Positioning women homeworkers in a global footwear production network: How can homeworkers improve agency, influence and claim rights?

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**Positioning women homeworkers in a global footwear production network: Identifying barriers and enablers to claiming rights**

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Abstract
This paper theorises the position of women footwear homeworkers through the lens of global production networks. Using data collected in India during 2011 to 2014, it illustrates the asymmetry of power between network actors, and attests to the poverty, invisibility and lack of acknowledgement and representation characterising leather footwear homework. It represents leather footwear homeworkers as working from the margins of these networks, with weak links to most other actors in the networks. Drawing from the concept of social upgrading and bringing in concepts from network regulation, the paper asks questions relating to how marginalised and informal workers might increase the power and capacity of their participation in GPNs.

Keywords: homework, leather footwear industry, India, social upgrading, global production network, network regulation.

Interviewer: So imagine, if you are the minister of the state and you could make some changes for homeworkers, what would you do?

Interviewees: (silence).

Interviewer: But just imagine.

Interviewee1: Free health treatment and then...

Interviewee2: Health and then they increase the piece rate.

Interviewee3: Education assistance for the children. So we are finding very difficult to educate our children, so educational assistance.

Interviewee4: So everybody has the same issues, she is talking on behalf of us yeah.

Interviewer: And when your children grow up and finish school, do you want them to do stitching work?

Interviewee’s: No, no way. This should end in our generation. They should go to a better job and come up in life.

Interviewee1: What you are going to do with this research?
Interviewee2:  *This is the first time of my many years of experience nobody, talked to me like this, nobody asked me anything. You are the first person, what you are going to do with this?*

(Homeworker group interview, 2013)

We begin this paper with a brief extract from our data collected from footwear homeworkers in India to acknowledge their presence – albeit marginalised – in global production chains/networks and to honour their hopes for improving their lives and their aspirations for their children. This paper aims to position women homeworkers as constituents in a footwear production network. In India, women homeworker’s labour is embodied in the production of men’s leather shoes that are exported to global brands. Their labour is an essential element in the subcontracted production network that is utilised to produce a highly marketable commodity, yet their labour is neither valued, nor acknowledged.

The paper aims to engage in the broader dialogue regarding worker representation and labour in global production networks, which are current concerns in employment relations research. The network metaphor was captured by Castells (2000) to describe a process enabling communication and technologies. Within the global value chain literature, the concept of global production networks (GPNs) is used to encapsulate the numerous actors that separately and together, collaborate, compete and communicate across the production, distribution and consumption continuum. As a relational concept, its principal strengths lie in its capacity to reflect the range of relationships between the multiple institutional actors (firm and non-firm actors), to capture the linkages and influences between global and local relations, and to locate and highlight the diverse power relations within the network.

However, several authors have criticised the GPN literature for failing to adequately theorise the role of labour. Carswell and De Neve (2013) call for a more ‘refined analysis, which recognises the agency of workers as demonstrated in a diversity of agency practices, including but not restricted to “resistance”’. Broadening the GPN construct in this way draws attention to how workers and their collectives participate in, experience and respond to the multi-scalar flows between and within institutions, including various governance mechanisms. Such an expanded concept of GPNs has
the potential to enhance analysis of the social relations of production, of class, conflict and resistance. A variety of other literatures also discuss workers’ use of broad networks to influence corporate behavior, such as in global consumer campaigns and social movements. In particular, the network regulation literature theorises networks wherein various actors have opportunities to gain and claim legitimacy as regulators (Baldwin and Black, 2008).

To the extent that the above literatures have considered efforts by workers to draw on network relationships to advance their cause, the focus has tended to be on efforts by formally employed workers. However there is emerging documentation of such approaches being used among informal workers, including homeworkers (Delaney et al., 2013). In our paper, we combine GPN and network regulation literature to flesh out the types of policy/institutions/relationships that can improve homeworker recognition and power in the chain/network. Homebased workers struggle to balance time, space and productivity between income-generating and caring tasks in the home; similarly they struggle to negotiate a space in the GPN. The act of providing space to marginalised workers, their voices and actions is of itself important and is a key contribution of this paper, but in the context of global production we seek to understand GPNs and their intersection with worker visibility, agency and resistance.

