CHAPTER 5

HOME-BASED SUB-CONTRACTORS IN THE GARMENT INDUSTRY: A PROFILE

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the profile of the two samples of home-based subcontractors i.e. the fifty-five interviewed and the thirty cases for in-depth study. The reasons and circumstances, which led the thirty women to be involved in home-based subcontracting, are presented in their own voices. They discussed their work history and their reasons for not returning to work in the factories. This chapter offers a glimpse to the ordinariness as well as the distinctiveness of the lives of the home-based subcontractors, so often invisible in the economy.

5.2 Profile of the Chinese Women Home-Based Garment Subcontractors

The Chinese home-based subcontractors interviewed in the study reside in predominantly Chinese neighborhoods of Kepong, Cheras, Old Klang Road, Sungei Besi and Chinese New Villages of Salak South and Jinjiang within the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur. The Chinese New Villages are remnants of those established during the colonial era to place the Chinese population in fenced-off villages in an effort to cut-off contact and support to communists and
thereby contain communism. These New Villages have now become sites of micro-industries, and many backyard factories, which draw on the labour in the vicinity. Garment making traditionally a Chinese-based industry mushroomed in these areas.

The home-based subcontractors lived mainly in wooden houses typical of the Chinese New Villages or terrace houses and low-cost / medium cost housing flats in predominantly Chinese areas. Most lived in rented houses and some had other tenants sharing their houses or had rented one or two of their rooms. A few were tenants renting rooms. For these respondents, their bedrooms doubled as their workplace.

\textit{Table 5.1: Age of Chinese Women Home Based Garment Subcontractors in and around Kuala Lumpur, 1994}

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<th>Age-group</th>
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<td>20 - 25</td>
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<td>26 - 30</td>
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The majority of the fifty-five respondents interviewed were in the ages of 26 –30, 31-35 and 41 – 45. It appears that 49% of the home-based subcontractors were in the reproductively fertile age cohorts or 26 –35 years of age. The women in the 41- 45 age group were those who entered sub-contracting when they were young and remained there because of their inability to re-enter the formal labour force. With inadequate retraining opportunities, rejoining the labour force for older women was difficult due to technological industrial advances made in the workplace. Another reason cited by the interviewees was that the factories preferred younger women. The employers claimed that younger women were easier to train and possess a more flexible disposition, suitable for the assembly line jobs. For these older women, home-based subcontracting offered them a familiar option for continued productive work.

Only a small percentage, 15% were re-entrants into home-based subcontracting after exiting subcontracting for work outside of the home. This group of re-entrants considered home-based sub-contracting in a casual / part-time manner i.e. working according to preference than needs. Two of the cases were late entrants to home-based subcontracting. In one case, the respondent was the only child and had the responsibility to care for her aged mother. She entered home-based subcontracting to be gainfully employed at home while caring for her aged mother. In another case, the respondent was widowed and had to assume primary financial responsibility for children. At fifty-one, with
little education, she had few options for work. Home-based subcontracting offered her a comparatively easier entrance to productive work.

Seventy three percent of the respondents had six or less years of formal education. Only one respondent had more than ten years of education. All were educated in Chinese medium schools.

Of the fifty-five respondents, 78% were still married; six women (10%) were abandoned by their husbands; two were divorced, one was a widow and three were unmarried. All respondents who were still married or previously married (whether abandoned, divorced or widowed) had children.

Of those who were married, 48% had one or two children, 37% had three or four children and 15% had five children. 60% had at least one child who was below five years old. 66% percent had at least one daughter but 92% had at least one son. This indeed was an unusually high percentage of women with sons in sub-set of occupation.

Out of the fifty-five respondents, 35% of their families were nuclear families while 65% were extended families. 60% had relatives occasionally living with them, while 30% could not rely on support from in-laws or siblings or parents for babysitting or occasional child-care.

5.3 Introduction to the Thirty Cases of Home-based Subcontractors

To deepen the intensity of understanding beyond generality, multiple in-depth informal discussions and participant observation were made on thirty of
the home-based subcontractors. A key factor for the selection of these thirty women was the higher degree of openness and willing collaboration with me to admit me into their homes. This, of course, presents a necessary yet unavoidable 'influence' in the choice of the cases. However, without the permission to intrude into the privacy and by extension into their lives, this in-depth study would have been impossible.

The thirty home-based subcontractors were all Chinese women who lived in the Old Klang Road (10%), Kepong (40%), Jinjiang (30%), Salak South (2%), Sungei Besi (8%) and Cheras (20%). Seventy percent had less than six years of formal education. Only one had completed twelve years of education. All received their education in Chinese medium schools. Twenty-four percent were between the ages of 26-30; another 24% were 31-35 years old; 14% were 36-40 years old; 26% were 41-45 years old and 12% over 45 years old.

Of these women, 80% were still married; 10% were abandoned by their husbands, none officially divorced, one widowed and two unmarried. Except for the unmarried ones, all had children. Of these, 48% had one or two children, 37% had 3-4 children and 15% had five children. All except 10% had sons.

The majority (80%) did sewing work. Two embroidered. One was a cutter for a designer / boutique. Three subcontracted finishing and packaging work. They subcontracted from big public-listed companies or its subsidiaries, medium sized factories, small factories, micro-sized enterprises and single
operators. The cases covered a range of apparels and accessories primarily ladies’ wear, men’s, and children’s wear, caps and furnishings.

On the whole, the thirty cases chosen were representative of the larger sample of fifty-five surveyed.

5.4 Reasons for Home-based Sub-contracting

Central to this study is the reason leading these Chinese women to enter home-based subcontracting. The oral accounts below by the home-based subcontractors, provide insights, flesh and spirit, to the circumstances leading them to home-based sub-contracting. The names used in the Cases are not necessarily the real names of the home-based subcontractors but names by which these women like to be addressed. The abbreviations of the names are given in brackets.

5.4.1 Case 1: Lai Meng (LM)

"I came from Ipoh to work in a garment factory when I was 18 years old. My friends and I came together. I was a sewer in the factory till I married Chan, a construction worker. I continued to work in the factory after marriage. My mother-in-law cared for my first child, a daughter while I continued to work in the garment factory. I gave my mother-in-law some pocket money from my salary every month. When the second child, a son, was born, my husband
insisted that I stop work. My mother-in-law said she could not cope looking after two small ones. ‘Mo pan fatt’ (no other way out), I had to resign and to stay home to look after the two children.

My supervisor in the factory continued to contact me. She asked me to send my children to a babysitter and return to work. Chan and his mother would not allow me. So, occasionally, during peak times, she would send me some clothes to sew at home. I gave a part of that money to my mother-in-law for helping to look after my children while I sewed. Sometimes, when she was free, she would help to trim threads or unpick. Since then I had three more children. Not like people today, I did not know anything about family planning. I just continued to have one child after another. I continued sub-contracting over these years from a few factories. In the last five years, I have only subcontracted from Cheng Chea. She helped me a lot in the past. A few times, Chan insisted I stop sub-contracting. Once he threatened to destroy the clothes. I was really frightened. If he did, all my earnings would not be enough to pay back. Sometimes I also felt like stopping. It was difficult to tell the factory boss, Cheng Chea, ‘bu hau yi zhi’ (don’t feel good to tell her). After all Cheng Chea has been very kind to me. She helped me when I needed the money. How can I not help her when she needs me?"
5.4.2 Case 2: Siew Lian (SL)

"My husband is a salesman. He is irresponsible and unfaithful. He comes home as and when he likes, does not care about us, provides for us irregularly. I cannot go out to work because there is no one to look after my daughter. I tried doing odd jobs—helping at the vegetable stall at the morning market and washing dishes at the neighborhood mee stall at lunch-time. My sister, Siew Gaik, helped me to look after my baby. We live in the same house in this New Village. But Siew Gaik also has two children of her own, aged 3 and 5. We found this arrangement of odd jobs and Siew Gaik looks after all three children it’s not fair and not easy. These odd jobs are hard work and do not pay well. A regular customer of the vegetable stall, knowing my plight, introduced me to the factory where she subcontracts. For the past two years, I have been sub-contracting from that garment factory. The factory owner, Mr. Liew, has several vans plying a fixed route to send and collect these garments from a few areas around Selangor. Our new village was one of the areas. Mr. Liew’s business is good. He is sending more and more work for me. I can no longer finish it alone. So, Siew Gaik and lately another neighbor, Ah Kiew Soh, have joined me. There were two other small work groups
similar to ours in this new village. At times, when the work becomes even heavier, I would invite my other neighbors to join. I pay them according to piece rate but I keep a small amount as my own commission for securing the job and for all the trouble and responsibility I have to bear. It is only fair, isn’t it? 

