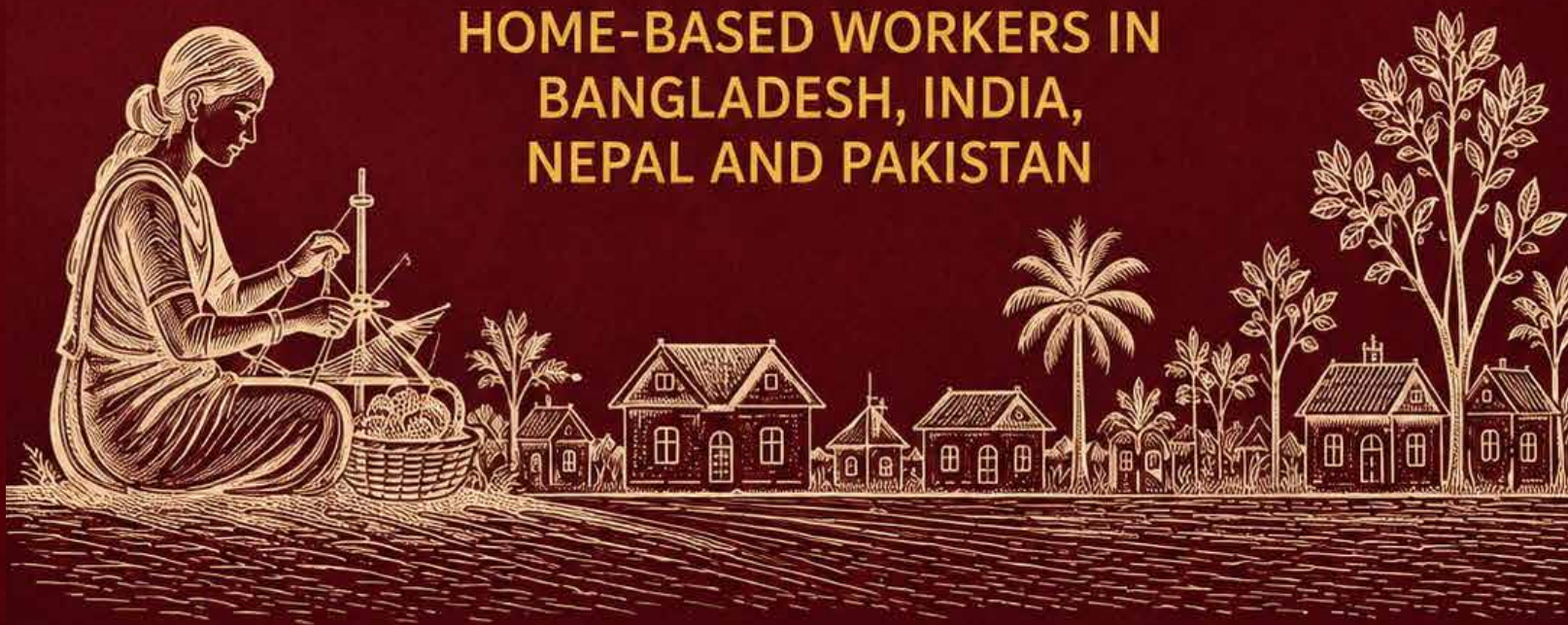




KEY FACTS

HOME-BASED WORKERS IN
BANGLADESH, INDIA,
NEPAL AND PAKISTAN



2026



Women in Informal Employment:
Globalizing and Organizing



Network of Home-Based Workers in South Asia

This document has been prepared by Firoza Mehrotra of HNSA and Shalini Sinha of WIEGO.

Designed by Sristi Joshi Malla from HNSA.

The data in this document has been compiled from WIEGO Statistical Briefs Nos. 23, 24, 25, 26, 28 and Tables on employment, informal employment, and groups of informal workers based on the India Periodic Labour Force Survey, 2019-2020 to 2022-23, available [here](#). The cited data are for different years, for different countries of the region -the Labour Force Survey of 2016-17 for Bangladesh; the Labour Force Survey of 2017-18 for Nepal and the Labour Force Survey of 2017-18 for Pakistan. For India data has been drawn wherever available from Periodic Labour Force Surveys of 2017-18, 2019-20, and 2020-23.

