



HomeWorkers  
Worldwide

**hww**

Organising  
For Rights

# We Work At Home

**SPECIAL REPORT:  
Footwear Workers in  
Tamil Nadu, India**

**New union for  
homebased workers  
launched in Turkey**

The Newsletter of  
Homeworkers Worldwide

Issue 6  
January 2010

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HWW was established in 1999 to carry out activities in support of homebased workers around the world and co-ordinate work in Europe.

From 2000–2006, HWW received funding from UK Department of International Development (DfID) for projects in selected areas of Asia, Latin America and Europe. Other sources of funding include the Lipman-Miliband Trust (2006) and Sigrid Rausing Trust (2007-2008). HWW also receives a grant to fund its participation in the Ethical Trading Initiative from Oxfam for work on homeworking in the UK

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## News in Brief

### Bulgaria ratifies ILO Convention

In July 2009, Bulgaria became the sixth government to ratify the ILO Convention No.177 on Home Work. Kaloian, the Bulgarian association of homeworkers, welcomed the ratification as recognition for homeworkers and their rights. Kaloian hopes to work with other organisations to ensure that the provisions of the Convention become a reality for homeworkers. The government is planning to introduce a new law for homeworkers in Bulgaria. Other countries who have ratified are: Albania, Argentina, Finland, Ireland and the Netherlands.

### Federation of Homeworkers Worldwide

In November 2009, members of the Federation of Homeworkers Worldwide (FHW) met in Istanbul, at the same time as the launching of the new trade union for homebased workers, Ev-Ek-Sen. In addition to taking part in activities around the launch of the new trade union, Federation members reported progress and problems in their work and planned common activities for the future. The AGM of the Federation was also held.

### Appeal for Funds

Many thanks to all who have responded to our appeal for funds to keep the newsletter going. Many of you have sent donations which will help us produce the newsletter in 2010 and distribute it internationally. We apologise if you have received more than one request. As a small organisation, we do not have the resources to send our different mailings and we hope you will understand.

## Ev-Ek-Sen: New Union of Homebased Workers Launched

Members of the International Federation of HWW attend a rally in support of the right to organise of Free Trade Zone workers for Novamed, a medical supplies company, Istanbul, November 15th November, 2009.



On November 10th 2009, a new trade union for homebased workers - Ev-Ek-Sen - was officially launched in Istanbul, Turkey. Founding members of the union, marched to the office of the Governor of Istanbul to register the union, accompanied by supporters from Turkey and from other countries.

The decision to found a trade union for homebased workers had been taken at a national meeting of Turkey HomeNet, one year previously in December 2008. Following that meeting, a series of meetings have been organised in different parts of Turkey to discuss the plan with homebased workers in many different towns and cities.

The founding of the union is, however, the result of many years work with homebased workers in local groups, coordinated nationally through the Working Group on Women Homebased Workers, national meetings and communications.

Local workshops were used to bring women together, to exchange their experiences and decide priorities. Mapping was also done by worker organisers to identify and draw in new members.

Many local workshops did common marketing or started projects. Some set up co-operatives.

In Turkey, homebased work is found throughout the country in different sectors. Many women do piece work for companies, but when no piece work is available, they may take orders from companies or individuals, and work on an own-account basis. The new union brings together all homebased workers, whatever sector they are working in and whatever their employment relationships in a national struggle for their rights as workers.

First of all, Ev-Ek-Sen has to struggle for the right to organise as a trade union as this is not recognised in Turkish law. The homebased workers are determined to carry on this struggle whatever obstacles are put in their way. They are calling for international support for their struggle.

If you would like to send a message of support, you can email the trade union at the following address: [evksen@gmail.com](mailto:evksen@gmail.com)

## Rochdale: Homeworker Project Under Threat



**The last Homeworker Project in the UK is under threat of closure as a result of local government cuts imposed because of the current financial crisis.**

For the last twenty years, Tanzeem Mahmood has been supporting a regular meeting of homeworkers in Rochdale, an industrial town in the North of England. The group meets every month and is made up of women of Pakistani origin. Other work has been done in Rochdale and in the wider area of Greater Manchester with homebased workers from other communities. However support for most work in the UK has now been withdrawn and the Rochdale Group is the only active group remaining.

