

Reflections and lessons from ETI's Homeworker Project

Background

Between 2002 and 2013, the Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI) worked with homeworkers and the supply chains they work in, in Bareilly, Uttar Pradesh in Northern India. In 2011 we began a phase of the project funded under DFID's RAGS Challenge Fund¹ and replicated the model we had been using in Bareilly in Sangam Vihar, an informal settlement or slum in South Delhi. This is a major sourcing location for many industries, including leather and jewelry. The ETI project focused on developing and testing a set of guidelines for companies working with homeworkers and for others within the supply chain.

Project activities included supply chain mapping, training for factory managers, contractors and homeworkers, looking at approaches to setting piece rates, establishing record-keeping systems to ensure transparency and accountability along the supply chain, and linking homeworkers with government services. ETI worked with local representatives of retailers and brands, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and trade unions to establish the National Homeworkers Group (NHG) in Delhi (in 2005) and subsequently with contractors and local organisations to establish the Bareilly Handwork Foundation (in 2006) in order to ensure local ownership and sustainability beyond the life of the ETI project. A set of training packages for homeworkers, contractors and brands has been developed from the project.

About this paper

The main activities of the ETI Homeworker Project drew to a close in April 2013 following which a series of reflection sessions were held in the project localities, which fed into an internal ETI reflection session in the UK². Our wider understanding and work on homeworkers is well documented elsewhere³, but this paper presents the key lessons and observations to emerge in the closing stages of the ETI Homeworker Project, which included the RAGS project⁴. In addition to this paper and the training materials developed under the project, we will be producing further short documents on specific topics as we draw out further lessons and experiences.

Themes covered

1. Working with skilled *zari* artisans
2. Working in a complex supply chain
3. Cultural/social issues and contexts in North India
4. The project model of training and organising
5. Replicating/adapting the project model

¹ Responsible and Accountable Garment Sector challenge fund: <https://www.gov.uk/responsible-and-accountable-garment-sector-challenge-fund>.

² In Bareilly and Sangam Vihar, these involved project participants. The UK reflection session involved eight members of ETI Secretariat staff including current and former project managers, communications, training and M&E staff and the ETI Director. Further input was provided by another former project manager and the project co-ordinator in India.

³ See www.ethicaltrade.org/in-action/programmes/homeworkers-project/guidelines.

⁴ The main aims of ETI's RAGS-funded Homeworker Project were: to create and test a scalable and replicable model of organisation and training for homeworkers in the Indian garment industry; and to create a sustainable partnership able to implement the organisation and training model in and beyond Delhi and Bareilly.

