WIEGO
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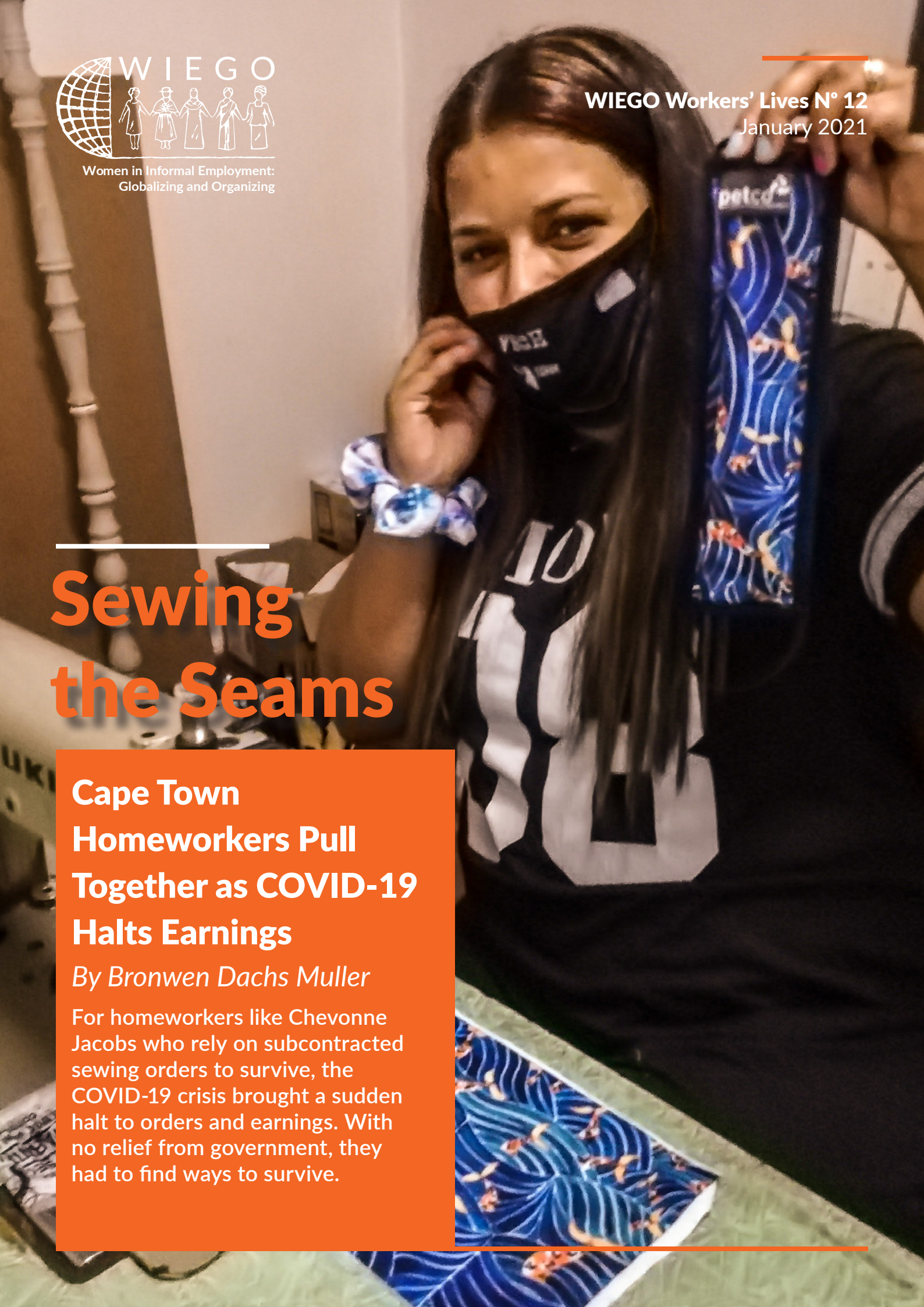

Sewing the Seams

Cape Town Homeworkers Pull Together as COVID-19 Halts Earnings

By Bronwen Dachs Muller

For homeworkers like Chevonne Jacobs who rely on subcontracted sewing orders to survive, the COVID-19 crisis brought a sudden halt to orders and earnings. With no relief from government, they had to find ways to survive.

Chevonne's mother, Cheryl Adendorff, helps her daughter with sewing masks. Sewing machines (opposite) in one of the two rooms that Chevonne and other homeworkers use when there's a big order to fulfill.

Cover: When she's working late into the night, Chevonne uses this sewing machine in a small room in her home.

