

Organising homeworkers in Tirupur's garment industry

BRIEFING SUMMARY

Tirupur, in Tamil Nadu is India's 'T-shirt capital', the centre of a textile and garment industry which supplies major international clothing brands. Alongside hundreds of thousands of factory workers, there are many women working at home or in small workshops. Working informally, homeworkers are outside any formal employment or social protection for workers and not generally included in trade union membership.

Local NGO SAVE (working with HWW) began mapping to build up a picture of homeworkers, the work they are doing and their priorities. SAVE decided to help the homeworkers organise themselves on a Self Help Group model. SAVE developed a set of training materials with a strong focus on women's rights. The project built alliances with local trade unions, working together to register homeworkers for government benefits and advocating for more effective benefit schemes.

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Tirupur is the major production centre for South India's cotton jersey garment industry. The city has 500,000 garment workers, around a fifth of whom are homeworkers. These mainly women workers are involved in a wide range of jobs, waste separation, trimming and folding, checking and hand finishing garments. Although they are a significant part of the workforce, these women are largely hidden and ignored. Their contribution is rarely recognised either by their communities or the major brands they work for. SAVE is an established and well respected NGO, based in Tirupur. They have extensive experience in working against child labour, and in supporting garment workers. They had not worked with homeworkers before this project, however. HWW, based in the UK, was partnering SAVE on this project and supporting them with expertise on homeworking. HWW has developed an approach to organising homeworkers which begins with mapping. Horizontal mapping identifies homeworkers, the kinds of work they are doing, the issues they face. Vertical mapping explores their position in supply chains, their relationships to intermediaries, subcontractors, retailers etc. This mapping work enables us to explore possibilities for organising, and to tailor appropriate forms of organising to the specific context.

SAVE began mapping the homeworkers to identify the types of work they were doing, the kinds of issues they faced, and the women's priorities. Following initial mapping, SAVE decided to use a Self Help Group model to organise the women. This had a number of benefits. Self Help Groups are a proven model for organising women in India. The groups could start regular savings quickly, forming a stable, committed group. Establishing a bank account gave an immediate sense of achievement and raised social status.

SAVE delivered a clearly structured training programme, with a specially designed manual. The training was delivered in a cascading programme, with the staff team benefiting from training, then group leaders and members. The



training was participatory and not dependent on high levels of literacy. The first training was on how to run a group. The groups had to commit to certain principles such as not letting their children work and sending them to school. All the groups undertook 12 training modules over 3 months, by which time they were less reliant on field workers. The core of the training programme was around women's rights and raising awareness of division of labour in the family and community. The programme proved an effective tool for building groups and developing the confidence and independence of members. Women said they had now come out of their homes and were more confident in the outside world.

'We are courageously moving everywhere, before we did not go out.'

The model was designed to avoid dependency and create solid, self-sustaining groups. Through the groups the women were able to enter into negotiations on wages, register for social security benefits, and also to tackle social and community issues locally, benefitting their wider community, children and others. As well as training and regular group meetings, larger meetings were held for advocacy and lobbying purposes with government officials and trade unions, as well as on issues such as violence against women and taking action through a local helpline.

One of the ongoing challenges of the project was negotiating better wages. Groups were encouraged to attempt to negotiate for better wages, and in some cases to eliminate intermediaries by going direct to the factory.

While this strategy had some success, the complex subcontracting arrangements posed a challenge, and big employers and retailers are reluctant to acknowledge informal workers in their supply chains. With more time the project could have focused more on following the supply chain, identifying companies and brands who could act to raise pay rates, and finding ways to influence them.

By the end of the project 1279 homeworkers had been organised into 105 homeworker groups, on the Self Help Group model. Some homeworker groups had already begun helping new groups in

their area to start up. Inspiring other women locally shows the visibility, confidence and inspiration that a group can have, creating a positive ripple effect throughout the local area.

“Other women are asking about our group, they want to form groups too, we are supporting our children’s education, offering food at the temple and participating in community activities...”

It would be good to scale up the project, building the groups into a sustainable Federation. SAVE would like to establish more homeworker groups in Tirupur to improve the position of more homeworkers, and build greater collective strength. At present they estimate the project reached only about 1% of the homeworkers in Tirupur. The scale of the issue demonstrates both the need and the potential for further organising work.



FURTHER INFORMATION:

Other briefing notes in this series, as well as more information about this case study, are available in the Resources section of the HWW website.

SAVE:

SAVE (Social Awareness and Voluntary Education) is a labour rights NGO based in Tirupur, South India. SAVE is dedicated to preventing child labour, empowering women, and supporting workers in the textile and garment sector.

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HOMEWORKERS WORLDWIDE:

HWW is dedicated to supporting homeworkers around the world as they fight for rights, respect and recognition as workers. We do this through supporting grassroots organising projects, pressuring companies to improve conditions for homeworkers in their supply

chains, lobbying for better laws to protect homeworkers, and building solidarity with other women workers.

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