



Homeworking in Britain

Flexible working or exploited labour?

In the front rooms, kitchens and bedrooms of UK homes there is a hidden army of essential workers. They are arguably the least protected section of the workforce in the UK. NGH estimates that there are over 1 million women undertaking paid work at home under the control of an employer.

In 2007 NGH conducted qualitative research with 67 homeworkers across the country. The results give an insight into the work homeworkers do, and the conditions they work under.

Types of homework

Although the traditional stereotype of a homemaker making clothes is now far less common, in recent years NGH has heard from homeworkers doing a huge range of jobs such as knitting, engraving, inspecting industrial seals and making souvenirs for sports clubs. Some deliver and distribute parcels or leaflets in their local area. Homeworkers are also involved in a range of jobs in the printing industry, including assembling greetings cards and packing gift tags. Others pack goods such as tights or hair accessories whilst others still work in

telesales, audio-typing or data-inputting.

Sectors

Of those interviewed

- 23% did sewing work
- 22% were involved in the packing and printing industries
- 10% were working in delivery and distribution

Who works at home?

87% of the sample were women. This high proportion of women is confirmed by many other studies on homeworking, particularly in research focussing on the manufacturing sector.

Reasons for doing homework

Some had more than one reason for working at home, but when asked for their *main* reason, the results were as follows:

- 34% – childcare
- 16% - flexibility
- 15%—other caring responsibilities
- 9% – health or disability

Our research clearly undermines the stereotypical image of homeworkers as housewives looking for a way to

pass the time and earn a little 'pin money'.

The homeworkers were asked what they would have to do without if they were not receiving their homeworking income: 57% of the homeworkers reported that they would not be able to afford basic essentials like household bills and food. Less than one in five said they would only have to cut back on treats or luxuries.

Employment Status

UK employment law currently provides different levels of protection for different categories; employee, worker and the self-employed. Those lucky enough to be classified as employees are entitled to the full range of employment rights including protection from unfair dismissal, payment of sick pay and maternity pay and rights to redundancy pay. There is, however, no clear and unequivocal definition of an employee and many homeworkers are uncertain as to whether they would be recognised as an employee if they were to take their case to tribunal. For further information see Briefing Paper No. 6 on Employment Status.

Health and Safety and Working Time

Health & Safety is of particular importance for homeworkers, since their work is carried out away from company premises, within the home. As a result any dangers could impact not only upon the workers themselves but on other members of their family, including their children.

For further information on these issues see Briefing Paper 8 on Health and Safety.

Several of the homeworkers interviewed said that they often had more work than they could cope with, and felt under pressure to complete orders. This can lead to stress and very long hours. In part this problem reflects the insecurity and irregularity that many homeworkers face: since they have no guarantee that their work will be either regular or consistent, when there is plenty of work available many homeworkers feel they have to accept more than they can comfortably manage in the time available.

Working for very long hours without a break can have serious consequences for workers' health, increasing the likelihood of injuries and of long term damage such as Repetitive Strain Injuries, disrupting sleep patterns and even affecting their mental health. As a result the Working Time Regulation which guarantee UK workers minimum rest periods, days off each week and paid holidays was introduced as a Health and Safety measure.

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Pressure to work long hours - a case study

'I know Lily says you can always say No, but I remember when she was crying when they brought her extra boxes'

Fastwork homeworker, when asked whether she could refuse work.

Fastwork employed approximately 12 workers on site and 60 homeworkers to work for them. For the most part the homeworkers were working on last minute orders, labelling batches of goods that were then sent out each day directly to supermarket branches.

The orders were delivered to Fastwork at 4pm each day, work was collected by or delivered to homeworkers between 4pm and 6pm and the homeworkers had to return it completed by 11am the next morning. This schedule gave the homeworkers no option but to work late into the night if they were to complete the work on time. An additional problem was the fact that the quantity of cards varied from box to box (depending on card sales in a particular store), so neither Fastwork nor the homeworker could accurately predict how long the work would take to complete. One homeworker reported regularly working in excess of 60 hours a week, with her longest shift being for a total of 20 hours! Others regularly worked 7 days a week as at weekends they were given different kinds of work with longer deadlines.

The very tight turnaround times (set by Supercards or possibly even the retailers, not by Fastwork) meant that Fastwork company managers would pressurise homeworkers to take more work than they wanted to, and the homeworkers agreed - fearing they would lose their jobs if they refused. Several also reported that one of the owners of Fastwork could, on occasions be verbally abusive towards workers who failed to complete work on time, or who were unable to take their usual quota.

Working for long hours under considerable pressure took its toll on the homeworkers' health, and one is now suffering from chronic shoulder problems which her GP has diagnosed as work related RSI. She reported this to her manager but they failed to take any action and continued to push her to accept large batches of work although they knew that this effectively meant she was regularly working till 2 or 3am.