



# STITCHING OUR SHOES

Homeworkers in South India  
SUMMARY



## STITCHING OUR SHOES: HOMEWORKERS IN SOUTH INDIA

The shoe industry is an immense global industry, with over 24 billion pairs of shoes produced last year alone, equating to three pairs for every single person living. Europe is the largest market for footwear imports, with almost 40% of the market share. Europe accounts for 65% of all India's shoe industry exports.

Many of the same human rights abuses associated with 'sweatshop labour' in the garment industry, including poverty pay, long hours, forced overtime and unsafe working conditions, are also found in the production of leather shoes. These, combined with unregulated and harmful practices used in the tanning of leather hides, which are damaging to the environment, present an industry in urgent need of transparency and regulations. While there has been a lot of publicity around the conditions in which clothes are made around the world, little attention has been paid to the supply chain for leather shoes.

The nature of the shoes industry has become increasingly global, with 88% of the world's shoes being produced in Asia under poor conditions. Tracing the origin of a pair of shoes back to the workers who made them is virtually impossible, and even many shoes with labels declaring 'Made in Europe' have leather uppers which have been hand-stitched by homeworkers in India, and then shipped to European countries where the final shoe is assembled. The intense competition in the industry has led to an increasingly complex web of sourcing – from Asia when price is of most concern to Europe when speed is important; from large factories for bulk orders to smaller scale units and subcontractors for flexible quick turnarounds.

Homeworkers play a vital role in the production of certain types of leather shoes, mainly casual leather shoes or men's loafers, wherever they are manufactured. These women, employed mainly to stitch the uppers of shoes, provide both the low-cost labour and the flexibility that is so sought after. In Ambur, India, homeworkers typically earn less than 10 pence for each pair of shoes they hand-stitch, which were then sold by European brands for £40 to over £100 per pair.



*Shoes stitched by homeworkers, Ambur. Photo by Heather Stilwell*



Most homeworkers are married women with children. They are tied to their homes by unpaid domestic work, particularly the care of young children or sick and elderly relatives. Women stitching shoes in their own home experience extreme insecurity, poverty wages and nonexistent health and safety protection. Their poverty pay makes meeting basic living costs difficult, but they feel unable to work outside of the home because of their family responsibilities. In some cases, homework provides the only source of income for the family when women are widowed or have a sick husband.

### HOMEWORKERS IN AMBUR, SOUTH INDIA

The region of Ambur, in Tamil Nadu, South India, is dominated by the leather industry, with agriculture on the decline. It is famous for leather footwear production, with thousands of women working as homeworkers stitching leather shoes for export. These women are largely invisible, not recognised or acknowledged as workers. They are excluded from legal protection, ignored by official statistics and often overlooked by trade unions, researchers and campaigners. *“Whether we like it or not, we have to stitch...It is our means of livelihood.” Pushka*

Homeworkers have the lowest pay, in a sector that is already low-paid; their employment is precarious, and they are denied employment benefits such as health insurance, pension contributions or health and safety protection. Yet these workers are not temporary workers, nor do they play a marginal role. Their work is integral to the modern production process of a wide range of styles and types of leather shoes sold by major western retailers and brands. Homeworkers are not directly employed by the factories but get their supply of work from an intermediary, who in turn gets the work from a subcontractor of the main factory. For many, homeworking is the only employment option available to them, and provides an important source of income.

Homeworkers are most often used to stitch the leather uppers of shoes, as this is one of the most labour-intensive parts of the production process. The women are paid per pair, and the pay rates are very low. Most women take around half an hour to stitch one pair, for which they are paid about 6 rupees. Working for 8 hours would earn them 96 rupees, well below the minimum wage of 126.48 rupees a day in Tamil Nadu. This in itself is far from a living wage, which the Asia Floor Wage calculates as 720.27 rupees per day.