In the 1980s and 1990s, there were many active groups and campaigns working with homeworkers in the UK which worked together with the National Group on Homeworking to lobby for recognition for homeworkers as workers in national legislation.

The local groups highlighted the fact that homeworkers were often working for major UK retailers but receiving low pay, irregular work and no rights as workers.

**the Rochdale Group is the only active group remaining**

The Rochdale group has been part of this campaign for change. Women from the group have attended meetings at the House of Commons in London and lobbied Members of Parliament. They have also participated in consultations with Low Pay Commissioners monitoring the implementation of the national minimum wage, brought in in 1999, with specific rights for homeworkers.

Through attending the group, women have also grown in confidence and found opportunities for training or for other kinds of employment. Over the years, hundreds of women have benefited. Now local government support for the group is under threat because of the financial crisis brought about by big banks.

The local council has not yet made a final decision. Members of the group are lobbying councillors and have letters of support from many organisations and individuals.

## Giving a Voice to Homeworkers

**I**n 2010, Homeworkers Worldwide (HWW) will be carrying out a small project to map what kinds of work women are currently doing at home and what are their main concerns. We want to ensure that homeworkers still have a voice in the UK, particularly at a time of economic and financial hardship for many.

In 2008, the National Group on Homeworking (NGH) closed due to lack of funding and now the Rochdale Homeworkers' Group is also under threat.

The new project, which is supported by Oxfam UK, cannot hope to duplicate the work of NGH or the many local projects that used to exist. But it aims to ensure that some of the main concerns of homeworkers in the UK are raised publicly and that other organisations put them on their own agenda.

NGH has already widely publicised the fact that homeworkers are entitled to the national minimum wage and demonstrated through its support for individual homeworkers that employers can be legally obliged to pay the difference if they have been underpaying. There is still a need to publicise these entitlements.

At the same time, some recent research has shown that many homeworkers are turning to ways of earning living that are still homebased but different from the traditional industrial piece work that was the focus of the work of NGH. Many women make food, for example, for local shops or restaurants while others take up dress-making. Others may take up commission sales, acting as 'beauty consultants', for example, for cosmetics firms.

*If you are interested in contributing to this project, either through direct or indirect experience of homeworking, get in touch with HWW, email: [info@homeworkersww.org.uk](mailto:info@homeworkersww.org.uk)*

## National Minimum Wage

If you are a homeworker in the UK, you are entitled to the national minimum wage. From October 2009, the rates are as follows:

For workers aged 22 or older:

**£5.80 an hour**

For workers aged 18-21:

**£4.83 an hour**

For workers aged 16-17

**£3.57 an hour**

If you are doing homework, you are probably paid on a piece rate. This means that you know how much you are being paid per item, or per bundle or box of items. Your employer will probably tell you how many you can do in one hour in order to earn the minimum wage. If you think you are not earning the minimum wage, you must keep records of how much work you are doing and how long it takes you, in order to work out the rate per hour.

The government has set up a free advice line if you want information about minimum wages and other employment rights.

**Pay and work rights advice:  
0800 917 2368**

If you cannot speak good English, this advice line advertises that it can give advice in over 100 languages. The website also has leaflets that you can download in a number of different languages: <http://bit.ly/nmwadvice>

## Homeworkers Organise in Self Help Groups

**S**ince 2002, Homeworkers Worldwide (HWW) has been working with Read Foundation, an NGO based in the south of Tamil Nadu, in Pudukkottai. Through the mapping programme, Read Foundation supported organising among rural women homebased workers, in the form of Self Help Groups (SHGs). The separate village groups came together to form a Federation of SHGs which they called Pasumai - Green.

In the course of the mapping programme, Read Foundation concentrated on three sectors where they knew there were many homeworkers in five blocks of Pudukkottai: ready-made garment workers; workers making garlands from flowers and those polishing artificial diamonds (gem cutting).