1. Working with skilled *zari* artisans

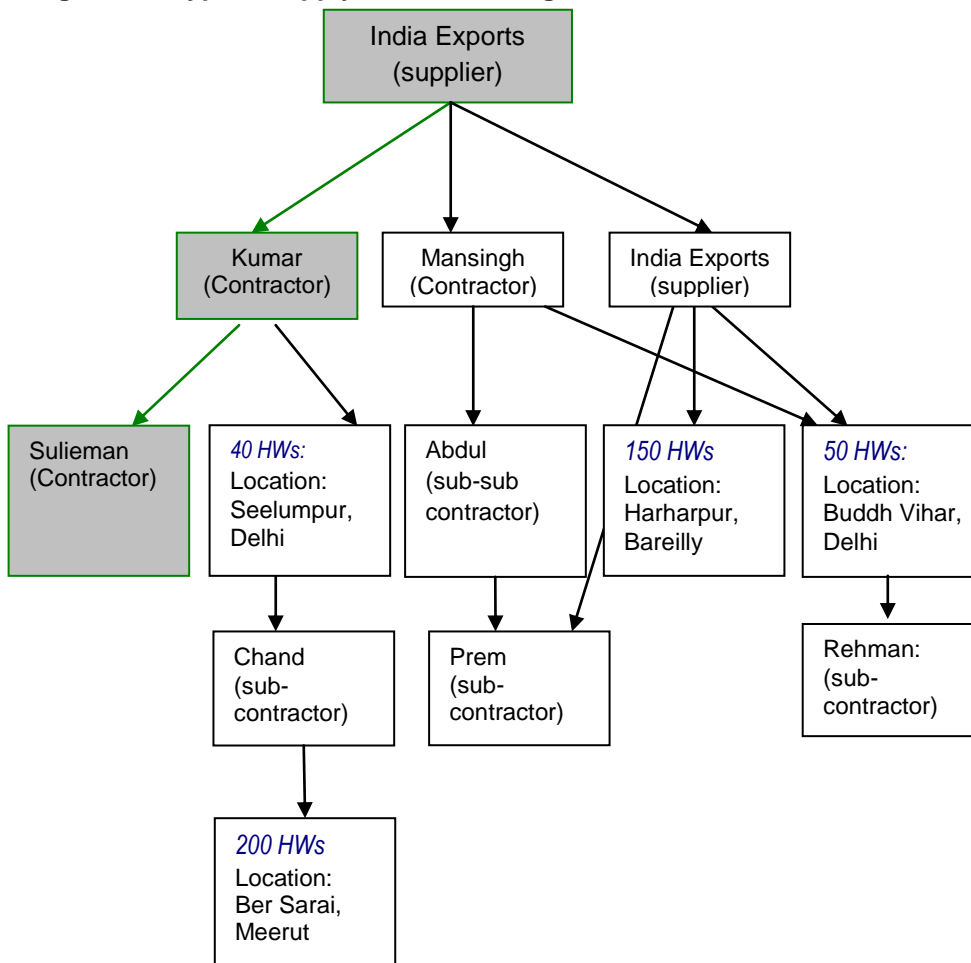
Homeworkers around the world are engaged in a huge range of work. Much of it is low-skilled finishing of part-manufactured goods. However the homeworkers we have been engaging with in Northern India are highly skilled artisans. Their art of intricately embellishing fabric with fine gold and silver thread, gems, beads and sequins, known as *zari* and *zardarsi* work, is said to date from Mughal times or possibly earlier. They once supplied the royal households of India.

Homeworkers get paid better and more promptly for work they do for the domestic market than work they do for the international or export market, and fewer domestic market pieces are rejected on grounds of poor quality. However, *zari* workers are still keen to take on work for the export market because it requires a higher level of skill, which appeals to them and gives them pride as skilled artisans. One of the cornerstones of ETI's Homeworker Project was to help these artisans get official recognition of their skills in the form of Government of India Artisan Cards, which also make them eligible for government services and social security (see below).

2. Working in a complex supply chain

Supply chains involving homeworkers are notoriously complex because homeworkers tend to be widely scattered geographically and have informal and flexible links with a many-layered network of sub-contractors and contractors (see Figure 1). This makes reaching homeworkers and targeting project activities designed for them particularly challenging. The seasonal nature of the work increases the difficulty of engaging with homeworkers, as their link to the supply chain is broken when they are not engaged in homeworking. The presence of multiple layers within the supply chain makes it hard to identify the actual site of production, which means brands and factories struggle to have a clear picture of working conditions there.

Figure 1. A typical supply chain involving homeworkers



Joint working at each supply chain level

We met these challenges by working closely with actors in each tier of the supply chain, and by involving NGOs and – where possible – trade unions, as well as companies so that we gained and maintained trust at each level and were able to identify and work with players at the next level. This approach eventually linked us with a network of sub-contractors who proved to be absolutely critical in giving us access to homeworkers themselves and to delivering aspects of the project. Sub-contractors link networks of homeworkers with the rest of the supply chain. Often they have been homeworkers themselves and therefore have a deep understanding of the issues homeworkers face. With the right support, our project showed that sub-contractors can be empowered and become community leaders, which can help sustain activities and improvements made in homeworking conditions beyond the lifetime of the project.

On the other hand, we found that some of the layers in the supply chain were not adding value, for example in terms of helping improve quality or provide homeworkers with access to orders. The addition of another tier in the supply chain could potentially reduce the money available to raise homeworkers' incomes. In cases where little value appeared to be added, we suggest that these layers could be removed in order to make the supply chain leaner and more cost-effective.