Even this meagre income is not guaranteed as the work is irregular and insecure. This insecurity is not a result of lack of work. It is not seasonal in nature, nor is it simply there as an overflow from factories during busy production periods. It is a result of complex and informal employment relationships that maintain a constant and reliable source of production for manufacturers, yet leave individual workers insecure, poorly paid and treated as expendable. *“We have nothing. That’s why we know this is employer exploitation. We have no other way. That’s why we are involved in this work” Shanti*

Homeworkers get their supply of work delivered to them daily by an intermediary, sometimes with several layers of subcontracting between the main factory and the homeworkers. This allows the factories, the principal employers, to take no responsibility for homeworkers, and ensures the homeworkers themselves have little or no bargaining power. Brands themselves may not even be aware that homeworkers exist in their supply chains. *“Today we may earn 50 rupees but there is no guarantee that we will have an income tomorrow. Those who work in the company have some guarantee for work but we don’t. There is no job security” Sumitra*

Homeworking also has a negative impact on the women’s health. Women usually sit crouched over the work for long hours, and the pulling of the needle through the leather itself involves many repetitive movements, sometimes using considerable force. The work can cause back and joint pain, eye strain and deformity to fingers, yet they are offered no health insurance commonly provided to permanent factory workers.



Outside factory gates, Ambur. Photo by Heather Stilwell

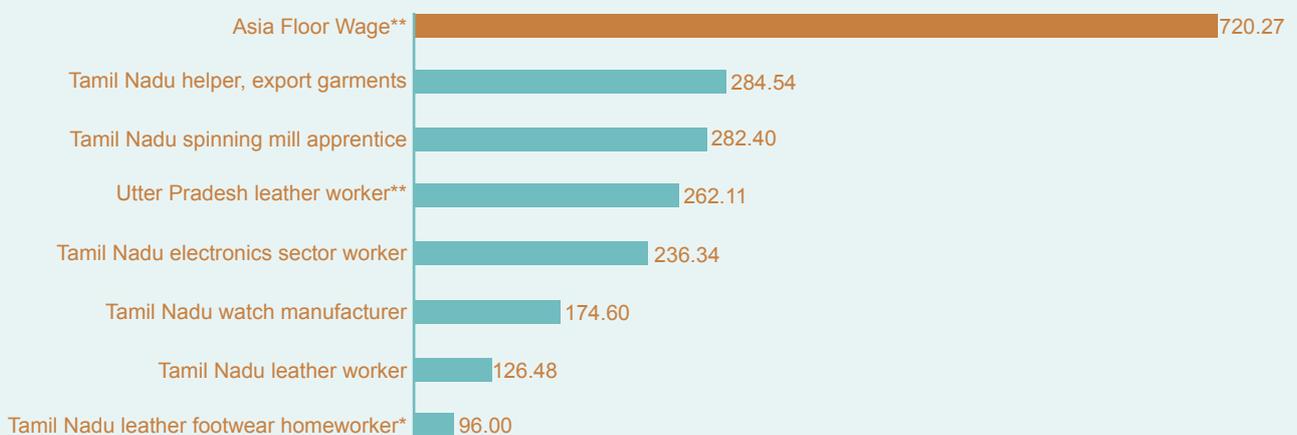
There are also concerns about the chemicals used to process the leather which can cause skin and other problems. These chemicals, used in the tanneries, also have a wider impact on the local environment, polluting the water and land so it is no longer fertile and forcing people to buy drinking water, therefore adding an additional living cost.

### HOMWORK OR NOT?

Although it may seem that stopping the practice of homeworking in leather shoe supply chains will help stop the exploitation of homeworkers, in fact that would be the worst possible outcome for these women. Homeworking provides them a vital, although inadequate, source of income. Instead, the industry needs to acknowledge homeworkers as a key part of the production process. Brands need to engage with the realities of who is making their shoes, and provide transparent supplier lists and reports on due diligence. International legislation is needed to ensure this happens, as voluntary initiatives for brands have repeatedly failed to protect workers. Attempts to exclude homeworking from supply chains only has negative effects on homeworkers, who either lose their work and income, or their work continues but it becomes even more hidden and secretive, thus making it harder for homeworkers to challenge poor conditions. The precarious nature of their work means bringing about change will not be easy. But homeworkers have aspirations, ranging from old age pensions and freedom from debt to wider equality and recognition: *“...First equal payment for homeworkers and the factory workers because both of them are human beings, both of them are spending their energy... So both should get equal payment for a pair ... All the workers, both homeworkers and factory workers, should have their benefits...” Gowri*

