

Marty Chen Interview 2021

Transcript Begins:

Carlin: So thanks so much for joining us, Marty. This is really exciting. I know we're here to talk about some really big news that WIEGO has recently. But I wonder if you could before we dive into that exciting, new grant, if you could tell us, what WIEGO stands for and what WIEGO's mission is.

Marty Chen: Thank you so much. Carlin, I'd be happy to. WIEGO, the name, the acronym is for a large cumbersome name, which is Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing. And the founders of WIEGO, coined that phrase, because it captured what we were seeking to highlight and to address. And what WIEGO is, is a global action research policy network that seeks to empower the working poor in the informal economy, especially women to secure stronger livelihoods better incomes, by changing the policy and legal environment. And we believe that this can be done through what we call the three V's. One is increasing the voice of informal workers through organization and representation. The second is visibility. And that is visibility in official statistics, and official policymaking circles with informed understanding. And the third is for the sake of a third V validity, which is that these workers should be seen as valid economic agents, they should be valued for their contributions, rather than stigmatized and penalized as they tend to be. And we seek to do that through five programs, two fundamental programs, the pillars, if you will, on voice and visibility is a program called organization and representation, where we find and strengthen and link up organizations of informal workers into sector specific networks. The second is our statistics program, a dedicated statistics program, which is dedicated to improving official statistics on the labor force and on economic phenomenon. And we work with the ILO and the UN statistics division and national statistical offices on that. And then we have three programs on policy areas that need to be reframed, we thought through the lens of the working poor in the informal economy. One is on social protection, one is on urban policies, and one is on law. And these programs, working together, generate knowledge. They build the capacity of the worker organizations to do advocacy, and they open spaces to engage in policy advocacy at the local level all the way to the global level.

Carlin: Well, there's so many things I'd like to hear more about there, Marty. But before we dive deeper into WIEGO, I wonder if you could take me back to your own journey. I know WIEGO has been a really pioneering organization in its own rights. How did you come to the idea of founding this network?

Marty Chen: The journey begins in my childhood. I would say I grew up in India. I was a member of a third generation of a missionary family that lived in India and worked in India from 1916 when my paternal grandparents arrived there. And I grew up with informal workers I grew up with to use these Alsatian terms, I grew up with caretakers, and washermen, and gardeners, and milkmen, all the people who provided the goods and services that middle class people needed were all informal. And many of these, in our lives became members of the family, as

the washerman up in the mountains that we still see, because we have a family home there, he said, "We ate salt from each other's tables, we are one family." So I grew up with informal workers. And then I managed to get my medical doctor and then public health husband to South Asia, and we lived in what was East Pakistan, then Bangladesh for most of the '70s. And we lived in New Delhi for most of the '80s. And in Bangladesh, I was working with this remarkable NGO called BRAC. And I helped start and lead its women's program during the 1970s. And so when I was asked to be Oxfam, America's rep in India, I just expanded and built on that work in Bangladesh and had a portfolio of grants for women's economic empowerment. And at that time, I began to work very closely with say, with the Self Employed Women's Association. And then, we came to Harvard in 1987. And I brought with me this grounded knowledge and experience of the informal economy, and began to put it into more academic frameworks. But I was quite taken aback, frankly, that the mainstream economists saw the informal economy as somehow problematic, as either too fuzzy or too messy to be meaningful, or more. So they saw it as non-compliant, non-productive, illegal black. And so I determined that there had to be an alternative narrative, because from my perspective and experience, in a region where 90% of all workers are informal, that that other perspective of the mainstream economists really obtained only to a very small part of the informal economy and most of the informal economy was working poor people trying to earn an honest living in a very hostile legal and policy environment, in large part because of those negative stereotypes. And I partnered in the 1990s, early 1990s, with SEWA in India, Renana Jhabvala in particular, and with what was called UNIFEM, at the time is now UN Women, in the person of Marilyn Car on a project to document the struggles and campaigns of informal worker organizations in South Asia. It resulted in a book called Speaking Out, but it was a documentation of these organizations and their struggles in South Asia. And in the process, we had a proposal into the UN to do something about the informal economy. And there was very little pickup. So what we did what I did really was apply to the Rockefeller Center at Bellagio for what they then called a team retreat. And we brought together 10 people who had worked on the informal economy each separately sometimes together for many years, probably a collective 200 years. And we met to discuss how to address these stereotypes that were so negative and to build on and recognize the fledgling organizations of workers. And I should say a precipitating event before the Bellagio retreat was that I was asked by SEWA to produce data on home based workers around the world for their campaign for a ILO Convention on home based work. And I worked with two colleagues one a student at the Kennedy School. And we generated what we could have data from ad hoc surveys. And they used that in the campaign. And it was determined that the joint action of organizations of workers, and people who did research and statistics, and organizations like UNIFEM, which hosted a conference of policymakers in Asia, also part of the campaign was really the way to go. And as ILA, but the founder of SEWA put it, statistics in the hands of workers is power. So that was really the precipitating final event that led us to the Bellagio retreat at which we planned what is now WIEGO, we thought it would be a project, we had no idea that it would grow into a global movement.

