



Counting the Invisible Workforce: The Case of Homebased Workers

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Summary. — This paper illustrates the limitations of official statistics on the informal sector with the case of homebased women workers: this is, women who work from their homes as own-account producers or subcontract workers. After noting that official statistics in most countries do not classify homebased subcontract work as such, the authors review the available data on both types of homebased work. The available evidence suggests that homebased work is an important source of employment throughout the world, especially for women, and that homebased workers comprise a significant share of the workforce in key export industries. The evidence also shows that the informal sector often has direct ties to the formal sector and is growth-promoting. The case of homebased workers, the authors conclude, illustrates the need for improved informal sector statistics as well as a better understanding of the impact of policies on the informal sector and the contribution of the informal sector to national economies. © 1999 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. INTRODUCTION

When opportunities in wage employment in either the modern or the agricultural sector are scarce, men and women turn to the informal sector. The term “informal sector” is invoked to refer to street vendors in Bogota, shoeshine workers in Calcutta, garbage collectors in Cairo, textile waste recyclers in Manila, home-based garment workers in Buenos Aires, and homebased electronics workers in West Yorkshire.

What these activities appear to have in common is a mode of organization different from the unit of production most familiar in economic theory, the firm or corporation. These activities are also likely to be unregulated by the state and excluded from standard economic accounts of national income (Swaminathan 1991: p. 1).

Moreover, the workers in these activities are not likely to be protected by labor legislation or organized by formal trade unions.

Since the early 1980s, developing countries have experienced sharply contrasting trends in the growth of modern or formal sector employment. Most countries in Latin America have experienced a slowing down in the growth

of formal sector employment. Many countries in Africa have experienced negative growth. Although some countries in South Asia have experienced moderate growth, the vast majority of the labor force in South Asia is in agriculture and the informal sector. It is only the once rapidly-growing economies of East and Southeast Asia that experienced substantial growth of modern sector employment (ILO, 1995). Even in those countries, before the recent economic crisis, a significant percentage of women workers were in nonwage employment: for example, 43% of women workers in South Korea and 79% of women workers in Indonesia (World Bank, 1995). Moreover, some developed or industrialized countries have experienced a recent decline in formal wage employment and a concomitant rise in informal employment. Shifts from formal into informal employment are a common feature of many transition economies and of economic adjustment more generally.

Recent official estimates suggest that over 80% of workers in low-income countries and more than 40% of workers in middle-income countries operate in informal and rural labor markets, beyond the reach of trade unions and direct government intervention (World Bank, 1995). Unofficial surveys and micro studies that

include broader measures of employment (e.g., that include homebased workers) suggest that the share of the workforce in informal employment is even higher. In sum, the developing world faces a major challenge of creating jobs within the modern formal sector as well as promoting opportunities within the informal sector, both urban and rural (ILO, 1995).

There are at least four theories as to why informal sector activities persist in developing countries. The first theory attributes the persistence of informal activities to the lack of, or a decline in, the growth of gross domestic product (GDP): this is the *lack of growth* theory. Underlying this explanation is the assumption that the share of the work force in modern or formal sector employment increases as GDP per worker rises (World Bank, 1995). A second theory attributes the persistence of some (not all) informal activities to changes in the structure of modern wage employment as GDP rises: this is the *jobless growth* theory (UNDP, 1993). Underlying this theory is the recognition that capital-intensive technology as well as recent economic policies and processes — notably, privatization, deregulation, and globalization — have led (in many countries) to a decline in the number of formal sector jobs or to the informalization of certain formal sector jobs. A third theory attributes some (not all) of the growth in GDP to the small-scale enterprise sector: this is the *growth from below* theory. Underlying this explanation is the recognition that (in many countries) small-scale enterprises in the informal sector are growing faster than large-scale firms in the modern sector.¹ A fourth theory — the *period of adjustment* theory — has recently emerged because, in almost all economies undergoing adjustment, there are marked shifts from formal to informal employment. Of course, these theories are closely linked. For example, the “lack of growth” theory is related to the “period of adjustment” theory as lack of growth often contributes to the decision to adjust an economy structurally.

Despite the size and persistence of the informal sector in developing countries, the concept of the “informal sector” has gone in and out of fashion. Some observers feel the sector is too messy, that is, too large and varied to be measured or to be meaningful as a concept (Peattie, 1987). Others consider the sector to be marginal, unmodern, and doomed to perish with successful growth. Recently, several independent schools of thought have converged on the fact that the informal sector, particularly

small-scale enterprises, accounts for a larger share of output and employment than anyone ever dreamed of in the 1950s and 1960s (Tendler, 1989).

