CHAPTER 6

PRODUCTIVE AND REPRODUCTIVE WORK ORGANIZATION OF HOME-BASED SUBCONTRACTORS IN THE GARMENT INDUSTRY

6.1 Introduction

This Chapter presents the findings on the organization of productive and reproductive work by the Chinese women home-based subcontractors in the garment industry. It offers an insightful understanding of the labour process, utilization of time between domestic and productive work as well as for leisure and recreation of the subcontractors. It examines the division of labour in the household. It discusses remuneration packages and the relationship between home-based subcontractors and the garment makers. It also elaborates on the contributions the subcontractors to the upliftment of family wellbeing and also to the garment industry.

6.2 Organization of Production in Garment Subcontracting

The home-based subcontractors received from the garment makers a part of the operation of the production of garments to complete. They were supplied materials to cut or cut pieces of fabric to be stitched together. The machines for the operation might be supplied by the garment maker or possessed by the subcontractor herself.
6.2.1 Equipment

The work done by the thirty respondents required only a few pieces of equipment. For packaging sub-contractors like SL, SG and AKS, the only basic tool was an iron and an ironing board. In the case of the cutting assignment as in the case of KF, she required mainly a good pair of scissors and a good work table. The heavy machine for cutting multiple pieces was not needed in her case as she was catering individual designs required by a boutique.

Plate 6.1: Sewing Machine and Embroidery Machine at Home
Supplied Rent-free by Home-based Subcontractors

Photo taken by Lee Lee Loh-Ludher, 1996

Most home-based subcontractors i.e. twenty-four of the respondents, were involved in sewing. The sewing process is the main process of the
production and the most time consuming. It is the easiest to farm-out. The equipment required by the subcontractor is often just a sewing machine. Some of the respondents like BL and SH were given sewing machines by their parents, a popular component of the dowry that a new bride would bring into her new home. Others like LA, AK, YT, LM and AC had to acquire their own commercial sewing machines to qualify themselves for better quality work to earn higher piece rates. Some might possess an edging machine to join the cut pieces together before stitching. Edging increases quality and eases stitching.

Normally subcontractors have to possess the required equipment before the garment makers would farm out the work to them. If they do not, then the subcontractor may be asked to purchase an old machine from the factories like in the case of KP and KC. The factory deducted the installments from the piece rate payments over five years. If the machine is too expensive, like in the case of CW, the factory places its own machine in the home of the home-based subcontractor. Choy Wan explained,

"The factory is kind enough to put a brand new sewing machine in my house. I am amazed that they trust me so much. I have been sewing embroidery for this factory using my own machine. But the factory now needs a higher quality of work and I cannot afford to buy one like this. A new one costs RM25, 000. Where am I to get so much money? Even if I sew clothes for the rest of my life I may not make half of that money. The factory has sent
me this machine with the understanding that I will continue to subcontract the embroidery work from them and no one else. Though they pay me a little lower than other factories, it is O.K. The piece rate is higher with this machine. I am grateful to them."

During that period these subcontractors were sometimes threatened with the repossessing of the machines. They were made to feel obligated to the factory and were forced to continue sewing for the factories sometimes at lower piece-rates. The factory in reality greatly benefits from this arrangement as it saves on space at the factory by utilizes the premise of the subcontractor rent-free. The machine is often purchased through leasing by the factory and thus enjoying tax deductions and tax benefits through depreciation in book value. At the end of five years, the factory can actually writes off the machine at zero book value. In reality, the factory has sold an old machine to the subcontractor at full value. The factory may then acquire a new upgraded machine enjoying replacement tax benefits from the government and places it in the home of the same subcontractor or another subcontractor and the vicious cycle begins.

If the machine is too expensive and the subcontractor will not be able to purchase one even by installment payment, the factory may also suggest to home-based subcontractor to place it in the home of subcontractor, as in the case of CW. In this way the garment maker externalizes its rental and utility costs to the home-based subcontractor. The factory then co-ordinates the
production process spread out among individual home-based subcontractors in spatially distant and isolated locations, each with their respective equipment.

6.2.2 Work Space and Work Environment

A visit to the home of a home-based subcontractor’s house would convince one that house was organized functionally but not aesthetically, with little effort to beautify or decorate the house. The interior settings of all the respondents’ homes were ‘functional’ to ease work and reduce labour for cleaning and maintaining the home.

