THE FLEXIBLE LABOUR MARKET: THE CASE OF HOMEWORKING

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Introduction

According to many commentators and employers, the 1990s is being seen as the decade of flexibility in employment. High unemployment rates of previous decades are being attributed to labour market inflexibilities, and some writers are urging greater flexibility as a means of achieving higher labour productivity (see, e.g., Metcalf 1989). Flexibility in employment, according to Evans and Bell (1986) can mean two things: 'functional flexibility', whereby demarcation lines are removed and employees are able to perform many different jobs, and 'numerical flexibility', whereby an organisation ensures its ability to respond to short-term changes in the demand for labour by making greater use of part-time, temporary or sub-contracted workers. Flexibility is often seen as the key to employing women, but in practice, as research has shown (Huws et al 1989), flexibility for the employer means low pay and loss of job security for the worker. The impetus for flexibility is being encouraged in the light of the single European market envisaged under the Single European Act, which took effect on 1 January 1993 and allows, among other things, for the free movement of labour throughout EC member states; and by the Treaty of European Union (the Maastricht Treaty). The growth of flexible employment patterns, particularly forms of employment known as atypical, is expected as part of the single market.[1] Atypical work, such as part-time or sub-contracted work, zero-hour contracts or the absence of employee status, has tended to be associated with women, and is also generally regarded as being of low status, particularly where it is accompanied by an absence of the range of employment rights and benefits normally taken for granted by employees. Recent research shows a growing employer usage of part-time and other atypical forms of work in Ireland (see Wickham 1993).

One type of atypical work being promoted as a desirable possibility for expansion is homeworking. Work involving information technology is considered particularly suitable: computer terminals may be installed in individuals' homes, with modems and other equipment enabling workers and firms to keep in touch with each other. Workers can carry out tasks at their own pace – and at their own expense, since the firm does not incur overheads such as heat, light and electric power. In the UK in 1992 British Telecom launched a teleworking project with a number of Directory

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Enquiry operatives, with a view to encouraging the use of teleworkers, with BT technology, by other employers.

Homeworking, however, is no new phenomenon. It is one of the last remnants of pre-industrial revolution working methods and at the turn of this century was the focus of a public campaign due to extremely low rates of pay. It was this campaign, and concern about 'sweated trades', which resulted in the establishment of what are now Wages Councils in the UK (now abolished) and Joint Labour Committees in Ireland. In the 1970s attention returned to homeworking in Britain with a number of publications on the subject, triggered by the Low Pay Unit (Brown 1974). Subsequent research includes Crine 1979, Cragg and Dawson 1981, Huws 1984, Bisset and Huws 1984, Hakim 1985 and 1987, and more recently Allen and Wolkowitz 1987 and Pennington and Westover 1989. ACAS published two reports on Wages Councils in 1978, both of which considered homeworking, and the House of Commons Employment Select Committee took evidence on homeworking in the Parliamentary session 1980/81. This research has consistently shown that homeworkers are poorly paid, generally lacking in employment protection, in insecure jobs and frequently unregistered for tax and social security.

As a result, it can be argued that homeworking is an extreme form of secondary employment. Literature on secondary and segregated forms of work have highlighted the fact that such workers earn poor rates of pay, have little job security, minimal benefits and few opportunities for promotion (Doeringer and Piore 1971, Edwards, Reich and Gordon 1975, Wilkinson 1981, Walby 1988, inter alia). It has also been argued (Edwards et al 1975, Barron and Norris 1976, Kenrick 1981, inter alia) that certain groups of workers are disproportionately confined to secondary and marginalised sectors of work, in particular women and racial minorities.

Homeworking is also rarely considered to be a form of employment. Most studies demonstrate that employers of homeworkers consider that the work is done merely for 'pin-money', as a 'hobby', and would consider any homeworkers to whom they give work as self-employed (Richards 1988). While courts have in some cases held that homeworkers are employees, the general legal approach (discussed in Richards 1989) is that there is no general rule on whether homeworkers may be regarded as employees.