Who are the key actors in this footwear GPN and how do they relate to homeworkers? By what means can footwear homeworkers have influence in a footwear GPN and improve their working/life conditions?

**Situating labour in GPNs**

The global production network (GPN) literature emerged from an earlier focus on global commodity chains and global value chains (GVC) (Gereffi and Korzeniewicz, 1994; Gibbon et al., 2009; Rainnie et al., 2011). The main focus of the GVC literature was on the way firms use their political, economic and managerial resources to maximise the efficient operation of their production chains (Raworth and Kidder, 2009; Rainnie et al., 2011). In contrast, an important feature of the GPN, as a relational concept, is that it attempts to surpass the narrow focus on firms to ‘encompass all relevant sets of actors and relationships’ (Coe et al., 2008: 272).
Coe et al., (2008) propose a heuristic framework to represent the GPN, consisting of three interdependent and embedded layers. The first layer includes the social, cultural and economic norms and institutions of the capitalist market system. The second layer, which we will refer to as the GPN power relationship sector, incorporates the GPN actors – state, firms, non-government organisations (NGOs), labour, and consumers. This is where the homeworkers are located and includes the interactions and power relationships between the various actors. The third layer focuses on the uneven geographies of distribution, represented by the patterns of inequality or ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ within and across GPN entities and geographic regions (Coe et al., 2008). This GPN framework acknowledges that firms are not the only actors with influence that can shape the processes of production, distribution and consumption. It is *polycentric* in that it recognises non-corporate actors such as state, labour, NGOs and consumers are important contributors that influence the GPN.

Importantly, this framework also situates the GPN beyond being purely about economic exchange (Levy 2008). From a labour relations perspective, the GPN concept thus has the potential to be utilised to analyse work and employment under current global economic conditions. However, Rainnie et al (2011) argue that the GPN literature has largely conceptualised labour as one of the various institutional actors, represented through their labour unions. While these authors contend that labour is the ‘ultimate source of value’ (p. 161), they see trade unions as but one form of worker organisation. They argue that it is imperative to go beyond abstractions of labour, to see GPNs as networks of ‘embodied labour’, constituted by individuals who are ‘real people’, who are spatially and socially embedded in a geography and culture, and whose lives are both affected by and influence the network. By extension, they argue that the study of GPNs should include labour as subjective agents ‘in both individual and collective terms’ (p. 161). The question of how ‘unrepresented’ workers, such as homeworkers, might be acknowledged and assert influence within the GPN therefore remains a gap in this literature which warrants further attention.

**Social upgrading of labour**

Upgrading is a pivotal concept within the GPN literature that refers to benefits that may accrue to members of the network, most usually to ‘lead’ firms such as TNCs or buyer firms, but also to local suppliers and to workers. The literature distinguishes
between economic upgrading and social upgrading and refers to the possible links between the two (Posthuma and Nathan, 2010; Rossi, 2013). The GPN network literature has focused on economic upgrading, in particular the economic benefits for supplier firms that upgrade technological processes and work organisation to improve flexibility, quality and speed of production to meet lead firm standards (Posthuma and Nathan, 2010). Social upgrading is a concept related to ‘decent work’ as articulated by the ILO (2002). The scholars who have developed and applied this concept have considered the potential benefits for workers brought about by economic and technical upgrading as well as other strategies for improving respect for workers’ rights in global supply chains (Barrientos et al., 2011; Posthuma and Nathan, 2010).

The factors contributing to the low wages and precarious work conditions in labour intensive industries are well documented (Phillips, 2011). While there is evidence that workers in first tier supplier factories can experience some, though limited, benefits as a consequence of economic upgrading (Barrientos et al., 2011; Selwyn, 2011) workers beyond the first tier supplier, tend to be employed on short-term contracts or under other precarious or vulnerable work arrangements including, in the most extreme cases, forced labour (Barrientos et al., 2011; Carswell and De Neve, 2013). Therefore, the work becomes less secure, lower paid, and rather than making significant gains, these workers are more likely to be captive to work and have little more than a survival strategy, particularly for women workers (Barrientos et al., 2011; Phillips, 2011; Raworth and Kidder, 2009).

