

HIDDEN HOMEWORKERS REPORT

RESEARCH FINDINGS: FINDING HIDDEN HOMEWORKERS IN FOOTWEAR SUPPLY CHAINS IN SOUTH INDIA

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Introduction to the Research

India is a significant exporter and consumer of leather goods – it contributes around 13% of the global output of skin and around 10% of global footwear.¹ It is a labour-intensive industry employing more than 4.4 million people and this export-oriented industry is also organised in complex ways – with large shoe factories and tanneries employing hundreds of workers to small home-based units run by families. At the bottom rung of this supply chain are homeworkers, mostly women, who are engaged in the hand stitching of shoe-uppers from their respective households.

Ambur town in Tamil Nadu, being one of the largest leather and leather goods manufacturing clusters in India, is also a significant employer of thousands of home-based workers, besides leather factory and tannery workers. Although there is no data available on the exact number of homebased workers in the leather manufacturing hub of Ambur, Tamil Nadu, our field surveys estimate that there are more than 10,000 women, largely hailing from socially and economically backward communities in the region. They are engaged in the hand-stitching of leather shoe- uppers, from their respective households. These workers are employed informally through networks of intermediaries or agents and lack direct employment relationships with their principal employers. Due to the informality in their work they face many work-related issues such as low wages, lack of social security protection, fluctuation in availability of work, occupational health issues, and much more.

To investigate these further, Cividep India, with the support of Homeworkers Worldwide and Traidcraft, carried out a survey of 80 homeworkers in Ambur and its neighboring villages. We also interviewed 4 intermediaries, or contractors/agents who provide work to these homeworkers by passing on orders from the shoe factories.

The research findings revealed that the homebased workers have a clear link with global supply chain of leather and the product that are exported abroad. Even though they 37.5% able to name the factories from which they get work, they had never met the factory representatives. Despite that fact the homeworkers stitch for international brands, they were paid very less piece rates that compare 50% less than the average minimum wage fixed by the government for the Tamil Nadu leather footwear workers. It is notable that 47.5% of women interviewed had asked for wage raise, but only 2.5% of respondents reported that they received what was requested.

High level of informalisation is among the important issue the homebased workers face in the leather sector, almost all of them interviewed had any kind written agreement with their contractor/intermediaries. As the women have to juggle between household chores

¹ *Leather Industry and Exports*. (n.d.). Indian Brand Equity Foundation. Retrieved June 3, 2022, from <https://www.ibef.org/exports/leather-industry-india>

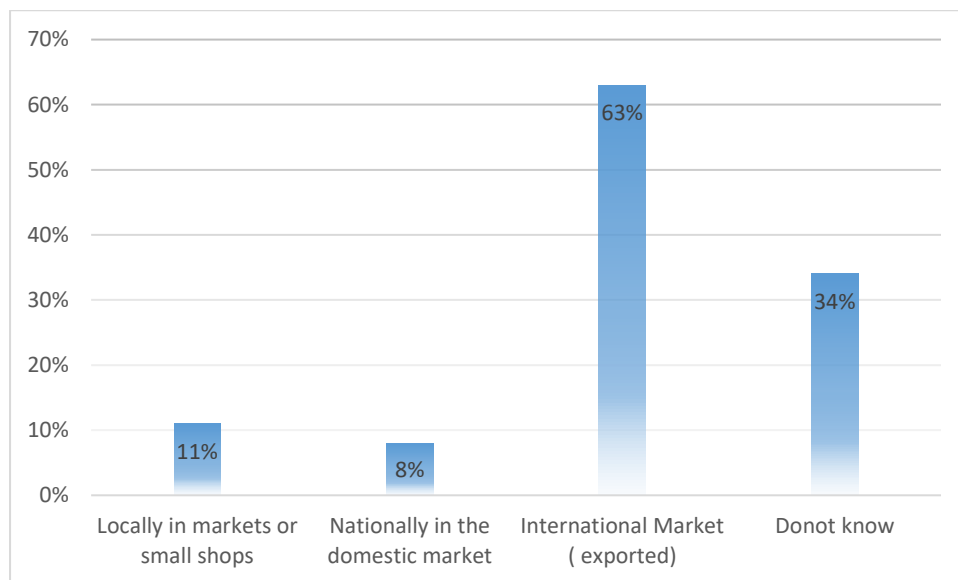
and work, they reported that they had suffered from health issues including shoulder pain, hip pain, etc due to long working hours. Further, none of the respondents have had any access to social security such as pension, health insurance, and so on. It is expected that the findings from this report will aid industry stakeholders in working towards policies and practices that enables greater transparency in leather supply chains that will lead to recognition of homeworkers and better working conditions for them. .

Research Findings: About the Homeworkers' Work

Supply Chain Links

The following chart shows, in which market the homeworkers thought their products were sold.

Chart 1: Where are the products you stitch sold



“We do not know the brand names, but while giving us the articles, the agent often tells us that the products will go abroad, and insists that we stitch them carefully without any double takka or punch (mistakes)”²

Almost two-thirds of the respondents said that the products they work on were sold in international markets. Of these, 39% of the respondents reported that their intermediary had shared this information, whilst 17% had either received the information from family members who worked in the factory or on the basis of the style, design or quality of the products. Only 5% of the respondents informed that they were able to identify the product market or brand from the packaging or labels attached to the products.

37.5% of the women could name the factories which provided their work, and publicly available supplier lists have then been used to identify a number of international brands that are sourcing from these same factories.

34% of the women said they did not know in which market their products were sold. 11% and 8% of the respondents said that the shoes they stitch were sold in local or national markets respectively.

None of the homeworkers interviewed had ever met any representative from the factory.

² Quotation from homeworker interview #48.

Who provides your work?

“Agents do not share any details about themselves. I ask for their details as I don’t want to be fooled by them”³

“Two years ago, a lady came and asked us to stitch uppers for her, and we did. But she disappeared without paying the wages”⁴

97% of the respondents received their work from subcontractors or agents, and the remainder collected their work directly from the local factory or workshop (described locally as ‘job work centres’). Most had no contact details of their respective agents, and only knew their names and the villages they came from.

The contractors’ interviews revealed that 3 out of 4 intermediaries collected the work directly from the factory, whilst the lone female sub-contractor received her work from the main contractor.

6% of the women reported that in the past they have had the experience of not being paid for the work they had done and of getting cheated by the agent. To avoid this, they reported that they do not take up work from new agents, even if they promise to pay increased piece rates.

73 % of the women worked only for a single sub-contractor or agent, while 21 % received work from two contractors, and 6 % of them from 3 or more sub-contractors.

Working Hours

Work – and Income – Fluctuations

“Our wages completely depend on how many pairs of uppers we are able to stitch in a single day. If the workflow is good, on an average we even stitch 100-150 pairs per month.”⁵

All the homeworkers were employed informally and nearly all were paid on a piece rate basis. 96 % of the respondents reported that their contractor provides raw materials (uppers and thread), explains the work, and fixes the piece rate. But the women have to buy the necessary equipment, such as needles and scissors. Only 4% of the respondents said they were provided needles and other equipment along with the raw materials.

On average, a homemaker stitches 11 pairs of uppers per day and spent 30 minutes on each pair of shoes.

During normal production times, 46% of the respondents work for 3-5 hours per day and only 16% of the respondents work for 8 hours/day.