INTRODUCTION

Home-based workers are among the most isolated and invisible categories of informal workers as they work from their own homes or from structures or grounds adjoining their homes. Despite home-based work constituting a substantial part of a country's total employment—especially for women—these workers remain marginalized and are often not recognized as such. Recognizing and counting home-based workers and their working arrangements is essential to making them visible and ensuring their inclusion in government policies, plans, and programs.

At the request of HomeNet South Asia (HNSA), WIEGO examined national labour force surveys and provided technical guidance on producing statistics on home-based workers that HNSA needed in their work. WIEGO Statistical Briefs were also developed for four South Asian countries: Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Pakistan.

This document presents a brief statistical profile of home-based workers in South Asia, drawing on country Statistical Briefs and data compiled by WIEGO. It examines twelve key questions regarding home-based workers in Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Pakistan and concludes with key policy recommendations.

Actual experiences on the ground show that there is gross under-representation of the actual numbers of home-based workers, especially women, in official statistics. There are several reasons for this invisibility. Many countries do not include questions on “place of work” in labour force surveys, a key indicator for identifying home-based workers. Enumerators are often not trained to recognize and count home-based workers as “workers,” or they and the respondents often confuse home-based work and paid domestic work. In addition, home-based workers themselves do not perceive or report themselves as workers, which leads to them being classified as unpaid domestic labour.



SECTION I

HOME-BASED WORKERS

1. Who are home-based workers?

Home-based workers provide goods and services for the market from their own homes or in a structure or grounds attached to their home. Home-based work includes a wide range of activities, ranging from manufacturing to professional occupations in the services sector to agricultural work that takes place in or near the home. Home-based work in agriculture is an often overlooked sector of home-based work, and yet it is especially important in South Asia. It consists mainly of livestock rearing and, to a lesser extent, activities that support crop production or post-harvest processes.

Home-based workers may be either self-employed own-account workers or sub-contracted piece-rate workers. The latter are referred to as home-workers, and they are located both in rural and urban areas.



2. How many home-based workers are there?

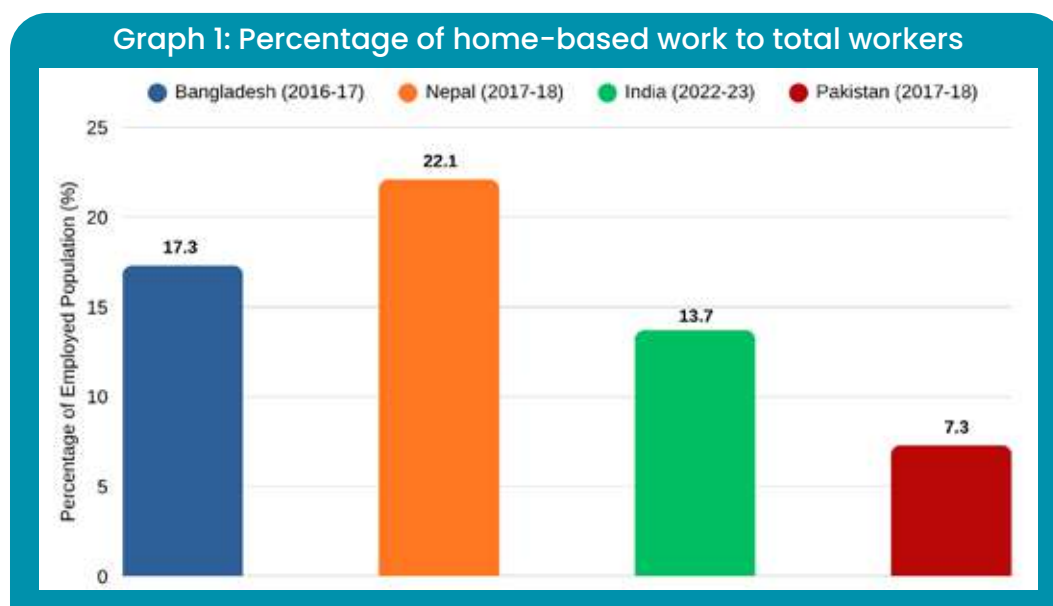
- In 2016–17, there were 10.56 million home-based workers in Bangladesh.
- In 2022–23, there were 73.93 million home-based workers in India.
- In 2017–18, there were 1.56 million home-based workers in Nepal.
- In 2017–18, there were 4.38 million home-based workers in Pakistan.

Based on available data in Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan, albeit for different years, during the period 2016–2023, it can roughly be estimated, that there were over 90.4 million home-based workers in these 4 countries of South Asia.

