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Switches and Stitches

Unpacking Home-based Work

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‘The misery of being exploited by capitalists is nothing compared to the misery of not being exploited at all.’

—Joan Robinson

The first *India Exclusion Report* explores ‘decent work’ as a public good analysing its many characteristics as well as the different ways in which one can be excluded from it. The report defines decent work as ‘a political choice in which employment, income and social protection can be achieved without compromising rights at work’ (Kompier et al., 2014). In this context the report uses home-based work as an example of informal employment in which workers are made vulnerable by the invisibility of the work, the lack of labour law protection to govern employment contracts and social security, and the place of work, i.e., ‘the home’ resulting in unwaged family labour including child labour and a lack of any kind of supervision. This chapter will build on this understanding of women home-based workers by focussing on specific areas of exploitation and vulnerability arrived at through a combination of primary and secondary research on the subject.

We will use the ILO (2013) definition of home-based workers to include all workers who carry out remunerative work within their homes or in an adjacent location or in any location that is not the workplace of the employer.² Home-based workers

can be further categorised as (i) self-employed workers (ii) homeworkers and (iii) employees differentiated through type of contract, nature of remuneration, means of production as indicated in Table 1. In this chapter the term homebased workers will be used to refer only to the first two categories of workers ie. Self employed workers and homeworkers. While the primary fieldwork includes conversations with both categories, the literature will focus on the latter category of homeworkers. It is also important to note that there are other categories of work that are non-remunerative that get masked within these categories such as unpaid care work, and contributing family labour which can exist with both arrangements of self-employment and homework.

Insights in the chapter will largely be drawn from primary field research conducted in Mangolpuri and Mangeram Park (Buddhvihar) in North West Delhi in 2017. The fieldsite was chosen based on discussions with members from the All India Democratic Women’s Association (AIDWA) and findings from a survey conducted by them in 2008 which mentions a rich diversity of home-based work in multiple industries in this region including garments, electronics, footwear (leather). We then partnered with AIDWA and another organisation, Balika Trust,³ to help facilitate our research. The different approach of the two organisations, where one works through mobilising union membership, advocating for home-based workers to be recognised

as workers and be provided social security cover while the other works to improve their access to finance and linkage with the market—gave us an opportunity to study two different models of engaging with home-based work. This was fortunate as our aim was to study the spectrum of home-based work in a particular geographic zone, and understand what factors determine the work home-based workers ‘choose’, observe the work, working conditions, and learn how they balance their time between paid and unpaid work, the extent of individual and collective agency as well as systems of control. We also wanted to capture subjective experiences and reflections, i.e., the way home-based workers perceive their own work.

In order to achieve the above-mentioned objective we employed a mixed method approach in this study. We first conducted a door-to-door survey in a small area of both fieldsites, stopping to fill forms only where we found members of the household engaged in homework. The areas were chosen with the help of field partners—AIDWA in Mangeram Park and Baliga Trust in Mangolpuri—on the basis of the concentration and variety of home-based work in these areas. At each household, we asked if anyone in the house does homework or has done homework in the past five years. If there were multiple home-based workers in the same household, we filled separate forms for each. The census yielded a sample of 80 respondents. We then chose 15 respondents to interview in greater detail.

Through the survey we were able to capture the basic demographic profile of home-based workers, description of the work through a series of tasks, information pertaining to wages/income. Out of the 80 respondents, 19 were from the General category, 15 belonged to the Other Backward Castes (OBCs), 17 were SCs, and 29 respondents either didn't know or didn't reveal their caste identity. The 80 respondents were mixed in terms of their religious affiliations: 24 respondents identified themselves as Muslims and 56 belonged to the Hindu community.

Within this sample we found more than 40 different tasks or types of home-based work, some of them contributing to the production of the same good or product. For instance, we found that in the assembling of switches, there are two tasks that have to be carried out. While some of these homeworkers do hammering work on metal plates, others fix springs between two internal components of the switches. The two tasks require a different set of skills and are valued independently of the other. We have therefore counted them as separate tasks or forms of home-based work. Examples of other kinds of home-based work that we came across are stitching and embroidery, assembling components of plugs, bulbs, bead and glass work, making *rakhis* (wristbands), making and adorning bangles and *bindis* (an accessory worn in the middle of the forehead), rubber cutting, keychain and brush-making, sticking price tags to be put on branded garments, assembling and packaging toys.

Alongside the diverse kinds of work, we also found there to be a range of work arrangements. We found women running or working in self-employed units of production; some would simultaneously act as subcontractors and work as homeworkers on a piece-rate basis while others would be working only as subcontractors giving out work to other women. We also found a diversity of commodity chains; some ending in large international companies such as Zara, others in national ones such as Lijjat Papad, and a few small chains where commodities being sold in the local market were also being assembled at home, such as toys and stickers.

Respondents expressed a multitude of feelings with regard to the nature of their work. Some focussed on the lack of alternative work options at better rates, others on the positive aspects of flexible work, still others felt this to not be work at all. At the same time, they raised some common concerns such as the low piece rate/wages, the precarity of the work in terms of delayed orders, delayed payment, inadequate supply of raw materials, costs of working

at home: lack of space, personally bearing the costs of electricity and water, and so on. Through our interviews and the study of the relevant literature, we found out about other common problems such as lack of social security provisions, little or no scope for collective bargaining, and health hazards. Many of these concerns, shared by other unorganised workers in the informal economy, contribute to exacerbating the vulnerability and exploitation of women home-based workers. Since our primary research was based on in-depth interviews with a very small sample of home-based workers, we are not claiming any of our findings to be representative in any way, merely indicative. All names in the chapter have been changed to allow a degree of anonymity.

The chapter focuses on select characteristics of home-based work namely the lack of visibility, sexual division of workers, space of the home as a workspace, piece-rate payments, lack of bargaining power, difficulty in organising, and lack of control over the production process as some issues that came across in our primary research as contributing factors in the exploitation of women home-based workers. Towards the end of the chapter, we also try to place home-based workers within the existing policy framework to better understand their exclusion and scope for representation. Through the recommendations, the chapter will also explore what the role of the State should be in improving the living and working conditions of home-based workers.

Sexual Division of Work

While making an argument that just conditions of work for women is a public good in itself, the second *India Exclusion Report* builds on this analysis by focussing on gender discrimination in employment (Lahiri, Sethia, Bose, Jha, Kompier & Mander, 2015). The report makes the argument that women are not simply excluded from employment

but are often ‘unjustly included’ or as Ghosh and Chandrasekhar (2014) put it, ‘excluded through incorporation in the market’ as can be seen from the concentration of women in low quality, precarious employment. The very nature of home-based work is predicated on the fact that women are tied to the home because of domestic responsibilities and have limited opportunities for work outside of the home.

This sexual division of work is embedded in the very nature of home-based work. Neethi P (2014) writes that the sexual division of work spaces where the labour of women both as ‘housewives’ and as producers of goods at their home are undermined, reinforces the systems of control that women have historically been pushed into. Under home-based works the domestic space combines the paid and unpaid work of women labour. Maria Mies uses the term ‘housewifization’⁴ to make the same point (Mies, 2012).

