Introduction

History–Visibility–Recognition–Organizing

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All over the world there are women and men who work and produce for the market within the space of their own homes, or together with neighbours in collective local spaces. They stitch shoes, sew and embellish garments, weave carpets, make baskets, prepare and sell food, assemble electronics and perform computer-based tasks amongst other forms of labour. They produce for a wide range of industries and services: textiles, pharmaceuticals, automobiles, tech—such as assemblage of parts for technological devices—tobacco, wood, food, education, as well as more recent forms of digital work, for instance, graphic design, programming, text production and translation. In 2019, drawing on household surveys in 118 countries, the International Labour Organization (ILO) estimated that there were around 260 million home-based workers worldwide, representing 7.9 per cent of global employment.¹ Yet an accurate count of the actual number of people—particularly women—who earn their living by working in their homes is still elusive, since many labour force surveys do not take this type of work into account, or fail to define and include it adequately. Buried in statistical obscurity and often omitted from labour laws, the conditions of their work are hidden from public view as an effect of its location in private spaces, and even their worker status is often denied through misrepresentation of home-based productive labour as leisure activities. No doubt, the overwhelming social perception of public spaces such as the factory, the office, the classroom, the laboratory, the shopping mall or arcade—all designated “workplaces” as distinct from what is considered the private world of “homes”—has reinforced the neglect of the home as a site of production and labour. Despite having contributed significantly to production in basically all sectors of the economy through centuries, home-based workers have remained largely invisible, unrecognized and undervalued.

1 International Labour Organization (ILO), *The home as workplace: Trends and policies for achieving decent work* (Geneva, 2020).

FIGURE 0.1 Mayuri Suepwong, a single mother, took up home-based work in order to look after her children while generating income. Her daughter, Chamaiporn, helps her after school. Like other home-based workers, she sometimes has to work long hours to meet tight deadlines with irregular pay.

PHOTO: PAULA BRONSTEIN/GETTY IMAGES REPORTAGE BANGKOK

At the same time, there has been growing awareness regarding the persistence of home-based production. Well-documented evidence on how modern industries at local, national and even global levels have both fed and fed on the practice of outsourcing production to home workers is now available. While it was earlier assumed that home-based work would disappear with the deepening of industrialization, the persistence and, in some cases, expansion of home work in the second half of the twentieth century challenged this view, as do current practices of outsourcing labour to private homes like the one which is illustrated in fig. 0.1. If earlier assumptions are being disproven by the prevalence of home-based work in contemporary times, the significant part played by home-based work—including its role in the industrialization process itself—has also been brought out by historical research into the work of women in industrialized countries. Often overlooked in official records, these histories—excavated by feminist historians—show that outsourced production in the homes of women emerged as a significant intersection of paid and unpaid work, between home and workplace, and between formal and informal employment, in the past as well as the present.

The persistence of home-based work has been particularly challenging for trade unions whose typical form of organization is less attuned to homes as workplaces and hostile to atomized forms of labour. Further, with most home-based workers located in the impoverished and informal margins of the capitalist economy, it is perhaps not surprising that they have remained without an effective organizational voice. Yet, the past few decades of renewed and distinctively women-oriented forms of organizing and activism among home-based workers have indeed provided a vehicle for the representative voices of home-based workers, including at an international level.²

With all its demonstrable commonalities across the globe and over more than two centuries, home-based work also shows considerable variety across sectors and regions of the world as well as in forms of struggle and organization, from the past to the present. A wider sweep across time and space is thus called for, with openness to dialogue between research and activism. Towards this, a beginning was made at a workshop called “Long-term Perspectives on Home-based Work” held in Stockholm in May 2018, organized in a collaboration between The Labour Movements Archive in Stockholm (ARAB), Centre for Women’s Development Studies (CWDS) in Delhi, and the global network “Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing” (WIEGO). Across three days, academics and activists from India, Sweden, South Africa, Kenya, Argentina, Norway, Denmark, the United Kingdom, the United States, Finland, Spain, Greece, Bulgaria, Thailand, Turkey and Chile shared and discussed research papers on home-based work from the nineteenth century to the present day.

This volume offers a selection of the papers presented at the Stockholm workshop. They draw on a range of disciplines, including but not limited to Statistics, Anthropology, Sociology and History. They address the past and present conditions of specific forms of home-based work, institutional and legal histories of regulations for home-based workers, their modes of organization and resistance, as well as the cutting edge of new aspects of contemporary home work in both traditional and newly developing sectors. As was the case for the workshop, the volume is both a result of and a contribution to the struggles of home-based workers for visibility, recognition and representation, and for dignified conditions of life and labour.

2 For example, see Renana Jhabvala and Jane Tate, “Out of the shadows: Homebased workers organize for international recognition”, *SEEDS*, no. 18 (New York, 1996); A. Delaney, J. Tate and R. Burchielli, “Homeworker Initiatives: Gaining Recognition and Rights as Workers through Organizing, National and International Standards”, in N. Lichtenstein and J. Jensen (eds), *West Meets East* (Geneva, 2016).

1 Conceptualizing the Invisibility of Home-based Work

The “invisibility” of home-based work has been a concern common to the struggles of home-based workers. It is a refrain in the research contributions to this volume. That home-based workers see themselves as invisible and so, to even get to a place where they can fight for their rights as workers, must mobilize for action to become visible, is apparent from the poems that are also included in this volume. Yet, what is meant by invisibility is itself a question that has several interpretations and which opens up a range of issues.

Ela Bhatt, founder of SEWA (Self Employed Women's Association) in Gujarat, India, who emerged as a powerful voice speaking on behalf of home-based workers from the 1980s, described India's home-based workers as invisible in terms of the absence of “official or even unofficial records of their existence, their conditions, and their contribution to the national economy”.³ Further, “confined within their homes for economic, social, or cultural reasons”, home-based workers “are invisible to the nation—in ‘purdah’, both literally and statistically”.⁴

Writing about the history of industrial home work in the United States, feminist historian Eileen Boris argued that “waged labour at home shares the same invisibility as housework” as both are part of the “gendered structuring of employment, whereby occupations, processes and places of labour become designated as male and female”. Also that employers, “taking advantage of gender ideology that identified the home as the domain of motherhood and housework by women, increased profits by shifting the burdens of production on to the [home] worker, whose payment by piece encouraged sweating”.⁵

More than a century earlier, based on descriptions of the conditions of home workers in nineteenth-century Britain, Karl Marx had referred to the “invisible threads” by which capital sets in motion an army of workers as an “outside department of the factory, the manufactory, or the warehouse”, where “the power of the resistance in the labourers decreases with their dissemination”.⁶

Conceptions of invisibility can thus be seen to encompass hidden dimensions of power and gender injustice, of poverty, and of the structural and

3 Ela Bhatt, “The Invisibility of Home-based Work”, in Andrea Menefee Singh and Anita Kelles (eds), *Invisible Hands: Women in Home-based Production* (New Delhi, 1987), pp. 33.

