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Home-Based Workers and Urban Plans, Policies and Practice: India in Comparative Perspective

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Abstract

This paper explores the impact of local government policies and urban plans on home-based workers in India and elsewhere. It presents recent national data on the size and composition of home-based work in developing countries as well as findings from two recent field studies of urban home-based workers in several Asian cities/countries, including India. The research findings highlight that homes often double as workplaces, especially for women workers, and that slums are domains of significant economic activities. To address these twin facts and the demands of home-based workers, the paper makes the case that city governments and urban planners need to integrate home-based workers and their livelihood activities into local economic development plans, and that city governments need to extend basic infrastructure to the homes-cum-workplaces of home-based workers and transport services to the settlements where they live and work. The paper provides some promising examples of where and how this has been done, largely in response to effective advocacy by organizations of home-based workers.

Introduction

Home-based workers produce goods or services for the market from within or around their own homes. In countries both rich and poor, they produce a wide range of low- and high-end goods and services for both domestic and global markets. Some of them are self-employed and some are sub-contracted. They stitch garments, shoes and footballs; weave textiles and baskets; roll incense sticks, cigarettes and cigars; thread flower garlands; process and prepare food items; assemble electronics; package pharmaceutical products; make automobile parts; and do laundry, hair-cutting, mechanical repair, clerical and professional work. Today, these workers represent a significant share of urban employment in some countries, particularly for women and especially in Asia.

This paper highlights that homes are workplaces, especially for women workers, and that slums are domains of economic activities. It makes the case that city governments and urban practitioners need to be aware of these twin facts in all their interventions. The paper draws heavily on two recent studies of urban home-based workers in Asia: a 2012 field study in three Asian cities (Ahmedabad, India; Bangkok, Thailand; and Lahore, Pakistan)¹ as part of a wider 10-city study (Chen 2014) coordinated by the WIEGO network; and a 2011-12 field study in 18 cities in seven Asian countries (Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Thailand) undertaken by HomeNet South Asia and HomeNet South East Asia (Sinha 2013a). The data for India and three other South Asian countries are from four statistical briefs commissioned by the WIEGO Network.

I. Size and Composition

There have been improvements in the statistics on home-based workers in recent years, but challenges to counting and classifying them remain. Most notably, national labour force surveys in many countries do not include questions on “place of work”, a key indicator for identifying who is a home-based worker. Also, enumerators are often not trained to recognize and count home-based workers as workers, and home-based

¹ The methods used in the 2012 three-city study included a survey, a set of focus group tools and key informant interviews. The sample was a purposive random sample drawn from the membership of local organizations cross-classified by two key indicators: status in employment (self-employed and sub-contracted) and product line (garments and non-garments). The survey sample in each of the three cities was 150 home-based workers, of which half took part in the focus groups (15 focus groups in each city with five members each).

workers themselves often do not perceive or report themselves as workers, with the result that they are often listed as doing unpaid domestic work. This is particularly true of women home-based workers. So even in those countries where home-based workers are counted, the estimates are likely to be underestimations.

Size and Significance

These limitations notwithstanding, available data, compiled by the WIEGO Network, suggest that even in countries in Africa and Latin America where home-based work accounts for a relatively small part of urban employment, it is significant (6 per cent of urban employment in South Africa and 3 per cent in Buenos Aires) (ILO and WIEGO 2013, Vanek et al. 2014, Chen and Raveendran 2014). The available data also confirm that most home-based workers are informally employed (75 per cent in South Africa; 60 per cent in Buenos Aires); and that the vast majority of home-based workers almost everywhere are women (70 per cent in Brazil; 80 per cent in Ghana) (ILO and WIEGO 2013, Vanek et al. 2014, Chen and Raveendran 2014).

It is in Asia, and in particular South Asia, where the prevalence of home-based work is quite high, especially among women workers. See Table 1 for recent data from four South Asian countries.²

Table 1: Home-Based Workers as Percentage of Non-Agricultural Workers by Sex: Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan

	Women	Men	All
Bangladesh (2009)	12.1	5.9	7.2
India (2011-12)	31.7	11	15.2
Nepal (2008)	47.6	21.6	30
Pakistan (2008-09)	40	1.5	5.3

Sources: Mahmud 2014 (Bangladesh); Raveendran et al. 2014 (India); Raveendran and Vanek 2013 (Nepal); and Akhtar and Vanek 2013 (Pakistan)

Although home-based work comprises a smaller percentage of non-agricultural employment in Pakistan and Bangladesh, the absolute number of home-based workers is still large, estimated to be over one and a half million in Pakistan and two million in Bangladesh. In India and Nepal, home-based work is significant both in sheer numbers and as a percentage of workers. These estimates suggest that there are at least 41 million home-based workers outside agriculture in these four countries of South Asia (HNSA 2014a): see Table 2.

Table 2: Numbers of Home-Based Workers Outside Agriculture by Sex (in millions): Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan

	Women	Men	All
Bangladesh (2009)	0.7	1.3	2
India (2011-12)	16	21.4	37.4
Nepal (2008)	0.5	.4	0.9
Pakistan (2008-09)	1	.4	1.4

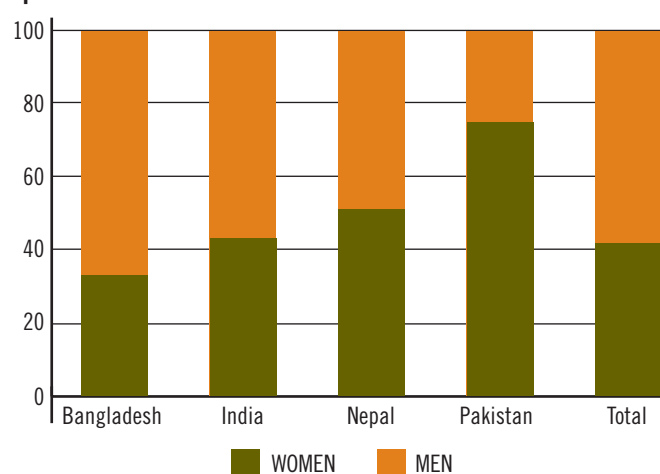
Sources: Mahmud 2014 (Bangladesh); Raveendran et al. 2014 (India); Raveendran and Vanek 2013 (Nepal); and Akhtar and Vanek 2013 (Pakistan)

² The data and other evidence in this paper are for home-based workers in urban areas outside of agriculture. While there are home-based workers in the agricultural sector, such as those who do kitchen gardening, take care of livestock, do post-harvest processing, make fishing nets and process fish, from in and around their own homes, the official data on home-based workers cited in this paper are for home-based workers outside agriculture.

Most notably, home-based workers comprise a particularly high share of women's work, in Asian countries — and especially in South Asia where home-based workers represent more than 30 per cent of all women workers outside agriculture in India and more than 40 per cent in Nepal and Pakistan. As Table 2 indicates India has around 16 million women home-based workers, Pakistan one million, Bangladesh 0.7 million, and Nepal 0.5 million — a total of over 18 million women home-based workers in these four countries.

