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# ► Home bounded - Global outreach

## Home-based workers in Turkey

Author / Saniye Dedeođlu





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## Abstract

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This report focuses on two categories of home-based workers in Turkey; industrial home-based pieceworkers and IT-enabled remote workers, who are commonly referred to in Turkey as “freelancers”. With an aim of exploring the current patterns and issues of these two categories of home-based workers in Turkey, the report presents the situation and working practices of industrial home-based workers and freelance remote workers. A supply-and-demand side analysis is used to analyse the changes in the production networks and in the working relations. Issues such as access to work, working arrangements, working hours, earnings, health and safety and work-life balance are main areas of investigation. The interviews conducted in Istanbul with homeworkers reveal that an analysis of gendered nature of home-based work is necessary to unveil the values attached to piecework and digital remote work and that even social, cultural and economic distinctions between two groups, the lack of job security and decent working conditions as well as low bargaining power have resulted in their increased vulnerabilities in the Turkish labour markets.

## About the authors

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## Introduction

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This report focuses on two categories of home-based workers in Turkey, namely, industrial home-based pieceworkers, who assemble or manufacture goods for factories, retailers or their agents under subcontracting arrangements; and IT-enabled remote workers, who render their services to employers via telecommunications technologies and digital platforms, and who are commonly referred to in Turkey as “freelancers”. The common characteristic of these two groups is their place of work: their own homes; but they may also work in shared spaces or anywhere outside the premises of their employer.

This report aims to present the current patterns and issues of these two categories of home-based workers in Turkey. It focuses on the situation and working practices of industrial home-based workers and freelance remote workers. A supply-and-demand side analysis is used to analyse the changes in the production networks and in the working relations. Issues such as access to work, working arrangements, working hours, earnings, health and safety and work-life balance are main areas of investigation in the report. A focus on the gendered aspect of home-based work is necessary for revealing the values attached to piecework and digital remote workers and in analysing the gendered nature of manual, labour-intensive and skilled professional work in Turkey.

To address these issues, this report draws from available secondary data and from empirical information collected between June and September 2019. Three focus group discussions with industrial pieceworkers were held in Istanbul, including 23 women in total. Three interviews were also held with female intermediaries who distribute work to pieceworkers, one with an outsourcer (*fasoncu*) and one with a garment atelier owner. For freelancers, ten individual interviews were conducted mostly online via Skype or other digital connectors (list in Annex A). Also, two interviews with representatives from a freelance organization were held during the timeline of this study.

The findings are presented in five main sections. The first section focuses on the macro outlook of home-based work in Turkey, including the legal aspect of homework. The second section provides an overview of the literature of homeworkers in Turkey and discusses the secondary material which assesses to what extent the topic has been the focus of research and policy. Following the literature review, the third section introduces findings on industrial homeworkers and the fourth section on freelance online workers. In the final section, a common ground of comparison is introduced between the industrial homeworkers and the freelance online workers that, despite their differences, addresses their common vulnerabilities.



## ▶ 1 Defining homework in the context of Turkey

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The ILO Home Work Convention, 1996 (No. 177) defines homework as work carried out by a person:

- i) in his or her home or in other premises of his or her choice, other than the workplace of the employer;
- ii) for remuneration;
- iii) which results in a product or service as specified by the employer, irrespective of who provides the equipment, materials or other inputs used.

The Convention states that if '[the] person has the degree of autonomy and of economic independence necessary to be considered an independent worker under national laws, regulations or court decisions', then the person is not considered to be a homeworker. The definition of homeworker also does not include employees who occasionally work at home rather than at their usual workplaces. It is a more narrow concept than home-based work, which encompasses all remunerated work that takes place in the home, including work that is carried out in an employment relationship as well as work performed independently by an own-account or self-employed worker.

Homeworkers differ from entrepreneurs, the self-employed or family businesses in that they are hired by enterprises or intermediaries for specific activities or services to be done from their homes or another place of their choice. Homeworkers do not own or operate the business they work for. The Convention also defines employers as 'a person, natural or legal, who, either directly or through an intermediary, whether or not intermediaries are provided for in national legislation, gives out home work in pursuance of his or her business activity'. In this vein, homeworkers refers to subcontracted/dependent home-based workers who carry out paid work for firms/businesses or their intermediaries, typically on a piece-rate basis.

The ILO estimates that around 260 million workers (7.9 per cent of all workers), including 143 million women, were working from home in 2019 (or latest year available).<sup>1</sup> Homeworkers generally work in the informal economy and are usually unregistered workers without a formal working contract. Due to its highly informal nature, it is difficult to have an exact number of workers engaged in homework worldwide. However, in recent years, the phenomenon of homework has entered into new sectors as a result of improved communication and information technologies, changes in supply chains and greater use of flexible work arrangements. Though there is a significant number of highly skilled homeworkers, particularly in information technology, most homeworkers are low-skilled workers, often employed in piecework. The classic characterization of homeworkers is a person, generally a woman, who does long hours of work for low levels of pay, with no registration and, at times, under high health and safety risks (Benería and Roldan, 1987; Boris, 1994).

In the Turkish context, the Household Labour Force Survey (HLFS) classifies homeworkers as workers whose workplace is home, and includes information on domestic work, home-based work and care work.<sup>2</sup> In 2016, 2.6 per cent (610,771) of all private-sector employees worked at home, of which women accounted for 89 per cent of those working at home.<sup>3</sup> The female-dominated nature of homework in Turkey also manifests itself in the fact that 87 per cent of all workers are unregistered and operating in the informal economy. Only 13 per cent work in the formal employment with social security coverage.

<sup>1</sup> Calculations by the ILO for forthcoming ILO global report, *Working from Home: From invisibility to decent work*.

<sup>2</sup> This definition differs from the ILO Home Work Convention, 1996 (No. 177) and the Home Work Recommendation, 1996 (No. 184) which excludes home-based workers who are not in a situation of dependency, and does not apply to domestic workers or other care workers.

<sup>3</sup> The number of homeworkers include own-account workers (340,000; approximately 55.7 per cent of all homeworkers, and those engaged in caring activities in the government scheme of cash for care, 27,747 around 5 per cent).

The age distribution of homeworkers shows that 68.6 per cent of them are above 40 years old. This is quite a high average when we compare it with the overall age distribution in the labour market. This is a reflection of the tendency for women piece-rate workers to move to home-based work when they get married and have children, at a relatively older age than those working outside home. In Table 1, 16 per cent of homeworkers are younger than 35 years old; some of these workers are likely to belong to the group of white-collar freelance teleworkers.

► **Table 1: Age distribution of homeworkers**

Age Groups	Number	Percent
15-19	12,488	2.0%
20-24	22,931	3.8%
25-29	10,619	1.7%
30-34	51,894	8.5%
35-39	94,159	15.4%
40-44	113,782	18.6%
45-49	119,880	19.6%
50-54	79,716	13.1%
55-59	59,828	9.8%
60-64	28,584	4.7%
65+	16,891	2.8%
Total	610,771	100.0%

Source: TurkStat, HLFS, 2016.

The educational attainment of homeworkers is aligned with the findings on age distribution: 49.6 per cent have primary school education and 13.8 per cent have no schooling. In total, this accounts for 63.4 per cent of all homeworkers, demonstrating the low educational attainment of the homeworkers. Those having university and higher degrees are 9.3 per cent of all homeworkers; they constitute the highly educated segment of workers working at home.

The HLFS also reveals information regarding the sectoral distribution of work that takes place in the home. The most popular sector is domestic worker (29 per cent), manufacturing textiles (22 per cent), services to buildings and landscape activities (17 per cent) and manufacturing of apparel (10 per cent). Traditional home-based piecework is mostly clustered in the categories of manufacturing of textiles (22 per cent), of apparel (10 per cent), of food products (3 per cent), of leather and related products (2 per cent) and other manufacturing activities (2 per cent), which comes to a total of 39 per cent of all homeworkers.

In 2016, the Turkish Labour Law was amended to include homework with the aim of providing legal protection for those working at home. Article 14 of the Labour Law states that 'Remote employment is a labour relation based on the principle of performing the action of working at home or by means of technological communication tools, within the scope of the work organization formed by the employer and established in writing'. This clause requires a written contract between employee and employer, which should include

the details of the work to be performed<sup>4</sup> and prohibits discrimination against homeworkers. In addition, employers are bound to inform the employee of the occupational health and security measures.<sup>5</sup>

The Turkish Law of Obligations (Articles 461–469) introduced in 2012 also includes a definition of a home-work contract and how it should be performed under the section of General Service Contract.<sup>6</sup> In a written contract, the employer informs the worker of the working conditions and wages and the worker is responsible for performing the work with or without his/her family member for a fee. The responsibilities of a worker are defined as to perform the work by using materials and work tools carefully and the responsibilities of an employer are to accept the finished product and to pay the worker after the completion of work. This regulation states that work can be done by family members alongside the worker.

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<sup>4</sup> The written contract should include the definition of work, the form of performance, the term and place of the work, the matters concerning the wage and its payment, the equipment provided by the employer and the obligations regarding the protection of such equipment, the provisions about the communication between the employer and the worker and the special working conditions shall be included.

<sup>5</sup> In remote employment, workers shall not be subjected to any procedure different from a comparable worker, due to the nature of his/her labour contract, unless a reason justifying such disparity exists. The employer shall be liable to inform the employee of the occupational health and security measures, in consideration of the nature of the work performed by the employee through a remote employment relation, provide necessary training, ensure health monitoring and take necessary occupational security measures relating to the equipment provided.

<sup>6</sup> The role of the Law of Obligation is to offer protection and regulatory framework to the workers who are out of the realm of the Labour Law and whose activities are excluded from the coverage of Labour Law. These areas are listed in the exception sector of the Law in Article 4. Although, with the amendment in 2016, the Labour Law started to regulate the work of remote workers, the Law of Obligation is still an important part of Turkish legislation for the working relations of those workers and their activities excluded in Labour Law.

## ► 2 Homework literature in Turkey

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Homework dates back to pre-industrial times and is not a new phenomenon. In recent years, the interest has focused on the changing trends in industrial homework under the impact of the global reorganization of industrial production and in global value chains. In addition, there is currently a revival in homework related to digital and ICT-based work worldwide that adds a new research stream to the existing literature, which examines the conditions and main actors of home-based work since the mid-1980s. In the Turkish context, homework is most often examined in relation to women's home-based piecework activities, mostly in the garment industry. The focus on the garment production is a result of the fact that it is Turkey's most global sector with a flexible organization of production and a vast employment structure. So it offers a good vantage point to examine homework together with women's work and labour (Balaban and Sarioglu, 2008).

In most academic research, women's home-based work is seen as a form of invisible informal activity carried out by women in urban areas when they move to cities (Çinar, 1994). Home-based work was a refuge for women who could not go through the entry barriers of labour markets. These barriers are related to labour supply, including issues such as patriarchal culture, marital status, inadequate childcare services or lack of education, as well as low labour demand (Ilkcaracan, 2012; Toksoz et al., 2014).

The focus on home-based piecework also reveals the manifestations of 'housewifization' of women (Prugl 1999; Mies, 1982) in Turkey and of how gender ideologies are played out to shape women's work and labour. The male breadwinner model and 'patriarchal contract' are the determining factors of the gendered division of labour and institutionalized gender roles establish constraints on women's labour supply in Turkey. Women use their labour to manifest their roles as 'good' mothers and wives and their loyalty to their community by making their work invisible and hidden from public view (White, 1994; Atasü Topcuoğlu, 2010; Dedeoğlu, 2012). These studies illustrate how patriarchal dynamics restrict women's job opportunities and compel them to engage in home-based work, which is defined by low pay, long working hours and the lack of benefits and job security (Bose, 2007; Rowbotham, 1993).

