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Gulsum Coskun, Turkey HomeNet Homebased Workers Trade Union Initiative

ABSTRACT
A slightly different version of this article was presented in the session titled as 'Organizing Women Homebased Workers in the Era of Globalization' by RC 44, Labour Movements, in the First ISA Forum of Sociology, 5-8 September 2008, Barcelona, Spain. It is an attempt to describe the main points of the history of the organizational struggles of women homebased workers in Turkey by a woman homebased worker herself. The article mainly focuses on the relationships between women's workload and the living and working conditions of homebased workers; organizational forms and strategies of homebased workers; organizational levels and their interactions; and in order to gaining visibility, the importance of building alliances.

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We are women homebased workers. Three types of homebased work are usually done together in Turkey. These are piece rate work, order based work and own account work. Piece rate work is when middlepersons bring work from factories (assembling zips, sewing toys, sewing beads onto dresses and blouses, packing spices, cleaning jeans, assembling car/truck engines or parts of computers etc.). Order based work is the work we take from our neighbours or sometimes workshops (making pasta or bread, preparing tarhana [a traditional soup], sewing, crochet, preparing dowry, etc). Own account work is the work we do in our remaining time hoping to sell it (knitting small baby dresses, needle work, knitting scarves, etc.). Also we make some samples to get orders, i.e. to display our work. And sometimes, this can be seen as own account work. However it is not own account, because we make these samples to get orders from people who do not know us. Let me give an example: In the same way that university educated people write a CV to find a job, we make samples. These samples are our CVs. Given that the work we do is irregular, and accordingly our income is also irregular, we have to do all these three types of work in the same week or even in the same day of our lives. Our main objective is to have regular income as soon as possible, even if it is very small; we want to earn our living. The

first two types are dependent work but the third, own-account, although formally it may appear to be independent work, in reality earns the lowest income of all.

It is really important for us not to confuse these three different types of our work. Some people confuse us with micro-entrepreneurs; but we have no capital. The things which they confuse with capital are our samples. We try to find orders for products similar to the samples that we exhibit because we need to find ways to fill the gaps in our work. Otherwise our already irregular work and income becomes more irregular. It should never be forgotten that we are not working in our free time, but working to earn our living.

The fact that we are woman is important for us. It is important to work together with the women's movement and support each other. We need to work together to find solutions to our problems which stem from the fact that as women we do unpaid domestic work besides our homebased work. All care work, rearing children, caring for the disabled, sick or older people are loaded onto our shoulders. Traditionally this was always the case and now with deregulation and privatization of education and health, this caring work is once again completely on our shoulders. And this stops us finding regular and secure work outside.

If the work a woman does at home is calculated as though it was paid at the minimum wage, the cost of a woman's unpaid labour would be visible. Besides, it is important to calculate the heavy cost to women of this double workload of paid and unpaid work. Since this unpaid domestic work is common for all women working at home or outside, and seen as the main responsibility of woman, it should be regulated by legislation in a way that the years spent doing unpaid domestic work are counted towards social security and retirement benefits.

Another aspect is that not only women's labour at home but also girls' labour is ignored and thought of as leisure time activities. We are raising our daughters not to earn their own living or to be employed but we raise our sons to earn their living, to take the responsibility for their parents and, after marriage, to take responsibility for their wives and children. Thus girls are taught that they need protecting and boys that they need to do the protecting. These patterns reinforce the power of men in the first place, and secondly of the older women with more authority in the family. Because we teach girls to be dependent and to be protected, the work done by girls is never given any value in money terms. This further reinforces the invisibility of homebased work. Our homebased work is seen only as leisure time activity.

Another point related to our working lives is that the literacy rate is low among us women homebased workers. In working life, we have almost no place. Our working lives start from understanding that we do embroidery work learned from our mothers, and in turn earn some money.

We have tried to organize ourselves since 1994, in Turkey. We have been discussing different forms of organizing since this date. There has been a process in which the Working Group supported the formation of Turkey HomeNet. There has also been a process by which we have announced the launch of Turkey HomeNet, our own organization. We want to say that supporters and supporting organizations are necessary, but integration of the whole work is important. Also we need to make a clear distinction between supporters and workers themselves. It is really important that workers represent themselves and formulate their own demands. Rights that are not used have no value. For

all these reasons, the announcement of Turkey HomeNet which is our own organization is really very important.