Given the low labour force participation rates of women in South Asia and other factors, women do not necessarily represent the majority of home-based workers in these countries. As Table 2 and Bar Graph 1 indicate, there are more men than women in home-based work in Bangladesh and in India: with women representing 33 and 43 per cent, respectively, of all home-based workers in those two countries. But there are more women than men home-based workers in Nepal and Pakistan: with women representing 51 and 75 per cent, respectively, of home-based workers in those two countries.

Bar Graph 1: Women and Men as Percentage of all Home-Based Workers Outside Agriculture: Bangladesh, India, Nepal & Pakistan



Sources: Mahmud 2014 (Bangladesh); Raveendran et al. 2014 (India); Raveendran and Vanek 2013 (Nepal); and Akhtar and Vanek 2013 (Pakistan)

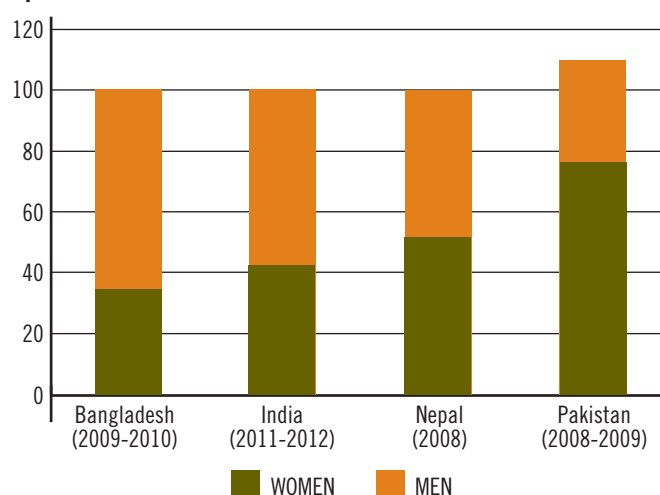
Although a large percentage of women home-based workers are rural, even outside agriculture, there are still large numbers of women home-based workers in urban areas: over 8 million in the four countries (Bar Graph 2). In Bangladesh and India, there are fewer women than men home-based workers in urban areas. In Nepal, the proportion is roughly equal, while there is a far higher number of women than men urban home-based workers in Pakistan.

Table 3: Urban Home-Based Workers: Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan

Countries	Women urban HBWs	Total urban HBWs	Women as % of total urban HBWs
Bangladesh (2009-2010)	156,836	454,529	34
India (2010-2011)	7,340,000	16,950,000	43
Nepal (2010-2011)	120,000	230,000	52
Pakistan (2010-2011)	424,000	545,000	77
Total	8,040,836	18,179,529	44

Sources: Mahmud 2014 (Bangladesh); Raveendran et al. 2014 (India); Raveendran and Vanek 2013 (Nepal); and Akhtar and Vanek 2013 (Pakistan)

Bar Graph 2: Women and Men as Percentage of Urban Home-Based Workers Outside Agriculture: Bangladesh, India, Nepal & Pakistan



Sources: Mahmud 2014 (Bangladesh); Raveendran et al. 2014 (India); Raveendran and Vanek 2013 (Nepal); and Akhtar and Vanek 2013 (Pakistan)

For WIEGO, Dr. G. Raveendran, former Additional Director of the Central Statistical Organization of India, has estimated city-level data across five cities of India for the four sectors it works in,. For home-based workers, there seems to be a great diversity across cities — in Ahmedabad, 56 per cent of non-agricultural employment for women is in home-based work whereas in Pune, it is estimated to be as low as 8 per cent.

Table 4: City Data from India

City	Home-based workers as % of non-agricultural employment, total	Home-based workers as % of non-agricultural employment, women	Home-based workers as % of non-agricultural employment, men
Ahmedabad	16	56	6
Chennai	7	17	4
Delhi	7	13	6
Kolkata	17	33	13
Mumbai	8	20	5
Pune	9	8	9

Sources: Special tabulation based on National Sample Survey on Employment and Unemployment, 2011-12, prepared by G. Raveendran, former Additional Director of Central Statistical Organization of India.³

In terms of trends, the evidence is mixed. Home-based work appears to be growing in Bangladesh and India and declining in Pakistan. In Bangladesh, between 2005 and 2009, the size of the total home-based workforce increased by 41 per cent: while the number of men home-based workers nearly doubled (more so in rural areas), the number of women home-based workers decreased (more so in urban areas) (Mahmud 2014). In India, over a 12-year period, the number of home-based workers, both men and women, grew: from 23.3 million in 1999/2000 to 37.4 million in 2011/12 (Raveendran et al. 2014). But in Pakistan, between 2005/6 and 2008/9, both the number and percentage of home-based workers in non-agriculture declined: from 1.7 to 1.4 million and from 6.6 per cent to 5.3 per cent (Akhtar and Vanek 2013).

³ See the datasheet available at <https://www.wiego.org/resources/city-level-statistics-informal-workers>

Composition

There are two categories of home-based workers: self-employed and sub-contracted.

The self-employed buy their own raw materials and supplies and sell their own finished goods, mainly to local customers and buyers. The sub-contracted workers (called homeworkers) produce goods for firms up the supply chain, both national and global supply chains. They do not buy their own raw materials or sell their own finished goods, and typically they do not know the backward or forward links of the chain they are engaged in beyond the firm or its contractor that directly outsources work to them. But like the self-employed, the sub-contracted have to cover many of the non-wage costs of production (workplace, equipment, utilities, transport) and absorb many of the risks of production (delayed or cancelled orders, unreliable supply of raw materials, delayed payments, rejected goods). It is important to distinguish between these two groups for organizing, advocacy and policy purposes.

However, in official statistics, the homeworkers are often classified as self-employed because they are not directly supervised by an employer and provide their own workspace and equipment. Or (less often) they may be classified as wage workers as they depend on a lead firm or its intermediary who provides the raw materials, pays them, typically by the piece, for what they produce, and sells the finished goods. In reality, sub-contracted home-based workers — or homeworkers — occupy an intermediate status in employment between fully independent self-employed worker and fully dependent employee.

In three of the four South Asian countries, homeworkers could be distinguished from the self-employed home-based workers in official statistics although, for the reasons described above, the numbers are underestimated as many home-based workers classified as independent are in fact homeworkers. In India, around 33 per cent of all home-based workers, more so among women (45 per cent) than men (25 per cent), were homeworkers; in Pakistan, also 33 per cent of all home-based workers and also more so women than men; and in Bangladesh, around 14 per cent of all home-based workers, more so women and among urban workers (HNSA 2014a).

Branches of Industry

In three of the four South Asian countries with data, manufacturing was the sector with the highest concentration of home-based workers, especially women. In Bangladesh, 55 per cent of home-based workers outside agriculture were in manufacturing: notably stitching garments, weaving textiles, processing rice, making food products, and making bamboo and cane products (Mahmud 2014). Similarly, in India, 55 per cent of all home-based workers outside agriculture were in manufacturing: notably stitching garments, weaving textiles, and making tobacco products (Raveendran et al. 2014). In Pakistan, 92 per cent of all home-based workers outside agriculture were in manufacturing (Akhtar and Vanek 2013). But in Nepal, only 12 per cent of all home-based workers outside agriculture were in manufacturing, while nearly one-third engaged in retail trade from their own homes (Raveendran and Vanek 2013).