Although there are many NGOs in Tamil Nadu supporting homebased workers in the form of savings and credit groups, Read Foundation focused specifically on the rights of homebased workers. In addition to local organising, they formed an alliance at state level with the Centre for Indian Trade Unions (CITU) to lobby for homeworkers' rights, particularly their recognition as workers.

### Interview with Sumitra, a homebased gem cutter



"I'm 45 years old, I have no children and my husband died of cancer last year. I manage to get some income through gem cutting.

In the 1990s, landowners took the gem cutting contracts and there was a lot of slavery and low wages. So women decided to break from them and form our own Self Help Group, with the support of Read Foundation. This way we got our own machines.

It was difficult to break from the landowner; they wanted a lot of work for little money, they thought their businesses would collapse. They also didn't believe that we could do it. They said that we

would be back asking for work again.

We took a loan from Read Foundation. It was easy because they asked for low interest and gave flexible terms. Through the SHG we got health insurance and an ID card from the Manual Workers Welfare Board.

Previously in our village society was very divided, between Muslim and Hindu, all the different castes. Now we all work together in the SHG. I needed more knowledge about society. Before joining the SHG I just stayed in the house: work and the house, that's all there was.

Women get married early, and this leads to problems. Sometimes husbands run away; the women don't understand about relationships, they have early births that lead to health problems. So now we do education about this through the SHG.

One big problem is that men don't share with women. We want to make it so that whatever men get, women get an equal share – like if the man buys a house, the woman owns half of it. We are working for this right.

### Interview with Kaladevi, a homebased garland worker

**Kaladevi works at home stringing flowers into garlands and for hair decorations to sell locally.**



"Because the flowers are in water, our hands are always wet and they get sore. When it's cold we get sick. Read Foundation gave me a basket to transport the flowers and I learnt to ride a bicycle so that I can go to temples and sell in the street. Sometimes the children sell the flowers for me. We have to sell all the flowers in one day, otherwise they wilt and we lose money.

The work is difficult in the rainy season because the quality of the flowers drops, but they are expensive to buy and there is no market for them."

### Interview with Runa, a homebased garment worker

**Runa has a sewing machine at home that she uses to tailor clothes for local people.**

"I am Muslim. In our community girls don't go out. People come to my house and ask me to do the tailoring. I have been doing this for fifteen years. I make jackets, skirts and blouses. I buy threads, hooks and other materials; it costs me maybe four or five rupees for materials. I used to go to another person's house to do the stitching. I get paid about three or four rupees for stitching a blouse. The contractor sells the blouse for about 15 rupees.

Read Foundation did a survey and found twelve women doing this work in one village. They brought the women together to form a Self Help Group. The people who are more experienced teach the others. Now we have our own machines. We make about ten blouses per day for about 20

rupees per blouse – so about 200 rupees per day. We spend about 20 rupees per day on materials.

We have been to Tiruppur and Erode to look at the designs for export. The companies give the designs out. We would like to do this kind of work. For the companies, you get 50 rupees for one blouse. We are learning how to do embroidery and overlocking."



Spinning coir (coconut fibre)

### Dreams for the Future

**I**n Pudukkottai, Read Foundation and Pasumai Federation reach 50,000 families through their organisation of Self Help Groups. At present, they work together to improve their incomes and living conditions and already have a lot of influence on the village committees, the panchayats.

The women have many hopes for their future work. They would like to do much more around health and safety and would like government pensions for women. They would like to spread their work

to other sectors like footwear, coir (coconut fibre), bidi (cigarette), clay and cashew workers. They would like to see the ILO Convention adopted and implemented at district and state level.

They know that this will take hard work and organising. They want to reach out to more homebased workers, build wider cooperation with district and state government and are prepared to lobby, campaign and demonstrate to make their dreams come true.

## Sewing Shoes for Export

# Pushka

*Homeworkers Worldwide recently asked Read Foundation and Pasumai to make contact with homeworkers in another part of Tamil Nadu working on leather shoes for export. The following are extracts from interviews with some of these women and reports of discussions with them.*

**P**ushka sews shoes for a well known brand which sells shoes in the UK for between £50 and £100 a pair, depending on the model. She is paid 6 rupees (about 7 pence) a pair of shoes. She lives in a one-room house that she shares with her husband and 3 children. In addition to sewing herself, she gives work to other women.