All Photos: Bronwen Dachs Muller

Sewing is something of a family industry for Chevonne Jacobs, a homeworker in Cape Town. Though there is no work she takes on that she can't do herself, Chevonne draws in many family members and other women from her community when there is lots to be done.

The easing of lockdown restrictions has brought much-needed work and "we're frantically busy," Chevonne said. She is now producing masks and other pandemic-related items as well as the luxury brand clothes and trendy sportswear she has been making for many years.

Chevonne's mother spent her entire working life as a machinist until she lost her factory job shortly before she turned 60.

"I find work for my mom. She's got my dad and my brother in the house and there's debt to pay off so she needs to work," said Chevonne, herself a mother of three. As she sat at her living-room table in Mitchells Plain[2] talking about her struggles through the COVID-19 lockdown and the situation now, she kept tabs on her sewing orders through her phone.

Stringent measures

South Africa's early lockdown restrictions were among the world's most stringent and when they set in on March 27, "all our orders stopped," Chevonne said.

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[1] Homeworkers are home-based workers who are subcontracted, usually through intermediaries, to produce products for domestic or international brands.

[2] Mitchells Plain, about 30 kilometres from central Cape Town, is home to about 300,000 people and has its roots in the 1970s forced removals into settlements in apartheid South Africa.

Quiet as in no work, she means, because silence is hard to imagine in this bustling home with its front door open to the large living room. Neighbours come to chat, standing in the doorway for 10 minutes before going on their way again. Nearby is a small, dark room "where we dump everything before we sort out where it needs to go." It's here that Chevonne does a lot of her sewing.

"It wasn't just my family, it was all of us…sitting in shock with nothing to do. I thought I have to do something, so I went through old cupboards and found some bags of material and then I called the ladies. I said, 'come and take what you need and make skirts, pyjamas, masks'. Then at least they had something to sell—even if very cheaply—or to give their children to wear. It lifted their spirits a bit."

Most of the jobs lost through the strict curbs on activity were in South Africa's informal economy and affected more women than men (Rogan and Skinner). According to the National Income Dynamics Study – Coronavirus Rapid Mobile Survey, over 30 per cent of informal workers reported that the lockdown meant they were unable to work, compared with one-quarter of those in formal employment.

Trying for government relief

"We heard about the grant," Chevonne recalls. The grant of R350[3] per month was a government-announced relief measure aimed at helping those who had lost livelihoods and did not qualify for any other social grant. "I helped everyone apply—my family, other women," Chevonne said, "but we got nothing. I applied for emergency food parcels too and again, nothing happened. Not even any feedback."

> "The grant that was meant to go to the unemployed—I've never seen anyone get that. And believe me, people have tried."

Josie Abrahams, who supports the organizing of local homeworkers and is in daily contact with homeworkers in the Cape Town area, said Chevonne's experience was the norm. "The grant that was meant to go to the unemployed—I've never seen anyone get that. And believe me, people have tried."

The Special COVID-19 Social Relief in Distress Grant was introduced as part of a R500-billion support package announced by President Cyril Ramaphosa in late April. Relief included increasing the child support grant by R300 per child in May and then by R500 per caregiver for five months. Also, the old-age pension was upped by R250 per month from May to October.

While these increases in social grants helped many informal workers and their families, they did not make much difference to homeworkers in Cape Town, Josie said. Because applicants for the child support and old-age grants are strictly means-tested, most homeworkers able to make ends meet before losing all their work through lockdown were not registered as recipients and therefore couldn't benefit.

While most homeworkers in the emerging network are women-headed households, Josie said the vast majority "saw nothing in the form of relief."

[3] The South African rand (ZAR) averaged R16.6 to USD1 between January – November 2020. This relief amount was thus equivalent to about USD21.

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Checking up on people

The lack of relief took a heavy toll on homeworkers, and Josie recounts that her usual organising communications with homeworkers took a new direction after March. "It's like talking to those who've recently been bereaved," she said of her phone calls to check up on people. "You have to prepare yourself psychologically for these conversations."

Before lockdown she could visit and see people, but then it wasn't until late September when restrictions eased enough to allow visits. "I could only make calls." Instead of starting conversations by asking, "How are you going with this order? Did it come through?" Josie would find herself asking, "When did you last eat?"

The dread of facing what she might hear was very painful, she said. "I still wake up at night worrying about people. It's bad enough for the people in our organizational networks, but for those outside—can you imagine how hard things must be for them?"

Department of Social Development data show that food parcels in the first few weeks of lockdown reached only a small fraction of those who needed them (Seekings 2020).

Deft seamstress Mariette Saunders sews elastic into masks. Chevonne draws in homeworkers to help meet orders and they work as a strong team.