5.4.3 Case 3: Siew Gaik (SG)

"Initially I ironed and packed the clothes to help Siew Lian. I felt sorry for her. Such bad luck. She married such a lousy useless husband. He was handsome and a very smooth-talker. I used to envy her when I compared him to my own husband. Now, I am thankful for my own good family. Ah Sam is not handsome but has a good heart. If not for his generosity, I won’t be able to help Siew Lian. At first I did not accept any of the money paid from Siew Lian for the work we did together. I thought it was just a temporary arrangement till she finds a proper job. But this seems to be the most convenient work. She is able to take care of her daughter as well as earn a living.

When the workload became more and more, Siew Lian also felt bad to make me work as hard as her. I work regularly with Siew Lian now. Mr. Liew sends us garments to inspect, iron and pack. I get less since I work less than her because I need more time for my
own children and also her daughter. Since this is the only means of earnings for her, she needs to spend more time to earn a living. I have a husband to support me. She doesn’t.

5.4.4 Case 4: Ah Kiew Soh (AKS)

"You consider this work? I don’t know. I have little to do and I often come over to talk with the two sisters and listen to the RFM stories together. I pity Siew Lian. She is so young and pretty but abandoned by her husband. That man has no heart. While talking or listening to the stories, I help to trim the threads or fold the clothes since my hands are idle and the two sisters are busy. I remember that it was near the festive season when the work was a lot that Siew Lian offered to share some money with me. At first I felt embarrassed to accept but she kept insisting and since the work became more and more, I agreed. I know she pays me only a little of what she gets but it is OK. She needs the money more than I do. My children keep saying that I am stupid to continue helping Siew Lian like this. To me, it is OK since I am free and have little to do at home. As human beings, we have to help others worse off than us. This is what gives meaning to our life."
5.4.5 Case 5: Choy Wan (CW)

"I was a highly skilled worker at an embroidery factory before marriage. I stopped working because I had a difficult pregnancy, morning sickness, vomiting and bleeding. During that time, my husband had been critical of my appearance. He often made excuses for not coming home at night. We had frequent quarrels and he would become violent and beat me. How could I control my anger? He is out with other women and still wants me to entertain him when he comes home! He said that since I would not entertain him, he would not come home anymore. Up to him, leave him be. After the birth of Chai Ling, he stopped coming home.

That was a traumatic time. I had to sustain myself with the income I got from the tenants. Luckily, one of the tenants, Chan Ko, a middle-aged bachelor, was extremely kind to me. He helped me a lot through those troubled times. Through his encouragement I approached my old factory, a medium-sized factory specializing in infant wear to ask to work from home. They have just delivered a brand new sewing machine to my house. The factory bought this machine and sent it here, with the understanding that I will continue to subcontract the embroidery work from the factory. Embroidery work, especially of logos of brand names, adds great value to the garment. A few other subcontractors and I were called to the factory
last month and shown how to use the machine and given some training to produce the high quality work demanded by the factory.

5.4.6 Case 6: Pik Ching (PC)

"I subcontract from a tailor, Ah Fong Chea to sew at home. Ah Fong takes in clothes from individual clients. She cuts and marks the places where the sewing has to be done and I sew accordingly. Ah Fong lives about 300 meters from here, half way to the morning market. On alternate days, on the way to market, I bring along the finished clothes and collect the cut pieces for sewing on my way back.

When I was young, I followed my neighbors to learn sewing from a tailor. At 19, I worked in a tailor’s shop, both minding the shop as well as helping the tailor with some sewing. After a few months, I left and joined a brassiere factory, sewing sponges and elastic parts of the under-garments. I was earning RM250 a month. It was difficult to work with those people at the factory. I resigned when I became pregnant. It was difficult to take the bus with my big stomach. But it was boring to stay home. Ah Keong works long hours - only comes home at 7 or 8 p.m. Ah Keong’s friend asked if I would like to sew brassieres at home. The factory owner brought the cut pieces for me to sew."
As the pregnancy advanced, I stopped sewing. I was kept busy with the birth of our son. As he grew and became easier to manage, I started sewing at home again. This time I sewed for a tailor. I was paid RM2 a piece. I stopped again, a year later, when I became pregnant with the second child. Since the second son's first birthday, I started sewing at home again. I stopped for a period of 8 months, when I found I could not cope with the two sons. When I could manage, I wanted to resume sewing but the factories did not want me anymore as I was unreliable. Luckily I found Ah Fong Chea. The chicken seller introduced me to her.”

5.4.7 Case 7: Leong Aun (LA)

"I had little education, only managed to finish Form 2 in a Chinese secondary school. I started work first in a tailor’s shop and then in a garment factory when I turned 19. Before that they said I was under-aged to work in a factory. I married Yap and had two children. After the second child, a son, I had to stop work because my mother-in-law could not cope. Yap’s income as an electrician was not enough for a growing family. The school fees, the school books, uniforms, shoes and pocket money came to a lot. Luckily, the school is nearby and they can walk to school. I had to find a way to supplement our income."
I was introduced to some factory people by Kiew Soh who sews blouses at home. Since then, I have changed six factories. The main problem is that every one pays very little and I have to earn more. So I have to move from one factory to another in search of a better deal. I need more money to supplement my husband's earning to meet the increasing costs of the growing family. To add to our problems, Yap's mother became ill and her medical bills were very high. Yap is very filial and so no matter how expensive the medicine was, he would buy it. It made it worse for our family. I could not say anything except try to find more money for my children.

I am not very skilled at sewing. My standard of tailoring is not up to the standard demanded by the export market especially the up-market branded products. I mainly sew for those factories selling in the local market. Currently I sew for this factory which sells lingerie in the pasar malam (night market).”

5.4.8 Case 8 : Xiao Lan (XL)

"I was born and brought up in Jinjang. There were six children in the family. We were poor. After completing Standard Six, my father did not allow me to study anymore. Only my brothers were allowed to continue. They were not interested in studies and so two of them dropped out after Form One and one completed Form
Three. Even though I had better results than them and I wanted to study, my father did not allow me to. He said there was no need for girls to study so much. Basic education was enough.

At 14, I started work in a garment factory, doing odd jobs and learning to sew. I had to give all my salary to my mother. She only gave me fifty cents a day for pocket money. I had a hard life - not like the children of today. I continued to work there even after marriage. I married late, at 26. I continued to work in the same garment factory, DH Garment. One and a half years ago, after the birth of my son, I wanted to resign. The boss asked me to subcontract and sew the garments at home, like many of my other friends. So now the factory van sends me the cut pieces to sew. Once a year, normally Chinese New Year time when the factory is closed, we, old friends from the factory, will gather to enjoy ourselves, remembering the old times and sharing our new life.

5.4.9 Case 9: Yi Ting (YT)

"Embroidering patterns is my forte. I have been specializing in embroidery for the last 6 years. With 3 children born within 7 years of marriage, it was impossible for me to continue working in a factory called GP. It is a big factory, part of a public-listed company. I like working there. The boss takes good care of the
workers. I embroidered blouses for four years. After the birth of my first child, my husband, who was a sub-contractor for home renovation work, built this extension at the side of his family home for me to work at home, so that I can look after the children as well. GP factory van sends the material and thread to me here. A year ago I employed an Indonesian maid to help with the housework while I do the embroidery. It is better than going to work in the factory.