“When orders are regular, I can give them (the other homeworkers) regular payments, but the work tends to be seasonal so there are gaps.

I have been doing this work for twenty years. I collect the work from the factories every day. We are supposed to complete all of the work in one day. If there is an urgent shipment, we are told to work harder.

I’ve met some of the buyers from the companies, they are from all over the world: UK, Germany, Italy. From May to December there is a lot of work, there is not so much work in the other months. I sew about ten pairs per day, depending on the model. Leather from Italy is nice and easy to sew quickly. Some models are difficult and take a long time.

I get paid 6 rupees (about 7 pence) per pair for these shoes. I give 5 rupees per pair to the other workers. Softer shoes are 5.50 Rs per pair, but there are not many of these. In the past five years the numbers of orders have been dropping. We used to get a lot of orders.

There are a lot of models and companies, like Tata shoes. There was an Italian woman who had her own business here. She worked with a lot of factories. She used to come and teach us how to stitch. We sew all kinds of different shoes: maroon, red, green, yellow, white, always leather though.

We record our payments in a book, including the size of the shoe and the number stitched. We record the amount per piece and the amount paid. We are paid weekly, on Saturday. If the factory finds any faults, they send the shoes back. I do all of the re-working because the other homeworkers won’t agree to take the shoes back – the re-working is not paid for. Sometimes we are paid late, because the factory also gets paid late. I try to pay the workers even if I don’t get paid myself. There aren’t too many choices for me; I can’t read. What other work will I do?

The work is difficult, you have to grip hard and pull the twine hard. I get neck, back and arm pain. My knees hurt from sitting for long periods. My fingers get numb. I have tried to negotiate for an increase in payments, but the company just says ‘We’ll see, we’ll see’. When there’s a rush order, we can sometimes negotiate. We have to buy our own needles, but the company gives us the twine and the thimbles (a sleeve of leather).

I use the money to buy household items like soap and rice, sometimes clothes. Rice costs 30 Rs per kilo, although it depends on the kind of rice. Two or three years ago rice cost 20-22 Rs per kilo.

I don’t have any savings. If I need extra money I take my jewellery to the pawnbroker. I pay 3% interest when I’m pawning jewellery, 5% if I take a money loan only. I don’t have a pension, I’ll work as long as I’m healthy. Otherwise there’s no way to get any money.

I’m Hindu but I’m not bothered about working with leather. I know how much the shoes sell for. The factory told me. I can visit the factory when I want because I’m a subcontractor. I’ve got a good relationship with them. I would like to make sure we get regular payments.”

**If I need extra money I take my jewellery to the pawnbroker. I pay 3% interest when I’m pawning jewellery, 5% if I take a money loan only.**

**A group of six homeworkers, all working on footwear, including big brand names. One of the women was a subcontractor and did most of the talking:**

#### How long have you been doing the work?

4,5,6,10,19,20 years. We don't have any choice.

#### Can you tell me what kind of work you do?

The work arrives with holes punched in it. There are 26 different models. We get a pattern and the model. We stitch the pieces together. One worker will teach the others how to do it. We need to work at home because we have to fit it around house work. We can't go to the factory for work. We get the work in the evening and send it back in the morning. Sometimes we work until 12 o'clock at night. Sometimes we have to work for 13-14 hours a day.

We know that people in China work longer hours – an Italian lady from the company told us this.

In the morning the subcontractor goes to the company to collect the work. The women with small children can't do this.

#### How do you get paid?

We get paid 7 rupees per pair, and it takes 20 minutes to complete one pair. We do about ten pairs



per day. We don't get paid if there are mistakes. We have to re-do the work. The softer leather tears easily. Sometimes if we're not concentrating, we make a mistake, like missing a hole.

The subcontractor keeps a record of payment. We have a small notebook to keep track of the work. Each homemaker has a number which is written on the shoe so that the subcontractor can give the right pair back to the right person if there are mistakes.