Workers in labour intensive industries are commonly referred to as exploited victims and situated at the bottom of supply chains. Conceptualising these workers in a production network offers a new way of conceiving their position. While workers may be disadvantaged and captive to the terms of the lead firms and suppliers, adapting Coe et al (2008) GPN heuristic they can be positioned alongside the firm and other non-corporate actors in the power relations sector, which opens theoretical space for exploring other ways in which they might participate with influence in the production network (Coe et al., 2008, Levy, 2008). Importantly, since trade unions have been effectively excluded from many formal workplaces and traditional forms of worker organising are failing to reach informal workers (Carswell and De Neve,
2013; Mezzadra, 2014; Philips, 2011; Selwyn, 2013), labour representation needs to be reconceptualised within the GPN framework as part of this contested terrain.

**Labour and networked regulation**

The regulation of transnational corporations (TNCs) has emerged as a critical component of responses by corporate, state and non-state actors, unions and NGOs (Delaney et al., 2013). Neoliberal globalisation has contributed to the decline in state protection of labour rights (Harvey, 2006), but various forms of private regulation, such as, multi-stakeholder initiatives, global framework agreements, corporate codes and industry initiatives have to some extent opened up new opportunities and degrees of accountability. Barrientos et al., (2011) describe this shift as a double movement, firstly as a move by corporations to avoid regulation and standards, followed by responses from various non-state actors that aim to use private standards such as non-judicial mechanisms to reinstate some form of regulation. The role of regulation and accountability is useful to consider in relation to GPNs since workers may utilise various broader networks of stakeholders to influence corporations, and this may be viewed as forms of participation and resistance in the GPN (Carswell and De Neve, 2013).

The polycentric nature of GPNs lends itself to understanding how local, national, and transnational nodes of production intersect. Two key nodes that have the most potential to assert pressure on lead firms are workers and consumers (Coe and Hess, 2013). Such pressure may be mediated via transnational networks of unions, NGOs or a combination of both. Similarly, network regulation (Braithwaite, 2006; Black, 2008) portrays a more complex and polycentric regulatory landscape (Black, 2008:137). The plurality of actors, types of mechanisms, relational and the spatial location of actors, all contribute to the complexity of regulatory responses and how various actors exert influence across a network (Black, 2008). The network regulation approach presents various actors, or nodes, in a network with opportunities to gain and claim legitimacy as ‘regulators’ and hence to obtain and sustain influence over the behaviour of other persons and institutions within the network (Baldwin and Black, 2008).

At least potentially, the network regulation approach offers a means to address how workers may benefit from, and contribute to governance in, the GPN by drawing
attention to the roles being played by the state, business and non-state actors and how each contributes in this dynamic regulatory field. While the extent to which multi-stakeholder initiatives and other non-state forms of ‘networked’ regulation has benefited workers in global supply chains is contested, there is some evidence that multi-stakeholder initiatives can result in limited benefits for formally employed workers in the first tier of global supply chains. In particular, social upgrading has been observed in those exceptional cases where global companies adjust their purchasing practices in order to provide their suppliers with more predictable orders and support those suppliers to enhance their productivity and human resource management (Barrientos and Smith, 2007; Raworth and Kidder, 2009; Rossi, 2013).

There are also a number of documented cases where dismissed trade union leaders in garment and footwear factories in the global South have worked with local and international NGOs and/or trade unions to hold global companies to the promises in their codes to uphold trade union rights (Connor and Haines, 2013; Jenkins, 2013). Jenkins (2013) for example documents how Cividep, a labour rights NGO based in Bangalore in South India, worked with formally employed women garment workers to establish a “pre-union” savings organisation and then a full trade union with over 2,000 members. Members of that union have faced bullying and intimidation from their employers but have worked with Cividep and its international allies to use both pressure on global brands and local state mechanisms to get dismissed trade union leaders reinstated and pursue other rights. While these developments suggest networked regulation has at least some capacity to influence the behavior of powerful corporations, there is much less evidence of these networked regulatory approaches reaching the nodes of the production network where workers are labouring under precarious and informalised work arrangements, such as homework (Raworth and Kidder, 2009; Mezzardi, 2014).

