SEWA DELHI

WIEGO
Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing

HOME-BASED WORKERS OF DELHI

COMBATING INVISIBILITY AND RECOGNIZING CONTRIBUTIONS

Contents

Preface

Home-based workers are those workers who produce goods or provide services from in or around their own home. There are more than 41 million home-based workers in India, representing 9 per cent of all Indian workers, 18 per cent (20 million) of women workers and 6 per cent of men workers (Raveendran 2020). In Delhi, the capital of India, an estimated 7 per cent of all workers, women and men, are home-based workers. However, activists and civil society organizations estimate that this is likely to be an under-representation of the actual figures.

Home-based workers can be found in all branches, and many sub-branches, of an economy (agriculture, services, and manufacturing and other industrial activities). Some home-based workers are independent, self-employed workers who take entrepreneurial risks, while others are dependent on a firm or its contractors for work orders, the supply of raw materials and the sale of finished goods.

Home-based workers, as economic agents, not only contribute to their households but also to their city's and country's economies. They provide goods and services at a low cost to low-income people and the general public, and they also produce goods at low prices for domestic and global value chains. By working from home to care for children and the elderly, home-based workers also improve the quality of their families' lives and contribute to the social fabric of their communities.

Despite their contribution, home-based workers remain invisible and unrecognized at the city level in India. Their economic activities are often dismissed as an extension of their domestic work instead of being recognized as production for the market that contributes to the economy. Because they remain invisible and undervalued, these workers tend to be overlooked by policymakers in the design and implementation of policies, regulations or services. Further, policymakers do not seem to understand how wider economic trends and calamities, like the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19), reduce work orders and demand for their goods, and, therefore, they receive no or little sector-specific support during such calamities.

Home-based workers are less likely than other groups of informal workers to be organized, although this is now beginning to change. The Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) Delhi has been organizing these workers since 1999 to bring them visibility and a voice, and SEWA and Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) Focal City Delhi (FCD) have partnered for the past five years to build evidence of home-based work in the city of Delhi. This includes a non-exhaustive mapping of home-based work clusters collated from different sources, including from research conducted by FCD and SEWA membership. In addition, FCD, along with SEWA, has been building a city-level network of organizations and networks working on issues related to home-based workers to support advocacy and strengthen their collective voice.

This booklet is a welcome step in documenting the lives and work of the home-based workers of Delhi, bringing them out of the shadows of non-recognition and enabling their contributions and demands to take centre stage. These workers demand visibility, legal protection, quality housing, public infrastructure and decent work conditions. They demand being counted in city statistics, recognized in city planning and included in social security benefits. But most of all, they demand to be recognized as workers, as contributors to their families, communities and cities.

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The Self Employed Women's Association

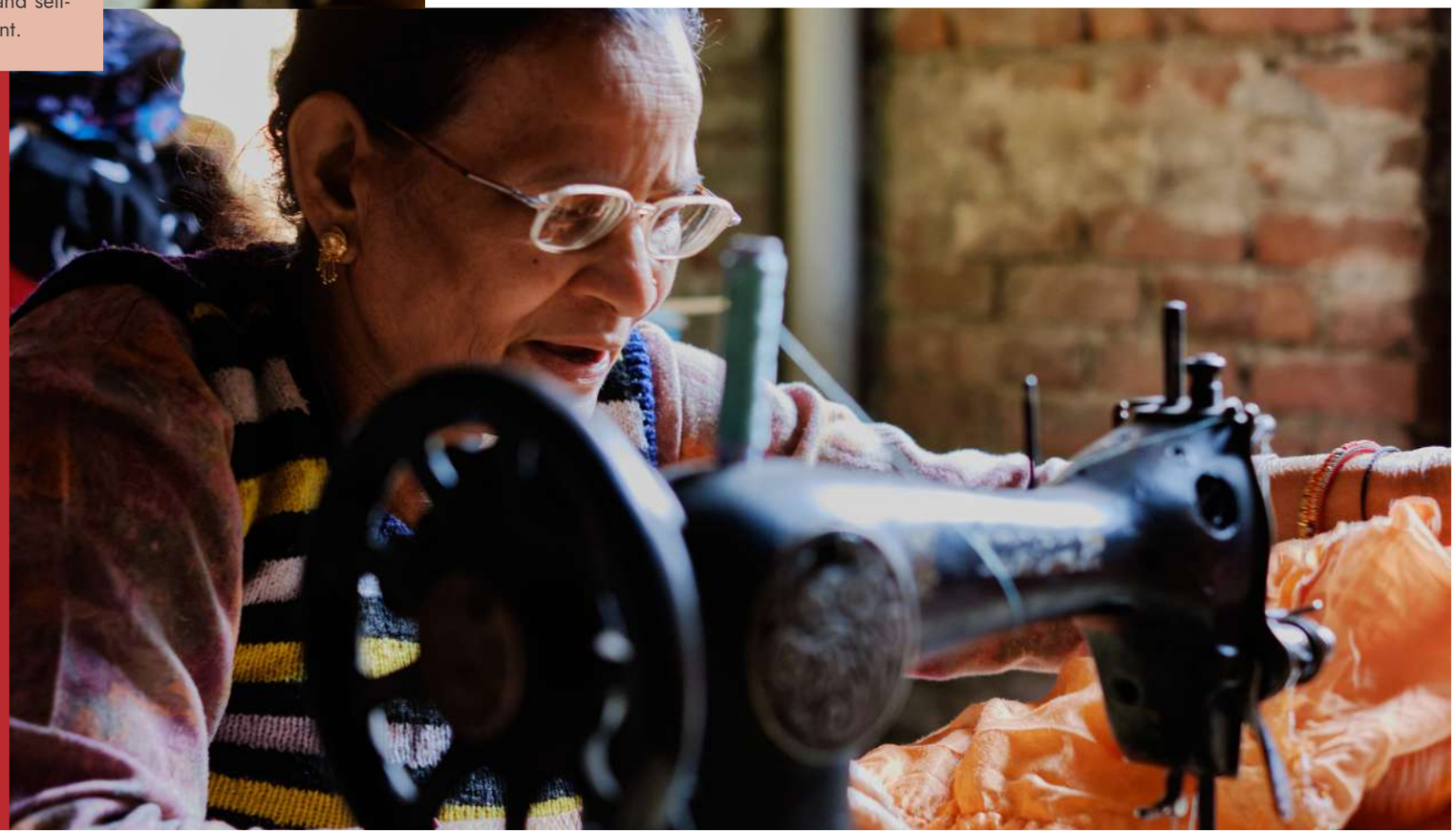
The Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) is a women's trade union started by women workers in Gujarat in 1972 under the guidance of Smt. Ela Bhatt.

Originally born out of the Textile Labour Association (TLA), India's oldest and largest union of textile workers, SEWA is now a globally recognized organization of women workers in the informal economy in India. SEWA organizes women workers towards the twin goals of full employment and self-reliance using a strategy of struggle and development.

Since 1999, SEWA has been organizing informal women workers in Delhi to bring them out of the shadows, support their livelihoods and lift them out of poverty. SEWA's work in Delhi began with women vegetable vendors in the Jahangirpuri area, and SEWA Delhi now covers 11 areas in the city: Raghubir Nagar (west); Jahangirpuri (northwest); Rajiv Nagar, Mustafabad, Sunder Nagri, Gokulpuri and Nand Nagri (northeast); Timarpur (north); New Ashok Nagar and Anand Vihar (east); and Harkesh Nagar.

SEWA Delhi's main programmes are built around advocacy, microfinance, skills development and education, and outreach centres. At the core of the SEWA approach is facilitating the grassroots organizing of informal women workers. Through mohalla or community meetings, women are brought together to discuss their concerns and find solutions. SEWA organizers and aagewaans (local community workers and grassroots women leaders) conduct these meetings in the local community to raise awareness about issues pertaining to these local residential areas. The aagewaan is the common connect between the community and SEWA. Her strong leadership makes her community sustainable through active participation and advocacy with the relevant stakeholders with respect to her trade and community demands.

