Recognition for Women Homeworkers

Responding to the situation of Homeworkers in the Leather Footwear Supply Chain in South India
Introduction

Many thousands of women in Ambur, in the southern state of India, Tamil Nadu, work at stitching shoes that are sold by high street retailers in the UK, as well as other parts of the world, or on the internet. Yet, few people who wear the shoes are aware of the women who do this work, or the conditions that they work under.

There are big factories in Ambur and elsewhere in the District of Vellore in which it is located. But there are also thousands of women homeworkers, whose work is doubly invisible. They are far away in India and they work in their own homes, sometimes behind closed doors and are rarely recognised as workers.

These workers are homeworkers. Like homeworkers the world over, they are mainly women trying to combine earning an income with their unpaid family responsibilities. They cook and clean, fetch water, take care of children and make sure they are ready for school, and look after elderly relatives particularly those who are sick or disabled.

The leather footwear sector in Ambur is booming and many of the world’s most famous brands of shoes are sourced here. The whole of the production chain can be found: from tanneries to finished products for export. In the shoe sector, most of the workers are women, both in the factories and in the home. The shoes they make are not cheap: they are mainly the middle to high priced brands, selling in the UK for between £50 and £300 a pair.

For workers in the sector, conditions are not booming. Pay and conditions are poor and there are many chemical hazards, particularly in the tanneries, arising from the use of up to 300 different
chemicals, including chrome. Workers do not have strong trade unions, and homeworkers are not even recognised as a regular part of the workforce.

Homeworkers Worldwide has been collecting information and contacts in the footwear sector for many years, in various countries as well as in India. For the last two years, HWW has been working with Cividep, an NGO based in Bengaluru (Bangalore), to find ways for the homeworkers to begin to come together and make their voices heard. Building organisation among workers is a long, slow process and among homeworkers this is particularly hard. But first steps have been taken for homeworkers to be represented and for long overdue changes to be made.

**Modern globalised production**

![Image of a person sewing]

Many people see homework as something old-fashioned, a relic of craft industries or a ‘cottage industry’ sector, a way in which traditional craft skills can be incorporated into a modern economy. But in reality homework has been increasing in many parts of the world as one way in which huge companies, mainly based in the Global North, can take advantage of a workforce of precarious workers, most of them women, to assemble their products. Homeworkers are generally paid a fraction of minimum wages; their work is irregular and they have none of the benefits and rights of a regular workforce. Because they are scattered In their own homes, they are not even seen as workers the way that workers assembled in one workplace are recognised. Where a traditional craft such as embroidery or weaving is involved, working for global markets has led to growing dependency for the workers.

In Ambur, those assembling shoes are often from low-caste communities, sometimes Dalits, and the tanneries and factories have traditionally been owned by Muslims. Because it is seen as a polluting industry associated with dead animals and their skins, the leather sector in India has been seen as low-status even though it is now an important export sector. But in Ambur workers in the sector are not only from castes traditionally associated with the footwear sector. The sector consists of large
factories and tanneries with extensive subcontracting to smaller units and putting work out to homeworkers and is not based on a traditional artisanal industry.

While India cannot compete with China in the volume of shoes produced both for export and for the domestic market, many of them made from fabrics other than leather, it specialises in relatively high quality leather footwear, particularly men’s shoes in relatively small orders. In Tamil Nadu, for example, a large factory employs around 1,000 workers whereas in Vietnam many thousands are working in large workplaces making trainers.

Some of the models of shoes produced in Tamil Nadu require hand-stitching, and this is where homeworkers are often employed. The most common operation is hand-stitching the uppers of a pair of loafers or casual shoes, although other work is sometimes done at home, including the stitching of the upper to the sole or assembling decorative parts of the shoe. Some factories employ women inside the factory to do hand-stitching but many subcontract work out to smaller units or to intermediaries who in turn give the work to homeworkers. In some cases, there is more than one intermediary distributing work to homeworkers. Since there are no formal contracts, work is often irregular, depending on the needs of production, or seasonal changes in orders and most intermediaries have to get work from different factories depending on what is available.

In some cases, the uppers alone are produced in India and the final assembly is done in Europe. As the most labour-intensive part of the assembly of a shoe, wage costs in India are a fraction of those in Europe. Assuming a homeworker is paid 10 pence a pair for stitching a pair of shoes, the rate of pay to homeworkers in countries such as Bulgaria or Portugal is nearer 40 pence a pair. Some uppers are assembled in India and then fastened to soles in factories in UK, Portugal or Slovakia.

