Home-based Workers

Organizing from Local to Global

Chris Bonner

This chapter briefly traces the history of home-based workers' organizing over the past forty years. It then provides a snapshot of how some home-based workers are currently organizing in different countries and regions, including the size and status of the regional networks, the forms that grassroots organizations take and how different characteristics require a range of organizational strategies. In Stockholm, in May 2018, prior to the Conference on "Long-term Perspectives on Home-based Industrial Work", representatives of home-based workers from five regions, together with *Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing* (WIEGO), met, discussed and took a decision to work towards the formation of an international network of home-based workers. This chapter provides information on the process and plans for the launch of HomeNet International, originally scheduled for 2020 but rescheduled as a virtual event in early 2021, due to COVID-19. The chapter is based on the personal experiences of the author, and draws on information and writings of others active in supporting organizations of home-based workers.

1 Organizing: A Long Journey

In the early 1970s, the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) began organizing informal workers in India. Women workers who "stitched garments in their homes for contractors but were seen only as 'housewives'"¹ started approaching SEWA. "We realized that many 'housewives' are workers, but are invisible – even for their husbands", said Renana Jhabvala, president of SEWA

1 Chris Bonner, Pat Horn and Renana Jhabvala, "Informal Women Workers Open ILO Doors through Transnational Organizing, 1980s to 2010s", in Eileen Boris, Dorothea Hoehtker and Susan Zimmermann (eds), *Women's ILO: Transnational Networks, Global Labour Standards and Gender Equality* (Leiden, 2018), pp. 176–201, p. 180.

Bharat and HomeNet South Asia, and former national coordinator of SEWA. This led SEWA to coin the term “home-based workers”.²

In the 1980s, groups of home-based workers who were organizing in both developing and developed countries began forging links. During this period, SEWA in particular put pressure on trade unions and the International Labour Organization (ILO) to recognize home-based workers. This gathered momentum in the late 1980s, and in 1990 the ILO agreed to convene an Expert Meeting to discuss the conditions of home workers. In 1991 the home-based worker groups, together with allies, met and discussed the idea of forming an international network. And in 1994, at a meeting held at the headquarters of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) in Brussels, home-based worker representatives from India, Canada, Netherlands, South Africa and the UK, together with representatives from unions, ICFTU, ILO, the International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations (IUF) and the International Textiles, Garments and Leather Workers Federation (ITGLWF) established an international coordinating body. This was registered in the Netherlands as a formal trust known as HomeNet. By then the Governing Body of the ILO had agreed to put home work on the agenda for a discussion on an international standard at the 1995–96 International Labour Conferences (ILC). In 1996, after tense negotiations, the Home Work Convention (C177) and accompanying Resolution (R184) were adopted.³ This victory led to moves to extend the membership of HomeNet and to put in place a democratic structure and constitution. This did not succeed, however, and a split took place. One group formed Home Workers World Wide (HWWW), based in the UK, and later, in 2006, the Federation of Home Workers Worldwide (FHWV).⁴ The focus of SEWA and its allies, especially WIEGO, shifted to helping build and strengthen regional networks in South and Southeast Asia, namely, HomeNet South East Asia (HNSEA), formed

2 Renana Jhabvala, “History of this Movement”, opening address at the Conference of Home-based Workers, New Delhi, India, February 2015; available at www.wiego.org, last accessed 28 May 2020.

3 See accounts in IUF, “Organizing Home-based Workers”, *Women at Work*, Winter 1994–95; Renana Jhabvala and Jane Tate, “Out of the Shadows: Home-based Workers Organize for International Recognition”, *SEEDS*, No. 18 (New York, 1996); Bonner, Horn and Jhabvala, “Informal Women Workers”, pp. 182–85. For a detailed account of the processes towards and during the ILC discussion on home work, see Eileen Boris's chapter in this volume, “From Industrial Evil to Decent Work: The ILO and Changing Perspectives towards Home-Based Labour”.

4 For more information on Home Workers World Wide, see www.homeworkersww.org.uk, last accessed 2 June 2020.

in 1997, and HomeNet South Asia (HNSA), formed in 2000 and formally launched in 2007.

