HOME BASED WORKERS AT RISK: OUTWORKERS AND OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH AND SAFETY

Jane Tassie

Dale St Women's Health Centre, Port Adelaide, South Australia

Abstract—Outwork is work done for payment at, about or from home. Outworkers generally work under conditions which are less favourable that those of their counterparts doing similar work ‘on site’. There are significant occupational health and safety issues associated with outwork. Terms and conditions of work (e.g. rate of pay, hours of work, degree of worker control over the work process, legislative coverage etc.) will significantly influence health and safety outcomes for outworkers. The paper addresses these more general issues as well as detailing specific workplace hazards and injuries, and other health impacts arising from the work. © 1997 Elsevier Science Ltd.

1. Outwork as an employment practice

Home-based work or outwork is also known as homework, piecework, and sweated labour. While it is not easy to give a definition which can encompass all forms and variations of outwork, generally it is work done for payment at, about or from home. It can involve many kinds of work processes, including manufacturing and processing, packing and sorting, or altering the nature of material (as in typing, word processing). It can also involve the provision of services, such as childcare, promotional work or selling. Outwork is done for the purposes of another individual, organisation, trade or business.

Outwork is not an homogeneous phenomenon. There are variations in industries within and across countries, and outwork is conducted under a wide range of conditions, contractual arrangements and relations of production (Benton, 1989; Dangler, 1986; Huws, 1989; Probert and Wajcman, 1988). Nevertheless, research has demonstrated that outworkers are by and large, compelled to work under conditions which are not comparable with those of workers performing similar tasks in the regulated labour market, and that the actual and potential levels of exploitation of outworkers are significant (Allen and Wolkowitz, 1987; Beneria and Roldan, 1987; Department of Industrial Relations and Employment, 1987; Mitter, 1986; Tassie, 1993; Textile Clothing and Footwear Union of Australia, 1995).
2. An historical perspective

Outwork is not a new phenomenon. 'Putting out' of work was a common form of work organisation prior to the Industrial Revolution, and occurred particularly in the garment and bootmaking industries.

Outwork in the 19th century was characterised by low pay, long hours, irregularity of work and subcontracting arrangements and many of the outworkers suffered ill health as a result of their work. A common complaint were respiratory problems which the workers attributed to the close conditions of their unventilated workspaces. Other reported problems included exhaustion, eye strain and what would now be classed as occupational overuse injuries. Many of the women in the sweated trades resorted to prostitution to support themselves and their families (Thompson and Yeo, 1971).

In Australia in the 1880's and 1890's, there was rapid expansion in manufacturing industries which saw increasing numbers of women employed in the paid workforce, particularly in the clothing industry. Many women were employed from home and were the targets of 'middlepeople' who approached factory owners promising quick results for minimal labour costs.

While there is little argument about the existence of harsh working conditions for outworkers of the 19th century, many would argue that the excesses of that time do not occur in the modern day world of industrial relations, and that outworkers today work under quite dissimilar circumstances. However, the type of exploitation of outworkers described by historians still persists as we approach the 21st century.

3. Outwork in the 20th century: the nature and conditions of home based work

Lipsig-Mumme (1983) has identified 4 recent periods of growth of outwork in Europe. The mid 1960's saw increases in the textile, clothing and footwear industries and in the early 1970's, outwork in the light and manufacturing industries (e.g. packaging and assembly of electrical items, food and drink, plastic, glass and cosmetic goods) expanded. The word transformation industry increasingly turned to outwork in the mid 1970's, with work tasks such as typing, and translation being done by home based workers. By the late 1970's, computer based information processing, key punching, programming computers and data entry were significant areas of home based work.

3.1. The scope of outwork

Perhaps the most familiar image of outwork is that of the outworker who works in the clothing trades, sewing garments or parts of garments for an employer. However, outwork occurs in many different industry areas, with a broad range of work tasks being performed by outworkers.