The sexual division of labour leads to unrecognised and a precarious ‘sexual division of spaces of work’ in the context of homeworkers, who in some cases are doing it to ensure survival and in other cases, they are in their own words, ‘doing it to pass their free time so that they don’t chit-chat with other women and roam around when they are idle’. This assertion is certainly a result of the understanding of the role of women as housewives as opposed to men who occupy positions of power both inside and outside the household. Hence this gendered workforce is struggling to balance its time and space between producing industrial outputs and household work. The growing influence of capitalism and patriarchy has been instrumental in the expansion of home-based workers as part of a broader employer’s assault on the working class (Herod, 1991). This spatial organisation of capital was a result of the construction of new relationships between domestic space and work through fundamental restructuring of space at a regional, national and urban scale that capital sought during the 1970s and 1980s (Neethi P., 2014). The

principle of 'living room as factory' and bringing paid labour into the home influences the existing social relations of gender (ibid.; Hsiung, 1996).

Many respondents expressed that they feel the work to be insignificant and supplementary. For instance, they shared that they do home-based work whenever they get free from other household chores; they do this work while chatting, while watching TV, etc. Apart from the cultural perception of women's role, it is this flexible nature of the work and the space they are carried out in, that make them internalise the idea that they aren't 'labourers' but they do it to simply pass their free time. Their husbands and other members of the family too do not recognise their work as a work of labour and the role of home-based workers as economically active agents.

In our sample survey we came across a predominance of women in home-based work. Where we did come across men working at home, this was largely in situations of self-employment carried out together with other members of the household. What was interesting to observe in these scenarios was the gendered division of labour where women and men were engaged in employment together.

For the past 20 years, Binduji and her family have been designing and packaging bindis out of their home, both to be sold directly in the market, and to be supplied on a piece rate basis. While the men design the bindis, the women cut the sheets, categorise the bindis and put them in packets. We were told that the men had received training in a factory. It is also the men who purchase the raw material from the market. Similarly in Sitaji's small pants manufacturing unit, her son uses a machine to embroider the elastic, while her daughter helps her in packaging work.⁵

In both these cases we found that while men and women are both involved in the process of manufacturing, men are the decision makers. They

are responsible for the work characterised as more skilled or technical while women take on the role of helpers. It is also men who negotiate the price of goods in the market.

Social restrictions don't prohibit women from working; it prohibits them from working outside the home. The myth that women don't work is upheld by hiding their work from public view (Prügl, 1996). Social norms which dictate that women shouldn't go out and work and shouldn't deal with unfamiliar men reinforce such a belief system and hence further isolate home-based workers from each other, which in turn reduces their collective bargaining power.

We also observed a stigma attached to home-based work. Women who were involved in home-based work were not ready to speak about their work and it was only from their neighbours that we heard about home-based work being carried out in their homes. While in some instances this was heightened by fear of losing work, we were also told by others in the neighbourhood that some deny carrying out home-based work because they consider it humiliating and don't want themselves to be perceived as being associated with any sort of industrial outwork. As this was a sensitive area, we did not manage to spend the necessary amount of time to interrogate this further. However, we felt this to be an important issue especially in understanding the subjective experience of home-based work.

Invisibilisation

Home-based workers remain invisible to State's policies and programmes as well as to the public eye. They don't feature anywhere in the popular understanding of productive labour. Since most women home-based workers work out of their home, what work they do, and the effort and time spent are not noticeable.

Further, lack of a clear-cut employer-employee relationship as well as lack of a designated place of work adds to the problem of invisibility of home-based workers (NCEUS, 2009). The 55th round of National Sample Survey (NSS) for the first time included certain questions on the type of enterprise to which workers belonged, place of work, nature of contract and mode of operation in case of non-agricultural activities. While the type of enterprise and place of work questions were retained in NSS 61st Round Employment and Unemployment Survey, 2004–5, questions about the nature of contracts and mode of operation aimed at identifying subcontract work were dropped. However, these questions were reintroduced in the 66th round, 2009–10 (Tripathi & Mishra, 2013). This dropping and reintroduction of critical information creates a data gap and makes it difficult to visualise the trend of percentage of homeworkers in India. Also, the 2004–5 and 2011–12 Employment and Unemployment Surveys did not have data elements for identifying subcontracted homeworkers as a distinct category of home-based workers. There was also a problem in classifying home-based workers who are not self-employed but wage workers (Raveendran, Sudarshan, & Vanek, 2013).

A report on the statistics and trends of home-based workers in India by WIEGO (n.d.) highlights that during the 12-year period between 1999–2000 and 2011–2012, the number of home-based workers increased significantly, from 23.3 million in 1999–2000 to 31.0 million in 2004–5 and 37.4 million in 2011–12. Home-based workers are thus a significant and increasing part of the Indian labour force, comprising 15 per cent of the total non-agricultural workforce in 1999–2000, 15.9 per cent in 2004–5, and 15.2 per cent in 2011–12 (Raveendran, Sudarshan, & Vanek, 2013).

Table 2 points out that the percentage of female home-based workers between the 55th and 61st rounds increased in both rural and urban areas. However, the percentage of female home-based

workers between the 61st and 68th rounds decreased in rural areas and increased in urban areas. On the other hand, the percentage of male home-based workers in the 12-years period constantly decreased in the rural areas and increased by 1 percentage point in the urban areas between the 55th and 68th rounds of the employment and unemployment survey.

	55th Round (1999–2000)		61st Round (2004–2005)		68th Round (2011–2012)	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Rural	14.2	40.7	13.3	43.8	12.7	32.8
Urban	8.2	26	8.4	29.4	9.4	30.5

Source: Home-Based Workers in India: Statistics and Trends (WIEGO, n.d.)

The above data which is taken from various rounds of the employment and unemployment survey report only captures data for workers who are above the age of 15. However, our field observation suggests that there are many children under the age of 15 years who are active and productive agents of home-based work. This significant section of workers isn't captured by the report prepared by the government of India. Therefore, the above figures are an underestimation of the actual percentage of home-based workers in India. Unless this gap is filled correctly, it is difficult to frame a holistic policy for these invisible home-based workers, of which both women and children are active producers of industrial outputs.

Piece-rate Wages

One way in which the exploitation of home-based workers—in this case specifically homeworkers—is carried out is through the system of payment in piece-rate. The piece-rate in countries like India tends to

be very low given the surplus labour and lack of bargaining power thereof. Further, the homemaker is dependent on the middle person/contractor for fixing the piece-rate as well as its payment. In our own research we found subcontractors fixing different rates even where the same task was being carried out; rates were based on the relationships homemakers had with the contractor. We spoke to members of a household where the contractor was offering different rates to the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law (higher to the mother-in-law because of a personal relationship). Another respondent, Malaji, admitted that because of her expertise in bead work, her speed in stringing them into necklaces, bracelets and her relationship with the subcontractors, she had negotiated a rate of Rs 7/ bunch whereas other women were paid only Rs 5/ bunch.

We also found that the piece rate can also drop; sometimes this is enough for people to look for other work while at other times there are other factors which determine whether workers continue to carry out specific work. In the case of Sheelaji, one of our respondents, where her children get paid for sorting and packing stickers, we were informed that the rate had gone down from Rs 2 per sticker page to Re 1 per page because more people had started to engage in this work. Despite this, she did not seem to bode any ill will against the contractor. She explained to us that the contractor does not have the budget currently to increase the rate or else he would have. A single contractor provides work to the 11–12 households on the same street. Furthermore if any stickers remain after the pages are complete or if there are defective stickers, they are allowed to decorate their own notebooks with them, in other words, create their own 'projects'. In this case payment is on need basis: whenever Sheelaji or the children need money the contractor makes it available to them. In contrast to this, when we asked why the *moti mala* work had closed down in Mangolpuri we were told that the rate had

declined and the effort was no longer worth the while, especially keeping in mind the strain on the eyes and the already poor rates to begin with.

