

Homeworking: Here & Now

A report by the Northern Homeworking Project on the current realities of homeworking in Northern England

'I can look after my three children who are very young and I can work at the same time, because childcare is very expensive which I cannot afford.'

'Some people don't think it is real work. Because I work at home they think it's a hobby which makes me really angry.'

'There are no alternatives because I can't work outside because I don't know English. It is very hard to learn now I am 50.'

Credits

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Thanks to Oxfam for funding this project. Thanks to Tanzeem Mahmood and the Rochdale Homeworkers Support Group for all their help. Thanks to Saima Saleem for her help with translation. Thanks to Steve Ireland of Ilyparkmedia for design work on this report. Special thanks to all the homeworkers, and others, who took part in our research.

This report is published by Homeworkers Worldwide in April 2011. You are welcome to reproduce any part of this report provided that the source is acknowledged.

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

HWW currently receives funding from Oxfam for the Northern Homeworking Project and from the BOAG group within the Ethical Trading Initiative. Other funding is in the form of donations from supporters.

Homeworkers Worldwide is a Company Limited by Guarantee. Registered in England and Wales number 3796677

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An Introduction to the Northern Homeworking Project:

A new voice for UK homeworkers

The Northern Homeworking Project was established in January 2010 to explore the nature of homeworking in the UK, focusing primarily on Northern England.

Following the closure of the National Group on Homeworking in 2008, UK homeworkers were left without support or representation. This small project, funded by Oxfam, aims to provide UK homeworkers with a voice, building on previous work, identifying current trends in homework and campaigning on key issues. The project is based at Homeworkers Worldwide. We are using the knowledge and expertise gained through years of work with homeworkers internationally, and applying this to our work in the UK.

This report examines some of the key issues we have identified through our work with homeworkers. We explore the different kinds of work women are doing at home, as well as some of the problems they face. Issues include low pay, irregular work and a lack of employment protections. As the government embarks on a major shake-up of the welfare system, we have worked closely with homeworkers to explain the impact of potential changes on their livelihoods, and to ensure their views and experiences are fed into the policy process.

We have spoken to women asylum seekers to explore the obstacles they face

in earning a living – primarily the ban on working for those seeking asylum. This causes major problems not only before, but also after, they are successful in claiming asylum.

We have also sought to place UK homeworking in its global context. Homeworkers here in the UK are part of a complex web of global supply chains, both as workers and as consumers. We need to follow these chains to the top to identify the big retailers who have the power to improve conditions for workers throughout the supply chain.

We are working to provide a voice for UK homeworkers, and through campaigning and lobbying together with homeworkers we hope to ensure this voice is heard by policy makers. Our resources are small and we have a big job to do, so we are working closely with partners and supportive organisations to make the biggest impact we can. We hope you find the following report of interest. It touches on a wide range of issues that we know affect other low paid women workers, as well as homeworkers. If there are issues here that concern you, or that you would like to campaign on together, please get in touch. ♦

Project Methodology

How the research was conducted

Researching homework is notoriously difficult, particularly for organisations that are not well established with long-standing links in homeworking communities. This is because homework is frequently hidden, and homeworkers are often reluctant to discuss their work for fear of losing it. Although Homeworkers Worldwide has existed for over ten years, it has not worked directly with homeworkers in the UK before commencing the Northern Homeworking Project, so many contacts for this project had to be made from scratch.

For Homeworkers Worldwide the most important principle when researching homeworking is to involve homeworkers themselves. In order to do this we sought to contact homeworkers through any means available to us. These included personal contacts, trade union contacts, former members of the National Group on Homeworking (now closed) and local community groups. Through this flexible approach we were able to contact 35 homeworkers for interview.

Just as the initial contacts with homeworkers were made through a range of channels, the form the interviews and research took varied to suit individual circumstances. One of the homeworkers took part in a lengthy telephone interview,

whilst three were interviewed in depth in their own homes, and one in a friend's home. A further seventeen women took part in group interviews. Finally, thirteen women were interviewed by other homeworkers as part of a peer research project in Rochdale. This peer research, its methodology and its findings are explored in greater depth in the 'Homeworking in Rochdale' article.

The interviews with homeworkers, and the direct words of homeworkers themselves were at the heart of this project, and form the real substance of this report. Nevertheless we did seek to supplement these direct experiences with evidence of the wide variety of work being done at home, and information on trends and changes in homeworking. We therefore also spoke to people with secondary experience of homeworking including trade unionists and community workers. We collected word-of-mouth evidence on homeworking through our 'mapping forms' on which we recorded different types of homeworking and additional information such as prices or pay rates where there was not direct contact with the homeworkers themselves. We have also drawn additional information, statistical evidence and analysis on some of the wider themes from a range of written sources, credited throughout the report. ♦

Nazreen's story

Nazreen works at home sewing. She works at home so she can take care of her children, but it is difficult to find enough work and money is tight.

'I like to do work at home because I can look after my family and whenever I have time I can do the work - there are no set hours. So I can both look after my family and work at home. To do work at home is difficult because I have to do the housework, and look after children and at the same time do sewing. To look after small children and do sewing is very hard, but somehow I manage.'

She says many of the local factories have closed, making it more difficult to find work.

'We can't earn much money from sewing. For one thing there is very little work around, and for another thing, the pay is very low. If you complain, they won't pay you any more money. There are different rates of pay for different work - 20p, 50p or 70p for each garment.'

This causes financial difficulties for Nazreen, especially as the costs of living increase.

'Because of inflation, everything is getting more expensive so it is difficult to balance your budget. There are less factories around now and we don't have much work so most of the time I am

free, with no work to do. Because of this I have financial problems but I can't go to work outside because there is no-one else to look after my children.'

It is common for homework to have an impact on women's health, particularly if they are working long hours in what is not designed to be a working environment. Nazreen has found that homework has had a bad effect on her health, but it has also made it more difficult for her to consider finding other work.

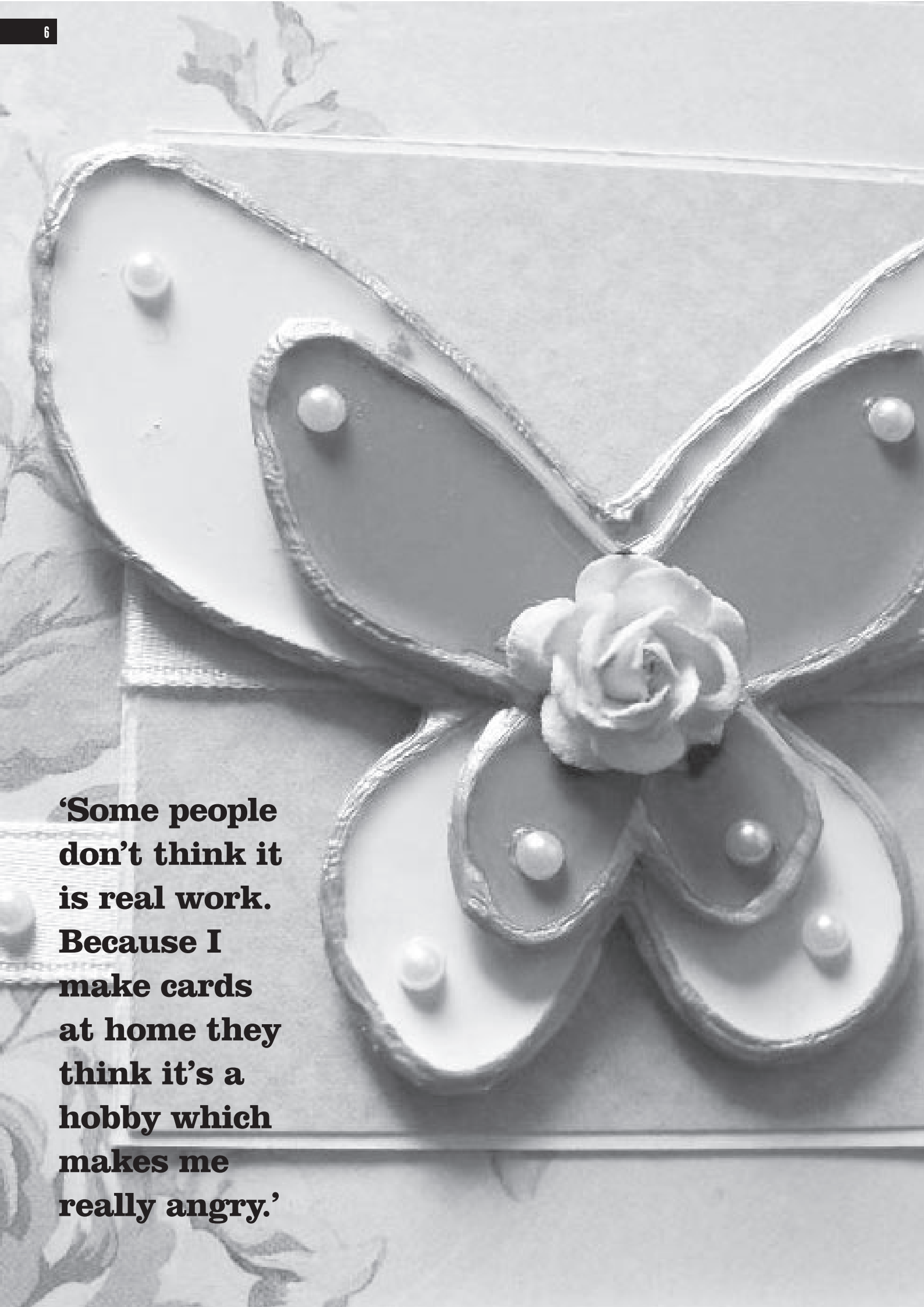
'Because of my homework my health is not good. I often get back pain, and a knee problem that has stopped me working. Now, even if I find work, sometimes I cannot do it because of my health. If I worked outside I couldn't take time off or rest and I get tired quickly now because of my health. That is why it is difficult to work outside the home.'