4 Ela Bhatt, *We are poor but so many: The story of self employed women of India* (New Delhi, 2006) pp. 44.

5 Eileen Boris, *Home to Work: Motherhood and the Politics of Industrial Homework in the United States* (Cambridge, 1994), p. 2.

6 Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1 chapter 15, section B.

systemic features of capital that underlie and propel the sweated conditions of home-based workers, the cultures and ideologies of gender that lay the ground for it, and the disempowering effect of the processes that inhere in its growth and expansion. From our perspective, and as evident from several papers in this volume, questions as to whose work is made visible or how visibility is framed, and what forms of invisibility become issues of struggle—when, how, why—need to be constantly asked, contextually situated and interrogated by researchers to guard against reinforcing invisibility of one kind or another. In this, questions of how home-based work and workers are defined and perceived, where they are recorded and counted and where they are not, are of particular salience. Critically and imaginatively interrogating and correlating different types of sources and sets of data have been useful and are necessary to lift the veil of invisibility in which home-based workers are so often shrouded. Such methods have been used to considerable effect in some of the papers in this volume, for both excavating the past of home-based workers and understanding their present situation.

The Stockholm workshop was held at a time when the issue of data and statistics on employment and work in the informal economy was being mainstreamed. Approaches to the collection of employment statistics had reached a critical juncture and were poised for change.⁷ Inevitably, the issue of how home-based workers could acquire greater visibility and recognition through these changes in statistical definitions and practices became a subject of intense discussion.

1.1 *Visibility and Recognition: Debating the Power of Definition*

Definitions have always been central to the struggle for recognition and visibility for home-based workers. Delineation of the home as a place of work and defining the nature of employment relations or status of employment have been key issues in the journey towards visibility. Home worker, industrial home worker, home-based worker—these are various terms and nomenclatures that have been in use. These different nomenclatures were not necessarily distinguished from each other in historical usage, as is evident in the choice of terms used by authors in this book, yet they do sometimes denote differences with reference to status of employment or the nature of employment and/or contractual relations.

7 See “Resolution concerning statistics of work, employment and labour underutilization” of the 19th International Conference of Labour Statisticians, 2013, and “20th International Conference of Labour Statisticians resolution concerning statistics on work relationships”, 2018.

At the core of many debates around definitions is the question of whether the home-based worker works for an employer directly or through a chain of intermediaries—typically at some form of piece-rate—or is self-employed on her own account with (some degree of) decision-making power over what to produce, how and at what price. Making a distinction between own account self-employment and wage work for a trader, manufacturer, contractor or service provider is of course crucial for analytical, regulatory, strategic and organizational purposes—even though the distinctions can often be blurry in home-based production.

“Home worker” is the term used in ILO Convention No. 177—Home Work Convention, 1996—that came into force in 2000. It defines home work as work carried out by a person, to be referred to as a home worker, in his or her home or in other premises of his or her choice other than the workplace of the employer, and as work that is carried out for remuneration and results in a product or service as specified by the employer irrespective of who provides the equipment, materials or other inputs used. The term “employer” refers to a person, natural or legal, who either directly or through an intermediary gives out home work in pursuance of his or her business activity.⁸ The ILO’s Home Work Convention therefore does not apply to own account self-employed home-based workers, and a dependent relationship between the home worker and employer is written into its definition. It explicitly excludes workers who have a degree of economic autonomy that is necessary to be considered an independent worker under national laws, regulations or court decisions.

The umbrella term “home-based worker”, on the other hand, has been more in use in developing countries and regions, particularly South Asia, where household industries, independent home-based production for markets *and* outsourced home work coexist on some scale. Home-based workers here include not only waged home workers (as per the ILO Convention), but also independent artisans working at home and other forms of own account (self-employed) workers who are involved in the marketing of their products. Of course, many own account workers may also have a dependency relationship based on, for instance, debt or market dominance by those who order or buy their products. A line between dependence and independence in the world of home-based work is thus not easily drawn, and organizations of home-based workers tend to include all subcategories within their ambit.

8 Available at https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_INSTRUMENT_ID:312322, last accessed 7 April 2021.

It is exactly the grey zone between self-employed and waged workers, and between independent and dependent workers, that has been central to recent debates on changes in definitions that apply to home-based workers in employment statistics. The issue itself is not new. It was reflected, for example, in the Swedish and Finnish Business Censuses in the early twentieth century (see chapter 1.2 by Laura Ekholm, “Reading the Margins of Business Censuses”). Yet, a hundred years later, the way the issue has been sought to be resolved has thrown up a new controversy, which was, in a sense, previewed in the Stockholm workshop debates.

The necessity of distinguishing between those who work in the home at piece-rates for some other employer and own account small entrepreneurs or independent artisans in home-based production has long been recognized, in that conceptualizing worker rights and regulations for the former would require recognition of the relationship with employers, while for the latter the focus would have to be on arrangements for purchase of raw material, for marketing, for credit, for storage, for better prices, etc.⁹ In the decades following the ILO Convention, some scholars further amplified a terminological and definitional distinction between *dependent home workers* (subcontracted home-based workers) and *independent self-employed home-based workers*. The former, in this perspective, are seen to be contracted by individual entrepreneurs or firms, often through an intermediary, usually given the raw materials and paid per piece, and not involved in selling the finished goods to the end customer, even though they may typically cover a large part of the costs of production: workplace, equipment, supplies, utilities and transport. The latter, on the other hand, are viewed as assuming all the risks of being independent operators, buying their own raw materials, supplies and equipment, paying utility and transport costs, and selling their own finished goods—either to an end consumer or to an intermediary—mainly to local customers and markets but sometimes to international markets, and while they rarely hire other workers, they may have unpaid family members working with them.¹⁰

9 See, for example, Bhatt, “The Invisibility of Home-based Work”, and also the 1988 *Shramshakti* report of the Government of India-appointed National Commission on Self-Employed Women and Women in the Informal Sector that was headed by Ela Bhatt.