There is rarely any written arrangement between the intermediary and homeworker, let alone the factory and homeworkers. The result is that intermediaries and subcontractors depend for their income on taking an unknown proportion of the price of the jobs and the homeworkers have to accept what rate if offered to them. Piece rates vary from about 6 to 10 rupees (5–10 pence) per pair, depending on the model of shoe being assembled, the number of stitches needed, and sometimes the toughness of the leather. Even if work is regular, homeworkers cannot earn a rate of pay equivalent to minimum wages. If there is no work, there is no income and when there is work there are no benefits such as health insurance or pension entitlements.

The pattern of production is therefore a modern just-in-time model, with homeworkers making up a flexible workforce, along with other informal workers, who are low-cost and disposable when there is no work. The extent of homeworking, and the dependence of the sector on this workforce is reflected in the thousands of women hand-stitching in their own homes, scattered throughout the town of Ambur and the many villages in the vicinity. Yet

![Figure 3: Long hours spent stitching shoes leaves many homeworkers with injuries to their hands. In this photo the homeworker is showing the rudimentary protective equipment that she has made for herself.](image-url)
because they are homeworkers, they are generally invisible. Employers at a meeting in Chennai, agreed that work was given out to homeworkers but stated this was a charitable activity aiming to help particularly poor women such as widows without other means of support and that it was only done on a small scale.

**Their home is their workplace**

The women homeworkers are mainly married women living in the town, and surrounding villages of Ambur, in the District of Vellore. Sometimes, young single women stay at home and do homework, but often they choose to go out and work in the factories when they single and have no family of their own. Homework is all pervasive in time and space: they have small houses without any separate room for storing bundles of shoes so the work is often done or stored in the main living space of the family; and when they are given work to be done, it takes up all their time in between other unpaid work. Work is often given to be returned completed the next day and in order to meet the deadline, women work late into the night, with help from other family members.

There are some single women, often widowed, or women with a sick or disabled husband, who depend on the homework as their main income. But most have working husbands. Many families come from an agricultural background, but the water and ground has been polluted by the leather industry, and many can no longer farm and have looked for other work. There are drivers and builders, and some work in the leather factories. Many of these women say that their husbands’ income provides the basic family living costs, but the homework pays for children’s education. Nevertheless, most are in debt and find it difficult to meet expenses such as unexpected health costs or a daughter’s wedding expenses without getting still further into debt.

Since either the women themselves or other members of their family have worked in factories, they have a good idea of the entitlements of a factory worker. A factory worker’s income is regular; they receive a bonus every year; are insured for health costs and pay towards a pension. On the other hand, as a homeworker they receive none of these. They are paid a low piece rate and although they work most of the year, they are not guaranteed a regular supply of work; sometimes there is a rush on and too much work. At other times, there is none.

Most women are not happy with this situation but see little that they can do about it. Many think that they should receive the same as factory workers but if they raise any of these issues with the intermediary who gives them work, they are told if they don’t like the work, he will take it elsewhere. There are few active unions in the factories and even they often fail to recognise the homeworkers as workers, and at any rate organising hundreds of women scattered in their homes makes any form of organising time-consuming and difficult.

Most homeworkers have been doing this work for many years already, and have work most of the year, with a few gaps when the work dries up. They often get the work from an intermediary in their own area and rely on informal relationships without any written records. So although homeworkers may get more or less steady work from one intermediary, this work does not originate in the same factory. The intermediary may go to different factories if the source of work dries up from one. Brands may vary their orders, some of which require hand-stitching, and others are not given to homeworkers because they are stitched by machine in the factory. Orders may change from one year to the next, as well as seasonal fashions. But although there are all these different factors
making up a kaleidoscope of models, fashions and orders, the end result for homeworkers is that most of the year there is work hand-stitching the uppers of casual shoes such as loafers or boat shoes.

Homeworkers are like factory workers, except that their workplace is their home. They do not design or market the shoes they stitch, or provide the raw materials, leather and threads. A more difficult question is who is their employer? Who is responsible for pay and conditions? The intermediary who brings the work may be a local man, with a van and a room to store the bags of pair of shoes. He may in turn depend on another intermediary who again may entirely dependent on work from factories. Further up the chain is the manufacturer who supplies the brand both of whom have some responsibility. The brand may bargain over prices and move his orders elsewhere if he is not happy, and may give orders at short notice in some cases, both of which factors lead to the use of more homeworkers. In the end, there needs to be a law of joint liability so that both intermediaries, suppliers and brands take some responsibility. At present big retailers and brands usually have codes of conduct, but these are voluntary without any legal force, and often fail to take homeworkers into account.

