

“We Have To Include Women To See A Change In Society” Zehra Khan Interview



HBWWF's General Secretary, Zehra Khan (in the middle with mic) at a rally held on International Women's Day, in March 2019, in Hyderabad – Pakistan.

Home-based work is a critical source of employment in the South Asian region and, estimates suggest, that it is home to over 50 million home-based workers. In the countries that make up South Asia, home-based workers largely find themselves at the bottom of supply chains and are, often, an invisible work force. While their contributions are significant, they remain unrecognised by Governments and by country laws. Despite the passing of the Homeworkers' Convention (C177) in 1996, none of the South Asian Governments have ratified the Convention. A majority of nations, in South Asia and elsewhere, have also failed to formulate and implement targeted laws that protect home-based workers and assure them their rights. However, Pakistan has proved to be a notable exception.

Over the past decade, home-based worker organisations have worked together to not just organise home-based workers, in the four provinces of the country, but have worked towards the passage of specific laws for this key worker constituency. These efforts have translated to

one of four provinces, in Pakistan, adopting laws that recognise and protect home-based workers. Home-Based Workers' Women Federation (HBWWF), along with other home-based workers' organisations, has been at the forefront of this movement and, in a brief interview with HomeNet South Asia, HBWWF's General Secretary, Zehra Khan, traced the beginnings of the movement, highlighted the lessons learnt, and outlined the way forward.

Can you share your personal perspective on the origins of the movement for home-based workers' law in Pakistan?

I started off with a graduate degree in clothing and textiles. During my college years, studying the textile traditions of Pakistan, I learnt about the contributions of home-based workers to the industry. So, I went on to take it up as the subject of my thesis while pursuing my Masters degree. When I took up work, I realised that these workers need to be safeguarded with legal rights. However, there was no organisation that was organising home-based workers at the grassroots level. It was then that we decided to move towards unionisation. We started forming federations and bringing together workers from various industries. First, we organised workers in the bangle sector and we helped ascertain the employer-employee relationship there. We then worked with boutique artisans before moving to unionising the garment sector.

Between 2005 and 2006, when we first started approaching political leaders, legislators and concerned departments to explore the possibility of formulating a targeted law for home-based workers, we were always asked – “Where are these workers?” So, we went back to the ground and formed study circles with home-based workers and then strengthened them so that they could be at the forefront of the fight and make themselves visible.

What have been your biggest learnings from the movement?

First, the movement has to involve the political class, legislators, and formal workers' trade unions and federations for it to achieve its goal. Throughout the making of the policy, the labour ministry was closely involved and we ensured that our political and other leaders endorsed this movement and what it was looking to achieve.

Second, the movement has been inclusive of women. We realised that we have to include women to see a change in society. And, third, we linked the home-based workers' issue as a labour issue instead of a gender issue alone.

Can you share the highlights of the Act for home-based workers that has been passed in Sindh?

Note: As of now, the Homebased Workers Act has only been passed in Sindh and has been submitted to the Punjab Assembly for approval.

The recognition of workers is the key highlight of the Act. Home-based workers are now recognised as part of the labour force. Because of this, the Act has also been able to accommodate a grievance system that places responsibility on contractors and middlemen. We are also in discussion with the Government on the issue of social security. As of now, the contribution is six percent of the workers' wages to the Social Security Institutes. A similar contribution is also paid by the employers. But we are working with law makers and concerned government departments to reduce this to 2-3% for home-based workers and also devising ways on how the government can collect contributions from their employers including contractors and middlemen. For this, we are looking to study social security laws and programmes, from South Asia and the rest of the world, and will look to imbibe a few lessons from them.

What do you hope that the law accomplishes in the future?

We would like to ensure social security to all home-based workers. We want the Assemblies in Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Balochistan to ratify the law. And we also want to establish minimum wages for all home-based workers. We have been able to successfully secure minimum wages for glass bangle workers (the notification was issued in August, 2019) and we want it extended to all workers.

The movement is still a work in progress and hopefully in the future we will be able to include other benefits too, including childcare. But for now, our core focus is the registration of home-base workers and the formulation of the rules of business under the Sindh Homebased Workers Act 2018 and to implement the Act immediately.

Home-based worker organisations, in other countries across South Asia, are also engaged in establishing laws for home-based workers. What do you think should be the guiding principles of their movements?

Organisations must ensure that they build awareness at the grassroots level. The workers themselves must lead these movements and should be aware of their rights and their exploiters. That is the only way the movement can be sustainable. Also, in order to achieve something as monumental as laws for home-based workers, you can't simply operate within the 'project mode'. Taking on and implementing projects alone will not achieve anything. Beyond projects, organisations will have to strengthen the voice of the workers and persistence is key.

Finally, why do you think Pakistan was able to achieve laws for home-based workers before any other country in South Asia?

We were successful in creating a movement of home-based workers led by home-based workers themselves and it is their commitment that has made the laws possible. As I

mentioned earlier, we saw that we had a concerned political class and decided to involve them at every step. Finally, the movement was helmed by a strong and aware leadership that did not allow it to stray.