SEWA in Delhi also runs numerous initiatives through SEWA Shakti Kendras, also known as "one-stop centres", which act as convergence and coordination centres for SEWA to empower communities by strengthening members' capacities to access entitlements through mobilization, building awareness, initial support and nurturing grassroots leadership. SEWA in Delhi also conducts programmes for awareness building on various government schemes, adult literacy, youth empowerment and health, as per the needs of various communities.



WIEGO

Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) is a global network dedicated to improving the working conditions of the working poor – especially women – in the informal economy.

The core aims are equal economic opportunities, rights, protection and a voice for all workers. WIEGO is distinct from other global research or advocacy organizations in the way that it mobilizes credible research, statistics and policy analysis in support of the everyday struggle for the rights and dignity of the working poor – especially women – in the informal economy. Because of its direct engagement with informal workers' organizations, WIEGO's analysis focuses on the concrete reality of the working poor, and its research and policy agenda reflects their needs and demands.

WIEGO's work focuses predominantly on urban informal employment around the globe, which falls into four occupational groups that employ large numbers of poor working women: domestic workers, home-based workers (including garment workers), street vendors and waste pickers. In five cities around the world (Accra, Ghana; Dakar, Senegal; Delhi, India; Mexico City, Mexico; and Lima, Peru), WIEGO's Focal Cities initiative deepens the work across its various programmes to a specific local context. It works to strengthen the organizational and individual capacities of informal workers, expand local networks of support and alliances for workers' organizations, strengthen solidarity within and across different sectors of workers, and support informal workers in articulating alternative planning and policy solutions for integration into urban systems on beneficial terms.

Since 2016, **Focal City Delhi (FCD)** has been working with organizations of street vendors, home-based workers, waste pickers and domestic workers to bring visibility to their work through knowledge generation and research. This has helped build their capacity to advocate for recognition and inclusion in policy and enabled linkages to larger cross-sectoral urban discourses in the city.

THE FOCUS OF FCD'S WORK

- Inclusion of livelihood issues in urban discourse and policy: FCD supports informal workers to represent themselves in urban policy arenas regarding issues such as inclusive housing policies for home-based workers; inclusive solid waste management policies for waste pickers; implementation of laws for street vendors; and access to identity, social protection and land rights for those living and working in slums.
- Research and knowledge generation: FCD works on coordinating and supporting research, statistics and good practice documentation to ensure membership-based organizations(MBOs) of urban informal workers have a strong evidence base to support their advocacy.
- Capacity building and organizational strengthening: FCD works with sectoral networks of informal workers towards building their capacity to advocate at the city level and strengthening organizations by providing overall support.

In the past few years, FCD has focused its efforts on supporting advocacy for home-based workers by bringing together different organizations working directly or indirectly with these workers, along with researchers or practitioners, in an effort to combine multiple ongoing efforts, learn from each other and have a wider impact. Through ongoing sharing of research findings on the impact of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) and identifying key stakeholders to engage with, FCD's aim has been to build visibility and voice for home-based workers in Delhi.

Another aspect of FCD's work to increase the visibility of home-based workers has been to visualize and map their presence in the city. This work pinpoints clusters of home-based work across the city, indicating the settlement typologies (slums and bastis, urban villages, resettlement colonies, unauthorized settlements), density of built form, and where the nearest suppliers and buyers (wholesale markets, industrial parks) are located. The mapping also goes to a micro-scale to show the travelling in of work at the neighbourhood level as well as the many issues that women workers face due to the small size of their homes and the lack of basic services when they are working from their homes. Through this mapping, FCD will continue to highlight the locations of home-based work in the city to push for better recognition for workers.

About this booklet

Home-based workers have historically been the most invisible sector of informal work in Delhi, and WIEGO's research has shown that they were the most affected by the COVID-19 crisis in terms of earnings loss (WIEGO 2022). Home-based workers were the lowest-earning sector even in pre-COVID-19 times, and their median earnings in mid-2021 were still zero, unlike other sectors of informal work, where there had been some recovery of earnings. Thus, the need to build visibility and recognition for home-based workers has never been more urgent than at the present moment. Despite suffering adversely, home-based workers have not received any specific relief from the state or central governments, and there have been no efforts to aid the recovery of the sector.

This booklet aims to highlight the presence and contribution of Delhi's home-based workers to the city's economy. By collating and interpreting data from official government surveys, SEWA membership details and research undertaken by WIEGO and SEWA, this booklet is intended as a handbook for policymakers, civil society organizations and the general public to help understand the nature of home-based work and the main issues these workers face. It also includes key recommendations for more favourable outcomes for home-based workers.

Home-based workers in Delhi: A snapshot

In Indian cities, there are various opportunities for work that will help people earn a livelihood. They use the skills and resources they have to do this work, sometimes from within their homes itself. Let's take the example of Rekha, who lives in Kalyanpuri in east Delhi. She usually begins her day around 6 a.m. She cooks, cleans the house, and sends her husband and children off to work and school. Then, she pulls out a sack of blue-and-green toy pieces and sheaths of small plastic from under her bed and gets to work. She has to join the pieces together to form a toy and then pack one each in a plastic cover. She has been at this work for two days in every spare moment. Nearly three hours later, she finishes the sack and gets back to preparing food for her children, who have returned from school.

After the children go to their tuitions in the afternoon, Rekha carries the sack, weighing nearly 5 kilograms, to a house nearby. Here, a man weighs the sack and makes a note. At the end of the month, for each 5 kilograms of work done, Rekha is paid a meagre Rs (Indian rupees) 50. Thus, she makes Rs 500–600 every month and uses it to pay for her children's daily expenses.

What Rekha does is called "home-based work", a form of informal sector employment in which the workers' primary workplace is their own home. Home-based workers undertake productive or remunerative employment from within their own home or adjacent premises. This work can be full-time or part-time, and it is diverse in nature, ranging from high-skilled handicraft work to work that is categorized as semi-skilled or unskilled.

CATEGORIES OF HOME-BASED WORK

There are two widely recognized categories of home-based workers:

- ***Self-employed or own account workers:*** These workers buy their own raw materials and are involved in the production process from start to finish. They have direct contact with the market, making and selling products or providing services from in and around their homes. Self-employed home-based workers are usually more closely associated with local markets.

- ***Subcontracted or piece-rate or homeworkers:*** These workers receive work from firms through intermediaries and subcontractors at piece rates. Work orders come with specifications, and raw materials are provided. Though they are part of both national and global supply chains, they do not have direct access to the market. This means that they rarely know who their primary employer (or the retail company they produce for) is, where the products they make are finally sold, and at what price they are sold.

DIFFERENCES IN HOME-BASED WORK AND DOMESTIC WORK (OR OTHER WORK DONE AT HOME)

1. Home-based workers work in their own homes. This is different from domestic workers, whose workplace is their employer's home. For example, a woman tailor who gets orders to stitch blouses and uses her own machine at home to do it is a home-based worker. A woman who goes out to different houses to do cleaning or cooking work is a domestic worker.

2. Home-based work refers to paid work only. Unpaid work in the home, such as cooking, cleaning and caretaking, is known as "care work". Home-based work is different from this as workers are monetarily compensated for their labour.

3. Home-based workers themselves sometimes describe their efforts simply as an activity to pass the time. This is due to a range of factors, including the fact that they are working in their own homes and are not recognized by the state or their employers. However, it is important to acknowledge that these are workers who are doing work that contributes significantly to the Indian economy.

REASONS FOR HOME-BASED WORK

Firms outsource production for some of the following reasons:

- They want to offset the business risk from fluctuating demand by employing workers only when needed. By contracting work out to smaller firms, who then outsource it to home-based workers, big businesses are able to treat these workers as a reserve army of labour with no guarantee of regular work.
- If workers are formally employed, firms would have to ensure minimum wages and other basic protections as mandated by the law. Instead, they choose to deploy work to home-based workers with no formal work contracts, saving themselves substantial investment in employee costs and infrastructure.
- As home-based workers work from their own homes, they pay the costs for rent, equipment, electricity and any other support services, thus reducing operating costs for firms.
- Some specialized skills and intricate work cannot be mechanized. Hence, even firms who have invested in capital-intensive production systems require workers to undertake specific tasks. As it is not profitable for them to have these workers on their regular payroll, this work is often contracted to home-based workers.

