
Invisible Threads

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Women's labour power is a resource which is utilised along with men's in all societies. The particular ways in which it is used and exploited depend on the nature of the economy, that is, the stage of development of the forces and relations of production, and its place within the international economy. Differences in the manner of exploitation may be found between the formal and informal economic sectors and between the Third World and the industrialised world. These may be differences of kind or degree. There are, however, similarities which occur across these conventionally accepted divisions. Such similarities are to be regarded as insignificant only if we accept as adequate the models which in their explanation ignore, or trivialise the subordination of women. This article discusses one form of women's labour which occurs in societies at very different levels of economic development and varying cultural definitions of correct relations between women and men, and which frequently appears to be part of the international division of labour. It illustrates a commonality of subordination across the divisions cited that is not only largely invisible, but inadequately conceptualised by the existing categories of production relations and poorly articulated with the role of women in social reproduction.

In the article I shall examine some of the processes, ideological and material, at the level of everyday life, which go to make up the experience of homeworkers in England.¹ There is some difficulty in defining those who can be properly included in a useful definition of homeworkers, both for research and policy purposes. In order to reflect the scale and variety of homeworking and to identify those sharing similar employment relations I have adopted the definition used in the Homeworkers (Protection) Bill, 1979:

*An individual who contracts with a person not being a professional client of his for the purposes of that person's business, for the execution of any work (other than the production or creation of any literary, dramatic, artistic, or musical work) to be done in domestic premises not under the control or management of the person with whom he contracts, and who does not normally make use of the services of more than two individuals in the carrying out of that work.*²

¹ I am indebted to Julia Graham who has worked with me on this research since March 1980 and with whom I have discussed many of the points raised in this paper.

² This definition excludes childminding, those whose home is owned or managed by the employer, those working on their own account and

The demand for low paid, low status labour, which are features of most homeworking, is not to be explained by the characteristics of the labourers. I shall assume that the societal mechanisms which produce and maintain the sexual division of labour are to be found in the relations of production and the labour process and the ways in which these are mediated through family, household, and politico-legal relations. It is by recording these mediating processes in the household, for instance, that we can recognise more systematically their operation in sustaining relationships of dominance and subordination and enabling the specific form of exploitation. The demand for low paid, low status labour in the factory, office, hospital or school is similar to that for homework in many respects. The conditions of employment do, however, exhibit dissimilarities. I shall examine data relating to the demand for and supply of labour in the area of homeworking, in order to understand more fully the obstacles to or leverage for change.

During the twentieth century homeworking in Britain has been almost totally an activity undertaken by women. This was not so in the nineteenth century when men were also involved, particularly in certain trades. It may be that one of the reasons that homeworking was thought to have disappeared, is that it is done by women. This is one aspect of the hidden nature of women's work. Another reason is undoubtedly that it does not fit the generally accepted view that home and work were separated in the process of industrialisation. As an industrialised society, work in Britain was carried on outside the home, in factory, shipyard, mine, mill, or office; while in the home, women brought up children, looked after the household and generally took care of the family or organised other women to do it on their behalf. This separation was increasingly adopted by those categorising and recording official statistical data, thereby making the disentangling of women's contribution to production and the charting of the social and sexual division of labour doubly difficult {Hakim 1980}.

The Contemporary Situation

There are no national figures in Britain of the number of homeworkers, nor of the firms which use this type

those working *from* rather than *at* home. All of these categories would include women. The first is exclusively 'women's' work and for a full appreciation of women's labour would need to be included; until now the exclusion has been in terms of the nature of the service and the relations with individual working women and men who are the child-minders' 'employers'.

of labour; nor are there any accurate data concerning the kinds of work undertaken. Townsend [1979] estimated that some 100,000 to 150,000 homeworkers were employed by manufacturing industry alone. Several investigations in the 1970s, concerning a variety of trades and localities, indicate the need for more comprehensive coverage. However, the records kept are totally inadequate despite the fact that the 1959 Wages Council Act requires local authorities to keep up-to-date lists of homeworkers, and the 1961 Factories Act makes employers responsible for providing half-yearly returns to local authorities on the number of homeworkers they employ. Since these measures are largely ineffective, the necessary documentation needed as a basis for policy decisions or monitoring the extent of homeworking is lacking.

