

South Asia: “We need to empower home-based workers by investing in more co-operatives. Unity builds strength and resilience”

Friday 31 July 2020, by [BROWNE David](#), [DAVE Janhavi](#) (Date first published: 27 July 2020).

South Asia is home to over 50 million home-based workers, most of whom are women. From [agarbhatti incense stick rollers in India](#) to piecework garment workers in Sri Lanka, they contribute immensely to national economies in addition to their families and local communities as working from home allows them to take on care responsibilities. Despite working long, irregular hours for low pay and often with no proper contract, home-based workers are often the only income providers in their households. But they remain, nevertheless, an ‘invisible’ and isolated workforce given little or no credence in government policies, programmes and legal protections.

Now, with the advent of [the deadly COVID-19 pandemic](#), these most vital but vulnerable of workers are facing even greater hardship, exacerbated by the three-month-long lockdown in most countries in the south Asia region. Despite the fact that many homeworkers are sub-contracted by domestic and global value chains in a bid to cut costs (others are self-employed independent operators), the pandemic has left them without work, wages, unemployment benefits or any form of government social protection. As a result, many home-based workers and their families are facing hunger and a desperately uncertain economic future.

One of their main allies is HomeNet South Asia, a progressive worker organisation founded in 2000, and registered in 2006, with the support and backing of the Indian trade union SEWA (the Self Employed Women’s Association) and WIEGO (Women in Informal Employment Globalizing and Organizing). In March, it published [a ‘Charter of Demands’](#) for, amongst other measures, income support for all informal workers, the recognition of home-based workers in law, and the establishment of a COVID-19 recovery fund. And earlier this month, it joined WIEGO, HomeNet South East Asia and the Asia Wage Floor Alliance to call on global fashion brands to make [a supply-chain relief contribution \(SRC\)](#) to the garment workers whose incomes and lives have been devastated by the pandemic.

Equal Times talked with Janhavi Dave, the international coordinator of [HomeNet South Asia](#), and asked her how the coronavirus pandemic has impacted home-based workers – and what lies in store for HomeNet’s 900,000 worker-members.

What is the biggest problem facing home-based workers in south Asia during the current COVID-19 pandemic ?

The biggest problem at the moment is food. There isn’t enough food. Many of our workers are having trouble accessing government welfare and food programmes. There are not enough rations

for poor people and not enough food in ration shops. Some of our workers, for example, are barely surviving on a fraction of what they would normally eat.

Home-based workers are not even officially recognised as workers, so there have been no special schemes set up for them. Migrant workers have been forced to return to their native places because there's no work and no money to pay rent. They don't have the proper ration cards. Many people are surviving on cooked food given to them by religious organisations. There's been a huge under-reporting of deaths.

What other issues are home-based workers in the region facing ?

The problems they are facing are not necessarily new ones. Many are the same problems that we have been struggling to overcome since HomeNet South Asia was first established in 2000. But these problems have been amplified by the pandemic and subsequent lockdown. Work started reducing in January, and there's been no work since March. Most workers still haven't been paid for the work they did in January and February. There's no work on the horizon for the next six months so they can't buy the things they need.

Our people have no social security, no pensions and no insurance. Now there's no work which means no income.

HomeNet South Asia covers Afghanistan, Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, India, The Maldives, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. Is the situation equally bleak in all countries ?

Things are much better in The Maldives and Bhutan because so far they haven't had so many COVID-19 cases. But in the other countries the situation is pretty much the same all over – especially in the slums and informal settlements, where community transmission of the virus is now beginning to really take off.

[In India](#), for example, there's been a lack of resources and not enough testing. And our peak is yet to come. Lockdown is a luxury for the few. For people living in informal settlements or slums it just creates more chaos. How can you confine people to their hutments for most of the day at the height of the summer ? Of course, social distancing is necessary and ideal but how can you have safe distancing in such densely packed areas ? People don't have toilets in their homes. They have to go to communal toilets across the road. And yet police are patrolling and preventing people from leaving their homes for most of the day.

But surely some home-based workers have found ways to adapt and survive in the crisis ?

Yes, but only a tiny minority. Of our 900,000 members only around 9,000 currently have access to work. Some of the garment workers [are now making face masks](#), for example. Other home-based workers are selling through online platforms. Some are moving to growing and selling organic food. But almost all of these people are members of co-operatives and are organised, proving that together we are more resilient. Individuals, people working on their own, have found it almost impossible to get access to work during this current crisis.

What are the big lessons to be learned from the corona crisis, especially with reference to supply chains ?

Traditional [top-down supply chains](#) have been created by design to maximise profits and exploit workers. What have companies done for home-based workers during this crisis ? The answer is pretty much nothing. Look at the garment supply chains in south Asia and south-east Asia. There is no business for home-based workers. The workers have no access to social security. And the

situation is the same in Africa, Latin America and central Asia.

It will take time for domestic and international supply chains to recover and for work to come back. I think it's now imperative that we transform our supply chains from top-down to bottom-up domestic supply chains. We need to involve the poor and empower home workers by investing in more co-operatives. This pandemic has reinforced the message that unity builds strength and resilience.

And we need to engage with home-worker leaders to embrace and exploit new internet technology to develop online selling and trading, webinars and the exchange of knowledge. The coronavirus has been a major setback and highlighted our fragilities. Buy local, sell local is the new imperative.

Last week, HomeNet South Asia and three other labour organisations sent out a joint statement demanding COVID-19 relief contributions from global brands to all garment workers to help ameliorate loss of income due to the impact of the coronavirus. Can you tell us more ?

Unlike factory workers, home-based workers are not recognised as legitimate workers. We have many members who are working in the garment sector. They may not be on the factory floor but the 'brand' is still their primary employer. In Tirupur, Tamil Nadu, for example, we have 40,000 home workers in garment supply chains ; in Dhaka (Bangladesh) we have 60,000 ; in Kathmandu (Nepal) there are 3,500.

We believe all workers deserve equal treatment. This is part of our advocacy strategy. Sometimes we speak to the relevant government. In this case we are appealing directly to the brands and we are asking them to contribute the equivalent of two per cent of the value of their orders in the 12 months before the COVID-19 lockdown. We want this money to be paid directly to the home workers.

Brands should respond positively to this if, as they claim, they are really 'with' the workers. It's not as if the pandemic will last forever. Home workers make their products and the brands need to continue the relationship.

If we can put COVID-19 aside, what lies in the future for the home-based worker movement ?

At the moment, as well as HomeNet South Asia, we have HomeNet South East Asia, HomeNet Eastern Europe and HomeNet Central Asia. We also have an emerging network in Latin America and Africa. We are now in the process of forming HomeNet International and are planning to hold our first congress this October. The whole effort is being co-ordinated by WIEGO. It may have to be a virtual launch because of the coronavirus pandemic.

The International Labour Organization's [Convention 177](#) on the rights of home-based workers has still only been ratified by 10 countries [despite being adopted in 1996], so we still need the solidarity and support of international trade unions to get this done.

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