Women may choose to take up home-based work because:

- They shoulder a disproportionate burden of care work in the family, especially taking care of children and elderly family members. As home-based work can be done at their own pace and from within their own homes, many women choose this work for the flexibility it offers.
- In patriarchal societies like India, many women are not allowed to freely move outside their homes and take up paid work. Many home-based workers cite restrictions on their mobility as a key reason for why they take up home-based work even if it doesn't pay very well.
- There is great ease of entry into the home-based work sector as it does not require any significant influx of capital to start. Women are able to use the skills that they already have, such as stitching and embroidery, to do paid work at home.

CONTRIBUTION OF HOME-BASED WORKERS

- **Supporting household income**
  For urban poor households whose entire livelihood is precarious, income from home-based work is a significant addition. In times of distress, these households take more home-based work as it can offer a regular cash flow through the month.

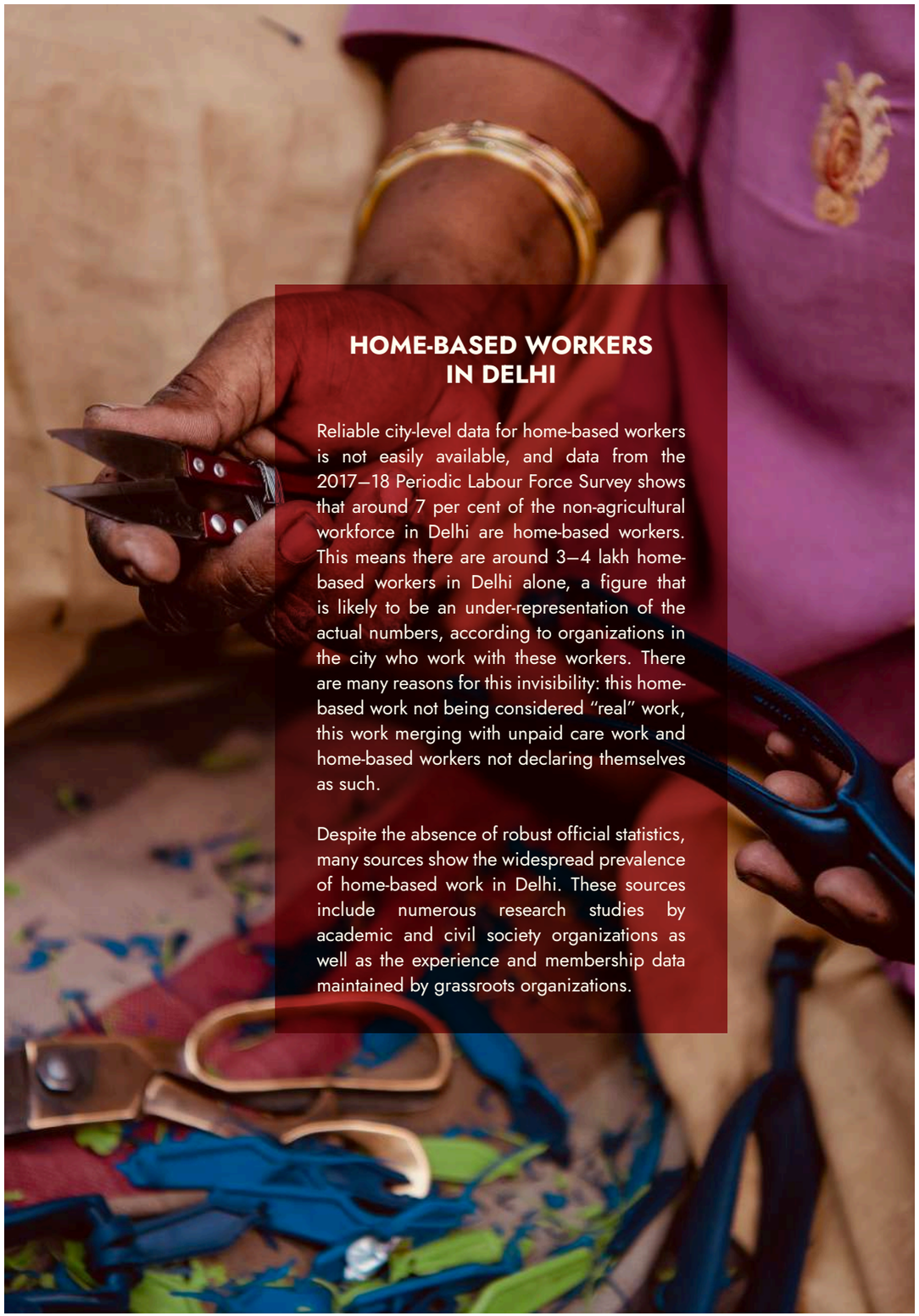
- **Easing care work**
  Women often do home-based work as it allows them to balance the burden of caring for children and the elderly, and other household tasks.

- **Adding to economic input**
  Home-based workers supply low-cost goods and services to urban customers while also creating demand for other goods and services, such as raw materials, equipment, city transport and other services. Their low-cost input also contributes to the production of cheaper goods as their product moves up the supply chain. 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.

- **Easing environmental impact**
  By not commuting on a regular basis and relying more on walking or cycling, home-based workers reduce traffic congestion and air pollution in cities.

REGULATION AND LEGAL ENVIRONMENT

According to the latest estimates from the 2017–18 Periodic Labour Force Survey (Raveendran 2020), there are nearly 41.85 million home-based workers in India. Despite this, there is no national law or policy to ensure the extension of labour laws to this very large workforce. Internationally, the most important document affecting homeworkers is the International Labour Organization's (ILO) Home Work Convention, 1996 (No. 177), which aims to protect and promote the rights of these workers. Its comprehensive coverage includes fair remuneration, social protection, the right to organize and freedom from discrimination. However, more than 20 years later, most countries have not ratified Convention No. 177, including India. In addition, over the years, organizations representing home-based workers in India have continued their efforts towards formulating a national policy for these workers, which are yet to bear fruit.



HOME-BASED WORKERS IN DELHI

Reliable city-level data for home-based workers is not easily available, and data from the 2017–18 Periodic Labour Force Survey shows that around 7 per cent of the non-agricultural workforce in Delhi are home-based workers. This means there are around 3–4 lakh home-based workers in Delhi alone, a figure that is likely to be an under-representation of the actual numbers, according to organizations in the city who work with these workers. There are many reasons for this invisibility: this home-based work not being considered "real" work, this work merging with unpaid care work and home-based workers not declaring themselves as such.

Despite the absence of robust official statistics, many sources show the widespread prevalence of home-based work in Delhi. These sources include numerous research studies by academic and civil society organizations as well as the experience and membership data maintained by grassroots organizations.