Home-based work is also examined as a form of informal work of women who are in need of work but cannot work outside due to their domestic roles and responsibilities or to patriarchal constraints keeping women at home. Therefore, home becomes a spatial meeting locus for women where their familial duties and roles are combined together with their income generation. Working at home has a contradictory effect on women's social status; it makes their life easier as their work is at home, but simultaneously has a negative effect as working from home reinforces their traditional roles of child and elderly care-giving and the performance of everyday household tasks (Aktas, 2013).

Home-based piecework of women is examined mostly in relation to the garment production (Sarioğlu, 2013; Tartanoğlu, 2017; Dedeoglu 2012) and women's crucial role in the labour process of producing added value in the garment industry (Atılğan, 2007). Women workers are dependent mediators for the supply of the work and raw materials. They also have no control over the means of the production (Balaban and Sarioglu, 2008). It is the gendered control mechanisms that make women's obedience easy and implicit, and resistance unnecessary, as their work is constructed within familial roles and relations where women view their work within the patriarchal consensus. The gender division of labour is inherent in the organization of home-based work. In this sense, it is very important to understand the dynamics of the organization of home-based garment work in the value chains. Control practices, in particular, are shaped by the varied patterns of gendered organization of work and labour process (Sarioğlu, 2013).

Home-based piecework has been around for a few centuries but online freelance work emerged as a new breed only in the past decade. The working conditions of homeworkers in digital industries with professional qualifications are much less documented in Turkey; no specific research exists on the topic. Like home-based pieceworkers, their workplace is not the employer's premises and may be in the privacy of a home;

their employer is not in close physical proximity and agents may be intermediating the employment relationship. Their employment may be informal in view of a lack of clear legal framework covering online jobs. In later sections of the report, the working conditions of freelance digital workers will be examined in detail.

### ▶ 3 The case of women home-based pieceworkers in Turkey's garment manufacturing: The study of 1999-2000 and the follow-up

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In Turkey, women's employment rate is one of the lowest among OECD countries.<sup>7</sup> With urbanization, which intensified after the 1980s, women's labour force participation in Turkey fell, dropping to a low of 25 per cent in 2004, and then increasing slowly, but steadily, to reach 38 per cent in 2018.<sup>8</sup> While well-educated and skilled women are active participants of the formal economy, with almost 70 per cent of women with university degrees in the labour market, women with lower educational attainment and the under-skilled are mostly concentrated in informal work such as home-based work and care work. Since the 2000s, employment in the informal economy is an important source of work for women in big cities. There are three types of informal work for women in Turkey: industrial home-based work, unpaid family work and home-based care work (Toksoz et al., 2014).

Though the exact size and number is not known, among women living in low-income households women's home-based activities in urban areas are widespread (Cinar, 1994; Dedeoglu, 2012). In the 1990s and early 2000s, many studies pointed out that home-based work was the most common form of employment for urban women in Turkey (Dedeoglu, 2012; Toksoz et al., 2014). For example, Cinar (1994) estimates that one in four women in Istanbul takes in homework and shows that home-based pieceworkers may outnumber the total women formally employed in the city. A great deal of home-based work is concentrated in the garment sector, which has been an important source of employment for women, not only as pieceworkers but also as formal/informal employees since the early 1980s. Indeed, a third of homeworkers in Turkey work in the textile sector (TurkStat, 2016).

The garment industry became one of Turkey's most important export industries in the early 1980s. The expansion of the industry is attributed to initial government support, the falling cost of labour and the renewed capacity of the textile industry to support the rapid expansion in the manufacturing of ready-made garments (Dedeoğlu, 2012). As elsewhere, the industry in Turkey draws heavily on women's labour, although women's contribution to the export success is largely invisible in official employment statistics. Women are the main suppliers of informal labour for the industry through subcontracted and home-based piecework.

Home-based workers are the main driving force behind the flexibility of the industry and its success in the global competition. Having access to the labour of home-based workers and keeping them within the subcontracting network requires reaching the most secluded form of labour in Turkey: housewives on the outskirts of Istanbul. Since Turkey is one of the countries with the lowest rates of female labour force participation, integrating women's labour into a labour-intensive sector such as the garment industry has required new approaches in order to be able to tap into women living on the outskirts of the city and retain their labour. This strategy has relied heavily on the use of kinships.

This part of the study examines the situation and role of pieceworker women in the garment industry and the ways in which women are integrated into the garment production in Istanbul. For this purpose, 20 interviews were conducted between June and July 2019 in Istanbul with home-based women workers, intermediaries and women's family members. This section also includes findings of women pieceworkers in Istanbul's garment industry from a study carried out between 1999 and 2000 (Dedeoglu, 2012). In the

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<sup>7</sup> In 2018, women's employment rate was 32.9 per cent in Turkey while the OECD average is 61 per cent for the same year (OECD Data Centre, [https://stats.oecd.org/viewhtml.aspx?datasetcode=LFS\\_SEXAGE\\_I\\_R&lang=en#](https://stats.oecd.org/viewhtml.aspx?datasetcode=LFS_SEXAGE_I_R&lang=en#))

<sup>8</sup> OECD Data Centre, [https://stats.oecd.org/viewhtml.aspx?datasetcode=LFS\\_SEXAGE\\_I\\_R&lang=en#](https://stats.oecd.org/viewhtml.aspx?datasetcode=LFS_SEXAGE_I_R&lang=en#)

report, the study findings are presented in two main sections in which the first section focuses on the organizational structure of garment production in Istanbul and the second, on home-based women workers and their working conditions.

## The demand-side analysis: Flexible organization and subcontracting in Turkey's garment industry

The garment industry in Turkey is a classic example of decentralized production networks where the administrative centres of transnational corporations (TNCs) and international brand names play a leading role in different segments of commodity chains.<sup>9</sup> The industry is organized so as to include different scales of production and embodies their connections and networks based on subcontracting linkages. Representatives of international brands, integrated textile production factories, large-scale garment factories and garment ateliers make up the different facets of garment production in Turkey. The mass factory and atelier production complement each other, even though a great contrast exists between mass and atelier production in terms of market access, power and competitiveness, as smaller and more informal businesses have less access to resources and markets with less decision-making power over production relations (Dedeoglu, 2012).

An asymmetry between large and small-scale firms governs subcontracting relations where small firms do not have control over the production process or power over the decision-making process (Taylor and Thrift, 1982; Beneria and Roldan, 1987). The findings in Istanbul show that large-scale producers are relatively more independent agents of garment production, while ateliers are more dependent on orders coming from these large or international companies. Although the orders usually pass from big firms to ateliers, horizontal subcontracting relations between ateliers are practised if different specializations and skills are needed. For example, garment ateliers producing designer or brand-name products can subcontract to ateliers doing mainly ironing, packaging and finishing of garments or to those ateliers acting as distributors of piecework.

Underlying Turkey's garment export success is a network of subcontractors who help to reduce fixed costs and provide lower labour costs. These networks are not only established between different scales of firms but also extend to home-based garment workers. The majority of small-scale workshops operate informally without paying tax duties or social security contributions. As Hernando De Soto puts it, informality is a way of life for the poor (1989: 11–2) and it is a way of survival for garment firms. Informality often takes a relatively hidden, illicit and underreported character. Firms evade taxation, health and safety regulations, labour rights and social security rules. Small workshops, in particular, keep themselves officially unrecorded. Firms usually try to reduce their VAT and income tax burden by underreporting the unit price or the volume of work. Moreover, most garment workers receive relatively low wages, lack social security coverage that provides pensions, access to health services for the workers and their dependents, and work under the shadows with no visibility.

Garment workshops are at the heart of subcontracting chains providing backward linkages to factory production and enable the industry to reach untapped sources of low-wage women and children. The number of garment ateliers has recorded a phenomenal increase in Istanbul since the 1980s, most vividly observable in *gecekondu* neighbourhoods (shantytowns) where abundant cheap domestic and international migrant labour is available.<sup>10</sup> The location of workshops in basements and in *gecekondu* neighbourhoods

<sup>9</sup> A classic example of buyer driven global value chains (Gereffi 1994). In garment production, mass production is only one type of business strategy, home-based production acts as complementary stages of subcontracting chains in the whole production line (Appelbaum and Christerson, 1997).

<sup>10</sup> The garment industry in Turkey is labour-intensive and its labour demand is always expanding to include the most vulnerable forms of labour. The main source of labour was the internal migrants coming from different Anatolian regions in the 1980s and 1990s and then international migrants started to supply Istanbul's garment industry in the late 1990s and 2000s (Dedeoglu and Ekiz Gökmen, 2011). In recent years, Syrians are the main labour source for the sector in Istanbul and the sector is the single reason why Syrians are moving to Istanbul after a couple of years spent in the border cities of Southeast Turkey.

not only allows workshop owners to take advantage of the low rents and low-wage labour in the area but also to evade official inspections. The family ownership is a noticeable feature of these ateliers, supported by family labour and initial capital pooled through familial solidarity networks.

Most workshops specialized only in the sewing and trimming of parts of standardized products such as T-shirts and sweatshirts, while some produced high-quality, brand-name products requiring highly skilled labour and expertise in a certain aspect of production, such as embroidery, lace-making, needlework or stitching. The workshops were family businesses owned by men. Workers were immediate family, more distant relatives and neighbours, resulting in a high proportion of women working in the workshops.

► **Table 2. Types of garment ateliers**

Ateliers working for brand-name exports	Ateliers working for standard export garments	Ateliers working for domestic markets
Specialized, quality-oriented products	Production of standardized and simple products (T-shirts, sweatshirts)	Lower quality than exported products
Skilled and experienced labour	Fast shift between different subcontractor firms	More diversified product range
	Skilled labour	Intensification of family and kinship relations
		Greater extent of informalization
Home-Based Pieceworkers		

Source: Author’s own data collected during interviews conducted in 1999-2000 and 2019.

The common undercutting feature of all these ateliers is their utilization of the work of home-based pieceworkers. Although reached in different ways, all ateliers subcontract to women and, in some cases, the number of pieceworkers working for ateliers could be higher than the number of those working in the ateliers. Within these subcontracting arrangements, home-based work takes on three different forms in Turkey: piece rate work (for an employer, subcontractor or mediator), order-based work and own account work (Tartanoglu, 2017). The first two types are dependent on an employer or mediator, whereas the last one is independent work and has the lowest income (Coşkun, 2010).

## The supply-side analysis: Women home-based pieceworkers

Piece rate home-based work is an integral part of industrial subcontracting relations in Turkey. Sending parts of production – most of the time stitching an item on a garment or in some cases sewing some parts of the garment with the sewing machine – to home-based women enables companies to save on labour costs and costs for space, machinery, electricity and other required inputs such as health and safety expenses (Sarıoglu, 2013). The home-based piecework labour process may be summarized by long and uncertain working hours, unclear employment conditions with mostly no contract, monotonous and repetitive working conditions, low wages with no social security, self-defined labour time with strict deadlines and, because the work requires hand skills, it is defined as unskilled work in the labour markets. While these are the negative aspects of home-based work, it may offer also opportunities for low-skilled women, e.g. enabling them to combine flexibly family duties, social interaction and professional activity that contributes to overall family income.

Women engaged in informal production, home-based activities such as knitting, sewing and assembly work that revolve around the demands of childcare, housework and other obligations of a home, see their income-producing activities as a mere extension of their domestic responsibilities. The type of work women do, the location of their work and the social context and social relations of their work have tremendous implications for how they define themselves and the meaning of work in their lives.



Jenny White's study (1994) of a group of women in a squatter settlement in Istanbul who engage in home-based piecework or work in family and neighbourhood ateliers for export and local markets, demonstrates the concentration of married women in the informal sector by its easy accommodation to women's family responsibilities. White presents a detailed analysis of why the women she studied maintain a fiction of 'non-working', even though they are intensely engaged in income-producing activities. Women's labour is seen as the property of the communities (i.e., their families, relatives, neighbours) to which they belong and, consequently, a woman's gender identity is largely defined by her labour in the sense that her income-generating labour is conflated with her social roles and seen to be the natural extension of her domestic and communal roles. Therefore, naturally, the unpaid or poorly paid nature of women's labour is legitimized by a cultural construction of 'giving' labour as a contribution to the family and community and an expression of identity.