Throughout the process of forming Turkey HomeNet, we have used several ways to define our own priorities and to get to know each other. The most important are local workshops, which we have been organizing ourselves. We hold local workshops to organize and reach more women. We use them to expand our organization in a specific place and to tell women about Turkey HomeNet. In these workshops, we start by talking about ourselves and our working conditions. We exchange experience between women from different places. We give examples from our international organization. Doing this, we introduce ourselves as women homebased workers, look at the possibilities of working together and define our local priorities. We raise awareness that our problems are not only our individual problems, but they are common. We are not alone and solutions of our problems can be common, too. Other aspects of these two or sometimes three day local workshops are: given that it is not easy for women to go out of the home, and yet they give two or three days to participate a workshop, it means that women attribute importance to our workshops. This is really important for us. It means that women decide to make an effort to understand and discuss our rights, exchange experience and search for solutions together.

Organizing is not merely organizing ourselves. The general aim of our struggle is to gain visibility. Homebased work is a kind of work that is both already widespread and spreading and this has some results. In this country, there should be a national policy on homebased work. Homebased work should be included in the policies of many institutions and organizations. However, in practice there is almost no sign of this kind of national policy. Thus, it is really important to gain visibility in the eyes of other stakeholders such as public institutions, universities, NGOs etc. Also it is necessary to build and develop alliances with other parts of the working class, because homebased workers are workers.

What kind of organizations do we have in Turkey? Our first necessity was to create/develop our own organizations at local level. Now, our local organizations vary: in Antalya (in the south Anatolia) we have self-help groups and a bazaar group, in Avcilar, Istanbul a homebased women workers' cooperative; in Mugla (in southwest Anatolia) a bazaar group previously and now a work team; in Hakkari (in eastern Anatolia), a work team and also an own account restaurant management; in Aydin (also in southwest Anatolia) a work team which takes collective lunch orders from some companies or makes bergamot jam; in Diyarbakir (in southeast Anatolia) a piece rate workers' group who work separately within a cooperative. We gather round the work which we can do together in our locality. We want to have work which we already know and can find ourselves and can teach each other. We want to have equal pay together.

On the other hand, income generating organizations are not our only organizations. These are also rights based organizations. Turkey HomeNet is our national solidarity network and our rights based organization. All the income generating organizations in different localities get together in Turkey HomeNet. We, as Turkey HomeNet, are developing a national policy, prioritizing and demanding our rights and carrying out actions. Nowadays, we are discussing and finding out about unionization and the conditions needed to form a union.[2] The main aims of Turkey HomeNet are to grow in our own rhythm, to strengthen our national, regional and international relationships, and

to build national and international policies together with other stakeholders. With 'our own rhythm', I mean that: we should work to earn our own living on the one hand, and to work as volunteers for the organization at local, national and international levels on the other. Also we are serious about discussing every issue together and having transparency and equality within the organization. Thus doing all this work takes time and seems slow, sometimes it seems so to us. However when we turn back and look at the work we have done, we can understand that it is not really slow, but we have made real gains.

What are our organizing strategies? Mainly holding local workshops and doing mapping. We have used these strategies for both organizing in localities and formulating the demands by which our national rights based organizations are shaped. I have just talked about local workshops, however I would like to stress once again that in order to form a national policy, we have to have a method for determining local priorities. As to mapping, when we, homebased workers do mapping, our aim is to build our own work team on the one hand, and to find ways of acquiring our rights on the other. But we have learned many things in mapping and this led us to make further elaboration of our priorities. As women homebased workers, our knowledge about our own lives has increased. Because, while doing mapping, we discuss our occupational illnesses, women's problems, our illiteracy, our work without social security. It is not possible to work together, to build a work team every time; with mapping, we thought that even if we don't build work teams, we can find ways to get together. And this led us to our rights based organization. In other words, even if our main aim seems to be to build work teams, our underlying aim which does not change and for which we together struggle, was to acquire our rights. For this reason, we have found that mapping done by women homebased workers themselves is fruitful. This is a lesson we drew from our experience. Mapping done by non-homebased workers resulted in the women who were interviewed thinking that they would receive some form of social welfare. Although when non-homebased workers do the mapping, information on homebased work can be collected and this information is important, our main aim is for an organization to emerge out of the process. When we do mapping, we can acquire both information on different kinds of work and the problems, and possible solutions. Through mapping, we also talk about our international and our national organization. We don't use a questionnaire. We have a detailed conversation. We talk about everything in the women's lives. In other words, we do mapping to find women like us and together with these women fight to build a work team and also most importantly to fight for our rights. Because, our persistent common feature is that we are women workers with no social security.