HOME AS PLACE OF WORK

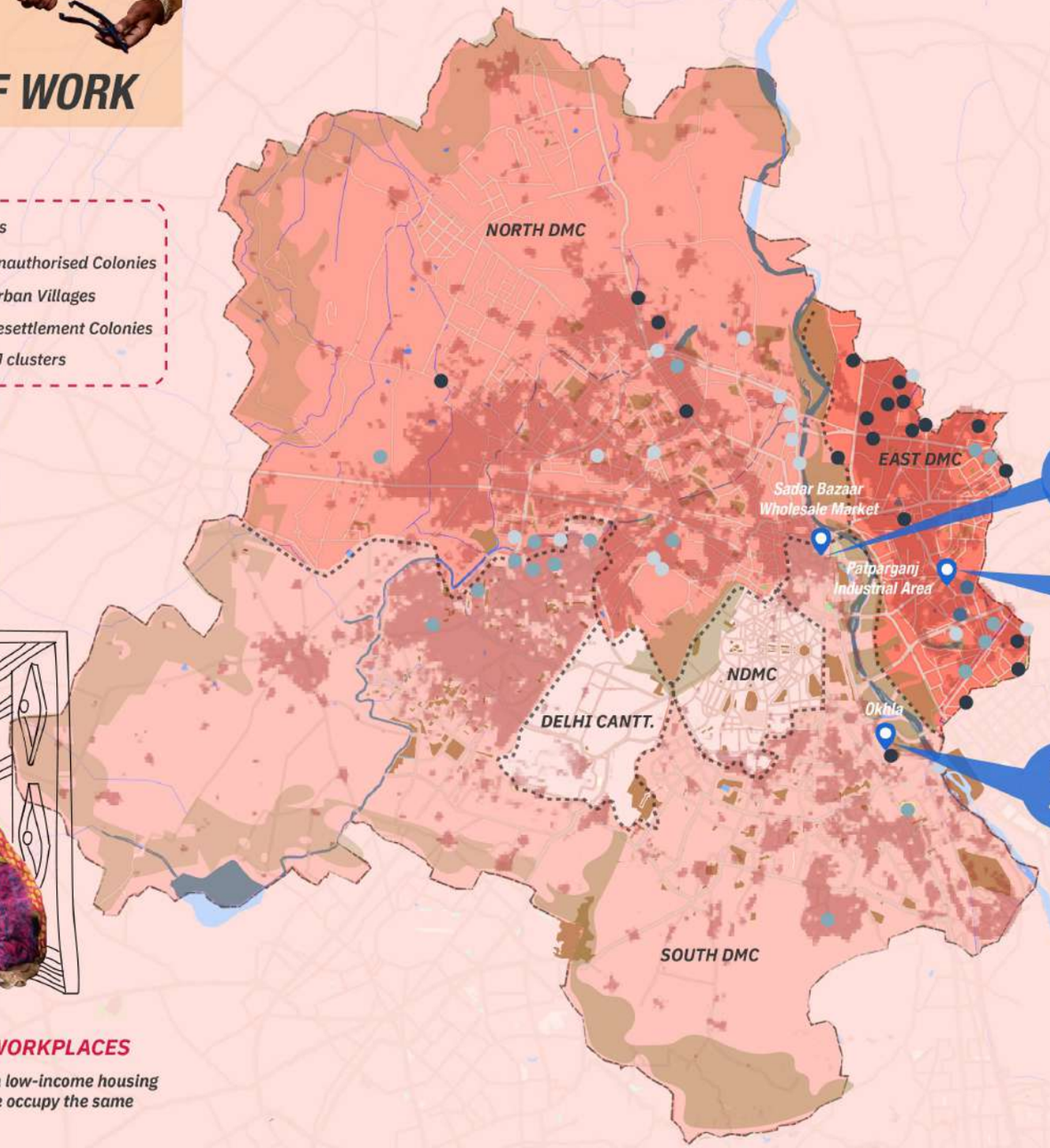
KEY

- High density built-up areas
- Home-based workers in Unauthorised Colonies
- Home-based workers in Urban Villages
- Home-based workers in Resettlement Colonies
- Home-based workers in JJ clusters

OUR HOMES ARE ALSO WORKPLACES

Most home-based workers live in low-income housing categories where work and home occupy the same space.

Credit: WIEGO and Social Design Collaborative



LOCATING THE HOME-BASED WORKERS OF DELHI

Home-based workers** produce goods or services for the market from within or around their own homes. There are many home-based workers throughout Delhi, many of whom are women, who **contribute immensely to the city's economy.

*They are an **invisible workforce** who face many challenges as they use their homes as their workplaces.*

Many self-employed home-based workers source work from local wholesale markets and supply it back there.

Work is out-sourced from factories in industrial areas to home-based workers who complete the work from their homes.

Some home-based workers receive work orders that can be traced back to global brands, and some are for domestic brands.

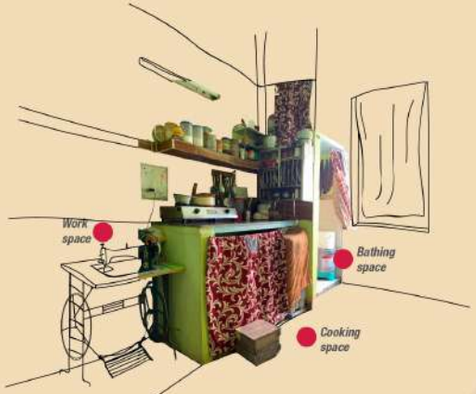
Home-based work in this map of Delhi includes one or more of the following:

- Embroidery/ Embellishment
- Thread cutting
- Envelope making
- Stitching
- Kitchen tools making
- Bead work
- Toy packaging
- Bindi making
- Mala making
- Sandal strap cutting
- Tag tying
- Artificial flower making
- Vegetable peeling

HOME AS PLACE OF WORK

Story of a Neighbourhood

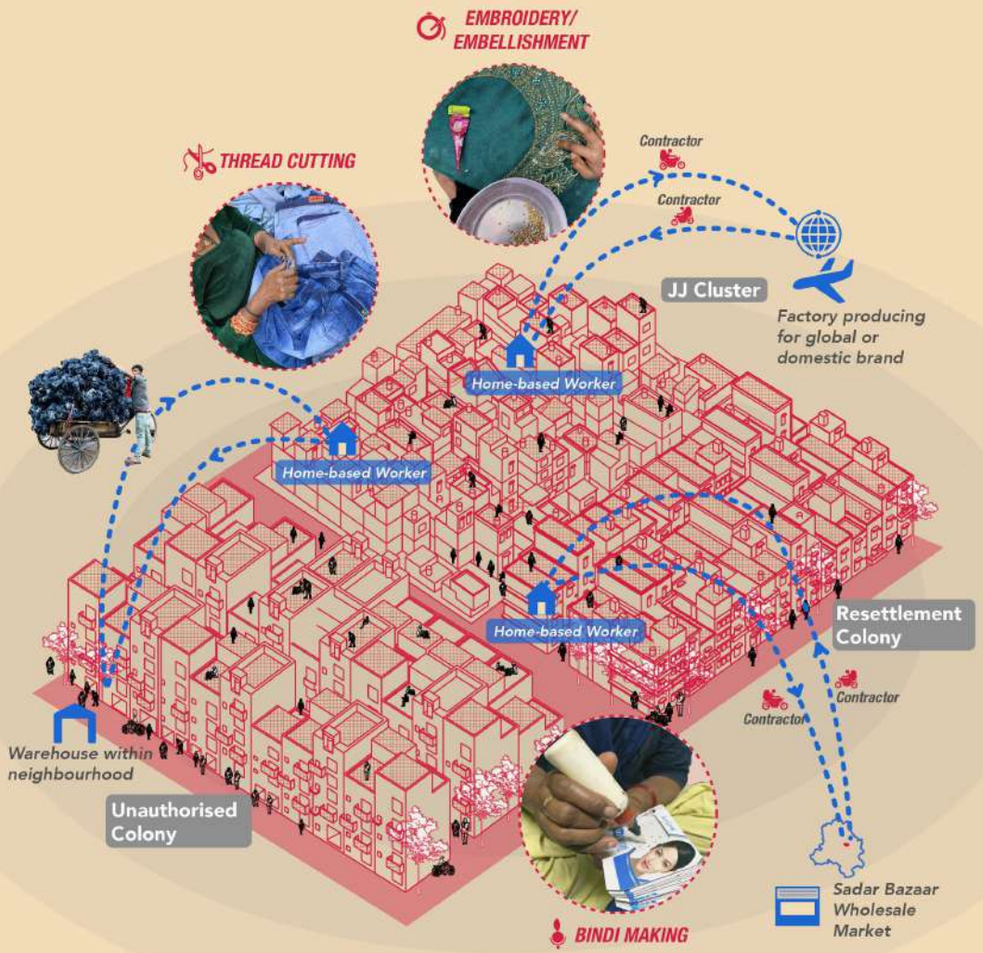
Delhi is a patchwork of diverse neighbourhooods ranging from planned colonies on one hand to self-built informal settlements on the other. These include JJ clusters (Jhuggi-Jhopdi clusters) commonly known as "slums", resettlement colonies to which JJ clusters are often relocated by the government, unauthorized colonies and urban villages. Home-based workers, like other urban poor citizens, live and work in such neighbourhoods. The aerial view below shows the vibrant economies they sustain.



A small house hampers productivity, as a home-based worker cannot take bulk work orders because she cannot store raw materials and finished goods, and she cannot work continuously as there are competing needs for the same space.

Sometimes work spills over into the adjoining areas such as the platforms in front of their homes.