II. Needs and Constraints

Like other informal workers, most home-based workers do not enjoy adequate economic opportunities, legal rights, social protection or representative voice: the four pillars of Decent Work according to the ILO (ILO 2002). But home-based workers face additional challenges. Working from in or around their own homes, home-based workers themselves and their activities — as well as their contribution to the economy — remain largely invisible and undervalued. This is particularly true for women, who represent the majority of home-based workers. Their economic activities are often dismissed as an extension of their domestic work, rather than being recognized as production for the market that contributes to the economy.

Because they remain invisible and undervalued, home-based workers tend to be overlooked by policymakers when they design policies, regulations or services. The result is that most sub-contracted home-based workers are not covered under labour or employment law, and most self-employed home-based workers are not covered by commercial law regulating contracts and transactions. Further, the homes-cum-workplaces of home-based workers often lack basic infrastructure services. In addition, policymakers do not understand how wider economic trends impact home-based workers; how inflation increases the price of their inputs; how recession or imports reduce demand for their goods; how competition increases during economic downturns or when factory workers lose their jobs; and how mechanization displaces home-based production (Chen 2014).

A study on the subcontracted incense rollers in Ahmedabad mentioned three structural changes within the incense stick (*agarbatti*) industry: increased competition from incense sticks made in China and Vietnam; mechanization of incense stick cutting and rolling; and higher cost of the bamboo sticks around which the incense paste (called *masala*) is rolled. The higher costs are due in part to deforestation of bamboo forests in east and south India, where the sticks were originally sourced. The manufacturers now have to import sticks from Tripura, a state in the far northeast corner of India. The risks of production, including fluctuating demand, prices and competition, are also borne by the home-based worker, even if she is sub-contracted (Mahadevia et al. 2014).

Home-based workers tend to remain isolated from other workers in their sector (apart from those in their own neighbourhood) and to have limited knowledge of markets and market prices (especially if they are sub-contracted) because they work from their own homes. As a result, they are less likely than other groups of informal workers to be organized, although this is beginning to change (see Section IV). Remaining isolated and unorganized limits their ability as individual workers to bargain in the market for more favourable prices and piece rates or to negotiate with government for basic infrastructure and transport services.

It needs to be noted that homeworkers, a subset of home-based workers, represent a significant share of employment in global supply chains, especially in Asia. Homework in its modern form is driven in large part by the purchasing practices of firms and is facilitated by changes in trade and technology. It is estimated that over 5 million homeworkers are part of garment and textile supply chains in India's domestic and global supply chains alone.

Lead firms and suppliers in global value chains outsource production to homeworkers for several reasons. First, some tasks require specialized skills and intricate work, which cannot be mechanized. Second, they can download the risk of fluctuating demand onto the homeworkers, to whom they issue work orders only when there is demand. Third, they can download most of the non-wage costs of production, such as workplace, equipment, electricity and transport, to the homemaker; and also avoid paying for worker benefits. In other words, homeworkers absorb many of the costs of production as they provide the workplace, equipment, energy, as well as transport to collect and deliver their raw materials and/or finished products. Further, homeworkers in supply chains often face irregular purchase or work orders, irregular supply of raw materials, uneven quality of raw materials, and delayed payments.

It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that the average earnings of home-based workers are not only low but also erratic due to seasonal rhythms, supply chain dynamics, and wider economic trends. The study in three Asian cities found that the average earnings of all home-based workers are quite low, with sub-contracted workers earning less on average than self-employed workers. While equal percentages of sub-contracted and self-employed workers were in the poorest earning quintile of their city, a far higher percentage of the self-employed were in the richest earning quintile (Chen 2014).⁴ In comparing *net*

⁴ For further analyses of the earnings of home-based workers in relation to national per capita income and national poverty lines in South Asia countries, see Sudarshan (2010) and Mehrotra and Biggeri (2005). And for an analysis of the earnings of home-based workers in Malaysia in relation to the wholesale prices of the goods they produce, see Loh-Ludher, Lee (2007).

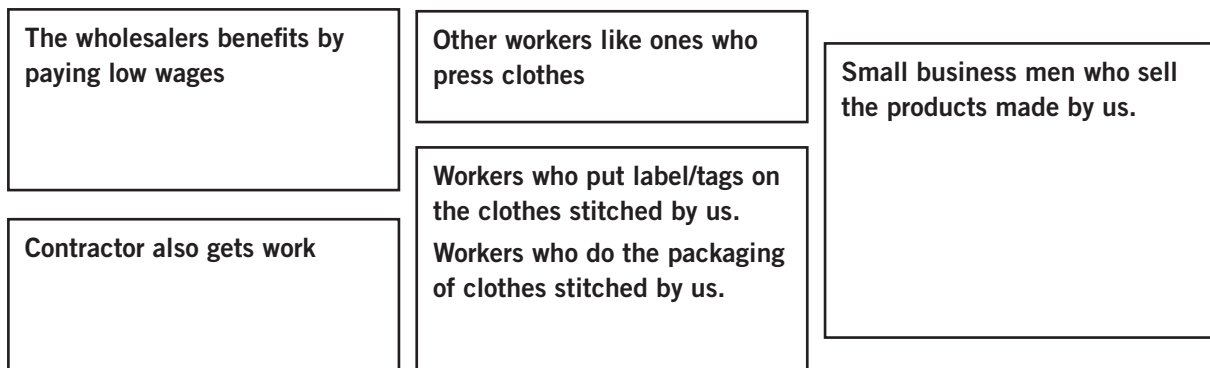
earnings, it is important to highlight that the sub-contracted homeworkers, like the self-employed, have to pay for many of the non-wage costs of production, notably workplace, equipment, utilities and transport. But these costs are not factored into the very low average piece rates.

Despite their isolation, home-based workers have begun to recognize their contributions, to organize and to articulate demands: see Box 1. In the study of home-based work in three Asian cities, home-based workers characterized their contributions as follows:

They contribute to the household budget but also, by working from home, to the care of children and the elderly, to the quality of family life, and to the social fabric of their communities. They provide goods and services at a low cost to low-income people and the general public. They also produce goods at low prices for domestic and global value chains. They do not commute every day and often go to markets on foot or by bicycle, thus helping to reduce air pollution and traffic congestion. They create demand by buying supplies, raw materials, and equipment and paying for transport and other services (such as washing, ironing and packaging of garments they produce). They pay taxes on the raw materials, supplies, and equipment they purchase; and the firms up the chain who sell their finished goods often charge sales taxes.

Chen 2014

Box 1: Contribution to the City Economy



Sources: Ahmedabad Focus Group (FG) 3

III. Impact of City Policies, Services & Practices

Because their home is their workplace, home-based workers are more directly affected than other workers by government policies and practices regarding housing (notably slum upgrading and/or slum eviction-relocation schemes), basic infrastructure services (notably the availability and cost of electricity but also water and sanitation), and zoning regulations (notably whether commercial activities are allowed in residential areas). Like other groups of workers, although not always on a daily basis, home-based workers are also affected by the accessibility and cost of public transport, especially if they are forced to relocate at great distances from their customers, markets or contractors.

