

## Understanding the Complex Issues Related to Homeworkers in the Global Apparel Supply Chain

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### Introduction

The phenomenon of subcontracting work outside of the ordinary apparel manufacturing structure creates many informal jobs (Burchielli, Delaney & Coventry, 2014, p. 5). These informal work arrangements put the workers in a disadvantageous position compared to the formalized labor arrangement (Lerche, et al., 2017). These informal work arrangements (or labor relations) give subcontractors an unfair advantage. Lack of a binding contract/ formal work arrangement allows businesses and government to evade their responsibility towards this labor segment.

Although, homeworkers contribute to their country's gross domestic product (GDP) but are invisible to labor market regulators. The income and livelihood of informal workers/laborers used in the apparel supply chain is at or below subsistence (Burchielli et al., 2014). Subcontractors use these workers on a temporary basis; the informal work arrangement gives the subcontractor and manufacturer maximum flexibility, reduced costs and lower risks but lacks any guarantee of labor rights to the homeworkers. The informal labor relations that homeworkers and subcontractors engage in are typically disadvantageous to the homeworkers (Lerche et al, 2017; Burchielli et al., 2014).

Burchielli et al. (2014) explain majority of homeworkers in the apparel industry are women. The reasons for this overrepresentation are: (1) in many societies women are assigned care-giving roles in their family, (2) women's domestic duties preclude them from obtaining formal employment, (3) women's need to earn an income to support their families is likely to force them into accepting more informal jobs. Women's invisibility in this informal labor arrangement highlights the lack of basic employment and human rights for homeworkers.

Businesses engaging in socially responsible practices need to ensure that all of their employees act ethically. This study identifies challenges faced by informal labor in the apparel supply chain, and it offers solutions to address these challenges.

### Homeworkers' a possible cover for Child labor and forced labor

Another aspect of homeworkers is that it involves production which takes place in or around the worker's household residence. The separation between paid commercial productive activity and unpaid household subsistence activity and chores results in 'both paid and unpaid family labor, including child labor' (Barrientos, Gereffi, & Rossi, 2010, p. 8). Thus, monitoring homeworkers becomes important to preventing child labor and forced labor.

**Engaging problem-based learning (PBL)**

This study utilizes problem-based learning (PBL) to provide understanding of the topic and engages in learning through solving complex, real-world problems (Cao et al., 2017). In this paper, PBL was utilized to identifying the complex issues related to homeworkers in the global apparel supply chain. At the same time, use of problem-based learning (PBL) helped to develop relevant solutions for the problems observed in the study.

**Multipronged solution based on Australia's case.**

Step 1: Develop a Homeworkers Code of Practice.

Similar to the code of practice developed by Ethical Clothing Australia. This code must be developed to provide guidelines to workers in order to maintain and improve quality of work. At the same time, this code must address homemaker rights and how worker rights can be upheld. The objective of Homeworkers Code of Practice must be to improve traceability, transparency and accountability in the lowest tier of the supply chain. Also retailers/ brands that have global presence must be encouraged to execute 'Homeworkers Code of Practice' to improve traceability and accountability in their supply chain.

Step 2: Homeworkers and awareness

"Some homeworkers may not identify themselves as homeworkers because they operate from home on a temporary or seasonal basis" (Burchielli, 2009). Efforts to disseminate information pertaining to homemaker rights is essential. In addition, unionization of this scattered and widely dispersed labor group could encourage resources to be made available to them by legislation. The homeworkers being made aware of the mechanisms used by businesses to violate labor rights in global supply chains. Homeworkers must be made aware of organization such as Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA), Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WEIGO), United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), Homenet, Homeworkers worldwide.

Step 3: Evidence from Australia

The 'Fairwear campaign' (FWC) and the development of 'Homeworkers Code of Practice' (HCP) resulted in an outcome of several forces joining to promote ethical practices in the Australian textile, apparel and footwear industry. In the campaign, the trade unions (Textile, Clothing and Footwear Union of Australia, TCFUA) and its partners (the Australian Retailers; Asian Women at Work, AWATW) secured an industry-wide agreement 'covering the terms and conditions of homemaker employment'.

With the support of the State, the homeworkers' code of practice was made legally binding on participants. A special unit within the trade union (TCFUA) was assigned the task 'to monitor the homework in the garment industry and takes legal cases against companies that fail to comply with Homeworkers Code of Practice'. The FWC's objective was to organize 'activities of homeworkers and to improve homeworkers' wages and working conditions.

## Conclusion

Solutions to sustainability problems have to take a multipronged approach. This is because many of the problems when studied in-depth, inform us that the problem are symptomatic of many issues. Linear thinking prevents us from confronting all the smaller issues that ultimately result in one big apparent problem. In fact, problems that are obvious or apparent are rooted in other smaller issues that need to attention. Impact of each decision needs to be considered and the impact of deploying a solution needs to be assessed before implementing a sustainable solution. The effective and efficient deployment of solution requires mapping or anticipating the role of each stakeholder and impact on each stakeholder, while being focused on improving the entire supply chain.

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