Carlin: Pretty amazing journey, Marty. And I'm curious, you know, you talk about the informal workers that you grew up with, and obviously WIEGO works with home based workers, waste pickers, street vendors, domestic workers. And I'm wondering if you could, you've met so many informal workers across the globe in this time, could you tell us a story about an informal worker or group that really helped bring to life some of the issues and the challenges that informal workers face? Is there a story that you remember from your time that you think would help illustrate, you know, the real challenges on the ground?

Marty Chen: There are so many stories, and they all speak to the resilience of the workers. But I'll choose one from Latin America, because everyone will assume I choose one from South Asia. And this was in Bogota, Colombia 2008. And WIEGO and others were hosting the first ever International Conference of waste pickers and I had lunch with the co-leader of the Association of Recicladores Bogota Silvio, during the conference, and I asked him his life story. And briefly, here's what he told me, he and his family were from the plateau in Colombia, there had been an epidemic. And so his parents moved to Bogota with him and his sister, he was about 13, to avoid the epidemic, and when they arrived shortly after his father abandoned his mother, and himself and his sister. So he dropped out of school and started panning for metal to resell, he would be down where the sewage would come out of the city into probably the river. And he would pan to find metal coins and bits of metal that he could sell. And he graduated from doing that to working on a landfill with other waste pickers, where they are experts at reclaiming from landfills and open dump sites, the recyclable waste that has value in the market. And he worked for some time alongside his fellow workers, and began to organize them. And what they did was they collected all the glass that they had reclaimed in a bundle or a heap to the side of this landfill. And when they had enough glass to make it worth their while, they hired a truck. And they loaded the glass on the truck. They put a mattress on top for them to sit on. And they had the truck driver take them to Medellin, Medellin, where there were the glass factories, and they sold this glass that they had accumulated and it was the first time that they realized they could operate in the market. And this led to him and his equally remarkable wife, Nora, who's a third generation waste picker, to form this Association of Recicladores Bogota and be part of Alliance of Waste Pickers in that country. And there's much to follow. I mean, they have now got over 40 cities in Colombia paying waste pickers for their collection and recycling services. But there's, that's a 25-year history that I can't go into now.

Carlin: And so some of the main challenges that you would say that informal workers face, I mean, what are some of the top challenges that they face on a global scale? What are some of the common themes that you hear?

Marty Chen: Well, I can turn it into what their core demands are, because we hear from them what their core demands are. And the first core demand is for recognition. It's for that validity that I talked about, for recognition that they are legitimate economic players contributing to their societies, contributing to the economy, contributing to the formal economy, because they provide goods and services. And in the case of waste pickers, particularly, they contribute to

reducing carbon emissions by reclaiming waste from landfills and dump sites and streets and households. So that recognition and the dignity that comes with that, that's so fundamental to them, because they are treated so much as undesirables by the elite public and the policymakers. A second core demand is for some kind of social protection, because by definition, they don't get it through their work. And this is not just social assistance, and small amounts of cash transfers, but also more fundamentally social insurance, so that for their health insurance and their pensions in old age, they also want their organizations to be recognized and have a seat at the policy table, because they're excluded from any real setting policy making processes. But then the situation begins to differ by the different groups. So you could broadly divide them between those who work in public spaces, and those who work in private homes. So the ones primarily in public spaces that we work with are the street vendors and the waste pickers. And the street vendors, of course, they want a secure location to vend, probably in a public space near the flow of customers. So not please in the periphery of the cities, but centrally to the central business district. And the waste pickers also want their routes for collecting and also their sorting sites, you know, recognized. And for the two groups that work in private homes, one are the domestic workers. And there their issue is mainly with the employer and the hiring contract that they have. And for home based producers, and I should hasten to add that in South Asia, you know, around 1/3 of all women workers are home based. In India, 1/3 of all manufacturing units are home based. So people who work produced goods and services from their own homes, need some kind of secure tenure for their homes. They need the basic infrastructure for their homes, services, water and sanitation and electricity to make their homes viable workplaces. And they have to deal with the market if they're self-employed, and they have to deal with the contractors if they're subcontracted. So they have a range of issues depending who they are, where they work, what goods and services they produce. So a great deal of WIEGO's work is to get the statistics on the different groups, but also to generate knowledge about the particular constraints and risks that the different groups face. And a primary demand overall, is please do no harm. You know, there's so much talk in policy circles about job creation. And meanwhile, we are destroying livelihoods because we aren't doing harm cities are doing our governments are doing harm. So the first request is please do no harm. And this is particularly poignant during COVID because we have done a longitudinal study in 12 cities around the world, and we know like the ILO had predicted that around 80% of the informal workforce, which is there are 2 billion of them worldwide. So 1.6 billion estimated, had their livelihoods come to a screeching halt, often with the lockdowns. And in the relief era response, there was response, but it tended to be for one or two months, some food aid, some cash, not a lot. And then it was sort of like government fatigue with relief. But the crisis has continued into 2021. And so the ability to work slightly greater, but the earning levels are still very low and the relief fatigue has set in. And I should hasten to add, that while they were seen as targets for relief, they are not part of the economic recovery plans. The economic recovery plans started small and medium and large enterprises going up. And most of these workers are in single person operations or small family units. And I could say almost all recovery plans, exclude them, right? So they're not part and yet, we're convinced that you have