Homeworking in Ireland: a case study

In Ireland, in contrast to the UK, there has been very little research attention on homeworking. Jones (1982) sampled three housing estates in Tallaght and found significant evidence of homeworking. The average hourly rate of pay found was £1.42½, with individual rates as low as 5 pence. The present author carried out a study of homeworking in the Republic of Ireland in 1987, which contacted both homeworkers and employers of homeworkers (the term 'employer' is used for convenience and does

not imply any legal relationship). For the purposes of the study, homeworkers were defined as follows: An individual who is employed to carry out work in his or her own home, on a regular and on-going basis, for a firm, agent or contractor, and is paid a wage (Richards 1988: 221).

Methodology

There are significant difficulties in obtaining respondents for a study of homeworkers. Homeworkers are a 'hidden' workforce, rarely registered for tax or PRSI, and rarely listed on any employment records. The sample for the homeworker study was obtained through media appeals, following a method which had been used for the first Low Pay Unit study (Brown 1974). An article was published in the *Evening Press* newspaper to explain the research[2], and this was followed by an appearance by the author on the *Gay Byrne Show* on RTE Radio 1, in which homeworkers were asked to contact the author to participate in the study. This method has the advantage of attracting a large number of potential respondents, and homeworkers are extremely difficult to contact by conventional study methods. Disadvantages include self-selection and the possibility of attracting only those who are dissatisfied with their work.

As the majority of workers in the study turned out to be hand-knitters (see below), this study was then followed up by one interviewing the proprietors of wool shops making use of hand-knitters. For reasons of resources, this study was carried out entirely in Dublin; while this will therefore not be representative of employers of hand-knitters, some of the homeworkers covered by the first study lived and worked in Dublin. In order to get as varied a response as possible, shops in a variety of locations were visited: city centre, suburbs both north and south, and with a variety of different socio-economic circumstances. About 50% of all shops visited were found to be making use of hand-knitters, twelve in all, employing about 52 knitters, all women. The numbers employed varied considerably according to the time of year and the number of orders received; individual shops employed between one and ten.

The response

After eliminating those who did not fit the definition adopted for the case study (above), the study population was 19, from 46 questionnaires distributed in response to letters. While this is small, it does compare favourably with similar studies in the UK. As had been anticipated, all of the respondents were women. Fifteen were married, nine with dependent children who were either minors or still in full-time education. The other married women had adult or no children. Four respondents were widowed, one with dependent children. The age-range of the women varied from mid-twenties to late seventies, and there was some indication of marriage and childbirth at an early age: one 26-year-old, for example, had two children, the eldest aged between 7–10. Two respondents were disabled.

The geographical spread was varied, covering most parts of the Republic, and distributed between rural and urban areas. Many respondents mentioned the existence of other homeworkers near them: one handknitter from Connemara wrote: "there's a lot of hand-knitting going on in our place". Traditional hand-crafts is an important industry in the West of Ireland, and much of this work is done by homeworkers.

Reasons for doing homework

There are two aspects to this question: why work at all, and having made that decision, why work at home. Despite stereotypical assumptions about married women taking part-time jobs to prevent boredom or for 'pin-money', the majority of homeworker studies have shown that women take such work out of financial necessity. This study found that money was a very significant factor in the decision to undertake handknitting for money: one woman, a widow, commented: "I am forced to knit to help my daughter who is in UCG. I would love to give it up." A similar comment was made by another respondent who had two student daughters.

Reasons cited for working at home included domestic or family circumstances, whether looking after children or dependants, running the family home, or in four cases, helping on the family farm. The 'convenience' of working from home was mentioned by seven respondents: this was explained as having the opportunity to earn some money while being able to attend to domestic responsibilities. Yet other studies of homeworking point out the difficulty of combining homeworking with childcare, and the British Telecom project referred to above actually discouraged women with children from applying to work at home, since it was believed that the work could not be combined with childcare (Bannister 1992). However, another advantage cited was saving on the costs of childcare or transport, and also the avoidance of tax[3].

While these reasons are fairly typical of those found in any study of homeworking, one additional factor was highlighted. The rural nature of much of Ireland, combined with poor public transport, meant that many women could not have found alternative means of employment away from the home. The fact that one respondent living three miles from the nearest town highlighted the isolation many women living outside metropolitan areas endure.