'Now if I manage to get any work at home I do it, it is not enough but what can you do?' ♦

There are different rates of pay for different work -



or 70p for each garment.

A black and white photograph of a decorative card. The card is shaped like a butterfly with its wings spread. The wings are made of a light-colored material, possibly paper or fabric, with a dark, possibly metallic or embossed, outline. Each wing has several small, round, pearl-like accents. In the center of the butterfly's body is a detailed, three-dimensional rose. The card is placed on a background with a faint floral pattern.

‘Some people don’t think it is real work. Because I make cards at home they think it’s a hobby which makes me really angry.’

Karen's story

Karen works at home making cards for a local company. She attaches crystals to the printed cards, which are then sold in card shops and at least one major supermarket.

Karen works at home because she suffers from chronic headaches and migraines. She is on medication to deal with her headaches. These can get so bad that she passes out which is why she gave up her previous job, and does not feel able to work outside the home.

'I'd be scared of getting ill if I went out to work. I'd hate phoning in sick.'

She found this homeworking job through another mother at her children's school who was making the cards. At first the work was very irregular, but when Karen's friend gave up her job to focus on fostering, Karen's work increased and now she rarely has a week without work.

'I'm so glad I found this job because it makes me feel better to be working. I get paid weekly, and my husband's job pays monthly so this money really helps tide us over in between. It helps with weekly top-ups like buying bread and milk and things.'

One thing that really frustrates Karen is that people don't recognise what she does as a real job.

'Some people don't think it is real work. Because I make cards at home they think it's a hobby which makes me really angry.'

The amount of work Karen receives

varies. She usually gets between 600 and 1000 cards a week. Sometimes if the company gets a rush order they'll ask her to do a load overnight, but she feels under no pressure to take on these rush jobs unless she wants to.

Karen is paid 1p per crystal she sticks on the cards. Some designs are easy, and some are tricky and take longer depending on the design, as well as the number of crystals.

The card she is currently working on has 11 crystals and she can make about 45 cards in an hour. She usually earns about £60-70 per week and works about 12-15 hours. This works out as between £4 and £5 per hour.

'I've seen the cards I make for sale and they cost about £4.50 which is quite a mark-up. Before I did this job I'd see cards in the shops and they'd say "handmade" but I didn't believe it. I thought they must really be done by machine but now I know because I'm doing it.'

Karen doesn't know how many other homeworkers work for the company but it must be quite a few. She always sees other homeworkers when she picks up her work, and she knows the cards she makes are also packed by homeworkers.

Karen enjoys her work and finds it fits well around her family life.

'I'm always there for the children, to take them to school and collect them. I don't have to worry about childcare in the school holidays, which is a big thing. I don't want somebody else bringing up my children - I'm always there for them and they benefit from this.'

The only downside is that, as a homeworker she doesn't get full employment rights.

'It annoys me that we don't get treated the same as those who work on site. If there is no work one week then you don't get paid anything and that is frustrating. We do our tax and insurance the same as everyone else but we don't get holiday pay. We're going on holiday next week, but I won't receive any holiday pay whilst I'm away. I'm doing a job like anyone else but why should we be treated differently just because we work at home?'

As a homeworker, Karen is legally entitled to the national minimum wage (£5.80 at time of interview) and holiday pay – but it can be very hard for a homeworker to assert these rights without being afraid they will lose their work.

'Finding this work was the main thing. I was looking for a long time and I felt guilty when I wasn't working. So it meant a lot to me when I found this work. The only thing that annoys me is that I don't get treated like everyone else. But I really enjoy my job.' ♦

INVISIBLE WORK

As in other countries, many women in the UK take up homework as a way of combining earning a cash income with family responsibilities. Often they find it difficult to find work outside the home which fits in with caring for young children or other dependants, and turn to homework as the only alternative.

The increase in homework in the UK was linked to the globalisation of production: giant companies, many of them retailers, have suppliers in different parts of the world. Subcontracting within the UK was used when a 'quick response' was needed. This led in turn to a growth in homework in industries such as garments or various components in manufacturing sectors. At the same time, white-collar homework increased as computers and modern telecommunications made it possible to maintain contact with homeworkers and transfer data from the office.

Many women worked at home, machining garments or assembling various components. Often they were packing products for major supermarket chains. These women were in many ways similar to those working in factories or offices, except that their workplace was the home and, as a result, they were mainly invisible and unrecognised as workers.

Many homeworkers have told us that there is less work available than before. Many companies have moved production to Eastern Europe after the changes there in the early 1990s. As a result, there is less manufacturing work available in the UK, although sorting and packing products, particularly for supermarkets is still a common form of work done at home. Instead there is a growing demand for white-collar work, including telesales or data compilation, done from home.

Where women have previously worked in offices, they have sometimes been able to maintain decent pay and conditions of employment and at least one trade union in the UK runs a network for homeworkers, so that they can maintain contact with each other and reduce their isolation.

Other women have turned to different kinds of work at home to make up for their lost income from manufacturing homework. Women often do dress-making or cooking at home, for neighbours and friends. They may have different customers or supply local businesses but are rarely a fully-fledged business in the sense that they are making profits or employing others. Sometimes they combine homework from factories with working for friends or neighbours, or doing part-time work outside the home when this is available.

Many women also use craft skills to try and make a living. Some of these efforts may become a full business but often women do the work on a small-scale and sell through informal networks or sometimes at local craft markets.

Another common way of earning an income from home is commission sales, sometimes with a catalogue and sometimes through the party plan system. There are also other jobs without an outside workplace, such as delivering leaflets or orders for mail order catalogues. The homeworker machining clothes for high-street stores is clearly a worker, although the employment relationship

is often disguised and her employment rights ignored. But the own-account homeworker, has no employer and is often designated as a small business, without the need for rights or entitlements.

Yet all these different kinds of homeworkers share many common features: they are usually women who are tied to the house by caring responsibilities and turn to homework for an independent income of their own, usually used for basic family expenses.

If they have a partner in low-paid work, it is difficult for a young family to make ends meet and a second income is crucial to meet their costs. In some households, the lack of work means the family depend on benefits which may be paid to the husband and informal work may be the only source of income for a woman and her children. Others such as asylum-seekers, particularly those who are destitute, are denied even the right to work.

Our current system of employment law and welfare fail to recognise the real problems faced by women such as these, combining paid and unpaid work, with a variety of different forms of paid work and employment relationships. Current discussion of welfare reform has addressed only some of these issues but homework remains unrecognised as one way in which women work to earn a living for themselves and their families. ♦

Does homeworking provide a living wage?



Whilst the research we conducted did not focus specifically on wages, it quickly became clear that most of the homeworkers we spoke to were earning only the minimum wage or less for the work they do.

It is well established that homeworkers on piece rates frequently receive less than the national minimum wage, despite being specifically covered by NMW legislation. Women described earning as little as £1 to £3 per hour. In addition, some of the women we spoke to were not always paid the full wages they were owed – sometimes they were only paid in part and had to wait for the following month to receive the rest of their wages. We spoke to one homeworker (who was paid per hour not by piece rate) who was earning above NMW but had significant work-related expenses which she had to pay out of her own pocket.

As part of our research we also spoke to women who were working on their own account, and to organisations supporting women in home-based self-employment. They confirmed that self-employed homeworkers also often earn well below the national minimum wage for the hours they work. In the long-term homebased businesses can become profitable, but in the beginning stages – for the first few years – earnings per hour tend to be very low. One self-employed homeworker

told us 'Just because you work a lot of hours does not mean you are earning the minimum wage! Sometimes you might, quite often you won't. Especially in this 'economic climate' - my income dropped 75% and all I can say is thank God for Working Tax Credits!'

Not only do many homeworkers earn less than the minimum wage, but the minimum wage itself is well below what is actually needed to meet the costs of living. A 'living wage' can be calculated in a number of ways, and is an important benchmark showing what hourly rate is needed for a worker to meet basic living costs (such as food, fuel and shelter) and give their family a decent standard of living. In London, the living wage is calculated annually by the Greater London Authority and currently stands at £7.85 per hour. Elsewhere in the UK living costs tend to be lower – in Scotland, for example, the living wage is £7.15 and elsewhere it is £7.60. All these living wage rates are significantly higher than the current minimum wage of £5.93 per hour, and even further from the wages of many of the homeworkers we spoke to.

While in practice many workers in the UK and worldwide earn far less than the living wage for their area, the principle that workers should be paid at least enough to cover the basic cost of living is gaining growing recognition and acceptance.

Popular campaigns are building behind the principle, from the community-based campaign work of London Citizens to the trans-national Asian Floor Wage campaign for garment workers. One of the most effective strategies of living wage campaigners has been to hold employers at the top of the chain responsible for living wages. Whether the workers are subcontracted, outsourced or indirectly employed the focus for campaigns has been the primary employer – the big name at the top of the chain with the power and the money to make the change. This strategy is significant for homeworkers, who are so often at the end of long complex supply chains. Company codes of conduct – such as the Ethical Trading Initiative's – increasingly state that workers in their supply chains should be paid a living wage, not just the legal minimum. Even Prime Minister David Cameron has described the living wage as 'An idea whose time has come.' ♦

FOR MORE INFORMATION VISIT:

Fair Pay Network
<http://www.fairpaynetwork.org/>

Living Wage Campaign
<http://bit.ly/thelivingwagecampaign>

Asia Floor Wage
<http://www.asiafloorwage.org/>

Ethical Trading Initiative
<http://bit.ly/alivingwageforworkers>

Claire's story

Photo credit: HWW



Claire lives in Yorkshire and works for a virtual call centre from home. She works from home because she has several long-term health problems preventing her from going out to work Politicians are currently calling for more people with long-term health problems and disabilities to get back into work, and Claire has done just that for years - but despite the fact she feels her employer is supportive and 'willing to work around' her there are still many obstacles that make work difficult.

