

Hidden Homeworkers - Improving Transparency and Traceability to Improve Working Conditions of Homeworkers in Apparel and Footwear Chains



Across South Asia, millions of women work as homeworkers for the global fashion industry. Typically employed informally by subcontractors or intermediaries and drawn from the poorest communities, women homeworkers are the sector's worst paid and most insecure workers. Despite this, for many women, particularly those with young children, homeworking offers a vital source of family income and banning this practice only pushes it further underground.

Running from 2019-2023, Hidden Homeworkers is an initiative of Traidcraft Exchange, Homenet South Asia and Homeworkers Worldwide, supported by partners SEWA Bharat (in Delhi), SAVE (in Tirupur), SABAH Nepal and CLASS Nepal. The project is co-funded by the European Union. It aims to work collaboratively with brands and multi-stakeholder initiatives to map supply chains down to the homeworker level. The programme helps brands

introduce simple systems that document homeworkers' contribution and wages, and develop action plans that drive transparency, best practices and improve working conditions in apparel and footwear value chains.

Homeworkers are workers contributing to the final product, and therefore are entitled to the same rights and entitlements as other workers (ILO 1996). Under the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs), brands have a responsibility to conduct human rights due diligence across their supply chains, but without transparency to the level of homeworkers this is not possible. Hidden Homeworkers seeks to rectify this: by innovating and extending transparency and traceability systems to the lowest tiers.

The Covid-19 crisis has hit livelihoods hard, with homeworkers unable to access social security, and unable to even contact their contractors during lockdowns. As unrecognised, invisibilised workers without written contracts, they are among the most vulnerable of workers at times such as these. Even as South Asia emerges slowly out of the strictest lockdown, many areas remain under considerable restrictions, with apparel and footwear, like other industries, reeling from an unprecedented drop in international consumer demand.

While industry seeks to slowly revive and restore supply chains, the Hidden Homeworkers project is reaching out to nearly 8000 homeworkers. It is supporting their access to government relief packages, and stepping in to provide necessary additional rations, as well as other essentials such as soap and feminine hygiene kits. Wherever possible, the project is also meeting the demand for livelihoods through engaging homeworkers in the manufacture of personal protective equipment, alleviating economic losses suffered following the global pandemic.

During this time, we are continuing to engage with brands in apparel and footwear and supporting them in their transparency and due diligence work, including working with Cividep India to develop a guide on best practices. In line with ILO Home Work Convention, 1996 (No. 177) we are also working to ensure that national policies are established that respect homeworkers' right to equality of treatment in the workplace, including in terms of freedom of association, occupational safety and health, and fair pay.