Finally, I will talk about how we build collaboration and alliances. First of all, by participating in trade union conferences, we tell of our way of working and our problems and make a call for collaboration. On the other hand, we act together with other workers from the organizing and preparation of workers' demonstrations which classical trade unions are also involved in, and in street protests. Sometimes we have made calls for these actions. We have told the existing unions that informal labour should be seen and that we are workers, because we should persuade the unions to recognize informal workers. Also we have made efforts to change legislation on trade unions, since in Turkey to be a member of a trade union you have to have a social security number and a workplace number. This condition is the most important factor keeping all informal workers outside the unions and

stopping them unionizing. So we are struggling to change this legislation. Also we have organized meetings, gathering all stakeholders together. In these meetings which we call public policy workshops, representatives of relevant public authorities, unions, academics, and women's groups gather. We explain our demands and propose solutions in our own language and work together for these solutions. We don't say 'Please you do it, and we will wait for you'.

As Turkey HomeNet, we also carry on our international relations; we don't confine ourselves to passively continue our relations but we try to shape them. Why? As I wrote before, to be seen, to touch each other, to exchange experiences, and finally to see that we are not alone. Also we are doing this, because our work is not irregular within our country alone but also globally work is moving to places where labour is cheaper. We cannot confine ourselves to our individual country, but we should make contacts all over the world. In the world there is no difference as regards the working conditions of women homebased workers. We find it important to share this information, to learn about each other and to build alliances internationally.

Lastly, the largest umbrella under which we collect all our work is visibility, and visibility is not merely organizing. For instance we are attending the Fifth International Occupational Health and Safety Regional Conference organized by the Ministry of Labour and Social Security of Turkey, and are making a presentation on health and safety issues of women homebased workers. We will also participate in the World Congress of Public Health in 2009 and planning to make a presentation. Our participation in the First ISA (International Sociological Association) Forum of Sociology is also part of our struggle for visibility and to build alliances. We were there because we would like to introduce ourselves, to know each other, to make contacts and to build alliances with social scientists and researchers.

NOTES

[1] Translated by Dilek Hattatoglu, edited by Jane Tate.

[2] On 10 November 2009, we launched our rights based organization, Turkey HomeNet Homebased Workers Trade Union (Ev-Ek-Sen) on the basis of international legislation.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Gulsum Coskun has been a homebased worker since 1985, mainly working in sewing, embroidery and traditional food production. As a founding member of Turkey HomeNet (National Solidarity Network of Homebased Workers) she is one of the organizers at local, national and international levels and is now struggling for the Turkey HomeNet Homebased Workers' Trade Union Initiative. She has completed primary school. In line with the most general aim of Turkey HomeNet – creating visibility – she has written a number of articles and presentations. Some examples include 'Occupational Health and Safety in Homebased Work', lead author, 5th International Occupational Health and Safety Regional Conference, 1-3 November 2008, Istanbul (published in the Conference CD); 'Turkey: Building Solidarity', The *Newsletter of Homeworkers Worldwide* 3: 6-7, January

2008, Leeds, UK; 'Letter from Women Homebased Workers: What is Homebased Work? Who are We?', lead author, *Chemical Union Women Magazine*, March 2008, Istanbul, Turkey; and 'Greetings from All of Us to You', a special issue of *Aviation Union Magazine*, 8 March 2008: 33-34, Istanbul, Turkey.