#### Do you have any savings or pension?

No, we don't have savings. We earn, eat, dress, that's all. If we need more money, we take our jewellery to the pawnbroker. Sometimes there is no work for ten days. We don't have pensions or health insurance. The Italian owner sold her business to Tata and didn't give anything to the workers. We didn't get any recognition. Companies are benefiting from our work so they should give something. We don't think there are any government schemes. We haven't really asked.

#### Do you have any problems with the work?

We get pains in our chest, neck and back because the work is difficult. Sometimes if you put the needle under your fingernail and it gets infected you can't work. Sometimes there are accidents, like stabbing someone else with the needle. Sometimes the needles snap.

#### What would you like to change in future?

We want to be able to take loans. We tried asking for an increase in payments but we weren't given it. Twenty years ago we were paid 75 paise for the work, slowly the payment went up, but for the past seven years it has been 7 rupees. Two years ago you could get rice for 12 rupees, now it costs 32 rupees a kilo.

There are too many contractors in the area. This stops workers organising because there is no solidarity. Contractors are selfish. They see this as an opportunity to get money for themselves. People are too isolated, they feel that if they don't take the work, someone else will."

**Gowri and Durga sew the backs and uppers of shoes and sometimes also stitch the upper to the sole. They get paid 5 rupees for one pair. They both started work twenty years ago, Gowri aged 15, Durga aged 12:**

"It takes about half an hour to sew one pair. We do about 10 pairs per day, so we work about 5 hours per day but this is on top of all the housework, cooking, washing, looking after the children. We are paid weekly or every 15 days. The worker has a note and gives it to the contractor for the money. The contractor keeps a bill book. The work is painful because of pulling the thread. We get pains in our shoulders, elbows, chest, neck and back.



Twenty years ago we were paid 40 paise per pair. Not everyone gets the same payment, some people are paid 10 Rs per pair. The factory says the international sales are going down so they can't pay more. Payments have stayed the same for five years. We don't have any savings. We use our money for our families. The factory gives loans if homeworkers need extra money. The loan is repaid through deductions from wages; if you take a 1,000 Rs loan, the factory takes 100 Rs extra.

If we make any mistakes we have to do the re-work and we are not paid for this. Sometimes the leather tears. Sometimes the tongue gets twisted and so the factory send the piece back. We have to teach the children not to play with the shoes: if there are a lot of mistakes or the children draw on the shoes we get fined. We write our initial or number on the shoe so that the factory knows who to send the piece back to for rework. Sometimes the children help with the work after school.

We have to complete all the work in one day. We get work from May to January, at other times there



is not so much work. We are dependent on our husbands when there is no footwear work. In the slack periods we have to get an advance, sometimes we pawn our jewellery. We want to increase our wages and get a bonus, especially because the cost of living is going up."

#### Three homeworkers, all working on footwear:

One of the workers learnt to sew in the factory and then taught the others. They know the patterns and the pieces are numbered so that they can see how to put them together.

The payment per pair of shoes has remained the same for at least two years. The women said that they felt they should get higher wages. They also knew that factory workers get medical insurance and that one of the companies ran health camps for factory workers but that there was nothing offered for homeworkers. They felt that homeworkers should get the same benefits as factory workers. Now the companies prefer to use homeworkers because they do not need to pay Employer State Insurance.

They would most like to have health insurance and health and safety protection.



**M**any of the Tamil Nadu homeworkers are working on shoes for export to Europe or North America. Although they may be getting work from a local company, they and others are one part of a supply chain leading to large retailers and well-know brands who market their products internationally.

In order to bring about change in homeworkers' lives, it is vital that homeworkers are organised, in whatever form they find most suitable. But it is also important to form broad coalitions with others working at other points in the supply chain. In Tamil Nadu, HWW and Read Foundation/Pasumai Federation have links with both trade unions and NGOs, two of which – SAVE and CIVIDEP are profiled on p.13.

Governments and bodies like the European Union also have a responsibility for the homeworkers' work and lives. The article on this page outlines some key issues for homeworkers, hidden in current EU-India negotiations on a Free Trade Agreement.