Organising in Ambur

In 2015, Cividep an NGO based in Bangalore, started the difficult task of investigating and organising homeworkers in the Ambur area. The NGO has experience of organising garment workers in Bangalore, with the long-term perspective of organising an independent trade union, but using the development of Self Help Groups and a community-based women’s organisation as steps along the way. It took a few years to build a social movement from these groups which provide a space to build solidarity among women and eventually a new trade union was set up to handle workplace problems. Now their trade union, GLU – the Garment Labour Union – is active in Bangalore and in the garment and textile sector in Tamil Nadu.

The garment workers in Bangalore are all factory workers but Cividep has adopted a similar strategy to reach homeworkers in the leather footwear sector in Tamil Nadu. They are supporting savings groups in the community and have set up a workers resource centre in Ambur as a training and meeting centre for their field workers and homeworkers. There have been a number of difficulties
organising savings groups because others have done this before and women have experience of being cheated or other bad experiences with Self Help Groups. But over time more groups have been set up and women come together in training sessions to learn about their rights and understand that they too are workers, even if at home.

**International links**

Most of the footwear production in Ambur is destined for export. So homeworkers are found at the end of a chain from big brands, either specialising in footwear, or selling a whole ‘package’ of fashion items. Organising therefore cannot be done only in the traditional ways of workers negotiating with a local employer. Local employers exist, of course, but big brands or retailers at the other side of the world in the Global North control prices and orders. They have the power to determine, to a large extent how their suppliers treat their workforce. Organising therefore in Ambur has to be supported by advocacy and campaigning in the Global North where most of the brands are based.

Homeworkers Worldwide (HWW), based in the UK, exists to support organisation of homebased workers and has consistently drawn attention to the large numbers of homeworkers employed in assembling leather footwear sold in the UK. Working with Labour Behind The Label (LBL), itself part of the Clean Clothes Campaign network in Europe and a partner in the Europe-wide ‘Change Your Shoes’ campaign, HWW produced a report ‘Stitching Our Shoes’ in March 2016 to draw attention to UK retailers of the homeworkers’ situation. As a member of the Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI), we also approached a number of companies.

As a result of this and other advocacy work in the UK, two important breakthroughs were made. We had early discussions with Clarks Shoes, who source many of their models from Tamil Nadu. A representative of Clarks met with Cividep to discuss the situation of homeworkers. Clarks stated that in principle they thought that homeworkers should be treated as workers, and intermediaries directly employed by the local supplier, instead of having to take a slice out of the payment for homeworkers. Clarks have implemented a system like this in a factory in Tunisia. Unfortunately in India, progress has been slow and we have not seen any concrete results for homeworkers yet.

At the same time, HWW and Cividep have been approached by Pentland Brands, a large holding company responsible for a number of major footwear brands. Following publication of ‘Stitching Our Shoes’, Pentland had investigated their supply chains in Tamil Nadu and found that homeworkers were used for stitching some of their models. In 2016, Pentland started a project to investigate conditions for homeworkers in this particular chain, why and when they were used, and how work is given to them. Following this, in 2017, they are planning to design and implement a system for the good employment of homeworkers.

HWW and Cividep are working with Pentlands in this project on the basis that it is important to demonstrate that homeworkers can be employed on a basis which is fair and treats them as part of the workforce. At present, the project is being implemented in one supply chain, and when a good pattern of employment is put in place, it is hoped that this can be extended to other supply chains of Pentland Brands. It is also important to extend this model to other parts of the sector. Many brands
prefer to ignore homeworkers, and if it is drawn to their attention they tend to ban it, in order to protect their reputation. This does nothing to help women homeworkers whose work may be taken away, or else driven further underground where there is even less chance of it being recognised. With a good practice model in place, it is possible to argue that other brands should implement such a model and that is a better solution for all.

It is also crucial that other suppliers apply a similar model. At present, homeworkers earn far less than a minimum wage. Paying a decent rate to homeworkers and recognising other entitlements such as health Insurance will only be sustainable if it is applied throughout the sector as otherwise it leaves isolated suppliers unable to compete on a price basis.

To ensure that any new employment patterns are set up and monitored on a sustainable basis, not only for the length of a project, homeworkers have to be represented. Whereas now they are dependent on agents for their work, they can have an independent voice through their own groups, association or trade union. So while discussions continue with brands, suppliers and their association, we have to listen to the homeworkers themselves about their priorities and demands as they find a voice through coming together and a long process of organising and learning that change is possible.

Figure 5: We have to listen to the homeworkers themselves about their priorities ..