**Women homeworkers in GPNs**
A key feature of labour intensive industries such as garment and footwear is the dominance of women workers, who are perceived as cheap, compliant and nimble (Mills, 2005). Bair (2010) discusses the gendered nature of global production and cautions against the gendered global assembly line being considered merely as an end, proposing instead that these large groups of women workers are a key element of the
global production network. Women’s participation in the labour market has increased, yet they remain responsible for social reproduction, which means they are disproportionately represented in the types of work most likely to have greater levels of precariousness (Mohanty, 2006). Importantly, blurred boundaries between paid and unpaid work, and formal and informal work are critical to understanding women’s involvement in work arrangements such as homework: although precarious, insecure, unrecognised, low paid and usually unprotected, it provides an opportunity to combine their roles (Delaney, 2010; Mezzadri, 2014).

A common characteristic of homework is its ‘invisibility’ (Boris, 1994; Burchielli et al., 2008), as homeworkers work from their own or neighbours’ homes. Homeworkers contribute to the global economy, but their contribution is often unacknowledged or trivialised by employers (Burchielli et al., 2014). They are invisible to labour market regulators, to consumers, and perhaps even to themselves, in the sense that they may not identify as workers (Hill, 2001). Homework is usually unacknowledged and unprotected by industrial labour laws (Prugl and Tinker, 1997). Through the use of homework in urban and rural locations, suppliers to national and multinational corporations reduce their overheads and economic risks by transferring the pressures of prices and tight deadlines imposed by lead firms onto the most vulnerable workers at the bottom of supply chains (Mezzadri, 2014).

In general, the GPN literature suggests that economic and social upgrading (and its opposite process, downgrading) occurs by virtue of the relationships within the network (Barrientos et al., 2011). For example, the adoption by nation-states of specific policies may encourage foreign and local investment, leading to specific industry development, involving various, strong relationships between the state, local and global firms (Posthuma and Nathan, 2010). Thus, economic upgrading occurs through a range of strong relationships that include connections with powerful actors, for example, a local first-tier firm may be connected with the global buyer as well as other local suppliers. Similarly, documented cases of social upgrading for workers indicate they have been connected with a firm that is upgrading and, in some cases, with a labour organisation that advocates for them (Posthuma and Nathan, 2010).
In the case of homeworkers, their invisibility (and home location) means they have few connections in the GPN, usually only being connected to the person that provides them work. However, there are a small number of documented cases showing some upgrading for informal workers (Posthuma and Nathan, 2010) and homeworkers (Burchielli et al. 2009; Raworth and Kidder, 2009), where these have had a greater number of relationships within and been more strongly connected to the network. This paper reports on how homeworkers might gain access to social upgrading and how governance and regulation fields in the GPN may assist this.

**Homework in the leather footwear sector in India**

We use the Indian leather footwear industry to highlight the situation of informal homeworkers hand stitching shoes in a GPN. The Indian leather footwear industry has produced shoes for export and the domestic market from the mid-19th century. Since the 1970s, government policy has supported the industry to increase its export focus to compete in the global market. Government liberalisation policies have contributed to financial support for the industry and the promotion of market flexibility, deregulation of the labour market, reduction in bureaucracy for foreign investment and the rapid increase in special economic zones and leather and footwear production clusters (Damodaran and Mansingh, 2008).

The weakening of labour laws, a weakened labour inspectorate and increased militancy of employers in the liberalised context alongside a limited welfare net has left workers and unions more vulnerable (Badigannavar and Kelly, 2012). An estimated 90% of the manufacturing workforce are employed under informal employment arrangements; many employed as contract workers in factories and many more homebased or working in small workshops, these workers are commonly referred to as unorganised workers (Badigannavar and Kelly, 2012). Previous research indicates that homeworkers in the footwear production network have the worst employment conditions, the most precarious and insecure work, and are the least visible (Barrientos et al., 2011; Mohanty, 2006).

**Method**

This paper draws on data collected from 2011 to 2014 relating to Indian homeworkers producing leather shoes for a GPN. We conducted interviews with footwear
homeworkers; Indian suppliers and subcontractors; Indian footwear industry group representatives; international footwear brands; local NGOs; international NGOs; and representatives of both an international industry code and an multi-stakeholder initiative.