Six respondents had, in any case, never worked outside the home. One (aged 26) married and started a family directly after leaving school; the others were all aged 50 or over. Of those who had worked, most gave up work on marriage or childbirth: some due to a formal marriage or baby bar, and others due to beliefs about a mother's responsibility. These are typical of the reasons women tend to give up paid employment; the only exceptions in this study were two women who had been made redundant. This is likely to be an increasing problem for women: figures for December 1993 (ICTU 1993) show that women form one-third of registered unemployed, and that female unemployment is rising at a faster rate than male unemployment, in contrast to the position in the UK.

Types of work performed

Given the craft base of much of Ireland's traditional industry, it had been expected that work done at home would be traditional rather than that involving new technology, and this was found to be correct. Fifteen homeworkers were hand-knitters, eight knitting traditional Aran sweaters, three were machine-knitters, and one sewed moccasins by hand.

Much of Irish hand-knitting is channelled through agencies which sell completed garments to large department stores and specialist shops, as well as marketing overseas. However, most of the knitters in this study worked for small retail wool shops, where garments were knitted in response to orders from customers. A small number of knitters sent their completed work by post to their employer (the term "employer" is used purely for convenience, given the doubtful employment status of homeworkers), and then had to wait for payment to come by post. In these cases, although it was not specified, agency employment seems likely.

Almost half of the respondents had obtained the work by replying to an advertisement, either in a newspaper or a shop window. Some were recruited by word-of-mouth, and some were approached by employers: one explained that the proprietor of her local wool shop had noticed the hand-knitted garments worn by herself and her children, and had asked her to knit for the shop. These methods were confirmed by the wool shop proprietors, who had all recruited regular customers, or asked them to recommend friends. Some had been asked for work by customers.

Rates of pay

One of the features of homeworking is that rates of pay tend to be extremely low, and this was confirmed by the present study. One of the lowest paid was the shoe-stitcher. She was paid by piece-rates, with a 'piece ' being a single shoe, and had to complete 100 per week. Rates varied depending on the shoe, and the three rates offered were 16p, 17½p and 22½p, resulting in a weekly pay-packet of £16, £17.50 or £22.50. Completing 100 shoes per week meant that she had to work eight hours per day, seven days a week: this 52-hour week meant that her hourly pay varied between 29 pence and 40 pence. However, this was not the end of the story: expenses connected with her work included two telephone calls per week to her employer's premises: a cost of 40 pence (or an hour's pay at the higher rate). No allowance was made by her employer for overheads such as heat and light.

Hand-knitters were also paid by piece-rate, and two methods were used in calculating the rate. Some received a standard rate per garment, which might vary according to size or complexity, and others were paid a rate per 50-gram ball of wool. Six knitters were paid according to this method, three receiving £1 per ball, and the other three £1.10. Rates per completed garment could obviously vary greatly depending on the size, but while this method may go some way towards recognising the amount of time

taken on a garment, the complexity of a pattern can also add to the time taken. A comparison of the pay rates, shown in the table below, suggests that payment by weight does undervalue the work, since those paid per ball of wool tend to receive less for a completed garment than those paid per garment.

The table shows, for eleven of the fifteen knitters (those who gave adequate information) hourly and weekly pay, which was calculated using the information given about the time taken to complete garments and hours worked per week. There is a high degree of variance in the hourly pay rates, from 25 pence to 75 pence with a mean rate of 40 pence. An explanation for this could be the speed of knitters, since the rates per garment or per ball did not vary so greatly. This is confirmed by information supplied about time taken to complete garments: this varied between 20 and 60 hours, with a clustering of replies around 40 hours. With two exceptions, regardless of individual speeds, all knitters complete garments within ten days to a fortnight. This could suggest that employers insist on tight completion deadlines. No knitter mentioned this, though many comments were made about having to work until quite late at night and lacking time for housework. However, some of the employers confirmed in interviews that they put pressure on knitters to complete work within short periods.