Claire suffers from spondylitis (arthritis of the spine), and has recently been diagnosed with fibromyalgia (a muscle fatigue syndrome). She is seeing a pain therapist who is also helping her to deal with some of the emotional effects of her condition. She has felt anxious and guilty about having to take so much time off work and the pain therapist has helped her cope with depression.

She has been working for the same company for the past four years, and is generally pleased with her terms and conditions. In the past she has worked in telesales from home, but this was commission-based and she found it was not worth the time she had to spend on it. She began her current job as a casual

worker, doing different hours each week but after about a year she became a permanent employee, working 30 hours a week.

Last year Claire was promoted and received a pay rise and free broadband connection. She worked as a supervisor, responsible for the eight other homeworkers on her shift. As well as doing the basic job of taking calls and checking information she would deal with these homeworkers' problems - such as IT problems or rude or aggressive telephone calls. She said that she was often asked if there was any organisation homeworkers could contact for support, but had to tell them that there wasn't. Recently she decided to give up this promotion and return

to her previous role.

'I loved it but the stress got too much.'

Since stepping down from the promotion, Claire earns slightly above the minimum wage, but is expected to pay for her own broadband connection and phone line. Calls for work purposes are free. Since Claire stepped back from the supervisor role, her employer is now removing her broadband connection and she will have to re-install her own at her own expense. Claire accepts this - although it will prove disruptive to her work - but is unhappy with the way the company dealt with it.

'They just sent me an email saying they'd disconnect me. Why couldn't they speak to me in person? I was in and out of

hospital at the time and this just added to my stress. You need broadband in order to do the job so I was really worried. I wasn't a happy bunny.'

Claire feels that communications have got worse with the company, and that they used to do more to keep in touch with their homeworkers.

'They used to give me a call every day, now I don't hear from them. They are willing to work round me, and my disability, but where it used to be easy to talk to them about it I've lost that personal contact.'

Claire has had to take six months off work in the last year with ill health. As an employee, she receives sick pay (then half sick pay, then statutory sick pay) but her employer has recently introduced a new policy of 'rolling sickness'. This is a new system which she doesn't fully understand but in practice it means she received far less sick pay when she was ill in hospital recently. Her employer has, however, agreed to pay for the time she needs to take off for hospital appointments where previously she had to take this as annual leave.

'They've adopted a lot of new policies recently, looking at the pay roll, HR and the Disability Discrimination Act. Some of the policies are better, but this rolling sickness is the worst thing they've done.'

Claire is a strong advocate of disability rights, 'The Government winds me up the way it treats disabled people.'

She also has concerns about the benefits system. Three years ago when Claire was working varied hours, and receiving disabled tax credits it made things very complicated.

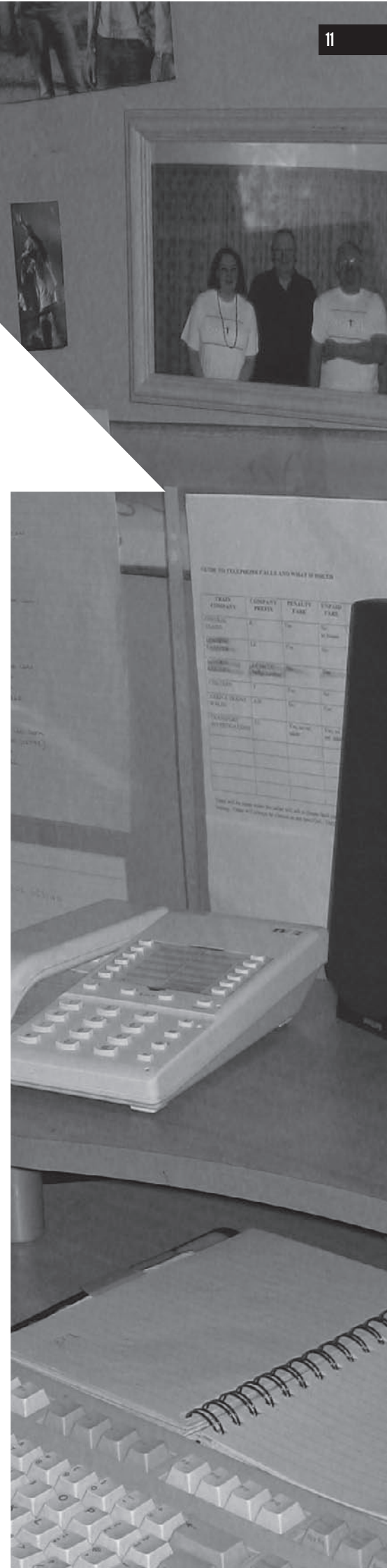
'They'd work it out based on the hours I did most often, but because my hours changed it meant sometimes I wouldn't get my full entitlement.'

Now she works fixed hours she is getting a fixed amount. Claire receives Disabled Living Allowance, and has a note from her GP saying it is therapeutic for her to work. She thinks benefits should be simpler and supports the idea of increasing the amount people can work without losing benefits.

'I remember when it happened to me, and it is a big thing when you lose your rent and council tax benefits.'

Claire was a member of the National Group on Homeworking, and campaigned with them. She is concerned that there is no support for homeworkers now NGH has gone, and was really pleased to hear about the Northern Homeworking Project taking up these issues.

Claire thinks employers need to be clearer about their policies, and that all companies should have the same policies on things like sickness so people know where they stand. She also thinks employers should be more aware of the Disability Discrimination Act, and their obligations to adapt to people with disabilities. ♦





Universal Credit

Welfare that works for homeworkers?

Photo credit: HWW

The government is making major changes to the welfare system.

The reforms are intended to simplify the system, reduce fraud and error, make work pay and, in the long term, reduce the welfare bill. Some detailed proposals have now been made, but there is still a lack of clarity on how some of the reforms will work in practice. In addition, these changes to the way the system works are being brought in at the same time as the government is making major cuts in some benefits and services through public spending cuts.

THE NEED FOR REFORM

The current welfare system, with its complex array of means-tested benefits, delays and errors, and threats of claw-back for error and prosecution for fraud, poses problems for those whose income varies from week to week. This is a particular problem for homeworkers, whose work is precarious, low paid and irregular. This is confirmed by recent research into homeworking in West Yorkshire which found that homeworkers **'felt there were little or no provisions within the benefits system to incorporate the complexities of homeworking.'**⁽¹⁾

The relative stability of income from benefits can be hugely important when earned income is uncertain and erratic, leading some homeworkers to work

informally whilst continuing to claim benefits. The Government is conducting a major overhaul of the way the welfare system works and the recent Department for Work and Pensions consultation paper recognised that **'Working legitimately is not a rational choice for many poor people to make. Fraud is always wrong, but we must recognise that the benefits system is making matters worse by pushing valuable work, and the aspiration that this can engender, underground.'**⁽²⁾

For homeworkers, and many others who may be working in the informal economy, change to the welfare system is certainly needed, to enable them to work legitimately while at the same time preserving a stable income. Some of the early proposals for change appeared to be moving in the right direction. One aim was to encourage those working informally to declare their work. This was to be done through raising the 'earnings disregard' i.e. the amount that someone can earn before losing benefits.

IRREGULAR INCOME AND INFORMAL WORK

Homeworkers' income is often irregular. One of the primary advantages for businesses using homeworkers is their flexibility. They can be given different amounts of work to do each week, and if no work is available they do not get paid. The existing benefits system does not

operate well for someone whose income is irregular. One homeworker told us,

'Sometimes when I don't get paid by who I am working for, then the government give me the wrong amount of money. Sometimes I do get paid and sometimes I don't.'

The current system presents homeworkers with a dilemma because their work is irregular and insecure. If a homeworker has been out for work for some time, then manages to get hold of a few hours of work one week she is faced with a dilemma. Should she inform officials, so the relevant amount is deducted from her benefits – even though there is no guarantee she will receive any more work the following week? Or should she keep quiet about her work and put herself at risk by continuing to claim benefits she may no longer be fully entitled to? This dilemma can either force homeworkers into informal working, or discourage them from claiming benefits to which they are genuinely entitled.

A HIGHER EARNINGS DISREGARD?

As part of its reform proposals the Government is seeking to combine all means-tested benefits into a single payment or 'Universal Credit.' One of the key principles is to ensure that, as people move into work they do not lose too much benefit too quickly. The reforms

1. PERS, Pakistani and Bangladeshi Women Homeworkers in West Yorkshire, 2008
2. DWP Consultation Paper 21st Century Welfare, 2010

will include an increase in the amount an individual can earn before their benefits are affected, and introduce a simple taper where benefits are gradually reduced as earnings increase. This is because they believe too many people are stuck on benefits because they are worried that, as their benefits are withdrawn they will be little or no better off in work.

Whilst some individuals are indeed caught in this benefit 'trap', and this is unjust, the government is overstating the extent to which this is causing unemployment. Our experience of working with homeworkers reflects what national statistics are also showing regarding unemployment – with five unemployed people for every job most people who are unemployed are not working because they genuinely cannot find work.

We think it is unlikely that changes to the benefits system alone will make a serious impact on unemployment, but we would nevertheless welcome a substantially increased earnings disregard and taper, because we feel it could help many homeworkers who are working to do so legitimately.