We also found factors that influence an increase in rate. One is when there is some technological change which leads to an added cost to the worker of gas/electricity, for example. To make up for this there is a token increase of 50 paise or less. For instance, Sajdaji, who packages heating elements, informed us that after 10 years of doing the same work, recently the rate had increased from Rs 1.25 to Rs 1.70 because instead of sealing the packages with wax, electricity was now required to seal them. The change in rate is supposed to make up for added costs. There were also some kinds of work we came across where every two or three years the rate is increased at a slow but steady pace. Assembling of bulbs is one such example.

There is no uniformity in how rates are revised for different products and once again, a lot seems to depend on the subcontractor's current circumstances and his/her relationship with the homemakers. It was observed that contractors assert control through deferred and delayed payments. We found it was common for payments to be 15 days or a month late and in certain cases up to 3–4 months late. Again relationships with the contractor count for everything because the worker has to trust that the payment will eventually be made. For this reason we were informed that even when there are outside contractors offering a higher rate, homemakers prefer a lower rate where there is familiarity and continuity. Mehrotra and Biggeri (2007) refer to this as high opportunity costs of change.

We were also interested in how homemakers themselves perceive current rates, and the process of fixing and revising them. We found that workers judge the fairness of the price based on the effort they put in, the time it takes to complete a task, and the number of people in the family who can

Table 3: List of Work with Basis of Wage and Wage Rates				
Work	Basis	Wage Rate/ Piece Rate	Per Day Earning for Household	Remark
Pocket stitching and pant stitching	Per piece	75 paise per piece	Rs 70	Pocket stitching work includes; piping, tattoo and stitching work and the pant stitching work includes 2 side and 1 inner stitches.
Slippers' thread cutting work	Piece	25 paise for a pair of slippers	Rs 25	Single woman worker cuts 100 pairs per day.
Toy packaging work	Piece	Rs 17 for 1000 pieces	Rs 9 (approx)	Woman worker packages 500 pieces per day. Children and other family members also help. Children and other family members also help.
Bindi designing	Per dheet (Per sheet of bindi with 640 bindis)	Rs 40 per sheet	-	The work is carried out by 5 members of the household.
Bindi packaging	Per sheet	Rs 10 for 144 sheet	Rs 300	Entire household is involved in this work (it is a different household than mentioned above)
Punching down and packaging of heater element	Per box	Rs 1.70	Rs 56 (approx)	10 heater elements per box. Single woman worker finishes 100 boxes in 2-3 days.
Switch making/ assembling work	Per kg	Rs 150 per kg	Rs 50	-
Packaging of designer shapes (stickers)	Per packet	Rs 13 for 7 big packets	Rs 100 (approx)	Each small packet has 6 small designer and mixed shapes/ symbols. For 7 big packets (with 16 smaller packets) they used to get Rs 13. Mostly children are involved in this work.
Moti-taar work which is used in soldering tools as a conductor	Per piece	Rs 10 for 100 pieces	Rs 30	Single woman worker does 300 pieces per day.
Papad rolling	Kgs	Rs 35 per kg	-	Woman and her daughter (after her school) do the work together.
Assembling bulb components	Piece	Rs 100 per 1000 piece	Rs 200-250	Both husband and wife together make 2000-2500 pieces per day.

Work	Basis	Wage Rate/ Piece Rate	Per Day Earning for Household	Remark
Moti mala/Bead work/Necklace making work	Piece	Rs 7 per piece	Rs 170–200	This is for one necklace with 20 threads.
Cutting soles of shoes	Piece	Rs 120 for 1000 pieces	-	-
Sticking round paper sheets inside bottle caps	Per piece	Rs 25 per 1000 caps	-	Per day information not available as this work has stopped.
Knitting sweaters	Half kg	Rs 400	-	Per day information not available as the women stopped knitting sweaters.
Shoe/slipper sticker cutting work	Per piece	Rs 30 for 1000 piece	Rs 60	Single woman worker makes 2000 pieces per day.
Shorts stitching work	Per piece	50 paise per piece	Rs 200–250	-
Bangle designing work	per box	Rs 8 per box	Rs 50–60	There are 12 bangles in one box and she makes 6–7 boxes per day.

Source: Prepared by the authors from the information gathered during the fieldwork.

help either in the piecework or domestic chores (so other members of the household have more free time). Where respondents have chosen to shift to a different kind of piece-work it has been because they anticipate a better rate, a regular increase in the rate, and a regular supply of the work.

The discussion on wages does not apply to self-employed workers as they have direct access to the market, and are in control of pricing. Homeworkers on the other hand are found largely in the manufacturing sector, part of a putting-out system of production that exists within both international and domestic value chains. There are two kinds of industrial subcontracting: (i) horizontal, whereby the status of the homemaker is closer to that of an self-employed worker, and (ii) vertical, which are based on relationships of dependence. Approximately 70 per cent of homeworkers fall within the category of vertical subcontracting

(NCEUS, 2007). The exploitation of homeworkers by contractors or by local employers can be understood as the first stage of exploitation within the commodity chain (McCormick & Hubert, 2002).

A comparison with Delhi's minimum wage for unskilled workers, which is Rs 538/day (Office of the Labour Commissioner Delhi Government, 2018) in Table 3 will show how exploitative this system of remuneration is: We received different responses to the questions related to earning. In some cases we got the exact number of hours they spend per day on the work and their per-day earning; in other cases respondents couldn't clearly calculate the exact number of hours they devoted per day on doing the contractual home-based work. Therefore to maintain consistency between the data gathered, we averaged out the earnings of households on a per day basis in which some of the

households had one woman working and some had more than one persons involved in the homebased work (the number of hours varied between 5 to 14 hours per day). We understand that this still doesn't give the exact picture of the per day (for 8 hours of work) earnings of home-based workers in the range of works that we were able to capture. However, this gives us some idea of the per day earnings of the workers in the listed works and the depressing state of wages in home-based works. The indicated family wages are also characteristic of 'piece-rate' work, as the focus is on the commodity and not on the individual working.

Belinda Leach (1998) writes about how piece-rate payment is an effective form of control over a dispersed workforce. Speed and intensity of production are automatically ensured as the homemaker has the incentive to work faster and longer to increase productivity. There is a constant pressure to complete as many pieces as possible and no fixed hours to limit the time spent on the work. In addition there is no method of calculating overheads or standards to govern the same. The homemaker is not paid for any activities aside from the manufacturing, such as for transport, or the costs of picking up any new skills. Last, since the unit of production is the piece and not the worker, the piece-rate often hides the labour of more than one individual. Payment is related to the piece, not the number of people labouring. It is for this reason that child labour becomes difficult to detect in these situations (refer to the section on children home-based workers).

Bargaining Power and Collectivisation

Even in comparison to other unorganised sector workers, home-based workers are at a serious disadvantage with regard to scope and ability to bargain for a better wage rate, or better conditions of work. While trade can bring workers together,

the competition for market share especially for self-employed workers can push them apart. They are isolated within the home, with limited opportunities to interact with other home-based workers. When we would enquire about the other kinds of home-based work in the area, even a couple of streets down we were told that this wasn't their business and so they were not aware. We found in our interviews that a lack of interaction results in a lack of information about the market. The nature of the commodity/value chain is such that the levels of intermediaries make it impossible for home-based workers to access their employers or even acquire knowledge about who they are producing for. The only agent with whom they have contact is the subcontractor on whom they depend completely for their livelihood and income. We asked each of the respondents whether they had attempted to bargain for a better rate with the contractors. Many answered that they had but to no avail as the contractors claim it is outside their control.