Focusing on clusters of homeworkers

Another challenge posed by working in this complex supply chain environment is the fact that workers move from one contractor to another based on the availability of work and piece rates offered. This meant it was sometimes difficult to sustain project activity and we had to repeat some activities with different groups of workers. We met this challenge by focusing on clusters of workers rather than those linked with just one particular contractor or supply chain at a particular time.

This approach also gave homeworkers an opportunity to interact directly with all the contractors involved in the project, which helped to raise and resolve work-related issues that they had been experiencing. For example, originally contractors would bring a single sample to show workers and then take it away to show others, meaning that they had to work from memory. Homeworkers suggested bringing more samples and leaving them in the village, so that they could remind themselves what the finished piece should look like. This reduced the number of pieces returned because they did not match the sample.

It also had the advantage of ensuring that benefits such as increased income could be scaled up for all homeworkers in an area, not just those who were linked with a particular supply chain. Another possible benefit is that it might also help to protect workers in a particular supply chain from losing orders if their labour becomes slightly more expensive. It can also have the benefit that workers are less likely to move from one contractor to another to gain better terms, thus improving the stability of the workforce.

Moving homeworkers to urban units

Over the project lifetime, we have noticed a tendency for brands and suppliers to call for homeworkers to be brought together in production units closer to urban centres like Delhi. We understand that part of the reason for this is to help them address the challenges of working in such complex supply chain. But it is also in response to perceived concerns such as the increased risk of child labour and quality control issues with homeworking.

However, we have also observed that these units can pose risks of their own. For example, unit owners may charge workers for jobs and lend them money for travel and accommodation, which can potentially lead to debt bondage. Health and safety conditions can also be very poor in these units, and there are wider community and gender implications (see below).

3. Cultural/social issues and contexts

Community leaders

Homeworking is, by its very nature, community based. In Project Manager Rana Alok Singh's words, 'They are community members first and homeworkers second'. Given the great religious, social and cultural diversity of India, we found that working closely with community and religious leaders to understand and accommodate their priorities is vital to the success of any homeworking project.

We needed to gain a good understanding of the particular community where we were planning to work and how it might affect and be affected by our project. The first step in doing this was to identify the individuals with the greatest influence, credibility and authority in the local community – such as religious leaders – and to learn about their values, concerns and priorities and how these relate to the project activities. Conservative village communities can be very hierarchical, and it is important to approach leaders before approaching community members. Once entry into the community and a level of trust had been gained, it became possible to include the voices of the less powerful, the homeworkers themselves.

Religious beliefs

While the majority of Indians are Hindu, there is also a large Muslim contingency as well as smaller numbers of Christians, and indigenous religions. The groups that ETI worked with in Bareilly were predominantly orthodox Muslim. One example of how we needed to take religious beliefs into account when carrying out the project related to the need for photographs for Artisan Cards. In the orthodox Muslim community in Bareilly, it is considered a sin to have your photograph taken, but photos are required for the Artisan Cards that would give homeworkers access to a range of valuable government services. To overcome this ETI talked with religious leaders and explained that having these cards would enable the poorest of the poor to avoid getting into debt – something that is considered a greater sin. Once persuaded, the religious leaders issued clear instructions to the community that they should have their photos taken.

Sangam Vihar homeworkers comprised a more mixed, secular community and there were fewer restrictions based on religion. However, social norms relating to gender (see below) still needed to be considered.

Gender issues

Women are traditionally assigned a lower status in many parts of Indian society and are often subject to strict rules about behaviour and mobility. This is particularly (though not exclusively) true in poorer, more rural or isolated areas. A large proportion of homeworkers are women, as this type of work allows them to combine childcare and domestic chores with income generation.

This creates challenges in gaining access to workers and getting them to gather publicly. We found that employing a woman coordinator and a woman community organiser helped to overcome this. The homeworkers were not only more willing to meet with the women workers, but also felt more comfortable discussing health and domestic issues with them. We also held meetings as close to workers' homes as possible, so that women did not have to travel far to attend.

Women in these two communities often found it difficult to negotiate on pay and working conditions with male contractors, as women are expected not to challenge male authority. The increased self-confidence and sense of group solidarity that came with being part of the ETI Homeworker Project helped to counteract this.