A project conducted by the South Australian Working Women's Centre in 1989 found that 31 types of outwork were occurring within South Australia. These included: typing, word processing, selling and promotional work from home, leaflet distribution, childcare, machining whole garments or parts of garments, hand knitting, soft toy manufacture e.g. panda and teddy bears, making lampshades, assembling gum sights, security alarm system and brass light fittings, decorating small pottery scent jars, vegetable processing e.g. chopping onions,
packaging medical supplies (Tassie, 1989). The S.A. survey results indicate that the range of work tasks undertaken by outworkers is vast, and not simply confined to the more familiar area of the clothing industry. These findings are consistent with overseas and interstate research.

3.2. The extent of outwork

It is almost impossible to quantify with any certainty, the extent of outwork. It is often invisible and carried out in a clandestine manner. Outworkers may not identify themselves as such for a number of reasons. Their work may be illegal, they may not have registered with the relevant authority, or they may not have legal status in their country of residence. Cultural prohibitions may prevent them from declaring their status as employees, or they may not be declaring income from their work to the relevant authorities. In addition, outwork has traditionally been considered as a normal part of many women’s lives, and so may not be considered by the women to be either ‘real’ paid work or an area for study and investigation. Many commentators agree that reported numbers of outworkers are often underestimates.

Recent Australian surveys demonstrate that there is an increase in numbers of people working as employees from their homes. The Textile Clothing and Footwear Union of Australia estimates that there are currently 300,000 outworkers in this industry in Australia, with the ratio of outworkers to factory workers being 15:1 (Textile Clothing and Footwear Union of Australia, 1995). Research conducted using 1981 Australian Bureau of Statistics data concluded that there were 68,900 clerical outworkers (Walker, 1989). Because of the lack of clarity of employment status of outworkers, many of those working from home but not considering themselves employees may in fact be outworkers.

3.3. Who does outwork

The vast majority of outworkers in both developed and developing countries are women. Particular groups of women, for example immigrant women who are recent arrivals to industrialised urban centres, are heavily represented in this area of employment. Child labour is used in the area of outwork. For example, Spanish girls of 5 years and upwards are assisting in embroidery production by hemming, and that by the age of 10, they are contributing seriously to the work (Lever, 1988).

The common link between most of the different groups who perform outwork is their relative powerlessness and disadvantage in labour market terms.

3.4. The structure of outwork

By its very nature, outwork is a decentralised activity. Much of the literature about the structure of outwork discusses the process of contacting and subcontracting, whereby various layers of contractors and subcontractors are inserted between the outworker and the person or body for whom the work is being completed.

Lipsig-Mumme (1983) comments:

"As each tier is added, the responsibility of the real employer diminishes, the fragmentation of the labour force grows, and the working conditions of the homeworkers declines" (p. 561).
Contracting and subcontracting arrangements also cross national boundaries:

"International subcontracting is an important feature of home work and is characterised by a long chain of contractors. Each contractor in the chain receives a commission which in some countries is 20–30% of the unit price. This means that for a baby's dress for example, which sells for $15 in a department store in North America or Western Europe, the local producer who made it may get less than 10 cents." (Schneider De Villegas, 1990, p. 428)

The role of other family members, usually husbands, as middle people in the structure of outwork has been well documented. Their work often involves such tasks as collecting material to be worked on and delivering the finished product to the supplier.

3.5. Employment status of outworkers

The employment status of outworkers is one of the central issues discussed in the literature on outwork. This is because employment status is often a key determinant of worker rights and entitlements under industrial awards and industrial relations and occupational health and safety legislation. This question of employment status has particular relevance for outworkers as they are one of the least protected groups of workers in the industrial system.

Outworkers are often forced (illegally) to define themselves as self employed, or are unsure of their employment status. Many outworkers who define themselves as self employed could well be considered to have an employee relationship with their supplier.

3.6. Working conditions

Numerous studies show lower levels of remuneration for outworkers compared with those workers who do similar work on site (Allen and Wolkowitz, 1987; Beneria and Roldan, 1987; Schneider De Villegas, 1990). Surveys on new technology outwork demonstrate that most of the outworkers in this area also earn less than their counterparts who are employed on site (Dawson and Turner, 1989; Di Martino and Wirth, 1990).

