



Making the invisible workforce visible: Tracking homeworkers in Monsoon Accessorize's supply chain

Hand-worked embroidery and embellishment can be seen on clothing, accessories and homeware throughout the high street. But the same high profile isn't given to the homeworkers who carry out these skilled traditional crafts, often for little money and in poor working conditions. Instead they are invisible to many – sometimes even to the retailers whose products they make. As a company whose origins and distinctive identity owe much to these traditional crafts, Monsoon Accessorize has long recognised the valuable role that these artisans play in its supply chain. This is why the company is working with the Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI) and other partners to develop ways of tracing homeworkers and improving their living and working conditions.

Many of the craftspeople carrying out hand embroidery and embellishment for Monsoon Accessorize work from their homes and villages. However, although this provides them with the much-needed opportunity to use their skills to earn money, it also makes them vulnerable to exploitation and poor working conditions.

This is something that Derek Jackson, the Global Ethical Trading Manager at Monsoon Accessorize, is all too aware of: “We know that homeworkers are often living and working in poor conditions – with low wages, irregular work and no way of raising grievances or improving their conditions. This makes it even more important that we find ways of identifying them and improving their work situation.”

However, as Derek is keen to acknowledge, this isn't always easy. “Our supply chains can be very long and complicated, with lots of intermediaries between us and workers at the bottom of the chain – which makes it hard to trace homeworkers, let alone ensure they have good working conditions. This is why we've been working with ETI, as a participant in the ETI Homeworker Project and a member of the NHG (National Homeworker Group) in India, to share our experiences and build our capacity to address homeworkers' conditions.”



Working with suppliers in India

“We source a wide range of accessories from India – jewellery, shawls, scarves, bags and home products – as well as some of our women and children's clothes. Most of our suppliers are based around Delhi, but their contractors and subcontractors are often located much further away.

We've been working closely with our suppliers to map our supply chains and get visibility of the production process right down to the homeworker level. This is where most of the hand embroidery and other hand craft take place – in villages and homes which can be up to several hundreds of miles away from the supplier's factory.”

Monsoon Accessorize is using a combination of approaches to map and monitor its supply chain, as Deepak Sharma, the Ethical Trading Manager in India explains. “We have a process of 'self-declaration' when new suppliers provide information on their production facilities or when they use new contractors. We also ask suppliers to complete our ethical sourcing questionnaire, which is basically a self-assessment tool that they use for each of their sites, and which we are encouraging them to use with all their contractors and subcontractors. The questionnaire includes a section on subcontracting, including the use of homeworkers.”



“We find that communication with suppliers has really improved”

“But we don’t just rely on the information suppliers give us.” Merchandisers at Monsoon Accessorize also collect information about where each stage of production takes place, every time they place an order. This is then cross-checked with the information provided by suppliers, as well as by merchandisers when they carry out quality or technical visits to production units.

Slow but steady progress

It hasn’t been a straightforward process. Like many retailers, Monsoon Accessorize has faced resistance from some suppliers when they have first been asked to provide detailed information on their subcontracting arrangements. “Some of our suppliers worried that we would bypass them and start dealing directly with their contractors,” says the Ethical Trade Manager, India, “but there is much more transparency in the supply chain now. We find that communication has really improved and suppliers are much better at keeping us updated about any last-minute changes to production.”

This is all down to hard work and making a continuous effort to establish good relationships and build trust. It’s also about helping suppliers to develop the skills and tools to take action.

“Suppliers need to know why this is important and how they can go about it. We’ve been helping suppliers by showing them how they can go about mapping their own supply chain, and how to put systems in place to monitor subcontracting and the use of homeworkers. We’ve been encouraging them to use the same tools as we do – such as checklists and recording systems.” Some of this capacity building takes place in one-to-one meetings with suppliers, but Monsoon Accessorize also runs joint supplier events on particular issues.

Helping suppliers improve homeworkers’ conditions

When they find homeworkers in the supply chain, the ethical trading team can provide further support and advice. Depending on the location, they may help link up suppliers and contractors with the NHG or its local group in Bareilly, or may set up joint projects with local community or voluntary groups.



“As an active member of the ETI National Homeworker Group in India, we have helped to introduce training and monitoring for embroidery workers in India, as well as improved access to medical and social benefits. We’re also partnering with SEWA (the Self Employed Women’s Association) to set up self-help groups and provide training and education in craft communities.”

The emphasis is always on encouraging suppliers to work with subcontractors to address particular issues around working conditions, and providing guidance on how that might be done: “When we find something that isn’t acceptable, or a situation that could be improved, we give them examples of better ways they could be operating and how that can help them grow as a business and become more competitive.” But not all suppliers respond in the same way. “Different approaches and strategies are needed with different suppliers.”

Building trust is key

However, as far as the ethical trading team is concerned, one thing is clear: “You need to build trust with partners. And you need to take a coordinated approach with buyers and merchandisers. We go to supplier sites with production colleagues and make sure that factories understand what needs to change and why. And we present a consistent message to them, which reinforces how seriously we take these issues.”