Equally, or perhaps more importantly, homeworkers were excluded from most of the employee protection legislation passed during the 1960s and 1970s, leaving them without access to redundancy payments, holiday or sick pay, pension or maternity rights and effectively without protection under the law on health and safety. Attempts to introduce legislation on protection and to provide for proper enforcement of the law were made during the 1970s and still continue. So far there has been no advance [Crine 1979]³.

Our research on the West Yorkshire Conurbation, the most recent and largest survey of homeworking, confirms in large measure the evidence produced in other surveys about the pay and conditions of homeworkers.

Homeworker Sample

The homeworkers in our survey were mainly manual workers (87 out of 90), reflecting less on the qualifications of the homeworkers than on the work available. Machinists were the largest group (35) spread across a range of products: men's, women's and children's wear, toys and riding equipment. The next largest group were packers (19), mainly of greeting cards, but with some packing mail-order leaflets and plastic bin-liners and bags. Producing decorations for cards and boxes and assembly work (21) was also carried out. Hand-knitting and hand-sewing, brush making, vegetable peeling, burling and mending, and stuffing and finishing cushions and toys (12) with clerical work (3) made up the remainder. The majority of homeworkers were between 20-39 years of age (69 out of 90), 14 fell between 40 and 59, and 3 were over 60.

The Organisation of Production

The picture of the typical employer as a small, local person struggling in a highly competitive market and

³Under Tax Law homeworkers are self-employed, under Labour Law they may be employees, but the onus is on them to prove it before an Industrial Tribunal. In practice this is difficult and an unlikely proposition for most homeworkers.

therefore forced to cut costs to a minimum is only a very partial account of the actual relations of production and the chain of sub-contracting involved in it. The small, local 'employer', or sub-contractor, is part of a sub-division of processes which links the homeworker into a highly formalised and mechanised system of production. A direct relation between employer and employee appears to be representative of a minority of cases, with sub-contracting, interposing several layers between the 'self-employed' homeworkers and the firm selling the commodity on the market, the more common form. In our research, over 70 firms were identified as suppliers of homework: some of them were national or international manufacturing organisations established in the locality and not in this sense local firms; others were sub-contractors for large-scale enterprises; only a minority were small, local employers.

There are at least two types of organisation of production, using the homeworking system. One is carried out by already established large-scale enterprises using a chain of sub-contractors with the homeworker as the last link in the chain. The other is a small-scale (initially part-time) trader recruiting homeworkers direct or sub-contracting this function to a kinsman/woman. There is no evidence to show that there is higher pay for the homeworker in the large-scale national enterprises than for those working for small market outlets. In at least one case, the national company's rate was lower than that paid by a small firm.

Wage Work in the Home

An explanation of homeworking from the perspective of those involved in it has not been fully developed. An adequate explanation of why women do homework and what, if anything, differentiates them from women in other wage work will only be possible when the relations between the incidence of homeworking, the availability of formal labour market employment, and the material and ideological structures of household types/domestic units have been mapped more systematically. Until that time the explanations will tend to be *ad hoc* and to move in the direction of individual, personalised reasons.

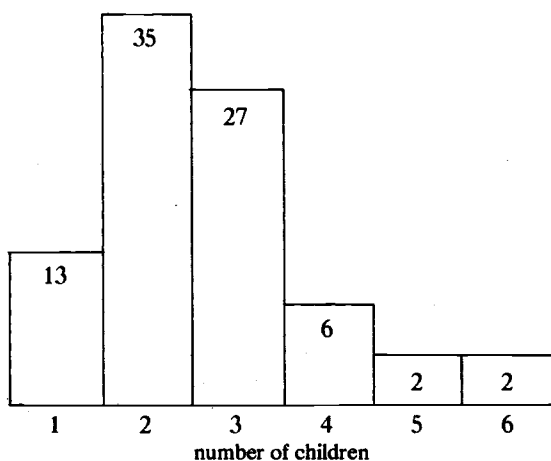
Dependent Children

One of the most common factors adduced for homeworking is that women with dependent children are trapped in their homes and wage work in the form of homework is one of the few possibilities open to them. This appears eminently sensible, given the lack of public day-care facilities for the under-fives and the problems of school holidays and school hours. Such an explanation assumes quite correctly, that the mother, not the father is expected to care for children. However, a 1971 survey [Social Trends, HMSO 1975:6a] showed