'I think it is a very good proposal for people who work at home, as we could claim benefit and not be scared.'

We asked homeworkers whether an increase in the earnings disregard would be a good idea, and help those whose income is irregular. There was strong support for such a proposal. One of the great advantages is that it would enable those homeworkers who are currently working informally to formalise their work, be more open about what they do and 'not be scared.'

It would be hugely beneficial for homeworkers who are currently working informally to feel able to declare their work. If homeworkers are not afraid of being caught working informally they will feel more able to be open about their work, making homeworking more visible and making it easier for researchers and statisticians (such as those compiling the Labour Force Survey) to collect complete and accurate information on the nature and extent of homeworking in the UK.

Finally, if homeworkers are working formally and are not afraid of being caught out, they will be in a far stronger position to challenge mistreatment and labour rights abuses such as non-payment of the minimum wage. It is common for homeworkers to be paid considerably less than the national minimum wage. But currently workers who are working informally and claiming benefits through necessity, perhaps precisely because their wages are so low, are unable to challenge employers who are exploiting them because they are too afraid to contact HMRC⁽³⁾ or other government officials for fear of being punished themselves.

A substantially increased earnings disregard and a simple, generous taper could go a long way to addressing these problems, allowing many more homeworkers to work legitimately and access the protection of the law when necessary. The precise level the government is proposing for the earnings disregard is unclear, and will vary depending on individual's circumstances. There are, however, indications that the disregard and the taper (proposed at 65% - meaning workers keep 35p in every pound they earn above the disregard) may be too low to make a significant difference.

THE SELF-EMPLOYED

There are specific problems with the proposals for those who are either genuinely self-employed, or treated as self-employed by the person they work for. The government is relying on the PAYE system to calculate how much claimants earn each week and therefore how much benefit they are entitled to. It is unclear how it will administer the system for those who are outside the PAYE system.

There is little detail on how the new system will operate for the self-employed, but the White Paper says:

"For Universal Credit we are considering introducing a floor of assumed income from self employment for those registering as such. The floor will be set at the National Minimum wage for the reported hours; clearly profits above this limit may be received and reported."⁽⁴⁾

We are concerned at the assumption that those who are self-employed, either starting up a business or working on their own account, are earning at least NMW.

The women we are in contact with who are working at home on their own account sewing clothes to order, making food, selling beauty products etc are earning far less than NMW. We have spoken to a range of groups working in this area, and they have confirmed our belief that, in many cases, women working at home in self-employment work very long hours, rarely calculate the number of hours they work and have very low earnings, particularly when expenses are taken into account. In the long-term homebased businesses can become profitable, and may even grow to provide employment for others, but in the beginning stages – for the first few years – earnings per hour tend to be very low.

We believe the assumption of an NMW floor will mean low income self-employed people receive less benefit than they are entitled to, and act as a disincentive to low income self-employed people to declare their work.

We believe this would undermine the Government's attempts to encourage the formalisation of existing informal work, to support people as they seek to work their way out of poverty, and to encourage enterprise and entrepreneurship. At a time when jobs are in short supply those seeking to create their own employment should be supported and encouraged in their attempts to do so.

We believe the Government should calculate benefits for the self-employed based on actual earnings (after expenses) rather than hours worked, in line with its approach to employees, and are lobbying for this amendment to the existing proposals.

IMPACT OF THE CHANGES ON WOMEN

Some of the changes proposed have worrying implications for women – in particular the payment of the Universal Credit to households not individuals. This will usually mean the money goes to the

3. HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC) is the government department responsible for enforcing the national minimum wage
4. DWP White Paper, Universal Credit: Welfare that Works, 2010

man rather than the woman in a couple. This will have a negative effect on women's independence, and is likely to reduce the amount of money spent on the children. Research shows that women spend more of their income on their children's needs than men do.

Another problem is that there will only be a single earnings disregard per household. As the disregard is likely to be 'used-up' by the first earner in a household, the second earner (usually the woman) will not benefit from it and may, in effect, be discouraged from working. Again this would have a negative impact on women's financial independence.

It is also feared that the increased 'conditionality' in the reforms will have a disproportionate effect on women. The government intends to impose strict conditions on claimants to ensure they are available for work, take opportunities to enter work and, if they are already in work part-time, take opportunities to increase their hours. Failure to do so will result in cuts to their benefits. This is likely to have a serious impact on women, because it is women who have most caring responsibilities and this

can limit their availability for work. The conditionality requirements are being significantly tightened for lone parents in particular, who are mainly women.

One of the points on which the government is still unclear is what provision will be made for childcare. Most homeworkers take up this form of employment precisely because they are caring for others in their homes, usually small children. Unless it is clear what provisions are going to be made for the cost of childcare, or provision of free services, it is not possible to measure the impact on women.

CONTEXT AND CONCERNS ABOUT PRINCIPLES OF PROPOSED REFORMS.

The current proposals are being made at a time of recession when unemployment is growing. Many of those seeking work cannot find a job and this is particularly true of homeworkers who almost unanimously complain of the difficulty of finding work.

In addition to welfare reform, there are many cuts being made in public spending and services which will affect women particularly, as public sector workers

and as users of services. Women will no doubt have to carry most of the burden of reduced services such as day centres, home helps etc as well as managing household budgets on reduced incomes from unemployment or cuts in benefits.

The early promise of improvement in the benefit system does not seem to have been realised. Although much remains unclear, once again homeworkers remain unrecognised, with little allowance made in the system for those receiving irregular work from factories or those trying to create their own employment at home.

Access to welfare support should be determined by needs and rights, not by status and conditionality. Welfare support should be there to ensure that those who cannot work, be this for long or short periods of time, are supported and able to maintain a decent standard of living. Instead these changes, with their harsh conditionality regime, are part of a long term shift towards welfare becoming a safety net for the desperate and deserving only, rather than social insurance against hardship that is ours by right. ♦

HWW Recommendations

- 1.** The Government should calculate benefits for the self-employed based on actual earnings (after expenses) rather than hours worked.
- 2.** Universal Credit should not be paid in a single payment per household, but shared between couples to promote equality. There should be an individual rather than a household earnings disregard.
- 3.** The Government should not introduce a system of welfare 'conditionality' that does not take into account the caring responsibilities that limit the options of women in particular.

Shazia's story

We prefer to work at home because there are two benefits for example we can look after the children and do the work at the same time. We can do the house work and sew at the same time. If I were to work outside then who would look after my children and I will have to work according to the factory hours. With young children it will be very hard to work in a factory and that is why I like to work at home.

It is hard to work at home as you are undertaking two responsibilities but the benefit is that when you are free from household work you can do your sewing. There is no time restriction and there is no pressure to finish the work quickly. So I do the work when it suits me but the pay is very low. Every piece is paid differently e.g. 15p, 25p and no more than 60p. If I complain and ask for £1 for the work they have given me then their answer is that 'this is all they can pay'.

The factory people take advantage of us as they know that because of the children and the cost of living we have no bargaining power and they say 'that if you do not want to sew then you do not have to' and we carry on doing it out of no choice.

The other problem of working at home is that it is very irregular. In summer they are always rushing me to get as many pieces ready as possible every day. My health suffers when I work day and night like this. My eyesight has weakened over the years and my back hurts and because of sitting I suffer from bad knees.

Sometimes when we need the money then there is no work available but if they have an order then they put pressure on us to finish the work to their deadlines. They do not care about us and only think about themselves. Working at home causes all sorts of these problems.

If I did not get work to do at home then I would find it hard to work in a factory as I am not educated, can only do sewing work and most of the factories have closed down. If I were to do any other work then I would like to do packing work at home which is not available locally and I would find it very hard to work in a factory. That is why I would prefer to work at home rather than outside. I like working at home and I feel this is best option for me. ♦

If I complain and ask for £1 for the work they have given me then their answer is that 'this is all they can pay'

Homeworking in Rochdale

A Peer Research Project

Homeworkers in Rochdale meet monthly to discuss homeworking issues, access information, training and advice, and socialise. The women – who are from the Pakistani community - have been meeting for over 15 years, and have witnessed many changes in homeworking during this time.

Rochdale once had a thriving clothing industry, and many of the homeworkers worked as machinists, but with the decline of manufacturing there is now little work available. Some homeworkers continue to do homework for the few factories that remain, others now work on their own account – cooking or sewing clothes to order for friends and neighbours, others have found work outside the home, or are not working at all.

The Rochdale Homeworking Support Group is run by Tanzeem Mahmood of Rochdale Council and is one of the last remaining support groups for homeworkers in the UK. As such, it is of enormous value, both to the women who are members, and to those who are seeking to better understand homeworking in the UK, and who want to find homeworkers who are willing to discuss their situation. The Rochdale Homeworking Support Group has been of invaluable assistance to the Northern Homeworking Project in our research, and their input has provided us with evidence to share with organisations such

as the Women's National Commission, the Low Pay Commission and the 2010 Year of Action Against Poverty Listening Campaign.

Researching homework is notoriously difficult as homeworkers are so often reluctant to discuss their work, and it can take a long time to build up trust. To try to overcome these challenges the Northern Homeworking Project organised a peer research project together with the Rochdale Homeworking Support Group. The plan was to train the homeworkers in interview skills so they could interview other women they knew who were homeworking.

Four women volunteered and took part in a special training session. Nesta, from the Northern Homeworking Project, explained the project and trained the women with Tanzeem's help and interpretation. In the following month a total of 13 interviews were completed, 8 in English and 5 in Urdu – making the peer research one of the most successful parts of the project.

Tanzeem said, **'The training session was very useful for them. It was good to meet in a smaller group to focus on this and it increased the women's confidence. They've gained skills, and confidence from going out and doing these interviews on their own.'**

HWW has always maintained that homeworkers are the best people to do research into homeworking, and the success of the Rochdale Peer Research Project has confirmed this.