Our primary research site was the town of Ambur in Tamil Nadu and surrounding villages in which approximately 20,000 homeworkers are involved in hand-stitching leather shoes for export (FHWW, 2013). We interviewed 116 homeworkers from twelve different villages in the area. We conducted three field visits to Ambur: one in December 2011, one in April 2013 and one in January 2014. In addition we employed a local research assistant who conducted interviews in April 2013 and August 2013.

Our research was facilitated by Federation of Homeworkers Worldwide (FHWW), an international NGO that has a long history of documenting homework, advocating for homeworkers and assisting in organising initiatives (Burchielli et al., 2008). Our method also involved observing the work of FHWW. Before our research began, FHWW had begun a partnership with a local NGO to try and empower women homeworkers in and around Ambur.

Our interviews were semi-structured, based on open, general questions (Miles and Huberman, 1994) about working conditions and arrangements, hours of work, and worker representation and protection. Researchers conducted the interviews with homeworkers and other local participants through local interpreters. Transcripts were subsequently checked by researchers and translators to ensure accuracy. These revised transcripts were then analysed thematically and organised into broad categories (Richards, 2009) responding to the aims of the research to understand the nature of Indian footwear homework in GPNs. Broad coding categories included: Indian footwear industry (features); Indian footwear homework and homeworker (characteristics); social and institutional actors; connections between NGO non-corporate actors, brand and supplier behaviours and discourses about homework in the industry. In the exposition of the data that follows, the names and identities of informants and homeworkers have been changed in accordance with ethical requirements for privacy and confidentiality.
Poverty and lack of choices

From the time of our first field visit to Ambur in December 2011 it was clear that the homeworkers’ lives were very difficult. The women told us that sustained pollution from the tanneries had polluted the local rivers and the water table so badly that agriculture was impossible and the government had to deliver drinking water to all the villages. With no agricultural work, the leather industry provided the only possible source of income. For those homeworkers who were married, most of their husbands were employed in the factories or tanneries in and around Ambur.

The women described working 6 days a week and an average of 9-10 hours per day on the stitching work, alongside cleaning, cooking and caring for family members. On average it took them an hour to hand-stitch a pair of leather shoes and they earned an average of 5 rupees per pair, giving them an average earning of 50 rupees a day (less than $1 AUD). By comparison the legal minimum wage for work in the footwear industry in Tamil Nadu was 122 rupees per day and the women estimated they needed a minimum family income of 150 rupees a day for the family to survive.

There is nothing good in our lives, we are just living. There is no best thing in my life. My husband’s earnings couldn’t maintain the family. We have nothing, that's why we know this is exploitation. We have no other way, that's why we are involving in this. If I have any other income definitely I won't do this (Alagu, 2011).

Nobody loves this work. We are doing this because we are all poor. We have to do it, that's the option only we have (Prathanya, 2013).

Hand-sewing leather is also strenuous and potentially dangerous work: the women showed us the scars where the needles had pierced their skin and most of the older women who had previously sewed the shoes could no longer do so because of repetitive strain injuries.

Invisibility in the GVC/GPN

The early GVC literature focused on the profit-maximising strategies used by supply chain firms in their interaction with each other and with the state. The GPN concept
broadened the range of actors and motivations under consideration but until recently that literature largely limited its consideration of worker agency to the strategies pursued by established trade unions. The women we interviewed could see little value in pursuing their demands through interaction with the actors highlighted within this narrow conception of the GVC/GPN. Their only direct contact with the GPN was with the middle-man or woman who brought them the work. The homeworkers did not see any productive avenue for lodging grievances with the middle person or the local suppliers.

We don’t have any rights. No, there is no such thing, if we have problems we women just get together and talk that is all. We don’t come under the union; if we work then we get paid our wages. I don’t know anything about the company. I am just at home doing this work (Prathanya, 2011).

Which company person is coming over here? If we go to the company then we can complain. If not how will we? If we fall ill we have to go to the doctor and tell them what problems we have. Such is our occupation, they will tell us, “Don’t do this job”. We don’t have any other choice, so we choose to do this work, so I cannot complain to anyone. We have to do this work because of the poverty in our families (Mathivathane, 2013).