Embroidery has been through cyclical ups and downs of fashion. There were times when embroidery was the fashion of the day, appearing on blouses and dresses and times when it was considered out of date and old fashioned. In recent times, embroidery has become fashionable again as a value-added item depicting the name of labels on garments ranging from lingerie to nightwear to socks and caps. Embroidery is also very popular as part of the traditional Baju Kebaya and Baju Kurong, accentuating the beauty of the material and batik design. Such fine embroidery work requires great skill. Not many people can do this work. This is the main reason, factories like GP, need subcontractors like us. I recently hired two assistant sewers and sub-subcontract out excess work to two neighbors on a piece rate basis, making 10% for myself. With an average earning of RM1,800 monthly, I have installed an
air-conditioner in my work area and bought three electric powered embroidery machines. Most of the tedious housework had been taken over by the Indonesian maid.

I don't want to start my own shop as I would have to do marketing and management. I am not well educated enough. There is a lot of work keeping books etc. I do not want to spend time and effort doing this.

Having a shop would mean higher overheads, salaries, water, electricity and lots of miscellaneous expenses. Then further investments in buying machines and others. It is a lot of money. Where can I find so much money? Then there are those EPFs to pay, government agencies to deal with! Better this way, no tax, no legal problems. Whatever I earn is all mine."

5.4.10 Case 10: Ah Kiew (AK)

"It is better working from home, more freedom. I can also look after my mother. She had a stroke two years ago. I work when I like and I don't have supervisors shouting at me. It is better.

I started working at 16 in a tile factory after failing my Form 3 exam. During the recession year of 1988, I lost my job. With my mother's help, I sold fried bee hoon and mee every morning to the children going to school opposite our house and to neighbors
rushing to work. Though the time the stall was open was only 3 hours, the time spent on marketing, frying and cooking and cleaning up was long. I had to wake up as early as 5 a.m. to cut the vegetables and ingredients. In the afternoon, I had to go to buy the ingredients for the next day. The hours are long and tiring.

My neighbor, AP, recommended work in a garment factory. I worked there but when my mother fell ill, I had to quit. Then the other neighbor, YT, recommended me to GP factory. GP boss asked for a sample of my work. That time the garment industry was booming and GP was desperate for workers. I was accepted to work from home. My parents bought me an old industrial sewing machine and an old edging machine and placed the two machines in the corridor in front of the bedrooms, between the dining and living rooms. Till today, I have not met the boss of the factory. I have not been to the factory either. Each time the company van sends cut pieces and collects the clothes. The same van brings my pay.

Everyday, I have to send the three children to school. Ten years ago, my mother decided to take in a child to baby-sit to use her free time. She took in a boy from a neighbor. The couple had a stationery business in town. Because of the irregular hours returning home, the boy began to live in our home, and return only during the weekends. The boy is more like a grandson than a ward.
After recovering from her illness, my mother also took in a two-year-old girl for baby-sitting. The girl was joined by her cousin. The two mothers are sisters. They preferred this arrangement to having maids. They are very assured of the good care our family gives to their daughters. Both send the daughters on the way to work. I then use our Proton Saga to drive the three children to school and pick them home. This is now my responsibility. So it is better to work at home."

5.4.11 Case 11 : Yoke Yin (YY)

"I have been sewing ladies' wear at home for the past 10 years. Given a choice, I would prefer to continue working in a factory. As a full time employee, I have EPF and savings for my old age, general medical benefits and sick leave. But there is no one to help me look after these two boys. My mother-in-law already has her hands full looking after three other grandchildren. And my parents live in Pontian - too far to help me. Child-care is too expensive. At RM200 per child, I will be earning just enough to pay the babysitter. I have no choice but sew at home to supplement our income. My husband is a house painter, not earning much. What choice do I have?"
"I began sub-contracting to sew sleeves of men's shirts at home six years ago while caring for my growing family. At that time my eldest son was five years old and I was pregnant with the youngest. Their father, Kam Cheong is very concerned about the upbringing of the children. He will not let me go out to work. I also think it is more important for me to stay home and care for them. I want to make sure that the children do well in life, get a good education and have good jobs. They must not suffer like their father working in the hot sun, becoming dark and ugly. I have to keep an eye on the children to ensure that they finish their homework and studies.

Their father is always worried about the children mixing with bad company. Children living in low cost council flats are not those with the best behavior. I have heard too many stories of boys smoking, getting into drugs and fights and girls being raped and taken away from homes. I must constantly watch over them. Even when I am sewing and I realize the children have gone out to play, I will stop and watch them from the verandah. I will shout and call them back if I do not like the children they are playing with. I allow my children to play in the evening, after their homework and before dinner. They must come back and wash up before their father comes.
Plate 5.2 : Sewing to Uplift Well-Being of Family

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daughter and the youngest son also follow their examples to help. They are very close as siblings, helping each other with homework. With such help, I can 'pull in' RM1,000 from my sewing. My aim is to save for the education of my children so that they do not have to go through what their father and I have gone through.

I had to buy a sewing machine to start subcontracting at home. I purchased an old, but still serviceable electric-powered sewing machine with a small loan from my sister. My sisters have been always helpful and we help each other whenever someone is in need. We pull whatever we have to help each other.

I had an accident and injured my left arm seriously when I was nine years old. Two of my fingers were cut off. My family took very good care of me and my sisters always protected me when other children made fun of me and called me names. My sisters got married early but I did not have any suitors. Even though, I am prettier than them, no one wants to marry me just because I have two missing fingers. When Kam Cheong wanted to marry me, my family especially my mother, encouraged me to accept. I was hesitant because he was 11 years my senior. He worked as a bricklayer and he is dark. Mother kept saying that as I was getting older it was better for me to accept the proposal. I also feared that no one would marry me if I waited any longer. Now, I understand
that not getting married is also good. No need to be "suffocated" by the husband’s wants and needs. One can be free to earn and use the money as one wants. Now it is too late- I should have realized this earlier.

Anyway, it is lucky that my children are good. My husband is getting old. He is keenly aware of the needs of the growing family. He is very careful about money and spending. He earns about RM 3,000 a month as the daily rate for brick-laying has increased over the years. He is considered highly-skilled and can command a higher rate. He also trains apprentices. He is very capable."

5.4.13 Case 13: Yoke Lan (YL)

"Most fortunate people my age, will be thinking of retiring and enjoying life. But I still have to toil. My only brother died 3 years ago, so my aged mother has come to live with me. My children’s father does not complain. But, I know that I must continue bringing in money to justify to my in-laws, my mother’s living here. If not, they will despise us, look down on us. I have to earn to pay for her medicine too. My children’s father never commented about my sub-contracting, but he does not help out in the housework or care of my mother. It is still my duty."
I started subcontracting at home ten years ago. I was introduced to the factory by a close friend, Ah Ying. I had young children that time. My son was five years old and my daughter was nine. My children's father was working for a hardware shop. There was a theft and he was blamed. The boss warned him but kept him on. He knew who was the thief but he was threatened by those involved. He did not tell me much. He said I as a woman should not be a busybody and ask too many questions. My duty is to take care of the children and the home and I should leave the things about his work to him. It is his duty to make sure there is rice and food for us and we should not worry.

But I was worried. He was very bad-tempered at that time. I could see that he was very worried and he drank a lot. He was not alcoholic but very bad tempered. I confided in my close friend, Ah Ying. She advised me to look for some work for my children and my own security. She suggested that I, like her, sew clothes at home. I was afraid to tell him but it became obvious he was very worried about his job. He was reluctant to go to work, unlike before. One day, I took some clothes home and started to sew. He was surprised but he did not comment. I just continued to make sure the housework was done and tried not to make him angry. I used the money I earned to buy food for the house and pay for the children's needs. I
continued sewing till today. He never once commented or asked me about my sewing."

5.4.14 Case 14: Ah Poh (AP)

"I was a supermarket check out supervisor. My three sons, ages five, three and one were with the baby sitter. Her fee was more than half of what I earned. My husband does not pay the baby sitter. He says it is my duty to look after the children and since I want to go out and earn, I should use my salary to pay the babysitter.

Last year, the kids fell sick often. A lot of my salary went to paying doctor's bills. I also had to take time off work to look after them because they refused to go to the babysitter. My boss was very angry with me, taking emergency leave so frequently. I didn't have much faith in the babysitter. She must have done something wrong. Their father kept scolding me for neglecting his sons. We quarreled often over this. At one stage he even insinuated that the reason why I did not want to stop working at the supermarket was because I was having an affair with my boss. Reluctantly, I had to resign.