Not much thought was put into the furnishings or the arrangement of decorative items. Even though they were in the business of sewing, few subcontractors indulged in producing decorative items except for cushions and curtains, for the homes. Most of the subcontractors affirmed that because of their daily sewing work, they did not wish to invest more time and energy into sewing decorative items for the home. Their ‘hobby’ has become their work and the joy of sewing has decreased. Most did not have the desire to tailor their own clothing. They would rather buy than make. Because they preferred to conserve their time and energy for essential domestic chores, the houses were simply furnished for ease of maintenance and care.

The workspace was cramped as the residences of the subcontractors were mainly apartments / low cost flats/ single or double-storied terrace houses. Only two (YT and AF) had annexes or extensions to their homes set aside as their
work place. YT's extension was even air-conditioned. Two (AK, KF) worked along the corridor between the dining and living rooms. The living room was the most common place of work. 50% of the cases had their machines located in one corner of the living room.

*Plate 6.2: Dining Table Doubles as Work Table*

*Photo taken by Lee Lee Loh-Ludher, 1996*

The second most popular area (30%) was the dining area with the dining table doubling up as a worktable. This arrangement was necessitated in the absence of a large table to spread out the materials. Bundles of cut material were then laid out on the dining table or placed around the machine or on the dining chairs and other tables. The bundles were simply shifted around to make
way for dinner, which the family often partook together each evening. Though not the most satisfactory, the dining table had to suffice as the worktable due to lack of space or better alternative.

Most subcontractors with small children would position their machines strategically in order to monitor the movement and activities the children while working. Rather than facing the wall, they would back the wall to keep an eye on the children, to ensure their safety or watch them doing their homework or studying. The worksite was often the very place where the children played, studied and sometimes slept. There was a total absence of safeguards or safety features to prevent the children from approaching the machines or hurting themselves. Accidents were not uncommon.

Electric ceiling or stand fans were installed to cool the work area and to enhance comfort. A radio cum cassette player often provided entertainment while the women worked. Their popular programs were serialized drama, comedies and songs.

Leisure and rest for the subcontractor was almost synonymous with watching TV, video or laser disc. Most of the respondents’ owned televisions with 20 inch or wider screens. The television dominated the living room in a central position. Chairs and sofas were arranged to face the television rather than to facilitate face to face conversation. In 60% of the interviewees’ homes, there was a reclining easy chair facing the television. This chair is normally the most comfortable and is reserved for the man of the house. When he is home, it
is often his prerogative to occupy that chair. In his absence, his sons may fight over the chair. The females sometimes have to vacate it for a male even younger in age. The chair has become a symbol of dominance in some homes.

It was common for the husband or children to watch TV while the women continued working in one corner of the dining or living room area. She might steal occasional glances or ask enough questions to follow the story line of the show the rest of the family was watching.

The home-based subcontractors themselves rarely take much time off for personal leisure. They might at most take one hour or so in the evening to watch a serialized soap opera. Almost all the respondents seemed to prefer radio to television as they could listen while working without distraction.

6.2.3 Work Arrangement

The raw materials were by and large supplied by the garment makers. This was basically a requirement as the type of fabric and accessories were integral parts of the design and were normally determined by the buyer or client. The designs also required a uniformity best decided by the designer or purchaser. The other reason was the complexity and innumerable variations and range of colours, accessories and texture of fabric. According to a purchaser for a manufacturer of men’s shirts, there were as many as 200 different designs of the small round white buttons used for men’s shirts. To the common
unobservant eye, these small white buttons would appear alike as if there was no difference between them.

The fabrics were cut according to the design and sent to the home of the home-based subcontractor. The only exception was in the case of KF who was a master cutter for Susan’s boutique. Fabric was delivered to her for cutting. As these were basically designer wear, only a few sizes of the same pattern were cut to be tailored. The factory normally delivered cut pieces in batches of a dozen or a gross or more recently in multiples of tens, by its own van plying a predetermined route to the homes of the subcontractors. Processed or finished products were then collected by the same vans and returned to the factories. For 80% of the cases, the delivery and pick-up was once a week following a fixed schedule. If orders were urgent, subcontractors were required to telephone the factory upon completion of assignments for immediate collection.