10 Joann Vanek, “Home-based Workers: Progress in the Development of Statistics”, paper presented at the Stockholm workshop on Long-term Perspectives on Home-based Work, mimeo (2018). We may note here that large proportions of unpaid helpers have also been recorded among those who would be included in the category of dependent home workers. See, for example, Labour Bureau, Government of India, *Report on Evaluation Studies on Implementation of the Minimum Wages Act in Bidi Making Establishments in Madhya Pradesh* (2003), available at labourbureau.nic.in/Report_on_Beedi_Industry_2015.pdf.

The hitherto standard practice of categorizing dependent subcontracted home workers as self-employed in employment statistics has of course long obscured and frustrated a clear view of the actual number of wage-based home workers, whose rising proportions have been obvious to activists and evident in most field studies of contemporary home-based work. With the aim of remedying this situation, WIEGO (Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing) representatives who were part of the team working on revising the International Classification of Status in Employment (ICSE) had supported the introduction of a new category of “dependent contractors”, defined as “workers employed for profit, usually by way of a commercial transaction, who are dependent on another entity for access to raw materials, capital items or clients that directly benefits from the work performed by them and exercises explicit or implicit control over their activities”. However, when this was announced at the Stockholm workshop, which was held a few months before formal approval of the revised ICSE by the International Conference of Labour Statisticians (ICLS), it evoked a stormy debate. Questions were raised particularly by the South Asian participants, who argued that the term contractor applies to infamous middlemen or agents of employers who hire workers for particularly exploitative conditions of work, and therefore designating all home workers as contractors would be a misnomer. The debate, which remained unresolved in Stockholm, continued to reverberate in the following years. It merits some explication, since a revised ICSE may indeed lead to global changes in the conceptualization of home workers in employment statistics and beyond.

ICSE 18, which was approved by the 20th ICLS in October 2018, posits two characteristics of jobs and work activities as relevant to differentiate them by status at work and status in employment. One is based on “type of authority” and the other on “type of economic risk”. Type of authority is used to classify workers as dependent or independent, under which “dependent contractors” are classified as dependent workers and own account workers in household market enterprises without employees as independent workers. Type of economic risk is used to classify workers as in employment for profit or in employment for pay (including piece-rate wages), under which both dependent contractors and own account workers are classified as in employment for profit. If, under the former characterization, home workers emerge as distinct from self-employed home-based workers, in the latter typology a home worker’s earnings are defined as profits, thereby conceptually blurring the important distinction between profits and wages.

Some of those who had instinctively recoiled at the nomenclature of dependent contractor for home worker during the Stockholm workshop later

came to be persuaded that the new category was “essential”. On the grounds that the definition included “dependent workers who do not have a contract of employment ... are paid only by the piece or commission, and do not benefit from social contributions paid by the economic unit paying for the work”, they accepted that such a definition fits subcontracted, piece-rated home workers, and is better able to capture home workers as distinct from other self-employed home-based workers. It was also argued that as an international standard it would help make comparable assessments and analysis of global, regional and national trends, and that governments could legislate, plan and programme for the security and empowerment of home-based workers using the data. These arguments rested on a sense of reassurance that the definition indeed refers to the dependent contractor as a worker, and even though the term dependent contractor is “not ideal” from their point of view, they believed that it would not lead to home workers losing any rights and entitlements under labour law, and, further, that the definition of home worker provided by ILO’s Convention 177 would continue to hold.¹¹

Yet, the question as to why the term contractor was brought in to define workers remained pertinent and continues to be contested by others. “Independent contractor” is the prevalent term in the US for some of the new, non-standard forms of work such as Uber drivers, where the inequalities of the employment relationship and the process of profiting from the labour of drivers are camouflaged as a commercial relationship between independent equals.¹² The insertion of a separate “dependent” category in ICSE was thus thought to be a victory for the informal workers’ lobby.¹³ However, it could equally be argued that insertion of the term “contractors” to signify workers introduces a new confusion of categories. If all home workers begin to be counted as dependent contractors, how, for example, would a piece-rated wage worker be distinguished from a contractor who merely farms out work to home workers but may have a dependent relationship with another employer? That renaming

11 “Understanding the statistical term ‘Dependent Contractor’: A Q&A with Firoza Mehrotra”, <https://www.wiego.org/blog/understanding-statistical-term-%E2%80%99Cdependent-contractor%E2%80%99D-qa-firoza-mehrotra>.

12 Only recently, in February 2021, the UK Supreme Court ruled that Uber drivers designated as independent contractors by Uber Technologies Inc. would be considered as workers (although not employees) with entitlements, in a case that was settled after more than six years of litigation. However, the decision only applies within the scope of definitions under a specific UK law.

13 Leslie Vryenhoek, “Major Step Forward for Informal Workers with New ILO Employment Categories”, available at <https://www.wiego.org/blog/major-step-forward-informal-workers-new-ilo-employment-categories>.

workers as contractors would also symbolize a political retreat from a labour perspective on home-based work was one of the arguments that was raised at the Stockholm workshop. Further, since the wages of such dependent contractors are defined as profit, a question remains as to whether it would promote conceptual falsification and a roll-back of the advances made in understanding the hidden political economy of outsourced home work that has been brought out by scholars and activists over decades.

A related concern is that this categorization may provide an excuse for traditional trade unions reluctant to deal with home workers to further retreat from this field of organizing, just as it may further cloud the already contested area of how (in)dependent contractors may be conceived in relation to competition laws, which in some parts of the world is a potential threat to the right of such workers to organize and bargain collectively.

The significance of these questions is far-reaching for future strategies of women home-based workers. They acquire particular salience in the prevailing context of an offensive against the politics of labour movements, as neoliberal regimes across the globe are engaged in restructuring labour relations as well as labour laws at the cost of the rights and entitlements of workers. ICSE 18 now has the authoritative backing of ICLS. Nevertheless, the tense debates at the Stockholm workshop and after suggest that the renaming of workers as contractors might encounter further resistance and interrogation in various countries. The unease with the term “dependent contractor” even among those who have accepted it may deepen when it is placed before the varied terrain of workers’ organizations, including of home-based workers, who have not been part of the consultations for the revision of ICSE.