The following comments were reported in the South Australian survey of outwork. They give some idea of the views and depth of feeling these workers have about their pay rates.

Elizabeth, leafletter: We're exploited. Six years ago we were paid $14 per 1000. In 6 years it's only increased $1. That's not much.

Eleanor, knitter: I've worked as a dressmaker all my working life. Just when we got the pay rise through I retired. My daughter put me onto this knitting. She regrets it now! I need the money but I won't keep doing it. I haven't worked hard all of my life to be ripped off like this at my age. It's slave labour.

Maria, lampshade maker: It is very underpaid and they get very rich. They push you—you get 10 stars if your work is excellent and they give you a box of chocolates. I don't want chocolates, I want more pay! (Tassie, 1993, p. 79)

Women were quite clear that they were not working for 'pin money' — they were working because they needed the money for day to living expenses.

The most common method of payment for outwork is by the item or piece completed. For example, a certain amount will be paid per lampshade made or per jacket sewn. This 'payment by results' system means that employers have the capacity to regulate the intensity of the work without directly supervising the worker.

In many cases, the amount of payment is a matter of direct 'negotiation' between the
outworker and the supplier of the work. One of the myths surrounding outwork is that outworkers as individuals have the power to negotiate with their employers over working conditions such as rates of pay. Outworkers in reality have very little negotiating power, and so use of the word ‘negotiate’ is perhaps not even appropriate to their situation.

Judith, machinist: They expected me to work for 12 days straight, nights and weekends leading up to Christmas. I said no and the boss threw my pay at me and said she could get plenty more to do the work.

Jill, leafletter: The first lot took seven hours. They said the second lot was less and so got paid less, but it seemed to weigh as much. The third lot they said was even less than the second lot. It didn’t seem to be getting any smaller to me so I counted them and there were more there than even the first lot so they were underpaying me all along. told them this and they denied it all. What could I do? (Tassie, 1993, pp. 84–85)

The question of negotiating power is particularly relevant in the current climate of Enterprise Bargaining and the push by many governments to promote individual contracts.

Studies show that in general, excessively long hours are worked, with no provision for overtime payments. The amount of work available, and thus the potential income which can be earned, is not constant. One of the advantages for employers in using outwork as a form of production is that outworkers can serve as a reserve group of workers whose labour can be utilised at times of high production, and dispensed with at times when production requirements are low.

3.7. Occupational health and safety

The literature describes various impacts of outwork on the health and safety of workers. There are particular occupational health hazards associated with specific work processes. For example, byssinosis (brown lung) and chronic asthma are commonly reported problems of clothing trades outworkers who are constantly exposed to cotton dust (Centre for Working Women, 1986: Schneider De Villegas, 1990). The use of Visual Display Units (VDU’s) by new technology outworkers can have health impacts. Occupational Overuse Injuries and eye problems have been reported by these outworkers (Dawson and Turner, 1989).

Like other women workers, many outworkers experience the stress of the double work day, with the demands of their domestic labour and their waged labour leading to health and safety problems. Isolation is another commonly reported concern which can have health implications. 71% of women surveyed in the South Australian survey said they had experienced occupational health and safety problems, ranging from exposure to toxic substances, Occupational Overuse Injuries, stress and exhaustion.

Kathy, lampshade maker: I push myself to exhaustion sometimes, especially at Christmas. My hands get sore from stretching the material on the frames. The glue gets everywhere, all over your hands and clothes. It gave me headaches and made me feel sick so I worked with the windows open.

Helen, knitter: I’ve had headaches and stress, especially when I have to meet a deadline. She keeps ringing me up about when I’m going to finish. It’s really annoying.

Jane, knitter: I have RSI in my shoulder and back — from looking at a graph continually. You have to keep your head in the same place. The mohair causes coughing and it comes up in your saliva. I’ve also had eye strain.
Jo, knitter: lost weight, my hair started to fall out. I got a sore back, headaches and had to get glasses. I’d sit knitting thinking about how much money I might be going to get paid, knowing it wouldn’t be enough.

