

## Cover Story

**Decent work environment for informal workers: an emerging need****Kumudu Weerakoon**

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*Cover Photo* - This issue's cover features home-based worker of different occupational category in Sri Lanka and the logo of the Sustainable Development Goal 8 – Decent Work and Sustainable Economic Growth.

*Photo credit* - F.R.Althaf Hasan & H.V.H. Maduranga, Trainee Public Health Inspectors, Public Health Training College, Galle

The ‘value supply chain’ concept encompasses the entire journey of a product or service, from conception to end-user, involving all stakeholders. As discussed in industrial and labour economics, this concept has gained prominence in the context of the fourth industrial revolution, leading to a shift from domestic to global supply chain focus by policymakers. This shift recognizes the interconnectivity of economies, the globalization of production and the critical role of international trade and investment (1).

Home-based work is a prevalent phenomenon within global supply chains, involving individuals known as homeworkers who carry out various tasks or activities from their residences (1-4). These workers establish connections with global supply chains either through subcontractors or directly with micro, small and medium enterprises (1).

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there has been a rise in informal employment globally, accompanied by a growing presence of women in paid employment, with many balancing work and family duties. A substantial portion of the informal workforce in manufacturing, services and agriculture consists of home-based workers. These individuals, often with limited education, engage in labour-intensive and low-productivity occupations, either as self-employed individuals or subcontracted homeworkers (4). Representing a significant subset of informal workers, home-based workers face distinct challenges such as economic vulnerability, limited legal protections, and gender inequalities (1-4).



Internationally, the rights of home-based workers are recognized, particularly through Home Work Convention No. 177 dated 4 June 1996, of the International Labour Organization (ILO), which aims to ensure equality of treatment for homeworkers compared to other wage earners. It covers various aspects, including the right to establish or join organizations, protection against discrimination, occupational safety and health, remuneration, social security, training access, minimum age requirements and maternity protection (5).

In the context of Sri Lanka, the absence of specific institutions for homeworkers poses challenges in enforcing these rights. While the government has taken steps to facilitate informal sector workers, such as introducing pension schemes for self-employed individuals (Farmers' Pension and Social Security Act in 1987 and Fishermen's Pension and Social Security Act in 1990), the voluntary nature of these schemes may limit their effectiveness (6). The Termination of Employment of Workman Act (TEWA) provides legal protection to workers, but its applicability is constrained. The protection against termination is extended only to employees who have worked in firms with 15 or more workers for more than 180 days in a 12-month period, leaving homeworkers outside the scope of this legal safeguard (7). The challenges arise from the often disguised or hidden nature of employment relationships for homeworkers, making it difficult for existing laws to adequately cover and protect them (1). Efforts to address these gaps in protection for homeworkers may require the development of specific legal frameworks or amendments to existing laws. Additionally, raising awareness, promoting dialogue with stakeholders and involving informal worker organizations can contribute to a more comprehensive approach to ensuring the rights and wellbeing of homeworkers in Sri Lanka (1-3).

The alignment of policymaking with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is crucial for ensuring that economic development, especially within the context of globalized economies and home-based work, is inclusive and sustainable (8).

- ***Decent Work and Economic Growth (SDG 8)***

Policymakers should prioritize the creation of decent work opportunities, ensure fair wages, job security and safe working condition for home-based workers

Support initiatives that promote entrepreneurship, skills development and access to financial resources within global supply chains

- ***Gender Equality (SDG 5)***

Recognize and address the gender dynamics within home-based work, with a focus on empowering women workers and ensuring equal opportunities, fair pay and protection against discrimination  
Implement policies that enhance women's access to education, training and resources, allowing them to participate fully in the global economy

- ***Reduced Inequalities (SDG 10)***

Mitigate income inequalities by ensuring that home-based workers receive fair compensation and are not subjected to exploitative practices

Implement policies that promote social protection, access to healthcare and other essential services for vulnerable workers, addressing disparities within and across global supply chains

- ***Partnerships for the Goals (SDG 17)***

Foster collaboration between governments, businesses, civil society, and international organizations to develop and implement policies that prioritize inclusive and sustainable development

Facilitate multi-stakeholder partnerships that address the challenges faced by home-based workers and own account workers in global supply chains

- ***Quality Education (SDG 4) and Decent Work (SDG 8)***

Enhance educational opportunities for workers, ensuring they have the skills needed to adapt to technological changes and contribute meaningfully to global supply chains

Promote lifelong learning and training programs that empower workers to thrive in an evolving and technologically advanced work environment

- ***Affordable and Clean Energy (SDG 7) and Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure (SDG 9)***

Encourage the adoption of clean and sustainable energy sources within production processes, reducing the carbon footprint of global supply chains

Support innovation in technology and infrastructure that enhances the efficiency and sustainability of value chains

- ***Social Protection (SDG 1 and 10)***

Implement social protection policies that cover home-based workers and own account workers, ensuring access to healthcare, unemployment benefits and other safety nets

Consider innovative financing mechanisms to fund social protection programs and alleviate the economic vulnerability of workers in global supply chains (9)

Hence, policymakers must integrate the principles of sustainable development into their strategies, ensuring that economic growth is not pursued at the expense of social and environmental well-being (1, 9). By aligning their efforts with the SDGs, policymakers can contribute to the creation of an inclusive, fair, and sustainable globalized economy, where the benefits of development are shared equitably among all stakeholders.

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