Introduction and Documentation Framework

Making home-based work environments safer, healthier and productive. Experiences and insights from MHT's work.

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BACKGROUND

Home-based work represents a significant share of urban employment in India. Between 2017 and 2018, it was estimated that 418.5 lakhs (41.85 million) people or 9.1% of people employed were home-based workers of which women comprised about 39.4% of workers in urban areas (WIEGO, 2020). Home-based workers produce goods and services through remunerative work ranging from *agarbatti* (incense stick) rolling and packing, to tailoring and cooking or catering in their own homes or adjacent grounds or premises for domestic or global markets. Homes are also used as work or storage spaces for groups of workers who work mainly outside the home, including street vendors, waste pickers, and small entrepreneurs. These homes-cum-workplaces are located in large slums and informal settlements, and sometimes in public housing complexes. The housing units in slums are very small, crowded with inadequate natural light and ventilation, with no or limited access to water and sanitation, and poor construction quality. The poor quality of habitat has a direct bearing on the health, safety, and productivity of home-based workers.

CHALLENGES OF HOMES DOUBLING AS WORKPLACES

Home-based workers face extreme difficulty in tight and cramped living spaces when their homes double as workplaces. With no clear divide between the living and working space, they often experience reduced productivity as household chores overlap with livelihood activities. They don't have adequate space to store the raw materials or their finished products which handicaps them from undertaking bulk orders. They constantly reorganize their work equipment and house furniture to accommodate their livelihood and household activities at different times of the day. The quality of housing is inadequate, leading to leakage and floods during monsoon making it impossible to work in and store their products. They live in unhygienic living environments prone to dust, dirt, and insects. Additionally, many homes lack the required amount of natural light and ventilation severely compromising the health of their inhabitants. Many residents also use chemicals or produce excess smoke for their products, adding additional stress to their health as well as their families' health. Home-based workers do not have access to well-designed or ergonomically efficient equipment and utilize low levels of technology

that affect their health. Many constantly complain about backaches, sprained legs, and body pain due to improper working postures and surroundings. Such living environments that give rise to occupational health hazards pose a health and financial burden on the residents.

Home-based workers are often exploited as a result of their "informal" nature, leading to irregular work orders, low wages, and overdue payments. The home-based work sector is also volatile; often fluctuating based on wider economic trends, making their already minimal earnings more erratic. The non-wage costs of production (equipment, workplace, utilities) that they often have to bear further cuts into their income. Due to the lack of even basic infrastructure services like water and electricity, slum residents resort to illegal connections and often pay exorbitant amounts for them. Women, as primary caregivers in many families, face the brunt of the absence of services as they travel long distances and spend hours trying to avail water and sanitation facilities for their household. This eats into their productive working hours. Furthermore workers pay a considerable amount of their earnings as rent and yet rely on the landlords' permission to undertake their home-based work. In the absence of technical assistance and collateral, they have poor access to credit, housing loans, and formal channels of finance. This deprives them of the opportunity to secure ownership of their living and workplace. Many live in the constant fear of eviction and displacement. Home-based workers who get displaced find it difficult to make new connections to find work and raw materials.

Home-based workers are more directly affected than other workers by government policies and practices that guide housing, development and availability of basic infrastructure like water, sanitation, electricity and transport. Informal settlements with large concentrations of home-based workers thus need serious policy interventions and infrastructure improvements to ensure that they have adequate provisioning of shelter and services. Home-based workers also need a greater voice and agency to engage with and influence key city-level decision-making processes and address habitat issues in their own communities.

Challenges of home doubling as workplace; Insights from literature review

Lack of adequate living and working space

6.92 sqm

average per capita space consumption in a slum household (Ahmad, 2015)

Poor quality construction of informal settlements

5.5 lakhs

slum households live in structurally bad and dilapidated dwelling units (GoI, 2015)

Lack of access to basic infrastructure services

2 hours

lost each day in collecting water when not available within premises (WIEGO, 2010)

Inadequate light, ventilation, and thermal comfort

2%

Loss in productivity for every degree rise above 25° C of indoor temperature (Vellingiri et al., 2020)

Inefficient sources of lighting

18+ hours

average usage of artificial lights in slum households (Debnath et al., 2017)

Lack of tenure security and mortgageable title

11.3 mn

people across India face potential threat of eviction or relocation (Housing and Land Rights Network, 2019)

Home-based businesses are small and use energy inefficiently

40%

of monthly energy consumption is towards livelihoods (Mahila Housing SEWA Trust)

Limited mobility and access to jobs and markets

<1%

average trip rates of women in urban India, much lower than that of all men (Mahadevia, D., 2015)

Home-based work is legally disincentivized through restrictive zoning regulations

12%

of urban workers are stigmatized as informal and subjected to socioeconomic exclusion (Nohn, M., 2011)

Impact of COVID-19 on home-based workers

30-40%

fall in the income of women home-based workers in April 2021 (Mahila Housing SEWA Trust, 2021)

ABOUT THE DOCUMENTATION

WIEGO spearheaded this documentation of Mahila Housing Sewa Trust (MHT's) work under their "**Urban Policies Program**", that aims to shape urban policy debates and government practices and increase the visibility of informal workers, their issues and contributions. One of the objectives of the program is to identify and disseminate promising examples of effective advocacy and interventions in service delivery and urban planning processes that have resulted in improvements in habitats and livelihoods of home-based workers.