The children were happy I stayed home. When they were better, I brushed up on the sewing skill I learnt as a teenager and responded to a newspaper advertisement and applied to take on
sub-contracting, sewing of ladies wear at piece rate. For peace of mind and well-being of my family, it is better I work from home."

5.4.15 Case 15 : Phang Ying Mooi (PYM)

"I dropped out of school when I was 10 years old. I wasn't very clever and preferred to play in the mining pool. I went to Ipoh at 14 to help out at my uncle's sweatshop. Other than sewing, I was expected to do the cooking for the ten people working there. As soon as I was 16, I packed up and followed some friends to Kuala Lumpur to work in a garment factory in Kepong. I was naïve. Luckily, Lord Buddha protected me. At 19, I married and moved to this flat. Within a year, my daughter was born and my husband arranged for me to take up sub-contracting, sewing women's wear at home. Now I am expecting my second child. I fervently hope that it will be a boy so that I can stop having babies and live a good life, with freedom and independence, like before when I was young."

5.4.16 Case 16 : Bee Li (BL)

"My first job was as a petrol pump attendant when I was 20 years old. My complexion was becoming darker and darker from the sun and heat. My friends used to tease me that I looked like an Indian and only Indian boys would marry me. It caused me great
concern so I quit and joined my old classmates to work in a garment factory. I married Leong and moved to live with his family. His family would always refer to me as the 'dark girl' always insinuating that I brought them 'darkness' and bad luck. I always cried in my room.

When I was expecting my first child, while mopping the floor, I fell and had a miscarriage. A quarrel ensued between Leong and his family. I was so happy when he decided that we should move out. Living on our own meant greater expenses. I suggested that I work to bring in additional income. A garment factory that Leong was servicing the machinery, was looking for subcontractors. Leong brought me to sew some samples for them. My previous experience in the garment factory was a definite plus point. They agreed and I started to sew at home. I like being at home, in my own 'kingdom.' It is better than working in the factory as I can work whenever I like. Leong earns enough for our family. Whatever I earn, I get to keep for myself. Of course, I spend it on my children and the household, but I am happy I can decide for myself how to use my money."

5.4.17 Case 17: Wong Ah Si (WAS)

"It is time for me to stop sub-contracting. Now I am 54. Look at my eyes- they are getting bloodshot. It’s time for me to stop. But
my life is not so fortunate. I subcontracted before but stopped when
my husband was earning well and the children were big. Three
years ago, my husband died. I started sewing to earn some money
for the family and to help my sister complete an order but haven’t
stopped since. We sew secondary school girls’ uniforms. It is good
also that I am sewing. At least I can tell my son that I am busy and I
can without guilt refuse to look after his newly born son. He said he
is willing to pay me for babysitting. I rather not take his money or
his wife will have lots to say. Let her find others to babysit her son. I
have enough of raising kids. With this RM300 from sub-contracting
and a bit of contribution from my daughter, I have enough to keep
me going. I will stop sewing when life is better.”

5.4.18 Case 18: Suan Heoh (SH)

“Sewing at home is better, much safer. When I was younger,
I had to help my family run a four digit betting operation, writing
numbers. I met Ah Kit who was renovating my house. We got
married but my family still asked me to help them. During the
confinement period after the birth of my first son, our home was
raided and my brother was arrested. We were frightened to death.
Imagine, if it wasn’t because I was in confinement, I might be in jail
! We always say our son brought us luck and saved me. After that
episode, Ah Kit preferred me to stay home and look after our precious son. I agreed. My parents had given me a sewing machine as part of the wedding gifts. I started tailoring for my neighbors but I found the customers fussy. Sometimes they choose patterns that do not suit their bodies. Of course, after I sew them, they don't look good. Instead, they blame me. I heard about home-based subcontracting from one of my neighbors, PYM. She introduced me and now both of us subcontract from the same factory. The earning is about the same but this is less trouble, less headache."

5.4.19 Case 19: Mei Hua (MH)

"I had only Standard Six education. I studied in the Chinese Primary School in this new village. Most of my classmates were from this new village. I stopped schooling because my results were poor. My father did not want me to go so far to the Malay Secondary School. I also have to help with our pasar malam stall.

When I was eighteen, I joined my friends to work in the garment factory in Kepong. Working at the factory was better than working for my family's stall. I did not get any money from my family before. At the factory, at least I get some pay. I met Kit Meng there. He was my schoolmate. His family lives nearby in this village too. We decided to get married four years ago. My son was born
three years ago. I stopped work at the factory to take care of my son. The supervisor said that I could work from home. I am paid piece rate like before. I miss my friends and the fun working in the factory. I feel rather lonely and isolated working at home. But what can I do? I have to look after my son. Now that I am pregnant again, I do not think I can return to the factory. This is the destiny of women—get married, have children and have no more fun in life! It is different for men, after marriage, they can still go out with their friends and have fun. I always wish I were born a man instead.

Kit Meng is a good husband. He helps me at home. He likes playing with the children. He helps to collect and send the clothes. He also collects my pay for me.”

5.4.20 Case 20: Meow Chu (MC)

“I finished Form Five and worked as a general clerk until the arrival of the first of my three children. My husband ran a small stationery shop in the next housing estate. He urged me to stay home to look after our children. So I stopped work. I used to help him look after the store but his way of working and mine are different. So it is better we don’t work together. Now the youngest is 5 and I have time on my hands between doing housework and transporting the children to and from school. Six months ago, I joined my friends to
subcontract, sewing men’s shirt collars. I don’t want my husband to know. As he will be angry with me for not helping him at the shop. I do all her sewing work in my mother’s house, which is near my children’s school. I look at this venture as something to utilize time profitably without putting any pressure on my family life. The income is low, but it is better than nothing. It is for the time being, maybe I will find some other work later. The good thing about subcontracting, is that I can arrange the work according to my own time, so I still can look after my children’s needs and my husband’s demands.”

5.4.21 Case 21: Kam Foong (KF)

“I came to Kuala Lumpur from Bidor, at the age of 19, to work in a garment factory introduced by friends. I stayed in a rented room then. Besides working in the factory, I stitched clothes for friends in my small room after work. This experience helped me improve my skills in cutting and tailoring. I left the factory after one year, to work in a batik factory that also has a sewing section stitching kaftan, tunics and dressing gowns, mainly for the tourist market. I was the master cutter in the factory. Two months after my marriage, the factory was restructured because the two owners quarreled. The sewing section closed down and I lost my job.
My husband and I decided that I should stay home and not go out to work. I started sewing for friends and neighbors. But, I did not like sewing especially dark colored clothes such as red and black. It caused a strain on my eyesight.

Plate 5.3: Cutting Fabrics for Boutique Clothes

Photo taken by Lee Lee Loh-Ludher, 1996

Through friends, I came to know of a boutique looking for a cutter. I was introduced to the owner, Susan. Her clothing outlet is now a famous boutique with a few branches. Susan also supplies clothes to other boutiques. I agreed to work for Susan as a cutter. Susan or her agents come to my home with designs and patterns.
The textile supplier sends the material, which Susan has chosen, to my house. After cutting, my husband on his way to work, will deliver the cut pieces, all in different bundles to two other subcontractors to sew."

5.4.22 Case 22 : Ai Ching (AC)

"In my younger days in Penang I worked in garment factories. There are many big garment factories like Dragon and Pheonix in the Rifle Range area, Eastern and Pan-Island. I followed my friends moving from factory to factory in search of better pay. The pay was very low at that time. I started with only RM250 a month sewing petticoats. Over those seven years I developed many skills. I learnt to sew pajamas, dresses, blouses and undergarments. Sewing brassieres for export is considered a skilled job as it needs very neat work and good hand-skills for the curves.

I married Ah Seng when I was 24 years old. He was working as a salesman and was based in Kuala Lumpur. I was introduced to him by our mutual friends. After marriage, I had to leave my home and my job and moved to Kuala Lumpur to live with my parents-in-law in Old Klang Road. It was a difficult life. I had to behave like a good daughter-in-law serving the family. I dared not even think of going out to work. I missed my friends and family. Even more I
missed my freedom. I waited anxiously for Ah Seng to return from his travelling. Within the first year, I had my first child. Luckily, it was a son. My joy was all from caring for my son.

