

Doing factory work at home

20



Some women do factory work at home because they or their husbands do not want them to leave home, or so they can care for their families while still earning money. Some workers bring work home for extra pay. Others are forced to work at home because factory owners cut costs or close the factories.

Workers work more hours and face different dangers at home than in the factory. Homeworkers are often paid less and absorb many of the costs of production that should be the boss's responsibility, such as:

- fans and protective equipment (if they have them at all)
- light and electricity
- tables, chairs, and work furniture
- waste disposal
- storage of parts, supplies, and finished goods
- transporting the work between the home and factory

Homeworkers are usually paid less than factory workers, even after taking into account that they may not pay for childcare, meals away from the home, daily transportation to the factory, or other things factory workers must spend money on.

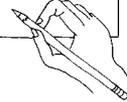
How to

Calculate your real pay

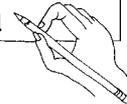
To find out how much you really earn after paying all your costs of doing the work:

- **Multiply** the pay per piece by the number of pieces you made. Do this for different pieces, if they are paid differently.
- **Subtract** the cost of materials, how much you pay family or neighbors who help you, and costs for electricity, water, and other things used while working. If you do not get your bills every month, make an estimate from previous months. (**Subtract** corrections you have to make if your boss does not pay for them.)
- **Calculate and compare** this amount every month or every few months to see how much your pay changes. When you know how much you are really paid, you can make a better argument that your boss pay more of the production costs and pay you more money.

OCTOBER ORDER
60 hoods at 20 cents
each
 $60 \times 0.20 = \$12$



\$12 pay, minus
- \$2.00 for materials
- \$1.50 to Mary for helping
- \$1.00 for electricity
- \$0.50 for water
= \$7.00 total



January \$8.50
March \$7.50
June \$7.50
October \$7.00



You are paying less for this batch than the last one! This is not fair!

If your husband earned more, you wouldn't need this extra money! Don't blame me!



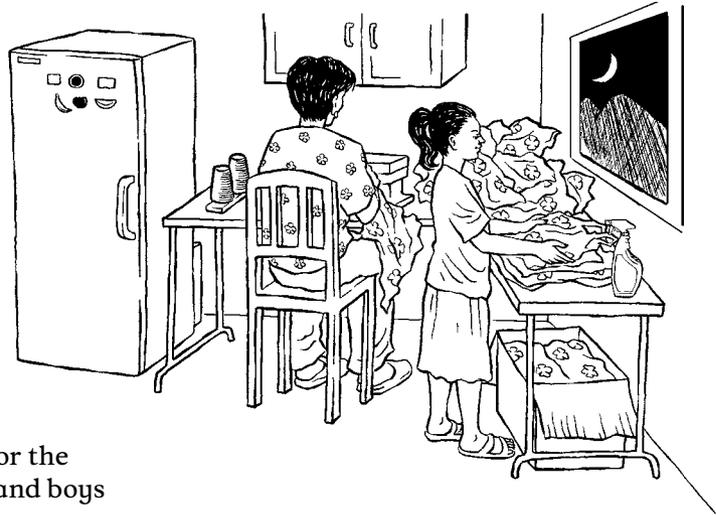
Working for "extra money" or to "make a living"?

Homeworkers work more hours

Women who work at home do more than just factory work. They cook, take care of children or family members, buy or collect food, water and fuel, clean, and do other tasks. Doing factory work while caring for their homes and families means women work longer hours, spread out over a longer period in the day. They usually work more hours than they would at a factory.

No matter where you do the work, too much work always leads to more injuries, health problems, stress-related illnesses, poor nutrition, and other problems.

To reduce the impact of working double on women's health, find ways for the whole family, especially men, to take part in caring for the home and family. Caring for the home is a set of skills men and boys can learn.



The whole family put to work

When work is moved into the home, the whole family is affected. One person may bring the work home, but often the whole family does the work, including the children, because every piece made means more money is earned. Sometimes the whole family must help in order to meet a production quota that is impossible for one worker to meet alone. Work may go late into the night, with no extra pay for the long hours worked by the family.