Current observers of the informal sector can be divided into three basic groups, depending on their particular interpretation of the size and significance of the sector. First, there are the orthodox neoclassical economists who argue that as GDP per worker rises, the share of the work force in the modern or formal sector rises. Their argument is based on the experience of industrialized countries and the few developing countries which have, at least until recently, enjoyed substantial growth in their economies or, in other words, on what we would call *selective reality*. The second group includes scholars who work on the informal sector and who argue that, globally, the share of the work force in modern or formal sector slowed down or absolutely declined in 1980s and 1990s (ILO, 1995). Their argument is based on the global experience of all countries since 1980 or on what we would call *global reality*. Regional time trends help explain this discrepancy in outlook. Until the recent economic crisis, there was an expansion of employment in the formal sector in the East Asian “miracle” countries: this trend is the primary basis for the “selective reality” point of view. On the other hand, there has been a persistence or expansion of the informal sector in most South Asian, Latin American, and African countries. The latter trend far outweighs the formal sector gains in East Asia and accounts for the “global reality.”

A third group of observers, who have worked closely with women in the informal sector, argue that the informal sector is even larger than official statistics suggest. Their argument is based on the fact that much of women’s paid work — not just their unpaid housework — is not counted in official statistics. If the magnitude of women’s invisible paid work, particularly homebased remunerative work, were to be fully counted, both the share of women and the share of informal workers in the work force would increase. Recognizing and, more importantly, counting women’s invisible paid work — that is, fully counting what we call the *gender reality* — would challenge our empirical understanding not only of the informal sector but also of the economy as a whole.

Globally, according to official statistics, women are overrepresented in the informal sector: that is, the share of the female work force in the informal sector is greater than the

share of the male work force. In South Korea, one of the East Asian “miracles,” over 40% of women workers were outside both the formal sector and the agricultural sector before the recent financial crisis (World Bank, 1995). Many informal women workers, however, remain invisible in official statistics. Perhaps no category of workers better illustrates the limitations of official statistics and mainstream understanding of the informal sector than that of homebased workers.

2. THE CASE OF HOMEBASED WORKERS

The case of homebased workers presents three challenges to orthodox economic understanding of the informal sector: it challenges official labor statistics, it challenges mainstream assumptions about the nature of the informal sector, and it challenges orthodox prescriptions as to what can (and should) be done.

(a) *Challenge # 1: to official statistics*

As used here, the term “homebased workers” refers to two types of workers who carry out remunerative work within their homes — dependent subcontract workers and independent own account workers — whereas the term “homeworkers” refers to the first category only.² It is difficult to determine the extent of homebased work internationally, because few countries collect adequate national statistics on homebased work. Official statistics on homebased work are inadequate for a number of reasons. The informal sector as a whole is often underenumerated. For example, official statistics often fail to fully explore whether individuals classified as “unemployed” are engaged in informal sector activities. Yet micro surveys from around the world suggest that the unemployed — particularly so-called housewives — are often employed in full or part-time informal sector activities. For example, a 1994 survey in Poland reported by the World Bank, found that 46% of the unemployed were employed in the informal sector on either a full- or part-time basis (World Bank, 1995).

Second, although homebased workers who work on their own account or for informal units are officially-recognized categories of the informal sector, they are less likely to be enumerated in labor force or establishment surveys than entrepreneurs/workers that work outside

the home. For example, many household labor force surveys fail to recognize multiple economic activities carried out by household members, particularly homebased activities. Thirdly, the underenumeration of women homebased workers is particularly acute because their remunerative homebased work is often seen as, simply, an extension of their unpaid housework.

Finally, homeworkers — those who work as subcontract workers or outworkers for formal firms — fall in a “gap” between informal and formal sector statistics, both conceptually and empirically. Although they are not likely to be included in the list of employees of the formal firms for which they work, they are also often excluded from informal sector surveys. A 1990 review of 70 countries for which the ILO has data found that only seven countries had a separate category for “homeworkers” in their labor force surveys or population census — Morocco, Hong Kong, Japan, and four European countries (Schnieder de Villagas, 1990). In the 1993 Resolution on Statistics of Employment in the Informal Sector adopted by the Fifteenth International Conference of Labour Statisticians, homeworkers are excluded from the official definition of the informal sector. In recognition of the fact that homeworkers are often excluded from surveys of formal enterprises, however, the Resolution recommends including all homeworkers within the scope of informal sector surveys but distinguishing them from homebased workers who work on their own account or for informal sector units (Perucci, 1997).³

According to the ILO Bureau of Labour Statistics, the 1993 Resolution and related international standards recommending an expanded and flexible labor code have been applied in only a few countries. When these standards are applied more broadly and consistently, international comparisons of data may be possible. In the meantime, much of what we know about homebased work is from a growing body of survey research and micro-level studies on microenterprises, the informal sector, and women’s work. These surveys and micro-studies suggest that homebased workers comprise a large and growing portion of the workforce in many countries.