After my father-in-law and my mother-in-law passed away, I had some freedom. I started sub-contracting, sewing of ladies’ undergarments. My four children do not need as much attention as before. It is important I had a source of income.

In 1983 after my mother-in-law died and my youngest girl was 9, I began to look for work. The prospect of re-joining the work force in another field at my age, was not too bright. The garment industry because of its comparatively low starting pay preferred to employ younger girls. I was too old. Luckily, there was a shortage of experienced sewers. I found an advertisement in the newspapers for home-based sewers. The benefits were not as good as in full time work. I decided to try it. I called the factory and the boss came to see my house and asked me to sew some samples. I was happy to take in the work to sew bras for the extra money. It was better than depending totally on Ah Seng’s irregular monthly family contribution. With my skills and my speed I could earn between RM 500 to RM 800 per month.

Luckily I was able to earn. My eldest useless son dropped out of school at the age of 16 after failing his Form Three exams. I
always blame my parents-in-law for spoiling him since he was their first grandson. He will not listen to me and has little respect for me. Ah Seng is seldom home to discipline him and the other children. He is like his father – has little respect for me, often using abusive language on me. Ah Seng and I often quarrel over his financial support for the family and my suspicion that he has other women outside. My in-laws always took his side and blamed me for his not coming home saying that is because I did not know how to care for him. My three girls are better behaved but have no interest in their studies. They are more interested in television shows and fashion. During school holidays, the two eldest daughters work at the nearby supermarket and departmental stores as promoters, earning money for themselves for cosmetics and trendy clothes. Even the youngest is beginning to follow in their footsteps. Each one is looking after oneself.

Now I have to look after myself too. Ah Seng has been coming home less and less frequently over the last ten years. I have given up on him. I had better earn my own income. Now the children have grown up. Soon they will earn for themselves, get married and have their own families. I have to look after my health and my well-being. My eyesight is deteriorating. Now the bras are often made of lace. It makes sewing difficult and unpicking without tearing almost
impossible. I am afraid to make mistakes. I get very disturbed by the noise the children make - their music and arguments. It is worse in the hot afternoons. My eyes get tired easily.

I am only concerned that one day when Ah Seng is old and no woman wants him, he will come back home to stay. I don't want him to but if he comes back, how can I chase him out. This is his home. You know, my mother used to tell me, jia zhu, ken chu, jia ko, ken ko (marry a pig, follow the pig, marry a dog, follow the dog)."

5.4.23 Case 23 : Poh Leng (PL)

"I never knew that I was an adopted child. I looked different from my sisters but I never thought I was adopted. One day, I quarreled with my sister over our common boyfriend. She shouted at me and told me that I was adopted and that my mother was a bad woman. I was so shocked and ashamed that I ran away from home. Luckily, I had a good friend who helped me. I was lucky her family was kind enough to let me stay for sometime. I was too ashamed to go home. I started work as their domestic servant for six months. It was hard work and difficult to work as a servant at the home of a good friend even though the family was kind."
After six months, I requested to work at their garment factory. I had always liked sewing in school. I liked embroidery and making all those decorative things for the house. I was lucky to get a job at the factory. I moved out of their home and rented a room together with three girls from the factory. We had two double decker bunk beds in our room. Luckily we worked on shifts so only one or two of us were home each time.

I got married five years ago and now have two sons. My husband drives a taxi. I always worry about his safety. Nowadays, it is dangerous to be a taxi driver. I am sure you must have read those stories of attacks on taxi drivers in the newspapers. Why are people so cruel as to attack we poor people who are trying to earn an honest living?

I had to resign from the factory because my children needed my care. They were often sick during the time they were being cared for by the babysitter. It disrupted both our work routines. There was a time; we thought they had dengue fever. I was really scared. My supervisor was sympathetic and suggested that it would be better for me to subcontract than to continue working in the factory.

My husband cannot help much. He is always very tired when he comes home. It is still better that I continue to work at home. At least, there is some security for the children and me. I don't want my
children to suffer like I did in my childhood. I must make sure they have a good life."

5.4.24 Case 24: Kim Hong (KH)

"I started out as a sweeper in a garment factory at 12 after dropping out at Standard Five. My family was very poor and so my father arranged for me to work at this factory. All my pay was given to my father. Due to labour shortage, the floor supervisor trained me to sew edgings on cut-material. Slowly, I learnt to do more. When I wanted to resign to get married, my supervisor trained me to be a home-based subcontractor. She advised me to continue working so that I could maintain my freedom. She has been very kind to me all these years so I followed her advice. After the birth of my first child, I stopped working but I kept contact with her and she encouraged me to picked up again as a subcontractor when my son was older. Maybe when my supervisor retires, I will stop too."

5.4.25 Case 25: Ching Siew (CS)

"I started my first job in a garment factory in Batu Pahat. There are many garment factories there. My friends and I worked in
many different factories. We would work in a factory for a while. If we find that another factory is willing to pay more, we will all quit and join the new factories. It was difficult to join them after I met Boon Haw. I was torn between following my friends and staying on in the factory where Boon Haw worked. My friends were more understanding than I thought. They not only did not insist but in fact encouraged me to stay. I am thankful to them.

Soon after I got married, Boon Haw was transferred to the Kuala Lumpur office. It has been six years now. Initially, I was lost here. No friend and no relative. I joined the garment factory here for two years. It was not like those days in Batu Pahat. People here are not so friendly. They are all so busy and have little time for others. After, I had my son, I decided to subcontract instead since my pay was not enough to pay for the babysitter and I have no family here to help me. Sewing at home gives me more money than working in the factory. I can even save on paying for a babysitter. I have also more freedom to organize my time and my work. I can even take naps in the afternoons when the children are sleeping.

I only studied till Form One. There are few jobs that I can do. I cannot read much and now I am finding it harder and harder to remember the words. I try to read anyway to keep up. I enjoy reading the 'Sister' periodical.
It teaches me a lot especially about married life. I like sewing at home. It gives me freedom as well as income.”

5.4.26 Case 26: Geok Yen (GY)

“I live with my mother in a flat in Salak South. I am her only child. My mother has cataract and diabetes and I am scared to leave her home alone. I have been moving from job to job in search of a suitable arrangement to earn a living as well as look after my mother. I tried selling Social Welfare Lottery tickets till the Social Welfare Lottery Board closed down. Then I worked as an assistant, dispensing Chinese Herbal Medicine at the Moral Upliftment Society where the Society gave free Chinese medical treatment to the poor. As the free medical treatment was offered on alternate days, I had to leave my mother alone for 5 hours on alternate days.

The income I received was not enough to sustain both of us as well as pay rent. However, I like the job very much. I regarded it as part of my service to the poor in the community, people very much like my mother and I. Although poor, I am grateful that I can share my Buddhist way of living with the people who come for medical treatment and give some joy to the downtrodden and destitute. To me, working at the Moral Upliftment Society, was a
medical treatment and give some joy to the downtrodden and destitute. To me, working at the Moral Upliftment Society, was a source of comfort. Each time I meet a destitute, I am thankful to Lord Buddha that my mother and I still have a roof over our heads and food to eat, no matter how meager. We are vegetarian in conformity with the Teachings of Lord Buddha.

Plate 5.4: Caring for the Elderly and Working at Home

Photo taken by Lee Lee Loh Ludher, 1996

Two years ago, I met Wong Ah Si who subcontracted school uniforms to sew at home. She had come to the Society to seek treatment for her headache. The Chinese Sin Seh had found that WAS's headache was caused by the strain and build up of pressure
into the night, trying to meet the demands of the factory. WAS related this to me while waiting for her medicines to be prepared.

I had worked in a garment factory about ten years ago and done home-based sub-contracting on and off. I decided it might be a good idea to return to home sewing. I enquired more from WAS and asked her to introduce me to the factory owner. WAS was happy to do so as it would mean less pressure from the factory. The arrangement was made and I began to take school uniforms home to sew on days I was not working at the Society. It is a convenient arrangement and I can spend more time at home caring for my mother as well as earn some money.”

