets is not always accurate or timely nor usable or operational. Their studies or consultations or conferences on “globalisation and the poor” are held frequently. They also do analysis of what is happening to the poor under the changed markets, but it does not tell what the poor can do to overcome this neglect or exclusion. They have little contact with the grassroots reality, and the least with the poor women who are invariably engaged in the informal economy.

So, therefore, we need to have our own studies, consultations, meetings, conferences to analyse, research, hold consultations and dialogues at the global level with the concerned research institutes, banks, governments, policy makers and other organisations who are all concerned about everything affecting globalisation – except us – the working poor.

Who will do this task? WIEGO does it especially now that WIEGO is growing bigger and better organised with more contact with the grassroots organisations through the MBO members.

As grassroots organisations, we must realise that organising is never enough. Organising is an ongoing process and it must institutionalise in different ways. Also, it has to have the capacity to respond in different contexts. We must organise into unions, co-operatives, in banking, trading, farming, servicing at local level and national level. We organise across states on issues to make policy interventions.

We have to organise at a certain scale and size, cutting across areas, income, occupations to combat the powerful forces of globalisation. Then only we can access legal protection, create new suitable laws, credit, information, market links, social security, better technologies for the working poor, our members.

There must be ways for our working sisters to benefit from a globalising economy. We need high levels of early and timely investments. We need effective systems in place. We need sustained inputs of resources and expertise beyond the breakeven point.

Moreover, such initiatives also need strategic partnerships with institutions that bring value of the relationship that goes beyond money. Where are such partnerships with institutions that bring value of the relationship that goes beyond money. Where are such partnerships. Our government's role, despite democratic, is declining in support of the poor. Partners are important for us.

All others are organised – employers, business, professional institutions, banks – only we are not organised. WIEGO has a long way to go friends. But with the increased strength now, we will organise and globalise further and deeper. Organising is our job, globalising is WIEGO's task. Together, we will go ahead.

Thank you – Welcome again.