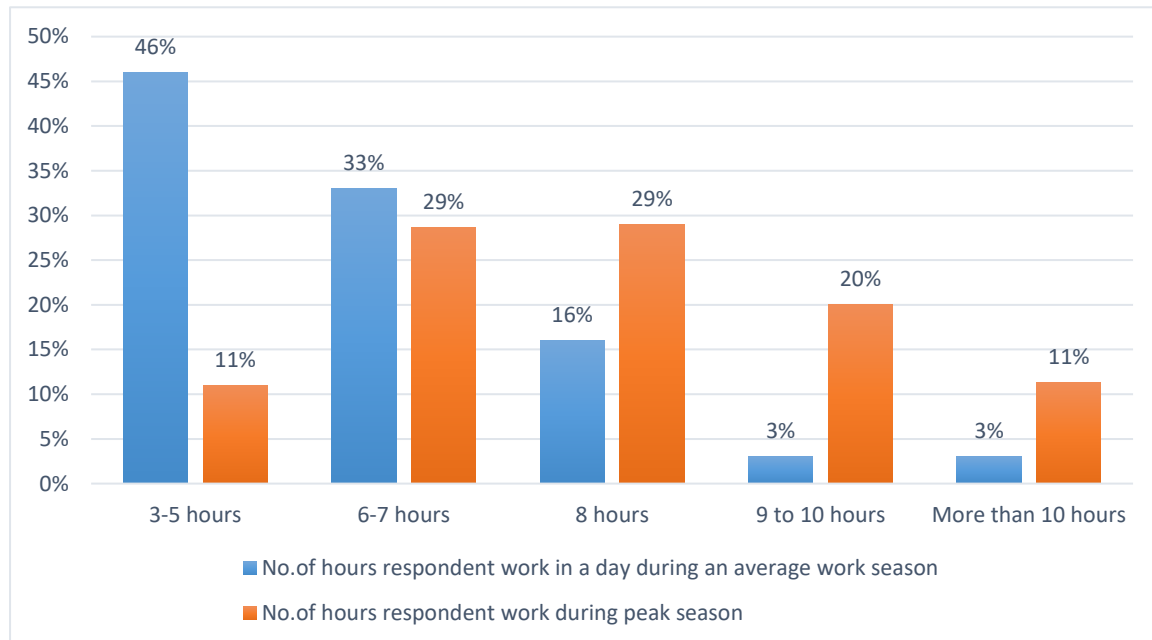
³ Quotation from homeworkers interview #51.

⁴ Comments made by the homeworkers during the survey interviews #34.

⁵ Quote from homemaker during survey interview #12.

During normal production times, the majority (59%) of the respondents work for 16-20 days a month. During peak time, many worked at least 6 days a week, and on occasion some even worked all 7 days a week.⁶

Chart 2: Working Hours: Comparing Peak Production with Normal Hours



The intermediaries who were interviewed reported that during an average work season they get orders for up to 6000 pairs of shoes per month whereas during the peak season they get orders for up to 5000 pairs per week. During the lean period from February to May, the volume of work, and hence the homeworkers' income, drastically reduces.

As a result, when work is available, most of the homeworkers work excessive hours, in order to make up for the lean period which follows. The work season begins gradually from June onwards and peaks between August and December/January.

During peak season, a homemaker earns around Rs. 3500⁷ per month on average. This starts falling by more than 50% during normal times, and goes down to around Rs.1200/month, falling even lower during lean season, to only Rs.550 per month.

During the peak production time, only 11% of the homeworkers work for 3-5 hours a day, and the majority (58%) of the respondents work for 6-8 hours per day.

81% of interviewees said they take extra work during peak season either because of the extra income or due to compulsion from the contractor.

⁶ This was not covered fully in the survey, so percentages are not available, but it was reported in many interviews.

⁷ At the time of writing, 100 Indian rupees was equivalent to £1.04 British pounds and 1.24 euros.

What happens if you don't complete your work on time?

*"the agent gives 15 pairs of shoe-uppers at 4 pm in the evening and comes to collect the same the next day, by 12 pm. As I have to do household chores and take care of my children, I find it difficult to complete that much work on time."*⁸

*"Sometimes the agent gives the work around 4 pm in the evening and asks us to return them by 7am or 8 am, the next morning. It is not possible for us to work in the evenings as we have to cook and do the household chores. So we stay up and stitch the whole night, without sleep"*⁹

31% of the respondents said their agents did not allow them sufficient time to complete their work and 34 % said that as a result, they asked their family members to help them..

*"If I do not complete the work, he (agent) questions as to why I could not complete it. He also warns of not giving me uppers the next time, if I get delayed again."*¹⁰

61% of the homeworkers reported that they would get verbally abused by the contractor/subagent if they failed to complete their work on time, especially during peak production season. 12% of respondents reported being denied work if they missed a deadline.

One agent explained the importance of meeting the deadlines and the quality standards set by the factory, and the difficulty in securing further work otherwise. Another reported:

"even if they ask to get 10 pairs of uppers stitched at 10pm, I have to take them to the field and get them completed. I can maintain a good relationship with the factory management only through these means and hence also ensure that they will adjust if we make mistakes."

Homeworkers' Wages, Income and Payment

*"As I took Rs.1000/-as an advance from the agent, I have taken these uppers to stitch (that she could not refuse). But as I have chest pain, I have not completed the work yet (2 more uppers yet to stitch)"*¹¹

98 % of the homeworkers were paid on piece rates, which varied from 6 to 15 rupees per pair. The remaining 2% of the respondents were paid either on daily wage rates or monthly wage rates. The average piece rate for stitching a pair of uppers was Rs.10.2 rupees. Only 8 % of the respondents said that they were paid immediately upon returning the finished product; while the others (majority 56%) had to wait for up to a month before they were paid. The rest received their wages on a weekly or fortnightly basis.

14% of the respondents said they had taken advances from their agent, with the amounts borrowed varying from 300-1500 INR (approximately one month's earnings).

⁸ Quotation from survey interview with homemaker #51.

⁹ Quotation from homemaker interview #54.

¹⁰ Quotation from homemaker interview #53.

¹¹ Quotation from interview with homemaker #03.

Homeworkers' Piece Rates

“When I requested an increased piece rate, the agent told me that if I wanted to do the work at the given rate I can continue to do the work, otherwise (I) could leave it. He said he that he could not increase the piece rate”

“If I do not do this work, I will not have enough to eat. As my husband is an alcoholic, he does not give money for the family expenses. So my family runs with whatever I earn through this work”

“If the piece rate had been raised by one rupee every year in the past, now the piece rate would have been anywhere between Rs.30-35 /- per pair”¹²

Homeworkers provided detailed information about the different rates they were paid, and the time it took to complete different styles of shoes. This data enabled the researchers to compare piece rates with the minimum wage and other benchmarks. Piece rates were converted into equivalent potential earnings for an 8-hour day with the formula: $480 \{minutes\ per\ day\} / \{time\ for\ one\ pair\} \times \{piece\ rate\ per\ pair\}$ and into a monthly figure assuming 26 working days per month.