"Only in mid-September did people in the network get some relief and this came from organizations. I looked at these women as at last they got some help to feed themselves and their families and I thought, not even their own government came to their aid," Josie said.

When the food parcels arrived, Chevonne helped by distributing them to women in her community whose families needed them most. "There was also a parcel that came from my sister-in-law's créche that my mom and I shared," she said.

Refusing 'slave' labour

Though this was a time of desperation, Chevonne turned away two jobs she was offered. "A man phoned and offered me an order to make masks for R1.50 [USD0.09] per mask and I said no. That is slavery. No."

She also refused a job to make personal protective equipment for a group of private hospitals in Cape Town "because the payment was too little." It was R7 a piece to make "a whole garment—head to toe, with a zip" and other intricate elements. "And you must still use your own cotton."

Because they buy their own thread and pay for their sewing machines to be serviced and fixed, Chevonne and those who work with her would at best have broken even if she'd accepted the work at those rates, she said. But the margins were so low it might have cost them more to produce the garments than they would have made.

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"Besides, I was busy with my three girls who were at home then."

In the family

While we talked, Chevonne's 12-year-old daughter—the eldest of her three—was on the sofa reading what looked like a school textbook. Snuggled next to her was her toddler sister engrossed in scrolling on a tablet. With most South African schools adjusting classroom time to enable social distancing when lockdown restrictions eased enough to reopen, only Chevonne's eight-year-old was at school that day.

"My eldest makes scrunchies—she's set up her own website and sells them." Chevonne pointed to two of the circular bands used to hold back hair that were lying on the table—one turquoise and the other shades of orange. "She knows what she likes and does this all on her own."

In late March, April and May, "my two older girls got work packs from school every week. And they had to do everything in it and then we would get new packs. I had to sit with both of them—and there was also my little one who's

two that I had to sit with. So it was a bit tough. But, actually, I liked it—spending time with my girls in the lockdown."

With COVID-19 restrictions easing and Chevonne now feeling the need to accept all the work she can get, that precious time spent with her children is over. "I work into the night to finish orders if I have to," she said.

Like most working mothers, Chevonne must manage child care while also making a living. With supervising homework and shopping and cooking for her family, as well as her paid work, Chevonne often calls on her eldest daughter, and sometimes her eight-year-old, to take care of the toddler.

"Sometimes when I'm really busy and my older girls can't, then the hairdresser's teenage daughter helps look after my two-year-old," she said.

Gendered inequalities and risks

Chevonne considers herself lucky to have a husband who's "an expert with an overlocker[4] and works hard" alongside her and also does some of the domestic chores. Most other homeworkers she knows are single mothers or have partners who do not work.

"So many have husbands who are sick and are at home," she said. Some older women she knows "can't even work because they have to look after them."

Gendered inequalities in domestic workloads in South Africa are particularly stark, and the child care and other responsibilities women bear are among the factors that place those who do piecework from their homes at greater risk of poverty than their male counterparts.

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Women who sew for a living are also vulnerable to exploitation and faced other risks during the pandemic. For example, Chevonne keeps in close contact with her factory-based counterparts and said there is community-wide outrage at the betrayal of more than 70 people, mostly women, by a man who took over a Cape Town garment factory from his mother and now cannot be traced.

Also missing is the money the man received through a pandemic-related relief measure (Oliver 2020). The Temporary Employer-Employee Relief Scheme (TERS) payments were introduced by the government to provide a percentage of salaries to employees laid off as a result of the pandemic. The scheme, which was plagued by allegations of corruption, allowed employers to claim on behalf of their staff as long as they were registered with the national unemployment insurance fund (Reuters 2020).

[4] An overlocker is a kind of sewing machine that can handle multiple threads and produce a professional finish.

"The people never saw the money" that their boss was obligated to pay them, Chevonne said. He got his employees to sign the necessary forms to enable him to receive the funds but then "used COVID [lockdown hardships] as an excuse to close the factory and disappeared," she said.

While the pandemic crisis has exacerbated such troubles, workers at the bottom of the economic pyramid have long faced the risk of non-payment. Although the example Chevonne gives relates to factory workers, homeworkers are even more likely to find payment has decreased or vanished after work is done.

Little room to negotiate

At the end of May, Chevonne's first order came in and she sprang into action to get 500 pairs of trousers made for an upmarket clothing retailer. Like all her orders, this one came through one of two Cape Town-based intermediaries.

"Sometimes we can negotiate prices, but not always," because of the risk of losing not just that job but others that would follow, she said. She takes orders to sew and package masks at R6.20 per mask and recently, when the order was for 5,000 masks, she accepted a R4 per mask rate.