From 2008, organizing in South and Southeast Asia intensified, aided by an injection of funds and support from WIEGO including research, statistics and capacity-building. Organizations grew, became stronger and made some remarkable gains. HomeNet Thailand, an affiliate of HNSEA, succeeded in gaining a law for home-based workers. In 2010, the Thai parliament passed the Home Workers Protection Act. As Poonsap Tulaphan, coordinator of HomeNet Thailand, noted: "Over the past ten years, we have dedicated our efforts, energy and resources to push for the passage of this law. So its enactment brought us such pride and joy". In 2011, in another victory for HomeNet Thailand and its allies, the Thai government introduced a policy to pay about 30 per cent as contributor's fee towards a social security fund for informal workers, making social security accessible to home-based and other informal workers.⁵ In 2008, SEWA and HNSA launched the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Business Association of Home-based Workers (SABAH) in several South Asian countries, supported by the SAARC Development Fund. As the majority of home-based workers in South Asian countries are self-employed, gaining access to markets through SABAH was a major achievement for them. Sheel Kant Sharma, General Secretary of SAARC, acknowledged this in a speech at the Conference of Home-based Workers in Delhi in 2015: "This is a flagship that focuses on increasing employment – collective marketing and selling of products, learning from each other are some of the aims of the project".⁶

While the existing regional networks continued their organizing activities, WIEGO began to reach out to home-based workers in other regions: Eastern Europe, Africa and Latin America. In Eastern Europe, led by the Association of Home-based Workers in Bulgaria, HomeNet Eastern Europe was formed in 2013, which later extended its reach to Central Asia to become HomeNet Eastern Europe and Central Asia (HNEE-CA) in 2018. In Latin America and Africa, identifying organizations of, or working with, home-based workers proved challenging. While some home-based workers were organized into collectives of various kinds, most were not organized as home-based workers. They were organized instead in self-help savings groups, women's groups, fair trade producer groups, artisan cooperatives or street vendor associations, among others. As Norma Sanchís from Argentina, who conducted a mapping exercise

5 WIEGO, "Winning Legal Rights for Thailand's Homeworkers", leaflet, available at www.wiego.org, last accessed 1 June 2020.

6 See www.wiego.org, last accessed 28 May 2020.

in Buenos Aires, commented, “It was very difficult to begin [...] because there were no people who identified as home-based workers. We could find people that could be identified as home-based workers but they had other names such as own account workers, independent workers”.⁷

However, with careful contact-building, networking and capacity-building, the basis was established for convening the first global conference of home-based workers. This conference, organized jointly by HNSA and WIEGO, was held in Delhi in February 2015 with home-based worker representatives from five regions of the world, together with supporting organizations. The conference adopted the “Delhi Declaration of Home-based Workers”, which documents the needs and demands of home-based workers. It also adopted a five-year action plan, which includes a vision for a global network of home-based workers as well as plans for building organizations from the grassroots up.⁸

Acting on this plan was the next major challenge. While the home-based workers coming from many different countries were surprised to find they had so much in common with one another, they also noted considerable differences in organizational development and approaches across the different regions. Much more work had to be done on the ground if they wanted to build global unity.

2 On the Ground and in the Regions

From 2012, WIEGO had taken responsibility for supporting organizing and network-building in Africa, Latin America and Eastern Europe.⁹ In these regions an important first step was reaching out and identifying organizations organizing or working with home-based workers in selected countries. Bringing them together in country and regional meetings to share experiences, build an identity as home-based workers and plan activities followed. In some countries, home-based workers formed working groups to steer things forward, supported by WIEGO, and all engaged in grassroots-organizing

7 Kendra Hughes, “Strengthening the Movement of Home-based Workers”, Case Study, WIEGO, 2016, p. 17, available at www.wiego.org, last accessed 30 May 2020.

8 “Delhi Declaration of Home-based Workers”, adopted at the Conference of Home-based Workers, New Delhi, India, February 2015, available at www.wiego.org, last accessed 30 May 2020.

9 For a detailed account of activities during the 2012–15 period, under the Funding Leadership Opportunities for Women (FLOW) project, see Hughes, “Strengthening the Movement of Home-based Workers”.

TABLE 14.1 Regional networks of home-based workers and members

Region	Regional organization or network	“Affiliates” and their membership
Africa	Africa Regional Platform: five countries	140 groups with 6,700 members
Eastern Europe and Central Asia	HomeNet Eastern Europe-Central Asia: thirteen countries	Thirteen organizations with 46,000 members
Latin America	COTRADO-ALAC: six countries	Six organizations with 3,400 members
South Asia	HomeNet South Asia: eight countries	60 organizations with 900,000 members
Southeast Asia	HomeNet South East Asia: six countries	Six country networks with 78,000 members

and capacity-building activities. As noted above, Eastern Europe established HomeNet Eastern Europe in 2013, but Latin America and Africa moved more slowly. In 2017, with the support of WIEGO, the Latin American organizations established an informal coordinating body with representatives from six countries, COTRADO-ALAC, while in Africa they established a Regional Platform, consolidated in 2019, with representatives from five countries. All these organizing processes are ongoing, with numerous challenges along the way.