*I try to give my children money to help me.
I want them to know that work should be
paid fairly, but when my pay is low,
I cannot give them anything!*

Work dangers are worse at home

Although homework is similar to work in a factory, working at home is more dangerous. Homes do not have enough space to create safe workstations or to store materials and chemicals safely. They often lack the lighting, ventilation, and safe electrical wiring needed for work to be safe. And if there is a health or safety problem, it can affect everyone in the family.

Fires

Materials near kitchen fires or stoves, outlets, or other sources of heat (lamps, heaters, or cigarettes) can burn. Homes often catch fire more easily than factories, and even a small fire can spread quickly. Prevent fires in your home:

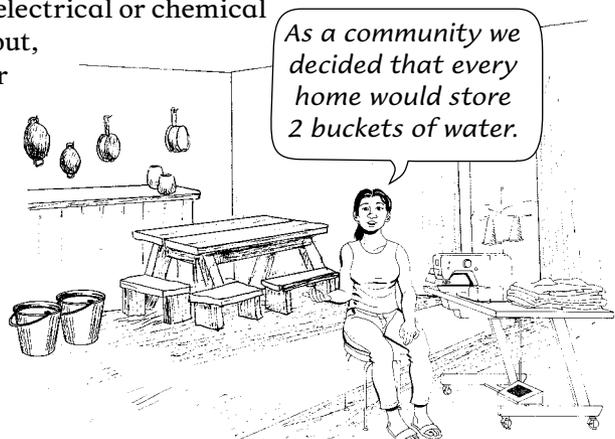
- Keep materials away from heat, flames, or electricity sources.
- Keep electrical wires dry.
- Unplug machines when you are not using them.
- Avoid overloading wires by not using many machines and appliances at the same time.
- Keep chemical containers tightly closed when not in use and make sure there is good ventilation to get rid of fumes.
- Do not smoke in the home or near materials that can burn quickly.

If a fire does start in your home, be prepared to put it out:

Eliminate one of the things fire needs to burn. Fires need material and air (oxygen) to burn. Small fires can be smothered by removing one of those elements. For example, if a fire starts in a cooking pot, covering it with a lid will stop it because it will not have air.

Extinguish fires with dirt, sand, or water from a container that you keep by your work area in case of fire. For electrical or chemical fires, use sand or dirt to put them out, not water. For cloth fires, use water or a fire extinguisher (learn how to make one on page 216).

Protect yourself. If you try to put out a fire, always stay between the fire and the door so you can leave if you must. Cover your nose and mouth with a cloth or mask to keep some of the smoke out of your lungs.



Prepare your family and community about what to do in case of fire:

Practice escaping from the house with your family, discuss how to get help, and where to meet afterwards.

Write down the phone numbers of fire stations in your community and make sure people have these numbers.

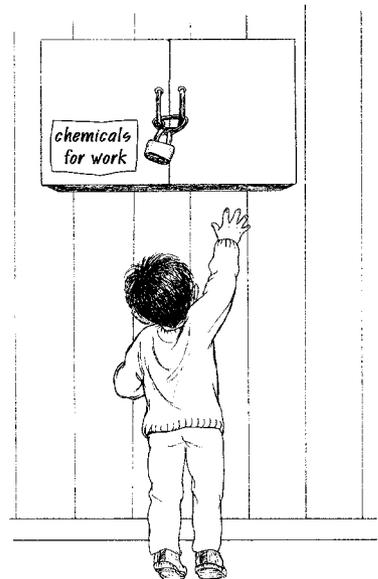
Decide on a community alarm (like banging on a steel pipe) to let others know there is a fire, to get out, and to get help. Choose fire spotters to sound the alarm.

Work together to stop a fire. Make sure you know where to find water, sand, or other materials to stop the fire, and which to use on different types of fires.