The dwellings of home-based workers are typically small and crowded, of poor quality, with little natural light or fresh air. The size of the house specially has implications on women's work burden.



Because their home is their workplace, home-based workers are more affected than other workers by government housing policies and practices to do with slum evictions/upgradation/relocation and tenure security; zoning regulations; as well as the provision of basic infrastructure services like water, sanitation, electricity and transport.

STATE OF HOUSING & INFRASTRUCTURE

Crammed spaces and lack of adequate light and ventilation

Lack of access to uninterrupted water supply, sewage and electricity

Many home-based workers live in informal settlements where access to services is a daily challenge. With no piped water supply, proper sanitation, or waste collection, women have to spend longer on household chores and care responsibilities. This has a direct negative impact on their productivity and earnings.

SOURCES

This is a non-exhaustive mapping of home-based work clusters collated from different sources including membership data of SEWA Delhi and research studies on home-based work conducted by WIEGO and partners.

WIEGO Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing

SOCIAL DESIGN COLLAB

Illustrated by: Nishtha Kashyap and Anchal Sayal

Credit: WIEGO and Social Design Collaborative

The mapping of home-based workers shows that home-based work is found all over Delhi and is concentrated in low-income housing settlements. Often, a lot of home-based work is found in resettlement colonies located towards the periphery of the city. Due to their distance from the city, there are not many other work opportunities in the surrounding areas for women workers, which leads them to take up home-based work. Another characteristic is that work is often outsourced from factories in industrial areas to nearby residential settlements. Proximity is a significant factor here as it reduces travel costs for both workers and contractors.

While the mapping shows the spread of home-based work across the city, this work is also extremely diverse in nature. Home-based workers in Delhi are engaged in a range of trades, from manufacturing to packaging, repair and food processing. They do highly skilled hand embroidery and embellishment work for large, global fashion brands, finishing up products manufactured in small factories or they package different kinds of products for sale.

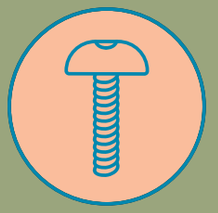
Buttonhole work

Bangle making

Rakhi making

Garland making

Toy packaging



Screw-rubber cutting

Newspaper envelope making

Vegetable cutting and peeling

THE VARIOUS CATEGORIES AND SUB-CATEGORIES OF HOME-BASED WORK IN DELHI

Stitching (cutting and tailoring)

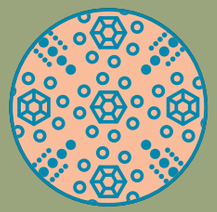
Embroidery

Flag making

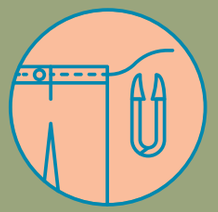
Hooks in chain making

Lace designing work

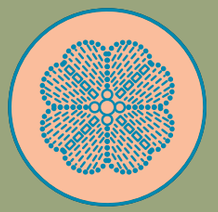
Packaging spices



Stone work



Thread cutting



Bead work

Button work

Pom-pom making

Bindi making

Jewellery (accessory) making

Lime powder (chuna) filling in packets

Due to the diversity of home-based work, it is not possible to identify a single pathway to how people take up home-based work. In certain handloom or handicraft trades, these skills are learned from older family members as the tradition is passed on through the generations. Often, other family members may also be part of the same trade; while the women may do the home-based part of the labour, the men may be involved in selling the products in the market. Even when the family may not be involved, women workers make use of skills that they have picked up informally, whether it is stitching or cooking, to take up paid home-based work. Some examples of this are self-employed tailors or pickle makers in Delhi. In other trades where knowing a prior skill is not necessary, for instance toy packaging or sandal-strap cutting, workers tend to learn from their friends or neighbours who are already engaged in the work. Thus, the community in which the worker is situated is an important determinant of the nature of home-based work that they do, as it is where skills are transferred and information is exchanged around the availability of work.

In places where home work occurs, the key actor is the subcontractor. For home workers, the subcontractor is usually the only point of contact, and they do not have any information about the firm or company for which they are producing. The subcontractor brings the raw materials for the work in bulk to the colony and distributes them to the workers. They are responsible for noting the dues for each worker and control the regularity with which payments are disbursed (on a weekly, bi-monthly or monthly basis). However, due to the close kinship or community networks prevalent in home-based work, women workers sometimes rely on contractors for immediate cash flows to meet urgent household needs or as a source for credit. Though it is not the norm, it has been observed that these networks sometimes even survive the displacement of workers from one area to the other. For example, the same contractor who used to bring bead work to women in Laxmi Nagar continued to do so even after an eviction drive in the area displaced the women, who were then resettled nearly 30 kilometres away. In cases where these networks may not be as strong, however, women workers recount stories of being cheated of their payments by subcontractors who get work done and then disappear.

It is also important to understand that over time, home-based work can vary in nature. Some types of trades or work are only available seasonally, while other kinds of work are available through the year. For instance, garland making typically peaks during the festive season of Diwali. Workers end up working long hours to maximize the quantity of work at this time, even as they may engage in other economic activities after the season. As mentioned previously, in the case of homeworkers, firms decide the pace and regularity of when work is available. For example, the demand for embroidery work in global fashion designs will determine whether these brands decide to give out work to home-based workers or not. What is clear is that workers themselves have no control over what and how much work will be available to them, making home-based work a very uncertain and precarious form of employment.

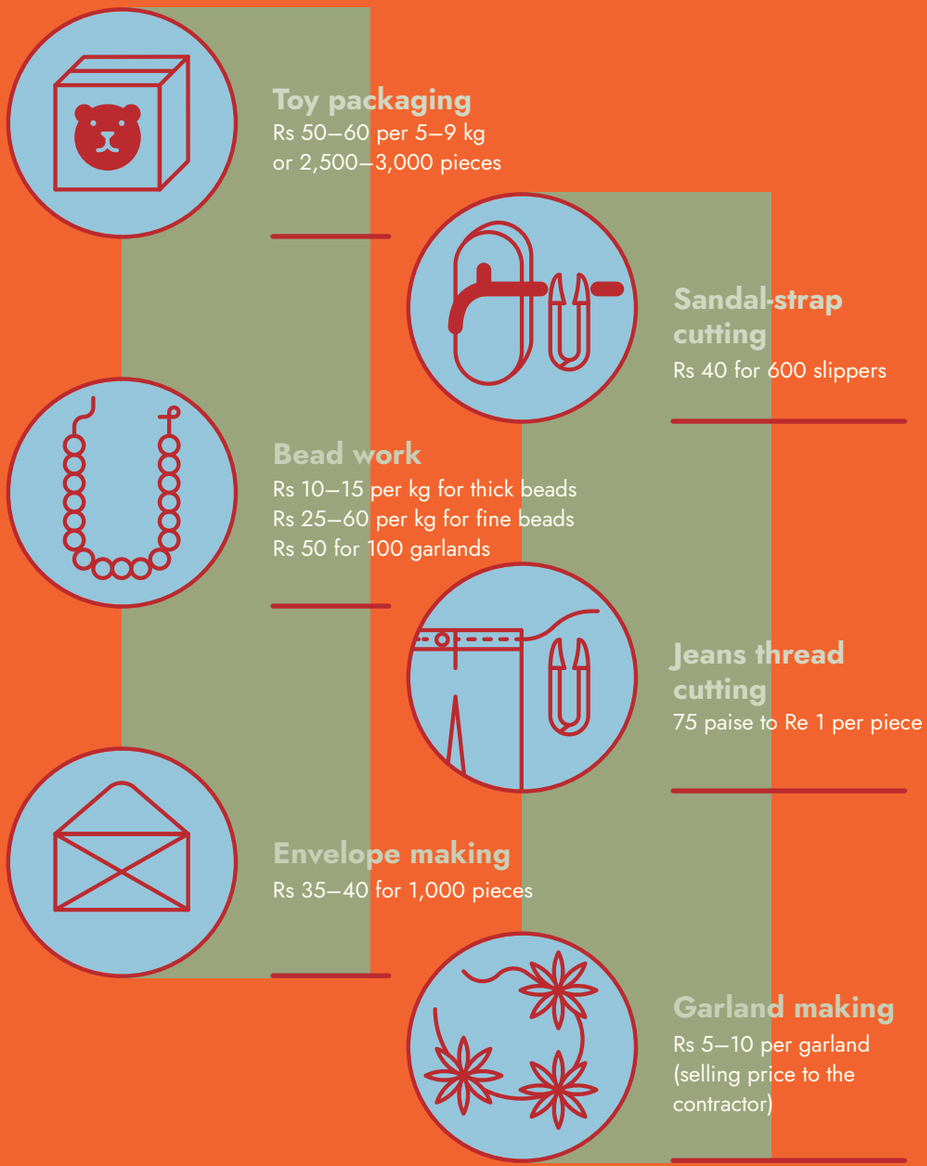
Key issues faced by home-based workers in Delhi

WORK AND EARNINGS

Even though home-based workers contribute significantly to both their households and their employer's value chains, they are hardly ever acknowledged. Their work is undervalued as a frivolous "time-pass" activity, and these workers are a heavily exploited section of the informal workforce.