that those women likely to have the care of young children (married women between 16 and 44) had a slightly higher than one in two chance of being involved in formal labour market activity. Women with young children below five years of age do participate less, but the important factor here is whether a male earner is present. However, over half the women with children of five years of age and above are not 'trapped' in their homes or confined to homeworking.

In our survey of 90 homeworkers, 85 had children who could be considered dependent and who lived with them. The following chart shows the distribution:

Homeworkers with dependent children
n=85



Forty-eight of the women had children under five years of age; of these, 24 had one child, 21 had two children and three had three children under five. The fact of dependent children was not always an explanation of the women's economic activity since 17 of our homeworkers also had part-time jobs on the labour market: 15 of them had children under 11 years of age. The description of their days can only be described as staggering. They were employed, did homeworking and the domestic labour of looking after husband and children and running their homes on tight budgets. The overwhelming reasons given by them were economic. In many cases, those with the younger children had husbands who were on short-time, redundant or sick.

Other Factors

To understand why women without children under 11 years of age were engaged in homework, we examined the characteristics which might differentiate them from women working outside the home. Of the total

number of women, three were over 60 years old and had retired from outside work, involuntarily in two cases. They did homework to supplement their pensions and combined this with caring for their grandchildren in school holidays. Of the others, one was unmarried (a 19-year-old Pakistani who had been unable to obtain employment and did homeworking to contribute to the family income), while nine were either in poor health themselves or had a sick or elderly relative to care for.

All the women with poor health had worked in outside employment most of their lives. After marriage part-time work was common, with some working full-time when their children were young. In all cases, homeworking was resorted to when they were too ill to work outside, but too poor not to work for money. All these women talked of returning to outside work as soon as they were well enough, but they were not optimistic about finding employment, particularly those over 50.

Of the remaining three women who were neither in poor health nor had elderly or sick relatives, two had part-time jobs in addition to their homeworking. One of them wanted to transfer to a full-time job, but was afraid of losing the homeworking she had done for ten years. Her family, husband and two teenage children did not mind her working, 'As long as they get their meals'. The remaining woman had given up outside work in her early fifties to look after her husband when he had a stroke, and she was 'too old to stand a chance of getting outside work' after he died. At 59 she looked after her daughter's children during the school holidays and did homeworking:

This job (hand-knitting) seemed ideal. I'd be doing something I liked and getting a few pounds besides. Since my husband has died, this bit of money is needed to supplement my pension.

She earns 19p an hour.

In addition to the health problems, there were instances of daughters getting divorced and returning home, adult sons in jail and just the normal expectations of 'I have to be here to get their tea'. The world of these women is one in which they are expected to undertake a wide range of service activities for other members of the household including adult children with problems and elderly parents or in-laws.

The explanatory emphasis put on the care of young children obscures what is a life-long experience of servicing others on an unwaged basis, until the women are too old or too ill themselves to carry on. Very few were explicitly expected not to work outside the home: their subordination lay more in the implicit expectation of their servicing duties. The data on



*Whitechapel, East End,
London, 1906. Women
and children making
matchboxes and bunting.*



homeworkers are insufficient to show how far the health and family responsibilities of homeworkers differ from those of women who work outside the home. What is needed is an investigation of the health and unwaged responsibilities of employed women. Are homeworkers more subordinated ideologically by their family members than women on the labour market? Our evidence does not answer this question. It does show that one possibility for women without dependent children, who are in poor health, is home-working.