The issue of contractors and their various tiers is of course complex, particularly in the formerly colonized and now developing countries of South Asia.¹⁴ Here, where larger contractors are primarily agents and labour mobilizers for employers, many low-end contractors may indeed be home workers

14 The emergence of the figure of the labour contractor has long had a connection with the way colonial rulers mobilized labour from and within the countries they colonized. In India, labour historians have used the term of “labour lord” for such contractors, and the persistence of the figure of the oppressive contractor resonates with the figure of the oppressive overseer of slaves in other contexts. See Lalita Chakravarty, “Emergence of an Industrial Labour Force in a Dual Economy: British India, 1880–1920”, *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 15, no. 3 (1978); Tirthankar Roy, “Sardars, Jobbers, Kanganies: The Labour Contractor and Indian Economic History”, *Modern Asian Studies* (September 2008); and for the debate on the role of contractors in the informal economy in the post-colonial and recent period, Jan Breman, “Labour, Get Lost: A Late-Capitalist Manifesto”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 30, No. 37 (1995).

themselves. The question, however, is that in their case, should the contractor identity be foregrounded over the worker identity or vice versa? Further, how would home workers' organizations approach the issue of denial of adequate wages or wage theft by contractors if both are clubbed in the same category? This relates to another important question: where would home workers redesignated as contractors place themselves in the building of larger worker solidarities, particularly against the neoliberal restructuring of labour relations that affects all workers and excludes none?

In such a fraught, complex and contested terrain, insights from historical research and a long-term perspective, the ways in which home-based work was conceived and represented, and the debates that took place at various points in the history of home work, acquire special relevance. Where the platform of the Stockholm workshop created a particularly vibrant and intersected space for debating meanings of the current framing of definitions and terms for home work, the papers in this volume bring out the interplay of vicissitudes of power, capital and dominant ideologies in shaping approaches to home-based work and workers over a longer period. These provide a critical foundation for thinking around some of the questions raised by the current conjuncture.

1.2 *Shifting Sands: Research on Home-based Work Across Time*

A long-term view has to bear in mind also that home-based workers have been largely invisible in the production of knowledge on labour markets and work, barring some notable exceptions and occasional surges in public interest across different phases and points of time in “industrialization” or “development”. Around the turn of the nineteenth century, for example, home-based work was intensively investigated and studied in Europe, and even displayed at large exhibitions. A large number of national and regional surveys and reports were written up by organizations and governmental actors at the time, when home-based work was approached as part of “the social question”—an expression describing the discourse around organizations, policy and publications trying to find solutions to the new forms of poverty and related problems among the urban working class in the late nineteenth century.¹⁵

15 See, for example, Marcel Allexandre, *L'industrie à domicile salariée* (Université Caen, 1906); Investigation Committee of the Women's Industrial Council, *Home Industries of Women in London: Report of an Inquiry* (1908); J. Beck, “Die Schweizerische Hausindustrie: Ihre Soziale Und Wirtschaftliche Lage” (1909); Franz Fiedler, “Die Heimarbeit Und Deren Bekämpfung in Der Kleider-Und Wäsche-Industrie” (1908); Heinrich Koch, “Die Deutsche Hausindustrie” (1905); *Svensk Hemindustri [Le Travail à Domicile En Suède]* (Stockholm, 1917).

Between the two World Wars home work received renewed attention in Europe and other parts of the world, not least because the wars had momentarily disrupted economic development towards workplace centralization. Indeed, the discussion on home work was taken up in the very first decade of the ILO's existence, resulting in the The Minimum Wage-Fixing Machinery Convention from 1928, which encouraged member-states to set fixed rates of minimum wages, "in particular in home working trades", for sectors where "no arrangements exist for the effective regulation of wages by collective agreement or otherwise and wages are exceptionally low".¹⁶ Before the First World War the idea of minimum wages, especially for home workers, had been contested in most European states as well as the US. But pressure from trade unions and other social movements as well as the exposure of the harsh and unhealthy conditions of home workers had prepared the ground for agreement that minimum wages were a reasonable way to control some of the negative effects of the home work practice.¹⁷ Except for the inclusion of home workers in the 1952 Maternity Protection Convention,¹⁸ the ILO did not adopt more conventions dealing directly with home work until The Home Work Convention (177) in 1996, although a Tripartite Meeting in the Clothing Industry in 1964 called for the abolition of home work because of low wages, long hours, unhealthy sanitary conditions and inadequate safety standards. This position was reversed in 1980, however, when the Tripartite Meeting decided that home workers should be treated on an equal footing with regular workers.¹⁹

By this time attention towards home workers was again on the rise, gaining international momentum from awareness of and research on the significant role of home work in global commodity chains and developing country exports. In the 1980s the momentum came from the developing world, where the textile and garment industry, stitching and embroidery were particularly in focus, and where resurgent women's movements and the newly developing field of Women's Studies were pushing research agendas towards engaging with undercounted and hidden dimensions of women's work.²⁰ The backdrop

16 Minimum Wage-Fixing Machinery Convention, CO26. See also Eileen Boris, *Making the Woman Worker: Precarious Labor and the Fight for Global Standards, 1919–2019* (New York, 2019), pp. 28–29.

17 Elisabeth Prügl, *The Global Construction of Gender: Home-Based Work in the Political Economy of the 20th Century* (New York, 1999), p. 41.

18 *International Labour Review*, Vol. IXX (1954), p. 544.

19 Internationales Arbeitsamt and Internationales Arbeitsamt (eds), *Home Work*, vol. 8, *Conditions of Work Digest 2*, (Geneva, 1989), pp. 22, 164–65.

20 See, for example, Vijay Rukmini Rao and Sahba Husain, "Invisible Hands: The Women behind India's Export Earnings", in Singh and Kelles (eds), *Invisible Hands*.

of this period, as noted by Gisela Schneider de Villegas,²¹ was persistently high levels of unemployment in large parts of the world, which meant that home work had become an increasingly important way of earning incomes, and even industrialized countries that had earlier seen stagnant or decreasing involvement in home-based work had started to see significant increases, especially because of its wide use in the services sector.²²

It was this latter period that also saw pioneering feminist research and academic writing on home-based work in both developing and developed countries: Maria Mies' study, *Lace Makers of Narsapur* (1982) and Lourdes Benería and Martha Roldan's book on industrial home work in Mexico City (1987) being two prominent examples.²³ The early edited compilation *Invisible Hands: Women in Home-based Production* (1987) by Andrea Menefee Singh and Anita Kelles, which included piece-rated workers as well as self-employed home-based workers within its ambit, was a first attempt at providing a view of home-based women workers across a range of industries in South Asia. Ground-breaking historical studies on industrial home work in the US and Europe were also a part of this phase of feminist academic engagement with home-based work, as for example the anthology *Homework: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on Paid Labor at Home* by Eileen Boris and Cynthia R. Daniels (1989).²⁴

The surge of political interest in home work in the 1990s was of course propelled by structural changes in the organization of international capitalism, and the liberalization and globalization context. Boris and Prugl²⁵ pointed out that the bodies of thought that were pertinent to locating home workers in academic discourse at the time included feminist scholarship on women

21 Gisela Schneider de Villegas, 'Home Work: A Case for Social Protection', *International Labour Review* 129 (1990) and 'Home Work: And overview' in Internationales Arbeitsamt and Internationales Arbeitsamt (eds), *Home Work*.