Table 14.1 and the information that follows¹⁰ gives a snapshot of the regional organizations or networks, their affiliates, and approximate membership in the five different regions associated with the movement.

HNEE-CA, HNSA and HNSEA are all established regional organizations, while the nascent networks in Africa and Latin America are still informal. The newest of the regional networks to be established, HomeNet Eastern Europe and Central Asia, is a registered body with thirteen affiliates. HomeNet Eastern Europe held its first Congress in 2014 (prior to the addition of Central Asia). The affiliates are a mix of associations, producer companies, unions and

10 This information was collected by the author, and in particular draws on WIEGO, “Report and Minutes, HNI Working Group Meeting, 2–4 October 2019, Western Cape, South Africa”.

cooperatives. Most are made up of self-employed workers producing crafts and clothing, but some comprise subcontracted piece-rate workers linked to global brands of garments and shoe-making. Some are registered as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), but operate as democratic, membership-based organizations (MBOs). Most are small, except for the Bulgarian Association of Home-based Workers, which is also a part of the trade union UNITY. This Association was established in 2002 and has more than 40,000 members.

HomeNet South Asia is the largest of the established networks. Formed in 2000, registered in 2006 and formally launched in 2007, HNSA is a well-established regional organization with sixty affiliates in eight countries. It consists of MBOs including trade unions, cooperatives, worker-owned producer companies and networks, as well as NGOs with home-based worker members or beneficiaries. Members of affiliates make a range of products, including garments, food, crafts and jewellery, either as self-employed workers or as workers at the bottom end of domestic and global supply chains. HomeNet South East Asia, established in 1997 after the adoption of the Home Work Convention, is the oldest of the HomeNets. Its affiliates are six country networks, each of which is made up of a variety of MBOs such as national or local associations, small producer groups and cooperatives. Self-employed workers and those producing for global and domestic supply chains make a rich variety of products, from fishing nets in Thailand to rattan furniture in Indonesia.

WIEGO provides support for the two nascent regional networks. The Africa Regional Platform coordinates activities in East and South Africa and has representatives from five countries together with WIEGO. The approximately 140 grassroots groups involved are mainly small self-help groups, cooperatives, and women's or community-based groups. Most of these produce crafts and, especially in Kenya and Uganda, are linked to the fair trade movement. As yet, there are no national networks or organizations. However, the groups are forming area clusters and working towards forming national networks. In Latin America, COTRADO-ALAC (Coordinadora Regional de Organizaciones de Trabajadoras/res en Domicilio en América Latina y el Caribe) is an informal regional coordination body, formed in 2017 during a regional workshop convened by WIEGO. It is working towards establishing a more formal regional network and is developing its statutes or constitution. The six organizations from six different countries are a mix of unions of informal workers (single and multi-sector), cooperatives and networks, many producing garments.

As Table 14.1 and the information above demonstrate, organizations from and within different regions display different characteristics, and need a range of organizational strategies. This is not uncommon amongst workers in the

FIGURE 14.1 Discussing the home-based workers group in Tanzania called UWAKE at an Africa Regional Workshop with participants from five countries, organized with support from WIEGO

PHOTO: CHRIS BONNER

informal economy from different sectors,¹¹ but amongst home-based workers that WIEGO and home-based worker networks are working with, it is more pronounced. Employment arrangements (subcontracted or self-employed), products, culture, history and maturity, organizing traditions and ideologies, all play a part, as do the economic opportunities prevailing in their countries and their relationship to global supply chains. For example, in Latin America, the primary form of organization amongst home-based workers we work with is a union, with some unions being made up of cooperatives of home-based workers. This non-traditional union format requires an approach of both economic development and political organizing. The notion of the solidarity or popular economy is a strong feature, associated with a pronounced political consciousness. In East and South Africa, organizations in our constituency

11 See Françoise Carré, "Defining and Categorizing Organizations of Informal Workers in Developed and Developing Countries", WIEGO Organizing Brief, No 8, September 2013, available at www.wiego.org, last accessed 1 June 2020.

are more commonly small self-help groups, community-based organizations or cooperatives producing crafts, traditional garments, conference bags and other items for local and export markets. The focus so far has been on economic development and livelihoods, with organizing for collective recognition and rights now emerging as an important driver.

Being poor and invisible, lacking recognition as workers (by self and others) without legal or social protection, and being subjected as women to gender stereotyping and patriarchy means that home-based workers are often dependent on the support of NGOs, fair trade organizations and non worker-owned social enterprises (profit and non-profit) for access to markets, training and welfare activities. This leads to a variety of “hybrid” organizational forms. “‘Hybrids’ [are organizations] with some elements of MBOs and other parts more akin to non-governmental organizations (NGOs).”¹² We see this in South Asia, where large NGOs with a focus on identities such as being poor or a woman, work with home-based workers as a group of beneficiaries, and also support their organizing into groups or cooperatives. In Ethiopia, an NGO supports women to form and sustain Savings and Credit Cooperative Societies (SACCOS), with most of the women members being home-based workers.