The Economic Factors

Analysis of the spending patterns of homeworking earnings shows that the majority of our homeworkers considered their wages an essential contribution to the household budget, and that the economic factor plays a major part in women's involvement with homeworking activities. By far the greatest number of homeworkers spent their earnings on household bills for food, heating and lighting, rent, and general household expenses including telephones (61), followed by children's clothes (24) and clothes for self (18). Only 12 responses were described as 'luxuries' and these included Christmas presents, husband's car expenses, stocking the freezer, as well as make-up and cigarettes, with six mentioning savings, and 11 holidays.

Forty-one of the homeworkers stated that they would suffer sufficient financial hardship to need to look for replacement earnings if they lost their present earnings; 20 would 'manage somehow', and 19 thought their money was a bit extra and nothing major would ensue if they lost their earnings (for the remaining eight there is insufficient information).

Hidden Labour

One aspect which is not immediately apparent is the hidden labour of other members of the household or friends and neighbours who help the homeworker. Thirty-nine of the homeworkers in our survey received such help. Apart from husbands or adult relations (sons and daughters, mothers and mothers-in-law and sisters being the most common), the incidence of child labour was striking. Much of this labour was packaging; an eight-year-old, the eldest of four children, stacked greetings cards for three hours every night. His mother earned 38p an hour and gave him 50p for several nights' work. Another homeworker paid each of her four children, aged between 5 and 11 years, ½p for every teddy bear they turned to the right side after she had machined the parts together. The children also helped with the packaging. She received 9p per teddy bear and earned 90p an hour. The stuffing of the bears was done by other homeworkers. In assessing the hourly rates paid to homeworkers, who work almost

without exception on piece rates, it is necessary therefore to note the labour of both young children and other members of the household.

Hidden Costs

As well as hidden labour, there are hidden costs borne by the homeworker: using one's home as a workplace involves expenses which cannot be calculated accurately and deducted from the gross earnings. Under tax laws those working at home in professional capacities, car set certain costs against income; homeworkers are not, for various reasons, in this position. In 17 per cent of our cases (half of whom worked for one employer) the employer made some contribution which the homeworkers considered very small. The costs which would normally fall to employers are heating, lighting, electricity for machines, machine or tool rental, materials and equipment and machine repairs. The most frequent costs are telephone calls as part of the collecting and delivery of work, travel costs to points of collection and delivery, and postage. Nothing, of course, was calculated for the setting up or clearing away of work, equipment and materials.

Seventy per cent of our sample worked in a room (kitchen or living room) used by other members of the family. Although such costs vary, many homeworking tasks involve dust and dirt, glue and sticky tape, bulky materials, sharp instruments, all of which take labour to clear away. The most common problem was lack of space, followed by dirt and noise. While homeworkers grumble, they do not calculate the labour time involved, nor the cost of inconvenience to those living where they work. The overwhelming majority, 92 per cent, earned under £1.50 per hour (bringing the worker into the low-pay bracket); 40 per cent earned less than 50p. Twenty-four per cent of our homeworkers were in occupations covered by Wages Councils yet over 70 per cent of these earned below the standard minimum rate for the industry.

The question inevitably arises of why the women work for such low earnings. The sections above have dealt with some of the reasons homeworkers *may* be confined to such wage earning activities. However, there is also the question of what alternatives exist.

In the formally organised employment sector, women are disproportionately concentrated in low paid work, much of it in service industries and occupations. According to a recent report, the low paid now earn slightly less in relation to the average than in 1886 [NCCL 1981]. Equal Pay legislation narrowed the gap between men's earnings and women's to some extent, by making illegal a 'women only' rate, resulting in women being put on to the lowest rate paid to men. But the legislation requires equal payment for similar

work and, since women in general do different work from men, the legislation will achieve little until sexual segregation in the labour market is radically reduced. A further problem arises because part-time rates do not legally have to be calculated as a proportion of full-time rates and as many women, particularly those with domestic responsibilities, are in part-time work they are vulnerable to lower rates of pay.

Since homeworking does not provide a living wage, it is carried out by those who live in households with other wage-earners. Most homeworkers are married and living in two or more person households. Women living without another wage earner who draw social security benefits fear the loss of benefit if they admit to doing homework, and their involvement may therefore be underestimated.