The average piece rates for the different styles are summarised in Table 1 Piece rates for stitching different styles of shoes , together with the average time taken to stitch a pair of shoes of that style (column 2). Column 3 shows how the piece rate compares with the minimum wage and column 4 estimates what a piece rate equivalent to the applicable minimum wage (Rs.9,500 per month) for that particular style, would have to be.¹³

Table 1 Piece rates for stitching different styles of shoe

Style number	1) Average Piece-rate / pair (Rs)	2) Average time to complete one pair (minutes)	3) Average rate for style (as % of minimum wage)	4) Minimum-wage-equivalent piece rate (Rs)
1	Rs 10.2	31	47%	Rs 21.7
2	Rs 11.0	36	44%	Rs 25.0
3	Rs 8.8	25	54%	Rs 16.2
5	Rs 8.0	30	35%	Rs 22.9
6	Rs 8.0	15	70%	Rs 11.4
8	Rs 8.8	41	28%	Rs 31.3
9	Rs 8.5	25	50%	Rs 17.0
10	Rs 10.9	32	56%	Rs 19.5
11	Rs 11.5	23	68%	Rs 16.9
12	Rs 10.0	20	66%	Rs 15.2

¹² Quotes from survey interviews with homeworkers # 35, 38 & 24.

¹³ See http://cms.tn.gov.in/sites/default/files/go/labemp_e_23_2021_2D_1.pdf.

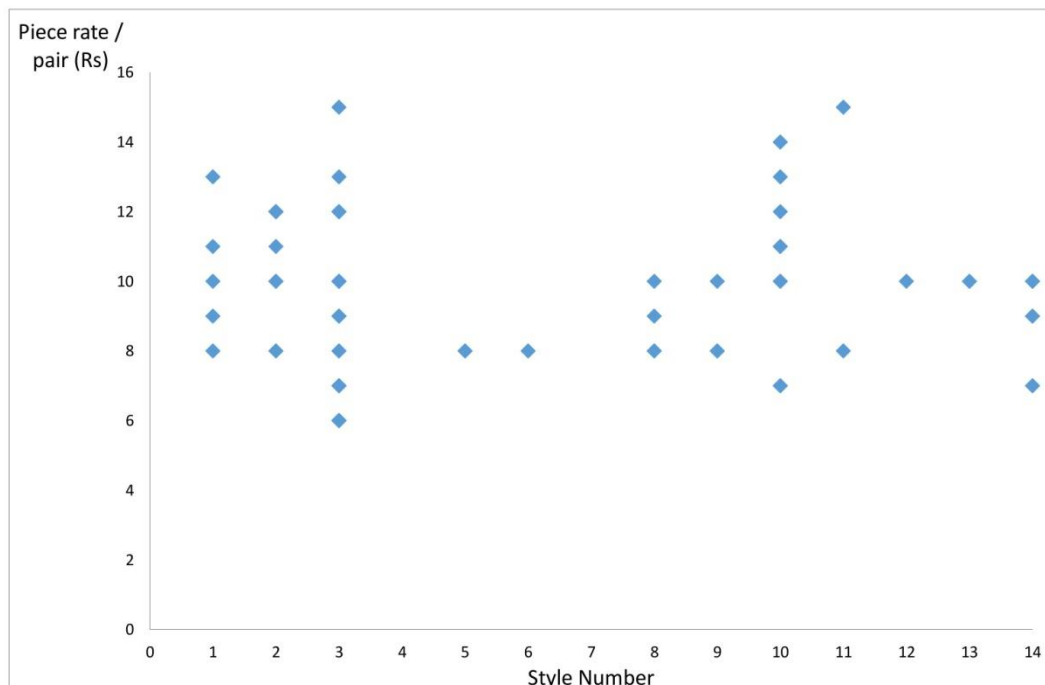
13	Rs 10.0	48	28%	Rs 35.7
14	Rs 8.9	26	51%	Rs 17.4
Average	Rs 9.6	29	50%	Rs 19.1

Key findings include:

- Piece rates were on average half (50%) the minimum wage.
- Some piece rates (styles 8 and 13) had been set as low as 28% of the minimum wage.
- Only two of the 80 homeworkers were paid at a piece rate which was equivalent to the legal minimum wage.¹⁴

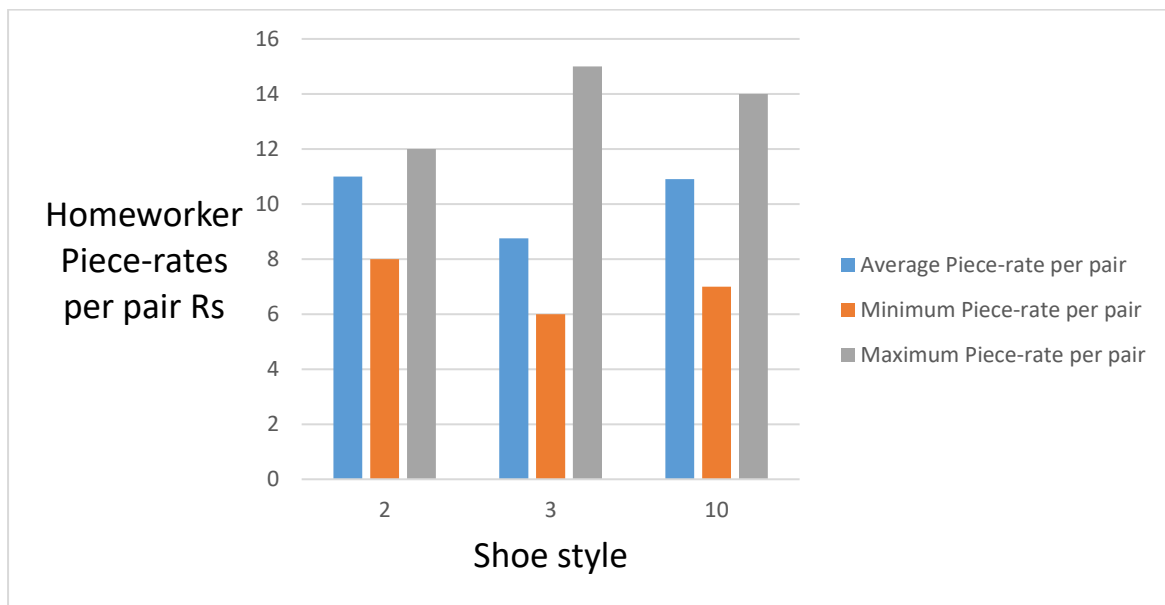
A detailed analysis of the rates paid for specific styles of shoe revealed that the piece rates paid to the homeworkers were very variable, ranging from 64% to 171% of the average rate for any particular style. The most extreme example was a shoe style where homeworkers reported receiving rates of anything between 6 and 15 rupees!

Chart 2: Scatter diagram showing variation in piece rates for each shoe style



¹⁴ A third worker who reported higher earnings probably misunderstood the question.

Chart 3: Variations in piece rates for common styles¹⁵



When questioned about these substantial differences, fieldworkers explained that the piece rate could vary according to the size of the shoe, the number of stitches and any additional embellishments that might entail extra work. The rates for any one style could also be reduced in outlying villages, as the agents deducted travel costs, or when there were several sub-agents involved. Further research would be needed to explore this variation in more depth.

However, the wide variation also suggests that there is not an accepted 'rate for the job', which one may expect in a situation where there was real dialogue about piece rates. It also reflects homeworkers' weak bargaining power over their piece rates. In practice they are 'price takers', obliged on the whole to accept the price offered by agents.