The Mahila Housing SEWA Trust (MHT), set up in 1994, grew from SEWA's work with the women engaged in the informal economy, in response to their growing demand for better infrastructure facilities and secure home, which is also their productive asset and workplace. MHT started providing technical and financial assistance, legal knowledge, and training for women home-based workers to access public services and upgrade their homes. Through its grassroots programs in habitat development, climate change resilience, and participatory governance, MHT empowers women from low-income communities to exercise their rights and collectively bargain for improved living and working environments. This document draws from MHT's twenty-five years of experience with local communities, governing bodies, and various planning and design experts, to capture key insights from their work and lay the way forward for future interventions and advocacy efforts to integrate home-based workers into urban policies and improvement programs. This document is conceived as a way to facilitate engagement with networks and organizations of home-based workers, architects, urban designers, planners, and other technical experts who are working or wish to work on this topic.

DOCUMENTATION METHODOLOGY AND FRAMEWORK

The goal for this documentation was to capture and present an in-depth investigation of MHT's interventions at various scales from individual households and communities to advocacy around city plans and policies towards "making home-based work environments safer, healthier and productive." The investigation started with literature reviews to gather and synthesize existing knowledge and outline key issues of women home-based workers from low-income communities in India. This was supported by a thorough review of MHT's work in the past twenty-five years highlighting MHT's interventions across multiple sectors (Annexure 1 presents the annotated bibliography of all reviewed documents). Building on this review and initial interactions with the MHT team and home-based workers, a three-pronged framework was developed to organize insights from MHT's vast and diverse portfolio, cutting across multiple sectors and scales.
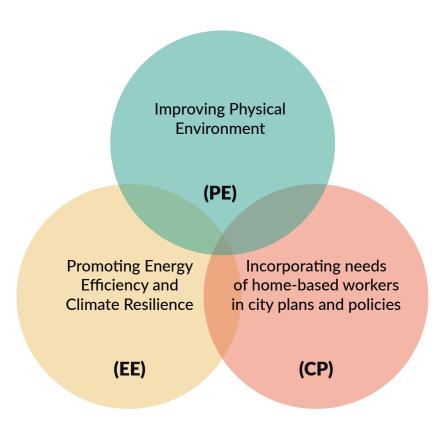
The framework posits three interlinked strategies:

1. Improving the physical environment, 2. Promoting energy efficiency and climate resilience, and 3. Incorporating the needs of the home-based workers in city plans and policies, that MHT employs to make home-based environments safer, healthier, and more productive. Guided by this framework, specific data and experiences were captured through telephonic and video interviews with home-based workers and MHT's program teams, supported with site visits (Annexure 2 gives details of the interviews conducted during this documentation).

The final documentation outcome is in the form of eight thematic briefs categorized under the three broad strategies (Illustration 1). The thematic briefs are supported by two cross-sectoral case study briefs that showcase MHT's sustained efforts with low-income communities over a long period of time enabling their incremental progress. Each brief elaborates on three components: Context, MHT's approach (supported by illustrations and case studies), and Learning and direction of further advocacy (Illustrated on pages 6-7). The briefs come together to collectively represent MHT's diverse interventions, as well as work independently as an effective advocacy tool to engage with different actors and service providers across multiple sectors.

This documentation was carried out amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, during which MHT's regular programs slowed down and face-to-face interactions and field visits had to be limited. MHT's focus was on mobilizing resources and carrying out extensive relief work with the support of community leaders. In this context, an additional thematic brief was added capturing MHT's emergency relief strategy specific to their COVID-19 pandemic response in slum settlements.

Illustration 1: Documentation framework: A three-pronged strategy for improving home-based work environments

Improving Physical Environment (PE)

Promoting Energy Efficiency and Climate Resilience (EE)

Incorporating needs of home-based workers in city plans and policies (CP)

PE1 Optimize and expand living and working space through efficient layout, design, and incremental upgrade

CP1 Influence design and processes of slum redevelopment and public housing projects

EE1 Enable access to legal electricity and affordable green energy solutions

PE2 Improve access to individual water and sanitation

CP2 Improve women's mobility and their access to jobs and markets

EE2 Promote innovations to improve light, ventilation and thermal comfort

PE3 Secure land and property rights for women home-based workers

CP3 Amplify voices of home-based workers in city-level urban planning and governance processes