Housing

Size and Quality

For home-based workers, whose home is also their workplace, housing is an essential productive asset. A small house hampers productivity, as the home-based worker cannot take bulk work orders because she cannot store raw materials and she cannot work continuously as there are competing needs for the same space by other household members and activities. Also, due to the poor quality of housing, equipment, raw materials and finished goods often get damaged: see Box 2. As a focus group of garment makers in Ahmedabad, India put it: *“We take less work so that we have space to store the material in our house... In case we get work in large amount and if the material gets damaged, we don’t get paid for that work, the trader even deducts cost of that material from our wage”* (Ahmedabad FG 1). In South and South East Asia, monsoon rains force many home-based workers to suspend or reduce production when their roofs leak or their homes flood and when the humidity rises. For example, many products — from incense sticks to screen printed textiles to processed foods — cannot dry due to leaks and humidity. It is also more difficult to store and transport raw materials and finished goods during the rains (Chen 2014).

Box 2: Impact of Small Size and Poor Quality of Housing on Home-Based Workers in Ahmedabad, India

Small Size

- **cannot take bulk work orders:** sometimes only take work they can complete in a day
 - *“In case we get work in large amount and if the material gets damage, we don’t get paid for that work, the trader even deducts cost of that material from our wage”* (FG 1 – garment maker).
- **cannot work continuously:** have to suspend work when children study, family members sleep, or guests visit
 - *“We face difficulty sleeping and sitting in our house. We face uncertainty (i.e. whether to keep working), whenever any guest comes to our house”* (FG 4).
 - *“We have to stop working when we have guests at home. During monsoons our roofs leak and hence the goods are also damaged”* (FG 3).
 - *“I cannot work in the night because using a sewing machine creates a lot of noise. My family members share my sewing space for sleeping and also other activities like dining, due to which I can only work in the morning and afternoon”* (FG 11).

Poor Quality

- **prone to leaks**
 - *“How can we work when rainwater enters in our house during the monsoon rains?”* (FG 1).
 - *“I hang polythene bags below the leaking roof”* (FG 11).
- **prone to flooding**
 - *“I build a small barrier (bund) in front of my main door to stop street water from flooding into my house”* (FG 11).
 - *“I can only afford 500 rupees as a monthly rent, but there are no houses in that range available in Ahmedabad. My house is in the low-lying area and it gets filled with water during the monsoon rains every year”* (FG 11).

Further, home-based workers face occupational health and safety risks, including: *ergonomic risks* relating to poor posture from sitting on the floor or at low tables (incense stick and cigarette rollers); repetitive motion (incense stick and cigarette rollers); and long work hours with limited rest time. They also face *exposure risks* to toxic substances (incense stick rollers, shoe makers, metal workers) (Tipple 2006). These risks are compounded when the home-cum-workplace does not have shelter, water, sanitation, lighting

or ventilation (Chatterjee and Thomas 2014). A comparative study of factory-based and outworkers in the Australian clothing industry found that the level of self-reported injury was over three times higher among outworkers than among factory-based workers undertaking similar tasks (Mayhew and Quinlan 1999).⁵

The study in seven Asian countries reported occupational health and safety hazards as a major concern for home-based workers. In Bangladesh, nearly all respondents reported respiratory and other chronic or acute health problems. In Thailand, many home-based workers, especially older workers, reported eye strain, sore eyes, and blurred vision. Their workplaces have poor lighting and, particularly in the inner-city areas, are often congested, hot, and stuffy. Exposure to dust and other irritants, such as the pungent fumes of kerosene, results in allergies and respiratory diseases. Those engaged in food processing suffer from skin rashes caused by splashes of hot oil while cooking. In Kanpur, India, those working with leather in severely polluted work conditions have to deal with extremely pungent smells. In Nepal, home-based workers are forced to work in candlelight due to frequent power cuts; the dim light affects the eyes and the smoke from the candles irritates the nose and throat (Sinha 2013a). The focus groups in the three-city study identified four main types of outcomes from occupational health and safety hazards: body aches and pains; blisters, cuts, or burns; eye irritation and strain; and respiratory problems. The main causes of these problems are lack of proper seating/work tables, lack of adequate ventilation, and the toxic substances used in production (Chen 2014).

It should also be noted that the children, and other family members, of home-based workers are impacted by noise, dust and other workplace hazards. As an incense stick roller in Ahmedabad commented: *“My house is too small to do home-based work. Also making of incense sticks is a very messy process which makes the whole house dirty and black”* (Ahmedabad FG 11).

Tenure

High rents and the lack of affordable housing is a major concern for those whose home doubles as a workplace. The three-city survey found that 40 per cent of the home-based workers in Ahmedabad live in rented houses; and 9 per cent of the home-based workers in Lahore reported that rents are high. Members of a focus group in Lahore also commented on the behaviour of landlords: *“We have to keep moving to new places and this wastes time and our work is affected as we don’t know where to get orders... We can’t find work easily in the new place. They seize half of our stuff to make up for the rent.”* (Lahore Focus Group 10). A focus group of incense stick rollers in Ahmedabad reported: *“Our landlord doesn’t permit us to do work at the house we have rented from him, arguing that it may damage his house”* (Lahore FG 10).

Location and Relocation

Where they live is also of concern to many home-based workers: as many live in congested, under-serviced, or low-lying areas and/or in areas far from their customers, contractors, and markets. In Bangkok, some were relocated to housing projects in areas on the periphery of the city that were submerged or cut off during the severe flooding in late 2011 and early 2012. Some of these home-based workers are concerned that their residential area will be flooded again. They have heard rumours that the area where they live will, in the future, be used as a flood plain to control flooding elsewhere. Also, in both Ahmedabad and Lahore, some of the home-based workers live in low-lying areas prone to flooding, especially during the monsoon season.

⁵ The study stated that the most significant factor explaining this difference was the payment system. All outworkers were paid solely by the piece, whereas factory workers were paid either under a time plus production bonus system or solely on a time basis. While the incidence of injury was far higher among outworkers, factory-based workers paid under an incentive system reported more injuries than those paid solely on a time basis. Increasing injury was correlated with piecework payment systems.

Relocations result in loss of work which, in turn, results in lower incomes, inability to pay electrical bills, the need to cut expenditures and withdraw children from school, and increased tension within families. In the three-city study, some of the focus groups spoke about the impact of relocation on their work and lives. In Ahmedabad, two focus groups ranked this as a priority issue. One group had been relocated from a slum colony on the banks of the Sabarmati River to make way for a river-front development project. The other focus group stated: *“It is true that AMC (Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation) has given us solid (pucca) houses,⁶ but what is the use when there is no work to do?...The AMC has forcefully demolished our hutments, and has pushed us to the city’s periphery. Commuting is difficult, work has decreased as there are no work contractors near the rehabilitation site”* (Ahmedabad FG 5). To cope, the women have sought alternative employment; have bought household necessities on credit; have taken loans from each other and from moneylenders; or have started using public, rather than private, health and education services which are often of poor quality (Chen 2014).