This finding highlights the importance of transparency mechanisms, so that the brands know how much homeworkers are paid, and can seek to ensure that pay is equitable. It should also be of interest to suppliers, who may want to know how much of the rate they pay to subcontractors reaches the homeworkers. Transparency is also important to homeworkers so that they know what the piece rate should be, and that the piece rate has been set at a fair level, which is at least equivalent to the minimum wage.

Actual earnings are even further below the minimum wage. Many homeworkers are unable to work for 8 hours a day because of their family responsibilities and/or because order volumes are insufficient during the lean season. Homeworkers were asked to estimate how much they earn at peak times and during times when workflow is average.

The homeworkers were also asked how many *pieces they had completed yesterday (the day before the interview)*, providing a very robust sample of real earnings (and hours worked) on a typical day; and this varied from Rs 30 to Rs 200 with an average of Rs 108 equivalent to

¹⁵ The data is for the three most common styles in the sample, all of which were worked on by at least ten homeworkers.

monthly earnings (ie x 26 days) of Rs 2,816. This equates quite closely to homeworkers' estimates of what they earn in peak season, which gives us confidence in both figures. **Rs 2,816 is around 30% of the minimum wage.**

It is also important to remember that often the Minimum Wage is set below a level which could be considered as a Living Wage – that is how much the average worker would need to earn to meet their own and their families' basic needs. The Global Living Wage Foundation has calculated a Living Wage benchmark for urban Tirupur at the time of the interviews (2021) as Rs 17,775/month.¹⁶ This estimate is based on an average sized family, and typical expenditure on food and other items at local prices, including some discretionary spending. Homeworkers' *piece rates* equate to just over one quarter (27%) of this Living Wage benchmark. **Their average earnings over the year (Rs 2,816/month) were one sixth (16%) of the Living Wage.** These figures demonstrate that the piece rates are set a very low level which, compounded by variations in order volumes over the year, condemn homeworkers and their families to in-work poverty, unable to meet their own and their families' basic needs.

Intermediaries' earnings

When asked about wages for their work, the intermediaries said that they were paid on a fixed commission rate. Two of them said that they get 2 rupees per pair and one said that he gets 3 rupees per pair. The subagent informed that she gets 1 rupee per pair as commission. When asked why the homeworkers' pay was delayed, the agents reported that this was because the companies did not pay them on time. One intermediary reported that because of the delay of payment from the factory, he had to take a gold loan¹⁷ to arrange payment for workers.

The intermediaries also reported that the homeworkers' low wage levels were one of the main problems they faced . One intermediary reported that, if a homemaker complained about low piece rates, he would call the company management and pass the phone to the worker. He commented "I have nothing to hide as my commission is fixed and (I) give the remaining amount to the workers."

Rectifying Mistakes & Reworking Pieces

"If they find the mistakes in our work when we return the uppers, they ask us to do the rework without payment. But if they discover a mistake in the factory, they cannot identify who made the mistake. So they will give it to someone else and pay for the rework"

77% of the homeworkers reported that they were asked to rectify any mistakes without any payment, and 4% of the respondents informed they get paid after the rework. 2% of the respondents said that they would be fined if they made mistakes but that they were still paid for the pieces.

¹⁶ Living Wage for Tiruppur, Tamil Nadu, India (updated for 2021) https://www.globallivingwage.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Updatereport_India_UrbanTiruppur_Tamil-Nadu_August2021_13Jan2021_final-1.pdf

¹⁷ In India, a gold loan is one taken using gold jewelry as surety.

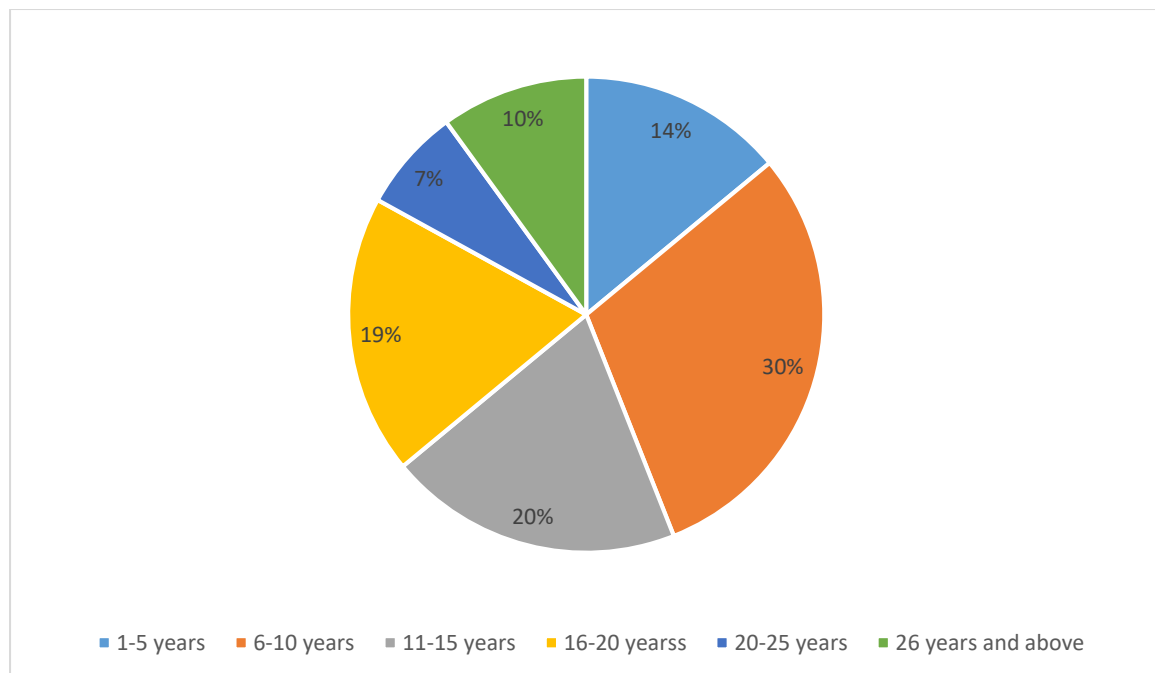
8% of the women said that the contractors became angry and aggressive if they made mistakes. 5% of the homeworkers said that the cost of damage gets deducted from their wages. And only 4% of the respondents reported that the contractors accept the mistakes and that they get paid for it.

When asked about mistakes and rework, an agent explained that if the mistake was permanent and could not be rectified, he would be fined, and that the company management also verbally abused him, and made threats of cancelling future orders.

All three male intermediaries said that they were paid for rework, provided that it was possible to correct the mistake, whilst the female agent reported that she was not paid for rework.

Research Findings: About the Homeworkers' Working Lives

Chart 4: How many years have you been doing Homework?



The above chart shows how long the respondents had been stitching shoe uppers at home. On average they had 14.4 years of experience and one respondent had even been doing this work for almost 50 years, having started immediately after marriage.

Why did you start doing Homework?

"I have to support my husband in meeting the family expenses, but due to health problems I cannot work in a company. So, I started doing this work. Unlike factory work, this work is very convenient for me as I can do it in my free time and it also allows me to spend time with my family."

"To supplement my husband's income I go to an agent's house in the next street and stitch uppers without my husband's knowledge. This income helps to fulfil some of my essential needs, as well as those of my five children. Because of low income I make my children eat the rice given through the Public Distribution System, however, the amount of free rice (20kg) we get is not enough"¹⁹

The most common reasons given as to why the women started doing homeworking were: to assist the family's primary earner meet the family expenses (56 %), to engage in work that provided them flexibility to care for elderly family members and do household chores (55 %),

¹⁸ Quotation from homeworker interview #03.