5.4.27 Case 27 : Ai Ling (AL)

"With three children to care for and no one to help, the only way I can earn a living is sewing blouses and track suits at home. Sometimes, there are also caps and bags. These are difficult to sew as I am not used to them. I don’t like to sew caps. The piece rate is not so high and it is difficult to sew. I cannot sew as fast and so I cannot earn as much. I try to ask the boss not to send me any. He said he has no choice. When customers order tracksuits sometimes they want matching caps so we are forced to sew them."
I am trying to contact my friend who used to work with me at the factory. She is really skilled at sewing caps. Maybe she would like to subcontract and sew at home. She too has children and resigned because of that. Now that her children are bigger, maybe she would like to subcontract as well. I can pass the caps to her and sew only the tracksuits and blouses.

Sewing at home is not too bad. At least I don’t have supervisors controlling me and I can work as and when I like. The money is not too bad either. Last time, after all the deductions for EPF and Socso, I had very little take home pay. Now all the money I earn, I get in full. It is much better this way. I need the money now, not when I am too old to spend. Next time, my husband and the children can look after me. I look after them well now they will look after me when I am old."

5.4.28 Case 28: Kam Poh (KP)

"Life was very hard for my siblings and I. We were orphans - both our parents died young. We stayed with our aunt, who has many children. We felt neglected and disadvantaged. One of my brothers was sent away to a juvenile delinquent home. We both started working at 15 and 16 years old. Better to work and earn for
ourselves than work hard but be unpaid at home. I sold cinema
tickets and KC was a waitress. Between us we were able to get free
food and enjoy cinema shows.

I eloped with Seong Ko. He was a member of a gang that
controlled the cinema area. He had always been my protector,
shielding me from other bullies. To avoid being found, I stopped
working and hid at Seong Ko’s home in Jinjiang. I learnt sewing
from the tenants there who were subcontractors. I helped them sew
petticoats. It was the easiest to sew, needing mainly straight lines.

When Seong Ko’s gang spilt up, we had no income for some
time. The sub-contracting was our main source of income. I was
poor but happy. Then Seong Ko decided to work as a lorry
attendant. The lorry transports goods to and from Singapore. Since I
was alone with our first child, we asked the factory to allow me to
buy an old sewing machine by installments deducted from my
income. When I was ill after the second child was born, Seong Ko
asked Kam Chu to help take over my work to prevent the sewing
machine from being repossessed.”

5.4.29 Case 29: Kam Chu (KC)

“ I went into sub-contracting to save my sister’s sewing
machine from being repossessed by the factory. We are very close.
We went through hard times as children. My sister, Kam Poh, had persuaded the factory to allow her to buy the old sewing machine by deducting the monthly payments from her income. When KP was ill and could not complete the consignment given to her, her husband came to me for help. He was afraid that the factory would take back the sewing machine so he asked me to complete the sewing for my sister.

KP was ill for two months - she could hardly get out of bed. After she recovered, I decided to continue sub-contracting and get a sewing machine the way she did. I am not as lucky as KP. My husband is a useless chap - loves to drink. Even though Seong Ko is only at home when the lorry is not transporting goods, he always helps around and cares for the children. My husband behaves like the lord in the house. He wastes his money drinking with friends. He always says he works hard to support us and so we have to look after him like a lord. The truth is what he gives us hardly enough. I used to pack crayons at home but it is dangerous for my children. They are too small to understand that they must not eat them. After sewing for KP, I decided to sew as well. It is safer than crayons, don't you agree?"
"I started work in a small garment factory when I was 18 years old. For eight years, I sewed children's garments. My initial pay was RM250 a month. It gradually rose to RM550 when I left to stay home after my second son, Yang, was born. It was no longer cost-effective to use the services of a babysitter to care for two children. I devoted my time to the home and family, carrying out domestic work.

Initially it felt good to stay home. Having time to enjoy playing with the children and watching TV. I could wake up late and go to bed late. After a few months, I was bored to stay home and used to take Yang to the supermarkets and departmental stores when Sheng, my elder son, was at school. I started to cook less and buy food home. But after a while, I was also lazy to go shopping. Nothing much to see and buy. All are the same.

At the same time, the situation in the home was becoming stormy. Every time I asked Lim for housekeeping money, there were constant arguments. He would storm out of the house and would not return for a few days. I felt neglected, became depressed and tried to search for fulfillment. I contacted my friends to go shopping or eat. But all this cost money. Lim complained that business was poor but I noticed that he was wearing more fashionable clothes,
smoking more up-market cigarettes and drinking more. I suspected
that he was patronizing bars or karaoke lounges.

I felt insecure staying at home without my own source of income.
I desperately needed to find some form of income. I asked my mother to
come and stay with me to look after my sons so I could return to work.
My mother agreed to oblige for a short period of time as a trial.

By then, it has become obvious that Lim was no longer interested
in the marriage. He continued to provide for the family and occasionally
brought home groceries or food purchased from road-side stalls. My
mother tried to treat him well, advising me to entertain my husband
properly so that he would stay at home. I am so hurt by his neglect, how
could I do it? Often, disagreements occurred between my mother and I.
She would then pack and leave. This would leave me in the lurch, as I
could not go to work. I received repeated warnings from the factory,
forcing me to change jobs often. I confided in my supervisor at the
garment factory about my problems. She suggested that I subcontract
from the factory to work from home.

I accepted sewing assignments from the factory. The factory
dispatched an old sewing machine to my home. A van delivers cut-out
clothes to my home together with the thread and buttons. I stitched
dresses designed for the export market and local departmental stores. I
am paid piece rate. Having money of my own is very reassuring. Now I
The thirty women were asked how they were recruited as home-based subcontractors. 40% subcontracted from the factory for which they were previously working. 55% of the cases were introduced by their friends, relatives or neighbours who were home-based subcontractors or acquaintances of factories seeking home-based subcontractors. Only one person found subcontracting through an advertisement in the newspaper. 70% said they on their own decided to subcontract, while only 10% reported that their husbands suggested that they subcontract. The rest were encouraged by relatives or friends. Although three of them had mothers or relatives who subcontracted, they did not inherit the business. The mother's subcontracting experiences had
an impact on them as they remembered helping as children but it by no means influenced them to model after their mothers. None of the home-based subcontractors wanted their daughters to inherit their business or be home-based subcontractors like them.

Apparently a wife’s desire to work was of secondary importance to their husbands. Though many of the women desired to work outside of their homes, they were not permitted by their husbands. They deferred to their husbands’ wishes to remain at home to assume their domestic responsibilities. In some cases, like LM and AP, they even had to utilize partially their salaries to compensate their mothers-in-law or babysitters for childcare services so that they could work. As ‘yi jia zi zhu’ (one family’s lord), it was the prerogative of the husband to make the major decisions of and for the family, with or without consulting the wife. Often the wives (LM, AP, YT and YY) were threatened or coerced into submission. Most, like AC, resigned to their fate to ‘jia zhu, ken chu, jia ko, ken ko’ (marry a pig, follow the pig, marry a dog, follow the dog).

5.5 Work History

Fourteen out of the thirty cases (46%) had their first remunerated job between the ages of 18-20, six above 21 years old, with one case (AKS) who started her first job at the age of 40. Two (KH and PC) started work at the tender age of 12, working to supplement family income. 70% have worked as unpaid workers along side family members or for family members. The majority was
first generation paid workers as most of their mothers were housewives or unpaid family workers.

Of the total, one-third worked as sewers in garment factories, with tailors or helped home-based subcontractors. Except for five, all had worked in some garment related jobs before becoming home-based subcontractors.

**Table 5.2: Age of First Entry of Respondents into Home-based Subcontracting**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>No. of Cases</th>
<th>% of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Below 20 years old</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-25 years old</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26-30 years old</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31-35 years</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Above 35 years</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From Table 5.2, it can be seen that age of first entry into home-based subcontracting occurred in the age cohorts of 21-25. Almost 53% of the subcontractors entered home-based subcontracting between the ages of 21 to 25 years old, after marriage and birth of the child.