In order to encourage more families to send their daughters to school, the Government of India has introduced a scheme that funds girls' schooling (see below). Access to this and other government schemes requires a birth certificate, however. We found that many women in the rural and impoverished areas where homeworkers are based give birth at home and are therefore not able to get birth certificates. We helped to raise women's awareness of the importance of getting the right paperwork and linked them with agencies that could help.

We also learned that the Homeworker Project had some success in helping to empower women and improve their status in the community. For example, we have anecdotal evidence that young women who benefited from ETI's project were able to delay marriage until they were older because their contribution to the household income was valued. They also reported being able to buy their own jewellery (which serves as their personal savings) and to save for their weddings, which reduces their risk of getting into debt.

Our project also highlighted the importance of considering any potential negative impacts of business decisions on women homeworkers. For example, the recent trend for homeworking to move nearer to cities to enable factories and retailers to monitor work and working conditions more closely, can have very negative impacts on women; because the women are not permitted to travel, it is the men who migrate to the city thus disrupting families and the village community and depriving women of a valuable source of income, possibly the only one available to them.

3. The project model

The ETI Homeworker Project began in the rural area of Bareilly, about 250 km west of New Delhi, where some of ETI's members were sourcing traditional zari and zadorsi work. The project model that we developed involved supporting homeworkers to organise informally, training them on workers' rights, health and product quality issues, and linking them with government services.

a. Training at each level of the supply chain

According to participants, one of the most valuable elements of the ETI Homeworker Project was the training we provided at each level of the supply chain; we trained factories and contractors on workers' rights and trained homeworkers on their rights, health and safety and ways to improve product quality. We also gave training at each supply chain level in the importance of maintaining written records of orders, work completed, deadlines, rates agreed etc.

The value of working closely with each level of the supply chain was reinforced for us in Bareilly, and of earning and maintaining trust with the key players at each level. Bareilly Project Coordinator, Vijay Jain said 'Having the brands, suppliers, contractors and homeworkers all actively involved gives the project strength and made whole purpose of project very clear. Every stakeholder has their own strengths; by bringing them together we were able to work more holistically'.

This also reinforced for us the importance of offering training at each of layer of the supply chain, so that knowledge, awareness and skills could spread in a joined-up way from factory to contractor to homeworker. We began by training factory managers in homeworking and labour rights issues. We then organised training for contractors on factory premises so that factories were aware of – and comfortable with – what we were doing.

Contractors received training on how issues further up and down the supply chain impact on them and on homeworkers, and what they can do differently. For example, improving communications with both factories and homeworkers about deadlines for orders, and providing homeworkers with clearer guidance on the work required for each piece and more samples to remind them how the finished pieces should look.

Contractors helped us to reach/make contact with homeworkers, and provided venues for training (sometimes in their own homes). Homeworkers themselves told us what issues they needed training in, including health and safety and how to improve and maintain product quality. NGOs helped to identify trainers and relevant training films in local languages, and factory staff and contractors acted as trainers and provided additional support. For example, trainers from factories gave homeworkers tips for improving the quality of their work, and thus reducing the risk of pieces being rejected for failing to meet quality standards.

Building on our initial training activities and subsequent experience of delivering these with input from supply chain actors, we have now developed a complete suite of formal training courses on homeworker issues for everyone in the supply chain, including brands and buyers.⁵

⁵ See <http://www.ethicaltrade.org/training/homeworkers-and-ethical-trade-workshop>

At the end-of-project reflection sessions in Bareilly and Sangam Vihar, homeworkers reported that they highly valued the training they received, and project workers observed changes in their behaviour such as moving their lights to hang directly over the working area rather than fixing them to a side wall, to reduce problems with eye-strain caused by poor lighting.