¹⁹ Quotations from homeworkers interviews #04 & 56.

to earn money for their own expenditure (36 %). and because they were not allowed to work outside of the home (19%).

Some respondents reported that they started doing homework when they were very young, whilst still of school age, and that due to their family’s financial situation they have continued to do the work even after marriage.

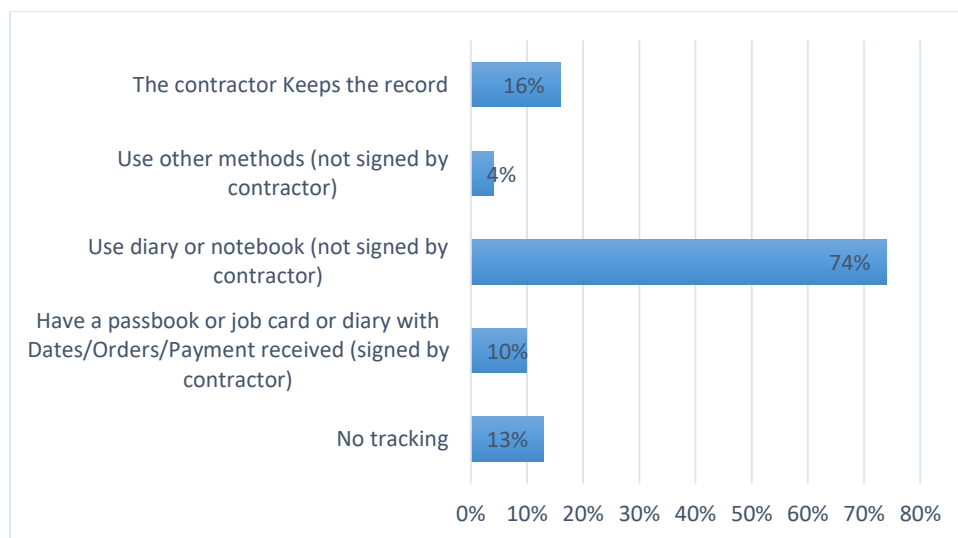
11% of the respondents informed that though they had worked in factories previously, , they had stopped and started hand-stitching work at home due to household care work duties, health issues and so on.

Do you have an Agreement or Contract?

80% of the workers did not have any agreement with their agent or subcontractor. 17.5% of the women have just a verbal agreement. The remaining 2.5% informed that they did not have written agreementst but have ID cards and salary slips as proof of their employment.

All the four intermediaries reported that they do not have any formal written agreement with the factory and that they work based on verbal agreements.

Chart 5: Do you keep a record of your work?



This chart shows how the respondents track their work, with the majority using their own notebook. Only 10% respondents had a job card or passbook or diary that was counter - signed by their agent, to track their work and payments, thus providing a record of the agreement if their subsequent payments were incorrect. Although the numbers involved are small, this finding does suggest some signs of progress - during previous studies none of the homeworkers had reported that the agents’ counter-signed their records.

Among the 4 contractors interviewed, 2 mentioned that the company keeps records for every order and provides gate passes with details of the orders taken, to access the factory premises. The company management counts the pairs and again, the security guard at the gate cross verifies them.

Another intermediary mentioned that he gets receipts (challan) from the company with number of pairs taken, date, style, and so on . The female sub agent informed that the main

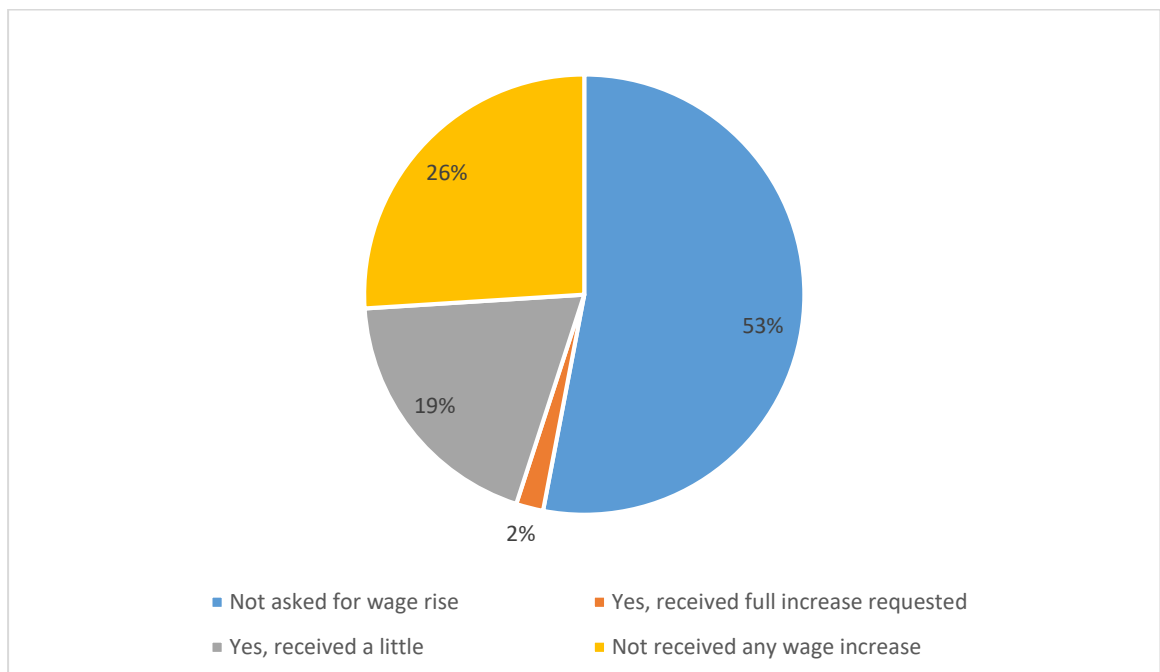
agent keeps a record of the number of pairs provided and their payment details while she also maintains a note book for her own record.

Collective Voice

42.5% homeworkers who were interviewed for the study were part of an informal collective initiated by Cividep to support the homeworkers. 31 % respondents were members of a Self-Help Group, and 6% of the women were members of women’s groups.

Only 6% of the homeworkers reported that they had collectively asked for an increase in the piece rates, whilst the majority (93%) said that they had not collectively raised any work-related issues. A few had come together in a group to raise particular social issues with elected members in the local government (for example, for street lights, community hall, and so on).

Chart 6: Have you asked for an increase in your wages?



47.5% of the women said that they had individually asked their agents for a wage increase. Of these only 2.5% of respondents reported having actually received the increase that they had requested. 26% of the respondents said their negotiations had not yielded any result and 19% of the respondents said they had received a very small increase in their wages.

"I asked for a Rs.1 raise for a pair but instead he gave a 50 paise raise".

"I had asked the agent to increase the rate by Rs.1/- per pair but he said that he needed the money to buy petrol"²⁰

Again, this suggests there has been some progress in raising the homeworkers’ awareness of their rights, as during previous studies very few had said that they would ever question

²⁰ Quotations from homeworkers during survey interviews #74 & #55.

the piece rates (although it is concerning that their efforts were unsuccessful in the vast majority of cases).

Almost all the intermediaries said that it would be good if the factory management increased the piece rates. One reported that the factory cited COVID-19 as an excuse whenever he raised the issue.