3. What percentage of total employment is home-based work?

- Home-based workers represented 17.3 per cent of the total workers in Bangladesh in 2016–17.
- Home-based workers represented 22.1 per cent of the total workers in Nepal, in 2017–18.
- Home-based workers represented 13.7 per cent of the total workers in India, in 2022–23.
- Home-based workers represented 7.3 per cent of the total workers in Pakistan, in 2017–18.

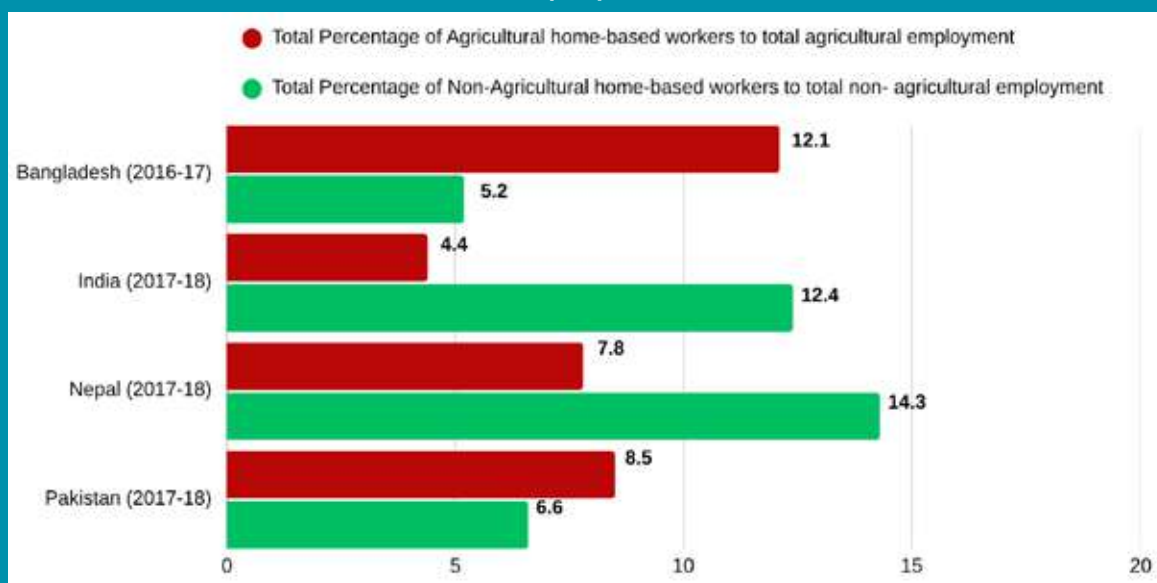
Home-based work accounts for between 7 and 22 per cent of the total employment in these four countries.



4. How many home-based workers are there in agricultural and non-agricultural employment?

- In Bangladesh, 5 per cent (3 million) of the non-agricultural workers are home-based workers, while 12 per cent (7 million) of the agricultural employment is in home-based work (2016–17).
- In India, 12 per cent (33 million) of the non-agricultural workers are home-based workers, while 4 per cent (9 million) of the agricultural employment is in home-based work (2017–18).
- In Nepal, 14 per cent (about 1 million) of the non-agricultural workers are home-based workers, while 8 per cent (a little over half a million) of the agricultural employment is in home-based work (2017–18).
- In Pakistan, 7 per cent (2.5 million) of the non-agricultural workers are home-based workers while 9 per cent (1.9 million) of the agricultural employment is in home-based work (2017–18).

Graph 2: Percentage of agricultural and non-agricultural home-based workers to total employment in these sectors