Some contractors reported that homeworkers were more likely to continue to work for them from season to season as a result of improved relations between them, and that some brands had made them preferred suppliers due to the increase in quality and reliability of their homeworkers' products.

b. Supporting homeworkers to organise

Homeworking by its very nature is isolating. This means that they are often unable to formally access trade unions. Supporting the organisation of homeworker groups therefore provides them with a platform to learn about their rights and strengthens their bargaining power with contractors.⁶ We trialed three models of organisation:

- i. Regular meetings between all the homeworkers in a village or area and the relevant contractors and sub-contractors (homeworker contractor meetings). The meetings focused on homeworking issues and working conditions. The meetings helped to raise working condition issues and discuss them. Combined with the training, they put homeworkers in a much stronger position to improve their conditions and pay, as they helped inform homeworkers of what was happening at the global level and enabled them to compare their conditions to other homeworkers and to better understand the whole supply chain and their position within it.
- ii. Self Help Groups (SHGs) for homeworker organisation: The larger groups (above) which worked relatively well in Bareilly, were less effective in Sangam Vihar. This was partly due to the fact that homeworkers comprised a less homogenous group than in predominantly Muslim Bareilly. In Sangam Vihar, caste and other social divisions made it more difficult for people to speak freely in large gatherings. We therefore helped them to organise smaller groups, along the lines of traditional SHGs but which were not solely focused on micro-credit and income generation as they tend to be in Indian village settings. These SHGs were attended by contractors and allowed discussion of a range of topics, including homeworker working conditions. These groups proved more effective in enabling homeworkers from a range of social backgrounds to have their say.
- iii. SHGs for income generation: smaller groups focusing on alternative income-generation projects for times when homeworking orders are low due to seasonal or fashion fluctuations. These have started to replace the larger homeworker contractor meetings in Bareilly. They are still in their formative stages, but once they are fully operational we anticipate that they will provide homeworkers with access to bank loans, government support services and support from NGOs that will enable them to run small businesses providing income to supplement what they earn from homeworking. This should help to reduce homeworker migration and ensure greater stability not only for homeworkers and their communities but also for the supply chain.

c. Linking homeworkers with government schemes and services

The Government of India has introduced a wide range of social initiatives, funds and schemes⁷ designed to improve social equality and the wellbeing of disadvantaged groups. Many of these are targeted at 'scheduled castes and tribes' – those groups who are recognised in the Indian constitution as having been historically disadvantaged. Others prioritise older citizens, women and rural areas. Homeworkers often fall into one or more of these categories and are therefore eligible for government support which can improve their skills,

⁶ See also **Homeworker Briefing: Supporting homeworkers to organise (tbc)**

⁷ Further information on government schemes can be found at www.indiastat.com/socialandwelfareschemes/27/stats.aspx.

education levels, health and bargaining power at no cost to the companies that they supply. However, homeworkers are often unaware of the existence of these schemes, or how to go about applying for them.

ETI's Homeworker Project helped inform homeworkers about relevant schemes and link them with organisations that could help them to make applications. In Sangam Vihar, these included Gender Resource Centres (GRCs), which were set up as part of a programme being run by the Delhi administration to deliver the government's social programmes. The schemes and initiatives that we accessed during the ETI Homeworker Project are described below.⁸