In Bangkok, where many slum relocations took place in the 1980s and early 1990s, several of the focus groups discussed the struggle to get basic infrastructure services, road connections, public transport services, and social services where they now live. A group of home-based workers that prepares chili paste for a living described being relocated by the National Housing Authority (NHA) to an area prone to flooding with no public transport. As one of the group members commented: *“At the beginning, we were living like beggars.”* (Bangkok FG 10). Eventually, the NHA provided housing loans to the community and promised to build a new road and provide public transportation. In brief, it took a decade or so for those who were evicted and relocated to secure their housing, stabilize their livelihoods, and leverage basic infrastructure and transport services. Most reported that they have fewer employment opportunities and earn less than before they relocated but enjoy better housing and more open residential areas (Chen 2014).⁷

Basic Infrastructure Services

One third of the survey respondents in the three-city study reported lack of basic infrastructure services as a problem. Of particular concern, also raised by all focus groups in Lahore and several in Ahmedabad, is the irregular supply and high cost of electricity. Pakistan is suffering from an acute energy crisis that is directly felt at the base of the economy; all of the focus groups in Lahore ranked irregular supply and/or high price of electricity as a major driving force in their work and lives. Three groups also prioritized the lack of water and sanitation, and one group prioritized the irregular supply and high cost of cooking fuel.

One focus group of garment makers in Lahore detailed the chain of impacts caused by load shedding as follows: *“When there is no electricity they [the contracting firm] cannot make dye and we receive the work late and then our own electricity fails and we have to work around the supply of electricity, which is erratic.”* Another said: *“Our houses are small and closed and we can’t work in the dark. We have to use needle and thread so we can’t see clearly...Light only comes for one hour. We can hardly do anything in that hour...We sit and wait for work. Or we try to finish our housework during load shedding. Or we use emergency lights which are expensive.”* And one noted: *“If we don’t deliver on time the contractors scold us and stop giving orders.”* They summed up the situation in one sentence: *“Work stops due to no electricity”* (Lahore FG 4).

Another focus group in Lahore expressed the problem as follows: *“When it is dark we cannot work. We have closed-in houses and there is no light. If we don’t work how can we eat?”* (Lahore FG 2). In sum, when there is no electricity, production slows down or is delayed, work orders are not met, and future work orders are often cancelled or not issued. And work orders provide essential income.

⁶ *Pucca/pukka* housing refers to dwellings that are designed to be solid and permanent. The term is used in India, Pakistan, and elsewhere in South Asia to refer to housing built of substantial material such as brick, cement, concrete, and timber in contrast to *kucca* housing made from less permanent materials such as mud and thatch.

⁷ See Chen 2014 (*IEMS Sector Report on Home-based Workers*), Box 6, page 39-40 for more details on the evictions and relocations among the home-based worker sample in Bangkok..

In Ahmedabad, all six of the focus groups that ranked irregular supply and/or high price of electricity as a major driving force were comprised of garment makers who used electrical sewing machines. Such machines consume a lot of electricity, especially if the machine is an old model. When there are power outages, the workers cannot operate their electrical sewing machines. If the power does not come back quickly, the women have to work late into the night to make up for lost time and complete their work orders. But in contrast to Lahore, the focus groups in Ahmedabad were more concerned with the rising cost of electricity than with power outages. This is because the price of electricity has gone up in recent years and power outages are not as widespread or prolonged as in Lahore. As one garment maker in Ahmedabad noted: “*Earlier my electrical bill used to be 500 rupees every two months but now it is as high as 1000 rupees every two months for the same level of use*” (Ahmedabad FG 2). The workers also noted that if the electrical company finds more than one electrical sewing machine being used in a single house, they reclassify the electrical connection as commercial, rather than residential, and charge a higher unit price.

When power outages are frequent or prolonged, or when they can no longer afford to pay their electrical bills, some garment makers shift back to manual sewing machines. One focus group in Ahmedabad discussed a number of problems associated with shifting to manual machines. Firstly, they cannot stitch as quickly on manual machines, compared to electrical machines, and the finishing of the garment is also not as good. Secondly, their legs begin to hurt from working the pedals on the manual sewing machines — forcing them to take breaks that undermine their productivity. As one garment maker said: “*My legs pain and my feet swell. I am not able to do work for at least three-four days in a month and there is loss of income during those days*” (Ahmedabad FG15). Other garment makers reported that they take painkillers and try to keep working. Manual sewing machines also make more noise and require more frequent maintenance than electrical machines.

It is important to highlight that slum-related health and environmental problems pose particular concerns for home-based workers, as they both live and work in those environments. Urban service-related hazards include problems of sewage, open drains or non-existent drains, poor waste management, the absence of water, and the presence of bad smelling canals and ponds. All these can take a toll on the health and productivity of home-based workers. Additionally, as with other workers, mainly women, the time they spend collecting water or disposing of garbage represents an opportunity cost, time spent away from their market activities.

Transport Services

Home-based does not mean home-bound. Both sub-contracted and (more so) self-employed home-based workers have to leave their homes on a regular basis as part of their work. So the distance between the market/contractor/customer and the home-cum-workplace, as well as the availability and cost of public transport directly impact the time and money spent in commuting and transporting goods and, thus, the productivity and earnings of the workers. In all three cities in the WIEGO study, nearly one fifth (18 per cent) of the survey respondents reported that they face problems transporting goods to and from markets: this is more the case for the self-employed (24 per cent) than the sub-contracted (15 per cent), as might be expected.

In Ahmedabad and Lahore, where there are strict norms of female modesty, seclusion, and veiling among the Muslim communities, even Muslim home-based workers leave home for work-related reasons. In Ahmedabad, a focus group of Muslim sub-contracted garment makers all reported that they go to a local market every day or every other day to supply finished goods to, and collect raw materials from, their contractors. Also, they all go once a week to a specialized market to buy accessories like thread, sewing machine needles and oil.

The focus groups discussed the problems and costs associated with the lack, irregularity, inaccessibility, and cost of public transport: not only the financial cost but also the opportunity cost of the worker's time (or that of other household members). Inadequate public transport means that they cannot get work orders or raw materials on time (thereby having to wait for the next round of work orders/supplies) or miss deadlines for returning finished goods (thereby having their payments reduced or their goods rejected). As one woman in Bangkok reported: *"I would like to go to the markets on the weekend, but there is no bus. Sometimes I have no choice but to take a taxi"* (Bangkok FG 9). It also means that the women and/or members of their family — whoever transports the goods — suffer exhaustion, headaches, and body pain, especially when they have to walk long distances. As focus groups in Ahmedabad and Lahore, respectively, reported: *"From carrying the goods, we get tired and get body aches. We have to sit on the roadside for some time and take rest. Otherwise, sometimes, we get our children to collect the goods"* (Ahmedabad FG 3). Another participant echoed these remarks *"We carry our stuff and walk for hours and use Panadol [a brand-name analgesic] for headaches as we get tired"* (Lahore FG 6). Other problems ensue; a member of a focus group in Ahmedabad noted: *"Because there is no public transport, we have to walk to the contractor's place. While coming back, we have to carry the raw materials. During the monsoon season, we face a lot of problems"* (Ahmedabad FG 3).