#### **Liberalisation in India: homeworkers left without a voice.**

Since the early 1990s, India has pursued a policy of economic liberalisation, primarily as a result of International Monetary Fund and World Bank conditions that were attached to loans given during the 1991 economic crisis. Trade, finance and labour were deregulated, public spending was reduced and health and education were part-privatised. Exports are now a key part of India's trade policy, which it has encouraged through the development of Special Economic Zones and, more recently, the development of bilateral free trade agreements.

This shift towards liberalisation saw India achieve the second highest growth rate in the world, after China. However it is clear that this growth has seen uneven benefits for India's population: India still has the largest number of people living below the poverty line and inequality has increased. The emphasis on export-driven, labour-intensive manufacturing has been accompanied by a major expansion of the informal sector of the labour market. As India seeks to compete on the global market, companies have sought increased 'flexibility' from their workforce, translating in practice into insecure work, low pay, and no social protection.

As the World Trade Organisation Doha round has faltered, countries have begun to pursue other means of achieving their goals. The European Union, in particular, has pursued a number of bilateral Free Trade Agreements (FTAs), including one with India that is currently under negotiation. Civil society organisations in Europe have been extremely critical of these agreements. They argue that the process is not transparent, that the partner countries have been badly treated and that social and environmental concerns are not being taken into account.

The EU's latest trade policy 'Global Europe: Competing in the World', makes it clear that it aims to secure access to new markets, particularly for its service industries. The EU wants India to reduce tariffs on goods imported from the EU and has resisted efforts to protect industries that India considers to be 'sensitive' – i.e. industries that India believes will need time to develop before they are able to compete with foreign companies.

#### **How does this affect homeworkers?**

A key feature of the proposed FTA is a commitment to reduce tariffs on most trade in goods and services, which necessarily entails a loss of government revenues. In the past, the government has sought to address this by increasing VAT on household and consumer goods, which will make it even more difficult for homeworkers to afford basic items. Another likely impact will be a reduction in public expenditure on health, education and social security, this would shift the burden onto the community and household: in practice this means that women will make up the shortfall by taking on extra (unpaid) work. There is also a risk of fees being introduced for basic services like water and sanitation, and cuts in food entitlement programmes, which currently benefit large numbers of homeworkers.

The EU is also seeking liberalisation of the financial sector. Until the 1990s, India's financial sector was largely nationalised; liberalisation of this sector has already meant higher transaction fees, the

closure of rural branches and an increased focus on services to wealthy clients. Further moves in this direction could be a severe blow to many groups of homeworkers, who have negotiated long and hard to be able to open savings accounts for Self Help Groups.

There is still time to act: negotiations on the FTA have not been completed. HWW is working with organisations and Members of the European Parliament to try and make sure that homeworkers are taken into account during negotiations. HWW will be publishing a briefing paper in the new year outlining our position in more detail. We would urge our partners in Europe to contact their MEPs and urge them to take action.

*Find out more and take action here:*  
<http://www.wide-network.org>

#### **Cividep India: Workers' Rights and Corporate Accountability**

Cividep is part of collaborative network of individuals and organisations concerned with workers' lives and the impact of economic globalisation and corporate behaviour. Cividep has helped workers organise, researched the effects of corporate activities and campaigned for workers' rights and corporate accountability both nationally and internationally. They currently focus on the garment and Information Communication Technology (ICT) industries.

Cividep estimate that India has a 15% share of the US market in garment exports and 9% share of the EU market. Around 4 million workers are employed in the garment sector in India, the large majority of them are women. Working conditions are extremely poor for many workers. Workers are denied freedom of association and collective bargaining; physical force is used to discipline workers and to make them work harder; sexual harassment of women workers is widespread; pay is very low and overtime is often not paid at all.

One example of an organisation they helped to set up to tackle these issues is 'Munnade': an organisation of women workers in the garment industry in Bangalore. Munnade has enrolled nearly 1,000 workers, held protest demonstrations when workers have been abused or attacked, both inside factories and in public places and supported women workers to use the law to protect their rights.

