

## Homeworkers in South India's leather footwear industry



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*Hand stitching leather uppers*

Cover image: Homeworker and child in Ambur (HWW)

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## Homeworkers in the leather footwear industry

It is not unusual for the leather shoes you see in high street stores to be made by women working at home.

Homework is a standard part of the production chain for some types of leather footwear, mainly found in the hand or machine stitching of uppers. Homeworkers Worldwide has identified homeworkers stitching shoes for major brands and retailers in many different countries of the world. Supply chains may shift - for example from Portugal to Bulgaria, from Bulgaria to India - but the homeworkers in these different countries are all doing remarkably similar work.



*Stitching shoes in Bulgaria*

Homeworkers are mainly engaged in hand stitching the uppers of loafer or moccasin type shoes. These are a popular shape for men's shoes, but also come in women's and children's styles. The price range tends to be in the middle or upper bracket and sometimes 'hand sewn' is a selling point for the brands concerned. Where homeworkers are machine sewing a wider range of styles are involved.

Homeworkers' legal rights vary from country to country, but in practice they are usually working for low pay with no employment rights and no social protection. They only get paid when work is available, making them a cheap and hugely flexible workforce. In most countries intermediaries and subcontractors are involved in

distributing the work to homeworkers – making them all but invisible to the brands and retailers at the top of the supply chain.



*Handstitched moccasin style shoe*

### **The leather footwear industry in Tamil Nadu**

Many international brands and retailers source leather footwear from North and South India. Tamil Nadu in the south is home to a growing export industry for shoes and other leather goods.

In the North the leather industry is built upon a traditional artisanal structure of many small informal workshops – producing predominantly for the domestic market but also for export. In Tamil Nadu, however, the industry is based around large factories – which nonetheless outsource a large amount of work to informal workshops and homeworkers. There is a well-established industry in Ambur, while newer factories are to be found in Chennai, and nearby Free Trade Zones.

The leather footwear industry in South India is a major employer, particularly for women. It is estimated that women make up 80-90% of the workers in the industry, and given that homeworkers are unlikely to be included in those figures the proportion may be even higher. The homeworkers in this industry are not employed directly by the factories, but get their work from intermediaries, and are generally working informally.

Thousands of homeworkers are working on shoes for export. Most are married women. Many of them worked in the factories when they were single, and are working at home now they are married with children. They have a lifetime's experience in the sector but as homeworkers are paid low piece rates without any of the benefits of factory workers.



*Homeworkers stitching outside their home in Ambur*

### **Who Foots the Bill?**

Since 2006 Homeworkers Worldwide has been working with local partners in India, in order to research the situation of leather footwear homeworkers and support them in their efforts to improve their working conditions. Research has included field visits, surveys and interviews with homeworkers, and the collection of information on labels in order to identify which brands are being produced. The information gathered has fed into our ['Who Foots the Bill?'](#) campaign for decent work for leather footwear homeworkers around the world. We are currently working with partners to support organising efforts with homeworkers in Ambur.

### **Working conditions**

The homeworkers are paid a piece rate, per pair of shoes they assemble. Pay varies depending on the model, the intermediary and the company, but the going rate is between 5 and 9 rupees per pair.

The work is hand stitching the uppers, and assembling decorative components for the uppers and sometimes joining uppers to soles.

*One woman, Shanti, lives near Ambur and explained to us how she had worked in the leather footwear industry for 30 years. Shanti worked in a factory for 15 years, and later as a homemaker. Yet with all this experience, on the day we met her she had been stitching the uppers of men's shoes, for a major UK brand, for a payment of 6 rupees per pair (less than 10 pence) with absolutely no other benefits.*

Health and safety are major concerns. Women have to work long hours to meet deadlines and earn sufficient income. This means crouching over work in postures that cause problems for backs and joints. Eyes can be damaged due to the detailed stitching. The stitching itself, pushing and pulling the needle through holes in the leather, can cause strain to shoulders and deformity to fingers. There are also concerns about the chemicals used to process the leather, which can cause skin problems. These chemicals from the tanneries have also had a wider impact on the local environment, polluting the water and land so it is no longer fertile.



*Fingers can become damaged and misshapen with repeated stitching through leather.*

None of the homeworkers have any of the rights or benefits they would receive if they worked in the factory.

*One young woman, working as a homemaker on the outskirts of Chennai told us, 'Homeworkers should get the same benefits as factory workers, like provident fund (pension), insurance and being made permanent after a number of years.'*

### **What is needed?**

Homeworkers in the leather footwear industry experience low pay, a lack of social protection (such as a health cover and pension) and health problems related to the work they do. Homeworkers in leather footwear production areas are far from invisible – many women can be seen sitting working outside their houses very close to the big factories that provide the work. However, the chains of intermediaries and subcontractors that bring them work mean they are often not visible to the retailers and big brands whose products they are making.

Two areas of action are required to improve the homeworkers' conditions.

- Organising action- Homeworkers need support to organise, to come together to set their priorities and raise their voices. Until homeworkers are organised at the grass roots, it is impossible to accurately represent their views and priorities. Organising gives homeworkers strength and will enable them to become visible further up the production chain, taking their demands to the brands and retailers who profit from the shoes they make. We are seeking funding for grass roots work in Tamil Nadu to make this happen.
- Company action - Companies need to recognize and take responsibility for the homeworkers in their supply chains. By collaborating they could make a huge difference to the women who make their shoes. For example, by working together companies could raise the 'going rate' for the stitching of a pair of shoes, creating an industry norm that moves from poverty pay towards a living wage. By working together with the factories, the brands could also establish a form of social protection for homeworkers, including employer contributions, which would apply irrespective of which brands they were working on.



*Homeworkers sewing together in Chennai*



**Background resources:**

[Who Fools the Bill Briefing Paper](#), HWW, 2008

A Case Study of the Footwear Industry in India, Sandip Sarkar

[CEC Working Paper, Leather Footwear Industry in India](#) (2008)

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