Transport is of particular concern for those who get relocated to the periphery of cities to make way for urban renewal and infrastructure projects. In Ahmedabad, relocated home-based workers reported spending 100-125 rupees (more than an average day's earnings) each time they go to the contractor to deliver finished goods and fetch raw materials. Across the three cities, home-based workers reported spending an average of US\$ 20 per month on transport, representing around 30 per cent of total work-related expenditures. They also reported that the volume of their work orders has greatly decreased as their contractors do not contact them, even if work is available, as they cannot deliver on a timely basis. Also, the contractors are not willing to come to the relocation sites to distribute work (Mahadevia et al. 2014). More significantly, about one quarter of the home-based workers who spend money on transport operate at a loss.

Similar Issues Across South and South East Asia

The seven-country study found that home-based workers across South and South East Asia faced similar problems in regard to housing, basic infrastructure services, and transport. In Nepal, home-based workers reported that they live in one-room houses because rents are so high. In the Philippines, home-based workers reported that rents had increased markedly in recent years. In Thailand, those living in rented houses reported that they have to pay flat rates imposed by their landlords for electricity and water (Sinha 2013a). In Phnom Penh, Cambodia, the home-based workers who rent homes worried that their low and erratic earnings would force them to default on their rental payments and face eviction. In Siem Reap, Cambodia, home-based workers were worried that the government might relocate them to a new location far away from their suppliers and buyers. And in Kanpur, India, home-based workers resisted being evicted from slum areas and relocated to government housing units because work was not available in the relocation areas (Sinha 2013a).

In 2015, HomeNet South Asia conducted a study on the impact of upgrading of urban informal settlements on the livelihoods of home-based workers.⁸ The study found that basic infrastructure improvement in two informal settlements of Bhubaneswar, India, increased incomes resulting from increased time for production (due to water connections), decreased health expenditures (due to sanitation interventions) and increased time for child care (due to water connections).

⁸ This study was undertaken as part of a home-based worker project under an Urban Livelihoods program of the Lakshmi Mittal and Family South Asia Institute of Harvard University. Janhavi Dave, "Ensuring Access to Basic Services for Home-Based Workers: Learnings From Bhubaneshwar, Odisha" in *Empowering Home Based Workers In India*, 2016.

During three regional workshops convened by the WIEGO network in early 2014 — one each in Asia, Africa and Latin America — home-based workers and other sectors of informal workers articulated a platform of demands (WIEGO Network 2014). The common core demands by all sectors of informal workers included: the right to organization and representation; legal identity and standing; and economic and social rights, including social protection. The key sector-specific demands of home-based workers, differentiated by whether they were made by self-employed, sub-contracted or all home-based workers, were as follows:

- **freedom from forced relocations and zoning restrictions** (all)
- the **right to basic infrastructure services** – water, electricity, sanitation – at their **homes-cum-workplaces** (all)
- **access to markets** for their goods and services (self-employed)
- the right to **fair prices in markets** (self-employed) and to **fair piece-rates** (sub-contracted)
- **protection from** subjection to **poor quality raw materials, arbitrary cancellation of work orders, arbitrary rejection of goods, or delayed payments** (sub-contracted)
- the **right to secure, transparent contracts**: work orders (sub-contracted) and commercial transactions (self-employed)

IV. Organizing Strategies & Campaigns: National, Regional and Global

Organizing home-based workers has unique challenges. This is because home-based workers are isolated, scattered and “atomized.” They do not know that other workers face the same terms and conditions, making it harder to generate solidarity (Gopal 2005, Burchielli et al. 2015, Loh-Ludher 2007). This is also because sub-contracted workers need to organize to demand labour rights while the self-employed need to organize around market knowledge and access. Yet, despite these odds, home-based workers have been organizing.

Scale of Organizing

Today, there are three regional networks of national and local organizations of home-based workers. HomeNet South East Asia (founded in 1996) has 5 national affiliates with a combined total of nearly 30,000 home-based workers as members; HomeNet South Asia (founded in 2000) has 58 local and national affiliates with a combined total of around 600,000 members; and HomeNet Eastern Europe (founded in 2013) has 13 local and national affiliates with around 48,000 members. In Africa, WIEGO is working with organizations of home-based workers in five countries (South Africa, Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia, Tanzania) to set up a regional working group. And in Latin America, WIEGO has helped build a network of organizations of home-based workers in eight countries.

Forms of Organization

Neither informal workers nor their organizations fit easily into mainstream definitions of workers and worker organizations. The organizations of home-based workers, like organizations of other groups of informal workers, take various forms: trade unions, cooperatives, self-help groups, associations or hybrid forms. For those organizations that are registered, their legal form is often dictated by what is possible under the regulations of their respective countries and may, therefore, differ from their de facto structure, strategies and activities. Regardless of particular form and registration, what is important is how well each organization deals with the economic concerns of its members and whether the organization’s governance is representative and democratic (Bonner and Spooner 2011, Carré 2013).

Especially in the case of home-based workers, some organizations are started by pro-labour non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Some such organizations have a hybrid structure, with both NGO and MBO members and with representatives of both constituencies on their board. HomeNet South Asia has recently shifted from a hybrid MBO-cum-NGO structure into a more representative, democratic MBO-led structure with a constitution that mandates the respective role and power of the MBO and NGO affiliates, giving MBO affiliates a greater voice in decision-making (Bonner and Carré 2013).

The need for transnational linkages and global advocacy is driven in large part by the globalization of production and markets. Organizations recognize the need to engage with international agencies and the international development community, which deal with issues that affect their work and livelihoods. Given that businesses and governments are taking advantage of the rapid transmission of ideas and technologies, organizations of informal workers felt the need to do the same. In effect, globalization has provided both the impetus and the means for home-based workers' organizations to link up transnationally and engage on the global stage.

Organizational Strategies

Organizations of informal workers, including home-based workers, typically pursue a wider set of strategies than trade unions of formal workers pursue (Carré 2013). See Box 3 for a typology of common core and supplemental strategies.