Eighty percent of the respondents said that they started home-based subcontracting when they withdrew from the labour force because of child-care responsibilities. In 12 of the cases, it was after the birth of the second or third child and the members of the extended family were unable to continue assisting with the child care or the cost of child care was higher than income earned. In
four of the cases, it was their child-care responsibility that caused them to be late or irregular at work forcing them to resign.

**Table 5.3: The Number of Years of Continuous / Intermittent Involvement in Home-based Sub-contracting**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years</th>
<th>No. of Cases</th>
<th>% of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Below 1 year</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-5 years</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-10 years</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-15 years</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Above 15 years</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>30</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The longest period a respondent (LM) had worked as a home-based subcontractor, continuously or intermittently was 20 years. One of the respondents (MC) started six months ago. Forty-three percent had been in home-based sub-contracting for one to five years and thirty percent had worked for six to ten years as shown in Table 5.3. Most of them had breaks in sub-contracting, taking short periods off for childbirth or baby care, resuming after the child was older or could be cared for by others. They were not entitled to maternity benefits and so they ceased to sub-contract during the period of child-birth and caring for the infant. They only resumed subcontracting when their health and child-care duties permitted them.
Apparently, the majority of the women entered sub-contracting during the period when the garment industry experienced rapid expansion (1985-1996) which coincided with the time of labour shortage.

5.6 Reasons for Not Returning to the Factory

When asked, why she did not return to work in the factory, Pik Ching's immediate response was,

"Who would look after my family and the sons? How can I leave my sons alone at home? They will mix with bad company."

Her husband, Ah Keong, too agreed,

"To be a good mother is a woman's responsibility. It's essential for my wife to look after my sons, ensure they eat properly at home after school, do their homework and not mix with bad boys. If they become bad, it will be too late to rescue them. We have to stop them from going to the nearby parks by themselves. There are too many bad elements waiting to lure young boys to vices. It is important for their mother to keep an eye on them."

This view of Pik Ching and Ah Keong on not returning to work because of the necessity to care for the children, particularly the sons, is shared by 21 out of the 30 respondents. Kam Foong, for example, expressed a similar concern,
“Wong and I will not let our son go out without one of us watching him. He is still small, we have to teach him properly. That is why I work at home. My son is going to take the UPSR exam. He must avoid mixing with bad company. He can entertain himself with television programs, computer games and badminton in our small front garden. We bring his cousin and some friends to play with him. It is better this way.”

Ah Fun also expressed her worries about her sons mixing with bad company,

“Children from homes in the low cost council flats are not those with the best behavior. I have heard too many stories of boys smoking and getting into drugs and fights and girls being raped and taken away from home. I must keep a watch over them.”

While sewing, AF would intermittently stop to monitor her children’s activities even at the playground. AF would call out instructions or reprimand her children if she was worried about the games they played or the company they kept.

Xiao Lan’s situation is similar to that of Ah Poh’s. XI. commented,

“I would like to go back to work in the factory but I cannot leave my son at home alone. I have tried to send him to a babysitter
but he often falls ill. Each time he is sick, I have to stay home to nurse him. He gets thinner and thinner. Every morning, he cries when I leave him with the babysitter. I don’t have the heart to send him to the babysitter. His father also prefers me to stay home to look after our son. I will go back to work once my son goes to school and can take care of himself.”

Suan Heoh’s reason for not going to work at the factory was that she has to stay home to ensure her children return directly from school. She said:

“I cannot go work because I have to be home to ensure my children return home directly from school and are safely at home. Although the boys are in the same school, they are not in the same sessions, one is in the morning session and the other is in the afternoon. My daughter is in a girls’ school. It is better for girls to be in a girls’ school. It is safer. My sons are in a co-ed school. It is alright for boys, but not good for my daughter to mix with boys when she is so young.

I have to accompany them till they board the school bus and collect them when the bus drops them back. If I go to work, I won’t be able to do that because of the different timings of school sessions and I may have to work on shifts.”
SH's husband, Ah Kit, emphasized his concern for the children,

"In a few years, the children will have more extra-curricular activities and will have to start taking public buses. It will be a dangerous time. They may get distracted by others and follow them to other places instead of coming home directly. I am trying to save to buy a car for Suan Heoh to drive them to and from school. If not, I will let her use the car and she will drive them to and from school and I will use the motorbike to work. It is better than to allow them to mix with other people in the public bus and at the bus station. You don't know what kinds of bad people hang around there. I have seen them myself. That is why whenever, we have to go out, we go together as a family in our car. I don't want them to be exposed to all these dangers."

Another reason cited by fifteen of the subcontractors for not returning to work in the factory is related work conditions. Bee Li explained, comparing the greater freedom of working at home,

"Conditions in the factory are not pleasant. I have to sit the whole day at the machine. I have no freedom to stand and stretch or walk about like I have working at home. The supervisors are always around watching us. It is really boring working there. Here at home, I am in my own 'kingdom'. I can listen to the radio or cassette as I
work, answer the telephone and talk to my children and friends whenever I like. I can even stop to eat whatever and whenever I like. I actually gained weight when I started working from home."

Choy Wan contributed her view about working in the factory,

"The supervisor does not allow us to talk to each other, saying that we will lose our concentration and injure ourselves. It is not true. I have not seen any injuries due to talking. I think it is because they want to make us work like machines and sew faster. It is very tiring on the eyes. Here I can take breaks, rest and continue whenever I wish. I can use my 'eye rest' time to do housework and care for my daughter and return to embroidery when my eyes are rested."

CW, XL, GY, ML and LM confided that working at home freed them from sexual harassment at work. They revealed experiences of being sexually harassed at the factory. Twenty other respondents have heard of or knew of instances of sexual harassment. However, they were reluctant to confirm if they had personally experienced sexual harassment. They perceived such behaviour as normal and did not view it as something serious. They were not aware of any recourse for those who were harassed.
Lai Meng, still a very attractive woman at 45, was a beauty when young. She explained that she was rather traumatized during her young years at work with the advances of her supervisors and managers. She recounted,

"these male managers and supervisors are out to get cheap thrills (lor pen ye). They like to touch and pinch young girls. One supervisor often tried to embrace and kiss us. He will hide in the store room and when we come in to get the thread or needles, he will try to touch or embrace or kiss us. I am not the only one who suffered from his aggression. Most of us are too embarrassed to tell others, only our close friends. We dare not offend him since he is our supervisor. I used to be so afraid to go to the store alone."

Geok Yen related her encounters while working in the factory. She felt that her self worth and dignity was eroded by such encounters of sexual harassment,

"It is worse for me because I am single. These male supervisors think that I am 'itchy' like them. They tried to touch me and talk dirty to me. When I resisted, they made jokes and said I was stupid not to know what I was missing. When I complained to the factory boss and even to the women supervisors, their attitude was that I was making a big deal about a small thing. One woman even suggested that I should go out with these men, spend their money
and get gifts from them. She did not understand that I have my
dignity. I am a good Buddhist and I do not sell myself like this.
People did not understand how scared I was and how bad I felt.

Now working at home, I am freed from all these troubles."

Mei Lin agreed with those feelings of fear. She related her experiences
while working in the factory,

"you can tell from those stares these men gave that they
have bad intentions and lusty desires. I dared not look at their faces.
It was frightening. They pretended to be kind and concerned about
my well-being but they were really like wolves. When I refused their
advances, they gave me trouble. I had the dullest and monotonous
jobs. They gave me the difficult jobs too. If I made mistakes, I had
my earnings cut. I was at their mercy.

Sometimes some of my friends and I agreed to go out with
them to bars and nightclubs. I like to go to nightclubs and bars. I
enjoyed myself and let these men pay for their naughty ways. It is
better to enjoy myself going out with these supervisors and get good
jobs than to suffer those dull and difficult assignments."

Choy Wan and Xiao Lan related their experiences of being molested by
their respective male supervisors in the factory. The supervisor hugged and
squeezed the breasts of Choy Wan on two occasions. She was shocked and frightened but dared not report about the incidents to anyone. She tried to avoid him but it was difficult since it was a small factory. She explained,

"My supervisor was an old man. He was as old as my father. When I joined the factory, he was very kind to me. I felt obligated to be nice to him. When he touched me on a few occasions, I thought it was accidental. He then started put his hands on my shoulder or pat me on my back. I dared not say anything but just moved away. But when he hugged me and squeezed my breasts, I became very frightened. I tried to avoid him and he called me ungrateful. That was when I decided to leave that job."