*Find out more on their website:*  
<http://www.cividep.org>

#### **SAVE: working with garment workers in Tirupur, India.**

Social Awareness and Voluntary Education (SAVE), is a Non Governmental Organisation established in 1993. SAVE was initially created in response to increasing child labour in the Tirupur region of Tamil Nadu, South India. However they have since broadened the scope of their work to the empowerment of women and work with a range of workers in the textile and garment industry.

Tirupur is known as India's "garment valley": it produces high volumes of garments for North American and European markets and its industry is one of India's highest foreign exchange earners. Its exports have grown from one billion to eighty billion rupees since 1994 and it represents 56% of India's total knitwear exports. There are 7,000 registered garment units in the town; combined with unregistered units, they provide employment for nearly 1 million people.

SAVE works through local branches to intervene in cases of labour rights abuses. They use a range of approaches, from the development of 850 Self Help Groups with a total of 9599 members and the delivery of health awareness programmes to national and international campaigning with other organisations and trade unions.

*Read more on their website:*  
<http://www.savengo.org>

## Korean Women's Trade Union (KWTU) celebrating 10 years Conference on Organising Strategies

**I**n September, 2009, the Korean Women's Trade Union (KWTU) held an international conference to celebrate the 10th anniversary of its founding. The conference brought together women's organisations to share alternative strategies for organising women workers who around the world are facing growing informalisation. Annie Delaney represented the Federation of Homeworkers Worldwide at this conference and has sent the report below on some of the highlights of the meeting.

Formed in 1999, the KWTU has focused its organising efforts on 'irregular' women workers and its membership has grown rapidly to 6,000 today. The conference formed part of the celebratory events alongside a mass rally and other activities where KWTU members celebrated the success of their work and analysed strategies to further strengthen their union and improve informal women workers' conditions. Women's organisations and unions from twenty countries attended the conference which was an important opportunity for labour rights activists to come together and learn from each other.

The conference heard about a range of organising strategies used by different organisations in the context of the urgent need to meet global trends of deregulation and relocation of production. For example, the Asian financial crisis in 1997 had a dramatic negative impact on women's work conditions. The effects of the more recent financial crisis in 2008-2009 are only just beginning to be felt. Capital has been quick to relocate production, sack unionised workers and move to areas where workers are less organised. Recent examples are the closures announced by Triumph in Thailand and the Philippines. In addition to the short-term impacts, this leads to a long-term increase in unemployment and forces many more women to seek an income through marginalised and unprotected work.

Traditional strategies are not enough to meet the challenge of organising in this new global context. The conference heard of a wide range of strategies

being used to bring women together, to build unity and solidarity, and work together to improve conditions, ranging from surveys and discussion groups, community-worker organising, using new communications methods to build networks and social activities such as singing and drama.

### Organising Women in Korea

The KWTU has organised women workers working in a range of areas. One example, focused on women working alone in schools, as lab assistants, cooks, nutritionists and in other areas. Their organising strategy included bringing many women from different schools together to identify their concerns. Following a national survey on working conditions of irregular school workers, the union held a forum and brought many school workers together. The work then evolved into struggles around the injustices school workers experienced, developing regional groups, establishing local leaders, an internet forum for members and continuously developing new leaders. The school workers' section of the union has grown significantly and despite workers being scattered across many schools they have established strong regional representation through leaders who play an important role in union activities.

### Women Farm Workers in South Africa

The South African women farm workers' union, Sikhula Sonke (We come together) is another example of women workers organising. Sikhula Sonke is led by women who through organising have been able to address many problems farm workers face. Some core issues of concern have been around evictions from their homes on the farm where they work, homes not being in the women's name, the difficulties of seasonal work, lack of work and income security. The union was registered in 2004, and in a short time has been able to win improvements in facilities such as toilets in fields, childcare and maternity leave. Farm workers have begun negotiating collective agreements with



owners and the union plays a key role in preventing workers being evicted from their houses under various circumstances. Sikhula Sonke's vision is for women's voices to be heard and they work towards this through organising, training and building women workers' leadership capacity. There are many activities for workers to participate in, such as a choir, and they support women through assistance to young people, issues around land access and for women to establish their own farms.