22 Internationales Arbeitsamt and Internationales Arbeitsamt (eds), *Home Work*, pp. 5–6.

23 Maria Mies, *The Lace Makers of Narsapur: Indian Housewives Produce for the World Market* (London, 1982); Lourdes Benería and Martha Roldan, *The Crossroads of Class and Gender: Industrial Homework, Subcontracting, and Household Dynamics in Mexico City* (Chicago, 1987); Eileen Boris and Cynthia R. Daniels, *Homework: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on Paid Labor at Home* (Urbana, 1989); Lourdes Benería, Gunselli Berik and Maria Floro, *Gender, Development and Globalization: Economics as if All People Mattered* (New York, 2003).

24 Eileen Boris, 'Regulating Industrial Homework: The Triumph of 'Sacred Motherhood'', *The Journal of American History*, 71:4 (1985), pp. 745–63; Boris, *Home to Work*; Boris and Daniels, *Homework*.

25 Eileen Boris and Elisabeth Prüg, *Homeworkers in Global Perspective: Invisible No More* (New York and London, 1996).

and work, a focus on documenting the work of third world women within the rubric of women in development, and gender and social policy. To this must be added the growing body of literature that had developed around concepts of the informal sector, the informal economy and informal workers, within which studies on home-based workers inevitably found a place. As “globalization” entrenched itself in several countries, altering the terms of discourse and frames of engagement, a number of studies also emerged in the context of the engagement between home-based work and globalization, in which Boris and Prügl’s volume *Homeworkers in a Global Perspective* from 1996—which, like the present volume, deals with long-term perspectives on home-based work—is a classic anthology.²⁶ It was in this period of internationalization that the home-based workers question reached a turning point around and for ILO’s Convention 177, in which the connections between activism and research moved outside national boundaries to the international.²⁷

Another round of nuanced scholarly work came around the turn of the next century: for example, Ping-Chun Hsiung’s study (1996) of gender, class and home-based work in Taiwan that perhaps for the first time brought out processes of class differentiation taking place within and among home-based workers; or Naila Kabeer’s comparative study (2000) of Bangladeshi women workers which juxtaposed their increasing involvement with home-based work in London with their increasing involvement in factory work in Dhaka. Radhika Balakrishnan’s edited book, *The Hidden Assembly Line* (2002), engages with the situation of home-based workers in South Asia and Southeast Asia, and presents an NGO perspective, reflecting a sense that the ILO Convention is ineffective while consumer-based.²⁸

Since the turn of the century, a growing number of writings have emerged within a wide range of disciplines: papers developing standard labour market

26 Martha Chen, Jennefer Sebstad and Lesley O’Connell, “Counting the Invisible Workforce: The Case of Homebased Workers”, *World Development*, 27:3 (1999), pp. 603–10, <[https://doi.org/doi:10.1016/S0305-750X\(98\)00154-5](https://doi.org/doi:10.1016/S0305-750X(98)00154-5)>; Marilyn Carr, Martha Alter Chen and Jane Tate, “Globalization and Home-Based Workers”, *Feminist Economics*, 6:3 (2000), pp. 123–42 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/135457000750020164>>; Boris and Prügl, *Homeworkers in Global Perspective*; Elisabeth Prügl, *The Global Construction of Gender: Home-Based Work in the Political Economy of the 20th Century* (New York, 1999).

27 See Jhabvala and Tate, “Out of the shadows”.

28 Ping-Chun Hsiung, *Living Rooms as Factories: Class, Gender, and the Satellite Factory System in Taiwan* (Philadelphia, 1996), <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt14bssv8>>, accessed 11 December 2020; Naila Kabeer, *The Power to Choose: Bangladeshi Women and Labour Market Decisions in London and Dhaka* (London, 2002); Radhika Balakrishnan, *The Hidden Assembly Line: Gender Dynamics of Subcontracted Work in a Global Economy* (Bloomfield, CT, 2001).

models to include home workers, like Edwards and Field-Hendrey's study on women's labour market decisions in the US; or "Counting the Invisible Workforce: The Case of Home-based Workers" by Chen, Sebstad and O'Connell, which brings the lack of available statistics on home-based workers to an international scale and has become a central work for many scholars.²⁹

However, much has shifted over the past two or more decades, both on the ground and in the field of research. Home-based workers face new issues that need to be understood. While this volume is still only a beginning, it aims to contribute to and update existing knowledge by bringing together cross-generational activists, artists and researchers, combining new sources with new research ideas, and bringing together perspectives of the past and the present so that we may look to the future: the future of home-based work as such, the future of its place in the broader political economy and the future of organizing home-based workers.

An expanded terrain of investigation into the materialities of gender culture that historically shaped, and indeed continues to shape, the labour process in home-based work has imparted a distinctive multicultural texture to this volume that speaks to the current juncture of an evolving relationship between home-based work and race, ethnic and immigrant community identity-based discrimination in labour markets. Cutting-edge insights into how the introduction of new technologies in the past and in the present have propelled home-based work and mechanisms of social control and subordination, from the sewing machine to algorithmic management, has re-grounded perspectives on the relationship between technology and home-based work with new data. Cross-country analyses of laws and regulations that address home workers in global supply chains combine with an unpacking of the complex interaction of global, national and local economies that move beyond an exclusive focus on supply chains towards the influence of macroeconomic policies, structures and processes at national and international levels, as factors affecting trends in home-based work. Case studies and histories of institutional and organizational perspectives in interaction with women's agency and organization bring out a variety of forms of organizing and alliances.