Tanzeem said, **'It is effective using homeworkers to do the research because they can easily access other homeworkers, and they are trusted.'**

In common with most homeworkers, one of the main reasons the Rochdale homeworkers were working from home was childcare – either they preferred to be at home to look after their children themselves, or other childcare was unaffordable.

'I could look after my three children who are very young and I can work at

Photos credit: HWW



the same time, because childcare is very expensive which I cannot afford.'

For some of the women, language was another reason to work from home, because they did not feel they spoke English well enough to work outside the home.

'There are no alternatives because I can't work outside because I don't know English. It is very hard to learn now I am 50.'

Another reason the women gave for homeworking was that they did not have alternative skills, **'I rely on this homework from the factory. Because I am not educated I can't do any other work except sewing.'**

The biggest issue for homeworkers was the lack of available work. Whilst some of the women were on extremely low pay (well below minimum wage) and they were unhappy about this, the lack of work was even more of a problem for them. Some women had no work at all, others did not get enough. The women wanted to work more but no work was available.

'There is a lot of problems working from home. For example, there is not enough work given, and I am given low pay for the work I do. I only have work 2 or 3 days a week and the rest of the week I have nothing to do. Sometimes work should come, but I am waiting around and there is no work for me.'

Another common problem was irregular work – whilst a lot of the time they were waiting for work and not receiving enough, at other time they were under pressure to work 'day and night',

'There is no work available for two weeks at a time and when they do have any then there is not enough time to finish and they rush you.'

Some of the women were working on their own account as there was little factory work available, and one of these women was the only homeworker interviewed who felt she was receiving enough work.

'I am sewing ladies clothes for £10 or £15 per suit. I am not looking for anymore

work because I am busy enough.'

Several of the women described how their health had been affected by their homework, **'When I work from home I feel lonely because I am in my cellar working. I also have back pain.'**

One of the most common myths about homework is that it is not 'real work' but that women are doing it as a pastime, to earn a little 'pin money'. In fact, homework provides essential family income, which women use to make ends meet. This makes the irregularity, or lack of homework, even more difficult to cope with.

'We can't manage on my husbands' wage and that's why I need to do something to earn some money.'

'I am a single parent and I didn't get enough from benefits so that is why I needed some work from home.' ♦

Please note:

Two of the in-depth interviews in this publication; Shazia and Nazreen, are from the peer research project.

FRUSTRATED AMBITIONS

of women asylum seekers

A dressmaker, a jewellery designer, a catering and events manager, a social entrepreneur and a teacher – the women we spoke to had the potential and the ambition to fulfil these roles but they have been held back and frustrated by the government’s denial of their right to work. We met with members of a women’s asylum seeker group to discuss working at home. The women had a wide range of dressmaking, craft and catering skills. Most of the women were currently seeking asylum – and so are not allowed to work – and some had recently received their papers and so are now looking for work. Some of the

women are working at home to raise money for their support group, others simply give away the things they make. One of the main reasons the women gave for working was to keep them occupied and to distract them from trauma they have experienced and the stress they continue to face.



CATERING & EVENTS MANAGER

Hope is from Uganda and is passionate about working with food. She did a diploma in hotel management at home, and since coming to the UK has studied hospitality and events management. She has done informal catering, including for a friends party involving 100s of guests, and preparing samosas to sell to raise money for the support group.

‘I love to work with food and I want to move into food and hospitality. I want to bring happiness and if someone has an event, you work to get everything ready, on time and good to eat. You see the results and the effort is well worth it.’

DRESSMAKER

Helen makes craft items like baskets, animals and vases from folded paper

using a technique called 3D origami. She also makes traditional African dresses.

Helen used to be a dressmaker at home in Nigeria, and she learnt her origami skills from another asylum seeker whilst she was in detention in the UK.

‘One of the Chinese ladies taught me how to do it to distract me from my mental problems. So now I teach the group how to make it. It is really helpful because it

makes your stress and depression less. We are not allowed to work so I give the baskets away as gifts.'

Helen takes around 6 hours to make a traditional African outfit. She does not have a sewing machine so has to borrow it from a friend. She is now teaching other women in the group how to sew these dresses.

'If I was allowed to work I would keep making African dresses. In my community there are lots of people who might order these. I made one for a friend and she loved it so much now her mother has asked for one. Once you have learned a skill you never forget it.'

JEWELLERY DESIGNER

Pamela is doing a course to learn sewing but she is particularly keen on beading and making jewellery. She also says it is important to her to have something to occupy her, even though she is not allowed to earn money from her craft. She has taught the other women at the group to make jewellery and they are making and selling some to raise funds for the group.

At home in Nigeria she wanted to do a jewellery course but it was too expensive. When she had to leave and came to the UK she learnt partly through teaching herself from a book, and partly from a woman at another asylum support organisation. Now she has begun a two year course on jewellery making. She enjoys the creativity of designing and making jewellery.

'It does help me with my mental

problems. It keeps me occupied from thinking. I can give the jewellery to friends and it makes me happy.'

If she was allowed to work Pamela said,

'I would like to make jewellery and import it back to my country because the quality of the beads is much better here – and people in my country are very fashion conscious. Or I could just do it on a small scale, and sell to friends and family and take orders.'

TEACHER

Laura has recently received her papers, after waiting more than seven years during which time she was not allowed to work. She is skilled in dressmaking, painting and a number of crafts but in the long term she would rather be employed outside the home than working on her own account.

'For the time being I am training to do voluntary work in teaching. I would like to work in schools in the long term, but I am struggling. Because of the jobs crisis, and because of the long time of not working – seven and a half years – the problems have accumulated.'

She explains how hard it is to wait for a decision about your asylum status,

'People give up hope. This time no, bring another claim, this time no. I have a friend who went on a course but she said "My ears are blocked" – she couldn't learn because she had too much to think about.'

Whilst she was waiting to receive leave

to remain Laura spent a lot of time on crafts but found it hard to market what she could make, and difficult to work at home alone.

'I was making paper baskets but it takes time so you need to get something back. You have to be able to market it otherwise you make it, it stays there, you make another, it stays there. You are stuck. You are sacrificing your time.'

She is clear that if she was going to make a living from her crafts and sewing she would have to produce something that is unique, as it is impossible to compete with mass-produced goods.

'Competing with the outside world is not easy. We need to make things using skills that are being lost – like traditional dyes – to sell to people who will want it because it is different.'

Because of her experiences she struggles with being at home alone, and would rather have a job outside the home, working with other people. She also says it is hard to concentrate at home, and it is easy to be distracted with other things to do.

If she has time, she says she might try to make some money from her products but the income would always be uncertain so she would need a regular job as well.

'I would like to end up working as a teacher because there is a problem with working at home. Time goes by, you need to program yourself to get the work done. I would like a job where I am meeting other people.'

SOCIAL ENTREPRENEUR

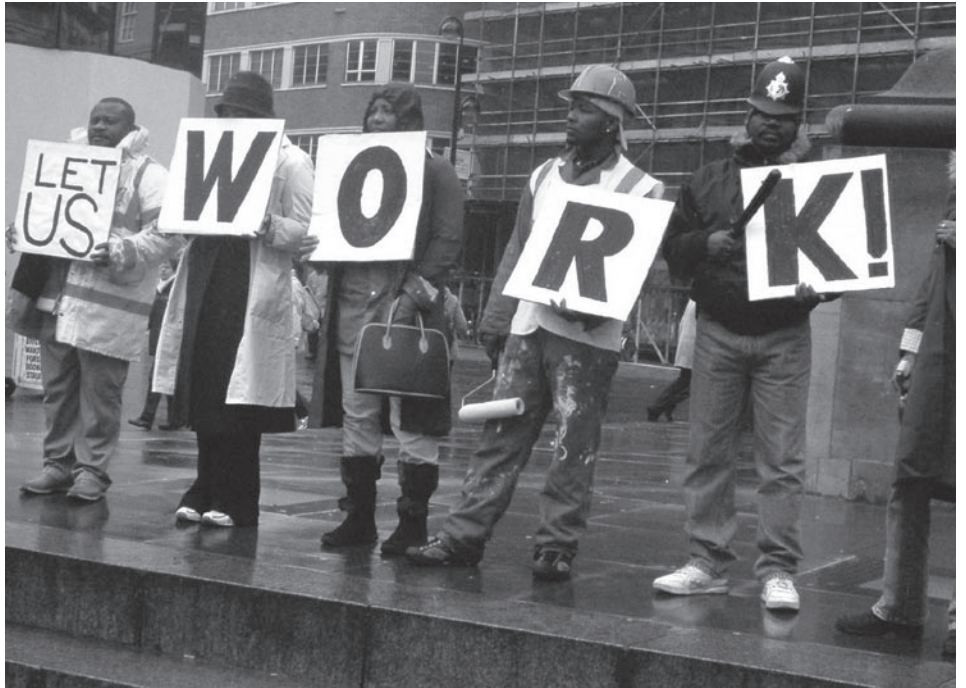
Shaheen is from Pakistan. She has recently received her papers and is now allowed to work. The transition has been difficult because when asylum seekers receive leave to remain they are moved from one government department to another type of support. Her family had to move house, and their benefits are taking a long time to be processed so that, several months after becoming entitled, she is still not receiving child benefit for her children.

Shaheen wants to work and is considering setting up a social enterprise with some of the other women from the group because it is so hard to find a job. She knows other women who have set up successful businesses and thinks that working together with other women on a social enterprise would be a good way to learn.

'A social enterprise would be a good way to get experience. I would like to set up a business but I am scared so this would help.'

