



Taking the first steps to implement the homeworker guidelines: Boden's experience in India

As a member of the Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI), Boden requires its suppliers to meet minimum standards relating to working conditions, as set out in the ETI Base Code. Like many companies, Boden uses factory visits and audits of first-tier suppliers to make sure those standards are being observed. But this often reveals little about the situation for vulnerable workers, such as homeworkers, further down the supply chain. The decision to launch a new product line with a new supplier changed all this, and was the trigger for a company-wide programme looking at how to identify and ensure good conditions for these previously hidden workers.

When Boden launched its first jewellery line in 2007, the search for a suitable supplier led to a new contractor in India. As with all new product lines and new suppliers, Boden wanted to be clear about the production process and who might be involved, not least because, as Hayley Morrow, Senior Technologist at Boden, admitted: “Alarm bells rang about the possibility of issues around working conditions and the potential involvement of homeworkers.”

Making a commitment

Hayley was put in touch with Vinita Singh – an independent ethical trade consultant in Mumbai with a lot of experience of working with homeworkers in India. “Vinita came with us to visit our supplier, after which she advised us on a plan of action – starting with mapping the contractors and subcontractors that our supplier was using, meeting them all to explain our requirements around working conditions, and then identifying actions they might have to take to meet those requirements.” Vinita also made it clear that Boden needed to make a longer-term commitment to the supplier, if these changes were going to happen.

An important step was to make the company's position on homeworkers clear, to encourage openness of suppliers and contractors. According to Boden's Ethical Trade Manager, Julia Rowlands: “We accept that homeworkers may be involved in our supply chain and are supportive of that.

We know that income generated from homeworking can be vital for homeworkers' families and that, for many women, it's the only opportunity they have to work. However, we also have a responsibility to help improve their working and living conditions, which means we need to know if they are involved in production and where they are.”

Understanding the supply chain

The supply chain Boden started to uncover was typical of jewellery (and other accessories) suppliers in India, where it is common to find several layers of contractors and sub-contractors. A high percentage of workers in India belong to the informal sector – working in unregistered small factory units or workshops, or as homeworkers, drawn from around the country depending on the raw materials and skills required in a particular product. “We found that our product was being made in small factory units in Delhi, as well as by homeworkers up to four hours away.”

“Our supplier helped us identify the main manufacturing processes involved – in this case, glass cutting, threadwork, knot stringing and component making. We then identified the main contractors who were being used for each of these processes. Our supplier mapped out the specific contractors involved in making one of our necklaces, showing the manufacturing route from start to finish.”

Changes in the supply chain

One of the first things was to clarify which contractors were involved in production, and to get better transparency in the supply chain. The mapping exercise showed that Boden's supplier was working with over 20 contractors. The supplier has since identified the five key contractors that will be working on Boden products and has started to build strong working relations with each of them. “This is an ongoing challenge. Each of the contractors needs to recognise what is required of them and be motivated to change. We needed to start with realistic actions, such as initiating record keeping, so that we could at least see what is happening.”



“The positive and open attitude of our supplier has been crucial”

Record keeping and mapping out key contractors may seem like simple measures, but they can help companies monitor rates of pay, check that unfair deductions and delays to payments aren't happening, and monitor conditions more easily.

Simplification of the supply chain enabled other changes to happen, including:

- opening bank accounts for key contractors and the supplier's own office staff, which means that payments can now be mapped; and
- improvements to health and safety practices, including the installation of extractor fans in units where resin grinding takes place, and provision of fire extinguishers in some premises.

Changes to Boden's operations

It's not just about others taking action: “We've also been looking at what has to happen within our own company. This experience has taught us more about the negative impacts we might be having on workers through our own practices, and how to reduce those. For example, early development of products will help our suppliers plan which contractors they can use and allow homeworkers sufficient time to carry out the work. Delays or changes to our selection procedures may put vulnerable workers at risk. For example, our late decisions can mean they have to work long hours, and if we cancel orders then they won't get the income they were expecting. This is why we have been working with our buying and merchandising teams to make them aware of how their purchasing decisions – especially on price and lead times – can affect homeworkers' conditions.”

What helped?

Hayley is clear that this work couldn't be done without building a good relationship with their supplier. “The positive and open attitude of our supplier has been crucial to helping reveal the real situation for workers in the supply chain, as well as the supplier's willingness to work towards implementation of the Base Code.”

Boden's commitment to these issues has also been important, according to Julia Rowlands. “Top-level support and recognising our responsibility to supporting homeworkers is key. This has enabled us to make a commitment to work with our supplier on these issues in the longer term.”

Boden also found that involving Vinita provided much-needed support for its supplier, particularly in helping to map and motivate contractors. “We also found the steps outlined in the ETI Homeworker Guidelines very useful, including the guidance on mapping, and some of the templates for data collection and record-keeping.”

Widening the scope of work

The work undertaken in India has helped Boden develop the confidence and understanding needed to widen this work to other product ranges and supply chains, and to address some of the more challenging aspects of working conditions.

Initially, this work was taken forward by reviewing Boden's existing range to identify other products that might involve homework, and following this up during supplier meetings. However, as Julia Rowlands describes, this is now carried out in advance of production: “I now sit down with buyers and technologists on a seasonal basis, to look at the range for the coming season and identify potential homeworker involvement.”

This has become much easier as buyers and technologists have more understanding of what to look for. “I held several meetings with buyers to help raise awareness of the sort of work that could be done at home and could therefore possibly involve homeworkers. For example, I showed them pictures of some of our clothing and jewellery products, to prompt discussion about issues that might arise for workers involved in making them.” Julia also provides updates to colleagues on any supplier visits, to keep them engaged and informed about the process of trying to protect workers' rights throughout the supply chain.

So far the mapping exercise has shown that, apart from some crochet work, most of the handwork for Boden's products is being done by workers based in small 'informal' production units, rather than workers in their own homes. However, as Julia acknowledges, this presents its own challenges in terms of ensuring good working conditions: “We are also starting to work with suppliers on some of the more challenging Base Code areas, such as homeworkers' wages and working hours.”