Sonja, FDC: You’re always getting coughs, colds flu and tummy wogs from kids. I also slipped a disc lifting a Day Care baby (Tassie, 1993, p. 96)

A recent study from England identified several factors which point to outwork as a form of employment with particular occupational health and safety implications. The study noted that homes are not designed to be workplaces, so generally lack features such as extractor fans or machine guards. All household members, including the most vulnerable members — the young, the elderly and the sick — are exposed to hazards. The risk of accidents is increased by the presence of children, pets and visitors to the house who are not familiar with work processes. The relative isolation of individual outworkers and the scattered nature of the homeworking population makes it difficult to provide them with information about safe working practices, and it is much more difficult for regulatory agencies to ensure that employers are acting within the law. The study adds that these problems are exacerbated in cases where homeworkers are not literate in English (Huws, 1995).

The researchers commented as follows:

"Few could have been prepared for the sheer scale of the problems identified by this survey." (Huws, 1995, p. 25)

The range of occupational health and safety issues identified in this study included neck or back ache, eye strain, headaches, fatigue, hearing loss, dizziness, nausea, skin problems, dust to lungs and other breathing problems. Many of the conditions identified were chronic and could cause permanent ill health. The researchers noted that because of their chronic nature, the problems are not always attributed to work, either by the outworkers or their health workers, and that this makes it difficult to implement preventive strategies. Because of the nature of the work, outworkers (and their families) are exposed on a daily basis to dust and toxins, and undergo extreme physical stresses associated with the repetitive work which is often conducted under intense pressure to meet employer deadlines.

Outworkers in this survey also commented on the emotional costs of home based work, reporting high levels of isolation, depression, stress, boredom, feelings of entrapment and consequent loss of self esteem. The nature of the work also had significant effects on other family members.

4. Addressing the occupational health and safety issues of outwork

Recent years have seen a shift in thinking about outwork in Australia. The trade union movement no longer proposes abolition of outwork, but rather seeks to regulate home based work in the same way as other paid work is regulated. Particular unions, notably the Textile, Clothing and Footwear Union of Australia (TCFUA) and the Commonwealth Public Sector Union have been active in addressing outwork as an issue. The TCFUA has conducted a series of information campaigns for outworkers, utilising a broad range of strategies, including ethnic media outlets, to inform outworkers of their award rights and entitlements.

Proposed changes to the Australian industrial system threatening the very existence of trade unions, and the shift from centralised wage fixing to enterprise bargaining, mean that it will be
more difficult for unions to direct resources to the issue of outwork and to reduce the exploitation of these workers.

Community based women's organisations have been active in taking up the issue. The Dale St Women's Health Centre is currently conducting a project in South Australia. This project aims to provide outworkers with information about occupational health and safety issues and relevant industrial, worker's compensation and occupational health and safety legislative rights and entitlements. Extensive work with community organisations and community groups representing different ethnic communities is being undertaken as part of the project.

However, Federal and State Government funding cuts have resulted in reduction of funds available to community organisations and unions to address outwork as an occupational health and safety and social issue in the community.

Employers and management have very often avoided their responsibilities under occupational health and safety legislation. They have not provided a safe place of work for their employees and have thus profited from the low overheads and minimal wages and working conditions associated with this form of employment. The increasing push towards deregulation and the reduction in the size and role of public sector regulatory agencies will mean that it will become even harder for under-resourced labour inspectorates to compel employers to fulfil their legal obligations.

5. Conclusion

Outworkers generally work under terms and conditions less favourable than workers performing similar work on site. This results in significant occupational health and safety problems for the workers. Outworkers, as with other workers, need the protection of awards and other worker's compensation, occupational health and safety and industrial relations laws: home based work needs increased regulation and regulatory agencies must be adequately resourced to take up the issue of outwork. Outwork as a work practice must be rendered more visible and subject to the same public scrutiny as other work practices, with outworkers being guaranteed adequate levels of industrial protection in order to assist in the reduction of the incidence of occupational injury and disease.

References