- **Aadhar numbers:** Every Indian citizen should have a unique ID or *aadhar* number. All government schemes are tied to these numbers, and there is a government drive for all who have *aadhar* cards to also have a bank account. This has made it easier for groups (such as Self Help Groups) to open bank accounts. The government pays subsidies directly into people's bank accounts thus reducing the risk of bribes and corruption. During the project, we alerted homeworkers to the existence of these numbers and helped them to apply for them.
- **Artisan cards:** Artisan cards provide recognition and registration of workers as skilled artisans. These cards act as a gateway for accessing various state-funded benefits, including major discounts on health insurance schemes (see below) as well as access to credit at preferential rates. As part of our work in Bareilly and Sangham Vihar, we alerted homeworkers to the existence of these cards and helped them to apply for them. Homeworkers told us that they valued these cards highly. Some told us that the card had enabled them to receive working capital loans – which they used to buy beads and threads for domestic homeworking orders – from national banks without having to pledge collateral.
- **Girl child project:** Once the birth of a girl is registered, the government makes fixed deposits for her education until she is 20 years old. We found that the homeworkers in our project often gave birth at home and were not therefore able to get the necessary paperwork to access the funds. We therefore helped raise awareness of the issue and linked them with relevant support organisations.
- **Health insurance card:** Under the government's health insurance scheme, villagers are expected to attend distant clinics and to pay for their care and medicines up-front and then apply for reimbursement. ETI negotiated with the relevant government department and insurance companies for the latter to run mobile clinics – a van with a doctor and generic medicines visiting the villages – with the costs covered in advance by the government. This reduced the financial burden on the villagers and reduced the insurance companies' administrative costs. One of the homeworkers participating in the project was reluctant to pay into the scheme until his daughter became ill and he realised the benefits. He later became a strong advocate for it in his community.
- **Micro-credit for small business:** India's National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) links groups like women's Self Help Groups to banks and encourages them to make small loans to support income generation projects or small businesses. These can help supplement the irregular income from homeworking and ensure a more stable workforce. The homeworker SHGs that we facilitated during our project are not yet in a position to apply for these loans, but our NGO partners are working with them to develop their income generation plans and will help them apply for these loans if necessary.
- **Skill development programme:** The government has a massive skill development programme administered by the Ministry of Labour and Employment, including vocational skills in the textile sector, as well as cycle repair, plumbing and so on. The trainee pays a small fee which is reimbursed when they pass a completion exam. During the project, ETI helped a number of homeworkers to enrol in this scheme and gain diplomas.

⁸ This is not intended as a comprehensive list of government services.

4. Replicating/adapting our project model

After the ETI Homeworker Project model became well established we took the experience we had gained and started to apply it to homeworker communities in Sangam Vihar, a large informal urban development on the outskirts of New Delhi. This was partly because retailers and brands were beginning to source from this area, and partly to test whether we could take what we had been doing, and the tools we had been using, and apply them successfully to other homeworker situations/contexts. We found that some aspects of the model and our approach to establishing it could be replicated, whilst others needed to be adapted to different social, economic and geographic characteristics in the new project location.

In Bareilly, the artisans have been well established for many generations. They live in scattered villages in the area around the town of Bareilly. Many are conservative Muslims, so women are often discouraged from leaving the home or mixing with people outside their immediate family. Contractors travel from house to house to deliver samples and orders and collect completed work. We found that this put them the ideal position to introduce our project to the homeworkers and explain how it could help them improve working conditions.

However, in Sangam Vihar, homeworkers are not so confined to their homes as the women in Bareilly, and their homes are clustered closer together. They collect orders and deliver completed work to the home of locally based sub-contractors. ETI was able to introduce the idea of using the sub-contractors' homes as venues for meetings between groups of homeworkers, sub-contractors and contractors, and meant that we were less reliant on sub-contractors themselves to explain the project to homeworkers and other supply chain actors. In this urban area, we also found that access to service providers such as Gender Resource Centres is easier than for remotely located homeworkers in Bareilly. Literacy levels are also higher and homeworkers are less isolated from mainstream society.

In Bareilly we helped homeworkers get artisan cards and ID numbers because they were originally from the area, but in Sangam Vihar we found that many homeworkers were not eligible for these because they are migrants from other states, like Bihar, and would need to be registered in the state where they were born.

This experience confirmed that our basic approach of offering training, supporting organising and linking with government services proved a successful and useful way of trying to identify, work with and improve conditions for homeworkers in different contexts. It also proved that it can work in a different context with some adaptation to local circumstances and, based on this experience, we are confident that a similar approach could be applied in other places/sectors.

Further information

- ETI has developed extensive resources on homeworkers and homeworking which are available on our website. These include detailed Homeworker Guidelines which have been tested on the ground by our members, case studies of members' experience of using the Homeworkers Guidelines and tools such as guidance on piece-rate setting to ensure homeworkers receive minimum wage. These will be added to as further resources are developed and may be found at: www.ethicaltrade.org/in-action/programmes/homeworkers-project
- Government of India social and welfare schemes (lists of schemes are visible, but a subscription is required to access more detail) <http://www.indiastat.com/socialandwelfareschemes/27/stats.aspx>
- Ministry of Textiles skills development scheme <http://isds-mot.com/node/3>