

HOMEBASED WORKERS In Thailand



ISSUES OF HBWS

Invisibility

Lack of Income Opportunities

Access to Market

Unsafe housing, workplace & Environment

Access to Infrastructure & Utilities

Health, Education & Social Protection

Limited economic resources

Floods in Bangkok greatly affected HBWs in Thailand



Homenet Thailand initiated a campaign to help flood victims

TOWARDS VISIBILITY, VOICE and STRONGER ORGANIZATION of HBWs

Homebased workers in the Thai cities of Bangkok, Khon Kaen, and Chiang Rai, are generally poor, receiving low wages or income that are hardly enough to sustain their family and household expenditures. They live in slum communities scattered in urban and suburban areas, making it difficult for them to organize effectively, and participate in local or community development. They are virtually invisible and unrecognized; their economic contributions to the urban and national economy are hardly valued.

What are the working and living conditions of these homebased workers? What do they need? How can they be better organized to be better heard and supported by government authorities, especially at local level?

To answer these questions, Homenet Thailand, in cooperation with its regional networks – Northeastern Women's Network and Northern Homenet – carried out a survey complemented by in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with HBWs in the three cities mentioned.

three categories; **own account workers**, or those who produce their goods, using their own capital and tools, and sell to the market; **homeworkers**, who are paid to produce goods or provide services to others; and a combination of the two.

The HBW groups in Bangkok who participated in the study are engaged in the production of crafts from carabao horns, crispy rolls, embroidered *hijab* (head scarf) for Muslim women, organza embroidery, garments, and patched leather bags.

In Khon Kaen, they are into producing semi-dried fish, brooms from coconut palm ribs, *salapao* or Chinese stuffed bun and steamed dumpling, pork sausages, *khanom dokchok* (sweet fried snacks made from rice and kidney flour), sweet crispy rice, woven cotton and plastic baskets, fishnets and artificial flowers. Some are also into garbage recycling.

Production groups in Chiang Rai are mostly hill-tribe inhabitants who have migrated to municipal areas. They are engaged in traditional weaving, sewing Buddhist Monks robes, pearly bead embroidery and

crocheting, food processing, and production of mulberry paper and tea pillows. The youth, disabled and elderly are employed by some of these groups. Government authorities have encouraged organizing such groups to produce high-quality products based on indigenous knowledge and local wisdom.

In Bangkok and Chiang Rai which are tourist destinations, most of the HBW groups are engaged in textiles production more than any other kind of production. In Khon Kaen, HBW production focused more on food.



The HBWs are of

PRIORITY ISSUES OF HOMEBASED WORKERS

Low and Variable Income

HBWs living in the central and inner city areas have higher incomes ranging from 150- 300 baht a day because they have greater access to work, market and transport. HBWs living away from the city centers do not have this advantage and are forced to resort to homeworking at lower levels of the production chain. Most of the groups earning the lowest average daily income of 50-100 baht live in suburban areas. Low wages and irregular orders force HBWs to labor for as long as 12 hours a day when productive work is available, this on top of their domestic chores and other forms of care work.

Because they are not effectively organized, HBWs lack the bargaining power to negotiate for higher wages, in the case of homeworkers, and for greater access to capital and other productive resources, in the case of own-account workers.

Employment Insecurity

Uncertain employment threatens most HBW groups, since they are dependent entirely on employers and orders. Sometimes, groups have to stop production because their previously delivered goods have not been paid. The HBWs in Bangkok, particularly those in textile production, saw their work continue to diminish because the manufacturers have relocated to other countries.

Those engaged in sewing and embroidery have experienced decreasing job orders due to competition from imported products. The introduction of new technology, such as computerized sewing machines, have made sewers using manual sewing machines redundant.

Employers now prefer computerized embroidery to hand embroidery because the former can be produced more quickly and more even quality.

Employment insecurity can also be caused by the unavailability of raw materials, as illustrated by the case of the buffalo horn producers who sometimes could not work a whole month due to this problem. Even if raw materials are available, HBW groups may not have the capital to buy them.

The seasonality of the market is also an important factor. Buddhist robes, for example, can only have high sales during religious festivals, with negative

effects on the sustainability of the producers' revolving funds. Sometimes, as in the case of tea pillows, the market can be saturated by the same type of product, resulting in decreasing sales and profits.

Occupational Safety and Health and Inadequate Social Protection

Aside from physical pain, stiffness or numbness (particularly in the legs, waist, and back), dizziness, urinary and posture problems associated with long hours of standing or sitting, HBWs also run against many other occupational safety and health (OSH) problems and the absence of a clear welfare benefit system. Some experience hand injuries due to cutting by plastic straps and piercing by nails and needles. Many HBW groups report the problems of eye strain, sore eyes, and blurred vision especially among older workers. Their workplaces have poor lighting conditions, and are often congested, hot, and stuffy, especially in the inner city areas. Exposure to dust and other irritants, such as the pungent smell of kerosene, results in allergies and respiratory diseases. Those engaged in food processing suffer from skin rashes caused by splashes of hot oil while cooking.

HBW groups lack knowledge about occupational health and safety hazards which can easily be provided by government. For example, the group producing tea pillows do not wear masks while working, because they do not know that they can be harmed by the smell of factory-processed tea leaves that they believed were chemical-free.

HBWs get free medical treatment from government under the Thai universal

health care system. There are social security schemes and a Homeworkers Fund. The social security scheme with co-payment by government just started and it is only a government policy, not a law. Therefore, HBWs still do not trust that it can be supported for the long term by government. As to the Homeworkers Fund, very few groups of HBWs can have access to this fund.