The other kind of bargaining power that is important to analyse is that which is applied within the household. Where home-based workers are women, we asked, how does this employment, management of time, additional income (no matter how minimal) impact intra-household negotiations? We asked the respondents in our study what they spend their earnings on and got a range of answers which varied depending on the overall income of the household as well as the role of the woman as a primary or secondary income earner. In households where respondents claimed they were working out of a desire to, and not out of need, they indicated that earnings were spent on their children or on themselves, i.e., on items that would otherwise not be prioritised. Alikoc writes of this in the context of Ghazi, where women see their earnings as 'pin money', or as money they have autonomy over (Alikoc, 2013). Naila Kabeer (2000) writes that this additional income can allow for a degree of economic agency and increased

Bulb Production in Mangolpuri

Roshni is 38 years old. Together with her husband Surya, she assembles bulbs on a piece-rate basis. Originally from Bihar, Roshni was born in Mangolpuri and has helped assemble bulbs since a young age as it was a means to make some extra money after school. For the past fifteen years, ever since they got married, she has assembled bulbs on a contractual basis.

Their eldest daughter is eleven, their other children four and five years old respectively. We were informed that the children study at a government school because private school is expensive and in government schools they get the uniform and school supplies for free. They used to own a place before in I block but had to sell the place and are now living on rent. It is clear from the small size and emptiness of their dwellings that the couple is living hand to mouth, a fact they do not deny. 'There are days we've gone to bed hungry. Following notebandi for instance there was no work for more than a month and a half,' Roshni declared.

Surya used to cut glass in a bulb factory before. 'Till ten-twelve years ago, there were at least fifty families running bulb production units just in L Block Mangolpuri,' Surya detailed. He was paid a monthly wage of Rs 2000. However, when bulbs from China started trickling into the market, the local factories began to shut down. The cost of one bulb produced in Mangolpuri was 75 paisa compared to the 50 paisa bulb produced in China. 'Gas is expensive here, and labour cheap in China. Where we could produce 100 bulbs in an hour, China was producing a 1000 in the same time. The factories closing meant less hard work but also less earnings. The factories supported a lot of employment,' they explained.

Together husband and wife manage to earn a monthly income of Rs 7000–8000 when there is work. On a daily basis they assemble between 2000–2500 bulbs at the rate of Rs 100 for every 1000 bulbs. They prepare the 'masala' or chemical used to fix the components of the bulb. Roshni cuts extra wire from the filaments while Surya solders the bulb to the holder. The two have also started their own unit on the side where they procure the glass for the bulbs, and holders separately, assemble the bulbs and sell them at the marketplace, though this was not easy to establish: 'We don't have credit, and are not educated. It is difficult for us to navigate the market where people will always see us as labourers, not as business people,' they explained.

There are however families in Mangolpuri that function only as self-employed units, assembling bulbs and selling them directly in the market. We found that many of the families in this line of work used to in fact own the bulb factories when different components of the bulb were manufactured in Mangolpuri. Ramaji's family is one such self-employed unit. He and his five brothers used to own a factory together where they manufactured the glass, cap and filament components of bulbs.

After the factory shut down, Ramaji and his wife started assembling bulbs at home to sell in the market. He explained that making the necessary connections to survive is difficult and he is only able to do so because he knows the market. Together, husband, wife and their six children put together 2000–2500 bulbs; the children prepare the masala, cut the extra filaments from the bulbs and package while Ramaji and his wife solder. The separate components are purchased from Moti Nagar and sold at a shop in Karol Bagh. Ramaji has to deliver the bulbs to the shop on a daily basis.

significance within the household. However, she points out that understanding how this influences intra-household power relationships is more complicated than understanding who controls and manages finances. It is also important to understand the 'subjective meanings and values that women accord to their earnings'.

In their essay on the impact of patterns of migration on home-based work, Sharma and Kunduri (2016) write that workers need to be viewed as 'social agents', migrants both in origin as well as in destination because of how embedded they are in local networks. We found this to be true of Mangolpuri and Mangeram Park as the home-based workers here appeared to be socially segregated on the basis of the state from which they had migrated. It is these local networks in which information is shared and organisation is possible. Sanyal (1991) builds on this understanding when he writes that location and proximity form an important axis of commonality for self-employed workers and that instances of organising often take place in the neighbourhood around cultural practices and identity-based associations. At the same time he notes that ethnic and religious differences can also be divisive and prevent organisations from forming. The case of Mangeram Park gives us a snapshot of how inter-community differences can be a reason for women to not come together to fight for their collective rights. It was observed that most of the Muslim women in Mangeram Park were involved in assembling the internal mechanism of a switch. These women originally belong to either UP or Bihar and there has always been a tension between these two communities. The friction between these two groups of women deters them to come together and discuss their issues and strategise their collective action against the exploitation. In another part of Mangeram Park however, we observed the opposite phenomenon where under the umbrella of AIDWA, women who are trade union members have mobilised other women home-based workers

to collectively bargain for a better piece-rate for switch-making. The collective has also been able to assert itself because the switch assembly work has carried on for more than 30 years in this part of Mangeram Park with a single family contracting out the work. We observed that having an outside organisation facilitate can help in getting collectives started. In Mangolpuri, Baliga Trust has formed several self-help groups primarily for the purpose of facilitating micro-credit. However, these groups have also become important networks for sharing information about possible work opportunities. Many of the women we surveyed were either members of an SHG or had found out about work opportunities from members of SHGs residing in the neighbourhood.

Workspace and Time

During our fieldwork we found that a number of women had engaged in two or more forms of home-based work. A key factor that contributed to a shift in the kind of work was a change in residence. The spatially segregated nature of home-based work in Mangolpuri became clear when we were told that block R for example is where one can locate people who design bindis and in block S and T, women who make papads. We found this to be true and conducted our sampling in accordance with the understanding that different galis housed different kinds of home-based work. Of the women we interviewed many were renters not owners, who had moved around within Mangolpuri, the lack of a fixed address adding to the precarious and impermanent nature of their work.

It became important to map Mangolpuri and understand its geography. We also realised that an understanding of Mangolpuri's history would be equally beneficial in trying to track how home-based work had changed over the years: what forms of work had disappeared over time and why? What new forms of work had emerged in

their place? What kind of impact had the changes in Mangolpuri's production history had on current home-based workers?

It has been established that home-based work can take place in any location that is not the place of work of the employer. However, where women workers are concerned, the location is more often than not, the 'home' (refer to section on invisibilisation for categories of location of work).

Feminists have long challenged the public-private bifurcation of work, where waged labour taking place in a defined workspace that is not the home is accorded a higher value. The private sphere of the home becomes representative of leisure, the space where labour is reproduced. In realising the value of unwaged housework and care work of women, without which the productivity of waged labour would suffer, feminists have sought to redefine concepts such as 'work' and 'labour'. This is further complicated when the home also becomes the place of paid labour, i.e., a workplace in the traditional sense.

Both the state and the employer are responsible for the rights of workers in a formal workplace. The costs of basic amenities and any tools of the trade are borne by the employer who is also responsible for ensuring occupational safety. The state can be held responsible for ensuring that conditions of work are humane and that labour law is adhered to. When the home becomes the place of work, the burden shifts entirely from the employer and the state, onto the worker. Many of the homes we visited during the study had become akin to storage units as work had temporarily stopped because of the confusion surrounding GST. Costs of amenities such as electricity and water and tools such as scissors or hammers were being borne by the women. In a couple of instances we found that when work is supplied for the first time, contractors provide necessary tools; however, when these are worn out or if they break then the women need to

purchase new tools for themselves. We did not in our own research come across cases of hazardous substances being used in production though there is abundant literature on the subject (refer to the section on health hazards for details).