to build back the economy from the base, to have a robust recovery and to get back on the path to reducing poverty and inequality, because both poverty and inequality have just been greatly expanded during the COVID crisis.

Carlin: Yeah, this is so interesting, Marty, because, you know, one of the lines that I read in one of the articles about WIEGO recently was that, you know, the informal economy is the economy in most a lot of these global south countries. So how does this happen that they don't get included in recovery plans when there's 90% of the whole economy is the informal economy?

Marty Chen: That's a good question. It's central to what we've been trying to do for 25 years, WIEGO is now 25 years old or will be in April of next year. And it's a puzzle to me that when you look at the majority of workers, the majority of enterprises, the majority of economic activity, everywhere, except the developed countries are so excluded from economic plans and economic, well now, economic recovery, and at best are treated with some labor protections or there's a growing movement for universal, you know, social protection. But on the economic side of the equation, hardly there at all. And I think it's because of this mainstream notion in economics, that they are at problem. And originally, they thought it would go away with industrial development, which of course it hasn't. And modern capitalism is generating more informal employment, not less. And the other assumption was that it's a drag on the economy. And there's also a related or as a taxi, that if you do things for them, it creates a perverse incentive for them to be informal. And my retort is what is more perverse that you leave out 90% of your workers and enterprises and activities from social and legal protections, and from your economic plans and policies, or you create a perverse incentive for a few to remain informal? And so that's been a huge challenge for us. It's a mindset problem that people see them in this particular way and don't see them. There was a recent publication by the World Bank that talked about informality. They never talked in formal economy, they never said informal workers, they never said, informality and the correlation between informality and bad governance, informality and COVID impact. And they went so far as not just talk about the correlation, but they essentially made a causation set of statements that informality is the cause of all these bad things. And so we've made progress in certain mindsets and thinking, but we have a long ways to go. But I would say what's really encouraging is that in 2018, we had the first ever global estimates of informality, that's 25 years of work between the WIEGO's statistics program and the ILO's statistics department, and UN's stats and national government, you name it. We then had two years later, for the first time with the first global crisis, we had a recognition that the informal economy was worse hit all previous recessions, it was assumed that the informal economy provided a cushion to fall back on and the cushion was for formal workers who lost their jobs could find work in the informal economy. But nobody was asking what happened to the informal workers. And we did a longitudinal study with the global recession 2008 to 10. Also on this saying there is no cushion for the informal workers to fall back on this crisis, there is recognition of that. And we do have some ILO conventions and standards, we have mentioned in the UN, the New Urban Agenda of UN Habitat. So there's

been a lot of progress made in sort of mainstreaming an alternative view of the informal economy. But we still have a ways to go.

Carlin: Yeah, and thank you for painting that picture of the real crisis that ensued with the pandemic, whereas, you know, you and I could switch to doing Zoom calls and working from home. But for many people in the our most of the informal economy, it really came to a screeching halt. And, you know, that brings me to the exciting news, which is that though, that WIEGO received a recent grant from the Ford Foundation for a very large and nice \$25 million to support this equitable economic recovery. Could you tell us a little bit about what that means to you as WIEGO and equitable economic recovery from the pandemic?

