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**Summary Report - Dialogue on Women Homeworkers  
Organised by One World Action, WIEGO, SEWA and TUC  
Monday 27<sup>th</sup> October 2008**

**Chair - Helen O'Connell, Head of Policy, One World Action**

The dialogue aimed to explore the importance of homeworking to women in the informal economy, its positive and negative aspects and to present innovative ways in which organisations are supporting women homeworkers. It aimed to:

- increase understanding of homeworking and its potential role in securing an equitable and safe livelihood for women
- explore issues around the empowerment, organisation and legal protection of homeworkers
- develop strategies, actions and recommendations for future policy and advocacy work

**Sanjay Kumar - Co-ordinator SEWA Bharat**

The Self Employed Women's Association is a trade union movement of poor, self-employed women workers whose twin goals are full employment and self-reliance. The Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) began in 1971 and now has over one million members across nine states in India. SEWA Bharat is the national federation based in Delhi.



SEWA's members are poor, illiterate and marginalised women - home-based workers (e.g. embroiderers weavers, incense rollers), agricultural and construction labourers, service providers (e.g. domestic workers), small-scale producers (e.g. salt and cattle) and street vendors. SEWA have a grassroots and holistic structure that aims to meet the full lifecycle needs of women - their programmes and strategies have enabled tens of thousands of women workers in the informal sector to organise, escape grinding poverty, and secure better lives for themselves and their families.

Ninety six percent of women workers are self-employed in the informal sector. Unorganised, isolated and living in extreme poverty with no regular income or protection, they are forced to bear the brunt of India's poverty and inequality.

Thirty million of these informal women workers work at home, many trying to make a living from sewing and hand embroidery for domestic and international markets. These women face numerous problems.

These include:

- Poverty - lack of sufficient food, access to basic services, credit and to education for their children.
- Exploitation and very low or late pay – no benefits or social protection.

- Lack of regular work and lack of access to domestic and international markets.
- Lack of training, proper equipment and materials so they are unable to improve their skills and raise their income.
- Health problems from poor working conditions.
- Isolation - they are usually unorganised and unrepresented.
- Lack of political voice and power within their communities.

In 2006 in Sundernagari, a poor area of Delhi, SEWA established a groundbreaking and innovative embroidery centre that aimed to support women embroidery homeworkers in the surrounding area. Over the last two years, the centre has evolved to provide its members with a range of opportunities, services and support. It currently:

- Links its 500 members directly to textile suppliers and exporters (e.g. Monsoon, GAP and Accessorise).
- Provides members with regular work, at a fair price and ensures members are paid on time.
- Provides members with training, equipment and materials so they can connect directly to markets and service bulk orders.
- Enables and empowers members to negotiate contracts directly with export companies.
- Provides a social space where women can come together to train, organise and socialise. There is a crèche where women can leave their children while they meet, collect and deliver work.
- Provides members with other SEWA support services. These include financial services (savings, credit, insurance), provision of social security, supplementary education for members' children, health training, and training in organising and project management so that members can actively participate in the planning, implementation and monitoring of the centre and its programmes.



*The women members visit the centre regularly to collect work orders and raw materials. On completion, they receive their payment. The centre is open from 9-6pm and women members can come in anytime. SEWA negotiates piece rates and timelines with the exporters on behalf of its members. The rates are developed in consultation with members. Expert trainers explain the work and discuss the rates and timelines before signing contracts. SEWA has developed a system at the centre to carry out orders smoothly. This involves sampling, quality control, material distribution, garment distribution, record keeping and delivery of finished goods.*

*I was one of the first members of the centre. I have been an embroiderer since I was 12. Since joining the centre, I get regular and better-paid work. I get double the amount I used to. I have also started saving in a general fund for my children. I can now pay for two of my children to attend the government school. I have learnt a lot, my confidence has grown and I now come every day. I now go to places and meet other women in my community - I used to be very isolated and unable to leave the house.*

Farida

Insights on homeworking were shared by Farida (homeworker and member of SEWA), Lata (Co-ordinator of SEWA's Embroidery Centre in Delhi) and Garima Gupta, (Associate Co-ordinator, Embroidery Programme, SEWA Delhi).

### **Elaine Jones - WIEGO-Women in Informal Employment: Globalising and Organising**

WIEGO is a global research-policy network that seeks to improve the status of the working poor, particularly women, in the informal economy. It highlights the contribution and size of the informal economy and promotes the recognition, understanding and support for informal workers. Its members are membership-based organisations of informal workers, research and academic institutions, NGOs and intergovernmental agencies. It has five major programmes: Global markets, Organisation and representation, Social protection, Statistics and Urban policies.

### **Ruth Bergan - HomeWorkers Worldwide**

HomeWorkers Worldwide (HWW) is a UK-based organisation that supports homebased workers around the world. Since the 1970s there has been a growing movement among homeworkers to organise and improve their working and living conditions and increase their visibility and recognition. HWW exists to support this movement and to help it grow. HWW links homebased workers internationally, undertakes research and mapping, and currently has three major campaign focuses - Increasing the visibility of homeworkers, Social Security and the Impact of Free Trade Agreements (e.g. between Europe and India) on homeworkers.