Home-based work is one of the lowest-earning sectors of informal employment. Even though there is much diversity within the home-based sector in the nature of skills required and the amount of time required to do the work, a common feature is that workers are paid far below what employers would be required to pay them in a formal setting. Their payment is usually calculated as "piece rates", which is based on either the number of units and/or the weight of finished products. The infographic on the right shows the prevalent rates for some types of home-based work documented in various studies conducted between 2017 and 2020.

Types of home-based work and their piece rates in Delhi



However, even these very poor earnings are not regular or guaranteed. Piece rates fluctuate based on demand, and subcontractors offset their risk by reducing the rates paid to home-based workers at any time. Also, as orders keep fluctuating, not all the women taking work from a subcontractor are guaranteed work at all times. Further, these rates do not take into account the cost of the tools required or utilities, like water and electricity, which are all borne by the worker.

In addition, there is no way to measure the amount of time that is spent on the work. Unlike formal sector employees who are paid a fixed salary for a work day that lasts eight hours on average, home-based workers' earnings are not related to the hours required to finish the task. Owing to the very low piece rates, workers often have to spend long hours to complete enough work to earn even a small amount, which could vary depending on the specifications of the task. For garment embroiderers, some patterns may require intricate work that takes much longer, but they would still be paid a piece rate. Similarly, for toy packaging work, when the raw material consists of larger pieces, workers are able to finish a bigger number of pieces or weight in a day as compared to days when the toy has smaller pieces to be joined together. Hence, home-based workers tend to work extremely long hours, often into the night, to finish their tasks for the day.

The root cause of these issues is that these workers are not recognized as workers and are completely unregulated, with no legal or social protections. In these conditions, their impoverished position leads them to work for very poor wages and take on the burden of long hours of work in less-than-ideal conditions to earn an income.

MAMTA

Mamta migrated to Delhi from Bihar with her husband and children over six years ago, and they live in New Ashok Nagar. A worker in the building she lived in offered to teach her and some other new migrants how to make flower garlands. Since then, she has made garlands for sale in temples and for weddings. She started working for a contractor who would bring work to her home. Over time, she became skilled in her craft, acquiring the ability to make garlands in various shapes and sizes.

The pandemic, however, completely stopped her business as she was dependent on the supply of garlands to temples and weddings, both of which were not permitted for many months after the start of the pandemic. Having done only garland work for many years, Mamta wasn't able to find another source of employment. Her husband was also laid off from his job in an export factory, and the family had to take a loan from a family friend to sustain themselves. When she was interviewed in 2020, they were paying the loan back with interest (she was unsure of the amount being charged), and she was very worried about the financial burden from the loan.

Mamta also reported that while her garland-making work had resumed, the demand remained low and payment rates had fallen even lower. Thus, at the most, Mamta earned Rs 1,000–1,200 per month. She felt unable to negotiate for pre-pandemic prices for her work. She had been unable to access any government scheme that she had information about because of the burden of the paperwork that she was unable to meet.

When she interviewed again in 2021, it appeared that even though Mamta received work from Ruaab at that time, she had no work orders from them, and subsequently, there had been no increase in her income. Her husband was employed, but he earned less than he did before the pandemic. There had been no notable change in her financial situation because she was still struggling to repay the loan her family took from a friend. In addition, during the pandemic, access to education was difficult for Mamta's two children because the family had only one phone with data services, which needed to be shared to attend classes. Hence, both the children ended up attending only half of their classes.

THE HOME AS THE WORKPLACE

For the vast majority of the urban poor, the house they live in is a key productive asset leveraged for work, and this is especially so for home-based workers, who both live and work in the same space. As mentioned earlier, home-based work is typically clustered in low-income settlements in Delhi, where the houses are typically very small and lack basic infrastructure – they may even lack full legal tenure – and this has many implications for home-based workers.

At the scale of the housing unit, a small house hampers productivity because the home-based worker cannot take bulk work orders as she cannot store raw materials and work continuously due to competing needs for the same space from other household members and activities. Due to the poor quality of housing, the equipment, raw materials and finished goods often get damaged. For instance, during the monsoon, houses frequently get flooded, making working at home impossible. Problems like lack of ventilation and lighting also pose occupational health and safety risks, which have to be borne by the worker. An internal research study on home-based workers in Savda Ghevra Colony in Delhi by the Institute of Social Studies Trust revealed, for example, that women undertaking bead work at home suffered because of the lack of natural light entering their home, leading to a strain on their eyes.

At the scale of the settlement, the lack of regular basic infrastructure – a dearth of piped water, sewage problems, open or non-existent drains, and poor waste management – also takes a heavy toll on the health and productivity of home-based workers. In addition, for women workers, the time they spend collecting water or disposing garbage represents an opportunity cost because of the time spent away from their market activities. Home-based does not mean home-bound, because these workers have to leave their homes on a regular basis as part of their work. As a result, the distance between the market/contractor/customer and the home-cum-workplace and the availability and cost of public transport directly impact the time and money spent in commuting and transporting goods and, indirectly, the productivity and earnings of the workers.

At the scale of the city, the policy of evicting self-built informal settlements due to lack of land or tenure rights results in loss of home and work and is detrimental to housing and livelihood security. The loss of work linkages impacts home-based workers heavily and lowers their bargaining power in wage settlement. Further, the overly strict separation of land uses (such as single-use zones) can negatively impact the livelihoods of urban home-based workers by adding a layer of "illegality" to their work.

