

## Interview with Rozalina, a homebased worker in Bulgaria.

*This extract describes the experiences of Rozalina, who has worked producing a range of goods, including footwear and glueing carrier bags. She also works with other homeworkers to try and improve their working conditions.*

*Rozalina begins by explaining how life has changed over the past fifteen years.*

### Changes in Bulgaria's economy impacting on homeworkers

“During the socialist period, there were lots of factories and big companies here. There was lots of work for everybody. Usually people worked in factories in the daytime and also worked on the land in their spare time. Mainly, people grew tobacco, tomatoes or fruit like peaches.

After 1989, the system changed... Lots of foreign companies came here and existing companies were privatised. All the big companies were sold off and destroyed. Wages are not regular any more and a new way of working was introduced. New sewing workshops have been opened by Greek and Italian subcontractors. During the process of privatisation, many Bulgarian people took the machines from the big companies and now they have opened new workshops. These workshops work for the Greek and Italian companies.

In the socialist period, working hours were eight hours a day, five days a week and we had good wages, usually between 300 and 600 leva a month. Everyone had rights to health and social security, including for a pension. We had the right to holidays and to sick leave...

***With the change of system, we have to work for seven days a week, instead of five days. We have to work for ten hours a day, or more, for very low wages, between 120 and 220 a month. There is no social insurance, for health or pensions.***

The government has now allowed companies to insure workers at the lowest level possible, the level of the minimum wage which is 120 leva a month. In the past, all the health insurance was paid by the company. Now the worker has to pay half, and the other half is paid by the company.

With the increase in privately-owned workshops, informal work and homebased work started.

In agriculture, in the previous period, everything worked according to written agreements. It was worth it to grow tobacco and people got paid regularly for their tobacco, or peaches, or whatever they were growing. They used to be paid after one month.

Now the tobacco is taken by the company but people have not been paid. Some of them have been waiting two years for payment. Sometimes companies which order tomatoes do not pay, because they say that they could not sell them

If you are working on your own land, you don't have (access to) certain markets. You can grow, for example, lovely green beans but no-one will buy them. You have to throw them away. With peaches, you have to go to the market every day, and if they are not sold, have to bring them back or throw them away.

***Nothing is secure. Life is much harder than it used to be. Instead of going forwards, we are going backwards.***

## **Homeworking in Bulgaria**

With the setting up of workshops and growth of subcontracting from other countries, a new way of working has appeared, that is homeworking.

In my home town there are three or four main types of homeworking: sewing the uppers of shoes; sewing pearls and beads onto blouses; assembly of carrier bags and, most recently, cutting the threads on t-shirts or blouses. Homeworking is done for subcontractors. The homeworkers have to go themselves to the workshops to fetch work, have to finish the work by a certain time and take it back to the workshop.

## **Issues for Bulgarian homeworkers**

The main problems are irregular payments and unequal payments for homeworkers doing the same job. If they want to earn the minimum wage, they have to work sixteen hours a day, or if they are lucky twelve hours. If they want to earn more than the minimum wage, the whole family has to help.

The minimum wage is 120 leva a month. But to live, a family of four needs 400 leva. So people need to earn more money than the minimum wage. Many people have regular jobs but in this supposedly regular job, they don't get paid. They have very hard lives. Conditions are bad and we are struggling to survive.

## **Homeworkers organising for change**

Up till now, I have been making contact with different women and trying to set up an organisation of homeworkers.

One of the issues is that the subcontractors pay different rates for the same work. It is all sewing uppers, but different women are paid different rates. So we have been working with the women to try and make sure that everyone is paid an equal rate.

Even in the town, the prices are not the same. It all depends on the subcontractor. But it is even harder in the villages, where the subcontractors are paying less than in the town.

We are organising around this issue. We say that we are all homeworkers, we have some power and some rights. We would like to build up the organisation, with a very precise constitution and find ways in which we can protect ourselves. At the moment, the most important thing is to get the same price for all homeworkers doing the same work.

I hope that we will be able to build a big organisation of homeworkers in Bulgaria. I would like our organisation of homeworkers to be connected with similar organisations around the world.... The most important thing for us is to make these connections. Here in my home town, I want to build a good organisation and later show what we can do here."

***Following this interview, Bulgarian homeworkers managed to ensure that in towns and villages they were receiving equal pay for the same work.***