Box 3: Typology of Organizing Strategies

Common Core Strategies: pursued by most organizations

- Collective bargaining/Negotiating
 - with employers/contractors
 - with government (local, provincial, national)
 - with private companies, exporters, suppliers
- Policy advocacy
- Mobilization campaigns

Supplemental Strategies: undertaken by some organizations

- Economic development services, including financial and marketing services
- Collective economic action: e.g. cooperatives that provide services of various kinds and producer groups that do joint marketing
- Collective access to social protection: negotiating access to existing schemes, advocating for more inclusive schemes or providing their own schemes
- Worker education, including awareness building

Source: Adapted from Carré 2013

Collective Bargaining

Home-based workers have to bargain with local government for basic infrastructure services to make their homes-cum-workplaces more productive. Like other informal workers, they need to bargain for accessible and affordable public transport between their homes and the markets where they buy and sell goods, or their contractors. Those who are self-employed have to bargain with suppliers and buyers for fair prices and terms of trade. Those who are sub-contracted have to bargain with lead firms and their intermediaries, the contractors, who outsource goods to them in order to obtain regular work orders, quality raw materials,

fair piece rates, and timely payments (Burchielli et al. 2014). But home-based workers without a fall-back position are often afraid to bargain because, as a home-based worker in Ahmedabad put it: “*We are afraid of bargaining because if we squeeze the employer, the employer will do the same to us*” (Chen 2014: 54).

Promising Examples

There are promising examples from cities around the world where home-based workers and their organizations have been able to demand better, more inclusive urban policies that integrate home-based workers and their livelihoods into urban planning and local economic policies. Organizations of home-based workers have also been successful accessing bigger and better markets for their members, in gaining victories for their members and other home-based workers in either the local or national policy arenas in some countries, and have joined hands across nations to form regional networks to bring visibility to the home-based workers, strengthen their livelihoods and to build a regional/global platform of demands.

Local

HomeNet Thailand (HNT) has facilitated City Dialogues to highlight and address the need for better public transportation for home-based workers and other informal workers in resettlement areas around Bangkok. These ongoing dialogues, started in 2012, provide a platform for informal workers to articulate their realities and problems to city authorities. The City Dialogues have resulted in tangible outcomes including more regular bus services during rush hour, and a pedestrian bridge in one flood-prone district (Tangworamongkon 2015).

HomeNet South Asia (HNSA) has used the study of multiple cities/countries in Asia, cited earlier, to facilitate city level policy dialogues between home-based worker organizations and city officials. In Faisalabad, HomeNet Pakistan negotiated a water filtration plant at a location with a concentration of home-based workers. The plant now serves 2,000 households. In Kathmandu, HomeNet South Asia, and SAATHI, a local NGO, partnered to meet with municipal officials to discuss the water, sanitation, and electricity needs of home-based workers. As a result, collaborative efforts are underway to install solar street lights and a 500-litre drinking water tank, and to devise a paid waste collection system. As a result of dialogues in Dhaka, Bangladesh between HomeNet South Asia and the Dhaka North City Corporation (DNCC), 20 million taka⁹ was allocated in the 2013-2014 corporation budget for garbage disposal in two slums (personal communication, Sapna Joshi).

The Self-Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) in India is the world’s largest trade union of informal workers, all women, and has been instrumental in achieving higher wages or earnings and better working conditions for home-based workers in many industries. SEWA is one of the first organizations in the world to draw attention to home-based workers — both nationally and globally. In Ahmedabad city, the SEWA Union has a membership of 107,530 home-based workers, of whom 21,114 are *bidi* (cigarette) rollers, 5,831 are kite makers, 38,356 are *agarbatti* (incense stick) rollers, and 42,229 are piece rated tailors (garment workers) (Dave and Kabeer 2015).

SEWA has developed three sister organizations that provide housing finance and basic infrastructure services to home-based workers and other informal workers: SEWA Bank, a cooperative bank owned and managed by SEWA members; SEWA Grih Rin Ltd., a for-profit housing finance company; and Mahila Housing SEWA Trust (SEWA MHT), a not-for-profit institution that provides or leverages infrastructure services and promotes more inclusive urban policies. SEWA Bank and SEWA Grih Rin have proved that home-based workers use and repay housing loans to build or buy a house, make repairs, or add on to an existing structure.

⁹ Equivalent to about USD \$257,480 on November 30, 2013 (per www.xe.com currency converter).

SEWA MHT, often in partnership with the government, provides infrastructure services to upgrade informal settlements and slums, including drainage, sanitation, electricity, and streetlights. It also provides technical advice on how to improve or expand existing houses and build new ones. In Ahmedabad, India, SEWA MHT collaborated on a cost-sharing project called Parivartan (“change”) with the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation (AMC) and private companies, which extended a package of infrastructure services to 45 slum settlements (3,386 households). The package included water connections, under-ground sewerage and toilets for individual households, storm water drainage, road paving, solid waste management, and street lighting. SEWA MHT’s role was to mobilize slum residents to join the project and form community-based organizations. The residents then shared the costs of the service provision and monitored service delivery.

In 2000, SEWA MHT collaborated with the Ahmedabad Electricity Board (AEC) to ensure the availability of safe, reliable, and legal electrical supply to slum communities in Ahmedabad. SEWA MHT negotiated the delinking of land tenure from electrical service, and “substituted it with an indemnity bond that requires slum dwellers to sign an agreement stating they will not pursue any legal proceeding with AEC if they are evicted or relocated from their homes” (Sinha 2013b). Through this program, “over 100,000 houses in the slums of Ahmedabad have accessed legal electricity connections” (Sinha 2013b). SEWA MHT has also persuaded the AEC to adjust its policies and systems for poor households. The electricity board has adopted monthly rather than bi-monthly billing, so bills are paid in smaller installments, and introduced the use of waterproof electrical meters outside homes. SEWA MHT has replicated these interventions elsewhere in Gujarat and in nine other Indian states, and began working in Bangladesh and Nepal in 2014 (Chen and Beard 2018).

At the city level, SEWA Bharat has been working to increase livelihood opportunities for home-based workers through the creation of new production models and enterprise development. For example, SEWA has been instrumental in setting up a producer company owned and managed by women producers, for scenting *agarbatti*. This model has many lessons for augmenting income for the home-based workers: collective enterprise, value addition, mechanized production, linkages with a private company for marketing, and promoting institutions owned and managed by women themselves.

In Delhi, SEWA Bharat has also promoted a model around promoting embroidery centres in the slum areas to bring home-based workers into direct contact with the international markets, eliminating middle men. Ruaab SEWA is a unique model of garment production and sourcing that is owned and managed by women producers, thus ensuring an ethical and transparent supply chain. Nearly 100 women are shareholders, and at any given time depending on work orders, between 75 to 200 women are working with Ruaab SEWA, largely from the slums of Delhi, but also weavers from Bhagalpur and Murshidabad.

National

HomeNet Thailand has effectively campaigned with and for home-based workers and other informal workers on the national policy front, in alliance with other civil society organizations. The first such success was the universal health coverage scheme for informal workers and other groups not covered by formal health insurance. Thailand stands out for its decade-long inclusion of civil society organizations, including HomeNet Thailand, in an alliance for health reform, which contributed to the campaign for what became known, initially, as the 30 Baht Scheme (Namsomboon and Kusakabe 2011, Alfors and Lund 2012). When the 30 Baht Scheme was replaced by the free Universal Coverage Scheme, the alliance of civil society networks, including HomeNet Thailand, was again involved in the design of the scheme, in the legislation, and thereafter in facilitating, monitoring and evaluating implementation.