Marty Chen: Well, yes, and first, I want to say that to thank Ford Foundation, because they have been a core funder of WIEGO from the beginning. And we've relied on them and a couple of other key core funders to be able to grow, not just the organization of WIEGO but this network. And the grant is for the network. It's for the social, the global movement of informal workers. So it will be divided between four large sector networks of informal workers, domestic workers, street vendors, home based workers and waste pickers. And it will also include money for WIEGO to continue to do what we've been doing, which is helping with capacity building for advocacy, helping with communications, helping coordinate sort of a global movement campaign for just recovery from below. And so for us, the building back better to use the slogan needs to start with the base of the economy, not the tip of the economy. And I hasten to add that during COVID, and the, sorry, the shareholder capitalism has done very well. But the base of the economy these working poor people are in a deep hole, because they lift off their daily earnings, those that work in those earning stopped, and they have gone deeper into debt. They've depleted their savings, and in many cases have pawned or sold productive assets. So they have gone deep into a hole and are still struggling to put food on the table. While shareholder capitalism has done very well. And so we need to start at the base. We need to start and rebuild where the majority of workers, the majority of enterprises, and the majority of economic activities are and to build on the recognition that did come with COVID. That were two recognitions. One is that the basic needs that all of us rely on and now we have the breakdown of the supply chains. We're all very conscious of the basic needs, and also some of the consumer luxury items that we all feel are important. We've come to realize the importance of those in our lives, and the importance of people who provide essential goods and services. I mean, notably starting with the health workers, who have come beyond the call of duty, and many of whom not the doctors and nurses necessarily, but many of the other medical people are informally employed. You know, most of our people who run the ambulances and the paramedics who are on the ambulances, they don't get health insurance, they're paid very little. So we know that the provision of essential goods and services, the production of food, the processing of food, the delivery of food, the last mile delivery of food by street vendors, is all informal workers. So we've you know, we've banged pots and pans and we've clapped and we've solved for the essential workers, turning the lockdowns and restrictions, but are we going to build them into the recovery? That's the challenge. And so long as we treat the informal as

sort of a social policy problem, and not an economic policy opportunity, we will not have a robust recovery, we will not reduce poverty and inequality.

Carlin: You know, it's so interesting hearing you talk about this, Marty, from your own journey to WIEGO to some of the major issues that you're taking on here in the world, which is this vast inequality. I'm just curious, on a personal level, what drives you and motivates you to keep going with this for decades really committing to this work? What are some of your own personal drive and aspirations and hopes here for this?

Marty Chen: Well, what drives me is the people themselves the informal workers that I've met around the world. I am an anthropologist by training. So the way I learn, the way I do inductive theory building, is by going and sitting on mud floors, if you will. That's what I've done all my long career, beginning in Bangladesh in the 1970s. And so it's the people, their resilience, their charisma, the struggles that they have fought their determination to keep going against all odds. That's definitely what drives me. It's how I learn and how I think. Along the way, with the WIEGO network, all of us in the WIEGO network are committed activists, many of us are activist academics, others are activists lawyers, others are activist organizers. But being part of a family of committed activists of different skills and talents and background has also been very inspiring and how we've all come together around the cause, and have developed technical capacity in a whole range of areas to build the knowledge and do the policy analysis and the policy advocacy that's needed, and doing it all the time with the organizations of workers. And so the organizations are also inspiring they, I mean, I've been in on the beginning of some of them, and seeing them go from strength to strength. I've been with them when they were small and struggling and they're now on the global stage. That's why it was particularly deeply heartfelt and moving to see the leaders of these networks featured in Time Magazine. Thanks to the Ford Foundation communications team who did this three really significant media pieces around the grant to the networks and to WIEGO.

Carlin: Actually, that makes me think also thinking about your journey, Marty, has there been differences in over the decades do you see in what you see as informal workers and who they are and their struggles or, I mean, what an over the last 20 years, have you seen any significant differences in who an informal worker is or what their struggles are?

Marty Chen: Well, if we start with the four groups that WIEGO has dedicated itself to the domestic workers, the home based producers, the street vendors and waste pickers, at one level their lives are and who they are and who joins those sectors is still very much the same. But there are new forms of informality or informal work that are also emerging even within those sectors. There are digital platforms for contracting their goods and their services that they are trying to struggle with, because sometimes the platforms help and sometimes they hinder. And there are new categories of platform workers, gig workers, who are mainly informal. The definition of informal being that these are workers whose enterprises are smaller, unregistered, or their employment arrangement, they do not get any contributions from employers to their social protection. So you think of the Uber drivers you think of any of these,