### "Work Yes ... But With Dignity"

The movement of working and unemployed women "Maria Elena Cuadra" (MEC) in Nicaragua is another example. MEC is a social movement that addresses issues for women, organises women workers in Maquilas, provides social and legal services, has established a training and leadership academy, and developed a broad range of programmes around economics, employment, income, security and health for women. MEC has some paid staff but relies heavily on a large network of women volunteers who willingly contribute to the organisation. Having a broad social and political agenda informs the approach MEC takes to organising. Women members of whom there are over 70,000, are encouraged to commit to bring three others to join as members. One strategy in organising in the Maquilas was to formulate a code of practice across a Central American network. This code was used to mobilise workers and negotiate to improve conditions. This is a good example of a voluntary code focus being on organising and improving labour rights by workers' involvement rather than on corporate behaviour. This campaign was run under the slogan "Work Yes... But with Dignity". MEC was successful in securing the principles incorporated in the campaign into national legislation. MEC is a movement that involves working women in regular forums to analyse their situation and formulate solutions to the problems they face.

The KWTU has achieved a lot in ten years. They are candid about the challenges they face, yet continue to develop innovative ways to organise women that few other unions would ever work with. The conference highlighted many of the common difficulties of organising but also provided many examples of how women are overcoming such barriers. The conference itself contributed to the important process of strengthening networks amongst women organisers to enhance our learning, the sharing of experiences and solidarity.

## CORE Coalition UK

**C**ampaigners have used various means to try and improve conditions for workers in international supply chains. There have been consumer boycotts, public exposes of conditions in supply chains, hundreds of thousands of activists have written to politicians and companies. Recently, a number of voluntary initiatives have been formed, where different groups come together to try and negotiate for improvements, including the Ethical Trading Initiative in the UK.



However many feel that without legally binding measures in place, there is not enough pressure on companies to change the way they do business. The Corporate Responsibility Coalition (CORE) works in the UK to develop legal means to force companies to take responsibility for the conditions of workers in their supply chains. In 2006 CORE succeeded in getting the Companies Act passed in the UK. As a result: company directors must now consider the environmental and social impacts of their decisions, as well as looking at the company's profits. Also, the 1300 largest public companies have to report annually on their environmental and social impacts.

CORE believe there is still a long way to go and are calling for the establishment of a UK Commission to develop guidance for companies as well as procedures for when abuses occur.

Find out more about CORE on their website:  
<http://corporate-responsibility.org>



HomeWorkers  
**hww** Worldwide

# Mapping Materials

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## **RIGHTS AND RECOGNITION FOR HOMEWORKERS**

A pamphlet highlighting the ongoing work  
of HWW

— *order your copy today.*

From 2001 to 2004, HWW carried out a mapping programme — a programme of action-research to support new organising of homebased workers. Work was done in parts of Asia, Latin America and Eastern Europe. A set of materials were developed in the course of this programme, to be translated and adapted for local conditions. These materials have now been developed and are available in paper or electronic form:

### **THE MAPPING PACK**

Basic guidelines for action-research with homebased workers

### **VERTICAL MAPPING PACK**

Tracing production and marketing chains

### **WE WORK AT HOME**

#### **THE TRAINING MANUAL**

Comprehensive training manual, drawing on experience of mapping work in Asia, Latin America and Eastern Europe  
— *available on paper or CD*

### **WE WORK AT HOME**

Booklet outlining results of first two years of the programme — with colour photos —  
*available in English, Spanish, Portuguese, Hindi and Tamil.*

### **PHOTO PACK**

Set of A4 colour photos of homebased workers and their organisations from different countries doing mapping  
— *ideal training or educational tool.*

### **POSTCARD PACK**

Set of 16 colour postcards illustrating mapping in different countries — can be used as a mini photo pack  
— *available in English, Chinese, Japanese and Bahasa.*

### **FROM CHILE TO CHINA**

Small book, illustrated with colour photos, describes different kinds of organisations that came out of the mapping programme.