



Homeworking: Women & Ethnicity

How labour market discrimination limits employment options

The common stereotype of a homemaker is of a woman, probably Asian, working long hours sewing garments at home for very low pay. In fact homeworking is immensely varied, both in terms of the types of work, and the people that do it. Nevertheless the vast majority of homeworkers are women, and a disproportionate number are from ethnic minority backgrounds. Why should this be the case?

Why are most homeworkers women?

Homeworking has always been seen as a largely female occupation, and recent research demonstrates that over 85% of homeworkers are women. This is because homeworking provides a means for women to combine the need to earn a wage with the unpaid family work that falls to women in the home. When homeworkers are asked why they work from home, the most common reason given is in order to combine work with child care, or other caring responsibilities.

Why are many homeworkers from BME communities?

It is extremely difficult to determine the proportion of homeworkers who

are from ethnic minority backgrounds.

This varies massively depending on where research is done, and cannot therefore be determined from small scale studies. In addition larger, more formal, and therefore less community-based research is also unlikely to determine the true extent of homeworking in ethnic minority communities, as long-term relationships of trust between homeworkers and researchers are particularly important when encouraging ethnic minority homeworkers to come forward and identify themselves. Nevertheless, whilst the precise proportion of homeworkers that are from ethnic minorities is difficult to ascertain, all our research indicates that a disproportionate number of homeworkers are from BME communities.

Our 2004 research into homeworking in Bradford demonstrated that women from ethnic minority communities face a double disadvantage, both on account of their gender, and their ethnicity. Not only did many of them have caring responsibilities that were not catered for in the external labour market, but they also faced language problems

or had experienced racism when working outside the home.

In the survey of Asian homeworkers in Bradford, the main reasons given for working from home were as follows:

- 30% Caring responsibilities
- 18% Cultural reasons
- 16% Work outside the home harder to get
- 26 % Unspecified reason.

In addition, 22% said they had suffered racism in a former workplace. 40% said their level of spoken English was 'good' or 'OK', but 40% said it was 'poor'. Whilst there is a perception that Asian, and particularly Muslim, women choose to work from home because it would be culturally unacceptable for them to work elsewhere this is clearly not the case - over half, 56%, had considered working outside the home.

Choice or necessity?

In 2007 the Pay and Employment Rights Service (Yorkshire) Ltd published a piece of research into homeworking and Bangladeshi and Pakistani women. The researchers found a clear distinction between those who viewed homework as a positive choice, and those who felt they had no alternative.

The women for whom English was a second language, mainly from the older generation, tended to work from home out of necessity – the language barrier, poor health, lack of formal qualifications and low confidence being some obstacles

they felt prevented them from finding work outside the home. These women felt there were many negative aspects to homeworking, such as the irregularity of work, or long hours that mean they feel isolated and unable to play a full role in family and community life. One woman described how '*Life becomes all work.*'

On the other hand the second generation Pakistani and Bangladeshi women, who had English as a first language and had higher levels of education tended to see homeworking as a positive choice. They said it made them feel '*less stressed*' than working out side the home and that they could be '*their own boss.*'

'Double discrimination'

There is evidence that homework is replicating and reproducing the trends in the external labour market.

The TUC produced a report in 2006 based on Equal Opportunities Commission research into ethnic minority women and employment. The report highlighted the negative effects of the cultural stereotyping that is often used to explain low levels of economic activity among women in some ethnic minority communities. Cultural conditioning seems far more likely to be found amongst employers attitudes than amongst ethnic minority women themselves. As a result, young black Caribbean, Pakistani and Bangladeshi women were all significantly more likely than young white British women to have had

difficulty finding a job or to have had to take a job at a lower level than

they were qualified for.

Case-study: Nasreen, a homemaker in Bradford

Nasreen has done a variety of different work at home for over ten years, including packing, sewing and assembly work. She is 44 and a lone parent with 7 children between 23 and 5. She has lived in Bradford since she came to the UK from Pakistan when she was 18. She is a Muslim.

Nasreen currently sews laundry bags for hospitals, also folding and boxing them and estimates that she gets about £1.33 an hour on piece rate. *'I can easily do about 6 hours a day, because my daughter-in-law is good and does the cooking and cleaning. If the supplier needs the work quickly then I do nights and weekends. I get a lot of support from my family - they know we need the income.'*

Nasreen has recently become a lone parent. *'One minute you have a partner who supports you and you rely on him - the next minute he leaves you. What do you do? No-one helps you except the social, for which I am grateful. I had to find a job and I knew that I would have a problem because of my language, so my next best option was to work from home.'*

Nasreen is happy with her supplier and the pay. *'I really didn't care what work I did, how many hours, or what wage I got because at the end of my hard work I got an outcome - which was money. It put food on the table and paid for my driving lessons and small car. It's made me feel independent.'*

Taken from *'Made at Home in Bradford'*, NGH, 2004

Low pay

Homeworkers, whether black or white, may find themselves having to work in jobs with appalling terms and conditions and rates of pay that are an insult to the level of skill and amount of time involved in this work.

In 2007, MEWN (Minority Ethnic Women's Network) Cymru conducted in-depth research into BME homeworkers in Cardiff. Almost half the homeworkers they spoke to were doing sewing work, and the next most common type of work was packing. Rates of pay varied widely, but some were paid as little as £1.50 or 28p per hour.

These shocking rates of pay confirm other findings by NGH that, whilst many homeworkers are vulnerable to low pay, BME homeworkers (and in particular Pakistani and Bangladeshi women) are often on the lowest rates – commonly well below the national minimum wage.

Working to make a difference

Homework must be recognised as an economic activity that makes a substantial contribution to our economy and homeworkers must be rewarded accordingly and given rates of pay and employment terms and conditions comparable with on-site workers. NGH campaigns on

these issues and works to support homeworkers in improving their terms and conditions.

Homework must become a real employment option for those who wish to work at home. For this to happen we must see an improvement in the terms and conditions of homework, but we must also see an end to all discrimination in the labour market, so that women are not forced into accepting low paid, unprotected and exploitative jobs.

Equality of opportunity and experience must not be a hollow gesture, lacking real commitment. All workers should have a basic level of employment protection and a minimum wage that provides all workers with a reasonable standard of living, regardless of their race, sex disability, sexuality or ethnicity.

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Background information

Made at Home in Bradford
(NGH, 2004)

An investigation into the link between poverty and Pakistani and Bangladeshi homeworkers,
Fazeela Hafejee & Safeera Mayet
(Oxfam & PERS Yorkshire Ltd 2007)

Homeworking Research Project Final Report,
Sabrina Hashem (MEWN Cymru, 2007)

Subject to Status: An investigation into the working lives of homeworkers in the UK,
Nesta Holden (NGH, 2007)

National Group on Homeworking
Office 26, 30-38 Dock Street, Leeds LS10 1JF
Telephone: 0113 2454273 Email: admin@ngh.org.uk
Website www.ngh.org.uk

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