Table 1: Pay Rates for Hand-Knitters

Knitter	Per Garment	Per Ball	Per Hour	Hours to complete	Hours per week	Weekly pay
1 (A)	£19	–	63p	30	15–20	c£12
2 (A)	£18	£1.10	30p	60	30	£9
3 (A)	£20	–	40p	50	25	£10
4 (A)	£16	–	25p	60–80	20	£5
5 (A)	£18	.50	20–25p	70–80	35–40	£10
6 (A)	£20	–	40p	50	35	£12
7	£19	–	50p	40	30	£9
8	£20	–	50p	40+	25	£10
9	–	£1.10	37p	40	30	£11
10	£15	–	75p	20	20	£15
11	£10	£1.00	55–67p	15–18	30	£20

(A) denotes Aran knitter. Four knitters gave incomplete information, and do not appear in the table.

These low rates of pay were then compounded by expenses incurred by the knitters. Most knitters had to deliver their completed work themselves, and collect materials for the next garment; this could not always be done at the some time since there might not be more work available immediately. Only one was compensated for any of

this: half of her bus fare was refunded. Three Aran knitters said that their employer refunded the cost of posting finished garments, and one other knitter's employer delivered and collected all work. Some estimated the cost of travel, one at £5 once a fortnight and another at £3 per week for petrol: this reflects the distance which had to be travelled[4]. Of course, other costs arise here, in that time spent travelling could otherwise have been spent working, thus earning money. This was put to the proprietors of wool shops: none of them made any contribution to the cost of delivery or collection of materials, and some appeared surprised that this should even be an issue, since knitters would anyway be 'passing', while shopping.

The proprietors were reluctant to disclose much information about pay rates. Six were prepared to say: two paid by weight, one at £1 per ball and the other at £1.50. This was for double-knitting; other rates were offered for different types of wool. The others paid by garment: one at £15, two at £20, though one of these offered £25 for more complicated patterns, and the last at £30. This shop was in quite an upmarket suburb of the city. Most proprietors expected work to be completed within two weeks; none was prepared to say whether there were any penalties for non-completion. However, during the course of one interview a knitter's daughter delivered a finished garment, which was overdue by a week. The customer by this stage had cancelled the order due to the lateness, and as the interview continued the proprietor commented that she had been 'let down badly' and implied that the knitter responsible would not get more work for some time.

Attitude to pay

Homeworkers were asked about other sources of income, from husbands' earnings, Social Welfare payments and so on, in an attempt to discover how dependent homeworkers were on their earnings. Obviously, in no case were earnings from homework a household's sole income. However, one respondent, a widow with two daughters in full-time education and in receipt of a contributory widow's pension of £74.15 per week, stated that she could not manage financially without the extra £11 or so per week. Another, whose husband received £27.90 per week disability benefit, earned £5 per week knitting; these amounts were necessary to supplement the meagre income from the family farm. These responses were quite typical: three other women were also dependent on some form of social welfare benefits, and had to support dependants.

Many complained about the work and what they saw as the low rates of pay. The shoe stitcher in particular felt very dissatisfied, working 56 hours per week which left her with little time for housework, and having to use coarse thread and rough needles with no protection for her fingers. One of the knitters commented:

> I would love it if we were paid a right wage for what we do – hand knitting can be very hard work and very slow. You can make some articles paid as low as £10.

Others felt similarly aggrieved. One, in her original letter, wrote:

> I earn about £10 per week for 25 hours' hard work. I think it's scandalous but I really need the money. ...I think this treatment should be highlighted in the media – it exploits women in the home who are the most vulnerable to this sort of treatment.

Those knitters who worked for agencies received payment by post, and a further problem arose here, in that delays were frequently experienced. The knitter quoted above was at the time waiting for £25 which was a month overdue, at a time close to Christmas. Another had been waiting for three weeks for £40, while another commented that she regularly had to wait up to six weeks for payment. It seemed to be the respondents who were most dependent on their earnings who were most aware of their own exploitation. Homeworkers are entirely without protection: a 'hidden' workforce who, by virtue of their doubtful employment status, are excluded from employment protection, rarely entitled to social welfare benefits as employees, and unorganised by trade unions.