As we have seen, home-based work is remunerated on a piece-rate basis as opposed to time-rate. In his writing Marx explains that 'time wage' is a converted form of the value of labour power. A working day sums up necessary labour time with surplus labour time. An extended working day is how capitalists extract additional surplus labour that is in effect unpaid. Fulya Alikoc (2013) in her article on home-based workers in Ghazi applies the same theory to homeworkers, arguing that the piece-rate payments and discontinued nature of the work make it difficult to establish how many hours are spent on necessary labour, surplus labour, and domestic/reproductive labour respectively. We asked each of our respondents to recollect how they divide up their time in a single day. While most were able to provide a vague sense of the hours spent on domestic tasks such as cooking, washing clothes, getting children ready for school, cleaning the house as well as on the paid labour, none were completely sure; the reason is the extent to which their paid work is merged with their other chores.

We are not making the argument that there was a uniformity in how respondents appeared to prioritise their time. Daminiji recalled the day by structuring it around her domestic chores, mentioning that she spends only the two to three hours that remain on the paid piece-rate work. Sitaji however, who runs a tailoring unit, made it clear that she puts in as many hours as necessary to complete the supply of work for that day, even if it means staying up till 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning. The time spent on the paid work is also dependent on the number of members of the household who either act as 'helpers', also called contributing family members, or who carry some of the burden of the domestic chores.

What then happens to the concept of leisure? Many of the women we spoke to said that they engage in paid work to pass the time, colloquially referred to as 'time-pass'. They claimed that having completed their chores they find they have time on their hands. Home-based work gives them something to do during this 'free' time, despite the abysmally low rates at which they are being employed. This view of work is intrinsically linked to how the work is valued, as something extra. When we interviewed Sajdaji, she expressed concern that the contractor would get into trouble. She said, 'this is his career, it is real work for him. It's not the same for me.'

Contracts and Relationships; Agency and Control Over Production

This section analyses the position of different actors in the petty commodity production chain and examines the asymmetry of power between contractors, subcontractors and homeworkers and their husbands and children. There is no absolute agency of an individual as most of the human pursuits involve other participating agents (Bandura, 2006). However, the part of the production system, which engenders the informal institutional framework, constrains the agency and control of the home-based workers over the production system.

Our observations from the field suggest that different actors use their agency in different ways at different points of time and space. In this section we are discussing in detail different instances in which the asymmetry of power plays out within the homemaker cluster: the ways in which women's labour is controlled; what kind of work obligations do homeworkers experience; and how different social relationships shape their subjective realities. In order to inform ourselves better on the conditions of homeworkers it is extremely

crucial to understand and discuss the nature of contract, the experiences of homeworkers and their implications for the agency of the female workforce. It is only through confronting the diverse obligations which women experience that we can comprehend their conditions as homeworkers (Allen & Wolkowitz, 1986). We are attempting in the following paragraphs to highlight the various aspects of the lives of homeworkers in the site of observation.

1) Shifting contractors

There are numerous cases where we found that the constant availability of work for homeworkers is contingent on the fact that a contractor is extant in the same region. The work is taken from them if the contractor leaves the area and shifts to another location, sometimes with pending payments. For instance, Malaji used to do bindi designing work 8–10 years ago, which she did for about 4–5 years. She had to leave this work because her contractor left the city and moved to Punjab. Similarly, Sheetalji, who does shoe/slipper cutting work, had left this work for 3–4 months to do beadwork because of the relatively low rate of the former, but unfortunately the contractor left the area and shifted to Noida. On the other hand, the contractor for whom Rinaji used to do *moti-mala* (bead) work, ran away with her pending payments.

These are few examples that highlight the skewed power relation between a homemaker and a contractor and how it adds to the existing vulnerability of a homemaker when a contractor either runs away with pending payments or moves to another location: no direct employment, no formal contract, unregulated work relations and lack of scope to unionise are reasons behind their powerlessness and lack of autonomy, and hence they limit their ability to influence their own circumstances.

2) Technology and women's control over production system

When on one hand advancements of technology have facilitated the outsourcing of industrial homework, in many cases it has deprived home-based workers of work. For example, Sitaji, who used to knit sweaters at a piece-rate had to stop this work mainly for two reasons: a) her contractor left the area, and b) people started purchasing machine-made sweaters because of which the demand dropped. The shift of sweater-knitting work from home to industries left Sitaji with no other option but to switch from a skilled work like sweater-knitting to other, different kinds of home-based works.

3) Surplus labor

Daminiji, who does toy-packaging work, tried to negotiate the rate with her subcontractor who unabashedly refused to increase the rate by saying that if she would not do this work, there were many other women in the same locality who were ready to do it for the same rate. This explains how the overabundance of labour force determines the bargaining power of a labourer and how the dominant logic of demand and supply of manpower justifies the unfair actions of subcontractors. We found that homeworkers in most cases are taken for granted, which makes them disposable because of their weakened strength of collective bargaining.

4) Bargaining power and wage revision

I am Sajda from Faizabad UP. I am living in Mangol Puri for the past seven years with my husband, a 22-year-old son and a 17-year-old daughter. My husband makes brooms at home and sells them in the market. Both my son and daughter are studying in college. For the past 10 years, I have been doing punch down work (with a punch down tool) of the outer and inner edge of the helical-shaped heater elements

and also packaging them in a polythene cover and putting them in a box. I do this work with my daughter's help. The product ranges from 1000 volts to 3000 volts. After punching down I pack the heater elements in a box. One box contains 10 elements for which I now get Rs 1.70 per box. It takes me 2–3 days for packing 100 such boxes. Earlier for the same work I used to get Rs 1.20. For many years the rate of doing this work remained the same. However, in the past two years, the contractor increased it by 25 paise on yearly basis. I now make Rs 2000–2500 per month and Rs 3000 per month in winter.

I know about 8–10 other women in the same area who do the same work, men are also involved in this work. The contractor doesn't give this work to more people because the work is not legal, it is his side business, and he does not trust easily as people have sold heating elements to make some extra money.

I get this work on a regular basis and (100–150 boxes per day) and more during the winter season. I receive payment whenever I ask for it and my contractor also gives me some advance when needed. I would like a more regular kind of supply work, for the rate to increase as it is supposed to. Also I would like more flexibility and to be able to take leave when I need to; the contractor doesn't listen even when someone is sick, he just wants the work to be done on time.'

The case study of Sajdaji shows a very strange relationship between a contractor and a homemaker. Because of the nature of work involved she managed to get a meagre increase in the wage rate. Moreover, the logic of demand supply of labourers doesn't seem to apply here despite the availability of so many free labourers, only because the work is not legal and the contractor cannot trust everyone. Such a relationship based on fear and lack of trust on one hand and the need of the homemaker on the other highlights a different power dynamic that exist within the homemaker and contractors cluster.

5) Homeworkers as subcontractors

However, in some cases there is an asymmetry of power within the cluster of homeworkers. Home-based workers who are also subcontractors are found treating other women in the same manner as the subcontractors, in order to maximise the profit for themselves. Sitaji and Girijaji who run small units of knickers and pants manufacturing, contract out the side-stitching work, piping work of the pockets and stitching of tattoos on the pants to 10–12 other women in their locality. They pay them the same amount that the other contractors usually pay. Sitaji pays on piece-rate basis, Rs 3.5 per piece to the home-based workers who work for her.