### **Discussion**

**What are the main challenges of SEWA's work?** The great need and demand from women workers to open up SEWA's programmes in new areas, incompetence and corruption of municipal authorities which can be very frustrating, progressive policies are in place but they are not implemented and the need for a Social Security Bill for Informal Workers - this is currently being discussed in parliament.

**How is SEWA funded?** In three ways - through the union (all members pay Rs5 per year), through formation of co-operatives, federations and sustainable enterprises and through funding from the government and international agencies.

### **How is collective bargaining important to homeworkers?**

It is always much more effective and powerful to be part of a larger group. Members will often be accompanied by SEWA staff when meeting with suppliers or exporters. Through organising bargaining power becomes real - through protests, engaging with governments, training programmes on campaigning etc. SEWA often bargains with the government to develop or improve current policies. For example in Murshidabad research by SEWA revealed that 50% of Bidi workers (who roll traditional cigarettes at home) do not possess the Bidi Roller Identity Card needed to access government schemes provided under the Bidi Workers Welfare Fund Act. Based on this research SEWA held successful talks with the Director General of Labour Welfare to demand he issue identity cards, issue scheme forms in the local language, identify a contact person responsible in the Labour Office and provide a mobile medical van for workers. The government supported SEWA to hold registration camps to verify and issue ID cards - the first camp was held for 100 workers on 4<sup>th</sup> August 2008. SEWA facilitate members' completion of forms entitle workers to health care, maternity benefits and education for their children.

## Group work

Participants were asked to develop ideas for international campaigns targeting suppliers and retailers to improve the conditions of women homeworkers. The notes below summarise the group feedback:



## Campaign Principles

- Firstly to map and analyse the current positions, concerns and needs of all stakeholders (homeworkers, suppliers, retailers, consumers, unions, NGO's and governments). What are their roles, claims, vested interests and influence on this issue?
- The campaign must be developed in close consultation and with substantial input from homeworkers.
- Campaign needs clear and focused demands - discussion about whether priority issues would be wages or social security.

## Homeworkers require:

- increased recognition, visibility and power
- regular work
- better rates of pay, a living wage and social security
- proper lead in times, official contracts and work schedules

## Demand Suppliers and Retailers to:

- Ensure transparency and accountability at every level of the supply chain from local, to national and international level
- Systematise structures/agreements - establish a duty of care to workers (through passbooks, record keeping, formalise verbal agreements etc)
- Not be penalised for using homeworkers but to acknowledge, recognise and support homeworkers. Improving conditions should be incentive driven.

## Target Consumers through:

A campaign of public awareness raising and positive messaging - link between designers and homeworkers. With the credit crunch, people might buy less but higher handmade quality.

## Government should be lobbied to:

- Have legal control along the supply chain and make companies liable for every stage - using the model from Australia.
- Ratify and implement the ILO Convention 177 on homeworking (only six countries have currently ratified this not including the UK).

## Unions and NGOs should:

- Support and contribute to CORE (Corporate Responsibility Coalition)'s next campaign calling for a UK Commission for Human Rights and Businesses to be established [www.corporate-responsibility.org/](http://www.corporate-responsibility.org/)
- Work with the International Textile Garments and Leather Workers Federation and the International Trade Union Confederation
- Use CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women) and Beijing Platform for Action
- Disseminate positive and practical information through a twin track approach – in country and in the UK
- Carefully target suppliers to influence retailers

- Use the manual developed by HomeWorkers Worldwide to map, research and analysis where homeworkers are working - both vertical and horizontal
- Map and highlight best company practice (market leaders) as a way of influencing the whole sector - lobby unconverted companies who are not engaging with the issue
- Link homeworking issues to the Asia Floor Wage Campaign [www.asiafloorwage.org](http://www.asiafloorwage.org)

### **Concluding Remarks**

Participants committed to taking these campaigns and ideas forward within their own organisations campaigns, advocacy and programmes. Sadly, the UK National Homeworking Group has recently had to close due to a lack of financial resources - this illustrates the lack of priority and importance to this issue and the need for sustained lobbying and continued campaigning to get the voices and solutions of homeworkers heard.

### **For more information please see:**

HomeWorkers Worldwide	<a href="http://www.homeworkersww.org.uk">www.homeworkersww.org.uk</a>
One World Action	<a href="http://www.oneworldaction.org">www.oneworldaction.org</a>
Self Employed Women's Association	<a href="http://www.sewa.org">www.sewa.org</a>
WIEGO	<a href="http://www.wiego.org">www.wiego.org</a>
ILO Convention 177 on Homeworkers	<a href="http://www.ilo.org/ilolex/cgi-lex/convde.pl?C177">www.ilo.org/ilolex/cgi-lex/convde.pl?C177</a>