However, there were also other arrangements. KF’s husband helped her to deliver the cut pieces and collect them from Susan. Similarly was the case of YY. Her husband exchanged completed works for new assignments on his way to work. It was evident that the home-based subcontractors were not paid a higher piece rate to absorb the cost of transportation. Both husbands considered it as part of their assistance to their wives. They complained and hinted to the factory impute the cost of petrol and transportation into the payment, it was not taken seriously and the price of the piece rate remained relatively unchanged over the years. It was taken for granted by the subcontractors that if the factory
was not able to deliver and collect, it was then their duty to do so if they wished to continue subcontracting, as explained by YL,

"Recently the boss said that the factory is not having good business because of poor sales and intense competition. To cut costs, the factory has stopped delivery and collection. I have to make the delivery and collection by mini-bus. If I don't go, they will not send the materials and I will not have work. This is the way of business - when business is good, they will send and collect and chase me to work more. When business is bad, I have to collect and send the consignments myself or I do not get work. Once a week, I meet my daughter near her school. She goes with me to the factory to help me carry the heavy load."

6.2.4 Contract

Home-based sub-contracting relied heavily on mutual trusts rather than a written contractual agreement or letter of offer. While the factories gave formal agreements to micro-enterprise operators, they did not do so for individual home-based subcontractors. All agreements were verbal.

Most parent factories used a system of recording on cards or small note books to record payments. A home-based subcontractor was required to sign on the card acknowledging the quantity of material collected, the piece rate payment, deadline for completion, quantity returned, differences in the amounts
and payment due as shown in the sample in Figure 5.1. If a deadline is not met, there is seldom a sanction but the completed work as well as work-in-progress has to be returned to the factory at the stated time unless extension was given. The subcontractor might be given extra time if the work was not urgent. In-house factory workers might be deployed to complete urgent orders. For a continued good relationship, subcontractors would work hard, neglect leisure and rest and even housework, to meet deadlines. Inability to fulfill urgent orders might involve a penalty or a demerit and decreased chances for good assignments.

*Figure 6.1: Sample of a Record Card for a Home-based Subcontractor Kept by a Garment Factory*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>No. Pieces collected</th>
<th>Piece Rate ($</th>
<th>Signature</th>
<th>Date returned</th>
<th>Deduct ($</th>
<th>Amount due ($)</th>
<th>Amount Received ($)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Observations by Lee Lee Loh-Ludher*
Most of the time, disputes were regarding quality. It was apparent when the factory or manufacturers encountered problems with the ordering company, the buck was passed down the line to subcontractors. Subcontractors were obligated to rectify defective products. If the work was urgent, the defective work-in-progress was taken back to factory for rework by in-house workers. The subcontractors despised the tedious work of correcting mistakes. Unpicking the stitches was intensely disliked by all as the similarity of colour between the thread and the cloth camouflaged the stitches making them almost invisible. Intense concentration on dark colours like black, red and bright colors hurt the eyes and increased the difficulty of unpicking. The fastest method of undoing the sewing was to use a sharp razor to cut thread. This method required the cloth to be pulled apart, which might lead to tears or strain on the fabric. This lowered the quality of the product, which might result in rejects. The subcontractors might request the help of the children to assist in the unpicking as their eyes were keener. Some of the subcontractors commented that they would rather be penalized for returning pieces with mistakes to the factory than to strain their eyes and waste their time reworking.

6.3 Earnings of Home-based Subcontractors

None of the home-based subcontractors was on a fixed salary. There was also no retainer fee or basic pay given to anyone of the subcontractors. The most common system of payment for home-based subcontractors
was by piece rate or by batches, often by the dozen (12) or gross (144).
Recently, for easy calculation, multiples of tens have become common.

6.3.1 Piece Rate

There is a profusion of piece rate in home-based subcontracting. The rates are normally the same as the rates paid to factory workers and not adjusted to compensate the women for the rental of the workspace or utilities consumed.

LM expressed her views regarding the earnings she received over the twenty years as a subcontractor,

"Over the years, I have been able to specialize in sewing zips and collars and as a result, I have developed a super-skill for that. I am paid by piece rate. As far as I can recall the prices for sewing zips and collars have not changed much over the last 15 or so years that I have been subcontracting. About 10 years ago I was paid RM1.80 per dozen and currently I am paid RM 2.40 per dozen. As for sewing full collars, the price has increased from 18 cents per piece to 28 cents currently. But it is not exactly the same job. The quality of work now is much higher and the sewing is more difficult.