We observed that in Sitaji's case the transition from home-based work to subcontracting was made possible because of a shift to self-employment; availability of a small space to be used as a manufacturing unit/workshop; access to micro loans to purchase machines, threads, needles, etc., and also the capacity to employ at least one full-time worker to work out of her small manufacturing unit.

6) Government policies and shifting power relations

The relation between the State and home-based workers has always been complex. As discussed previously, because of the invisibilisation of homeworkers, they don't feature in the consciousness of policy-makers when micro- or macro-economic decisions are taken. There is no focus on understanding how wider economic trends affect home-based workers who are connected to the global supply chain. For instance, due to the global economic crisis in 2008, home-based workers producing for global value chains experienced a sharp decline in their work orders as compared to those who were producing for domestic value chains (Horn, 2011). Likewise, two of the recent decisions of the government that have affected the lives of

homeworkers are 1) Demonetisation and 2) GST. With demonetisation Girijaji home-based business was down for more than two months and when GST was introduced, it had the same impact on her work. Similarly, we found that family units involved in the bulb-making process, bindi-designing work, heater-element work, knicker- and pant-stitching work, etc., were out of business for a few months after demonetisation and then the introduction of GST; this resulted in a declined demand for their work.

Through our interviews we found therefore that agency and control within the production process is attained and lost, in many forms, and is difficult to generalise when individual relationships and negotiations replace standards and regulations. This adds to the vulnerability of home-based workers who have to depend on the personal relationships they are able to form and maintain for their job security.

Children Home-based Workers

Children are also involved in the home-based work that their parents do at home. Unpaid child labour is a harsh reality of home-based work in India, where the opportunity cost of schooling is perceived to be higher and hence the incidence of participation of children in such work is also higher (Mehrotra & Biggeri, 2007).

It is observed that children are mostly involved in work that requires less skill, for instance, assembling the components of electrical plugs, packaging toys, sticking packing papers, cutting extra wires of bulbs, taking out designer stickers from a sheet and putting them in one packet, etc. Schoolgoing children do these tasks after school hours and spend more time doing them during their holidays. On the other hand, adult college-going children are often found playing a crucial role in these kinds of work after they come home from

college. We found cases when children, mostly girl children, are made to discontinue their studies because they are required to work with their parents at home or outside. The contractors are not bound to pay any money to these children. However, some parents do give them a meagre amount in the name of pocket money out of the earnings they receive. This dynamic between parents and children is often ignored despite the fact that the incidence of child labour in the homeworkers' households is much greater than in non-homeworkers' households, and there is a higher probability that these children fall into either the 'only working' or 'working and studying' categories as compared to others because of the higher opportunity cost of sending them to school where they see no immediate returns (ibid.). Though companies don't directly employ child labourers, they don't have any checks on works subcontracted out to homeworkers where the prevalence of child labour is unprecedented.

Therefore, though women homeworkers may occasionally assert their demand before subcontractors, and can go against their families to do the work they want to do and can make their children do unpaid labour, mostly they don't have any control over the production system and are often treated as an inconsequential cog in the home-based production wheel.

Health Hazards

Existing literature captures the occupational health hazards faced by home-based workers across sectors. For instance; the health concerns of garment workers, beedi workers, incense (*agarbatti*) stick makers, pottery workers, etc., has been discussed. Precarious working conditions of the home-based workers and the link between the nature of work and the poor health conditions of workers has also been discussed. Sudarshan and Sinha (2011) point out that garment workers and weavers experience abdominal pain and miscarriages due

to continuous pedalling. Postures and poor lighting conditions result in eye problems and joint pains among garment workers and pottery workers. Also constant inhaling of agarbatti fumes causes persistent cough, cold and bronchial problems. Similarly, in the handmade paper sector, workers face immense health risks due to the chemicals they are exposed to during their work.

Chen and Sinha (2016) on the other hand highlight that in the Australian clothing industry the level of self-reported injury was over three times higher among homeworkers than among factory-based workers undertaking similar tasks. They also point out that in India workers in the leather industry deal with extremely pungent smells. The main source of health hazards are the lack of proper seating arrangements at their homes, lack of adequate ventilation and exposure to toxic substances which are used in the production of several goods with high chemical input.

One of the respondents we interviewed was tasked with cutting the threads off rubber slippers, and another with cutting rubber stamps that get sewn onto the slippers at a later stage. Both mentioned that the smell of rubber gets so strong that they have to carry the work outside the house. Sheelaji who does packaging of designer stickers with glitters also complained that the glitter from the stickers gets into everything in the house and is difficult to remove.

Beenaji who used to do the beadwork to make necklaces by using sharp needles stopped this work after a doctor suggested the same because of persistent strain to her eyes. Similarly many respondents shared that they also faced chronic backaches because of the long hours of sitting in the same position while working. Women who do the work of sharpening the inner and outer part of plastic bangles with a knife, often gets cuts and bruises in their fingers. We observed that although a few women shared their health concerns with us,

a significant number of respondents did not believe that the work they are involved in is affecting their health in any way.

Policy Framework

Home-based work is a worldwide phenomenon. In order to address the issues around the exploitation of homeworkers, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) in 1996 adopted a new convention, the ILO convention on Home Work No. 177 (or C177), for the rights of homeworkers. The convention mandates the applicability of core labour standards, for instance: promotion of labour rights at work, provision of decent work opportunities, social protection, right to organise and to bargain collectively etc., to all home workers (ILO, 1996).

ILO Homework Convention No.177 defined a homemaker as a person who carried out work for remuneration in premises of their choice, other than the workplace of the employer, resulting in a product or service as specified by the employer, irrespective of who provided the equipment, material or inputs used.

C177 is an attempt to make sure that homeworkers across the world are treated equally with other workers, and have the same rights to:

1. Set up, join and take part in workers' organisations of their own choosing.
2. Protection against discrimination in employment and occupation.
3. Occupational safety and health protection.
4. Statutory social security protection.
5. Maternity protection.
6. Access to training.
7. Minimum working age.

Only 10 governments of the world have so far adopted C177 as part of their country's laws, a process known as 'ratification'. HomeNet south Asia

and other organisations with support from WIEGO and ILO are continuing to press governments to ratify the convention and bring a specific law pertaining to the protection of home-based workers across the world. India has not ratified this convention till date.

The Kathmandu Declaration

In October 2000, home-based workers and their organisations, South Asia governments' policy-makers and researchers met and formulated the Kathmandu Declaration for the rights of South Asian home-based workers. The Kathmandu Declaration spells out the following major goals:

1. Formation of National Policy on home-based workers.
2. Right to organise.
3. Minimum wage.
4. Occupational health and safety.
5. Statutory social protection; maternity, childcare, skill development and literacy programmes.
6. Access to market and economic resources.
7. Setting up social funds for home-based workers.
8. Incorporation into official statistics.
9. Advocacy with SAARC to address the issues of home-based workers.

Labour in India falls in the concurrent list of the constitution and is therefore within the purview of both the centre and states. Laws passed by the centre can be adapted by the states which can introduce rules for implementation, and extend coverage as they see fit. Most labour laws pertain to the organised sector. Even those that cover unorganised workers have limited coverage in terms of types of employment, employment relationships and the number of workers for instance (NCEUS 2007, p. 155). In this section we will look at laws that have a

bearing on home-based workers.