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"There's Mommy, Aunty Shaamela, Carmen…lots of women at home who come and help sew when these orders come in," Chevonne said. And the news that there is work spreads fast. "Companies won't give work to just one woman. It's much easier for them this way."

Solidarity in community

We walked across the road to a building owned by a neighbour who lets Chevonne use it when she needs it, as long as Chevonne covers the electricity and other utility costs.

Cape Town has one of the world's highest crime rates, yet on this early summer morning in the street Chevonne's family lives on, people chatted with the doors to their homes wide open behind them (Davids 2020).

About 10 women were sitting at their own tables in two adjoining rooms, most sewing material into masks, some sewing hems on labels and one cutting elastic. Most had walked here from their own homes.

Intricate work with needles can be difficult, particularly for older women whose joints show the strain. But the older women's experience brings a quality to their work that compensates for their slower progress, Chevonne said.

"We help each other and teach each other; there's no formal training for this work," she said. "Everything the women here do I can do myself—and I jump in wherever there's a need."

"We help each other and teach each other; there's no formal training for this work."

Chevonne will cover her electricity and other basic costs before she pays the women sewing today, but she won't take a cut for finding and bearing responsibility for their work.

"I'm doing this for my children," said the 36-year-old who was born and raised in the area. "If they ever get into hard times people will say, 'Her mommy and daddy helped people. Their door was always open. So now I'll open my door for you'. That's how life is."

Familiar injustices

Back in her home, Chevonne showed me the ironing board in a wide passageway where the woman who'd been cutting the elastic for the masks would soon be ironing them in preparation for packaging.

Her husband overheard this and fetched a package I'd expect to find in a shopping aisle. In it were two children's masks, neatly folded side by side, and the barcoded sticker on the back showed its price as R140. Of that, only R12.40 will come to Chevonne to pass on to the women who sewed, ironed and packaged those masks.

The injustice of this brings only a shrug from Chevonne. It's been this way for a long time. She's heard the story Josie told me about a woman at a funeral recognizing her own stitching in a dress worn by a woman standing in the pew in front of her. The seamstress who had been paid R17 to make the dress asked the wearer what she

Chevonne's glamorous hairstyles are the work of a hairdresser who has set up her salon in a room in Chevonne's Mitchells Plain home.

had paid for it. She was told R700—a purchase price over 40 times more than she had been paid for her labour.

Markups like that are extreme, but "we often make sweatshirts for R15 each and they sell for R270," Chevonne said.

In a room at the end of the passageway, the hairdresser whose daughter sometimes babysits for Chevonne is blowdrying a customer's hair. "She has six young kids to support. She was stabbed in the back by the people she used to work for." The hairdresser keeps all her earnings, after paying for the electricity she uses.

Chevonne looks delighted and does a twirl to show me the red and gold highlights in her long glossy hair. "She did this for me yesterday. Once a week, she does my hair for free. Because, remember, I only charge her for electricity."

Strategies to survive

"We women need to empower ourselves," Chevonne asserted.

She tries to have more than one source of income at all times and she will tell her daughters to do the same. Selling cosmetics on commission, which she had been doing for four years when COVID-19 hit, provided a critical trickle of cash when the garment orders dried up.

According to Josie, many homeworkers have strategies to supplement their main source of income. "To make a bit of money in the worst of the lockdown, some looked after the children of people still able to go to work."

Josie added, "They do all this just to put food on the table in the evening." But in many cases, it isn't enough. "People tell me, 'the bulk of my money goes to feeding the box'. What they're talking about is the pre-paid electricity meter. These are not households of two or three people, they're extended households" with many relatives and others.

> Homeworkers in the garment industry are the most vulnerable and exploited link in the supply chain, largely because their role as workers is unrecognized.

Homeworkers in the garment industry are the most vulnerable and exploited link in the supply chain, largely because their role as workers is unrecognized. "They need to be given this recognition," Josie contended. "If they were recognized, they would have been entitled to the same support as other workers during lockdown."

And if the value of their role was recognized, homeworkers wouldn't have to accept work at exploitative rates, she said. "Global brands offer shocking contracts and say, 'take it or leave it'. That must stop."

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Wearing a scrunchy made by her daughter on her wrist, Chevonne works on an order for personal protective equipment. Photo: Bronwen Dachs Muller

About UN Women
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About WIEGO
Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) is a global network focused on empowering the working poor, especially women, in the informal economy to secure their livelihoods. We believe all workers should have equal economic opportunities, rights, protection and voice. WIEGO promotes change by improving statistics and expanding knowledge on the informal economy, building networks and capacity among informal worker organizations and, jointly with the networks and organizations, influencing local, national and international policies. Visit www.wiego.org

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