In many cases, pieceworker women do not perceive of their work as proper work done outside home. Women's uneasy definitions between work and 'work' and social identity in their families and communities pave the way for their invisibility in the labour market. Many women engaged in different segments of garment production as pieceworkers, traditional handicraft makers or atelier workers described their activity as a hobby or help to the family business and did not consider it as 'work'. Therefore, women regard their work as the extension of their traditional housewifery activities built upon the expression of group identity and solidarity.

## Piecework and women

Home-based workers fall mainly in the age range of 30–45, have lower levels of schooling (on average they have completed five years of compulsory schooling) and are married with children. Piecework is the main work opportunity for poor middle-aged women with few qualifications and heavy childcare and domestic responsibilities. They live in poorer households in comparison to their neighbourhood's general well-being level. During the fieldwork in the summer of 2019, we conducted interviews with ten women pieceworkers, most of whom were between 35 and 45 years old and married with children. Women over the age of 45 are not preferred by intermediaries because the speed at work decreases with age and their eyesight deteriorates for needle and embroidery work. However, the women expect their daughters to engage in piecework during the summer holidays. During the fieldwork, we encountered two university students doing piecework with their mothers to earn some cash during the summer holidays.

In Istanbul's garment industry, workshop production and home-based work are related in terms of garment workers' life histories. It is a common practice for a mother to do de-threading work at home for the same workshop where her daughter works. Another form of mobility is for the garment worker to start work in a workshop when she is young and become a home-based garment worker when she gets married or becomes pregnant. Workshop and home-based garment workers move in and out of employment, not only because they have weak connections to the labour market but also because the fluctuating nature of the garment business creates a high turnover for workers. In this regard, a woman works in a workshop for a few months or a year or so, and then, when there is no work, she is made redundant and stays home for some time and then looks for another place to work. In some cases, women interrupt their employment due to marriage or children.

Some women were married to men who were in formal employment with social security coverage that enabled the women and children to be covered by health insurance and survivors' benefits. However, it is important to stress that not every pieceworker's husband has secure and formal employment, as many women engage in home-based work because their husbands are casual workers and cannot afford to support their household financially. Moreover, some women are divorcees or widows who remain without the financial support of a male provider.

The pieceworkers are portrayed as passive and vulnerable victims who occupy the last ring in the chain of global garment production. Their labour is easily substituted and their labour market vulnerability is also

reinforced by their personal characteristics, which are typically unskilled, poorly educated and married with children. Usually associated with the neediest women in the community, piecework is done by women who are known to have no economic support from husbands, such as divorcees or widows, whose husbands are not providing for them for a variety of reasons, or who need extra cash for other reasons such as investing in home ownership. Such women were seen as *fakirs* (poor) women who are usually pitied (*yazık*) in their community. This also reflects how a woman without a man's economic support is conceptualized in society (Dedeoğlu, 2012).

For garment production, home-based workers take up many different activities ranging from packing, cleaning thread from the sewn piece, sewing in beads, embroidery, etc. The working time of women changes depending on the volume of work that comes in and the deadline. The women stated that they worked longer hours particularly during periods such as holidays and the New Year, stock renewal and the beginning of the season due to the high volume of orders coming in with tight deadlines. During these times, the working time increases to 16–18 hours per day. However, in a usual working day, women explained that they worked 12 hours between 9:00 and 21:00.

As discussed in the following sections, piecework is distributed to women through an intermediary and women usually perform their tasks in their homes. However, during the fieldwork it was observed that the intermediaries sometimes rented a small shop-place (*dükkan*) where all pieceworker women could come together to work. These shop-places are purposefully located close to women's homes in the same neighbourhood. The place where the work is done is important for women and they either work in their homes or prefer to be in these small-workshops (if available) located close to their home, since women's piecework is the result of women's immobility due to their domestic roles and unavailability of other types of work. As Balaban and Sarioglu stress: '[Piecework] represents a low-paid and labour-intensive work form primarily conducted by married women, where the productive and reproductive activities of women are juxtaposed both spatially and practically' (Balaban and Sarioglu, 2008:17).

### Why home-based piecework?

For the home-based pieceworkers, their husbands' permission was not the only obstacle preventing their employment in a factory or atelier. Childcare, old age and being unskilled were also cited as obstacles. A commonly encountered problem is the care of small children. Working only becomes possible when proper childcare facilities are available in the workplace; otherwise a family needs to find alternative forms of childcare. For example, the help of other family members or private crèches, even though costly for a working-class family, are other means of sorting out childcare while the mother is out at work. Using these options is viable only in the case of lucrative and stable employment. Women prefer to do home-based piecework only if marginal and temporary employment options are available to them. The testimony of one of my informants clearly singles out childcare as an obstacle to women's entrance into the labour market:

*How could I go out to work? I have two small children and my husband works all day and comes back late in the evening. I do not have anybody from my family who can look after my children while I work. My husband's family is far from where we live now. So I am doing piecework and looking after my children at the same time. We live in a one-room flat which was transformed from a kind of storage room or dükkan (shop), so it is hard for me to have a relative with us to look after my children. I wish I could work in better paid work so we could buy our own flat and live better.*

Some of the women focused on other obstacles such as domestic duties and childcare responsibilities that prevented their employment, rather than on the opposition of their husbands. The emphasis on those duties and responsibilities puts women in collusion with their husbands in constructing and preserving their roles as wives and mothers. The perceptions of gender roles and meanings attached to being a man or woman are internalized equally by men and women through a set of cultural practices that help to hide the unequal socioeconomic outcomes of confinement of these asymmetric gender roles.

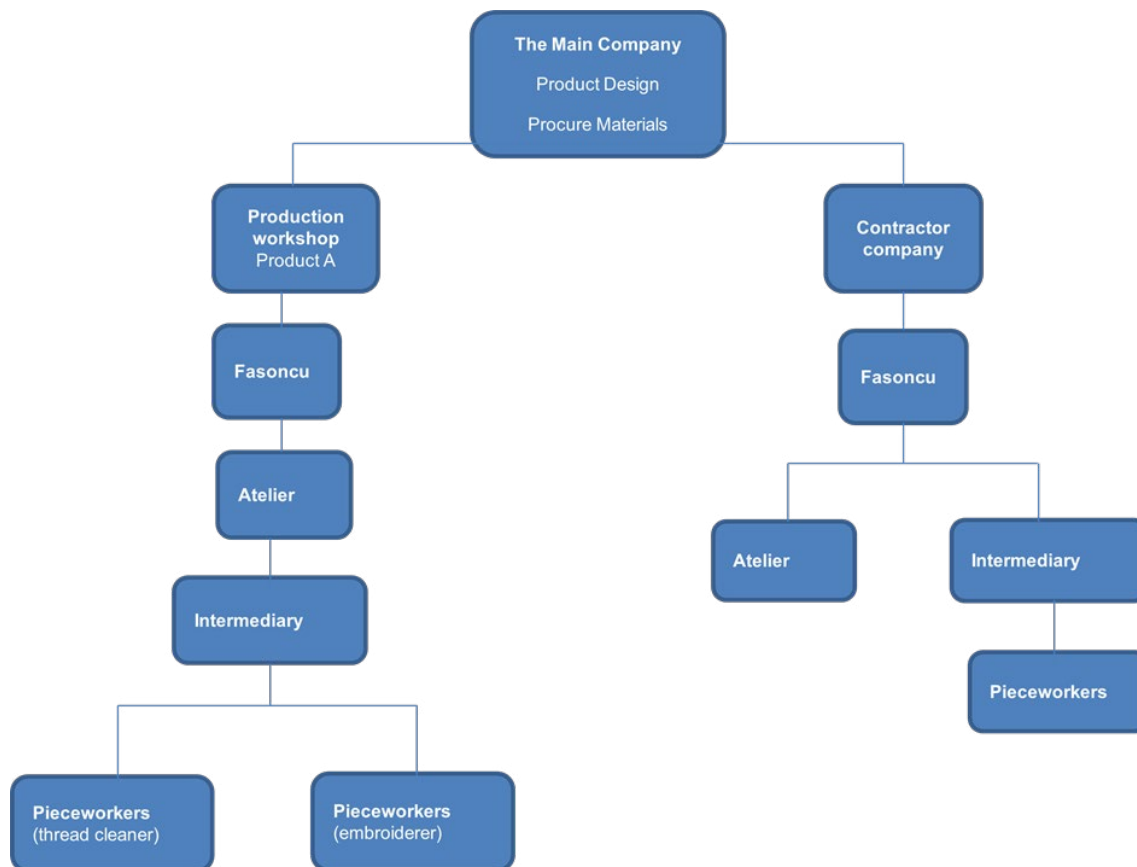
## Organization of piecework

As indicated earlier, Istanbul's garment industry is organized in a supply chain that includes different scales of production. The top is composed of large apparel companies such as LCW, INDITEX, Trendyol-Milla that determine the product design and types of fabric used in a specific design and produce a sample product. This sample product is then passed down to the next level to the actual production workshop through a contractor specialized in finding suitable workshops or directly from the top company, where the sample design is turned into higher volumes of products. The workshops undertake to provide all the equipment and materials required in the production process. In this process, this main workshop is also responsible for both the quality and cost of the fabric and accessories and depends on other suppliers to produce a finished product. Therefore, this main workshop outsources different activities and tasks involved in the production process.

In the subcontracting chain, there are smaller ateliers working for the main workshop described above, specialized in sewing, cleaning yarn, ironing and packaging operations. Among these ateliers undertaking different activities, the sewing ateliers subcontract yarn-cleaning, ironing and packaging operations to home-based women.

In the garment industry, people called *fasoncu* (outsourcer) are employed to deal with all the outsourcing activities, working with different sized workshops ranging from large to small ones. Their role is to organize the allocation of different stages of production to different ateliers. For pieceworkers, their role is to find intermediaries who could subcontract work to women. Continuing down the chain, the *fasoncu* brings pieces for cleaning, packaging and ironing to intermediaries who then organize pieceworkers. The role of the intermediary is to organize enough women to perform the tasks and ensure the smooth running of production. In this process, pieceworker women are responsible to the intermediary, the intermediary to the *fasoncu*, the *fasoncu* to the atelier and the atelier to the workshop and the workshop to the company.

► Figure 1. Organization of piecework



Source: The data collected during the summer 2019 fieldwork.

During the fieldwork, we interviewed a *fasoncu* to better understand their role and skills in the production chain of the garment industry. A *fasoncu* needs to have garment production experience and connections with the ateliers, suppliers and intermediaries. The contractor we interviewed had 25 years of working experience in Istanbul's garment industry. He ran his own atelier for 15 years and worked as a contractor for various companies during that time. The most difficult part of his job was that there was no fixed place of work or working hours. There was also no concept of overtime. Although he might take Saturdays and Sundays as holidays, the *fasoncu* could be called by the intermediaries any time of the day and every day of the week. Apart from this, he needed to move to different locations in the city and he had to control the intermediaries for the distribution and supervise the work. Therefore, he was on the move all the time. Although he stated that his preferred working time was normally nine hours a day, in practice it was 11–12 hours per day.

Labour intermediaries for home-based work are usually women who distribute the work to pieceworkers. Even if the intermediary is a man, he always works with his wife or other women since their work is directly with women. The age of intermediaries ranges from 35 to 55 and they are usually ex-garment workers with good connections to women in their close vicinity. In Istanbul's garment production, intermediaries work in two ways. The first type of intermediation is that the work coming from the *fasoncu* is subcontracted and distributed to pieceworkers' homes. The women are usually the ones the intermediary works with and her network. This type of intermediation is for occasional and non-consistent jobs that come in. For this type of organization, the intermediary works with one or several ateliers and deals with different *fasoncus*.

