



GARMENT MAKERS

“There are many women all over the country working at home like me. Surely there should be some law to protect all of us.”

Karima-bibi, Garment Worker (keynote address at 1987 National Workshop on Home-based Piece Rate Workers)

Because of Ahmedabad City's history as a textile centre, it has long been known for a set of allied industries relating to textiles. These include the dyeing, block printing, and screen printing of cloth. Products manufactured from local textiles include garments and a range of bed sheets, bed covers, cushion covers, and napkins. A variety of textile products are embroidered, including gold brocade embroidery (called *zari*), mirror work or ring embroidery, and patchwork. While most tailors or seamstresses specialise in either garments or other textile products, some produce both and some combine embroidery work with stitching. Although it is not one of the major garment manufacturing centres in India, Ahmedabad's share in the domestic and export garment sector is growing. During the 1990s, the garment sector in Ahmedabad grew rapidly: output grew by 18 per cent and retail trade grew by 12 per cent (Singh 1999).

Garment production takes place in large factories geared mainly to the export markets, in small factories or workshops geared to the city and state markets, and in homes for, largely, the local city market, as follows:

- large factories, including several successful jean-making factories, employ more than 200 workers each, mainly women.
- small factories employ anywhere from 15 to 50 workers, nearly 85 per cent women.
- small workshops are typically operated by a single micro-entrepreneur who hires a few others to work in one or two rooms of his home or tailoring shop or by a small group of self-employed garment makers who come together and hire a common space. Some of these groups eventually save enough capital to purchase a few extra machines and hire workers. Those who work in these workshops, anywhere from 5 to 15 workers, are mainly men.
- home-based operators, nearly 80 per cent of whom are women (Unni and Bali 2001), operate at an even smaller scale than the men in the small workshops.

Estimates suggest that, in the late 1990s, around 55,000 people were engaged in or connected with the garment industry in Ahmedabad City (Ibid., Kantor 1999). The composition of this workforce at that time was roughly as follows:

30,000 (55%)	-	home-based producers/home-workers
9,000 (16%)	-	factory workers
8,700 (16%)	-	retailers and wholesalers
3,300 (6%)	-	contractors
1,800 (3%)	-	factory owners
900 (1.6%)	-	material and equipment suppliers
400 (0.7%)	-	workshop operators
200 (0.3%)	-	designers



SEWA organises and supports home-based garment makers, both those who work on their own account and/or as industrial outworkers, as well as wage workers in garment factories.⁴

Home-based garment workers may have one or more of a variety of relationships with the market. These vary from a dependent industrial outworker who produces under a sub-contract for a shopkeeper, manufacturer or contractor, to an independent own account operator who sells directly in the market. In real life, many home-based garment makers are neither purely independent nor purely dependent :

- **Industrial outworkers:** who get work orders and raw materials (typically pieces of cloth pre-cut to a pattern) from a trader or contractor, stitch the pieces into the required garment, and return it to the trader/contractor to be paid by the piece. These sub-contracted garment makers use their own sewing machines and often buy their own thread as well.
- **Dependent producers:** who produce on orders from individuals or firms. Some factories and firms outsource their production to home-based producers. They give orders to the individual producers who then buy the raw materials and produce garment items according to the specification of the firm.
- **Independent producers:** who produce on their own with or without the help of other family members and sell their products in the open market. In some households, the whole family is involved in garment making. The family invests its own capital and (generally) the women of the house stitch the garments while the men go to bazaars and fairs to sell the finished garments.
- **Dual-status producers:** who get some work from a trader and produce for him on a piece-rate basis but also buy raw materials on their own and produce for others. Sub-contracted and outsourced work is generally rather seasonal. During festival and marriage seasons there is more work and sub-contracted workers keep very busy, indeed are often over-worked, However during the slack season, when they do not get enough work orders, they try to earn some more by buying cloth and producing on their own. They then try to sell these products to the trader from whom they get sub-contract orders, to other vendors, or directly to customers.