Our interviews with local industry representatives largely justified the women’s pessimism. We visited two factories, both of which exhibited clear evidence of economic upgrading. Whether or not this economic upgrading had benefited the factory workers was beyond the scope of our research but it had clearly not benefited the homeworkers. In fact, the local industry representatives downplayed the significance of homeworkers’ role in the supply chain. One of the largest leather footwear manufacturers in Tamil Nadu, stated:

Homework is only required a few months of the year, when there is only overflow during peak times in spring summer. Usually the factory does all the work…6 months of the year no work is done by homeworkers, zero, the other 6 months about 20-30% is done outside (MD, 2013).
While the perception presented by the industry is that this is an irregular and marginal workforce, our research suggests the opposite. The many homeworkers we interviewed stated that they worked all year, 6 days a week, with a low season occurring only around June each year.

In practice, in terms of worker entitlements these homeworkers are also largely invisible to the state. Direct employees of the tanneries and footwear factories are entitled to receive the legal minimum wage and to have their employer contribute to the government’s Employees’ State Insurance (ESI) scheme and Provident Fund (PF). Homeworkers in the same production network are not entitled to receive either ESI or PF. Although they technically could register with the government’s Tamil Nadu Footwear and Leathers Goods Manufactory and Tannery Workers Welfare Board to receive the much more limited accident insurance and educational assistance for children provided by that board, the women we interviewed were unaware of this entitlement. Unusually, the national Indian Minimum Wages Act 1948 includes outworkers in its definition of employees for the purposes of the Act, but we found no evidence of the homeworkers in Ambur being paid piece-rates equivalent to the relevant minimum wage, nor of any efforts by the state to monitor or enforce this.

**Voicing demands within the GPN**

Drawing on the networked regulation literature, it’s possible to expand the GPN approach to worker agency to look beyond the work of established trade unions and to give significance in the GPN’s power relationship sector to the role of groups of workers who have not (or not yet) organised themselves and those workers’ interaction with other actors, including local and international NGOs. Our research sought to do this as we followed FHWW’s efforts to make connections with the footwear homeworkers and other actors in the footwear GPN.

**Homeworker voices and demands**

Many of the homeworkers we interviewed were clearly aware of, and angry about, the fact that they were missing out on rights and entitlements granted to workers who were formally employed in the factories and tanneries.
Today we may earn Rs. 50 but there is no guarantee that we will have an income tomorrow, those who work in the company have some guarantee for work but we don’t, if we fall sick and cannot work then the day’s income is lost (Sabeetha, 2013).

We have to bear the (medical) expenses ourselves, we have to shell out our own money, we have heard that those who work in the company have ESI (insurance) and what do you call it? Pension. But we don’t have any of these things. We don’t get those benefits, those working in the companies get PF (provident fund, ESI pension etc), he (the middle man) just goes around and collects the uppers and we stitch it; that is all (Gokilamani, 2011).

In many of the interviews we asked the women what they would like to communicate to the international brands, if they could. Through this process some of them started to think about their place in the GPN and at least think about possible avenues for seeking a greater share in the surplus value they are creating:

They [the companies and middle people] are paying us very less, we develop pains on account of this, when we go the hospital they tell us don’t stitch, don’t do this work, what else can we do, if we work, only then we can pay for our children’s medical expenses when they fall ill, we can buy things for our children. All of us are in the same situation, if they do some help for us that would be good (Alagu, 2011).

Maybe all of us living in one street can organise ourselves, but then Bhai [the middle person] takes shoes from ten different companies, how do we know which company to approach? …not this company the international company should pay? Ok, the company that buys the shoes, where the finish goods are sold, the person who earns the largest profit (Mathivathane, 2013).

**Seeking effective local NGO partners**

Our meetings with homeworkers were facilitated by a local NGO. FHWW had helped that NGO secure funds to regularly visit homeworkers in the area and to provide the women with information about their rights and their position in the global footwear
production network. FHWW wanted the local NGO to discuss with the women the possibility of them organising themselves and drawing on FHWW’s international network connections in order to press claims for better wages and conditions. From the beginning, FHWW recognised there would be risks for the women in taking this step and did not want the women to be pressured into organising. However FHWW did think the homeworkers in the villages surrounding Ambur were potentially in a better position to organise and draw on network support to negotiate for better piece-rates or other benefits than many groups of homeworkers. This was because most of the shoes they were stitching were for high profile international brands; because the leather production industry in Ambur was so well entrenched and so vertically integrated that the factories were unlikely to shift; and because there were only a relatively limited number of villages close enough to Ambur to be integrated into the production processes of shoe factories in and around Ambur.