HomeNet Thailand also campaigned successfully for a Homeworkers Protection Act, which entitles homeworkers in Thailand to minimum wage, occupational health and safety protection and other fundamental labour rights. To understand obstacles to implementing these protections, under a WIEGO project on law and informality, HomeNet Thailand examined instances where homeworkers had attempted to access their rights and to activate the tripartite implementation committee (comprised of government,

private health providers and civil society) set up under the Act. The group also made a concerted effort to inform homemaker leaders and homemakers about their rights under the Act through workshops with lawyers and government officials, posters, newsletters and other documents. In 2014, as a direct outcome of these struggles, three home-based workers supported by HomeNet Thailand were included in the tripartite implementation committee.

SEWA's efforts to bring voice, visibility and validity to home-based workers have been ongoing and multipronged (Sinha 2013b). Organizing home-based workers has given them voice; highlighting their large numbers and contribution to the economy has brought visibility to the workers and their work; and finally, ensuring that they are included in the government schemes and policies has granted them validity.¹⁰ It was due to the coordinated campaign by networks of home-based workers globally, led by SEWA, that the International Labour Organization adopted the Convention on Home Work (C177) in 1996. The Convention is the first comprehensive, international standard in favour of any category of informal workers.

SEWA MHT in India has also campaigned for an enabling policy environment for housing and infrastructure for the poor at the national level in India, including procedures for better transparency and accountability regarding the housing subsidy to which the poor are entitled; and has worked to reform state-level rehabilitation policies and leverage urban town planning and tenurial systems for the urban working poor in the informal economy. In the area of housing and infrastructure finance, SEWA MHT has advocated for enabling regulations and incentives to increase the access of the poor to formal housing finance.

Regional and Global

Organizations working with home-based workers from eight countries in South and South East Asia — Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, Sri Lanka and Thailand — along with city mayors and administrators from those countries, came together in a Regional Conference of City Authorities and Home-Based Workers in May 2014 in Pataya, Thailand to highlight how good civic amenities enhance the productivity, livelihoods and living standards of urban home-based workers. The conference participants developed and adopted an “Asian Cities Declaration on Home-Based Workers, 2014” (HNSA 2014b). In 2015, HomeNet South Asia and WIEGO organized the first-ever global conference of home-based workers in New Delhi, India. Over 100 home-based worker representatives and supporters from 24 countries participated in the conference and jointly formulated the Delhi Declaration, the first global declaration of home-based workers.

Key recommendations of both the 2014 Asian Cities Declaration and the 2015 Delhi Declaration include: recognize the home as workplace and slums as sites of economic activity; integrate home-based workers and their livelihood activities in local economic development plans; extend tenure security through in-situ regularization and improvement in all existing settlements; extend basic infrastructure to all homes and settlements; and extend public transport services to all settlements.

In partnership with SEWA, and with support from the South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), HNSA has launched a marketing initiative in seven South Asian countries aimed at increasing employment and marketing opportunities for home-based workers. Through this project, home-based workers gain market access, become both owners and beneficiaries of the businesses created, and learn how to manage complex business organizations. Approximately 100,000 home-based workers in the SAARC region have benefitted from this initiative; 13,800 have been provided work with an increase in income varying from 25 per cent to 60 per cent.

¹⁰In Ahmedabad, SEWA's impact on the income and earnings of home-based workers has been documented. In the period between 2009-2014, there was a reported 78 per cent increase in income of *agarbatti* rollers, 53 per cent increase in income for the *bidi* rollers, 88 per cent increase in income for the kite makers and garment makers. In addition, SEWA home-based worker members had increased access to SEWA financial services and also to low cost supplies (Dave and Kebeer 2015).

In 2018, representatives of the three regional HomeNets — Eastern Europe, South Asia, and South East Asia — as well as the fledgling networks in Africa and Latin America decided to establish a global network of home-based workers with support from WIEGO. They agreed to an extensive consultative process to ensure that the networks and organizations of home-based workers fully participate in the planning process for the global network. And they set a launch date of 2020.

Conclusion

As the evidence presented in this paper has shown, three areas of urban policies, plans and practices have direct impact on the livelihoods and productivity of home-based workers: informal settlements and housing policies, basic infrastructure and transport services, and zoning regulations.

Housing policies directly impact home-based workers, more than is the case for other groups of informal workers. To secure their livelihoods and make them more productive, home-based workers need good quality, low-cost housing in central locations as well as affordable and reliable basic infrastructure services (water, sanitation and electricity) for their homes-cum-workplaces. Provision of work sheds or other work spaces for home-based workers should be included in the design of low-cost housing and settlements.

Similarly, settlement schemes need to factor in the livelihood of home-based workers and other informal workers. Evictions and relocations of homes and other workplaces, especially to the periphery of cities at a distance from markets, contractors and customers, pose a direct threat to the livelihoods of home-based workers and other urban informal workers. The best approach to protecting and enhancing the livelihoods of home-based workers, and other informal workers, is in-situ upgrading of informal settlements and informal housing. This will require that city planners recognize informal settlements and houses as sites of production and build them into plans for the allocation and zoning of urban land. If and when home-based workers and their families have to be relocated, efforts should be made to ensure that, from the outset, the relocation sites have adequate shelter, basic infrastructure, transport services, and access to markets, in addition to education and medical facilities.

Zoning policies need to reflect the significance and location of home-based work. Overly strict separation of land uses (such as single-use zones) can negatively impact the livelihoods of urban home-based workers. It is important to promote a balanced mix of uses that fruitfully interact with each other. In regard to home-based production, “it is important to distinguish not only land uses but also the scale of the uses — because, for example, a small tailor workshop may enrich a residential neighbourhood while a sewing factory may cause undue nuisance” (Nohn 2011). Distinguishing both land uses and the scale of uses would allow policymakers to better address the needs of home-based workers. For home-based work, “it may be advisable to let neighbours decide whether or not such activities are desirable in the neighbourhood” (WIEGO Network 2014: 4). Finally, transport systems and transport services need to be designed with the view of connecting home-based workers and other informal workers to the markets where they buy and sell and the places where they work.

Clearly, there is a link between urban policies, plans and practices and home-based workers and other groups of urban informal workers. Most existing urban policies, plans and practices are not designed to support and protect the urban informal workforce and, therefore, often have negative impacts on the working poor. If they want to reduce poverty and inequality and to enhance overall growth and development in their cities, municipal governments need to recognize that most informal workers are working poor people trying to earn an honest living and contributing to the urban economy of their cities. They also need to recognize that most urban informal activities are situated in private houses or on public land. More specifically, they need to recognize that most slum or squatter settlements and many informal houses — as well as public land or spaces — are sites of production and distribution.

In sum, municipal governments need to recognize the contribution of the informal workforce, including home-based workers, to their cities and to integrate informal activities into the plans, policies and practices of their cities. They should do so by inviting informal worker leaders to the policymaking table.

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About WIEGO: Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) is a global network focused on securing livelihoods for the working poor, especially women, in the informal economy. We believe all workers should have equal economic opportunities and rights. WIEGO creates change by building capacity among informal worker organizations, expanding the knowledge base about the informal economy and influencing local, national and international policies. Visit www.wiego.org.