Only two full-time homeworkers earned above the average weekly wage for manual working women in employment, and seven earned less than half this average wage. Only ten part-time homeworkers earned almost the average part-time earnings and most of the homeworkers earned well below it.

For the vast majority of women who have no possibility of earning enough to keep themselves and their dependents, the upkeep of their households depends on other wage-earners. In this sense they are secondary earners. The alternative is to take on more than one job, a combination, for instance, of a full-time job and a part-time job or two or more part-time jobs. Women with dependent children draw child benefit, but unless they are without a male 'supporter' they do not qualify for cash benefits under the stringent social security regulations. This may explain the homeworking activities of women who also work part-time in the formal sector.

The Myth of Autonomy

One of the attractions of homeworking is thought to be the autonomy the homeworker has in deciding when and for how long she will work and at what pace. The time and effort control exercised over the assembly-line worker and all those who clock in and out of work is contrasted with a person working in her own home, with no supervisor or timekeeper. In the abstract, such a contrast appears to give the homeworker a freedom and flexibility denied the factory or office worker. But this picture is quite misleading, although it is put forward as an explanation and is shared by some of the homeworkers themselves.

The homeworker is invariably a piece-worker, paid per item, or per box, or per 100, with the supply of work determined by her employer. She may be required to do a certain amount in a specified time—'He [the

employer] will provide £20 of work weekly. If you drop below this he will take the machine away'. Or the work may be given on a daily basis, with the amount varying from day to day. Several women received work at 10 a.m. which had to be completed by the following morning at 10 a.m. The employer did not, however, have any obligation to supply work on a regular basis and the women could be without work for three to four weeks and then expected to do the amount within the time specified. Fifty eight per cent of our homeworkers had at times been without work when willing to do it. Yet workers were also required to produce in response to rush orders, with half our sample experiencing more work required of them than they could comfortably manage.

The pace is also set by the amount to be done, where the employer has the sanction of withdrawing work altogether if not completed on time; other employers used different rates of payment according to the time taken to complete. For instance, a hand-knitter was paid a lower rate per ball of wool if she took more than a week to produce a garment. The choice of when to work or for how long is therefore severely constrained by the employer, with the additional need to reconcile it with the demands of housework, care of relatives, children and husband.

Average hours worked on homeworking jobs

up to 10 hours per week	11	} part-time
11—20 hours	38	
21—30 hours	26	
30—40 hours	3	} full-time
41—50 hours	5	
51—60 hours	2	
61—65 hours	2	
no information	3	
total:	<u>90</u>	

Thirty hours or less is the official definition of part-time working. The flow of work and the marked irregularity of much homework on a daily, weekly or seasonal basis is determined by the employer. So, to a large extent, is the pace. The only choice left is how the homeworker fits her waged and unwaged work together within the time at her disposal. This 'choice' frequently involves working unsocial hours, getting help from her family, and, always, turning her home into a workplace with all its attendant inconveniences and hazards.

Conclusion

It has been suggested that the domestic system, including homeworking, as developed in Western European

societies, was an important form of proto-industrialisation and could be adopted in Third World countries to reduce unemployment and underemployment and to provide a basis for capital accumulation and the development of the formal industrial sector [Fischer 1973; Mendels 1972; Tilley 1971]. It is also becoming increasingly fashionable to advocate that informal sector activity can meet some of the problems of unemployment and poverty in societies like Britain in the 1980s, and that the removal of employee-protective legislation enables the small entrepreneur to survive and establish a flourishing business.

Such suggestions need to be treated with the utmost caution. The relationship between the formal and informal sectors is not that of a rural, domestic system leading to a modern urban industrialised sector. The complementarity of the systems historically is reinforced at present by the evidence of the continued existence of homeworking in Britain involving not just small entrepreneurs but large national and international undertakings. The elaborate systems of sub-contracting indicate the mutual interdependence of the two sectors; thus, to argue for policies to increase informal sector

employment when the formal sector is in severe decline, is to ignore the realities of the situation.

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