Over the course of the research it became clear to FHWW, and to us, that FHWW had probably chosen the wrong local NGO to partner with in this work. The local NGO had no knowledge of potential leverage points in the international GPN and seemed to be reluctant to learn about and discuss them. Over the three years from 2011-2013 the NGO visited the area regularly to talk to the women but the engagement never seemed to progress beyond asking the women about their situation.

No one has ever come here; you are the only one who have come here, and the person who brought you here [referring to the local NGO]. He has been coming here for the last 2 – 3 years, he has come here and enquired about our conditions, he said that he would do some help but I am not sure if he would (Alaimagal, 2013).

In 2013 FHWW ended its relationship with that NGO and re-started the same work in collaboration with another Indian NGO, which has much more experience, both of working with international NGOs in order to influence working conditions in a GPN and with supporting informally employed workers to start a process of organising themselves to try and collectively improve their situation (Jenkins, 2013). At the time of writing FHWW was relatively confident that this new cooperation will prove much more fruitful.
International NGO actors

In October 2012, the Dutch international development organisation Hivos released a report into the prevalence of child labour in the leather footwear industry and provided an assessment of how seriously 28 international footwear companies were addressing the issue. The report cited evidence of child labour in leather footwear production in Ambur and other sites in India. The report received significant media coverage and some brands and suppliers named in the report immediately moved to protect their reputations with consumers by making changes to production arrangements, such as moving work previously done in homes into stitching centres to monitor whether children were doing the work (Hivos, 2012: 8). This was done without asking the women doing the work what they wanted or addressing their wages and conditions.

The release of the Hivos report took FHWW by surprise. FHWW immediately contacted Hivos and urged it to take the rights and needs of homeworkers into account in its campaign. FHWW (2013) also prepared a formal response to the Hivos report, which argued that if income and conditions for homeworkers can be improved, most mothers would be likely to encourage their children to spend more time on their studies or attend school if they are not doing so.

Hivos was receptive to FHWW’s requests. FHWW was invited to participate in meetings of stakeholders in Agra and Chennai to discuss the Hivos campaign involving local NGOs, Hivos, FHWW, brands, suppliers and the Business Social Compliance Initiative (BSCI; FHWW, 2013). A subsequent report by Hivos to follow up responses and actions of footwear brands emphasised that the labour rights of homeworkers must be addressed alongside child labour (Hivos, 2013). This report incorporated responses from FHWW that specifically addressed issues of concern for homeworkers. In a research interview in early 2014, a FHWW representative told us that if the cooperation with the first local NGO been more productive in terms of supporting homeworkers to organise themselves, then FHWW would have been in a position to immediately start discussions with the homeworkers about whether they wanted to draw on the impetus generated by the Hivos report to try and meet with brand representatives to discuss how to improve the homeworkers’ situation. Instead, FHWW planned to wait to see if the second NGO could establish the necessary trust
with the homeworkers - and support them to start organising themselves - in a manner which would make joint action in pursuit of their rights possible in future.

Discussion
This paper started with the premise that GPN theory provides the scope to acknowledge the agency of a range of non-firm actors, such as labour, consumers and civil society organisations, as well as the profound asymmetries of power inherent between actors and within processes. The key aim of our research was to deepen understanding of the means by which informally employed, unrepresented homeworkers might establish connections with other actors within the GPN in order to pursue improvements in their working conditions and rights, and how governance and regulatory fields in the GPN may assist this.

There is a strand of the GPN literature which sees economic upgrading of firms as a pathway to social upgrading for workers (Posthuma and Nathan, 2010). While we observed clear signs of economic upgrading in the footwear factories, the question of what benefits, if any, resulted for factory workers was not explored. There was no evidence to indicate that social upgrading is linked to economic upgrading amongst informal homeworkers. While the homeworkers’ contribution was integral to production in the GPN and they were adding significant value in the global chain/network, they were not sharing in this value. Despite long hours of work, their earnings were inadequate to meet the daily costs of survival for the women and their families, their income was precarious and the work was endangering their health.