CONCLUSIONS

For the women who are still seeking asylum having something to keep them active, and to distract them from depression is extremely important. The negative effects of long-term unemployment on mental and physical health are well known. This state-enforced idleness and poverty can only exacerbate the problems asylum seekers are already dealing with in terms of trauma they have experienced,



as well as the uncertainty and insecurity about their future whilst their asylum claims are being considered. The primary purpose of the work seems to be to keep active. They enjoy sharing their skills with others and a common theme was women passing on the crafts they had learnt to other women.

The women who have received their papers were understandably more focussed on how they could earn a living now they could work and were facing bills and costs that had previously been met by state-support. The current jobs climate and the fact they have been put out of work for several years were huge obstacles. Many asylum seekers have received a lot of training – it is something else to keep the mind occupied whilst they are not allowed to work – but

without recent experience of actually working this training can quickly become irrelevant. Whereas before, the women needed crafts and training to distract them from their situation, now they are allowed to earn they need to find work that will provide a real income and this is extremely difficult.

It was clear that the women seeking asylum, and the women who had recently been granted leave to remain all had a wealth of skills that were currently being wasted. The asylum seeking women had ideas for dressmaking, craft and catering businesses that they could not put into practice. And the women who had been granted leave were struggling to find paid work – they had been out of work so long that it was hard to access employment and their confidence was low. ♦

HWW Recommendation

Grant asylum seekers the right to work and ensure that permission to work remains for people whose claim for asylum is refused, but who are unable to return home through no fault of their own.

Recognising the value of voluntary work

One of the unexpected findings of our research into homeworking was the number of women who were, in addition to trying to earn a living from home, working on a voluntary basis for a charity or community cause.

Several of the women we spoke to were asylum seekers making craft items to raise money for their support group. Another homeworker was similarly making crafts to raise money – this time for a disabled charity. She was also teaching residents at the charity’s care home how to make the crafts as a recreational activity. Another homeworker we spoke to had been actively involved in Race for Life fundraising for several years – and in doing so had raised significant sums of money for cancer research.

This charitable and voluntary work adds a further dimension to the economic contribution these women are making to society. It is well-documented that women bear the greatest burden of

unpaid domestic work – such as cooking, cleaning and caring. This work is rarely recognised or properly valued, though without it society would be unable to function. Housework – if it was paid – would cost the UK over £700b per year⁽¹⁾.

Many women take on homework as the only way they can fit earning a living around this housework, and find the homework they do is frequently underpaid and undervalued. When their voluntary work is also taken into account it is clear that these women are contributing to their families, communities and wider society in a myriad of ways – but that their total contribution is rarely recognised.

This is particularly pertinent given that the

government’s welfare reform proposals appear to be aimed not just at moving those who are unemployed into work, but moving those who are working part-time into taking on more hours. In doing so the government appears to be ignoring the many demands that are placed on women in particular, such as childcare and other caring responsibilities. It is also failing to consider the other contributions women are making in their communities, through both formal and informal voluntary work. It is likely that, following major cuts in public services, the need for this voluntary caring and community work will be greater than ever. The women doing this work need to be valued and supported, as without their contribution our society would be much the poorer. ♦

1. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/1948016.stm>

Is childcare working for working women?

One of the main reasons homeworkers need to work at home is to look after their children. Whilst some women will always choose to be at home to look after their children themselves, more affordable and more flexible childcare is needed to give women more options. Only then will women truly be able to choose how, when and if they work, and who looks after their children.

PRE-SCHOOL

Free part time nursery places are provided for children aged 3-4, but for younger children the cost of nursery care is considerable. The average part-time nursery fee for a child under two is £88 per week, more than half of average part-time gross earnings of £153 per week⁽¹⁾. It can therefore make sense for mothers to take on homework, even if it is very low paid, and keep their young children at home rather than take better paid work outside and spend over half their earnings on childcare. One homeworker told us 'I can look after my three children who are very young and I can work at the same time, because childcare is very expensive which I cannot afford'.

The 15 hours of free provision for children over 3 is popular and well-used; 85% of children take up their place⁽²⁾. Nonetheless it can be difficult for parents to find work that fits neatly around these hours, especially if travel is involved, meaning even part-time work will probably involve some additional child care costs. In addition, the free provision is only available for 38 weeks a year, which can cause problems during the holidays.

SCHOOL AGE

The costs of juggling childcare and employment do not end once a child starts school. Many homeworkers have spoken to us of their desire to be at home when their children return from school – meaning a traditional 9 to 5 working day is not an option. One homeworker explained, 'I cannot work outside because of the children. I want to be home when children come from school. When they are at school I can do some homeworking' another said she preferred homework because, 'I'm always there for the children, to take them to school and collect them. I don't have to worry about childcare in the school holidays, which is a big thing.'

Breakfast clubs, after-school clubs and holiday clubs are all valuable but provision is patchy and frequently costs money. As with free nursery provision, schools are only open 38 weeks of the year, leaving a number of weeks when working parents need to find other forms of childcare. For these reasons, many women with children seek jobs in schools (as classroom assistants, or dinnertime supervisors), or other part-time jobs (such as cleaning) or homework.

MORE THAN ONE CHILD

The costs and complexity of fitting work around nursery or school hours is multiplied for parents with more than one child. At nursery for example, discounts may be offered if two siblings attend, but they are not large - 5-10% is common. Childcare arrangements become even more complicated when the children are at different stages of education, one at nursery, one at primary school and one at high school for example.

FINANCIAL SUPPORT FOR CHILDCARE

In addition to the free nursery places, the government also provides help to pay for childcare through the childcare element of the working tax credit. For families that qualify this can pay up to 70% of the cost of using registered childminders or nurseries. The additional 30% can still be a big expense to low income families. As with other benefits, for people moving in and out of work – or with irregular incomes – the system can be complex. For a parent, losing work also means losing the payment, and therefore losing the ability to pay for childcare. Withdrawing a child from nursery can make it even



harder for the parent to move back into work as well as causing disruption to the child at what is already a difficult time for the family. It is currently unclear what form financial support for childcare will take in the future, as tax credits are likely to disappear as part of the government's welfare reforms.

INFORMAL AND FORMAL CHILDCARE

Many parents prefer to make informal childcare arrangements with friends and family. If parents want to pay for this informal help they are not able to access state support or employer childcare vouchers in order to do so. Research indicates that Pakistani and Bangladeshi women are far more likely to use informal than formal childcare³. It is common for grandparents to provide unpaid informal childcare, and this provides yet another

area of unpaid, undervalued, largely female, labour which is in need of greater recognition. Campaigning groups such as Grandparents Plus are calling for informal childcare to be recognised and for grandparents to be able to receive childcare tax credits⁴.

WOMEN AND CHILDCARE.

In combination all these issues of cost, availability and flexibility of childcare can place considerable limitations on employment options. For the women we work with the best, or sometimes the only, solution is to work at home. Other women may choose to work part time, to take work they are over-qualified for if it offers flexibility, or not to work at all whilst their children are young. Still others may choose to work full-time and juggle the cost and practicalities of childcare arrangements as best they can.

Whilst it may seem obvious it is nonetheless worth stressing that these compromises and limitations are generally placed on women, because they continue to bear the greatest responsibility for bringing up children. The compromises mothers are forced to make regarding the hours they work, the jobs they apply for and the career breaks they take are a significant contributor to the gender pay gap. The pay gap currently stands at 16.4% per hour for full-time workers, and 20.4% per hour when full and part-time pay is taken into account. The pay gap between men and women opens out most dramatically after women have had children. More affordable childcare and a more equal distribution of childcare responsibilities between the sexes are both necessary for women to have real choices over their working and family lives. ♦

HWW Recommendations

1. Increase the availability of free and affordable childcare.
2. Ensure that employment and welfare policies are sensitive to the needs of parents and others with caring responsibilities.

3. p59, Pakistani and Bangladeshi women's attitudes to work and family, DWP Research Report 458

4. Grandparents Plus – Rethinking Family Life, 2009

Sheila's story

Sheila lives in a village in Derbyshire. She began work as a machinist in a garment factory at the age of fifteen. For ten years she worked in a number of large sewing factories, including Viyella Aertex.

Sheila began homeworking 35 years ago when she was pregnant. She worked for Adrianna Babywear, a Nottingham company based at the Lace Market. Sheila sewed all kinds of baby wear, as well as women's nightwear for Adrianna.

When the work from Adrianna fizzled out, Sheila looked for work with other firms. She found work in a local factory and began working evening shifts. When she had proved herself as a good machinist, sewing shirts, dresses, pyjamas and other garments, she was allowed to work at home.

'When they needed extra help they call me back into the factory to work through the night. They said, "You can bring your mam" so my mam would come with me and do the examining work, and I'd do the sewing. Sometimes they'd call in all the outworkers, there were a few of us, and we'd work through the night.'

When Sheila's employer moved his firm up to Sheffield for family reasons she began working for another firm, making children's kilts.

'I made thousands of these. The pay wasn't brilliant but it was piecework and because I got quick I earned a decent wage. You'd sew the nylon under-top onto the pleated kilt skirt, overlocking and lockstitching. They came in bundles of 24 and I could sew a bundle in 20 minutes. He was another great chap to work for. Honest as the day is long. He always knocked at the door, never shouted to be let in and always had a please and a thank you.'

'If there was anything wrong with the work you'd done – and it happened from time to time – he'd tell you what it was and bring it back to you to repair. He was very straight about it, and there was no problem because he knew it wasn't our job to do the examining.'

When this work dried up, Sheila began taking homework from another garment company, **'But the pay was rubbish and I decided to go out to work.'**

By now, Sheila's daughter Tracey was at school, and with Sheila's mother taking Tracey to school, and her husband picking Tracey up she was able to go out to work.