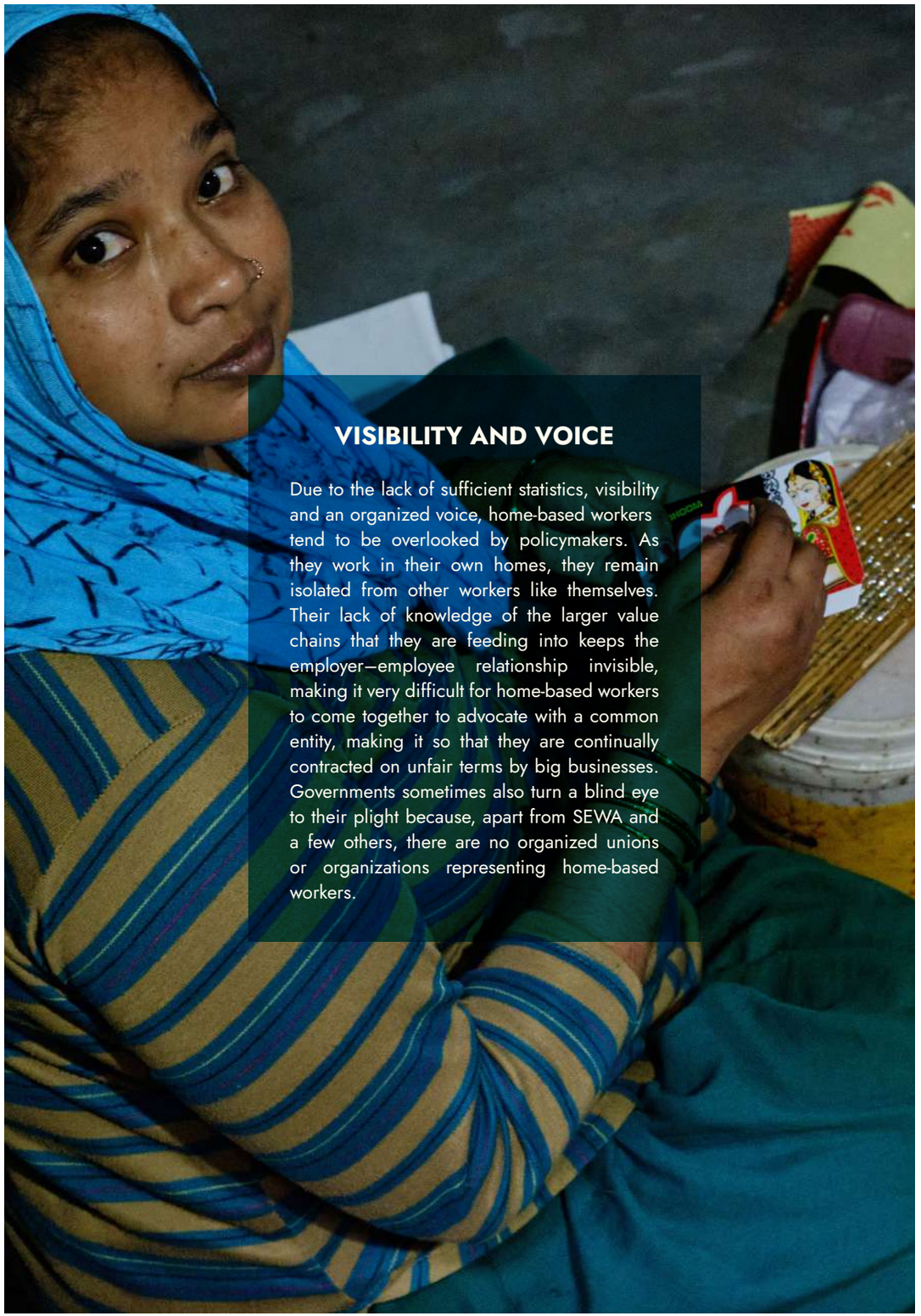
MIRAZ

Miraz and her sister first learned how to do aari ka kaam (embroidery) from their mother, continuing the family trade. When she was first interviewed in 2020, Miraz was working with a contractor who paid her Rs 40 per hour for her aari work, and she also picked up contractual work from Ruaab. She credited her experience with SEWA and as a Ruaab shareholder with helping her enhance her ability to negotiate with contractors for higher rates and better working hours.

The COVID-19 pandemic affected her sources of work because aari work is considered a luxury, and the demand for it fell considerably during this time. Thus, the contractor reduced both the rate and the regularity of work, and her home tailoring business also dried up. Her husband has never shared his income with her – he has long left Miraz to make household decisions on her own using her own income.

During the lockdowns, the stress of making financial decisions with limited information was coupled with the stress of having free time, something she was entirely unused to, and this was hard on Miraz. She sorely felt the lack of an alternative source of income or livelihood. These challenges were compounded by the failure of the public distribution system in her neighbourhood, where, in spite of having a ration card, she did not receive rations during the pandemic.

In 2021, during the third wave of COVID-19 in Delhi, Miraz suffered a major financial setback because she received no orders for aari work or orders from Ruaab, and, consequently, her income reduced greatly. She said that she did not receive any work from her contractor in December 2021 and January 2022 and attributed this to the contractors going back to their villages because of the second wave of the pandemic in April 2021. The burden of household chores on her had also significantly increased because her children were not going to school and required constant attention and care. She joined SEWA when she was very young, and her association with SEWA has given her confidence and has empowered her. Once the pandemic comes to a halt, she hopes to get regular work orders again and start enabling her family's hopes and dreams.



VISIBILITY AND VOICE

Due to the lack of sufficient statistics, visibility and an organized voice, home-based workers tend to be overlooked by policymakers. As they work in their own homes, they remain isolated from other workers like themselves. Their lack of knowledge of the larger value chains that they are feeding into keeps the employer–employee relationship invisible, making it very difficult for home-based workers to come together to advocate with a common entity, making it so that they are continually contracted on unfair terms by big businesses. Governments sometimes also turn a blind eye to their plight because, apart from SEWA and a few others, there are no organized unions or organizations representing home-based workers.

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON HOME-BASED WORKERS

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic began, home-based work was one of the lowest-earning sectors of informal employment in Delhi (WIEGO 2020).

To better understand the impact of the COVID-19 crisis across informal worker sectors in Delhi, WIEGO conducted a study at two points in time – mid-2020 and mid-2021 – that revealed the devastating impact on home-based workers. First, the national lockdown announced in March 2020 put a complete stop to all work orders. Many of the factories in the city, from where contractors used to source work, were shut, and the middlemen were out of work themselves. Many women workers had unsold inventory and had not been paid for previous orders. Even those home-based workers who were not part of supply chains were without income as they could not meet with customers or go to the markets to procure raw materials. Many of these workers were unable to meet even basic needs for food or milk. While a small number found alternative ways to earn an income – making masks, for example – or had another earning member in the household, most others were in extreme distress. All or most of their savings had been used up, and many workers had to either sell their assets or borrow from moneylenders at high interest rates. In addition, with the whole family at home, most women workers had to spend increased time on household chores, cooking and childcare.

In a second round of research, it was found that, unlike other sectors of informal employment that had at least partially revived with the easing of lockdown restrictions, home-based workers in Delhi continued to be severely impacted. Two years into the pandemic, the median monthly earnings of the home-based workers sample remained at zero as the vast majority of these workers were still not able to get any work at all (WIEGO 2022). Even subcontracted workers associated with SEWA's Ruaab Collective said that while the mask-making that had initially been available to them had gradually dried up, and the orders from global brands had still not revived. Self-employed home-based workers were faring slightly better and were attempting to resume their work. However, they were finding it difficult to find as many customers as they had previously due to the overall impact on the economy, which has reduced consumer demand even during festive times.

In order to cope, home-based workers have had to exhaust their household savings, which were not very significant to begin with. Over three-quarters of the home-based workers surveyed have had to borrow from family, friends and neighbours to cope during this time. Without work reviving, they remain heavily indebted and unsure of how to repay these loans. Due to a lack of recognition from the government, they have not received any cash grants or loan support, apart from those women who had Jan Dhan bank accounts, in which they received Rs 500 each month for three months at the beginning of the pandemic. For food support, they have relied on the government ration schemes, which are unfortunately activated only during key crisis moments, such as when infections peak. The majority of these workers have thus relied on their own MBOs and other NGOs for additional support for rations.

MADHU

For many years, Madhu did stitching and sewing work through a small tailoring business she ran out of her home in New Ashok Nagar. Her primary clientele were people from her neighbourhood, with the maximum business coming in during festive times. Her husband had and continues to have serious health problems, and this meant not only significant medical expenses but also no familial support for her business as their focus has been her husband's health.

The pandemic greatly affected her business, and she reported earning only Rs 40 in January 2021, with a maximum of Rs 700 in March 2021. She didn't see her business picking up anytime soon either, as her business model was dependent on the additional disposable income families had during festive seasons, which she thinks is unlikely in her community after the pandemic. In response to this crash, she enrolled in Ruaab in December 2020 for mask-making work.

While she was aware of benefits and schemes available to her, she didn't find them useful due to the red tape she had to deal with. Applications have been stuck in the system for a long time, and she didn't know what she could do to change this despite the repercussions on her own life.

One of her main concerns was the lack of support from the government with regards to chronic health conditions. Her husband is mentally impaired ("dimaag se kamzor") and required many health interventions since he was unable to keep himself healthy. In fact, due to a lack of access to medical services and funds, they haven't even been able to get an accurate diagnosis for him. The medical burden on Madhu was immense – there seemed no end in sight, and she lamented the lack of support from the state.

When she was interviewed in 2021, Madhu, who had enrolled in Ruaab after her tailoring business shut down during the pandemic, received work orders from them. The skill development training sessions at the Ruaab centre helped polish her skills, and she learned how to stitch items like blouses. In the festive season in 2021, she received orders from her old clients, and her monthly income was estimated to be about Rs 1,000–1,500.