In contrast with those who focus on economic upgrading as a path to social upgrading, other writers interested in the potential for social upgrading have considered the agency of, and interactions between, a wider array of actors in the ‘power relationship’ sector of the GPN, including the state, non-government organisations (NGOs), labour and consumers (Barrientos et al., 2011). This literature has parallels with the network regulation literature, which recognises the various actors that intersect at different stages of the chain/network to influence regulatory responses by government and firms (Black, 2008). Up until recently both these literatures primarily handled the question of worker agency by focusing on how traditional labour unions cooperate with and/or challenge other actors in pursuit of the interests of the formally
employed workers who primarily constitute their membership base (Rainnie et al., 2011). The presence of effective trade unions can give groups of workers greater power and influence, but if unions are not present or they do not organise workers because they have been informalised and experience precarious work conditions, then a representational gap emerges. Homeworkers need to find other means to organise themselves and assert influence, in order to address the asymmetries of power characteristic of GPNs.

Our data illustrates the many significant barriers which would need to be overcome if leather footwear homeworkers in Ambur are to establish empowering relationships with other actors in the GPN. The footwear homeworkers were dependent on the production chain/network for their survival and many obstacles were alluded to in the data that arguably have prevented them from undertaking forms of labour activism. A key characteristic of homework is the invisibility of the homeworkers, linked to the predominance of women working from their homes and shouldering social reproduction responsibilities. As workers, the women we interviewed were not only largely invisible to the factory managers - who denied the significance of homework in the GPN - but also, in a sense, to themselves in that many did not identify themselves as workers. Invisibility and lack of recognition are barriers to collectivism and, conversely, the lack of representation/collectivism further entrenches the invisibility of the workers. Their lack of representation and recognition leaves them marginalised with few connections to firm actors and with little capacity to influence and make demands upon other network actors, such as brands, suppliers and the state.

Our research observed an international NGO, FHWW, as it attempted to work with local NGOs to support the homeworkers in Ambur to overcome these barriers to recognition and influence. The women workers’ willingness to engage with local and international NGOs about their concerns and ideas is evidence of initial forms of resistance (Carswell and De Neve, 2013). The homeworkers were aware of their dependence on the chain/network, due to poverty, yet they sought out connections with local and international NGOs and demonstrated a willingness to engage with this research over a three year period. Through this engagement the homeworkers became aware that they could potentially improve their situation through improved connections to local and international NGOs. However, discussions with the
researchers demonstrated that most of the homeworkers expected that others should advocate on their behalf and the homeworkers’ expectations of the extent to which their social conditions could improve were very low. The data shows linkages between local, national and transnational NGOs may assist homeworkers to build connections that otherwise would not be present, yet it also highlights the dangers associated with international NGOs intervening in the GPN without first consulting with the workers who will be affected by their intervention.

**Conclusion**

The GPN concept and related theoretical developments such as networked regulation create theoretical space for imagining how homeworkers might establish relationships with other influential actors and work with them to demand a greater share in the value they are helping to produce. The research process described in this paper demonstrates that, in practice, the activity of establishing these relationships and coordinating efforts to further these demands is by no means easy. Leather footwear homeworkers in Ambur face multiple barriers to organising themselves and asserting their rights and the international NGOs interested in supporting them have faced challenges in coordinating with each other and with local civil society partners. Such challenges notwithstanding, the response by international brands to the Hivos’ report demonstrates those brands are vulnerable to media exposure which damages their reputations in the eyes of consumers. If the homeworkers respond positively to the local NGOs’ efforts to facilitate their self-organisation, then FHWW and Hivos and the local NGO are in a position to offer the homeworkers significant support in negotiating with international brands, local suppliers and the state.

Whether this process successfully brings benefits to workers is, of course, highly contingent. What is clear is that, for footwear homeworkers in Ambur, these networked relationships offer a means to assert some influence within the GPN and toward improving their situation. Through the exploration of the connections between non-firm actors and informal and unrepresented workers, we aimed to contribute to the conversation on labour and representation in GPNs. Our findings demonstrate there would be value in further research into similar efforts to support homeworkers and other informally employed workers to obtain greater influence within GPNs.
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