Occupational Health & Safety Issues

“I have been stitching shoe uppers for many years, and I do not face severe health issues. However, if I start working after a (few days) break, I start feeling hip pain. And when I stitch very hard uppers, I get pain in my nerves, in which case I take a break for a few days”

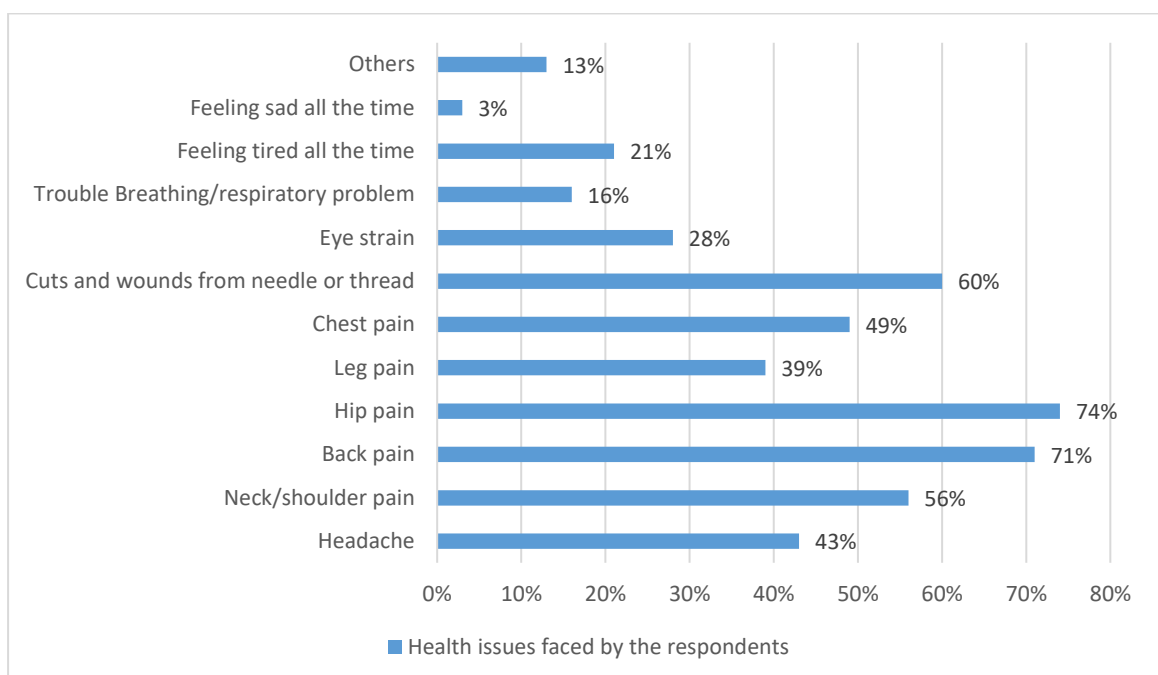
“Despite wearing PPE such as needle guard or finger guard, we still get a lot of cuts, wounds and injuries on our fingers”²¹

The respondents reported that the agents did not provide any kind of safety equipment.

90% of the homeworkers surveyed use safety equipment such as a finger guard, needle guard, or gloves, to protect themselves from needle injuries. Workers explained that these were made for them by friends, relatives or neighbours who were working in the shoe factories, using pieces of waste leather. 10% (8) of the workers reported that they did not use any safety equipment, and one of them explained that this was because she didn't know anyone working in the factory who could make the protective equipment she needed.

Almost all the homeworkers said that they suffered from health issues, particularly hip pain, shoulder pain and leg pain, due to their long working hours. The graph below clearly illustrates the different types of health problems the homeworkers face:

Chart 7: What health issues do you experience?



²¹ Quotations from homeworkers during survey interviews #04 & #03.

Almost all participants reported that they do not take any protective measures to avoid these health problems, although some reported using balms or over-the-counter medicines to relieve the pain.

Some mentioned that they soak their fingers in warm water for some time as it would help relieve the pain caused by cuts and wounds from the needle or thread. .

Impact of Covid 19 Pandemic

“Every year we used to get a small increase in the piece rate, but since 2019, due to COVID, the piece rate has remained the same with no increase at all”

A woman said “ Pre- COVID, we used to receive our wages on the same day we returned the uppers but now we are paid once a week”²²

82.5% of the respondents said that after the pandemic, the amount of work they received had reduced. One homemaker explained, “when I asked the agent for the reason, he stated that factories were not running to full capacity.” Others also said that their agent did not seem to be aware of the reason for the lack of work during the COVID 19 lockdown.

23.75% of the respondents said that piece-rates have reduced by Rs. 1/- per pair after the pandemic. And 20% of the respondents said that after COVID, their payment was delayed.

Access to social security/social assistance

“We have been stitching uppers for so many years but do not have social security protection. Just like factory workers, it would be very helpful if we are given ESI, PF and bonus. I cannot go the factory because I have to take care of the children at home”²³

None of the respondents received any social security benefits such as health insurance, pension, accidental insurance, maternity benefits or unemployment benefits from their employer or contractor.

Almost all the respondents were able to access at least one of the Tamil Nadu government’s social assistance schemes. All respondents reported that they had a ration card, and access to free food grains, while 42.5% of the respondents had received a subsidy from the government to purchase cooking gas (though this was no longer available).

18.75% of the respondents received maternity care allowance, but only 8.75% of the homemakers were able to register with the unorganised workers’ welfare board.

Access to Basic Services

“As the tap water is salty, we buy drinking water: a pot (8-10 litre) for 4 rupees and a can (15 litre) for 10 rupees, from outside”²⁴

²² Quotations from homemakers during survey interviews #35 & #24.

²³ Quotations from homemakers during survey interviews #42.

²⁴ Quotation from homemaker during survey interviews # 52.

With regards to access to basic services, almost 99% of the respondent's families had electricity. And 70% of the respondents had a regular water supply direct to their homes (for household use but not for drinking water). The remaining 30% of the respondents' families had no direct water supply and so shared a common street tap with other households. Similarly, 24% of the respondents' families did not have their own household toilet facilities, and instead, had to share with other families. 19% of the respondents said that they had no street light facilities. Only 15% of the families had a covered drainage system, while the others relied on open sewers for their household waste.

"My husband is the sole earner of the family. His income is not even enough to meet the family expenses and children's education. During the flood, one of the house walls collapsed. So, we borrowed money for rebuilding" ²⁵

The impact of the flood also highlighted the vulnerability of these workers to adverse weather events, likely to be increasing due to climate change. 14 interviewees were severely affected by the flood; while three lost their entire homes to the flood, and 11 others lost their belongings in the flood waters.