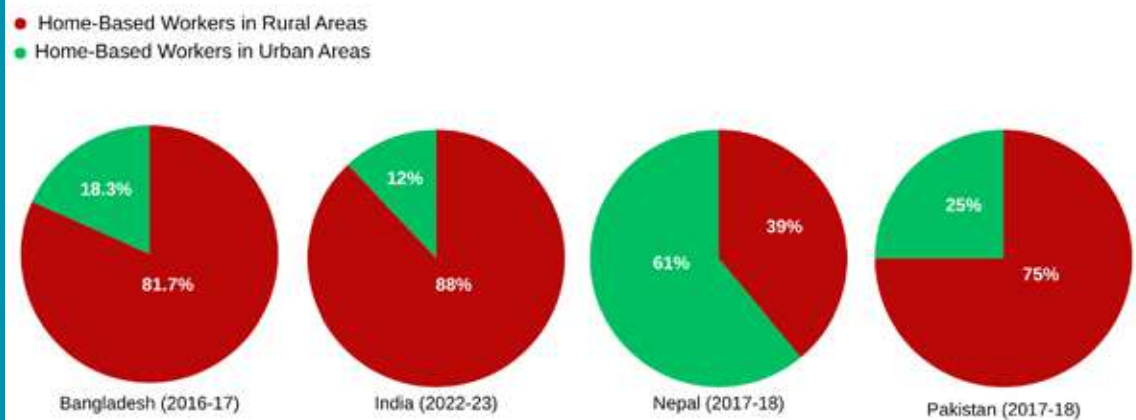


5. What is the distribution of home-based workers between rural and urban areas?

- In Bangladesh, 81.7 per cent home-based workers are in rural areas and 18.3 per cent in urban areas (2016–17).
- In India, 88 per cent of all home-based workers are in rural areas and 12 per cent in urban areas (2022–23).
- In Nepal, 39 per cent of all home-based workers are in rural areas and 61 per cent in urban areas (2017–18)
- In Pakistan, 75 per cent of all home-based workers are in rural areas and 25 per cent in urban areas (2017–18).

At least three-quarters of all home-based workers in Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan are located in rural areas. In contrast, in Nepal, over 60 per cent of home-based workers live and work in urban areas.

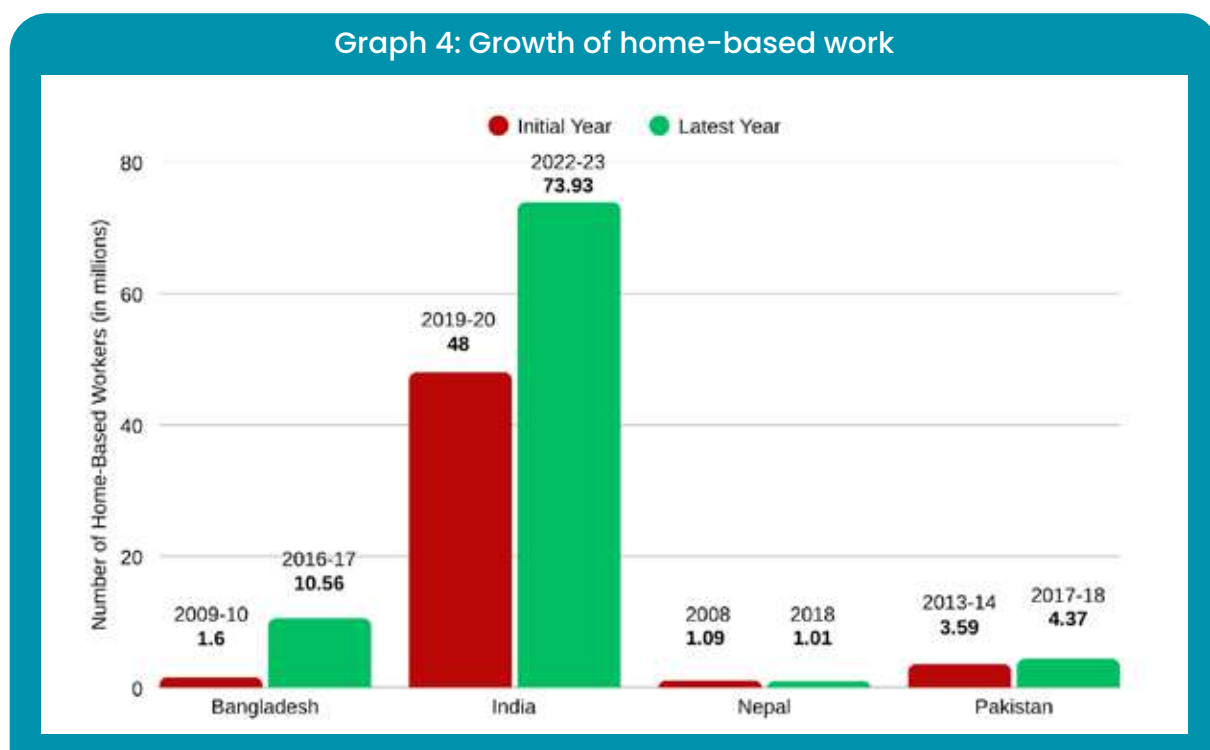
Graph 3: Distribution of home-based workers between rural and urban areas



6. Home-based work is often considered a traditional form of work that is shrinking in modern economies. Is home-based work shrinking or growing?