Coinciding as it does with the movement of regional networks of home-based workers towards the formation of a global network, this volume marks

29 Linda N. Edwards and Elizabeth Field-Hendrey, "Home-Based Work and Women's Labor Force Decisions", *Journal of Labor Economics*, vol. 20, issue 1 (2002), pp. 170–200; Martha Chen, Jennefer Sebstad and Lesley O'Connell, "Counting the Invisible Workforce: The Case of Home-based Workers", *World Development*, 27:3 (1999), pp. 603–10, <[https://doi.org/doi:10.1016/S0305-750X\(98\)00154-5](https://doi.org/doi:10.1016/S0305-750X(98)00154-5)>.

a crossroads moment of interchange between historical perspectives and current-day activism. The decision to form an international network was actually mooted in a parallel set of discussions among four regional networks—HomeNet Africa, Contraldo Alac (Latin America), HomeNet Southeast Asia, and HomeNet South Asia—that took place around the Stockholm workshop in 2018. It culminated in the constitution of HomeNet International that was formally launched at a congress held in February 2021.³⁰

Engaging with home-based work is a complex affair, but one thing is certain: this type of labour is here to stay. It is being utilized and reinvented—by employers and states, as well as workers themselves—in production dynamics around the world and across industries and sectors.

1.3 *Towards a Global History of Home-based Work under Capitalism*

Writing the history of home-based workers contributes to their visibility and a clarified view of the confluence of historical processes that have propelled home-based work to its current condition. History sheds light on the persistence of exploitative and particularly difficult working conditions among home-based workers, on the underlying social and economic compulsions behind home-based work, and on how the worker identity of particularly women in home-based work and their economic contributions have been pushed to the margins. Moreover, a long-term perspective can deepen our understanding of the political economy of home-based work, its relations with the state, with other forms of work, with trade unions and with international organizations. It can also contribute to an analysis of the forms of regulation that have been applied—and to what effect—and why some issues tend to sustain or repeatedly recur. In other words, what changes, what remains the same and what falls by the wayside across time, and why.

In mainstream historiography, it has often been assumed that home-based work belonged to an early phase of industrialization and disappeared as the process of industrialization advanced.³¹ A large number of historical studies have focused on home-based work as proto-industrial work, especially in the

30 A HomeNet International was also formed as part of the efforts pushing for the ILO Convention on home work, but that network did not survive the 1990s. The structure of a new HomeNet International was thus put in place during the Stockholm conference in 2018, with a formal launching congress planned for 2020, which got delayed because of the Covid-19 pandemic. Finally, the congress was held virtually on 23–24 February 2021.

31 See for example Richard A. Easterlin, *Growth Triumphant: The Twenty-First Century in Historical Perspective* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1998) pp. 79.

European context.³² Yet, the remarkable persistence and reinvention of home work well into the twenty-first century across all parts of the world challenged the understanding of home-based work as simply a feature of a passing phase of “proto-industrialization”.

Where contemporary studies mostly engage with the situation of home-based workers in the global South, the historiography of home-based work has been dominated by research on the situation of workers in the global North.³³ This, in a sense, set the stage for a standard historical description of home-based work, mirroring the view of home-based work as simply a form of production that disappears as factory production advances. However, as the studies in this volume show, the relationship between home-based industrial production and the processes of industrialization is far more complex, and was so even in the past.

One aspect that is missing in our book, and in much of historiography at large, relates to the former colonized regions, particularly in Africa. This lack in no way reflects an absence of home-based work in Africa's modern history. On the contrary, home-based work is prominent throughout the region and contemporary studies are available on home-based work in African countries.³⁴ However, historical studies remain scarce. There are some studies that are records of home-based rural craft work in South Africa that was initiated by vocational missionary schools to stimulate “native home industries” in the countryside. Self-help crafts schemes were developed by churches and

32 Hans Medick, “The Proto-Industrial Family Economy: The Structural Function of Household and Family during the Transition from Peasant Society to Industrial Capitalism”, *Social History*, 1 (1976), pp. 291–315; Peter Kriedte, Hans Medick and Jürgen Schlumbohm, *Industrialization before Industrialization: Rural Industry in the Genesis of Capitalism* (Cambridge, 1981); Maxine Berg and Pat Hudson, *Manufacture in Town and Country Before the Factory* (Cambridge, 2002).

33 Marilyn J. Boxer, “Women in Industrial Homework: The Flowermakers of Paris in the Belle Epoque”, *French Historical Studies*, 12:3 (1982), pp. 401–23; Sheila C. Blackburn, “No Necessary Connection with Homework: Gender and Sweated Labour, 1840–1909”, *Social History*, 22:3 (1997), pp. 269–85; Malin Nilsson, “Seasonal Variation of Hours Worked in Home-Based Industrial Production: Evidence from Sweden 1912”, *Economic and Industrial Democracy* 40:4 (2019); Jessica S. Bean, “To Help Keep the Home Going: Female Labour Supply in Interwar London”, *The Economic History Review*, 68:2 (2015), pp. 441–70; Malin Nilsson, “Needles and Cribs: Becoming a First-Time Mother and Starting Industrial Homework in Early Twentieth-Century Sweden”, *Journal of Family History* 45:3 (2019).

34 Kalpana Hiralal, “The ‘Invisible’ Workers of the Informal Economy: A Case Study of Home-based Workers in Kwazulu/Natal, South Africa”, *Journal of Social Sciences*, 23:1 (2010), pp. 29–37; Martha A. Chen and Shalini Sinha, “Home-Based Workers and Cities”, *Environment and Urbanization*, 28:2 (2016), pp. 343–58.

humanitarian organizations. Production was mainly concentrated in the rural areas and the products sold in urban markets, and workers were paid by the piece.³⁵

The relation between colonization and home-based work is in itself an understudied but interesting topic. The idea of craft production as a development strategy initiated by the colonizers has often been regarded as a tool for the empowerment of women by international organizations during decolonization. It was also used by the apartheid regime in South Africa, which created incentives to move the clothing and textile industry to the so-called homeland areas with the lowest wages in the country. Between 1995 and 2001, mass retrenchment led to informalization of the textile industry in South Africa, as many of its workers became home workers. The effects of this history persist with design houses in South Africa able to get access to retrenched but skilled textile workers even today. However, as these workers start to retire, it seems that it is becoming increasingly difficult to find equally skilled workers for the same tasks.³⁶

The economic history of colonized countries in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is among other things marked by a shift from local production and export of finished products towards export of raw materials and severe disruption, often destruction, of the dynamics of local production. But there are exceptions. Economic historian Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk suggests that in Java, women continued to produce textiles in their homes for the local market.³⁷ A study of unemployment in Tunisia indicates the prevalence of women home-based workers in the “inner regions of Tunisia”.³⁸ Interestingly, Ethiopia has a growing garment/textile industry, but a recent attempt by WIEGO to identify home workers in supply chains could not progress; it was found easier to locate workers who still do traditional spinning and weaving for local markets. The experience suggests that perhaps the role of global supply chains is less predominant and more limited than the literature suggests, and points to the need to develop greater understanding of the political economy of home-based work in hinterlands that are less integrated into global circuits of labour

35 Ruth Castel-Branco, “Research and Analysis of Home-based Work in South Africa: An overview report”, unpublished WIEGO report, 13 September 2013.