Like the official data, however, the micro-level data are also not comparable due to inconsistencies in the concepts and definitions used. Nonetheless, an overview of the findings challenges official statistics by suggesting the

critical importance of homebased work as a source of employment, especially for women.⁴ Homebased work is prevalent in both the rural nonfarm sector and the urban informal sector, especially in manufacturing and service activities. Homebased workers may be involved in a mix of dependent and independent work at any given time, or may move between independent and dependent work over time.

Evidence suggesting that homebased work is an important source of employment throughout the world

Argentina: 8% of workers in the manufacturing sector in Buenos Aires are homeworkers; 10% of workers in the manufacturing sector in Cordoba and Rosario are homeworkers (Marshall, 1995).

Egypt: 53% of women's and 10% of men's businesses are homebased; 70% of women's and 18% of men's businesses are started in the home (Weidemann and Merabet, 1992; survey of a sample of 317 women small entrepreneurs in Egypt).

Philippines: 13.7% of workers in the informal sector are homeworkers (National Statistics Office of the Philippines, 1996).

Botswana: 77% of enterprises are homebased (Gemini study 1992; nationwide survey of a sample of 1362 enterprises).

Kenya: 32% of all enterprises are homebased; 37% of rural enterprises and 16% of urban enterprises are homebased; 43% of women's enterprises and 23% of men's enterprises are homebased (Parker and Torres, 1994; nationwide survey of a sample of 5353 current businesses and 1990 previous businesses).

Lesotho: 60% of enterprises are homebased; 88% of women's manufacturing enterprises are homebased (compared to 37% of men's) 57% of women's service enterprises are homebased (compared to 30% of men's) (Fisseha, 1991).

Malawi: 54% of enterprises are homebased (quoted in Liedholm and Mead, 1994).

South Africa: 71% of enterprises are located within a home or homestead (Liedholm and McPherson, 1991; survey of 5253 enterprises in two urban communities).

Swaziland: 68% of enterprises are homebased (Fisseha and McPherson, 1991; nationwide baseline survey of 2759 enterprises).

Zimbabwe: 77% of enterprises are homebased (McPherson, 1991; nationwide baseline survey of 5575 enterprises).

Evidence suggesting that homebased work is an especially important source of employment for women

Argentina: 87% of waged homeworkers in the clothing and footwear industries are women; 88% of self-employed homebased workers in the clothing and footwear industries are women (Marshall, 1992).

Federal Republic of Germany: 87% of all homebased workers are women (1987 figures cited in Prugl, 1992). Hong Kong: 87% of all homebased workers are women (1986 figures cited in Lui, 1994).

Italy: 90% of all homebased workers are women (1985 figures cited in Prugl, 1992).

Japan: 93% of all homebased workers are women (1989 figures cited in Prugl, 1992).

Mexico: 92% of embroidery homeworkers in one study are women (Cook and Binford, 1990).

Philippines: 79% of homebased workers are women (1993 figures cited in National Statistics Office, 1996).

Evidence suggesting that homebased workers comprise a significant share of the workforce in key industries

Multicountry: Homework is prominent in manufacturing industries which involve simple manual tasks, labor intensive operations, simple machines, or portable technology (Schnieder de Villagas, 1990).

Multicountry: Homework is predominant in clothing and textile industries, the leather industry, artificial flower making, *bidi* (cigarette) rolling, carpet making, and, more recently, electronics (Prugl, 1998).

Multicountry: Since the 1980s, an increasing number of homeworkers are engaged in service activities, such as telework.

Venezuela: 45% of clothing industry workers are homeworkers; (Prugl, 1992).

Argentina: 31% of clothing workers in Buenos Aires are homeworkers; 20% of textile workers in Cordoba are homeworkers (Marshall, 1992).

Mexico: 30% of garment industry workers in one study in Mexico are homeworkers (Crummet, 1988 as cited in Prugl, 1998).

Chile: Homeworkers produced an estimated 60% of all women's and children's clothing and 30% of all men's clothing in the early 1980s (Prugl, 1998).

Thailand: 38% of workers in the wearing apparel industry are homeworkers (estimates based on figures cited in Prugl, 1998).

Philippines: 25% to 39% of all workers in the wearing apparel industry are homeworkers (Prugl, 1998).

Indonesia: 60% of all small-scale weaving establishments in one town depend on homeworkers for their production (ILO, 1992a, b).