The Minimum Wages Act, 1948 covers labour, both urban and rural, agricultural and non-agricultural. The Act protects any employment relationship in which there is at least one employee. The implication of this on home-based work is that homework is covered under the Act whereas self-employed work is not. While detailed calculations of minimum wages have been carried out keeping time-based payments in mind, the Minimum Wages Act also covers piece-rate payments. This was upheld in the *Bandhua Mukti Morcha* case in 1984. In accordance with the Act, the appropriate level of government is supposed to fix minimum rates payable under different kinds of employment with a process of regular review, for both time-rate and piece-rate payments.

The Child Labour (Regulation and Prohibition) Act, 1986 on the other hand is applicable to all children under the age of 14. The Act prohibits children from engaging in certain forms of employment and regulates their engagement in other instances. The Act lays down guidelines on the number of permissible hours of work, and the times of day during which it is permissible for a child to engage in certain occupations. The Act applies to urban, rural, agricultural, non-agricultural workers as well as to waged workers and home-based workers.

As noted in a previous section, child labour is commonplace in home-based work. However, it becomes impossible for authorities to pinpoint cases because more often than not children participate in the work as helpers/contributing family members and are not remunerated for their work. Scholars have highlighted that while the Act lays down regulations to prevent child labour in certain processes and industries, it is blind to family-based occupations within the household.

Moreover, the Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act, 2017 is also not applicable to home-based

workers because it applies only to ‘establishments’ with more than 10 workers. Therefore even the twenty six weeks of relief from work, that the Act guarantees, is not available to home-based workers. The fact that this benefit is not extended to women engaged in waged work simply because their place of employment is the home, clearly indicates the value accorded to home-based work. Also, the Workmen’s Compensation Act 1923, which seeks to hold employers responsible for personal injuries as a consequence of accidents during employment, applies to both agricultural and non-agricultural workers but not to home-based workers. The Act also specifies a list of occupational diseases, which if contracted would make the worker liable for compensation. This Act has not been used to protect the rights of homeworkers against personal harm as the act only pertains to certain classes of employers. There is no direct link between these classes of employers and home-based workers.

However, the Unorganised Workers Social Security Act, 2008 (UWSSA) was formulated on the basis of recommendations put out by the NCEUS which envisioned a social security net that would act as a ‘national minimum’ (Kannan, Srivastava, & Sengupta, 2006). The Act was meant to provide three kinds of security: (i) health cover and maternity benefit (ii) against accident or death (iii) old age pension. While the act is weaker than the NCEUS scheme on the basis of which it was designed, it still stands out in comparison to other labour laws as its very focus is unorganised sector workers.

Some of the defining features of the Act are that it:

- applies to both self-employed labour as well as wage workers (inclusive of piece rate);
- provides for the formulation of schemes both by the centre and states on matters related to life and health insurance, pensions, protection against occupational injury,

housing, education, skill upgradation;

- directs the setting up of a National Social Security Board under the Minister of Labour and Employment to represent unorganised workers and employers as well as persons belonging to SC, ST communities, women and other minorities (the National Social Security Board has been set up, and some states have also constituted social security boards); and
- prescribes building a stronger database of unorganised workers through record-keeping at the panchayat and municipal levels with the help of district officials.

While the Act includes within its schedule a large number of schemes, coverage thus far has been fragmented; implementation of the Act has been poor and home-based workers have been systematically kept outside its ambit. There have been many reasons for this including the variety of categories of workers covered and the limited availability of resources for a social security cover of this magnitude. Also a majority of the schemes included are still based on BPL targeting which is in its very essence exclusionary. For the act to be made stronger and implemented, strong organisations of unorganised workers are paramount as only constant pressure on the State is likely to yield results (ibid.). Unfortunately, the unorganised sector is formed of workers who at every turn face challenges to organising.

Neetha N (2006) adds a critique of the UWSSA arguing that it leaves out unpaid workers from its ambit. The Act seeks to cover the working poor who suffer at once from both inadequate earnings and the lack of a safety net. At the same time, the Act excludes unpaid domestic and care workers who, she argues, are amongst the most vulnerable.

In the case of the Beedi and Cigar Workers (Conditions of Employment) Act, 1966, which

covers waged labour as well as homeworkers, it does not apply to self-employed workers. It defines 'employee' as a 'person employed directly or through an agency, whether for wages or not, in any establishment, to do any work, skilled, manual or clerical'.

The Act aims to legislate for a clean working environment. To prevent injury to health, places of work have to maintain proper lighting, ventilation and temperature. The state is supposed to ensure that arrangements have been made for drinking water, latrine, washing facilities as well as those related to childcare and first aid. It includes labour provisions such as working hours, overtime, rest time, holidays, annual leave. The Act does not therefore apply to anyone working from their own private dwellings. Following the passage of this Act, the Beedi industry was included in the minimum wage schedule for each state, adapted for the payment of piece-rates. In 1977, the Government of India extended the provisions of the Employees Provident Fund Act to beedi workers.

Beedi Workers: A Best Case Scenario?

The Beedi and Cigar Workers Conditions of Employment Act enacted in 1966 was the result of agitation by workers who formed part of the beedi industry: at that time more male than female, employed by private sector companies, organised through unions and affiliated with political parties. The first recorded Beedi workers union was formed in 1934 (Agarwala, 2006). Agitation on the factory floor was carried out through strike action. Labour department records show that in a single year, in 1951, 120 strikes were carried out in the Beedi industry. The key demand during this period was for protective legislation to be passed.

The passage of the Act resulted in limited benefits for the organised workforce such as a guarantee of

minimum wages, bonuses and fixed working hours. However, it also resulted in the creation of a large informal workforce not represented by the unions and not directly employed by the companies which were therefore not accountable to this workforce. After 1967 there is a marked decline in disputes in the beedi industry which up until then are sporadic but high. By the 1970s, several beedi factories are reported to have laid off large numbers of workers or to have closed down.

In researching Beedi workers in Tamil Nadu, Gopal (1999) details the intricate, decentralised process by which Beedis are produced using subcontracted homeworkers. She writes of 'commission shops' that follow the provisions of the 1966 Act and act as direct contractors to the principal company. Each shop employs 100–200 workers directly who are either individual or joint 'passbook holders' which identifies them as Beedi workers and guarantees them a provident fund and bonus amount. Subcontractors which use the brand name but are not directly linked to the principal company are able to exercise arbitrary powers. As commission agents, they make a profit off every 1000 Beedis rolled and sold. The actual production of Beedis takes place in the homes of young girls and older women who instead of passbooks are given 'notebooks', and are in fact not recognised under the Act as Beedi workers.

The process of rolling is divided into many steps which are scattered between households: the leaves are soaked, cut into rectangular pieces once dry, and packaged until they are ready to be rolled. The task of cutting is considered one of high skill and is reserved for workers who have experience or proficiency. The leaves are then rolled with tobacco dust and a thread is used to tie them. The final task of folding the tip of the beedi inwards is the first task given to young beginners. This is also the work given out to handicapped and elderly women to earn a living. The process of subcontracting and the divided nature of the production process also

create disparities between the workers themselves. Age, class, skill are some of the divisive factors apart from obvious social cleavages (ibid.).