- In Bangladesh, the total number of home-based workers substantially increased from 1.6 million in 2009–10 to 10.56 million in 2016–17.
- In India, the total number of home-based workers also saw a large increase from 48 million in 2019–20 to 73.93 million in 2022–23.
- In Pakistan during the four-year period from 2013–14 to 2017–18, the total number of home-based workers increased from 3.59 million to 4.37 million.
- In Nepal, due to data limitations, it is possible to compare only the growth in non-agricultural home-based work. Overall, the total number of non-agricultural home-based workers decreased slightly from 1.09 million in 2008 to 1.01 million in 2018.

In the decade beginning in 2010, there was a large increase in home-based work in three of the countries.



For Nepal, due to lack of data, it is possible to compare only the growth of non-agricultural home-based work.

SECTION II

WOMEN HOME-BASED WORKERS

7. How many women home-based workers are there?

- In Bangladesh, there were 8.68 million women home-based workers in 2016–17.
- In India, there were 44.29 million women home-based workers in 2022–23.
- In Nepal, there were 0.91 million women home-based workers in 2017–18.
- In Pakistan, there were 3.58 million women home-based workers in 2017–18.

Based on country-level data available for different years during the period from 2016 to 2023, it can roughly be estimated that there are over 57 million women home-based workers in these four countries.

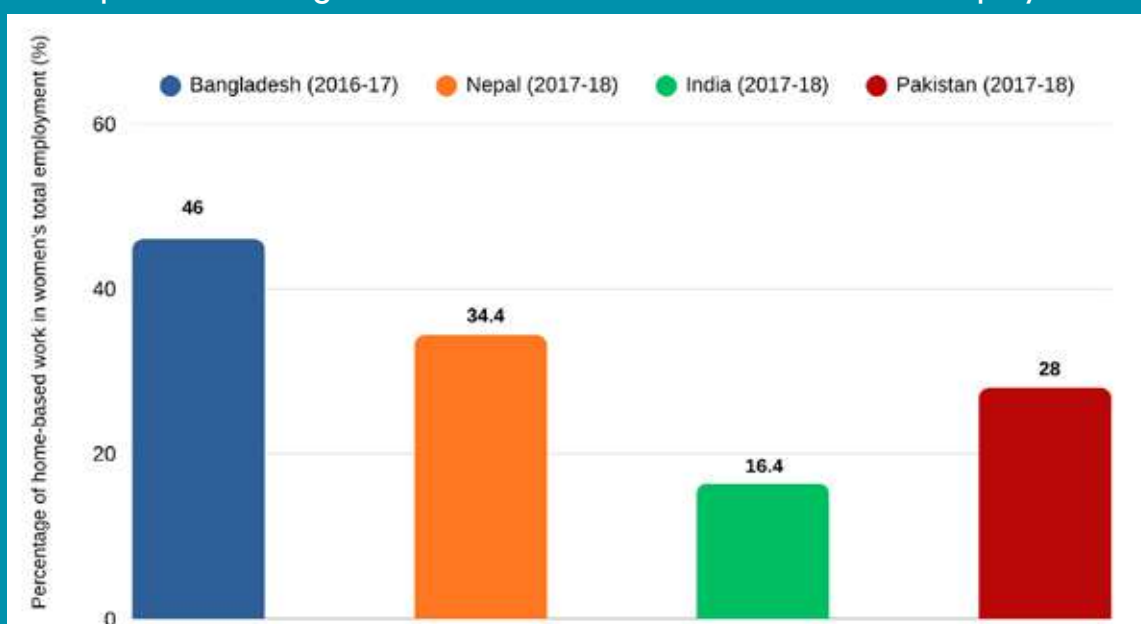
8. What is the percentage of home-based work in women's total employment?

- In Bangladesh, home-based work accounted for 46 per cent of women's employment in 2016–17.
- In India, home-based work accounted for 16.4 per cent of women's employment in 2017–18.
- In Nepal, home-based work accounted for 34.4 per cent of women's employment in 2017–18.
- In Pakistan, home-based work accounted for 28 per cent of women's employment in 2017–18.

Home-based work is a major source of employment for women, accounting for between 16 and 46 per cent of employment in these four countries.