ER Emergency relief in crisis and disaster situations; COVID-19 relief

CS1 A house of her dreams: Story of Meena Soni from Vishwas Nagar, Ahmedabad

CS2 Rebuilding a home – and a life: Story of Zarinaben from Sawda Ghevra resettlement colony, Delhi
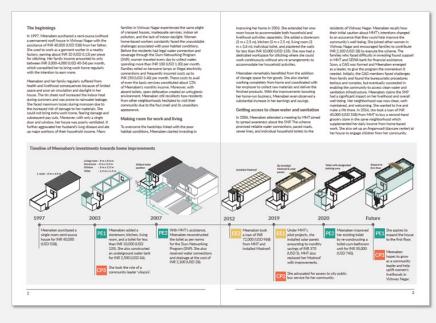
Physical Environment (PE): Brief 1

Case Study (CS): Brief 1

THEMATIC BRIEF OUTLINE

Context

The context gives a concise background to the situation of home-based workers in India, pertaining to the specific issues discussed in the brief. It highlights the challenges that workers face and gives an insight into the measures in place to combat them. By addressing the gaps that impede the home-based workers to access measures in the status-quo, the context establishes the need for MHT to intervene and provide holistic, long-term solutions.

MHT's approach

This section outlines the areas of MHT's intervention across varying scales, locations, and sectors. It describes MHT's work with the community, government bodies at all levels, private sector agencies, and service providers to minimize the challenges discussed in the context. This section underscores MHT's role as an agency for change in the particular thematic area presented in each brief.

Box and Illustrations

The box supports MHT's approach through case studies to demonstrate how MHT's intervention has benefited home-based workers and their communities. The case study boxes provide a personal narrative and description of the struggles of home-based workers and the impact of MHT's support for better physical environments and participation in local and city-level governance. Some studies are also supported with illustrations to explain specific details visually.

Quotes from interviews with grassroots women

The quotes are accounts given by women home-based workers from low-income communities about their circumstances and MHT's role in working with them to improve their living and working conditions. They reinforce the impact of MHT's process of empowering women workers to bring about significant change in their communities.

Learnings and direction of future advocacy

MHT's experience of engaging with various communities and stakeholders is recorded and used to formulate a way forward for MHT. This sets a guideline to work on the challenges that still persist for women home-based workers and provides a direction for advocacy of better policy measures for the future.

CASE STUDY BRIEF OUTLINE

Two special case study briefs of Meena Soni from Ahmedabad and Zarinaben from Delhi are included in the document to showcase MHT's sustained efforts with women from low-income communities to improve their households over the past twenty-five years of MHT's work. These case studies present a narrative summary of lives of two home-based workers along with details of the steps taken to improve their habitats over the years. A brief timeline of these interventions is illustrated to show the process of upgrading their houses.

PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS

Mahila Housing Sewa Trust (MHT)

The Mahila Housing SEWA Trust (MHT) has been working for more than twenty-five years to improve the quality of habitats in low-income informal settlements in Indian cities. MHT's mission is to strengthen collectives of grassroots women in the urban informal sector to advance constructive dialogue and action on improving their housing, living and working environments. MHT facilitates this by organizing women into collectives, and supporting them with financial, legal, and technical services to lead change. MHT has impacted more than a million lives through interventions across multiple sectors starting from improving the design and layout of homes in slums to accommodate specific work and storage needs, to influencing regulations for public affordable housing. They have been instrumental in promoting individual water and sanitation in informal communities at scale and preparing communities in Ahmedabad, Delhi, Bhopal, Jaipur, Ranchi to take action towards climate resilience.

WIEGO

Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) is a global organization for informal workers, especially women, aimed at ensuring "equal economic opportunities, rights, protection, and voice" for them. They focus on improving data surrounding the informal economy and partner with various organizations to influence local, national, and international policy frameworks. Today, WIEGO is a network of individual and institutional members in over forty countries worldwide. They employ the expertise of their member-based organizations, researchers and statisticians, and development practitioners across various agencies to draw a clear picture of the ground realities for the informal workers. They identify ways to improve their livelihoods and integrate them into the formal economic system. They work to include issues surrounding employment, especially of the informal workers, at the forefront of development policies and processes. They investigate the size, composition, and contribution of the informal economy and the overall extent of the size of the issues surrounding informal workers. WIEGO also promotes equitable policies and practices in various nations to provide income and social security to informal workers.

City Collab

City Collab is an interdisciplinary team of architects, urban planners, and communicators with a mission to support high impact organizations working on improving the built environment in cities with useful evidence based communication and advocacy. They bring together a diverse skill set of facilitation, research, writing, and visual communication and partner with organizations working in the urban development sector to co-create compelling content that makes complex ideas more accessible and appealing. City Collab has worked with MHT to organize various fundraising and communication projects and advocacy initiatives such as the "My Home, My City, My Voice" bringing to light the various issues and aspirations of women residing in slums.

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