Most industrial outworkers and dependent producers are paid per piece or per dozen pieces produced. The rate per piece or per dozen pieces varies by the type of garment. Whatever the item, sub-contracted garment makers earn only a small percentage of the selling price - as low as 2 to 5 per cent - while the employer-trader and his contractor (if any) earn a far higher percentage as high as 40 per cent (Singh 1999; ILO 1991). In the late 1990s, sub-contracted garment workers typically earned between 20 and 33 rupees per day (46 to 76 cents) on those days that they received work orders (Chen and Snodgrass 2001; Unni 1999). However, those who made women's dresses could earn as much as 200 rupees per day (Unni 1999). From these slim earnings, they have to deduct expenses for thread, oil, needles, and electricity; maintenance and repair of sewing machines; and travel/transport to collect raw materials, supply finished goods, and receive payments. A recent SEWA survey found that home-based garment workers earn between 500 and 1500 rupees per month, while some workers in small factories earn up to 2000 rupees per month (Unni and Bali 2001)

Irregularity of Work and Payments: What a garment maker earns is not just a function of her wages but also of the number of days she gets work. There are seasonal fluctuations in the garment industry: the peak season is when most festivals and weddings take place (September to February) and the slack season is the other six months of the year (March to August). During the slack season, if they do not get or work orders, some dependent producers shift to other occupations: for instance, rolling bidis or incense sticks.

⁴ Among the garment makers in SEWA's membership, 424 (2%) work in garment factories and 20,878 (98%) work from their homes. Those who work at home include both self-employed producers and those who work under a sub-contract for a piece rate (called industrial outworkers or homeworkers).



Even during the seasons when they get work, recent estimates suggest that home-based workers in particular but also some small factory workers either do not get - or do not seek - regular work: 20 per cent of home-based workers and 10 per cent of small factory workers work less than 20 days per month; and over 40 per cent of home-based workers work but only 2 per cent of factory workers work less than five hours a day (Unni and Bali 2001).

	Hours per Day	Days per Month
Home-based Workers	9-12 hrs. (10%)	30 days (60%)
	6-9 hrs. (45%)	25 days (20%)
	3-5 hrs. (41%)	20 days (10%)
		<20 days (10%)
Small Factory Workers	15 hrs. (35%)	25-30 days (76%)
	5-10 hrs. (62%)	20-25 days (16%)
	<5 hrs. (2%)	10-20 days (8%)

During the off-season, four out of five home-based workers (80%) work for less than 20 days per month (ibid.). Compared to home-based workers, the workers in small factories get more steady work throughout the year: although production/work peaks just before large festivals.

Payment of wages may also be irregular. Wages are paid weekly or monthly on the whim of the trader. If a garment is defective or lost or does not meet the satisfaction of the trader, the piece-rate for that item is deducted from the worker's wages (Sharma 1987). The number of garments stitched and the amount of wages earned are supposed to be recorded by the manufacturing or retail firm (or their intermediary) in a notebook that the worker holds onto. However, the lead firms or their contractors often tear out the relevant page from the notebook when they settle each worker's account, leaving no evidence linking the workers to the lead firms or their contractors (ibid.).

Changing Technology and Skills: Fashion in the garment sector - and thereby demand for different products - changes rapidly. A decade ago, home-based garment workers in Ahmedabad City mainly stitched *sari* petticoats and children's wear for the local market. Now, the demand is for more sophisticated items in both the local and markets, which they do not know how to cut and stitch. Earlier, cotton was the main fabric used, but now a variety of synthetic materials including satin and velvet are popular. These materials do not stitch well on the older sewing machines owned by the women. Most women have the simplest types of sewing machines, and although many women have fitted these machines with motors, their productivity remains low. Most home-based garment workers would like to graduate to using modern electrical sewing machines, but simply cannot afford to do so. Or they would like to own the special machines or the special gadgets (which they can attach to their sewing machines) for making buttonholes or hemming, which they now do by hand (Jhabvala and Kanbur 2002).

The skills required to keep up with the fashion for new garment products are also changing. New garment products often require greater expertise in cutting, new types of stitches, better quality buttons and other accessories, and better finishing. Most home-based garment makers have few or no opportunities to acquire these skills and know-how. In large factories, the management determines what skills the market will require and provides in-house training to its workers. Apart from in-house training, few public or even private institutions offer training in these new skills to garment makers.

.....
 Garment workers have always played an important role in the SEWA Union, comprising a significant share of the home-based workers among SEWA's urban membership. As of end-2004, home-based garment workers represented 4 per cent of SEWA's total members, 13 per cent of SEWA urban members, and about 23 per cent of all home-based workers among SEWA's membership.