Graph 5: Percentage of home-based work in women's total employment

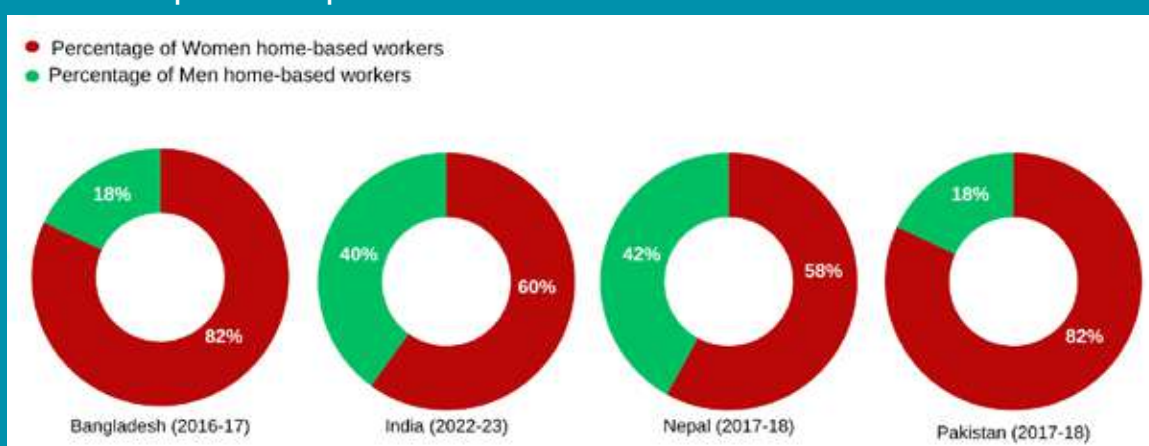


9. Are there more women than men in home-based work?

Country	Years	Percentage of women home-based workers	Percentage of men home-based workers
Bangladesh	2016-17	82	18
India	2022-23	60	40
Nepal	2017-18	58	42
Pakistan	2017-18	82	18

In all four countries, there are more women home-based workers than men home-based workers. The share of women home-based workers varies from 82 per cent in Bangladesh and Pakistan to 58 per cent in Nepal. While 60 per cent of home-based workers in India are women, they account for over 44 million workers.

Graph 6: Comparison of women and men in home-based work



10. Which industrial sectors have large numbers of women home-based workers?

- In Bangladesh, women home-based workers are predominantly engaged in the manufacturing and services sectors. Within the manufacturing sector, textile and garment manufacturing is their main activity. Within the services sector, most women home-based workers are concentrated in tailoring services (2016–17).
- In India, 51 per cent of women home-based workers were employed in manufacturing, with wearing apparel, textiles, and tobacco products engaging the highest percentage of them (2017–18).
- In Nepal, 60 per cent of women non-agricultural home-based workers were engaged in the services sector, with 50 per cent of them employed in retail trade. The manufacturing sector accounted for about 40 per cent of women non-agricultural home-based workers, with textiles and food production being the largest sub-sectors (2017–18).
- In Pakistan, the percentage of women home-based workers in manufacturing accounted for nearly 50 per cent of the total home-based work, with the largest numbers being in the textiles and apparel sub-sectors (2017–18).

A significant proportion of women home-based workers are employed in manufacturing in all the countries except Nepal. Within manufacturing, textiles and wearing apparel are among the largest sub-sectors for women home-based workers, especially in Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan.



11. How many hours of work do women home-based workers put in?

- In Bangladesh, women home-based workers work an average of 40 hours or more per week, while men work less than 30 to 55 hours a week (2016–17).
- In India, over 55 per cent of women home-based workers work for between 15 to 39 hours per week, and 14 per cent worked for more than 48 hours per week (2022–23).
- In Nepal, in the non-agricultural home-based work sector, about 39 per cent of women home-based workers work an average of 40 hours or more per week . However, in the agricultural home-based work sector, more than 20 per cent of women home-based workers work an average of 40 hours or more per week (2017–18).
- In Pakistan, women home-based workers work an average of 30 to 34 hours per week, while for men it ranges between 39 to 52 hours a week. (2017–18)

The average work week for women home-based workers is substantial, though shorter than men's. This is due to their larger care burden, which includes cooking, cleaning, managing fuel and water as well as children, the elderly, and the sick.