Chemicals

Chemicals used at home may get in your food, water, and air. Commonly used cleaners (solvents) and glues can cause both short- and long-term health problems, including dizziness, breathing problems, skin and eye irritation, cancer, and even death. See chapter 8: Chemicals, and Appendix B: Common chemicals and materials, to find information about the chemicals you are working with. If you find no information, treat them as if they are dangerous.

- Limit contact with the chemical. Use personal protective equipment (see chapter 18) to keep it off your skin and out of your eyes.
- Wash your hands and work areas, and afterwards do not use those cleaning cloths or water for anything else.
- Do not use household containers to store chemicals. If you do, remove all labels and write the chemical name on the container. Label all containers with words like “DANGER” and “DO NOT TOUCH” to remind yourself and your family that it is dangerous.
- Never use a container that held a chemical for another purpose. Even if you wash it really well, the container can still have chemicals.
- Keep chemical containers covered and inside shallow containers to catch spills and leaks.
- Store chemicals away from children’s reach.
- Store chemicals in a locked cabinet or outside shed.
- Do not smoke, eat, drink, or cook near chemicals.



Dust

Small threads and dust from garments can cause difficulty breathing (see page 97), allergies, coughing, and skin rashes (see page 158). Sometimes dust is too small to be seen. Protect yourself with good ventilation (see chapter 17) and by using a face mask to cover your mouth and nose. See pages 266 to 270 to learn about face masks and how to make one.

Dust buildup on exposed wires can catch fire. Keep electrical boxes closed.

Strain and overuse

To reduce injury and pain from doing the same movements many times:

- Place tools and materials you need close by your workspace. Reaching repeatedly for them can hurt your body.
- Support your wrists, elbows, back, legs, and feet while you work. If a part of your body hurts while working or after, try a different position.
- Take breaks. Look away from your work to let your eyes rest, and move and stretch your body.
- Get a comfortable chair with back support.

For more on strain and overuse problems, see chapter 7: Ergonomics.

Noise

The constant sound of a machine, especially if it is loud, can harm your hearing. See chapter 13 to learn more about noise and how to make earplugs.

Stress

It is normal to feel stressed, anxious, or sad when you are overtired and overwhelmed from pressure at work and at home. Feeling stress is not only uncomfortable, but over time it can lead to high blood pressure, headaches, weakened immune system, and muscle tension. You can reduce the harm from stress to your body and mind (see pages 403 to 404).



My contractor wants the order finished, my husband wants dinner, my mother has to go to the clinic, and the children need attention! But at least no supervisor tells me what to do!

With so many demands on your time, when do you take care of your needs?

Find support with other homeworkers

Doing factory work at home can be very isolating, and competition for work can be intense. Bosses encourage this competition, because it keeps costs low.

Invite other homeworkers in your community to talk about common problems, learn about each other's successes and failures, and find ways of working together for better conditions. Some homeworkers share space, buy supplies in bulk so they are cheaper, and share childcare responsibilities. Working as a group also lets you take bigger orders, bargain for better pay, or even become your own boss.

Our homeworkers' group

When I started sewing at home I didn't know how many women worked at home in my community. So I went around and spoke to most of the women who did factory work at home in my neighborhood. At first they didn't want to talk, but it was easy to share with someone who knew the work. Soon we would meet regularly to talk about our children and home life, as well as work.