The Relevance of Trade Unions

Homeworkers were asked whether trade unions could have anything to offer them. Just under half answered 'no', 25% said 'don't know', and the remainder, 30%, answered 'yes'. Only one of these had ever been a member of a trade union. Seven homeworkers had been trade union members when in previous employment: four of these replied 'no' and two 'don't know', which suggests that their experience of trade unionism had not been entirely positive. It was felt that, quite apart from problems connected with the scattered and hidden nature of homeworking, and its status as part of the 'black economy', trade unions would simply have no interest in organising homeworkers.

Those who believed that trade unions could be of help to homeworkers referred to a notion of collective power, as well as expressing a desire for a standard basic rate of pay. Even these respondents saw difficulties: it would not be easy to organise a scattered workforce, for instance. The shoe stitcher commented that attempts had been made to organise the homeworkers employed by her factory, but that this had failed for two reasons: first, homeworkers were afraid that unionisation would lead to the deduction of tax and PRSI from their pay, off-setting any union-negotiated wage increase, and second, many had husbands employed at the factory who felt that they would suffer if the homeworkers became unionised.

These negative and pessimistic attitudes about trade unions on the part of homeworkers are consistent with work carried out in the UK by Allen and Wolkowitz (1987). Many respondents in that study were fearful of losing their jobs if they became organised, and felt that in any case trade unions would have no interest in women homeworkers. Some previous union members were more positive than in the Irish study, however. The actual experience of trade unions in organising homeworkers is limited: within some unions there has been a view that homeworkers themselves are

uninterested, or that recruitment is only possible where homeworking is linked to a factory and homeworkers had previously been employees. Historical hostility on the part of the trade union movement to homeworkers has compounded the problem. However, Allen and Wolkowitz (1987: 149) suggest that examples from India demonstrate that it is possible for homeworkers to be organised; if trade unions are serious about protecting the interests of women workers homeworking is an area which cannot be ignored indefinitely.

One surprise in the study of proprietors came when one shop-owner demonstrated strong support for protection for knitters. She agreed that the rates she herself paid were too low, and was very critical of other proprietors who paid less: one of her current knitters had previously worked elsewhere for £7 per garment. Her solution was an enforceable national minimum wage for hand-knitters. This would be possible without loss of trade, she argued, through shops passing on the full payment for knitting to the knitter, which she herself did[5].

She argued that most shops, to her knowledge, tended to add about £15 profit for themselves. Shops would still make a profit anyway, since the wool was being sold at full retail price. She believed that homeworkers should go on strike – 'down needles' – for about a month at the start of the busy season, in autumn, which she thought would lead to an increase in pay rates.

Homeworking in Ireland: Conclusions

Within this limited study it is of course difficult to make any definitive conclusions about homeworking in Ireland. However, it does appear that the work is widespread, and this is confirmed by those who responded to the radio appeal, many of whom mentioned knowing others who were doing similar work. The homework labour force identified by this study is typical of that found by other research: women, usually married, trapped at home by domestic responsibilities and an inability to find alternative work. Many of the workers possess no marketable skills, due to the expectation society has made on women in the past. This leaves these women open to exploitation.

British research has shown, as Allen and Wolkowitz (1987: 125) have pointed out, that homeworking is not something done casually, in 'odd moments' between domestic duties or while watching television, despite claims by employers. The supposed flexibility which it is claimed homeworkers have in relation to when and for how long work is performed is limited in practice by often strict control exerted by the employer: production quotas, for instance, meant that the shoe stitcher in the study had to work eight hours per day, seven days a week.

Allen and Wolkowitz add that homework, far from being 'casual', must be seen in the context of a full, very long, working week. This frequently involves, as other studies have shown, working well into the night and at weekends, often requiring the help of other family members in order to complete work on time. This must also be

combined with housework and childcare: research has shown (Hakim 1980, Allen and Wolkowitz 1987) that most husbands of homeworkers do not perceive homework as 'work': these men pride themselves in not having 'working wives'. Thus a break from one kind of work is frequently used just to continue with another.