36 Ibid.

37 Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk, *Women, Work and Colonialism in the Netherlands and Java: Comparisons, Contrasts and Connections, 1830–1940* (Cham, 2019).

38 Hamadi Sidhom, “Le travail féminin à domicile, taux de chômage et productivité : Le cas de la Tunisie”, in Jacques Charmes and Mohamed Saïb Musette (eds), *Reflets de l'économie sociale* (Alger, 2006), pp. 199–223.

and capital, and whose interaction with globalization may be of a different nature. There is indeed a vast field to explore in future research regarding the role of the colonized and colonizers in home-based work in colonial and post-colonial times.

1.4 *Engaging with the Work, Life and Organizing Experiences of Home Workers across Time and Space*

The papers in this volume provide new perspectives and new case studies to a relatively scarce academic literature. Together with other papers and participants of the Stockholm workshop, they also contribute by identifying questions that are relevant to where we are now. That is not to say that the earlier literature is outdated, it remains an important ground from where we take off; however, just as capitalist production re-invents itself, so must the production of knowledge.

The preparation for the Stockholm workshop, including deciding on themes and papers, was done at meetings with representatives from WIEGO, CWDS and ARAB (The Swedish Labour Movement's Archive and Library). Co-production of knowledge through dialogue between activists and researchers has growing relevance for a global historical perspective on home-based work. Activists and researchers can benefit from each other's different outlooks, experiences and approaches in building and using knowledge. Such co-production of knowledge is perhaps still at a preliminary stage, though it has been an ongoing process for the past three decades in the case of home-based workers. Organizations such as WIEGO have worked systematically to collect data and information through a core programme on statistics in order to mobilize, organize and support home-based workers in their struggles for recognition and decent working conditions.³⁹ The current development of activist networks and organizations of home-based workers at local, regional and international levels, paralleled by a growing research interest in home-based work, paves the way for an intensified exchange. Knowledge-building regarding commonalities and particularities in home-based work across regions is of course still at a nascent stage. What is clear, however, is that research in this

39 See, for example, the report, *Mapping Home-based Workers in Kenya and Egypt*, February 2014, published by WIEGO and World Fair Trade Organization Africa: "The mapping exercise, conducted in 2013, aimed at expanding the global networking amongst HBWs by identifying home-based workers and support organizations in Egypt and Kenya that could be brought to WIEGO's HBWs Programme and the developing network of home-based workers" (p. 5). For statistics as one of WIEGO's core programmes, see <https://www.wiego.org/our-work-impact/core-programmes/statistics>.

area calls for greater engagement with the experiences, outreach and histories of organizations and networks of home-based workers, and how these are related to specific political–economic contexts in various parts of the world at various times in history.

Some key issues in the dialogue between activists and researchers at the Stockholm workshop are of significance for both global labour history of the new century and for ways in which workers' movements can respond to the changing relations between labour and capital. These include the following.

- (a) How urban development is reshaping home-based work, particularly as population density increases, living spaces become smaller and thus space-intensive labour can no longer take place in the home; furthermore, home workers are being displaced to the outskirts of cities as informal settlements are demolished to make way for new formal housing—work conditions become harsher and incomes decline, since more time is spent on infrastructural challenges.
- (b) The emergence of entrepreneurial ideologies and “start-up” concepts that encourage individualization rather than organizing.
- (c) Where earlier home-based work was a supplement of regular employment, workers are becoming more dependent on home-based work as the option of regular employment disappears; as it is becoming increasingly difficult to make a living from one type of work, many are simultaneously taking on subcontracting, vendoring, going to the market, farming, cooking for sale, etc.
- (d) People are still organizing and forming communities and networks—also without the formal organizations. Collectives among home-based workers are utilized to, for instance, counter violence from contractors and middlemen, to land bigger contracts, to gain access to finance and savings, to achieve recognition and increase bargaining power as well as the likelihood of getting paid on time—or getting paid at all—and getting orders ready in time.
- (e) Barriers to unionizing/organizing home workers can be self-identification (as entrepreneurs or contractors rather than workers) and, in the case of women, opposition from families (mainly husbands) who try to prevent them from joining collectives.
- (f) While ILO Convention 177 does play a role as a reference for the struggle, few countries have ratified it, and lack of legal recognition of home-based workers as workers with unionization rights is a recurring problem in many parts of the world, leading to their lack of access to the ILO's tripartite structure.

Global labour history has been criticized for its lack of spatial focus and over-emphasis on universalizing phenomena across spatial contexts. Research on home-based work—the most local form of production—helps to situate research at the local level and to follow the entanglements from there. Global labour history has a tendency to look more at structures and organizations, and less at activists and movements, sometimes making workers on the floor, and even more so women workers, disappear from the narrative. Focusing on a micro-historical approach and looking into agency and resistance amongst home-based workers is a way to give workers a voice in the shaping of global labour history. It is from such a perspective of co-produced knowledge that this volume locates its relevance in the narratives of global labour history.

2 Looking to the Future from the Past and the Present

During the last year of working on this book, the world was swept by the Covid-19 pandemic, which placed the home as a workplace at the centre of public attention in unprecedented ways. Several chapters in this book discuss how the introduction of wage labour under capitalism eventually led to the (ideological) separation of home and workplace. We discuss how the formal workplace—as a physical place separated from the home—became the norm that framed both (state) regulation and organizing practices. This dichotomy is of course problematic in many ways. It codes unpaid care work as non-work, and it obscures the fact that home is still the most common workplace. With the pandemic, the home returned as the workplace for new groups of workers. Even as the home reclaimed its status as workplace in the public mind, the pandemic also laid bare and enforced many old structures of inequality—not least those of class and gender.