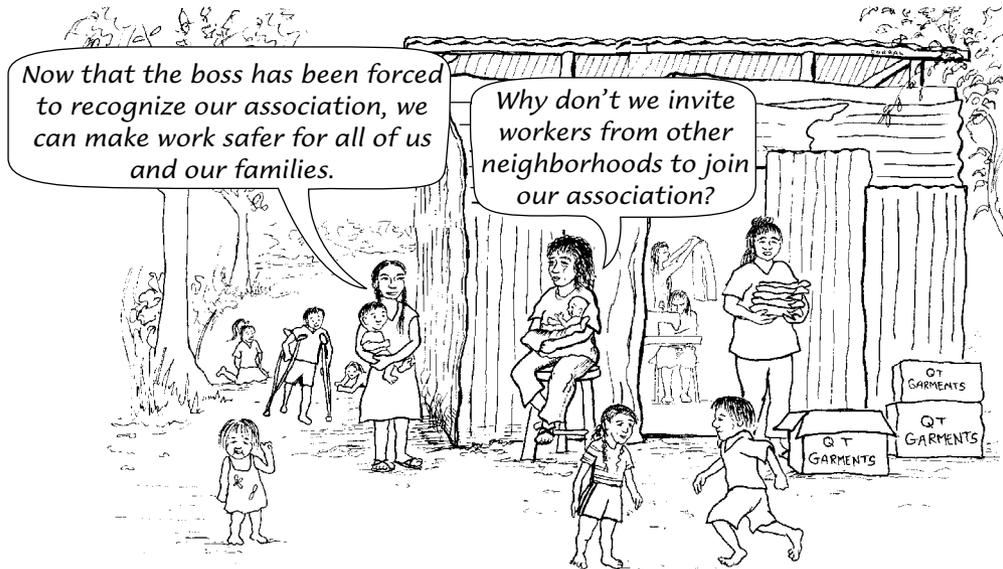
After a chemical cleaner caught fire in the home of one of the women, we talked about how to prevent fires and what to do when fires happen. One woman explained that she had taught her children how to escape in case of fire. I learned a lot and felt much happier after the meetings.

Five of us decided to form a workshop together, and we work in my house. One of us takes care of the children while the rest sew. We share the profits equally, so we all get paid for our work sewing or caring for the children. When there is a lot of work, some of us stay up all night sewing together. The work is still very hard, but we now have some support.

Now that my husband has a large truck, we are going to see if we can get larger orders directly from the factory owner, instead of the middleman. If we do, we can earn more money and be able to negotiate directly with the owner about pay, supplies, and tools, such as scissors. My hope is to organize more homeworkers in our community, so we can support each other and improve our conditions.

Homeworkers deserve recognition as workers

When homeworkers are recognized as workers, they can be covered by local and national laws and have access to social protection programs such as health insurance, maternity protection, and disability, injury, and unemployment compensation.



The rights of homeworkers



The ILO Home Work Convention (No. 177) says homeworkers should be protected by the same national laws on health, safety, and labor rights that protect factory workers. Homeworkers should be:

- allowed to form or join organizations of their own choosing.
- protected in the field of occupational safety and health.
- protected against child labor.
- protected against discrimination.
- provided access to training.
- offered maternity protection.
- offered social security protection.

The roles of the UN, ILO, and other international organizations that promote workers' rights are explained in Appendix A.

Unions help homeworkers win rights

In the 1980s, many Australian garment companies started to hire homeworkers instead of factory workers. The Textile, Clothing and Footwear Union of Australia, which protected the rights of garment workers, realized that even though the homeworkers did the same jobs as factory workers, they often were paid less. They were also not covered by labor laws, which meant that the employers got away with not fixing bad working conditions. So the union tried to recruit and organize homeworkers. But many were too scared to make a complaint against their bosses. They did not want to lose their jobs. They thought nobody would believe them or support them because they did not have anything in writing and were immigrants who did not speak English.

The union worked with homeworkers and community partners to initiate the FairWear campaign. This national and international campaign brought together many community organizations to support home-based workers' rights. Women's groups, churches, and community organizations joined with the union in calling for companies to respect homeworkers' rights. They invited people from the radio and newspapers to the events and demonstrations they held outside the companies' stores. The media attention showed consumers which companies were making their clothing but not paying fair wages. With the support of consumers, the union forced the companies to sign an agreement to make sure homeworkers were protected by labor laws and received fair wages. Garment homeworkers are now protected by the Textile, Clothing and Footwear Union of Australia.