The second type of intermediation is based on regular business deals in which they either get regular work orders all year round or work with several different ateliers to ensure a regular inflow of work. For this,

the intermediaries gather a group of eight–ten women in a workshop hired specifically to do piecework. Working with the same ateliers is an advantage for intermediaries as it ensures steady payments and then the intermediary can pay the pieceworker women. Otherwise, if the intermediary does not receive regular payments from the ateliers for which she works, then she cannot deliver her payment to pieceworkers. This may undermine the trust relationship between the intermediary and her pieceworkers.

Intermediary women explain their work as a way to contribute to their household income and support their children's education. On average, the earning of an intermediary is around 1,000 and 2,000 TL a month.<sup>11</sup> The intermediary we interviewed stated that she made between 1,500–2,000 TL, depending on the volume and regularity of work coming in. The pieceworkers working for intermediary women are often family members, relatives and neighbours living in her vicinity, through which a trust relationship and solidarity are formed easily, thereby fostering a more flexible organization of the production process. The intermediary woman we interviewed had been working as an intermediary for the last four years and before that she had worked in garment ateliers for five years. During busy periods, she brought in her relatives and neighbours whom she knew from her neighbourhood to her already existing team of ten women. This allowed her to organize her business in a more flexible manner and respond to the changing demands and orders. Having a reliable and trustworthy team was essential for running her business, as any case of missing pieces, lost equipment or bad quality of work could damage her reputation and might cancel her work with ateliers.

## Recruitment strategies

The case of women's home-based work in Istanbul's garment industry illustrates that the organization of women's piecework and atelier production is based on gender and social relations as well as kinship relationships, in which women's work is embedded. This in turn causes both men and women to devalue women's home-based work. These relations and ideologies also provide a mechanism whereby women produce cheaply for international and national markets. Thus, women's labour, both paid and unpaid, is conflated with their social and gender identity and membership of social groups such as the family. Women's informal work in home-based piecework or in garment ateliers tends to reproduce the patriarchal character of social relations without any public recognition of the work. In this regard, the recruitment strategies of women pieceworkers reflect a gendered integration into garment work. There are three different strategies used in Istanbul's garment production to integrate women into piecework.

## Unpaid family workers

In this group, there are family members who work as pieceworkers for their own atelier to reduce costs and provide flexibility and reliable labour. Istanbul's garment workshops rely heavily on close family members and relatives, who provide a reliable and flexible source of labour. They are available for work as long as their fathers, husbands, or uncles run the workshop. The mothers or wives of workshop owners are the invisible heart of this core labour force, akin to the workshop owners' wives in Hsiung's study (1996) of the satellite factory system in Taiwan, ROC. Their roles in family businesses are quite diverse and range from direct contribution to production, to cooking for garment workers and cleaning the workplace. These women are not only encumbered with trimming and cleaning garments at home, but they also organize their neighbours and relatives to engage in piecework when extra labour is needed. Mothers of workshop owners look after the family's young children while the wives are at work in the workshop. Although they remain housewives, these women extend their domestic tasks beyond meeting the physical needs of household members to providing and maintaining particular ties with relatives, neighbours and friends, who are in turn a source of aid and reserve labour. Their involvement creates an environment in which the workshop is viewed as a family setting for women's work that further attracts more women into production. While this group of women is not usually paid for their activities, they are clearly contributing to garment production

<sup>11</sup> In July 2019, the minimum wage in Turkey is 2,020 TL a month, which is around 380 USD.

in many diverse ways. Not only do they support garment workshops with their labour in the workshop, but they also provide family care and manage relations in the neighbourhood – activities that are key to the survival of the family business.

The roles of this group of women can vary over the course of their life. Some young girls, by gaining garment-making skills and experience and establishing networks of new friends and contacts, manage to find better working conditions and may even move into formal factory employment, if their family gives consent. For married women, workshop jobs have a different trajectory from those of young girls, as their labour is often more closely tied to household needs and family business cycles. If a family business closes down, women go back to their homes and children, or if the business expands through partnerships with other workshops and increases the number of non-family employees, the married women are excluded from the work and stay home.

### Recruiting through an intermediary

In Istanbul's garment industry, some tasks are subcontracted directly from a workshop to women and others are allocated by middle-women, who are sometimes relatives of the workshop owner. There was a distinctive difference between how larger-scale factories managed their subcontracting and how garment ateliers organized their relations with home-based pieceworkers. Garment ateliers are the mediators for large-scale factories in distributing garment pieces to home-based workers. As it is a time-consuming and costly activity to deal with home-based work, large-scale factories preferred to subcontract the work to garment ateliers. Despite some factories subcontracting piecework to ateliers, the ones that specialized in designer and high fashion production had direct relations with home-based workers, as the tasks required highly delicate and skilled handicraft, such as embroidery or making ornaments on garments. In order to find the right women for the work, factories establish an efficient network of subcontracting.

Here is an example of how a large-scale factory directly managed its subcontracting relations with home-based pieceworkers. Two workers were allocated to distribute garments to pieceworkers, who were all women and lived in neighbourhoods close to the garment factory. One of these workers was the driver of the van who was also in charge of carrying the garments. The other worker was a woman who was in control of the women pieceworkers. She demonstrated to the women what should be done to the new pieces and kept records of the garments distributed and the payments each worker should receive. She could decide independently how many pieces were to be subcontracted and to whom. This woman, Serpil, who was 35 years old and the mother of two children, told her story of how she became the middle-woman in the factory.

*I am good at maths and also a high school graduate. Most of my colleagues are primary school graduates and I was quick to learn every job at the factory. So, our manager (müdür) asked me to do this job when they decided to subcontract some tasks to women instead of doing them in the factory. Now, we have 50 women in different mahalles around here and some of these women have been working for more than eight years. What I do is very difficult because if a piece is missing or something is wrong with the quality of the work I am responsible. I try to work with women whom I trust and have known for a long time. In the beginning, there were just a few women whom I reached through my own personal contacts and mostly from my own family and neighbourhood. We need to make sure that women have skills to do the job. Even though most women have sewing and embroidery skills it is more important to follow the designs and be precise, clean and on time.*

Although Serpil was an ordinary worker in the factory, her role as a middle-woman (or intermediary) in the factory gave her decision-making powers over the pieceworkers. Serpil was like a manager with pieceworkers and demanded information about their work processes. She often reminded the women that the timing of the completion of tasks was very important and if the work was not completed on time payment would have to wait until the following month. She was certainly the boss of the pieceworkers, for whom having a good relationship with Serpil was the channel for getting access to regular piecework.

## Networks of pieceworker women

The irregular nature of piecework and the strict rules of work completion have resulted in the composition of a complex alliance between women pieceworkers and middle-women, which shows the extra-economic relations underlying the social organization of piecework in Istanbul's garment industry. This irregular structure of work has developed a network of women in which a pieceworker, for example, is the main subcontractor of the factory but also shares her quota with other women in her household or neighbourhood. In cases of surplus work and under time pressure, a pieceworker uses the help of her neighbours and pays them later. This practice of collaboration among women generates further flexibility in the organization of piecework, and shifts the responsibility of intermediaries, in terms of finding new subcontractors, to pieceworkers.

I joined Serpil on one of her visits to her pieceworkers where she distributed some work and collected the finished pieces. In one of the neighbourhoods, there were two women pieceworkers whom Serpil had known for a long time. When we arrived the two women were together making their garment pieces. Serpil gave them the new garments and explained what was required and then a third woman suddenly appeared and carefully listened to what Serpil had to say. Later, I asked Serpil who she was and she told me that the other two women shared some of their work with her. When there was too much work and too little time to finish all the pieces, Serpil herself gave work to the third woman. This was one of the ways that the factory's circle of subcontracted women enlarged over time.

Garment ateliers establish their network of pieceworkers through using the personal connections of women in their families. Extended families always have some untapped labour of women that can be drawn into production whenever necessary. For example, the grandmother of the family usually stays in charge of childcare during the day, while other family members are working in the atelier. Sometimes she also does the finishing of garment pieces by cleaning stitched edges or, in some cases, she acts as the middle-woman in their immediate environment by distributing garments to other women. Ateliers that are unable to utilize their own family labour usually have a number of pieceworkers who have worked for them for a long time. These women establish a small network of pieceworkers in which they have the leading role as distributor. Their networks can be as small as four or five women.

While piecework is an individual activity and each woman is paid individually for her work, it is common in the literature to argue that women work collectively in their homes (White, 1994; Cinar, 1994). Often a neighbour would come in and join in the work for an hour or so and leave. There was a clear sense among all the women interviewed in this research that piecework is low paying and extremely tedious and all subcontracted tasks are repetitive, time-consuming and require very little skill. That is why pieceworkers are those who are in extreme economic difficulty with few other available sources of work.

Home-based garment work is usually done in a network of reciprocity among women. When there is a need to finish the work quickly, other women help them out with their piecework by getting together for tea gatherings. The women in the community volunteer their labour and maintain the relations of cooperation based on such mutual help, in anticipation of receiving the same kind of help from others in case they should ever be in similar need.

## Skills acquisition and women's elişi

Turkish girls enter adulthood by acquiring skills of embroidery, knitting, needlework, crochet and sewing while they also learn how to cook, clean and serve. These skills, used to prepare an elaborate *çeyiz* (trousseau), are utilized to earn money in two ways. First, women make lace, embroidery and knitting for young girls' *çeyiz* and, second, women use their skills to take in piecework or to work in an atelier. Many women in the *gecekondu* areas in Istanbul who live on an income from either lace-making or needlework have similarities with the case of Mies' study in Narsapur in India, where lace-makers working from their homes

exclusively utilized their skills to integrate the Indian economy into the world markets of export production (Mies, 1982).

Turkish working-class women's engagement in income-earning activities is organized in their homes in the form of home-based piecework and their traditional activity of *elişi* (handicraft). *Elişi* is a common activity, covering knitting, embroidery, sewing and needlework, making a wide range of materials such as bedspreads, coffee table and table covers, cardigans and socks. Making *elişi* has always been the basis of earning some cash for low-income women and also builds a bridge to the labour market in which women could always make some petty cash by making lace or other forms of *elişi* (Iktisat Dergisi 2002:3-17).

Hanife was a lace-maker who had two sons and an alcoholic husband and lived in a one-room flat. Her husband had an irregular income and could barely support his family. Hanife's income from lace-making was kept secret from the husband in order to force him to meet the necessities. She kept her money and saved it in a bank or bought gold for herself. Despite the fact she was engaged in lace-making for many years her husband never realized that she was making money out of it because women's *elişi* (handicraft) is always seen as a hobby and a non-monetary activity.

Filiz, a former garment worker, quit her work when she got married. However, although her husband had regular employment, his income was not enough to support his family. Thus, Filiz started making *elişi* for her neighbours. She said:

*His salary is all right but just enough for rent and food. I want to buy carpets and curtains for my home... Making elişi is better than going out for work. I earn some cash and do my household chores (evişi) as well. My husband never knows whether I make money with elişi. He thinks this is a thing I try to pass my time and entertain myself with ... If I work hard I can make 50–75 million a month and spend some of this money to buy things for my house. It is not that I want to hide money from my husband but I do not want to make him to feel like he is not capable of earning money to support his family.*

Her earnings are dependent upon the price set among the women who demand and supply these products that create a kind of local market for *elişi*. For example, there is an approximate price for a ball of yarn (*yumak*). Setting the price of the lace-maker's labour, two women – the buyer and seller – negotiate and determine the price each time. A well-known fact among local women is that the prices for *elişi* are very low. Low prices for *elişi* can be explained by the fact that customers and lace-makers are both from working-class families. If the price is low women can afford to buy, otherwise they would make it themselves, since every woman has similar skills of lace-making. Thus, these reasons for low prices make income from *elişi* very low and marginal. My interviews with women engaged in *elişi*-making show that there is always a demand for *elişi* either from other women or from traders who specialize in the marketing of these products. The *elişi* trade takes place in two different channels. First, there are shops that sell trousseau items and generate a demand for women's *elişi*. They buy from women and sell the items in their shops. There are also middle-(wo)men who collect items from other cities around Istanbul such as Bursa, Balıkesir, etc., and bring them to Istanbul. The second channel is more outward oriented and internationally marketed, with Arab countries being the main destinations, especially for women's headscarves which are painstakingly decorated with needlework or lace-work.