The pandemic not only made the theoretical dichotomies of home and workplace more relevant than ever, it also came with a very real aggravated economic crisis. The relationship between informal work and economic crisis has been discussed in both previous research and in many of the chapters in this volume. Informal and irregular workers are disproportionately exposed during economic crises. They are in several ways more economically vulnerable and unprotected as compared to other groups of workers. In this pandemic, many informal workers have faced additional risk for their health. For some—street vendors, for instance—the risk came from working in crowded public spaces. For others, like domestic workers, the risk came from working in other people's homes; and for still others, such as delivery workers, the encounter with many different homes put them at great risk. All informal as well as irregular

workers once again found themselves outside the scope of social security as they were excluded from—or rather, not considered at all in—various forms of economic compensation from the state during lockdowns.

Home-based workers, of whom many are informal workers, were also severely affected by the pandemic. As global demand falls, so do orders for home-based workers in global supply chains. In countries where the state provided some form of economic compensation to workers affected by the lockdowns and economic crisis, even high-skilled home-based workers in the formal economy had difficulties applying for support because of the lack of standard employment relations and thus an inability to “prove” what kind of wage they would have received under normal circumstances. This was even more the case for home-based workers in low-status industries and the informal economy. Several organizations of home-based workers have called for targeted relief from their government. In India, migrants among the home-based workforce in urban metropolises, unable to feed themselves or pay their rents, and facing basic survival issues, fled to their home villages, some making journeys of hundreds of miles on foot. In Eastern Europe and Central Asia, HomeNet called for minimum wages, treatment for workers affected by Covid-19—including those without social and health insurance coverage, and temporary relief from payment of taxes, rents and mortgages. They also called for support centres to provide services and information to home-based workers.

In Uganda, the “Home-based Workers Network” issued a statement about the economic impacts of COVID-19 for home-based workers. Here they describe how Covid-19 and related lockdowns have severely affected their work. For example, orders were halted without clear terms or information on how and when they would be resumed. The lockdowns and disruption of public transportation also severely limited the possibilities to pick up raw materials and to reach customers to sell their products. They also describe how funding for their business became even more scarce as money otherwise saved in group savings schemes were now being used for daily livelihood expenses.

Conditions within the home during lockdowns and increased incidence of working from home brought other issues to the fore, including what has been called the shadow pandemic of greater domestic violence, where current evidence suggests an increasing scale of intensity. The increase in domestic violence and gender-based violence was not a problem confined to only home-based workers. Nevertheless, as there is a relationship between economic stress and domestic violence, home workers as a particularly vulnerable section are also more exposed to domestic violence. Curiously, it was only when wage workers from formal workplaces suddenly had to work from home that the public eye saw the shadow effects of working at home. This was true not only

for the problem of domestic violence, but also for work environment issues in general. Home-based workers—whether in manufacturing, crafts, computer-based work or other sectors—have always struggled with the challenges of how to make their (often limited) home space into a decent workplace that minimizes health risks, but now wage workers from formal workplaces were facing the same situation. This dramatically increased the public interest, including traditional trade union interest, in the work environment of the home.

Evidence on the increasingly volatile location of home workers—in, for example, the apparel industry—suggests that an overdetermined emphasis on global chains may be less useful in the future for manufacturing home workers. Detailed empirical analysis of in-country macroeconomics indicates the need to focus on the domestic market drivers of home-based manufacturing in this century within the larger historical shaping of home-based work under capitalism. At the same time, where home-based work has expanded and moved along new and internationalized service trajectories and higher skills, shortage of work is an experience common to new digital services as well as traditional home-based work in manufacturing. The book thus addresses new forms of home-based work and new data, and questions dominant paradigms regarding traditional forms of home work, as well as shifts and changes in forms of organizing.

2.1 *The Structure of This Volume*

The volume is organized into four sections around the following themes in home-based work: long-term connections, regulations, resistance and contemporary issues. The subject of each chapter is briefly outlined and contextualized in introductions to each section.

The first section presents examples of long-term continuity by describing similarities in the dynamics of gender, place and skill in four different settings between the 1860s and 2000: Buenos Aires in the mid-nineteenth century; Greece between late nineteenth and early twentieth century; Finland and Sweden in the mid-nineteenth century; and Turkey in a late twentieth and early twenty-first century setting. The section brings out the importance of context and how a seemingly similar experience can cover widely different experiences related to particularities of context.

The second section includes contributions that highlight the reasons for prolonged lack of regulation of home workers' conditions. From the end of the nineteenth century until the 1980s many unions wanted to ban home-based work. It was with the expansion of home-based work under neoliberalism that unions at national as well as international levels started to support the struggles of home-based workers for recognition as ordinary workers with access to

workers' rights. The contributions illustrate this development by analysing the various ways of regulating home-based work, the ILO Convention as well as a number of instruments of multinational companies where the rights of home-based workers are treated as human rights.

The third section on resistance brings the struggles of home workers to the forefront. These struggles have been mostly neglected in earlier accounts of the history of workers' struggles and movements. The contributions here show how resistance is indeed a significant feature in the past and the present of home-based workers, whether inside, outside, against or with the support of unions. The section illustrates how alliances with women's organizations and sometimes governments have added to the visibility of home workers' struggles and in the long run have also gained international support from unions, leading to regional and international organizing as a strategy. The chapters highlight how the collection of documents, experiences and statistics has provided struggles of home-based workers with greater power in defining their situation and conditions, and in acquiring visibility. Such investigations of the history and the present of home-based workers have been useful in framing strategic points of intervention to improve the situation of home-based workers.

The fourth section presents some cutting-edge research on features and dynamics of contemporary forms of home-based work. New forms of employment of home workers dispersed over several countries through the intermediary of the digital platform are shown to display both commonalities with traditional home-based work, yet crucial differences in the highly centralized and opaque processes of selection and rejection of work and workers, and close monitoring of workers through algorithms. For the otherwise extensively researched field of home-based work in the apparel sector, a new perspective shows that recent restructuring of the global apparel industry sets limits on the use of home workers in India, with leading firms preferring sweatshop factory production where workers' labour productivity is more tightly controlled, enabling extraction of greater value from the unpaid component of labour time for capital accumulation. A multisectoral and detailed view of home-based work in India also suggests that domestic demand and its macroeconomic context is a more significant driver of home-based work than global dynamics at present. A focus on the turn towards self-employed home-based work by highly educated immigrant women from South Asia in Canada, forced into home-based work by ethnicity and race-based exclusion from the job market, suggests that women workers display entrepreneurial skills and creative satisfaction in providing catering and clothing for a clientele of similar ethnicity, where the work is laborious and time-consuming, yet the product is a complete creation.