Uneven and Discontinuous Government Support

Bangkok-based urban HBWs have received very little support from government, except for the Hijab Sewing and

Embroidery Group that was given ten sewing machines by the city authorities. Government support targets more the own account workers, specifically in Chaing Rai and Khon Kaen, where homeworkers' groups did not receive any such support. In Chiang Rai, government provided support in the form of product development and start-up funding to all the nine groups studied. However, no consistent government support for market access was provided, which meant that all groups had to do their own marketing with occasional use of sale space in government-sponsored trade fairs and community product sales centers.

Housing, Transport and Infrastructure Problems

Housing, transport and access to market and work are available to those in inner and central city areas. However, their living conditions are congested and sometimes they fear eviction because their houses are on rented private lands. The landowner may want to use the land for some other purpose, such as building an apartment block. Those living in rented houses pay higher charges for electricity and water imposed at flat rates by the house owners.

HBWs in Bangkok suffer more from housing and transport problems than those in Khon Kaen or Chiang Rai because most of them are poor migrants from rural areas who built their homes on government or private land. When Bangkok became increasingly urbanized and the price of land began to rise, they were evacuated to the suburbs where the government provided them with low-priced land that they could pay for through long-term instalments. Because these sites are far from the city center, relocated HBWs experience inconvenience, high transportation costs, and difficulty in getting access to work. Flooding, resulting from the authorities releasing flood waters from Bangkok to suburban areas, also cause difficulties for those living there and make it harder for them to get work. One case in point was the one-meter high flood which lasted for one month at a particular housing estate in October 2008.

Uncertain employment threatens most HBW groups, since they are dependent entirely on employers and orders.

THE NEED for MEMBERSHIP-BASED ORGANIZING

Many HBWs covered by the study remain scattered and unorganized. Generally, own-account workers are more organized than homeworkers, but the former's groups are often loosely formed, unstable, and with no clear vision, systematic management, and leadership accountability. Although savings groups were set up in some areas, they were not well-established and their activities were not sustainable.

The HBW groups' decisions mostly depended on their chairpersons only, and their joint activities were minimal and discontinuous. These groups' capacity to form and manage membership-based organizations (MBO) should be developed. An MBO is an organization whose members are in-

dividuals who pay their dues and actively engage in shaping its objectives, rules, structure and direction. These members work with each other according to clear and democratic rules and regulations, taking into account equitable and comprehensive distribution of knowledge, information, and resources to all members. An MBO also creates economic and welfare systems beneficial to all members, who must have a sense of ownership, confidence in the organization and its leadership, and belief in its future success and progress.

Supporting group organization and management among the scattered and organized HBWs is a necessary first step. Building the HBW groups' capacities to become MBOs should



Campaigns for homeworkers' welfare in the areas of occupational health and safety as well as wages and social security.

follow in order to pave the way for their greater visibility and voice in policy and program advocacy, both at local and national levels.

Homeworkers and the Homeworkers Bill in Thailand



Nang has been a fishnet maker from Khon Kaen for more than ten years.



Artificial flower maker



More than ten years of dedicated work by the Informal Workers Network and the Foundation for Labour and Employment Promotion with the support of trade unions and other partners resulted in the approval of the **Homeworkers Protection Act** on 29 September 2010.

Salient points of the Homeworkers Bill are as follows:

1. Providing protection to subcontracted homeworkers of manufacturing industries to produce and assemble products outside the employers' work premises;
2. Providing the hombased worker a copy of the written contract, including terms and conditions and payment rates; prohibiting the employer to deduct payments unless provided by law and this should not be more than 10%;
3. Providing safe and favorable working conditions and OSH awareness;
4. Gender equality at work.

It is clear that the **Homeworkers Protection Act** aims at reducing the inequality faced by the homeworkers and providing them the basic rights and justice that formal workers enjoy.



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**EMPOWERING HOMEBASED
WORKERS**

We are on the web
<http://www.homenetseasia.org/thailand>

Products of HBWs



RECOMMENDATIONS TO LOCAL GOVERNMENT UNITS (LGUS)

Based on the study which provided rich information on what is already being done mainly by local authorities for HBWs as well as what HBW groups suggest can still be done, Homenet Thailand suggests the following recommendations:

Access to Productive Resources

- Facilitate HBWs' access to new sources of work which pays fair wages;
- Generate other occupations in the light of decreasing work opportunities and give more employment alternatives;
- Enable HBWs to access material support in the form of loans, grants, revolving funds for production, tools, machines, and raw materials;
- Provide greater market access to their products through, for example, buyer coordination, free market space, OTOP trade fairs, and provincial product festivals organized by government agencies;
- Organize occupational skills training as well as study and exchange trips so that HBW groups can learn from each other in terms of livelihood ideas as well as production and marketing techniques;

Advancing Social and Legal Protection

- Provide knowledge to, and raise awareness of occupational health and safety among HBWs so that they can prevent health risks and protect their personal health, especially in highly vulnerable occupations such as buffalo horn carving, fish-net making, and crispy roll production;
- Support mutual aid and strengthen management of savings activities for basic welfare benefits;
- Provide HBWs knowledge about workers' rights and legal protection of their rights so that they can use existing laws and policies to improve their quality of life

Improving Housing and Infrastructure

- Support efforts to solve housing and infrastructure problems by coordinating with the Collective Housing Program and other organizations which can help build affordable houses in HBW communities.