Engaging in *elişi* is a way for women to express their identity. Women's *elişi* skills, which are normally devoted to making girls' *çeyiz* (trousseaux), are often turned into an income-generating activity that provides a significant support for household survival. Whenever women need extra cash they can easily rely on income from *elişi*. This work has the advantage of making incomes 'invisible', as in the case of Hanife, and building nest-eggs. In some cases, this income becomes vital if a woman is trying to establish financial security for the future. However, women's contribution to the household budget does not drastically alter the patriarchal nature of gender relations and the women's perception of their primary roles as mothers and wives.



## Earnings

Women's piecework is ultimately a means of earning money. Although the expectation and demand for a fair financial return were not publicly expressed, all the women interviewed were well aware that their work, even as 'help', meant a financial gain and directly or indirectly contributed to their family budget. The financial returns were highly appreciated by women and their families. Despite women's confinement to the role of housewife and the marginality of their income, all the pieceworkers were conscious of how much money their work made and the dependency of their families on their income for survival. Women's awareness of financial gain from their work does not, however, translate itself into women's perception of themselves as workers and breadwinners for their households.

The case of Ayla, illustrates the extent of appreciation of financial gains made through home-based piecework. Ayla, who was 32 years old and a mother of three young children, was a regular pieceworker for an atelier located in her neighbourhood, and said that:

*No-one pays you money for sitting idle at home. My husband and everyone know that I earn money for my children and my family. We even managed to save money for the future. In case of illness or an emergency, we at least have some money so we will not be in need of financial help from other people (elalem).*

Ayten had three sons and a husband who did irregular jobs and often shifted from one job to another. Even though her husband was usually not unemployed, the money he made was marginal because of the irregularity of his occupations. Thus, Ayten began to take in piecework from a large-scale textile factory eight years ago. She said that:

*I know that it seems like petty work but I make as much money as my husband earns each month. Without my contribution we would not have been able to support our sons' education. We also have built the house we live in with my contributions. Although it is very hard and irregular work, everyone knows without it we would be starving out in the streets. My husband's income is only enough to feed us but the rest is done through the money which I make from the piecework.*

Although pieceworkers make a substantial contribution to the global garment manufacturing in Istanbul, their income is conceptualized as *pazar parası* (bazaar money), which is seen as charity to poor women. This conceptualization was made clear in one atelier owner's statement, where he explained how and why he subcontracted to women:

We subcontract only to women and they sometimes come and ask us whether there is any work. Most women are regulars and all are from this area. In the past, we hired women to do hand-work of the pieces as full-time workers but the garment business is irregular. Sometimes these women had nothing to do for weeks and we had to pay their salaries. Later on, we decided to subcontract women at home so that we delivered pieces to them when there is work and pay them on a piece basis. For women, it is better to do piecework than sitting idle at home so they earn their *pazar parası*. I think that this work is good for women because *fakir kadın* (poor women) need to feed their children and at the same time they can watch over their children. Times are hard for families so people are trying hard to make ends meet and everyone has to do something in order to survive (*hayatta kalmak için*). Piecework gives the opportunity to live without depending on anybody (*el açmadan yaşama*).

## Piece rates

The fieldwork in the summer of 2019 provided information about piece rate earning of women. It is stated that the rate range depends on the content of the work. For example, they can take 5–6 krş for a simple cleaning of a piece and 10–15 krş per piece for chiffon or linen cleaning. If embroidery is done on a piece, these fees increase. The women interviewed mostly do chiffon fabric cleaning. The intermediary preferred not to get simple T-shirt cleaning and trimming activities since the rate was so low or the embroidery work as it required so much hand-skilled work and manual dexterity. Therefore, they concentrated more on

chiffon fabric cleaning. Though pieceworkers earned 10–15 krş per piece, the intermediary priced the piece at 30 krş, meaning that only half went to the worker. This is a 50 per cent rate for intermediary services.

Since the work of pieceworkers is quite irregular in nature, as there are times when more work comes in or at other times, none is available, it is difficult to estimate their monthly total earnings. Nonetheless, women mentioned an average monthly income of 800–1,000 TRY.<sup>12</sup> As very little is paid per piece, the total monthly income of a pieceworker is much lower than the minimum wage. They received the payment in cash from their intermediary. Women chose to be paid daily, weekly or monthly. The monthly payment is more popular among women as it means getting a larger sum of money than in other payment methods.

## Work-life balance

Piecework is a manifestation of women's burden of domestic chores and caring responsibilities and this issue has been emphasized in the interviews too. All the women were married with children and did not have the opportunity to work outside due to their in-house responsibilities and childcare. When asked if they would like to do the same job as a full-time worker in a workshop, they told us that they would not prefer to work in any workshop. Doing home-based work offered women the opportunity to be flexible to arrange their time for their children's school schedule, to cook for their family and to take care of early age children. These were the main determinants of the women's preference for home-based piecework. Full-time work in a workshop did not provide the women with the opportunity to attend to both productive and reproductive activities at the same time.

In the case of pieceworker women, domestic chores and caring roles were the reasons to take up home-based work but in the case of freelancer women, the freelance work could result in the intensification of women's domestic work and caring activities.

## Collective action: The case of Ev-Ek-Sen

In Turkey, workers' collective action is always a difficult and politically challenging process and it becomes more problematic for homeworkers as they are invisible to the public eye and disconnected from each other. Therefore, building solidarity is not easy in a setting where trade unions pay little attention to home-based workers in Turkey. However, in the early 2000s, home-based women workers organized themselves to develop solidarity as cooperatives. The main motivations of these cooperatives were higher wages and the elimination of the work of the mediators or subcontractors (Tartanoğlu, 2017). The common characteristic of these was their income generating organization status.

The first rights-based organization of home-based workers was founded in solidarity with HomeNet, as Turkey HomeNet in 2007, and the Union of Home-based Workers (Ev-Ek-Sen) was launched two years later as a workers' organization organized by female workers themselves. Their primary struggle is for visibility and recognition. However, according to the existing trade union regulation, home-based workers are not able to form or join a union because they are not formal sector workers and they have no social security number. Instead, they rely upon international legislation (Hattatoğlu and Tate, 2016). In the declaration of Ev-Ek-Sen, the aim of trade unions is presented in the following statement:

*We are organising for 'decent work', for social security, but by organising we are also striving to win the right to organise. We have organised and launched our union; however, the government has started a legal case to shut it down. Thus, winning recognition for our trade union Ev-Ek-Sen as a trade union will imply the recognition of the right to organize for all homebased workers and more generally for all those who work without being covered by social security. We, homebased workers, are one section of workers who lack social security*

<sup>12</sup> The minimum monthly wage is 2,020 TL in 2019.

*coverage. Therefore the recognition of Ev-Ek-Sen will be a very important gain not only for our unionization struggle, but also for that of all precarious workers.*

As pointed out in their declaration (Ev-Ek-Sen, 2009): “We, home-based workers, are among the most invisible sections of precarious workers, so that there are even times we find it difficult to explain that we also work, that we are also workers like other workers”, the main problem of unionization is the situation of the women as informal workers and their weak potential for labour agency. In the meantime, the activities of the union are directed by experienced workers who are politically active and by academics from the field of work and employment relations. Therefore, the effectiveness of the union was problematic from the founding stage and its sustainability was controversial since it did not have the widespread support of the workers. Women’s consent to their working conditions and their relations with the mediators and the employers as an extension of their family interactions make resistance or collective actions unnecessary and, in these circumstances, their work appears as voluntary participation. The trade unions remained inactive since the early days of its founding and its legal status was taken to the court.

## ► 4 Freelance homeworkers: Remote, online and home-based workforce

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Technological change is driving significant change in the world of work with increasing access to information and communication technologies, artificial intelligence, robotics, machine learning and automation (ILO, 2017). Technological change is also shifting the type of work available, with a growth of jobs in the 'gig' or 'on-demand' economy (De Stefano, 2016). While these jobs may offer flexibility, they are insecure and often do not offer workplace entitlements and access to social protection (ILO, 2018a). Technological change has generated a rather 'invisible' workforce in the sense that their work has no dedicated location and their employment relationship is often not recognized.

The growth of digital work is visible in Turkey with a workforce primarily composed of mostly well-educated professionals, commonly referred to as "freelancers". Translation, ICT and journalism are the most popular occupations. Their working conditions, demographic characteristics and sense of work show significant differences from pieceworkers who are at the bottom of supply chains of industrial production. However, the most significant common characteristic between online freelancers and pieceworkers is their experience of homework, including work orders coming from employers or intermediaries and the informality of employment relations.

In the following section, the initial findings of interviews with freelance workers in Turkey are presented.

### Who are the ICT-based homeworkers?

The demographic characteristics of ICT-based homeworkers indicate a younger age group than industrial home-based workers. The oldest respondent in the group was 43 years. The rest were in their early 30s. The oldest ones interviewed were married women who had left their formal employment to freelance and work at home, sometimes changing their occupations. For the young graduates, engaging in freelance homework seemed to be an early career stage before moving into corporate office work.

The educational attainment was much higher as all had university degrees in related fields that ranged from computer sciences to MBAs and to translation and interpretation studies. One of the translators had just finished her PhD and the other one was getting her masters in sociology from one of Turkey's most prestigious public universities in Istanbul. Only one respondent was a high school graduate but was trying to get his degree from an online course in Austria. He started to get involved in IT programming when he was in early high school years and then his work gradually got momentum, before deciding not to go to university.

Regarding the marital status of the interviewees, only two women were married, the rest were single. The marital status of homeworkers is not related to their choice to work at home, as is the case for women piece-workers in Istanbul's garment industry. In this regard, the two groups show stark differences.

### Why work at home?

The reason of opting for home-based work seems to be a personal choice in the first instance but it is actually more the result of how the structure of work is shaping workers' preferences. For example, people working as translators and interpreters are more commonly homeworkers than office-based workers. This is the same for graphic designers and ICT workers. The common practice is to perform the job online and from home. Though most of the interviewees had formal working experience in companies, what is called as office work or plaza work in Turkish, they then chose to continue their career as homeworkers.

For a 32-year-old website designer, corporate work was an endless stream of bureaucratic procedures with no creative side to it. He stated that,

*I had voluntarily terminated my three-year full-time corporate work before I started freelance work. I was so bored of corporate work and its rules because I had to put up with endless meetings where no-one can continuously decide anything and with pretentious colleagues in the workplace. Working in such an environment kills anyone's creativity, that's why I didn't want to continue ... You know what, I actually stopped working for a while altogether.*

In a similar vein, a 43-year-old female interviewer, married with two children who had a degree in electrical-electronic engineering mentioned the lack of R&D focus in the corporate business in Turkey. Throughout the years while she was promoted, her work shifted to managerial tasks and she was distanced from product development and R&D. In her opinion, the corporate work did not concern itself with R&D, though product development was where her main interest lay. In this case, she turned to working at home in order to focus on the type of work that she preferred to do.

For a well-known journalist, it was the restructuring of the media sector due to the political and economic conditions in Turkey that pushed many journalists out of formal employment to freelance work. Most large media corporations, such as HaberTurk and Hurriyet, had reduced the number of workers and of printed products they produced. This had resulted in the increasing number of journalists seeking freelance work opportunities, which were not plentiful.

For a young web-designer at 34 years old, the 'work culture' in Turkey was the main reason to work as a freelancer and he mostly did work orders coming from abroad. He explained the 'work culture' in his profession in the following statement:

*We have quite feudal business structures in which a 'boss father' ideology overrides every aspect of our way of work. These boss fathers always claim that they are providing 'bread' for a large number of people. So the outcome is that we need to obey him for everything and no scope for independent thinking. When the boss idealizes himself as the ultimate power then he starts not to pay for your overtime and bonuses.*

It is evident that people have engaged in freelance work for different reasons. However, the changing labour demands of ICT-based sectors and sectoral restructuring are the main reason people choose to be freelancers and personal work independence also seems to be attractive for young people and those seeking autonomy in their working conditions.