### WAGE LADDER

Minimum Wage - Rupees per day



\*assumes eight hours work; half an hour for one pair of shoes @ 6 rupees a pair

\*\* Asia floor wage and Utter Pradesh wages are expressed as monthly amount. Daily rate has been calculated assuming 26 working days to a month.

Exchange rate: 99 Indian rupees to one British Pound, February 2016.



The main demands put forward by homeworkers are better wages and access to proper healthcare, for example through health insurance from employers. In Ambur, homeworkers are beginning to come together in self-help groups as a first step in forming their own organisation. This will enable them to make demands on companies and government. In the first place, there is an urgent need to establish a definite and clear employment relationship in order to address the homeworkers' concerns. *"We cannot negotiate with the middleman because the middleman knows many people who really need and want a job. So if I negotiate for one rupee or two rupees, they will change the area"* Runa

Typically, homeworkers stitch in isolation, meaning that the opportunities to meet and organise are limited. Through work with local NGOs on the ground, efforts to organise workers have begun. For this to have a real chance for change brands must be transparent in their supply chains, and address the issues of informally employed workers by investigating beyond their first tier suppliers. Brands must recognise homeworkers as a valuable workforce, and by doing so they must take responsibility for all their workers, not only the ones who are the most visible.

*Note: All names have been changed to protect the identity of workers.*

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### Mapping conditions in leather supply chains

We call on companies sourcing leather and leather products from India to map all levels of their supply chains and make this information publicly available. This should be done with other companies, unions, NGOs and workers, with the specific aim of finding out:

1. Basic conditions of employment including identifying informal, contract or casual labour, in tanneries, factories, workshops or in homes.
2. Paying attention to aspects of gender and caste/community discrimination in the workforce;
3. Gap between actual wage levels and living wages for all workers;
4. Health and safety risks at all levels and whether workers have health insurance and other social security protection.

Brands need to publish their social audit reports, as well as reporting explicitly on due diligence efforts to ensure adequate pay for homeworkers and that their rights are respected.

### Rights for Homeworkers

Where homeworkers are part of the supply chain, they should be recognised as workers with the same rights, as acknowledged in the ILO Convention on Home Work.

Equal treatment means that homeworkers have the same rights as other workers to a living wage; health insurance and other forms of social protection; health and safety; security of employment; and the right to organise collectively for their rights.

### Regulation of supply chains

Production is now organised globally, with supply chains stretching across the world, so we need binding international regulation of supply chains. Codes of conduct are voluntary and have not been effective.

We need regulation to require greater transparency from companies about their sourcing and legislation that is binding on companies to take responsibility for conditions in their supply chains, with joint and several liability along the chain. There needs to be legal frameworks to hold brands to account.



## SUPPORT THE CAMPAIGN

You can support the campaign for better conditions for leather footwear workers by asking questions about where your shoes are made and supporting the demands of workers in the sector. To read the full *Stitching Our Shoes* report please see the *Homeworkers Worldwide* website and the *Labour Behind the Label* website.

For further information contact:

Homeworkers Worldwide  
email: [info@homeworkersww.org.uk](mailto:info@homeworkersww.org.uk)  
twitter: [@homeworkersww](https://twitter.com/homeworkersww)  
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Labour Behind the Label  
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twitter: [@labourlabel](https://twitter.com/labourlabel)  
website: [www.labourbehindthelabel.org](http://www.labourbehindthelabel.org)

CHANGE YOUR SHOES is a partnership of 15 European and 3 Asian organisations. We believe; that workers in the shoe supply chain have a right to a living wage and to safe working conditions, and that consumers have a right to safe products and transparency in the production of their shoes. This briefing has been produced as part of the campaign.



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