SECTION III

ORGANIZING HOME-BASED WORKERS

12. What are the challenges in organizing home-based workers and why is organizing so crucial for them?

Organizing home-based workers has several unique challenges. They tend to be isolated, scattered, and importantly, work from home, making it harder to build solidarity. This reduces the opportunity for organized protest, collective bargaining, or competitive price setting. Additionally, in the absence of a clear employer-employee relationship, and because they work from home, they do not typically fit the 'traditional' definition of a worker. They typically engage in a wide range of

occupations and participate in many sectors which also makes organizing a complex undertaking. Generally, a typical 'worker' has only one permanent occupation, and trade unions are formed by occupation or sector. There are two types of home-based workers, and each faces distinct challenges. Sub-contracted workers need to organize to demand labour rights, while the self-employed need to organize around market knowledge and access. Organizing them together is a challenge, but many regional organizations have achieved success.

Despite these odds, home-based workers have long been organizing and continue to do so. Today, a robust regional network of national and local organizations of home-based workers exists across South Asia. At the individual country level as well, a diverse set of strong organizations representing home-based workers— taking various forms such as trade unions, cooperatives, self-help groups, associations, producer companies, or other hybrid forms—are emerging and thriving. Regardless of their structure or registration, these organizations deal with the economic concerns of their members and their governance is representative and democratic.

By organizing and collectivizing, home-based workers have gained visibility and recognition as economic contributors, advocated for better working conditions and legal protections, and continue to claim their rights across the region.

CONCLUSION

Home-based workers are key economic actors, contributing both to their households as well as to the national economy. They provide goods and services at a low cost to low-income communities and the general public. They also produce goods for domestic and global value chains. Working from home allows them to combine their paid work with their unpaid care for children, the elderly, and the daily lives of household members, and to contribute to the quality of their family life and the social fabric of communities. But despite their contributions, they remain invisible and unrecognized. Because they remain invisible and undervalued, home-based workers tend to be overlooked by policymakers when they design policies, programs, regulations, or services.



Some key measures to support home-based workers include:

- **Statistical visibility:** Home-based workers need visibility, and this begins with their inclusion in national surveys and the publication of reliable data on these workers. The best source of national data on home-based workers is a labour force survey or other household surveys. These need to include questions about their place of work and the new International Classification of Status in Employment (ICSE-18), which is designed to better identify the working arrangements of home-based workers. Additionally, since most enumerators are culturally disposed to regarding home-based workers as only undertaking domestic duties, they require special training to distinguish between paid or unpaid domestic work and home-based work.
- **Gender sensitive approach:** The majority of home-based workers in the region are women, making gender-sensitive policies crucial. In addition, policies and program targeting women workers such as those for skill building, entrepreneurship development, etc. need to integrate and include home-based workers. Proactive government measures to promote employment-led economic growth, including minimum employment guarantees, must include home-based work.
- **Dedicated policy for home-based workers:** Home-based workers need an exclusive, comprehensive national policy or law that mandates decent working conditions, worker rights, legal protections, and minimum wages/earnings. There is also a simultaneous need to extend the reach of, and facilitate access to, social security, especially childcare and health insurance.
- **A seat at the policy table:** Home-based workers must participate in the design and implementation of the national policies and programs that affect them. Organizations advocating for their rights also need to engage with not only regional and international agencies but also the international development community which deals with issues affecting their work and livelihoods.

HomeNet South Asia (HNSA) is the only regional network in South Asia, comprising of 62 organizations representing 1.2 million home-based workers (HBWs). It operates in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. HNSA works towards building regional solidarity among HBWs, especially women workers, empowering them to lead a life of dignity, free of poverty by obtaining decent work and social protection, within a rights framework. HNSA strives to make home-based workers and their issues more visible; to help organize them; to improve their working and living conditions; to promote and advocate for formulation and implementation of national, regional and international policies for home-based workers, and to promote access of home-based workers' products to local, national and international markets. HNSA has been building the capacity of HBWs to understand and address multiple issues that adversely affect their lives such as climate change, violence, access to basic services, and digital literacy. For more information, visit <https://hnsatrust.org> or email contact@hnsatrust.org

About WIEGO

Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) is a global network focused on empowering the working poor, especially women, in the informal economy to secure their livelihoods. We believe all workers should have equal economic opportunities, rights, protection and voice. WIEGO promotes change by improving statistics and expanding knowledge on the informal economy, building networks and capacity among informal worker organizations and, jointly with the networks and organizations, influencing local, national and international policies.