Xiao Lan shared her fear of the harassment of her boss each time he walked into the workshop. Being young and powerless, she had no recourse since the person who harassed her was the manager of the factory.

"The manager who used to harass us in the factory was a big man. He would walk around in the workshop looking at us. He would walk up to one of the girls and on the pretext of showing her how to improve or correct her work, he would rub his private part against her. All of us knew about his tricks but we dared not do anything. When I see him walking into the workshop, I, like the other girls, would try to hide my face with the hope that he would
not pick me. I could feel my fear and disgust when he came near me. But I was too frightened to stand up and walk away.

Even the thought of that episode disgusts me. Now I know it should not be tolerated. I did not know before. Working at home, I am not subjected to it now. It was a frightening experience."

AK and PC who were rather introvert in nature, explained that by working at home, they were not forced to associate with those they disliked. They disliked socializing with others whether supervisors or peers. PC explained,

"Working at home, I am not forced to associate with people I don’t like. In the factory, I have no choice. At the last factory where I worked, there was a ‘sui por’ (lousy woman) sitting next to me. She also likes to gossip. She is calculating and grumpy. She comes to work with a ‘black face’ most of the time, complaining of about almost everything. It is ‘sui’ (bad luck) to see her black face early in the morning.

At home, it is only my family that I have to face. I can select who I want to mix with. My friends are mainly from the neighbourhood. They see me on my way to the market or while we are waiting for our children. We can talk when I like and if I don’t want to talk or when I am busy, I just make some excuses e.g. I have
a lot of work to do and I can be freed from them. This is not possible in the factory, you are stuck with all the people working there, good or bad."

AK preferred staying home and going out with her family to the parties and picnics offered by the factories. KP, ML and LA felt after marriage, they had no more interest to socialize with the friends in the factory. They preferred to spend their time with the family.

For SL, CW and YY, returning to work would not be cost-effective. Without subsidized childcare service at the factories, what they earned from the factory was not enough to pay for the services of babysitters of their children at RM150 to RM200 per child. They felt that their possible earnings working in the factory instead of at home, might be the same or higher in gross terms. However, after making provisions for payment for transport, meals and incidentals related to ‘going to work’, their net earnings from the factory might be lower than that from homebased subcontracting. It was unlikely that their husbands would pay for childcare service. According to the norm in Chinese family, husbands would not pay for childcare because they preferred their wives to care for the children instead of working outside the homes. If the women wished to work, then she had to financially deputize the babysitter. Thus if a woman has to send two or more children to a babysitter, she cannot ‘afford’ to be employed outside of the home.

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Out of the thirty cases, twenty-four shared SH’s belief that caring for the son is very important. She explained,

“For Chinese families, sons are very important. Our families follow the Chinese patrilineal kinship structure. Only our sons are regarded as descendant group member as they carry on the family surname. They carry the surname and will be responsible for praying for us when we die. If not, they will keep our ashes in the temple. He will also be our provider in our old age.

My father has lots of properties but all go to my brothers. I only got some jewelry from my mother. Ah Kit’s family is the same. He inherits all the property from his parents. Only his mother’s jewelry was distributed among his sisters. We have to keep the family urn and pray for his parents and ancestors and continue with the ceremonies.

Out of the 30 respondents, 80% of them (including the two unmarried respondents, GY and AK) regarded it important to bring up the sons well. They felt that if the sons were delinquent or unable to earn a living, they would lose their security and would not be provided for in their old age.

When asked if it was just as important for them to care for the daughters in the same way, most of them did not have a firm view. While they said that it should not make any difference especially at this time when women were
working and earning but they could not expect their daughters to look after them in their old age. One typical explanation given by the respondents was similar to LM's reply,

"It is important to protect our daughters. All these stories in the newspapers about rapes and murders are frightening. It is not safe for girls to be left alone. The boys can take care of themselves but they may mix with the wrong company.

Now many young women work and give money to their parents but after marriage, it will be difficult to do the same. Her husband and his family will not like it. It is not the same as the sons. They can decide for themselves."

Ensuring the proper education and discipline of children again was very much regarded as the work of the mother, though serious disciplining matters, which might involve corporal punishment like caning, was more likely to be administered by the father. Twenty-two of the respondents said that it was their duty to ensure the children are well brought up. This view was as exemplified by the remark of LM,

"I will not want my children to be regarded as 'mei yu jia jiau' (not taught by the family). My mother-in-law and husband will blame me. It is the mother's duty and responsibility to ensure the children are taught proper manners. It will be such a shame to be told that my children are not properly
taught. I will be too embarrassed to walk around in the neighbourhood if the neighbours say that of my children."

Most (90%) of the husbands interviewed were of the opinion that mothers were to be blamed for the misbehavior of their children. According to ten of them, the measure of the ‘worth’ of a good woman was her ability to bring up the children and the success attained by the children. As affirmed by Yi Ting’s husband,

"Of, course the mother must bear the responsibility of enforcing strict discipline of the children. The mother is home with the children most of the time unlike us fathers. We have to run around outside to earn a living. We don’t have time. If the women at home don’t take care of children, then what will they do at home? Paint fingernails and watch video? Their purpose of staying home is to look after the children and make sure they are good."

5.7 Conclusion

The home-based subcontractors can be roughly divided into two groups: one group of usually skilled workers and the other doing tedious labour intensive jobs. The first group has developed a ‘super-skill’ in terms of speed and quality, which the manufacturers were reluctant to lose and very much in need of. Thus the manufacturers even pursued them to their homes to have them continue
working when these women could not come to be employed due to marriage and childbearing. A network of support amongst the garment makers, the supervisors from the previous factories and other female family members exist to some extent to help these subcontractors. The second group are married women with domestic commitments with low education and training who were willing to take on labour intensive work at wages well below the rate acceptable to men or factory workers. This group is the most vulnerable with little alternatives even in the informal sector.

The main reason cited by the home-based subcontractors for working at home was their obligation to care for the young, the old and the sick, though there were also reasons related to relative greater freedom and flexibility in home-based work. Sexual harassment might be a contributory reason in some cases but most did not regard it as a serious enough matter and were unaware of avenues for recourse.

These Chinese women have been socialized in a culture, which traditionally has treated women unjustly, confining them to their home and depriving them of meaningful participation in the social, economic and political arena. Embedded deeply in conservative syncretic intermix of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism, Chinese culture has emphasized to these women the importance of the san gang (ruler guides subjects, father guides son and husband guides wife) and yi-jing which associates the male with yang (being strong and rigid) and the female with ying (weak and flexible). They and the Chinese men grew up
believing that an ideal Chinese woman was expected to observe the *san cong si de* (three obediences and four virtues). She was expected to obey her father before her marriage, obey her husband after her marriage and obey her son after the death of the husband. The women were also expected to *xian fu jiao zi* (care for the husband and teach her son). The patriarchal practices reinforced by the ideology of the Yi-Jing, accorded their husbands the greater social and political importance as *yi jia zi zhu* (one family’s lord) while the women were relegated to a lesser role as the homemakers with primary reproductive responsibility and domestic duty.

Although there have been changes in social outlook, the Chinese society remained promoters of patriarchy and these women grew up still practicing patriarchy and patrilineal kinship; recognizing only the son as descendent group member as he carried the family surname. The son was expected to practice filial piety and provide support to the parents in their old age. Thus, these women withdrew from the labour force to invest in the care of their children especially the sons and be primary or supplementary providers of the family. Their involvement in home-based subcontracting was not a transient but often a long-standing one.

The case studies on the women home-based subcontractors thus, reveal the power of culture and social structures in constraining women. Their stories exhibit a commonality in the interplay of cultures, families and social institutions on the individual home-based subcontractor restricting them
spatially to their home and limiting them in their choice of productive work. They resorted to home-based subcontracting to alleviate the feminine dilemma and allow the convergence of their roles as mother, wife and homemaker and that of a worker. Home-based subcontracting apparently instead of creating a spatial divide between home and work, allows these Chinese women home-based subcontractors a locational merger for productive and reproductive work.