## Employment status: Employee or independent contractor?

Home-based telework is defined by the Eurofound and ILO report by using two overlapping categories: work performed with the help of ICT from outside the employer's premises and work done from home.<sup>13</sup> While the definition is clear, there is a constant shift between home-based telework and self-employment/own-account work. The interview findings show that most work for orders coming from companies or intermediaries but also are own-account workers. This may not be a simultaneous status but most respondents had worked as a self-employed employer or employee at some time in their career path. The young ICT worker explained his employment status in the following statement:

*I've been focusing on online marketing in recent years, working on online advertising. I do website and I do the landing pages of websites. I usually work with local companies in the city where I live. Online advertising is aimed at increasing the turnover of these companies. This is my business in which I am contracted to work.*

<sup>13</sup> 'Working from home' is considered to be home-based telework, while 'working at home' refers to work done at home using the home as a place of work and production without ICT. An example of the latter is the worker sewing garments at home who sells their products to a company, often based on a piece-rate remuneration system (Eurofound and the International Labour Office, 2017:5).

*Apart from this, I also have my own business. I have my own websites. I arbitrage over them. I buy traffic in a cheap way through Google or Facebook and show ads to these people. In this way, I give one and get back three.*

Another ICT worker who was more involved in product development and R&D used to own her own company with partners. She designed a product for the largest mobile network company (Turkcell) in Turkey and got a fund from TUBITAK for her product. After a disagreement with her partners, she quit the company and then decided to work from home with no institutional strings attached.

In some cases when, for example, a software developer is a sought-after worker, the person may receive more contracts than they can manage. At this point, they start passing these jobs to other people. This can be in different forms. In one, they can act as a contractor to other workers and get commissions for their service. In another, they can be just a referral for a friend or colleague. A respondent explained his business in the following statement:

*Every freelancer who has made a name in the business and earns a lot from this business establishes his/her own advertising agency or company. For example, I have two companies of my own. Since I have a very good communication with other freelancers, I make these people work for me without actually signing them into my companies, but I usually make a contract. And, there's the beauty of working with freelancers: they always want to do good work because they want to make a good name in the business. For example, a company employee can only focus on the appearance of the work, but a freelancer wants to protect his/her name and produce the best outcome.*

Their employment relationship is in constant change between being a dependent contractor for agencies or companies, to being completely independent, to working as an intermediary. The cross-cutting common ground of all these positions is their home-based work. For some, homeworking is a manifestation of independence, for others it is a stage of career progression and for others it is a form of rebellion against the hierarchical working practices that take place in the business world.

## Identity of client/employer

In the ICT sector, the identity of client can be a company trying to develop their operating systems, marketing or any other activity conducted online. It can also be agencies working to meet the specific needs of companies such as advertising, online marketing, etc. In some cases, it could be a person rather than an organization and in others, a more complicated and bilateral and triangular relationships may exist.

A web-designer, working as a freelancer during the last five years, has been working for the same agency throughout this time. In addition to his agency work, there are also his own personal customers for whom he works without a contract. He considers this to be his informal work, regulated on mutual trust.

It is also possible to have international clients since face-to-face personal communication is quite rare. As such, workers can do their job anywhere. One of our respondents explained his international client portfolio:

*In Austria, both Austrian Turks and Austrians are my clients. I have clients in the US, as well as a major software company in Switzerland ...I work mostly with transport companies and cleaning companies rather than software companies in Vienna.*

There are digital platforms that some ICT workers work with. They are not popular among experienced workers, but preferred by fresh graduates who want to promote their name and work.

Not everyone is getting jobs on these platforms, but it is a common way of getting business, he adds. There are digital platforms like 'platformwork', 'armut.com', 'freelancer'. These can be local as well as global. There is also an online job platform. Job seekers are signing up and adding experiences to their profiles. The employers are also registered. They give you points as you work through the platform. Points increase your bargaining power while you are taking the job.

These platforms are a form of intermediary especially serving those start-ups trying to establish a clientele base to conduct their own business deals. They provide intermediary services for freelancers and clients in which the payment is transferred through these agencies after a cut for their commission, ranging from 5 to 30 per cent of the total amount of work, and eliminate the risk of non-payment for new freelancers. But after their career progresses as a freelancer they mostly prefer to work directly for their client without using these intermediary services.

These platforms are not preferred by experienced ICT workers as the competition is high, which drives the wage level down intensely. So the experienced workers prefer to get work through their own networks as skilled and experienced IT programmers. He explained his situation:

*I have been doing this work for about eight years and do not have any platform experience. If I want to get a job from these platforms my earning will be cut down as I do not have records there. I would not have earned the wage I deserve. So I seek work individually. On these platforms, the competition is intense.*

The multi-sources of clients are again similar for translators. Book translations for publishing houses, translations for news outlets, translations for NGOs and individual translations are the sources of work for one translator. For those that can do simultaneous translations then they can work for companies specialized in translation services. These companies tend to subcontract their work to freelance translators on an hourly or daily basis and refrain from hiring staff on full-time contracts.

## Working contracts

Working contracts for direct hires are often verbal and based on a trust relationship between an employer and an employee. Not having a written contract is mentioned as one of the biggest problems of freelance work and can result in workers not being paid for the job from time to time. To overcome this obstacle, ICT workers and other freelancers try to build regular working relations with a number of agencies, firms or publishing houses.

In some of their dealings, the workers have written formal contracts when they work with agencies and formal companies as freelance contractors. One of the respondents stated that he felt more secure if a contract was signed for his assignments because it guaranteed the fact that he would get his fee when the task was completed. He also mentioned his earlier experience of not getting his payment at all when there was no formal contract.

One of the respondents explained his written contract in which he was referred as a 'service provider' or 'expert' and stated that his status was as an independent contractor with respect to the firm and not an employee of the firm. The contract also stated that the contractor would not provide fringe benefits, including health insurance benefits, paid vacation or any other employee benefit. In the contract, the work itself was defined clearly without any reference to the number of working hours and also the contractor would get paid when the work was finished. Moreover, the contract also included the stages of work and how it would be monitored by the firm. The liability of the agency or client was limited to making the payment after completion of the work.

## Working hours and output-based work

The interview results indicate that all online freelancers work for output-based tasks with deadlines. None is paid for hourly work with the exception of translators when they did simultaneous translations, which they mentioned was an occasional job. Web-designers, graphic designers, software programmers and translators are working on specific tasks and are subcontracted with a deadline. When they get a job they are free to determine when to work in a day. With laptops, smartphones and data plans, online workers are able to meet their job demands practically wherever they are.

Working time flexibility is one of the main reasons why white-collar professionals choose to work home-based. As often mentioned, four or five hours of work a day is an ideal working day and some do shorter hours of between two to three hours. In the corporate world, individuals spend more than ten hours in their offices as Turkey has a long working hour culture. A graphic designer explained his working routine in the following statement:

*I work three to four hours daily. I can really control the number of hours I put in daily. For example, designing a logo for a company may take me a couple of hours to finish, but I usually ask for a week to finish it. Because the job itself is not the time you spend in front of a computer screen but I need to think over it and its design.*

A translator also explained her working routine:

*If this is a longer-term job planned such as a book translation, I work three–four hours a day. If an extra job comes in during this process, e.g. an article translation, if this extra job is short-term, then I have to work extra on top of the three–four hours a day for the book translation ... But in other times, I can first spend my day finishing the short projects immediately and, when I finish that project, then I work more intensely on the long-term translation.*

Though the working hours of home-based ICT workers seem to be shorter in comparison to regular office workers, homeworkers actually put longer daily hours in reality. It is stated that the number of hours worked is usually determined by how the workflow is. In some periods there is a high demand and they take in more jobs. So, the daily working time can be extended and during such periods they said that they could only spend time for eating and sleeping, and worked constantly to complete the work. As one respondent explained:

*I really regret that I have to spend almost 18–20 hours a day working by phone or computer. I work at home but I also have things outside to meet customer expectations for filming. I have to arrange new appointments almost every day, clarify the details of past appointments, or communicate price information for new customers. All that takes up most of my day.*

Therefore, the daily or weekly working time varies according to the demand they have and willingness of homeworkers to put in more hours. Similarly, other studies document the extensive hours of freelancers. For example, in Ukraine, on average, freelancers spend about 30 hours per week on online work, which includes 22 hours of paid work and eight hours of unpaid activities. Over 20 per cent of workers work in excess of 48 hours a week – a percentage that is higher than in the total population (ILO, 2018b). There are also studies documenting long and non-standard hours of freelancers. Shecchuk et al. (2018) shows how having work shifts and irregular work schedules is adversely associated with the well-being of freelancers.

During the interviews, the respondents mostly referred to their daily working time as the time spent directly on their actual projects; the time spent on learning new skills and finding new customers were not considered in their calculations. Spending time and investing in learning new skills and keeping up with the newly emerging trends in their related fields may also take a major component of their time. They also need to bear costs such as buying new software programmes, equipment and training packages.

## Earnings

In most of the interviews, homeworkers stated two important factors affecting their earning potential. One was their desire to work longer hours and get more work and another was their reputation in their working fields. Indications are that freelancing provides high income and work satisfaction for those with good reputations and who are able to have good-paying clients. However, most freelancers spend their time working for lower incomes. A software programmer stated:

*For example, I earned 18,000 thousand TL last month as I had a really difficult project which required such hard work. My average monthly income is around 5,000–6,000 or sometimes 7,000–8,000 TL. But your earnings*



*are solely determined by how much you work ... When I was in my full-time job three years ago, my salary was 5,000 TL per month. It feels like I am making almost the same amount that I earned from my full-time job three years ago as now from my freelance job. But I could have earned around 10,000 TL month by now and my social security premiums would have been paid.*

Unstable incomes are a main feature of home-based freelance work. If more jobs are accepted, then there is the potential to earn more, but this results in long daily working hours. The long-hour working culture in corporate work is the main reason why young professionals refrain from working in full-time office-based jobs despite the income security it provides.

*For me, it is enough to earn around 4,000–5,000 TL a month. You also need to consider keeping some as savings as the income varies and there are times when there is no job. But I must say that this income is not fixed and may vary by month. A freelancer's earning depends a bit on the person doing the work ... I don't want to work more than four-five hours a day and don't want to spend all my time in front of a computer. But again, the more you work, the more you can earn.*

As mentioned earlier, a good reputation is key to having access to well-paid jobs and maintaining a good client portfolio. Some freelancers take advantage of their reputation to work shorter hours and accept only a few jobs. A product developer stated that she worked a few hours a day and earned around 4,000 or 5,000 TL a month. But if she went back to her old days she could be earning more than 20,000 TL a month.

Online freelancers also encounter some problems regarding earnings. They cannot rely on standard rates for hourly or output-based work so there is a high fluctuation in rates. In addition, the many newcomers to online jobs-searching platforms for ICT workers has led to an increase in competition for jobs and thus a lowering of overall rates as many newcomers are willing to accept low pay rates for various reasons to get jobs and build up a reputation. The third is non-payment, which is often faced by freelancers. Here is an example of a non-payment case encountered by a product developer:

*It is good to work freelance because I earned a total of five years' salary in the first 1.5 years after leaving the workplace. But this should not be misleading as the earnings are not always so high and sometimes you cannot even get the money you agreed on. For example, I once did a job. Then a guy who gave me the jobs said I don't plan on paying you. He really said it bluntly. In this sense, it is very difficult to work freelance in Turkey, you are kind of left to business and work ethics of people you are doing business with. You have to look after your own rights, otherwise you can do business, but you can't make money. Since the legal process is too long, pursuing your rights through the legal system is not possible. Instead of experiencing the weary process of dealing with it, I get new jobs to eliminate the financial loss.*

Note that freelance work initially gives the impression of workers having more freedom and control over their working time and earnings; however, it also means that they have to work hard to find a new job, learn new skills, respond to shifting demands of employers and sometimes taking up unwanted jobs to survive in the market. All this adds to a sense of insecurity among the freelancers.