As explored in the chapter earlier, the nature of home-based work comes with its own set of challenges to organising or forming unions. The lack of information, the arbitrary recruitment processes, and the dependence on creation of personal relationships with contractors contribute to the vulnerability and exploitation of Beedi workers. There is however a degree of interaction between Beedi workers which may not be replicated in every situation of home-based work. Gopal (ibid.) argues that the nature and quantity of Beedi production ensures relationships of loan and receipt whereby there is a borrowing and subletting of Beedis which entails a degree of interaction between workers. Furthermore, it is the kind of work that women carry out in groups inside, or outside their homes. She refers to a practice termed 'Beedi-chit' where women rolling similar Beedis form a kind of cooperative where extra production gets credited to a member of the group on a lottery basis. She notes however that the effect of this interaction is not always positive and empowering but can also foster jealousy and petty disagreements.

Based on her research in Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and Kerala, Agarwala (2006) writes of the success of the informal Beedi workers' movement since the 1980s. She argues that the modus operandi of this movement has been very different from that of the formal unions of the past. As the work is largely home-based, she argues that organisation has taken place at the neighbourhood level as Beedi workers live in clusters in slums. What has allowed for the success of the movement, she argues, is a shift in demands. The Beedi workers movement instead of focusing on fighting for basic labour rights from employers with the State as a mediator, has begun to demand basic citizenship rights from the State, bypassing the elusive employers. The demands being made of the State are of welfare—

identification, health and education benefits, the right to housing and social security—to be upheld and implemented by welfare boards for informal workers to be set up by state governments.

The relative success of the Beedi workers movements over movements of other homeworkers can be tracked through established institutional support. In 1987 the Beedi cess collection was resumed. The Beedi Welfare Fund Act was amended to provide identification to informal workers and with family welfare as a primary goal. In the following years, hospitals and dispensaries as well as housing projects have been set up for Beedi workers.

While unionisation remains a key goal, where they exist, many are still led by men, and hence are not representative of the workforce. At the same time it has to be said that achievements have been made where workers have not only asserted themselves as workers, but as voters.

Recommendations

In the 2015 *India Exclusion Report*, the authors write that while many bodies are culpable, it is the State's responsibility to guarantee legal rights to women as workers in employment relationships and extend the same guarantees to women who work outside these relationships as well such as unpaid workers. In the context of the informal sector it is also the State's responsibility to regulate the market and provide social protection outside workers' rights such as rights to housing, health cover, pension and maternity benefits. In the specific context of home-based work based on the issues discussed above in the chapter, we make the following recommendations:

1. That labour law be revised to ensure that outsourced, subcontracted labour are provided the same safeties and guarantees when it comes to their health and safety,

minimum wages, and social security cover. As discussed in the section on laws and policies above, home-based workers currently fall outside the ambit of most labour laws such as the Factories Act even though these laws are framed to protect workers in the same industries in which home-based work is located.

2. That the state should ensure better data generation and dissemination in the National Statistical System—in terms of their size, spread and proportion of women, types of industry, nature of contract, time spent on paid and unpaid home-based work per day, basis of payment, level of skills, periodicity of payment among others—to enable a better understanding of the conditions of work and contribution of home-based workers. Such a comprehensive dataset is also required in order to improve the participation of home-based workers during the decision-making process at the time of framing of labour laws and benefits.
3. That a stronger framework for social protection be imagined that takes into account the specific vulnerabilities of informal sector workers in urban areas. To begin with, home-based workers should be registered and covered under the Unorganised Workers Social Security Act 2008. This would allow for basic minimum social security to home-based workers by coverage under schemes for housing benefits, pension, PF, maternity benefits, health insurance, childcare. However, as discussed above, the Act is not without its flaws; for instance, it fails to recognise intra-household inequality. Home-based workers where they are part of self-employed units also include unpaid workers and contributing family workers who are not covered under the Act. The framework should therefore be individual-based. An important aspect of

social protection for home-based workers is housing rights as where they live is also the place where they are employed; therefore this aspect needs to be studied carefully and integrated into a social protection programme.

4. That an Urban Employment Guarantee Programme be envisioned along the lines of the MGNREGA that is demand based. When we asked respondents what demands they would make of the State, many answered that they would like for there to be other alternative work opportunities available so that they would not have to engage in piece-work, which they are aware pays them close to nothing. We were constantly asked if we knew of any available work because the women all felt that there were no opportunities available to them. In particular, they expressed a need for employment opportunities that would allow them to work from home so that they could also take care of their domestic responsibilities. The authors of *India Exclusion Report* (2015) reviewed literature that explains the constraints on paid work opportunities because of the demands of unpaid care work. 70 per cent women interviewed said that they prefer part-time work where available. Employment opportunities have to be envisioned keeping these constraints in mind. If guaranteed a certain quantity of paid work, this would also provide home-based workers bargaining power to negotiate higher piece-rates, which now they are unable to do as they are dependent on this single source of work.
5. That a fair piece-rate be calculated for home-based workers. Fighting to be paid a Minimum Wage is often the only legal tool for many workers in the unorganised sector, and an issue around which workers are organised. However, the calculation of the

Minimum Wage on the basis of time (even though the Act includes people paid on a piece-rate basis) leaves out homeworkers who are paid on a piece-rate, task basis. We therefore recommend that the government carries out Time & Motion studies for different industries where home-based work is most prevalent to work out what a fair or minimum piece-rate should be in these industries. Furthermore, there are many costs that are born by home-based workers instead of the industries in which they are employed, such as benefits and protections (paid to permanent factory employees), and costs of basic amenities such as electricity, water, gas; these are borne by homeworkers personally. We recommend that these costs are included in the calculation of the piece-rate.

6. An important role of the State is to regulate the market. In cases where commodity chains can be identified whether the product is being sold globally or domestically, it is important that the State carry out a mapping exercise and identify home-based workers so that employers along the chain can be held accountable for the working conditions and protection of home-based workers.
7. Together with a regulatory framework it is also important that the government make commodity chains more transparent and accountable. One way of doing this is ensuring a paper trail exists where home-based workers are made aware about each node of the production chain. The information about the product; who are they making the products for; the utility of the product; and the share of contractors in the supply chain should be declared before them so that they can be empowered to make an informed decision about their choice of work and be in a position to negotiate for a fair piece-rate.

It is also important that the government put in place a process for grievance redressal where home-based workers can register complaints about treatment by contractors, conditions of work, and so on. However, this system would not be possible to implement for all homeworkers, only where they can be identified and employers along the chain held accountable.

In the long run the only way for home-based workers to assert themselves and bring their issues to the forefront is through organising and political action. However, given the challenges they are faced

3. Fieldwork for this study was conducted between May 2017–August 2017 in Mangeram Park and Mangolpuri in North-West Delhi.
4. Maria Mies defines housewifisation in the following way... ‘as a process by which women are socially defined as housewives, dependent for their sustenance on the income of a husband, irrespective of whether they are defacto housewives or not. The social definition of women as housewives is the counterpart of the social definition of men as breadwinners, irrespective of their actual contribution to their family’s subsistence.’
5. Fieldwork for this study was conducted between May 2017–August 2017 in Mangeram Park and

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with, it should be incumbent upon the State to encourage the formation of SHGs and associations even if from a business standpoint to allow for skill-training, building credit, collective bargaining.

Endnotes

1. The fieldwork for this study was supported by colleagues at Centre for Equity Studies (CES): Jenny, Shruti and Anirban and also Inayat, Payal, Safia, Asmi and Anchal during their internship.
2. Based on our observations we felt the need to complicate this definition by making a distinction between principal employers and sub-contractors/intermediary employers. The work arrangements between home-based workers and the latter are

Mangolpuri in North-West Delhi.

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