and they are actually informal. So modern capitalism is generating modern forms of informality, which go alongside the traditional historic forms. So the historic form of a subcontracted dependent contracted worker are the industrial out workers who work in the global supply chains forever. And the new form is those who work for the digital platforms. So we're seeing it in new guises, and but the traditional categories, especially in the Global South, are still out there still struggling. And we have pockets of victories, but we have hope that we can have more widespread victories for them. And this is a critical moment for the workers because with the COVID moment, it is an inflection moment. The world has the global community has to decide whether we're going to revert to the old bad deal for informal workers where they were stigmatized and penalized, or, and there's a strong likelihood of this, that we go back to a worse normal. Because in the name of public health in the name of economic recovery, governments around the world are destroying the physical infrastructure of street vendor markets or waste pickers sorting sites. They're closing dump sites where informal waste pickers work. They are trying to get rules and regulations for factories, to have fewer shifts so that they don't have so many workers coming through public health. In the name of public health and economic recovery, governments are doing what they long wanted to do, which is to destroy the informal economy. So you take the city of Dakar in Senegal, there was a large African market much celebrated where many people worked, and many people went to buy goods. And it was in a central location that the government wanted to build a mall. So they used COVID as an excuse to completely destroy the market in order to buy a mall. Now that a mall and an open market cater to completely different interests. And it's real estate and elite customers on one side. And it's, you know, it's the poor middle class and working poor customers, and the informal traders on the other side, and this is a clear moment to make a choice. It's a moral choice. Who are we supporting in our cities? What vision of cities do we have? Is that Shanghai where you can't find informal workers they are there but you can't see them? Or is it Hanoi where there's still cheek and jowl just operating side by side or Mumbai a city you know well and I know well, where it's, they operate side by side and with a fair amount of tension, but at least it's the formal and informal sharing spaces at different times of the day, operating sort of organically together.

Carlin: Well, that's an interesting framing of this moment. So it will be interesting to watch and people should follow WIEGO to see more of the research that comes out of this moment in time and some of the work that the organizations will now do on the ground and at this moment. And Marty, just one last question. Basically, we're the Mittal Institute here at Harvard, and I know that there is a long history of WIEGO at Harvard and many connections. Would you just like to elaborate on WIEGO's connection with Harvard?

Marty Chen: Thank you. Yes, and I also want to express my gratitude to the Harvard Kennedy School. When I came to the Harvard Kennedy School in 1987, I was living, as I mentioned, these two decades of work in Bangladesh, in India on the informal economy, I did start from the Harvard Kennedy School, across Boston webinars what sorry, not webinars seminar, we were in person on the informal economy with economists and others from Boston University, MIT, Harvard. And I was able to do the research that I continued to do on the informal economy.

And once WIEGO was founded a decade later, which was 1997, I was connected with the Hauser Center for Nongovernmental Org at the Kennedy School. And I was allowed to sort of have a build a secretariat, sort of incubate WIEGO if you will, at the Harvard Center for non-governmental organizations. And so we did have the WIEGO Secretariat at Harvard for two decades, as long as I was the international coordinator. When I handed over to my successor in beginning of 2018, we closed the Secretariat, but I still am at the Harvard Kennedy School, and I'm still a full time paid Senior Advisor to WIEGO. And so it's been very important to us to have a base at Harvard. And we are grateful to the Kennedy School for that. And it has allowed me also to teach about the informal economy. And I have done so both through my own course at the Kennedy School, but also through joint course are actually two joint courses that I have taught with Rahul Mehrotra, who is also from the Mittal Institute cabinet at the Graduate School of Design and our second course, the two of us co-teach with Bish Sanyal from MIT's Urban Studies and Planning Department. So I've been able to teach on that topic while at Harvard. So all of that has been hugely important to WIEGO. And for that, I'm very grateful.

Carlin: And some founders also involved with Harvard also.

Marty Chen: Well, the founders of WIEGO, one of them, Renana Jhabvala, was a student she did her Bachelor's at Harvard College. And the other co-founder from SEWA was Ela Bhatt or is Ela Bhatt who got an honorary degree from Harvard in, I can't quite remember, but she did get an honorary degree from Harvard. And I should say that one of the other top leaders of SEWA the Self Employed Women's Association of India is Harvard College graduate as well, Mirai Chatterjee. So this remarkable trade union going on two million women informal workers in India, among its top leadership, have two Harvard College graduates and the founder got an honorary degree from Harvard. So strong connections.

Carlin: Lots of nice connections there. Well, thank you, Marty. This has been so fascinating to hear so much of your own thinking about the informal economy, its resonance in this really important moment in time today, and just really interesting to hear your own personal journey and background too. So thanks for sharing everything, Marty.

Marty Chen: Thank you, Carlin.