## Social security and health insurance benefits

In Turkey, both employees and employers pay social security premiums as a percentage of the gross base salary plus some other benefits. These premiums are paid towards retirement, health, sickness, work accidents and occupational diseases, disability, maternity and survivors' benefits. People can join the social security system through a regular employment contract as an employee<sup>14</sup> or self-employed or as a voluntary member who contributes to their own old age and health insurance. There are those who cannot afford to pay their premiums but their health premiums are covered only from the central government budget. In the interviews, the most important concern of ICT-based homeworkers was working without a formal contract

<sup>14</sup> One is registered by one's employer with the scheme and wage deductions are remitted by the employer and paid to the Social Security Institution on a monthly basis.

and the lack of social security coverage. Although the workers could contribute as self-employed, they would have to pay both contributions, which they often could not afford. This concern was raised in the interviews as none of the respondents was covered by a regular employment contract or voluntary contributions.

*The biggest problem for freelancers is working without a contract and social security. Paying my social security on my own is very expensive; I cannot afford it. I only pay my health insurance premiums for the time being ... I don't know what I will do when I am 65 years old! ... I am kind of beginning to worry about my old age security but I don't have a plan to tackle with this issue right now.*

Married women who are ICT home-based workers usually take advantage of being a dependent family member and use their husband's contribution to benefit from health insurance. They can also contribute to the private pension system, which is expanding in Turkey.

*Since I am not paying in any social security, I am covered by my husband ... When I was working in İş-Bank, the Bank used to contribute to our private pension account. After I quit my job, I stopped benefiting from that pension account ... Now I am neither paying in for the formal insurance premium nor my private pension account ... I don't know what I am going to do when I get older and my age progresses towards my retirement.*

The young age span of homeworkers somehow overshadows the importance of being a registered worker. For them, retirement is a boring concern and it does not seem to be very important in their lives. One of the respondents told us that he had not been to hospital in a long time and he was not worrying about his premiums right now. He also added that from time to time, his social security insurance was paid by the agencies for which he did regular work but not all the time.

*I am insured by my father so I can waive any health problems with this ... I cannot really bother with retirement. We retire at the age of 65 but I don't think that I can ever get pensions after all my situation is like this. Until this day, there is not a single day I have not done any registered work ... You know that I can continue doing freelance work for a long time but I think it is time now that I look around and get a corporate job. Recently I even got in touch with some of my contacts in my close circle to find a suitable job.*

## Occupational health and safety

The occupational health and safety of homeworkers is usually discussed within the concept of piecework and engagement with hazardous materials and chemicals as well as their possible health impact on family members and children. When people work with computers, it is usually perceived to be less hazardous than working on a construction site or in a factory. However, there may be hidden risks involved in working with computers, for example, ergonomic and psychosocial hazards that include risks to the mental and emotional well-being of workers, such as feelings of job insecurity, isolation, as well as long hours of work and poor work-life balance.

The interviews with ICT-based homeworkers reveal that freelancers are not concerned with health and safety issues and many did not state that they had faced any health issues so far. Even though no major health concerns were raised, there were nonetheless some issues. For example, a translator stated that her eyesight was gradually getting worse due to translation work but she also expressed that this had nothing to do with freelance work, as she might have the same problem if she worked in an office. She also cited the case of her friend who had to stop working as a translator due to her deteriorating eyesight. She stated that 'She was a freelance translator and constantly translating in front of her computer and then her eyes got so bad that she could not do translations any more'.

Ergonomic problems were also mentioned in relation to spending long hours sitting down at a desk and in front of a computer. The problems such as posture disorder, back and wrist pains, eyesight problems and hernia were often mentioned. A respondent explained her situation in following statement:

*I got a hernia because I sit long hours for days and days ... Another posture problem I have is that my right shoulder is lower than the left one. People tell me it is because I carry my handbag with my right hand but they are wrong. It is because I hold the mouse with my right hand all day long and sit at my desk with my right hand extended further along. There is a serious callous in my right wrist from holding the mouse.*

Besides the health risks involved in ICT-based homework, working alone at home can be isolating and poses different risks for workers. In case they become ill, workers do not receive any work-related support, such as paid sick leave, which can be quite critical from time to time. One freelancer explained another challenge of working alone:

*I took a month's work once. I was reporting weekly on the progress of the work as they wanted to monitor the progress. At that time, I got sick for a week, but it was so terrible that I was trembling in the sink like that. I called in to tell them that I could not keep up that week's work. But they kept calling me three to four times a day and pressuring me more when I could get the job done. It was too bad. For example, this would not have happened if I was working in an office ... After this event, I started working together with two-three friends. We share each other's work in case of sickness or other emergencies so that we do not have to live through such pressure.*

Health and safety issues are silent in the lives of freelance workers and often not seen as related to work itself. It is also important to consider that these workers are in the early stages of their career with a young age span so they do not worry much about health issues since they appear to be an occasional occurrence.

## Work-life balance and social isolation

In the Turkish context, women's home-based piecework is perceived to be a perfect work-life balance strategy for low-income women who can attend to their caring responsibilities while working at home. The freelance work of professionals cannot easily be seen as a work-life balance strategy as many are young and single workers. It is rather a response to the structural changes in labour demand of the industries where they work.

For many of the respondents, the perception of homework is seen to be a problem as they are often seen to be unemployed by their families and close circles. Therefore, homework is not a 'proper' job for a university graduate with high qualifications and does not correspond with an office job. The respondents often mentioned that they have constantly to put up with attitudes of others as if they were unemployed and their families put pressure on them to find a 'proper' job. As many mentioned, it became a huge psychological burden.

Since they work at home there is also an increase in the chores that they usually undertake in the domestic sphere. A mother of two explained this shift in the following statement:

*Let's say that there is a parents' meeting at school for children. He [her husband] considers that I can go to that meeting since I am not working in an office. Actually, my husband knows his domestic responsibilities and used to follow them when I was working in a bank. But my status change has affected me negatively in the domestic sphere ... There is this issue of distraction I am really concerned with. When I was at the office there was less distraction during working hours and I could work more concentrated, but working at home requires more dedication and a complete self-control, which is more difficult.*

In this case, freelance work intensifies the unequal gender roles for women, but especially for women who are married or with children, in taking up domestic duties and care work and risks further confining women to the domestic sphere. The burden of domestic chores is not only perceived as the responsibility of

married couples but also extends to cohabiting couples. A respondent explained her situation with her boyfriend with whom she lived and how she felt responsible for many domestic tasks although her boyfriend made no demands on her to do them. 'The home is my workplace at the same time. I feel like it needs to be clean and I feel the duty of cleaning it' was her explanation for doing the most of cleaning in the house.

*He prepares the breakfast in the mornings but he usually does not have the time to do the dishes. He always tells me that he will do them in the evening. But I do the dishes in the end as I cannot work in a messy house ... Although we do the big cleaning together at the weekend, but I am always in charge of all the little things that never end in a home.*

This division of labour acts in a similar way when it is the man who stays at home. The one staying home becomes responsible for the domestic tasks. Here one man explained his situation:

*When I was living with my girlfriend, I was working from home and she was working full time. So she was going out in the morning and coming back in the evening. When she came back home in the evening, she was always asking me why you didn't cook and why you didn't tidy the house since I stayed at home all day. That's why we argued so much. I'm not sleeping in all day long but doing work. It's hard for people to understand.*

Working in an isolated environment is another problem encountered by homeworkers. Many find freelance work to be isolating and lonely work as no human interaction is involved during day-to-day work activities.

*When you work in a workplace, you inevitably socialize at lunch and during breaks and even while working. But in freelance work you usually work at home alone. Sometimes I don't go out for three-four days. As such, one feels lonely and isolated.*

*The major disadvantages of freelance work is the isolation. You're too lonely when you work at home. If you work in an office, there are a lot of people working with you. You're chatting with them over tea or coffee breaks. But when you work at home, you're on your own. I live in loneliness. In this sense, the freelance negatively affects work-life balance.*

## Collective action: The case of *Ofissizler* (The Officeless)

*Ofissizler* (The Officeless) is a member-funded network of solidarity among freelance workers founded in Istanbul in 2018. It was founded by freelancers who met in *Dünyada Mekân*, which was a common space founded by freelancers, white collar workers and the unemployed, which operated between the years 2015 and 2018. The space was used as a co-working space during the day and housed the meeting of several grassroots organizations in the evenings. Freelancers who met there decided to self-organize and focus on the problems of freelancers and launched the network of *Ofissizler* in the summer of 2018.

*Ofissizler* aims to bring visibility to freelancing as a non-standard form of employment, investigate the working conditions of freelancers and build solidarity networks among them with the aim of overcoming the isolating conditions of freelancers. The concomitant network of solidarity not only aims to demand and advocate for legal rights that would bring income and social security to freelancers, but it also investigates the possibilities of establishing solidarity economies among freelancers and aims to support any such initiative.

To conclude, the aims of *Ofissizler* can be summarized as follows:

1. gaining recognition of freelancing as a distinct form of employment;
2. establishing networks of solidarity among freelancers (i.e. organizing co-working days, acquaintance meetings, social activities, etc.);
3. demanding and promoting legal rights for freelancers (i.e. setting minimum rates, preventing non-payment, demanding contract and social security benefits, etc.); and

4. supporting alternative forms of production that freelancers could establish (cooperatives, work-sharing, skill-pooling, etc.).

Issues such as job insecurity, unregistered work, non-payment of fees, long working hours, social isolation and occupational health and safety are the main problems that the organization is trying to offer solutions for. Many homeworkers do not know how to deal with these problems, so the *Ofissizler* advocates that acting together is important in solving common problems and eliminating the loss of rights to which they are exposed. Social isolation, on the other hand, is seen as the biggest disadvantage of not working in an office and the *Ofissizler* is looking into finding alternative working spaces for homeworkers but arguing against working in coffee shops which is not a form of collective action and is costly. For this reason, they are currently considering establishing a cooperative to meet their basic needs such as open shared office space and to gain a corporate identity to have an invoice and equipment rental.

*Ofissizler* is established by freelance professionals active in many fields such as software developers, translators, press consultants, illustrators, reporters and copywriters. Their main motto is explained by 'full-time solidarity, not freelance.'<sup>15</sup> In this sense, from time to time, they also support each other in getting jobs and there is also support in areas requiring particular attention during the contractual process of their work. They also experience working together on certain days of the week as a co-working day (Thursday) to keep the power of acting together alive. One of the main aims of freelancers is to support each other in the social isolation of work processes and they have activities such as open-air cinema, film screenings and breakfast get-togethers. They also organize informative meetings and workshops on topics such as freelance contractual procedures, legislative rights and documentary screenings.

#### ► Box 1. Ofissizler

Freelancers often work alone, away from the social and material resources of an office. In the workshops organized with freelancers, they have expressed the negative effects of this isolation both on their professional development and their emotional well-being. They are not only deprived of such material resources as free electricity, Wi-Fi, food, coffee or computer, but they are also deprived of the knowledge and experience shared among colleagues and the emotional and social support they may provide. To overcome the material, professional and emotional impacts of their isolation, freelancers not only hold experience-sharing workshops, they also regularly gather together on Wednesdays in *Dünyada Mekân* to co-work. By working, chatting and eating together, freelancers can recuperate from the loss of human connection in the workplace.

On the other hand, all freelancers cannot participate in those face-to-face discussions. Having seen the variety of financial or emotional reasons why freelancers may not come to such gatherings, we have decided to try our hand at establishing an online platform to chat and discuss with freelancers. We are currently using an open source chatting platform called 'riot.me', in which we have separate rooms for freelancers from different industries as well as common rooms for discussions among freelancers from different industries. In this way, we are trying to defeat the isolation freelancers feel due to being away from their colleagues. They can ask questions relating to their industry, ask for advice when they encounter a problem while working or simply chat to connect with other freelancers.