Cutting through all this are common issues that make organizing in and across countries and regions both necessary and possible. Having regular work is perhaps the most important issue they all share, whether as self-employed workers or as workers on piece-rates at the bottom end of domestic or global supply chains. Having access to markets is critical for everyone, for without markets there is no work. Other crucial issues faced by all home-based workers are recognition and rights as workers, as well as legal and social protection. In all these cases, organizing into collectives, and from there into bigger networks or associations, can provide a vehicle for livelihood support and development (sharing knowledge, skills, resources and accessing markets) and for political mobilization (recognition and rights), through increasing their knowledge and power to bargain with firms or brands, with local and national governments or on international platforms (for example, the ILO).

3 Reviving HomeNet International

In Stockholm, Sweden, in May 2018, two days prior to the Conference on “Long-term Perspectives on Home-based Industrial Work”, representatives from

¹² Carré, “Defining and Categorizing Organizations”, p. 2.

Africa and Latin America, HNEE-CA, HNSA, HNSEA and WIEGO met to discuss the formation of a global network of home-based workers. This was the culmination of many years of prevarication as to if and how such a global network should be formed. The limited grassroots organizational bases in Africa and Latin America, and the ongoing challenge of building and sustaining democratic, accountable, membership-based organizations and networks in the established regions, had made it difficult to answer those questions. Renana Jhabvala, president of HNSA, explained, "There are two views: one is that everyone continues to organize in our place, as Latin America and Africa have not developed, perhaps it is better to wait. The other view is that if we form a global network we will get more visibility and help other organizations develop. This is the right time".

At the end of two days of intense discussions on the need, purpose and vision for a global network, the second view prevailed. The meeting unanimously agreed to forge ahead with mobilizing towards the founding of a home-based workers' international network in 2020, subject to confirmation by the affiliates. With a collective sigh of relief and excitement they set up a Working Group to lead the process, with a representative and alternate from each of the five regions, and with support from WIEGO. Violeta Zlateva, president of HNEE-CA, expressed a commonly shared sentiment when she said, "Now is the moment to move forward. Globalization into HomeNet International is a great idea". And Firoza Mehrotra from HNSA added, "We are all together in solidarity". Importantly, they came away with a draft purpose and vision for the network, and a commitment to a careful and participatory process of organization-building. Patricia Coñoman from Chile, a long-time trade unionist and political activist, and, as we later found out, a poet, penned a poem to celebrate the moment.

At the time of writing this, the Working Group had met regularly (mostly virtually) and developed a detailed plan of action towards a founding Congress; painstakingly developed a draft constitution; including agreement on the thorny issues of membership criteria and representation; set up a system for recruitment of affiliates; and agreed on unifying issues as a basis for the initial work of HomeNet International (the name decided upon). An important part of the process has been deepening the understanding of differences and similarities across regions, building shared perspectives and a sense of solidarity.

At the same time, work in the different regions and countries, with both established and nascent organizations, is continuing. Recognizing that there is no global without local, building the leadership capacities and increasing membership participation are high priorities. New communication tools are

being developed to effect global visibility, on the one hand, and on the other, to support information flow and decision-making at the grassroots.

4 Conclusion

As we know, work content and work arrangements are rapidly changing, and this is expected to accelerate following the COVID-19 pandemic. The home-based workers in this constituency, namely (mainly) poor working women in the informal economy, are in an even more precarious position than before. New struggles will be required to find and retain work, improve conditions and adapt to new demands; older or ongoing struggles will require to be intensified for recognition and rights. Organizing at local, national, regional and global levels, and building alliances, will become even more imperative.

5 Postscript

On 24th February 2021 HomeNet International became a reality. Recognizing that global solidarity and visibility were even more important during the COVID-19 pandemic, HBW representatives were determined to press ahead and form their global network. They decided to launch HNI virtually. Despite the many challenges posed by using such a platform, 80 delegates from 36 affiliates in 20 countries participated in the virtual congress. They were joined by over 200 HBWs from affiliates and emerging affiliates, with another 200 or more allies from trade unions, NGOs, funding organizations and many more. Over two days and five hours they adopted the HNI constitution, appointed a transitional leadership (International Working Committee) and an International Coordinator, and identified key activities for HNI. HNI is now focusing on building solidarity amongst affiliates and advocating for social protection for home-based workers together with other organizations of informal workers.