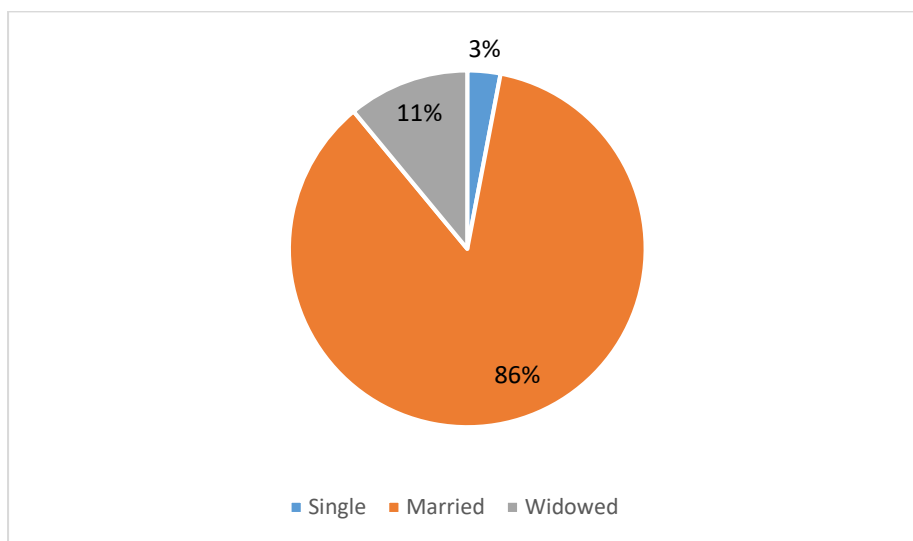
²⁵ Quotation from homemaker during survey interviews #47.

Research Findings: Demographic Profile of the Respondents

As almost all the homeworkers employed in the leather footwear supply chain are female, the research team sought to represent the diversity of the homemaker labour force by selecting respondents from different villages, age groups, religions, caste, education levels and years of experience.

All of the 80 homeworkers interviewed for the study were women, and their average age was 37. The majority of the workforce fell in the two main age group of 28-37 and 38-47 years. The charts below show that 86% of the total respondents were married women while 11% were widowed. Only 2.5% of the respondents were single.

Chart 8: Homeworkers' Marital Status



Among the four contractors interviewed, three were male, one was female, and all were married.

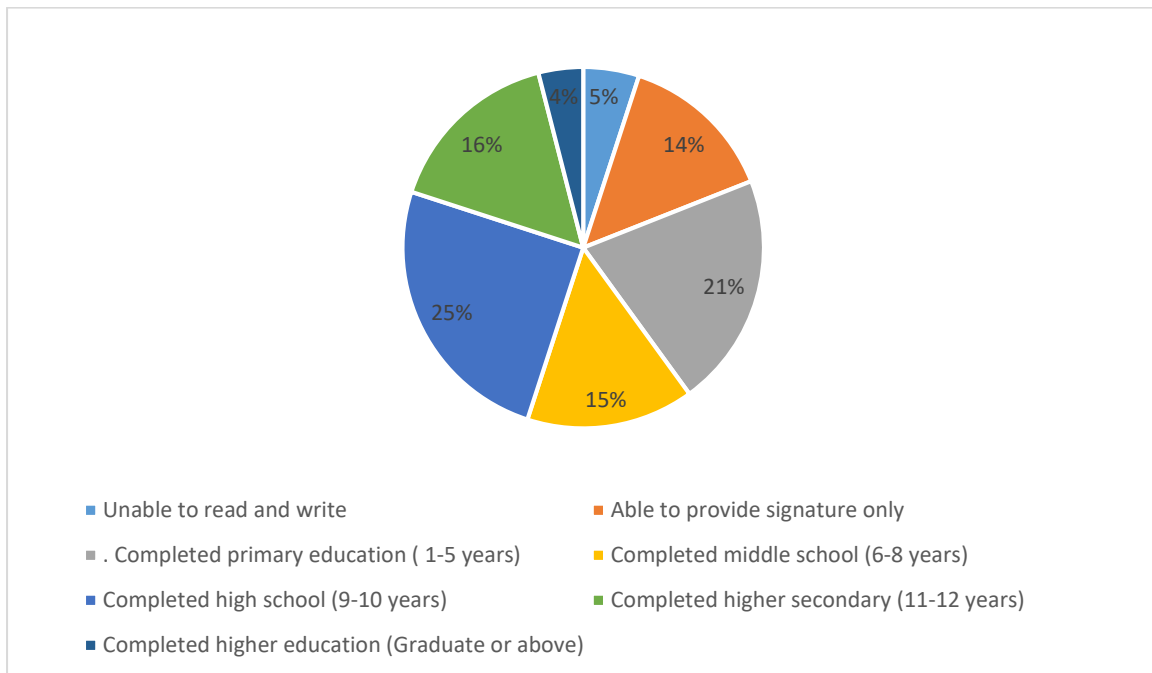
Homeworkers' Caste & Religious Background

36 % of the home workers interviewed were Muslim and the majority (64%) of the respondents were Hindus. Regarding their caste background, over 80% of respondents were drawn from either disadvantaged Hindu or Muslim communities, with a significant number from the most disadvantaged group, i.e. the Scheduled Caste (SC) or Dalit community (12.5%).²⁶ 5% of the respondents said they did not know their caste.

All the four intermediaries interviewed followed Hinduism and two of them belonged to the general caste category. The remaining two belonged to the OBC category.

²⁶ The majority (76%) of those interviewed belonged to Other Backward Class (OBC) or Most Backward Class (MBC) category and many specially mentioned they belonged to specific caste-based groupings including the Vanniyar, Kaundar and Singh communities. 12.5% belonged to the Scheduled Caste (SC) category also known as Dalits and more specifically to the Arunthathiyar community. 6.3% of the respondents belongs to Backward class.

Chart 9: Homeworkers' Education Level



The above chart shows that the respondents have diverse levels of education. In the sample, 5% of the respondents could not read and write, while another 14% of the respondent were only able to jot their signatures. On the other hand, 4% of the respondents have completed their graduation. Majority of the respondents had either completed primary school or high school.

Homeworkers' Household Income

“We could pay only the interest on the money we borrowed during the COVID 19 lockdown and we have also taken loans for our children’s school fees. So, majority of our income (household) is used to pay interest and repay the loan we have taken. We do not have enough money to meet the medical expenses of my mother-in-law”²⁷

41% of the homeworkers’ total household income was between Rs.5001-10000 per month. 25% of them had household incomes below Rs.5000 per month. Only 5% of the families were earning above Rs.20,000 p.m. Overall, the average income of the respondents’ household was below Rs.10000 per month.

In 10% of the households, these homeworkers were the primary earners. The homeworkers’ husbands were the primary earners in 80% of the households, and other family members provide the main income in the remainder of the sample. All the four intermediaries mentioned that this was their only job and that they were the primary earners of their households.

²⁷ Quotation from homeworker during survey interview #54.

Conclusion and Recommendations

For Retailers and Brands

- Adopt a Homeworker Policy which takes an inclusive approach to the presence of homeworkers in your chains, and is compliant with, or more robust than the Hidden Homeworkers model Homeworker Policy, and promote its uptake by leather footwear suppliers in Tamil Nadu.
- Raise the issue of homeworking with your leather footwear suppliers in Tamil Nadu, share your Homeworker policy, and ensure them of your full support in implementing this. If they or their suppliers disclose the presence of homeworkers in their supply chains, consider taking up the opportunities for supply chain mapping currently available within the Hidden Homeworkers project.
- Instruct auditors to ensure that suppliers are routinely asked about subcontracting and the use of contractors and/or homeworkers. Quality assurance and production teams can also probe where different processes are carried out and check production capacity, to identify where there may be sub-contracting.²⁸
- Support your suppliers to implement mechanisms to improve transparency around homeworkers and piece rates, using the tools and resources available in the Hidden Homeworkers toolkit.
- Consider how homeworkers might be enabled to access a grievance mechanism, by including the supplier's contact phone number for e.g., and also the name of the brand responsible for a particular order, on any job card or documentation that may be introduced.
- Irrespective of whether your suppliers disclose the use of homeworkers, join and invite your suppliers to also participate in our proposed Regional Working Group on homeworking. This would be an important step towards collaborative due diligence with local civil society organisations.
- Support efforts by Hidden Homeworkers' partners to build a regional stakeholder forum to promote ethical, gender and caste-sensitive employment practices within the Indian leather sector.