Source: Ilyas, Ozlem, Reframing Freelancing for Difference: Towards a Post-Fantasmatic Politics of Class and Work, Unpublished Thesis of Master of Arts in Sociology, Boğaziçi University (2019:187)

<sup>15</sup> Turkish translation "Freelance değil, tam zamanlı dayanışma".

## ► 5 Freelancers vs pieceworkers: Differences and similarities

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Piecework and online-based freelance work are distinctly different employment practices performed by different workers' groups. Their underlying common characteristic is their workplace where they perform their work.

For Turkish homeworkers, the ability to work from home enables one to control their own time and the flexibility of combining family care responsibilities with earning an income. While having control over their time and flexibility is more relevant for freelancers, being able to attend to family responsibilities while working is of greater importance for home-based pieceworkers.

The invisibility of homeworkers is widely perceived as the result of workers' own perception of their work as not being proper work because it is home-based. It is true that there is a blurring of employment statuses between unemployment, being housewives (unpaid care work), self-employment, that compounds their invisibility, as it makes having a public record of their jobs difficult. Their invisibility is not only in the problem of definition but also by the fact that no exact information is available on how many and where they are. In the policy discussions of the government, the employment status and social protection of industrial homeworkers and online workers are usually absent.

The invisibility of homeworkers is also a result of the informal nature of their work. Both for pieceworkers and freelancers, informal employment arrangements dominate industrial homework and the online freelance work sector. The contractual agreements with their employer, principal, agency or subcontractor are most often verbal. There is a risk of non-payment in an environment where the course of legal action is rarely practised. Some freelancers sign formal contracts that usually come with agency work and with the need to face lower pay rates to avoid the risk of non-payment. That is why most freelancers opt for informal work contracts and working relations. Industrial pieceworkers and freelancers are from quite different social and educational backgrounds, but when their informal working conditions and the vulnerabilities they face in their work are considered, there are commonalities between the two groups.

Whether a freelancer or pieceworker, their jobs are prone to certain risks that increase the vulnerability and precariousness of being a home-based worker. For freelancers, the pay is more satisfactory because it is more than double the minimum wage and they have the potential to increase their earnings by taking on more work. They also have had to establish a form of informal networks to keep the market price rate at a certain threshold and not let it go down too low. One strategy applied is to avoid using online agencies to find a job where price rates are much lower than the market price. For industrial homeworkers, the question of keeping earnings at a certain level is not relevant. Earning something is always better than earning nothing. There is not much that they could do anyway. Homeworkers have little experience in assessing going rates. Hardly anyone has considered negotiating a better piece-rate. If a homeworker assesses that she could earn an acceptable amount in so many hours of work, the rate would be good enough. The main strategy was work more, work faster and involve family members.

Having limited coverage of social security and health insurance benefits is a common vulnerability that homeworkers experience in Turkey. It also underlines their dependency on their families and enforces patriarchal gender roles and relations in families. Women homeworkers in particular rely heavily on their husbands' social security coverage regardless of whether they have a higher income and professional skills or are home-based pieceworkers. Women homeworkers, more than men, are dependent on their male family members for social security and health insurance. The male freelancers studied in this report, were more vulnerable as they did not have state and family coverage and were not covered by any individual alternative type of social security. They did not choose to voluntarily contribute to social security, usually because

of the high cost of paying both contributions. As a result, the freelancers face the risk of not having any health and social insurance during old age and unemployment.

Work-life balance arrangements indicate another common characteristic for both groups. For women, homework is a way of reconciling the demands of childcare, housework and other obligations of a home; therefore, their income-producing activities could be a mere extension of their domestic responsibilities, especially for pieceworkers. The flipside is that men also feel responsible for domestic tasks when they work from home if the person they are living with has a regular job. One respondent mentioned how he was made responsible for preparing dinner and doing basic cleaning by his girlfriend. But when a man has a wife and children at home, he does not undertake domestic chores.

The role of intermediaries is more significant in pieceworker women's access to work, but it also plays a crucial role in the case of freelancers especially in the early stage of their career. It is recorded that intermediaries charge pieceworkers almost 50 per cent of their wages in commission which is a manifestation of women's dependency on intermediaries to get work and generate income. The more vulnerable the workers are, the more intense is their exploitation and the higher the rates of commission. In the case of freelancers, the commission charged by intermediaries fluctuates between 5 to 30 per cent. The commissions do not reach the levels paid by pieceworkers, as freelancers have greater bargaining power.

The Turkish case shows that homeworkers have a weak organizational structure and collective action. The industrial pieceworkers have a weaker ability to organize and form collective action than freelancers. The informal work contracts, irregular workloads and isolation of homeworkers, hinders their capacity to act collectively. Significantly, trade unions usually play an unenthusiastic role in relation to homeworkers. With their focus on formal employment, trade unions have a tendency to treat homeworkers as competitors, who pull down the wages of formal workers. However, freelancers in Turkey are beginning to create their own organizations to defend their rights. The case of *Ofissizler* is a nice example of collective action.

Homeworkers in Turkey, notably industrial homeworkers, but also elsewhere, are among the most vulnerable groups of workers with little opportunity to defend their rights or improve working conditions. Focusing on two different segments of homeworkers, namely industrial pieceworkers and online-based freelancers, has brought to light the advantages but also the insecurities and vulnerabilities associated with both types of workers. Although there are social, cultural and economic distinctions between these two groups, they both tend to face a lack of job security and poor working conditions as well as a low bargaining power that generates vulnerabilities.

## Annex

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### Annex A. Details on interviewed workers

► **Table A1. Number of online freelance workers interviewed**

	Age	Gender	Education	Occupation
Interviewee 1	28	Male	Computer Engineering	Software Developer
Interviewee 2	36	Female	Economy	Photographer
Interviewee 3	32	Male	Computer and Instruction Technologies Teaching	Web Designer
Interviewee 4	33	Female	Applied English-Turkish Translation	Translator/Interpreter
Interviewee 5	32	Female	Sociology	Translator/Interpreter
Interviewee 6	41	Female	Industrial Engineering	Software Developer
Interviewee 7	36	Male	High School Graduate	Software Developer
Interviewee 8	40	Male	Communication Studies	Graphic Designer & Photographer
Interviewee 9	35	Male	High School Graduate	Software Developer
Interviewee 10	43	Male	Journalism	Freelance Journalist

► **Table A2. Number of pieceworker women interviewed**

		Age	Education	Marital Status
Focus Group I	1	35	Primary School	Married
	2	40	Primary School	Married
	3	37	High School Dropout	Married
	4	42	Primary School	Married
	5	37	High School	Married
	6	28	High School	Married
	7	41	Primary School	Single
	8	17	High School	Single
	9	16	High School Student	Single
Focus Group II	10	30	Primary School	Married
	11	38	Primary School Dropout	Married
	12	55	Illiterate	Married
	13	44	Illiterate	Married
	14	34	Illiterate	Married
	15	37	Primary School	Married



		Age	Education	Marital Status
Focus Group III	16	48	Primary School	Married
	17	32	High School Dropout	Married
	18	38	Primary School	Married
	19	34	High School	Married
	20	45	Primary School	Married
	21	43	Primary School	Single
	22	54	Primary School	Married
	23	39	Primary School	Married

## Annex B. Statistics on homeworkers

► **Table B1. Education level of homeworkers**

Education Level	Number	Percent
No Schooling	84,011	13.8%
Primary Education (5 years)	303,097	49.6%
Secondary Education	79,538	13.0%
High School	52,551	8.6%
Technical and Vocational High School	34,328	5.6%
Undergraduate Degree (2,3 and 4 year education)	48,418	7.9%
Graduate Education (Masters and PhD)	8,828	1.4%
Total	610,771	100.0%

Source: HLFS, 2016.

► **Table B2: Sectors distribution of homework (Top 10 Sectors)**

	Number	Percent
97 Activities of households as employers of domestic personnel	154,711	29%
13 Manufacture of textiles	120,240	22%
81 Services to buildings and landscape activities	92,918	17%
14 Manufacture of wearing apparel	51,348	10%
47 Retail trade, except of motor vehicles and motorcycles	47,595	9%
88 Social work activities without accommodation	27,747	5%
10 Manufacture of food products	15,152	3%
32 Other Manufacturing Activities	10,362	2%
85 Education	9,625	2%
15 Manufacture of leather and related products	9,363	2%
Total	539,062	100%

► **Table B3: Number of Weekly Working Hours**

	Number	Percent
1-10	91,608	15%
11-20	125,421	21%
21-30	133,636	22%
31-40	117,779	19%
41-50	70,676	12%
51-60	33,964	6%
61-70	17,938	3%
70+	19,751	3%
Total	610,771	100%

## Annex C. Employment status of industrial home-based piecework and freelance remote work

► **Table C1. Home-based piecework: employment status**

Employment status	Industrial piecework but informal. Not covered by Labour Law since no written contract is done.
Agreement/ transactions	No written contract/ all agreements are verbal based on trust relations.
Working time	Working hours changes by workload and deadlines. Unstable, irregular; zero to high intensity; low and high demand seasons. In busy times, it extends to 16-18 hours; It is 12 hours in normal working days. Days without work.
Working rate	Piece rates changes depending on the piece worked on and type of job done. Rate does not change by who does the work but usually set by subcontracting atelier and intermediary and known by all women. Intermediary get 50 per cent of rate charged for each piece.
Earnings	Monthly income range between 800 to 1000 TRY. Difficult to earn a stable income. Change with low and high demand seasons.
Payment practices	Cash-in-hand payments. Daily, weekly or monthly payments. Delayed payment may occur. Non-payment – occurrences in exports.
Joy security	No employment security.
Social security and national health insurance benefits	Unregistered work. Women are dependent on their husbands for health insurance.
Recruitment	Personal, familial relations based on trust, local community networks, and women's own networks.
Skills training	Early socialization, on the job, sample making by subcontractor.
Supervision and control	Product specifications & raw materials given by contractor/subcontractor; revision of rejects ; visits by subcontractor/ <i>fosuncu</i> .
Workplace and equipment	Homeworker's home and equipment Sometimes, intermediary can hire a place for pieceworkers to work together.
Legal recourse for breach of agreement	Under Labour Law.

► **Table C2. Freelance remote work: employment status**

Employment status	Not always defined due to absence of written contract. In rare occasions, a written contract is issued.
Employment relationship: Employee or independent contractor?	Not always clearly defined. Agreement might state “independent contractor.” But control & supervision practices may indicate employee status. Working for agents, intermediaries.
Identity of client/ employer	Companies, persons, agencies, advertising companies, soft-ware companies.
Contract	Often verbal specifically for direct hires. Agency intermediary – written agreement; or formal agreement via online account.
Probationary period	Not common. Online platforms give points to each job seeker that can be a form of portfolio for freelancer. Previous job experience.
Job security	None. May be terminated anytime, with or without notice by any party. Workers’ response: Secure additional online job; or another income source.
Working time	Purely output-based with deadline. No hours counted for the job itself but Workers spend more than 5 hours a day in a normal work routine.
Wage	Output-based, e.g. articles.
Payment practices	Paid through bank accounts. Different instalments through the completion of work.
Earnings	5,000 TRY Monthly average income. Changing by sector, translation earns much lower than software programmer.
Social security and health insurance benefits	No benefits linked to job. Up to worker to contribute voluntarily. In forma written contract, employers pay for social security contribution. Women are insured through their families (married or single).
Skills training	Worker’s account: online courses, other vocational courses. Employer/Client: various modalities; may give training video, or sponsor training course.
Supervision and control	Employer/client. Agency (translation). Daily or weekly checks (mid-term report i.e).
Workspace and equipment	Worker’s home & internet connection; and/or shared working space (The Ofissizler); worker’s PC/laptop & smartphone.
Do workers have a say?	No room for negotiation pay rate on digital platform. A well-known name can negotiate price and the content of the work.
Legal recourse in case of non-payment or breach of contract?	Under Labour Law.

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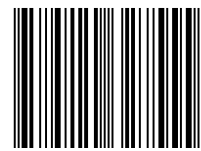
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