Madhu now finds herself engaged in household chores the entire day.

SEWA Delhi's work with home-based workers

SEWA Delhi's journey has been an eventful one, the years highlighted by several milestones and achievements. The initial intent has, however, remained unchanged – to take up issues related to women workers in the informal sector and represent their concerns to policymakers at both the national and state levels. These issues include livelihood protection and advocacy for women home-based workers. SEWA Delhi has been organizing these workers since the inception of the Delhi office and has supported members in the vagaries of their professional and personal lives.

In Delhi, SEWA started organizing vegetable vendors in Jahangirpuri in 1999 when they were facing severe issues because they belonged to the informal sector. SEWA grassroots workers mobilized these vendors and helped them form self-help groups, and soon SEWA started organizing home-based workers in Sunder Nagri in the same way.

Ever since then, SEWA Delhi has worked to organize home-based workers through various means. Their organizers go from door to door and arrange community meetings, camps, campaigns and awareness sessions. They form trade groups and trade committees to help workers demand their rights and discuss the issues they face at work. Thus, home-based workers doing specific types of work come together and form groups at the area level and committees at the state level. These groups and committees play an important role in organizing and demanding rights from contractors, middlemen and the government.

In 2019, the majority of the SEWA Delhi membership base was made up of home-based workers, and the organization carried out a survey to understand and find out the types, categories and subcategories of these workers in their operational areas, as well as the issues they faced and what they needed to improve their working and living conditions. The workers were categorized into 22 subsets according to the nature of work in which they were involved. On the basis of the survey report, discussions were undertaken and a demand charter was prepared by home-based workers for better working conditions. This charter was submitted to the labour commissioner with the signatures of all the home-based workers who had participated in the study.

SEWA RUAAB

As most of these women workers are poor and not educated, it is difficult for them to voice their concerns or stand up for their rights. They have no choice but to depend on the middlemen or contractors, and not being collectively organized makes them all the more vulnerable to exploitation. It is thus imperative to empower these women to collectively demand their rights, including fair wages and markets for their products. As a result, in 2006, SEWA Delhi intervened to remove the chain of middlemen and directly link women workers to production houses so that they are able to receive fair rates for their work as well as recognition of their skill and effort.

SEWA Delhi promoted and registered an artisan-producer company called Ruaab, which exclusively provides regular embellishment work to home-based workers, with subcentres in six areas of Delhi: Sunder Nagri, Rajiv Nagar, Nand Nagri, Mullah Colony, Mustafabad and New Ashok Nagar. Ruaab facilitates linking women home-based workers to the market. The initiative is designed and managed by women producers and works through an embroidery centre model to ensure an ethical and transparent supply chain, ensuring that they are no longer the invisible last link in a long global value chain. The women workers of Ruuab also engage in skill training, such as legal awareness and technical skill development, which helps build their capacities to speak out against exploitative working conditions and become economically independent. Thus, working with Ruaab has helped enhance their capacity, upgrade their skills and build a collective strength.

Further, to enhance the visibility of home-based workers, in 2021, SEWA Delhi strongly advocated to have various kinds of home-based workers included in a pilot survey by the Department of Labour. The maximum number of subsets of various trades was included, and SEWA workers also sensitized many fellow surveyors. This pilot led to the identification of home-based work under different categories, but, unfortunately, not under the umbrella of home-based workers. Nevertheless, even being identified was a big step towards the goal of these women being identified as workers. Since 2021, SEWA Delhi has been successfully carrying out registration drives and camps, registering home-based workers on the e-SHRAM portal and linking them to social security schemes with the help of the SEWA Shakti Kendras.

RUKSANA

Ruksana was a young girl when she learned stitching and embroidery from members of her family as this was the family trade. However, she had also completed a beautician's course and had worked in a salon for a few years, which she had enjoyed. First interviewed in 2020, Ruksana was working for both SEWA Ruaab and a contractor in her neighbourhood, as this allowed her to pick up the work from their centres and work on it at home.

Ruksana's family had been facing significant economic challenges even before the spread of COVID-19. Her husband lost his job in a garment factory nearby as a result of the communal violence that devastated parts of Delhi in early 2020. Her work with Ruaab and the contractor meant she could make some money through the pandemic, but the rates for her work have been decreasing even with Ruaab. However, this was still an improvement from the contractor, who pays her even less per mask than Ruaab's decreased rate.

Ruksana has a ration card, but the public distribution system shop only provided rice and wheat. All the other supplies had to be bought, and the liquid petroleum gas cylinder proved to be a significant expense. She had to take a loan from a moneylender to tide her family over and buy supplies, such as gas, oil and salt, and the interest owed had begun to build up.

When she was interviewed again in 2021, she barely received any work, and her earnings reduced to Rs 400 per month. The contractor in her locality had not been receiving sufficient work orders either and hence was not able to employ home-based workers except old contacts.

It is pertinent to mention that Ruksana's husband's income had also suffered a devastating blow. In 2021, he worked for only 10 days every month at a woodworking factory because the factory did not have sufficient work to engage its workers. As the family income shrank, it became difficult for Ruksana and her family to repay their loan, and lenders began to pester her. Thus, she was compelled to take a loan against her LIC policy to clear off the loan. During the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns, it became hard for her children to access education because she had limited access to data plans and electronic devices.

So far, as an aagewaan, she has actively engaged in educating other women employed as home-based workers about the various legislations and government schemes meant to empower them.

SUPPORT DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 crisis and the resulting national lockdowns forced all businesses to shut operations, affecting all intermediary and final stakeholders in various supply chains, right down to the lowest workers, that is, home-based workers. This sudden loss of livelihood coupled with stalled payments for finished work further exacerbated the situation for home-based women workers. SEWA Delhi not only provided them with quick relief in terms of food, nutrition, health kits, awareness programmes and medical consultation but also linked them to its sister concern, Ruaab, for livelihood support.

At this time, Ruaab reached out to both government platforms and other trading houses to secure work for women artisans who have lost their sources of livelihood in Sunder Nagri, Rajiv Nagar, Mustafabad and New Ashok Nagar. These women were engaged in the production of reusable masks and other personal protective equipment supplies, such as operation theatre gowns and caps, as per the work contracts secured with various parties. Able to do this work safely from their homes, the women artisans responded well, and the finished pieces were collected by the designated group leaders and given to delivery persons for transportation. This enabled them to earn a livelihood even in those grim times.

Policy recommendations to benefit home-based workers

RECOGNITION AND VOICE

Enumeration and inclusion in labour surveys

Issuance of worker identity cards

Inclusion in Minimum Wages Schedule

State policy or law for welfare of home-based workers

Linkages to ensure access to social security

Inclusion of home-based workers and their representatives in policy making and local governance

DECENT TERMS OF WORK

Assurance of secure enforceable work contracts and higher piece rates set with reference to minimum wages

Enforcement and grievance redressal mechanisms to ensure timely payment of wages, safety, occupational health and other basic worker rights

Provision of community work centres in low-income settlements

Inclusion in income-generating and skill-building schemes to enable movement towards more remunerative employment

Provision of credit at minimal interest to enable home-based workers to undertake entrepreneurial activity

Access to quality child care services at the local level to ensure women are able to equally partake in economic activity

BETTER QUALITY OF HOUSING AND URBAN SERVICES

Access to basic services like water, sanitation, drainage

Access to quality affordable public transport

Access to housing finance

Granting of tenure security and no eviction of existing informal settlements

Better design of low-income housing that is accommodative of livelihood needs of work space, loft/storage, lighting, ventilation, etc.

ADDITIONAL DEMANDS TO AID POST-PANDEMIC RECOVERY

Cash relief to home-based workers to offset the huge income loss sustained in the last two years

Provision of food rations for free and at subsidized rates to continue in the medium to long term given that recovery of livelihood is still impending

Inclusion of home-based workers as a separate category in the ongoing e-SHRAM registration process and actively linking them to social security benefits

Initiatives from the government to enable employer accountability towards home-based workers, including supply chain relief contributions for homeworkers and revival of work orders at fixed rates of pay that match national standards for work

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