SEWA has a long history of working with garment workers. In organising garment workers, SEWA has focused primarily on negotiating higher piece-rates and fairer working conditions for garment *industrial outworkers* - many of whom are Muslim. This has involved negotiations with the Labour Commissioner - as well as rallies in front of his office - to demand minimum wage, identify cards, and welfare benefits (childcare, health care, and school scholarships) for sub-contracted garment workers. In 1986, SEWA was able to get a minimum wage for garment stitching (89.60 rupees per day) included in the official Gujarat state Schedule of minimum wages under the Minimum Wages Act.⁵ Over the years, SEWA has also helped *own account* garment makers to acquire new skills, improved equipment, and market information to try to compete in the fast-changing local garment market. This has included loans for improved sewing machines and related gadgets, training at the National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT), and electrical connections in the homes of SEWA members (to avoid the high costs of tapping electricity illegally). In recent years, as export-oriented factory-based garment production has expanded in Ahmedabad City, SEWA has begun to organise *waged workers* in garment factories as well. After the riots of 1985 and the communal violence in 2002, when Muslim homes were burned and looted, SEWA has helped rehabilitate its Muslim members - many of whom are home-based garment makers.



⁵ As in other minimum wage negotiations, SEWA seeks to have the minimum wage fixed in a tripartite negotiation with the Labour Commissioner's Office, the employer, and the workers so it will be acceptable to all concerned. SEWA does not expect that the minimum wage will be enforced but uses it as a benchmark or target in on-going negotiations.



Box 3 Razia-bibi: Garment Maker

Razia-bibi and her husband, Hameed-bhai, live with their three sons in one room at the back of their provisions store. This one room serves as living room, bedroom, workspace, and kitchen. A storage room - piled high with sacks of grain - that connects their one-room home at the back to the store in the front doubles as a bedroom at night. Hameed-bhai and their eldest son run the provision store; Ayesha and their eldest daughter used to sew garments in the 'living' room at the back. Both of their daughters were recently married.

When they were married in 1975, Hameed-bhai was a textile mill worker and Razia-bibi was a garment maker. When Hameed-bhai first lost his job at the textile mill, and when his first attempt at shop-keeping failed, the growing family had to rely on Razia-bibi's earnings. By 2000, Hameed-bhai was running a successful provision store and Razia-bibi was still stitching garments, but only as a source of supplemental income. From their two sources of income, they were doing reasonably well. At that time, Razia-bibi and her daughter stitched *salwars* (draw-string pants) for 2 rupees per salwar. They received pre-cut salwar pieces from two sub-contractors - a woman and a man - in their neighbourhood. The sub-contractors receive orders and cloth from ready-made garment traders and cut the cloth into salwar pieces. According to Razia-bibi, the piece-rate set by the sub-contractors went up slightly during the 1990s from 75 *paisa* (0.75 rupee) per salwar in 1990 to 2 rupees in 1998.

When asked whether she had ever bargained with the sub-contractors to raise the piece-rate, Razia-bibi said "no". But she acknowledged that she and other workers in the neighbourhood complained to the woman sub-contractor that the increases in the piece-rate had not kept pace with inflation. Not only their cost of living but also their costs of production had gone up: 100 grams of thread, which used to cost 4 rupees in 1990, cost 20 rupees in 2000. In 1998, in response to their complaints, the woman sub-contractor raised the piece-rate from 1.5 to 2 rupees per salwar.

In 2000, Razia-bibi and her elder daughter also worked on their own account: that is, they received orders to sew *sari* petticoats or *salwar-kameez* (pant-tunic) sets from individual customers who supplied the cloth and specified the design. Depending on the fabric, they charged 12-15 rupees for stitching a petticoat and 30-45 rupees for stitching a salwar-kameez set. On occasion, Razia-bibi helped her mother-in-law, who stitched cushion covers under a sub-contract, complete a work order.

In early 2002, during the communal violence, Razia-bibi and her family had to flee their home-cum-shop and take refuge in a near-by cemetery and mausoleum. Their shop was looted: many of the provisions and a ceiling fan were taken, the glass containers and counter were broken. The looters also stole a color TV, a black-and-white TV, new clothing and shoes (purchased as part of their daughters' wedding trousseau), some jewelry, and some pots and pans from their home. Razia-bibi and Hameed-bhai estimate that they lost around 100,000 rupees worth of goods. From their insurance policy with SEWA, they received 6,000 rupees compensation.

Although they had been saving and planning for their daughters' weddings, Razia-bibi and Hameed-bhai ended up holding a simple joint wedding: their two daughters married cousins. By 2003, the provision store was up and running again. With her two daughters married, and living in nearby Rajasthan state, Razia-bibi was not sure whether she would resume tailoring. But the now-smaller family seemed to be doing all right with the profits from the provision store and the earnings of their two younger sons, who work as mechanics.

Source: Chen and Snodgrass 2001