²⁸ Many Brands have found that a policy which allows subcontracting, on condition that it is declared, to be more effective in getting visibility over where production is taking place than a No Subcontracting clause.

- Join and invite suppliers to enrol on Better Buying, to provide you with feedback on how your purchasing practices may be adversely impacting on human rights risks within your supply chain.²⁹
- Improve liaison between commercial and ethical trade teams, to ensure coherence between sourcing decisions and the implementation programmes (e.g. underpinning supplier buy-in on implementation through stable commercial relationships, spreading orders out throughout the year, so that workers have more work during the lean period).

For Suppliers and Manufacturers

- Carry out mapping to track payments to sub-contractors and homeworkers, and conduct a (baseline) assessment of homeworkers' needs. Our Hidden Homeworkers project has been set up to provide you with support and guidance throughout this process, including the opportunity to partner with local civil society partners in touch with local communities and workers.
- Implement systems to set minimum wage-compliant piece rates (at least), and to track orders and payments to homeworkers.
- Seek to reduce transaction costs to contractors, and any consequent resistance to adoption of new systems, by promoting standardised tools and systems for agreeing on piece rates, and registering and tracking orders and payments to both homeworkers and agents.³⁰
- Encourage homeworkers to come together collectively, so their views can be represented in subsequent work (for example in agreeing on piece rates) and as a mechanism for direct access to the supplier, should a grievance arise.
- In collaboration with local civil society organisations, build understanding of potential barriers to employment and promotion opportunities faced by Dalit/minority women workers and any barriers to Freedom of Association and Collective Bargaining.
- Investigate the effectiveness of internal grievance mechanisms, and consider how these might be extended to include informal workers and homeworkers. Revise recruitment and HR policies accordingly.
- Explore ethical employment practices with homeworkers, to help retain skilled female staff whose domestic responsibilities make it impossible for them to work within the factory, but could return to full time work at a later date.

²⁹ See <https://betterbuying.org/>.

³⁰ Payments to agents should be separated from payments to homeworkers.

For Multi-Stakeholder Initiatives

Policy. Ensure that your implementation process benefits and does no harm to the poorest women workers in global supply chains. Promote transparency and traction over the issue of homeworkers in your company members' supply chains by adopting an inclusive attitude to homeworking which seeks to raise the conditions of homeworkers rather than excluding them:

- Ensure that your Code of Conduct explicitly addresses homeworkers, through a clause which seeks to include and raise the conditions of homeworkers.
- Promote the adoption of inclusive Homeworker Policies by your company members.

Collaboration. Efforts to address conditions of homeworkers and other informal workers in informal subcontract supply chains are labour intensive.

- Promote collaboration between your company members and appropriate civil society organisations to implement transparency initiatives in the Tamil Nadu footwear industry and other sectors where homeworking is prevalent.

Government Advocacy. Facilitate networking and alliances to bring the voice of your members to support advocacy by local actors aimed at:

- ratification of the ILO Home Work Convention and
- supporting the extension of health care and social security provisions to homeworkers
- increasing minimum wages in the leather sector towards a living wage.

Support advocacy by local actors and the ILO seeking to deter further weakening of collective bargaining (e.g. through an increase in the threshold of trade union recognition) and the flexibilization of employment under the reform of Indian labour laws currently in progress.

For the Indian Government

- Ratify of the ILO Home Work Convention C177, and adopt a national policy on homeworking.
- Recognise that homeworkers need access to social security and introduce a suitable scheme.
- Extend the Minimum Wage regulations to include piece rate workers and homeworkers.
- In consultation with appropriate trade unions, incrementally raise the (extremely low) legal minimum wage towards a Living Wage so that it adequately meets basic family needs.

For European and North American Governments

Several administrations are considering new legislation, requiring companies trading in their countries to carry out supply chain due diligence, address human rights and environmental risks, and provide remedies - and then holding them liable if workers or communities experience significant harm as a result of human rights or environmental abuses. While these initiatives are to be welcomed, however, it is important that legislators consider the potential impact of these new laws on marginalised women workers like homeworkers, and take steps to ensure that they are included within the due diligence provisions, so that the new legislation protects their interests and prevents harm.³¹

³¹ For more information about this legislation, see Homeworkers Worldwide's briefing paper, available at: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/60a24248d1bdf007a7d6d14f/t/60ec644175dbc90295e8e088/1626104901112/MHRDD+policy+briefing+FINAL.pdf>.

Appendix: Research Methodology

The main aims of the research were to document the working conditions of homeworkers in the leather footwear sector in Tamil Nadu and to explore possible links with homeworkers to the global leather supply chain. The research also sought to investigate the following sub-themes:

- To assess the working situation of the homeworkers against international standards, especially with regard to wages, OHS issues, seasonality of work, etc.,
- To understand the nature of their employment, and any work agreements or contracts that they may currently have in place.
- To learn about social security schemes and other government schemes that the homeworkers can currently access or use in the future.

The research was carried out by Cividep India, an NGO based in South India that has more than two decades of experience in conducting research in the field of labour, business and human rights. Cividep India has been working in the leather hub of Tamil Nadu since 2013 and has strong links with the communities where the homeworkers are based.

A detailed questionnaire was prepared to capture all the sub-themes of the study; and this also included some open questions, to gather the workers' subjective reflections on their work. Initially the questionnaire was prepared in English and then translated into Tamil for ease of doing the survey as it is the first language of the majority of interviewees. Two training sessions on how to collect data using the questionnaire, were also organised for the field researchers.

A pilot study was conducted during the first week of November to test the feasibility of the questionnaire. Five homeworkers were interviewed for the pilot survey, and a few minor changes were made to the questionnaire following these interviews. The field team then started the main data collection process during the second week of November 2021.

As homeworkers are widely dispersed throughout India's southern leather hub, nine villages were selected to carry out the research. As far as possible, given the constraints of time and resources, the research team made efforts to ensure that their sample represented the diversity of the labour force.

A total of 80 workers were interviewed from the Ambur-Vaniyambadi- Pernambet region, with each interview taking around 45 minutes to complete. Despite the challenges of COVID-19, the team managed to carry out 73 in-person interviews in the first phase, maintaining social distancing and COVID safety measures.

Unfortunately, the fieldwork was then halted by the sudden flood that hit the region during the first week of December 2021. In Ambur alone, more than 500 homeworkers were severely hit by the flood, and many lost their homes and were evacuated to flood relief camps set up temporarily in nearby schools, temples, mosques, etc. After a two-week gap, the team was able to complete the remaining 7 worker interviews.

In addition to the homeworkers' interviews, four intermediaries who act as the link between the homeworkers and the factories were also interviewed to get their perspectives on the work and the challenges they face. During the course of the survey, a photo documentation of the products the homeworkers were stitching was also undertaken.

Besides, field notes, and meetings reports produced as a part of Cividep's outreach activities were also used as the secondary source of information.