From 1980 to 1988 Sheila worked at a Thorntons chocolate factory. After leaving Thorntons, because she couldn't find anything that fitted round her family life, Sheila went back to doing homework.

'I was doing bits and pieces for various companies and I was a bit of a naughty girl for a while because I didn't declare it. But a lot of the outwork companies didn't want you to declare it because it saved them money too, so they paid you cash in hand.'

Sheila then began working at her husband Neil's firm. She began work in the canteen two days a week to get some regular income because the sewing homework was fizzling out. Then Neil's employer offered her work packing construction materials at home.

'There were six outworkers, some had been doing it for fifteen years. You couldn't work at home unless your husband worked for the firm. They didn't want outsiders.'

Sheila was packing for this construction components firm when the minimum



wage was introduced and she realised the homeworkers weren't receiving it. She saw an advertisement for the National Group on Homeworking and asked them to send her all their information on the national minimum wage.

'The other outworkers all wanted the minimum wage but they wouldn't back me up because they were scared to lose their jobs – but I wasn't scared. I knew if they sacked me they'd have to give me a damn good reason.'

Sheila took all the information she had to her boss and told him she was entitled to the minimum wage.

'I told him we can do this the easy way or the hard way, but I know what I'm entitled to and I'm going to get it. He agreed to pay me and all the other outworkers the minimum wage.'

Sheila got more involved with the National Group on Homeworking, and took part in research and campaign work. She visited the House of Commons and spoke to MPs about the issues facing homeworkers.

Several years later the work from the company began to dry up.

'I was told there was no more outwork four years ago. I said if I'm going to be finished I want redundancy. The company didn't like it, but I got it. Because I got it, and told the other outworkers, they got it too.'

Sheila's daughter Tracey was sewing specialist ballet tights at home, so Sheila started to do some of this work too. Their supplier of work was claiming that some of their work wasn't up to standard and she wasn't paying them for it. They knew they were doing the work right so they went straight to the factory to get the work direct and cut out the intermediary. The factory was happy with their work so they continued working in this way until the company brought all the work inside, and moved to Leicester.

Meanwhile Sheila had been homeworking on and off for a local sportswear firm for about ten years. She began making polo shirts and children's PE kits, which the boss had electronically embroidered at his unit, then the firm moved on to producing mini replica football kits for car windows. Sheila was sewing these kits on and off until about 18 months ago, when her boss shifted his embroidery unit to Leeds.

'There is little work in this area anyway, but nothing at all for homeworkers. If there was any homework, I'd have found it and I'd be doing it. Things have definitely got worse over the recession. Lots of small firms have closed and we don't have the unions to back the workers anymore. The newer firms don't recognise the unions, so fighting has to be done by people on the shop floor who don't know their rights. There's no one to stand up for them. People have lost their voice.'

'I've got £6000 worth of machinery – my industrial machines – and they're sat here doing nothing. I do my own things, and a few little jobs for neighbours – but you can't charge your neighbours.'

Sheila has been making cards, gift boxes, and ribbon-wrapped soaps at home to keep busy. She usually makes these for family and for gifts but also makes some to order for a small charge.

She volunteers in a local Leonard Cheshire Care Home, and uses her knitting, crochet and craft skills to help them raise money. She also does car boot sales both to earn some money for herself and to raise funds for Leonard Cheshire. ♦

Please note:

This is an edited version of an interview which can be read in full in HWW Newsletter, No.7



SUPPLY CHAINS:

A Global Perspective

We all wear clothes or use things in everyday life that are made in different countries of the world. If we examine the labels or packaging of the things we buy, we can see they are made in Europe, Asia, Africa or other parts of the world.

People are becoming more aware about the conditions in which the products that we wear or use are made. But homeworking is still often invisible and many people are unaware that women working at home may have assembled their clothes or other products.

Over the last two decades an international movement of homeworkers has grown and as they have been organised, they have shown us the many different kinds of work they do.

The Homeworkers Worldwide mapping programme showed that textiles and clothing is still the most common type of work done by homeworkers. But there are many different types of work: machining garments; knitting, weaving or crochet; decorating textiles with embroidery or sequins; weaving carpets or fine silk cloth; hand sewing of tapestries.

Homeworking is also found in the electronics and engineering industries. Homeworkers assemble printed circuit boards; parts for cars or telephones; computer cables; electric light plugs or lighting components. In leather footwear, they sew the uppers of shoes, sometimes by hand sometimes by machine. They pack and assemble one thousand and one different types of products for sale by retailers.

There is also much homework linked to agricultural or forest products. Pepper

and cinnamon, for example, are grown wild but the processing of the spices are done at home. Cashew nuts have to be peeled and roasted before they are exported. Seaweed is dried by homeworkers for export and use in cosmetics. Many different kinds of grass, rushes or bamboo are used for weaving baskets, hats and other items.

Homework is growing because women working at home make up a flexible workforce. When there is work, they have an income. At other times, they have to make do with no income and rarely have any employment rights. With growing competition by big companies to push prices down, homework and other forms of informal work are on the increase.

At the same time, rural families cannot survive on subsistence agriculture and need a cash income. In many parts of the world, men and young women migrate to find waged labour, but married women stay behind to look after children and parents. They turn to homework to earn a cash income needed for health and education costs.

Homeworkers Worldwide supports the demands of homeworkers all over the world for a living wage, social security particularly for healthcare and old age pensions, and recognition of their rights as workers and for freedom of association, the right to organise.

As people become more aware of the extent of homework and the conditions of employment of homeworkers, they can support their demands and put pressure on retailers to recognise homeworkers in their supply chains, whether they are working in the UK or any other part of the world. ♦

Designer sweater is knitted by homeworkers in Scotland

Hair bobbles packed by homeworkers in UK

Girls top embroidered by homeworkers in India

Socks are made by a Greek firm in Turkey who subcontract packing to homeworkers in Bulgaria.

Jewellery is manufactured by a company in China and assembled by homeworkers in a village

Dummy assembled by homeworkers in Czech Republic

Mobile phone is kept in a leather case assembled by homeworkers in Istanbul.

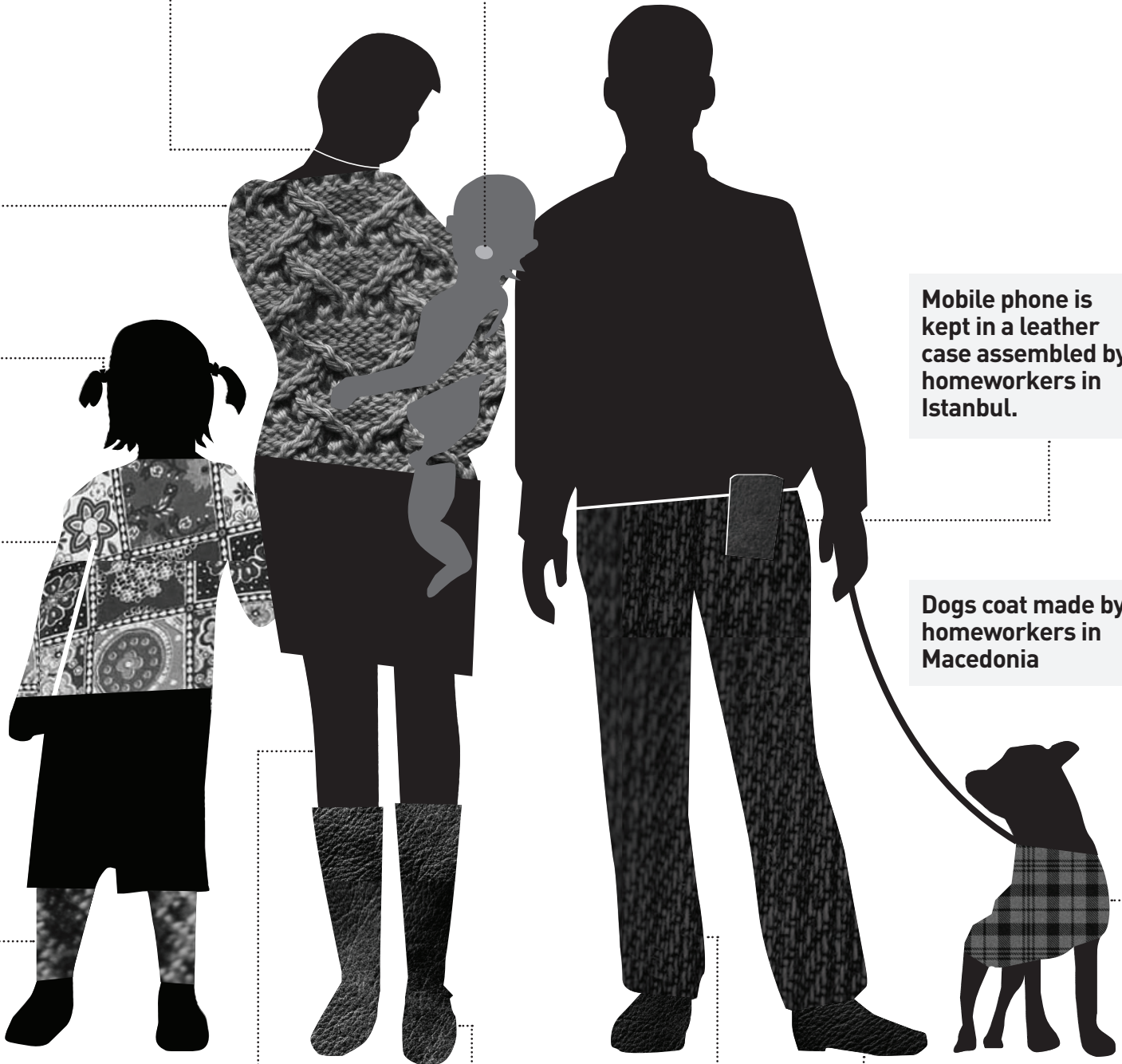
Dogs coat made by homeworkers in Macedonia

Tights are bought from a supermarket who subcontracted the packing to a company employing homeworkers

Boots made by homeworkers in Portugal

Trousers machined by homeworkers in UK

Uppers of shoes are hand-stitched by homeworkers in Bulgaria; assembled in a workshop in Bulgaria; sent to Italy and then exported to UK.