The critical importance of including homebased work in order to obtain reliable statistics on workers is highlighted by a 1993 survey of micro- and small-scale enterprises in Kenya. This survey found the population of microenterprises to be much larger than previously estimated, with more than 900,000 enterprises compared to previous estimates of 635,000. The higher estimate was traced in part to the investigators discovery of some 300,000 enterprises operating from the home, which most likely went uncounted in previous surveys (Parker, 1994).

(b) *Challenge #2: to mainstream assumptions*

The case of homeworkers in particular — and of homebased workers more generally — challenges the mainstream characterization of the informal sector in at least three ways. To begin with it shows that some subsectors of the informal sector are not governed by social ties and relationships, as per the characterization of the informal sector in the World Development Report 1995 (World Development, 1995) on labor, but by direct *ties to the formal sector*. That is, some subsectors of the informal sector have direct production, trade, or service links to the formal sector. Further, homework does not emerge simply because women prefer to work at home (that is, the “housewife” theory) but also because employers prefer to subcontract work to homeworkers as a cost-reducing strategy. Second, the case of homeworkers shows that the informal sector is of *policy relevance*. That is, activities in the informal sector are governed by and affected by macroeconomic and sectoral policies and regulations. Finally, it shows that the informal sector is *growth promoting*. That is, workers in the informal sector are not just in stagnant undynamic subsectors but also in dynamic export-oriented subsectors. Further, in those subsectors, informal sector workers actually subsidize capitalist growth by providing space, tools, and equipment and by working for below-minimum wages.

(c) *Challenge # 3: to orthodox prescriptions*

In its World Development Report 1995, the World Bank offers various prescriptions to deal with income insecurity. In regard to *formal labor markets*, the Bank recommends a range of government interventions to deal with income insecurity: social security, unemployment benefits, job security regulations and severance pay, public works (World Bank, 1995). In regard to *labor markets during transition*, the Bank recommends a range of government interventions, including increasing transfers to ease employment restructuring, to dampen cost of adjustment for workers, and to maintain popular support for reforms (World Bank, 1995).

But, in regard to *informal labor markets*, after acknowledging that informal sector workers are more vulnerable to income insecurity and loss than formal sector workers, the Bank states that it is more difficult to provide security

through public intervention to the informal sector than to the formal sector. In taking this position, the Bank argues that employer-worker relations in the informal sector are governed by social customs and traditions and that informal workers depend upon informal arrangements to provide insurance against these risks: that is, they receive financial help from relatives or from employers who are governed by socially accepted codes of mutual support and reciprocity. The only policy the Bank recommends to deal with income insecurity in the informal sector is public works (World Bank, 1995).⁵

3. EMERGING POLICY ISSUES

(a) *Redefining labor statistics and laws*

As noted earlier, homeworkers are treated as an anomaly in the 1993 definition of the informal sector and are often not enumerated in either formal or informal sector surveys. Underlying the deficiencies in labor statistics are related conceptual biases in labor law. Most labor laws recognize only two categories of workers: *employees* (or supervised workers) and *self-employed* (or nonsupervised workers). Homeworkers represent a fundamental challenge to the inherent dualism of labor law, as they are *unsupervised wage employees* tied through subcontracts to formal firms. Because of the dualism inherent in labor laws, most laws fail to recognize and cover the diversity of labor relationships or the range of *atypical workers*. Reality suggests that workers fall along a continuum of possible labor relationships: from full-time employees to casual employees to dependent workers to semi-independent workers to fully independent workers. Both labor laws and labor statistics need to be reexamined in light of this reality. In recognizing homeworkers as an anomalous category and recommending that they be enumerated in informal sector surveys, the 1993 Resolution on informal sector statistics represents an important first step in this regard.⁶

(b) *Redesigning Policies*

Experience suggests that informal sector workers can be protected and promoted through public interventions and policies. Most notably, of course, direct assistance has been targeted to informal sector entrepreneurs: not

just micro-financial services but also other forms of direct assistance (notably, training, input supply, and marketing). More important, perhaps, the concerns of informal sector workers and entrepreneurs can be (and have been) integrated in macroeconomic, sectoral, and regulatory policies. In different countries, several types of policies have been introduced to protect and promote informal sector workers (see Table 1).

(c) *The homeworker convention*

Over the last 20 years, trade unions and associations of homebased workers and other informal sector workers have been organized in such far-flung countries as India, South Africa, the Philippines, the United Kingdom, and Canada. More recently, international links between these organizations have been forged. Most notably, the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) of India has spearheaded a global campaign to influence the international trade union movement and the International Labour Organization (ILO).

