

Good Employment for Homeworkers

Stitching the uppers of leather shoes is a common form of homework found in all continents: from Europe to Asia and Latin America. Stitching by hand or by machine is often the most labour intensive part of the process of assembling a leather shoe and is frequently done by women working at home.

In Tamil Nadu, in the South of India, there is a growing industry producing leather footwear for export. This region has traditionally been the home for many tanneries and has increasingly turned to production of complete shoes or the uppers of shoes for export.

Part of the workforce assembling these shoes for export are women working at home, usually hand-stitching the uppers of leather shoes. Because they are women working from home, they are usually invisible and not recognised as part of the workforce. They generally work informally, with no recognition and none of the rights of contractually employed workers. Yet in one part of Tamil Nadu, the Ambur-Vaniyambadi-Ranipet area in Vellore District, there are many hundreds of women doing this work, all year round, for many years of their lives.

Footwear produced in this region is mainly for export and homeworkers often work on shoes for some of the biggest brands in the fashion industry. Some companies are beginning to trace the production of their shoes down the supply chain and address any problems they identify.

In 2016, Pentland Brands, responsible for some of the major brands of footwear sold on our high streets and internationally, have begun to address these issues. Working with Cividep in India and Homeworkers Worldwide in the UK, Pentland are supporting a project to address issues around homework in the production of some of their shoes.

While the project is still at an early stage, the first steps are important and have lessons for others. There has been no attempt to ban homework or brush it under the table. In the first phase the aim was to understand the supply chain and the part played by homeworkers in the production process. The second stage is to put in place a pilot scheme which ensures that homeworkers receive their rights and entitlements and that there are systems in place to support this.

At present, the project is confined to one particular supplier and their supply chain. Once a practical system has been developed to ensure that homeworkers are treated as recognised workers, it is hoped this can be replicated throughout supply chains where homeworkers are utilized. It is hoped that through knowledge sharing with other brands the system will be replicated by different brands.

Recognition of homeworkers

The situation of homeworkers in Ambur, in Vellore District, is a good example of the role that these workers play in the production process and the need to recognise this part of the workforce. Their employment is generally informal and invisible.

Yet in this one region, there are many hundreds of women doing this work at home. They have work most of the year, even though the shoes they work on may come from different factories and be part of orders from different brands. Many women do this work for many years and depend on it for family expenses.

The type of homework they do comes clearly within the definition adopted by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) in its Convention, No.177 on Home Work. All designs and specifications are decided by the brand and supplier and the raw materials, the cut pieces of leather, are supplied via subcontractors and agents. While there are subcontractors and agents (intermediaries) between the supplier and the homeworker, homeworkers themselves are clearly dependent workers, not independent contractors. The ILO Convention recognises that such workers, even though their workplace is the home, are part of the workforce, who should be recognised as workers and entitled to the same rights as other workers.

In collaboration with HWW, Pentland Brands has strengthened its Homeworker Policy, which acknowledges the position of homeworkers and commits to seeking to accept them as part of the workforce by acknowledging their rights and benefits. (This is in contrast to other companies which prohibit homework, which can lead to concealment, making issues harder to tackle, and damages the livelihoods of homeworkers).

Tracing the Chain

Working with a local NGO the project has started to trace the supply chain, which in this case is quite short. The brand deals directly with the supplier who has his own factories but subcontracts some hand-stitching work to agents or intermediaries who distribute the work to homeworkers. Considerable trust is needed however for the supplier to be truly transparent about the chain and employment relations and conditions in it.

Tracing the chain means understanding the pattern of distribution of work but also the role of different actors in the chain and the value or price given to their work. Homeworkers are paid by the piece and rarely keep track of exact number of hours worked, and establishing rates of pay is not straightforward.

Decent Work for Homeworkers

In April 2017, much of this early work has been done and we are now embarking on mapping pay rates, hours worked and prices paid along the chain.

The project is supporting the development of systems to establish employment rights and conditions for homeworkers and a methodology for implementation and monitoring. This phase of the project will aim to set up a pilot scheme which can later be implemented in other similar chains, both by this supplier and more widely in the sector.

Central to any new system of employing homeworkers will be their involvement in discussions of changes to be made, with the aim of developing a form of permanent representation for homeworkers and with it, a self-sustaining model of implementation and monitoring.

While there is much work still to be done and the project is at an early stage, we are confident that it is moving in the right direction and hope that it will be the start of changes in the leather sector in Tamil Nadu which will benefit all those concerned.

May 2017. For more information about Homeworkers Worldwide, contact info@homeworkersww.org.uk, tel: 0113 320 3214, or see: <http://www.homeworkersww.org.uk/>.