Employment Rights: In Law and In Practice

Employment status

One of the major problems facing homeworkers who are working for another person or business is that they may not be recognised as employees with full employment rights. Even if a homeworker is doing exactly the same job as someone working on site, and has done for many years, the law is unclear on who actually qualifies for employment rights and homeworkers frequently miss out.

The rules on who is self-employed, who is a worker (with a few basic rights) and who is an employee (with full employment rights) are complicated, unclear and unfair. Businesses can, and do, use this lack of clarity to deny homeworkers the rights they should in all fairness be entitled to.

For example, some homeworkers are falsely termed self-employed so their employers can get away with not paying them minimum wage. Others may be treated as workers, with basic rights including minimum wage but no protection against unfair dismissal or redundancy, no right to a written contract and no maternity rights.

One homeworker we spoke to explained the injustice of being denied employment rights, simply because she works at home. **'It annoys me that we don't get treated the same as those who work on site. If there is no work one week then you don't get paid anything and that is frustrating. We do our tax and insurance the same as everyone else but we don't get holiday pay. ... I'm doing a job like anyone else but why should we be treated differently just because we work at home?'**

Homeworkers are not the only vulnerable workers to be affected by this loophole in the law. Agency workers, construction workers and those on zero-hours contracts all face similar problems. Workers without employment status are in a precarious position with no job security – it can therefore be impossible for them to assert even the basic rights they may have for fear of losing their work.

The Fair Work Coalition, made up of voluntary and community organisations, faith groups and trade unions was launched in March 2010 to campaign for a revision of the law on employment status. The coalition, of which HWW is a member, is working to highlight the injustice experienced by workers in this position and demonstrate that there is an important link between people's employment status and their chances of being in working poverty.

The problems homeworkers face regarding uncertain employment status reflect more than just a specific injustice in UK employment law however. They are a manifestation of a wider prejudice that affects homeworkers all over the world. Too often the work homeworkers do is dismissed as not being 'real' work, and as a result, homeworkers are not recognised or respected as workers. Because their work is done at home it is hidden, and because they are women it is undervalued. One of key demands of homeworkers globally, therefore, is for rights and recognition as workers, and here in the UK that means a revision of the law on employment status. ♦

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The National Minimum Wage is now (2010-2011) £5.93 an hour.

If you think you might be earning less than this you can call the Pay and Work Rights Helpline on 0800 917 2368 or contact the Northern Homeworking Project.

Homeworkers and the national minimum wage

Homeworkers are legally entitled to the national minimum wage, indeed their specific inclusion in 1998's National Minimum Wage Act was a major victory for homeworking campaigners. However, ensuring homeworkers actually receive the minimum wage remains a challenge.

Although the Northern Homeworking Project has not conducted any large scale research into pay rates, we have spoken to a number of homeworkers who have confirmed piece rates that equate to pay well below the NMW. These include making handcrafted greetings cards for £4-5 per hour, sewing sports equipment for £3 an hour and sewing trousers for £1 an hour.

There are numerous reasons why employers of homeworkers continue to get away with paying criminally low wages. One is that the lack of available homework means homeworkers are willing to accept poor rates of pay and are reluctant to challenge their employers. Another is that some – though not all – homeworkers are working informally which places them in a precarious legal position. Contacting the state for help is not an option for homeworkers who are afraid that they themselves will be investigated and punished.

The use of unrealistic piece rates makes it easy for employers to disguise pay rates so they appear to match minimum wage, when in practice homeworkers are earning far less. The introduction of new rules on 'fair piece rates' in 2005 should have made this easier to detect, but our experience suggests few employers use the new system.

Finally a lack of support and organisation makes it extremely hard for homeworkers to challenge unfair conditions and low pay. Greater support is needed to give homeworkers the information, advice, solidarity and support they need to take on employers and enforce their right to the national minimum wage. ♦

Recommendation

Employment status to deliver fairness and clarity, making people have the same set of basic rights.

Support Services

Photo credit: HWW

Homeworkers are one of the most invisible and vulnerable groups of workers – they frequently lack information about their working rights, find it difficult to access the welfare system, and feel isolated and alone. Support and solidarity is essential to help them overcome these obstacles. Over the years the number of support services and local groups for homeworkers has waned leaving homeworkers more isolated than ever. This lack of support also poses a problem for policy makers. Without local support groups acting as a collective voice for homeworkers it is increasingly difficult to ensure homeworkers are able to participate in debates about policies that affect them.

When the local authority-funded Rochdale Homeworking Service was under threat in 2009 local homeworkers were determined to defend their service. The Homeworking Service provides support and advice to homeworkers across the borough through an advice line, outreach work, home visits and a Homeworkers' Support Group. The service provides information and guidance on employment rights, health and safety, and how to look for work and has helped numerous homeworkers access training opportunities. Over the years members of the Support Group have been involved in campaigning and lobbying activities, including addressing MPs at the House of Commons. When the Homeworking Service was threatened with closure, members of the Support Group organised

a campaign, lobbied councillors en masse and even threatened to go on hunger strike if the service was cut!

Their campaign was a success, and demonstrates two things – firstly how greatly the service was valued by the homeworkers, and secondly how their involvement in the Support Group had given them the campaigning experience, confidence and collective strength to take on their local council and win. Unfortunately, as government spending cuts continue to bite, the service is once again threatened with closure. The Rochdale homeworkers are organising to fight for their service once more.



Another possible source of support and solidarity for homeworkers is the trade union movement. One of the homeworkers we spoke to said she would have liked to have the support of a union when she was working from home. 'Even though I wanted to work at home I would still have paid my dues to have someone to stand up for me.' She had been a union member

when she worked onsite, but not at home, and now she believes the unions are 'just disappearing' as so much manufacturing work has been outsourced overseas.

We spoke to another union, Prospect, working in the telecommunications industry that had a specific strategy to support homeworkers. Whilst their members work mainly at a managerial level, and have far better pay and conditions than traditional industrial homeworkers, it was nonetheless interesting to note that some of their issues, such as isolation, were similar. The organiser we spoke to stressed that, even with all the advantages of communications technology, organising homeworkers was a challenge – particularly reaching non-members. One of their key initiatives was their 'Homealone' project which, rather than relying entirely on phone, email and 'virtual' socialising encourages homebased volunteer co-ordinators to arrange social events for members to meet in real life.

Support can take a number of forms and has in the past included support groups, campaigning organisations, local-authority funded projects and trade unions. What is important is that homeworkers can access information and advice, can meet with other homeworkers to tackle isolation and build solidarity, and can use the strength of this solidarity to speak out on issues that concern them. ♦









HWW Recommendation

Greater support for homeworkers is needed at a local level, to tackle isolation, build solidarity and feed into national campaigning.



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recommendations

- 
Revise the law on employment status to deliver fairness and clarity, ensuring that all working people have the same set of basic rights.
- 
Increase the availability of free and affordable childcare.
- 
The earnings disregard for calculating benefits should be set at a level high enough to make a real difference to those in irregular work.
- 
The government should calculate benefits for the self-employed based on actual earnings (after expenses) rather than hours worked.
- 
Universal Credit should not be paid in a single payment per household, but shared between couples to promote equality. There should be an individual rather than a household earnings disregard.
- 
The government should not introduce a system of welfare 'conditionality' that does not take into account the caring responsibilities that limit the options of women in particular.
- 
Grant asylum seekers the right to work and ensure that permission to work remains for people whose claim for asylum is refused, but who are unable to return home through no fault of their own.
- 
Greater support for homeworkers is needed at a local level, to tackle isolation, build solidarity and feed into national campaigning.

IN CONCLUSION

Throughout our research we have spoken to homeworkers about the problems they face as they try to earn a living from home. Here we set out proposals to address some of these problems. The following recommendations are not comprehensive – homeworkers raised a huge range of issues during this project and we have not been able to address them all in this brief summary. Our recommendations simply highlight some key steps we believe the government should take in order to make it less difficult for women to earn a decent living working at home.

NEXT STEPS

Whilst we have focussed specifically on homeworkers throughout this project – and believe it is essential for homeworkers to have an independent voice to raise concerns specific to homeworking – we recognise that many of the issues this report raises are common to other women in low paid and precarious work. We therefore intend to build on this project by linking up with other organisations concerned with issues of women and work to build a network for research, advocacy and campaigning around these issues.



HomeWorkers
hww Worldwide

Homeworkers Worldwide (HWW) exists to support and build solidarity with homemaker organisations all over the world. HWW works to make homebased workers visible both through our own campaigning and advocacy work and in partnership with other organisations. HWW supports the demands of homebased worker organisations for recognition and rights as workers.

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Northern Homeworking Project

In 2010 HWW established the Northern Homeworking Project (NHP). The NHP, based in Northern England exists to ensure UK homeworkers have a voice. We work with UK homeworkers to map the different kinds of work women are doing at home and to identify their main concerns. We work together with homeworkers to campaign on their key demands and lobby other organisations to incorporate these demands into their own work on poverty and livelihoods.

For specific information on the UK project please contact Nesta:

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