The ILO is the specialized agency of the United Nations that deals with employment issues and sets standards for international labor laws. It is a tripartite body whose decisions are made by representatives of governments, employers, and trade unions. In the past, the standards set by the ILO have mainly applied to the formal sector of labor: that is, to workers in large-scale, organized industries (Jhabvala and Tate, 1996). Historically, the official position of the international trade union movement was that homebased work should be banned because the conditions of homebased work are exploitative and homebased workers are too

dispersed and isolated to be organized. The SEWA-led campaign has lobbied for the recognition of informal sector workers and for their inclusion in the tripartite negotiations — as well as the various conventions and programs — of the ILO.

The culmination of the SEWA-led campaign, joined in the early 1990s by an international alliance of homebased workers (called Home-Net), was the recent adoption by the ILO of an International Convention on Home Work.⁷ The Convention, adopted in 1996, recognizes homeworkers as workers who are entitled to just reward for their labor and sets a standard for their minimum pay and working conditions. The text of the Convention covers many of the policies noted above, such as: equality of treatment with other workers; the right to a minimum wage; social security protection; maternity benefits; health and safety provisions; protection against discrimination and the right to organize. It also includes some wider measures such as the inclusion of homeworkers in labor statistics and the need for a system of labor inspection and for regulation of intermediaries.

The Convention is the first international treaty to set labor standards for the informal sector. If ratified and implemented by national governments, the Convention represents a powerful means to reduce poverty among homeworkers, often the poorest of all workers. Moreover, it would establish an important precedent for similar legislation to protect and promote other categories of homebased workers and informal sector workers more generally. It could also change the whole face of the international labor movement given the sheer size of the informal sector.

Table 1. *Policies to protect and promote*

Macro policies	— To increase the demand for goods and services produced in the informal sector — To remove biases against and barriers faced by informal sector workers and entrepreneurs
Labor policies	— To provide legal recognition to informal sector enterprises and workers — To protect the rights (including property rights) of informal sector workers
Urban policies	— To promote protective (and remove restrictive) zoning and housing regulations — To incorporate street vendors and other informal sector workers in urban plans
Social security and insurance schemes	— To design health, life, occupational, and property insurance schemes to informal sector workers — To provide social services and social security to informal sector workers
Institutional policies	— To promote organizations of informal sector workers and — To promote representation of informal sector workers in policymaking bodies

NOTES

1. It should be noted that (a) many developing countries have a "traditional" informal sector of traders, artisans, and service groups which evolved historically and (b) many developed countries have experienced a recent growth in small-scale production systems in contrast to the large-scale factory system: this model is commonly referred to as the "flexible specialization" model.

2. The terminology around homebased work is confusing. Homebased work should not be confused with (a) unpaid housework or domestic chores or (b) unpaid subsistence production. In regard to remunerative homebased work, some observers use the term "homeworkers" for dependent subcontract workers and the term "homebased workers" for independent own account workers. Other observers use the two terms interchangeably. In this paper, we use the term "homebased workers" to refer to both dependent and own account workers and the term "homeworkers" to refer specifically to dependent subcontract workers (often called "outworkers"). Under our use of the terms, that is, homeworkers are a subset of homebased workers.

3. The 1996 International Convention on Home Work, which we will discuss below, also recommends improving statistics on homeworkers by including them in informal sector surveys.

4. The aim of this review was to gather available quantitative data on homebased workers. In our search for studies that include data on these workers, which proved challenging, we found wide-ranging definitions, research methods, and frameworks of analysis. Thus, it

was not possible to apply a consistent definition in collecting data that would allow for comparisons. The data presented are not comparable and are not intended to show comparisons between countries or sectors. Rather, they are intended to present whatever quantitative data are available to suggest the extent of homebased work across regions and economies.

5. The World Development Report 1997, which was published after this paper was originally written, reflects a broader understanding of the role and policy implications of the informal sector.

6. Whether homeworkers are enumerated in labor force or establishment surveys, and whether they are classified as informal or formal sector, has implications for the calculation of the size of the workforce, the value of domestic production, and the relative contribution of the informal and formal sectors to GDP. For instance, the calculation of output per worker will be higher if homeworkers are not counted than if they are. Some observers argue that homeworkers should be classified as informal sector workers because they are not covered by labor laws and not organized by formal trade unions. These observers also argue that the output of homeworkers should be attributed to the informal sector rather than to the formal sector.

7. This paper was commissioned by SEWA as part of that campaign to provide an overview of available statistics on homebased workers. In the final days of the campaign, several hundred copies of the original version of this paper were circulated at the 1996 International Labour Organization Conference.

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