Rates of pay, as identified by this study, are extremely low: more than half earn less than 50 pence per hour. Of course, it is possible to argue that the over-representation of hand-knitters in the study causes bias, but on the other hand the shoe stitcher was one of the lowest paid. Since she mentioned other homeworkers working for the same factory, she was not an isolated case. However, many of the women (with the exception, it seemed, of those in most need of the money) simply looked on their earnings as an easy way to earn a little cash for a hobby they enjoyed: this could be a consequence of the type of work involved, knitting being something many women do for pleasure. The same could not be said of other types of homework, such as covering game-boards, hand-painting toys, making mass cards or machine-sewing tights.

The Politics of Homeworking

Research on homeworking is useful not only in that it provides startling information about the low pay involved, but in that homeworking provides a stereotypical model of what society perceives to be 'women's work', even more vividly than other typical 'female' employment such as that involving manual dexterity or domestic-type skills. Homeworking is low in status, it lends itself to taking second place to domestic work – and is expected to do so: employers assume that homeworkers will do the work in free moments, and thus congratulate themselves on providing women with a hobby for which payment is offered. Homework is poorly paid, but this is then justified by the argument that it is not work in the accepted sense. Women engaging in employment outside the home have for many years been assumed to be doing so for pin-money and thus do not take the work seriously; this is even more true of employers' beliefs about homeworkers.

The marginalisation of women in employment is in part a consequence of women's status in society, particularly in relation to married women and those with children: subordinate to men in the domestic sphere and in the institutions of society, and expected to perform a domestic role which takes precedence over any other roles which women may wish to perform[6]. If they wish to work, they must obtain employment to fit in with their domestic duties, which leads many women to take part-time work, or low-level jobs with few responsibilities.

Other women may become homeworkers, and as a result are consistently disadvantaged in terms of pay, conditions and employment protection. Because their place of work is in the home, traditionally regarded as a woman's place, it is easy for employers and others to justify the treatment of homeworkers. Since the home is the place where a woman performs her (unpaid) natural role, it is not regarded as a place of

paid employment. Yet research has shown (e.g. Richards 1988) that where men work at home, then the home becomes a legitimate place of employment and the man is considered, for all purposes, to be engaged in regular paid employment.

It is clear from this research, and other work, that no progress will be made towards improving the conditions of employment of homeworkers until traditional forms of homeworking become recognised as a legitimate form of work and those who perform such work are perceived as participating in paid employment. It may be argued that much of the disadvantage experienced by female homeworkers follows from their being perceived as housewives earning pin-money; if male homeworkers receive much more favourable treatment from employers, as evidence from another (unrepresentative) study by the present author suggests (Richards 1988: pp 310–313), then to deny this treatment to women is clearly discrimination. Homeworkers must not remain a hidden workforce, and for this to change, those who campaign for better conditions for the low paid must give some attention to homeworking. The spread of homeworking in the new technology area is unlikely to have any effect on the image of traditional homeworking, since those who engage in this work are more likely to be well-qualified and have worked in office premises prior to working at home, and are also better paid – although still lower paid than their counterparts in an employer's premises (Bisset and Huws 1984). Whatever advantages may be found for employers in flexible forms of work, very few appear to exist for homeworkers.

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Notes

1. This was the conclusion of the EC and Department of Labour Conference on "Women and the completion of the internal labour market", as reported in Industrial Relations News No. 8, 22 February 1990.
2. Published as "The Homeworker: exploited and underpaid" Evening Press 19 November 1986.
3. As the pay rates will show, however, with independent taxation the respondents in the study are unlikely to have been eligible for tax in any case.
4. This again confirms the findings of many other studies. Brown (1974: 12) cites one homeworker whose employer collected and delivered work, but then deducted one-eighth of her weekly earnings to pay for this 'service'.
5. She showed me an invoice as proof of the fact that she took no profit from the knitting process.

6. Even successful women find that this is expected of them: during the last Presidential election campaign Mary Robinson was accused of having neglected her children in favour of her own career; yet it occurred to no–one to ask the two male candidates how much time they had spent with their children.

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