My gross earning per day, working 8 hours is approximately RM50, giving me a monthly gross income of RM1000. I am paid monthly, within the first week of the month for the work I did the month before. There were times when the former factories delayed
payment but with Cheng Chea, payment has been regular and prompt. I have a life insurance policy, which I bought from a friend - a small one of about RM10,000. I bought it to help my friend who was desperate to make some sales. I don’t really think it is useful. What good is it to this money only when I am dead? I need the money now when I am alive and not when I am dead.

I had no other benefits like Employees Provident Fund or Social Security. Is it true that the factory has to look after my health? I am not their worker. Ah Chan and his workers also do not have any medical insurance. Why should Cheng Chea look after me? I am not her worker. For us, housewives, life is like that. We can only depend on our husbands and children, if they are good. If not, we have to look out for ourselves.

The case of YT was an interesting one as she consistently drew the highest income,

"I do mainly fine embroidery work mainly for blouses, baju kebaya and baju kurung. A simple single stalk flower fetches me RM1.20 while the more complicated bigger flowers can fetch as much as RM3. I can sew an average of 40 small flowers or 15 big bouquets a day, working 6 hours or less. I can sew twice that
number if I work a ten-hour day. I can earn an average of RM1,500 to RM1,800 a month if I work hard.

I have an Indonesian maid whom my family shares with my in-laws next door. She works for them part of the time and for us part of the time. There is not so much work so it is better to share one maid. My husband has built me an extension room. He is a contractor so it was easy for him to build it. It can get very hot in the afternoons and I feel tired easily. Last year I installed an air-conditioner to maximize my comfort and productivity. Since I have been working so hard, I deserve to have some comfort. Sometimes the children like to come into this room since it is cooler than the rest of the house. The only thing they complain about is the noise of the embroidery machine and that there is no TV here.”

While AK worked for the same company as YT, their jobs were different and they received different compensations. She explained,

“Yi Ting is my co-worker and neighbour. I sew the pieces she has embroidered into blouses, baju kebaya and baju kurung. She is paid piece rate for the flowers she embroiders. I am not sure how much she paid. I am paid RM6 to RM8 per piece. On the average, putting in at least a total of eight hours daily I can earn an average of RM800- RM1,000 monthly. Our factory gives us bonus and
invites us to big hotels for annual dinners but I normally do not go. I don't know most of the people and no close friends to go with. Sitting there the whole night alone just to eat and watch people is no fun. I prefer to spend the time at home with my family."

Unlike AK, LA sewed for the lower end market. Her earnings were very dependent on the speed of her work to produce a higher volume to compensate for the low piece-rate. She shared her experience,

"I sew blouses and dresses for the lower end of the market. The piece rate payment is at RM1.80 - RM 2.40 per piece. If I put in around 8 hours a day, my monthly total taking reaches about RM600. I us an electric powered Singer sewing machine, which I bought through hire purchase many years ago. I believe I can earn more in the factory since I can have full concentration and no disruption from my children. However, that is not possible with these children to care for.

I prefer to work in this corner of my living room as I watch over my children as I work. At home, I have more freedom to balance my workload and duties as a mother, wife and daughter-in-law. The disadvantage of working at home instead of being at the factory is that I do no have any health benefits. No maternity leave and no sickness benefit. I am paid only when I work. I wish I had
health insurance coverage. It is important to have health benefits.

You look at my mother-in-law. She is immobilized by kidney failure. Every month we have to pay hefty medical bills. This is causing me great concern. I really pray I will not have any such disease. I do not want to be a burden to my family."

A more common example was similar to the case of YY. She discussed her situation,

"I sew skirts at RM2.10 each. To finish my target of 12 skirts daily, I have to follow a strict regiment to manage my time between housework and sewing. One day's rest is one day without income. My approximate daily income is about RM 25, giving a total monthly income of about RM 600 to RM 650. This is a substantial part of our household income."

The accounts narrated by five of the home-based subcontractors offer some insights to the system of payment and compensation for their work. Their experiences were representative of most of the other respondents with the exception of PC, SL, SG and AKS. The situations of these four respondents were somewhat different as explained below.

In the case of PC, the calculation for her earning had a slight adaptation. She was paid by Ah Fong on a 60/40 or 70/30 share, with Fong taking the
bigger share. Ah Fong charged her clients RM20 for sewing a simple dress and
RM 30 and above for a more complicated design. She kept 60% of the RM20 or
70% of the RM 30 for herself and paid PC the balance i.e. RM 8 for the simple
design and RM9 for a more complicated one. PC sewed an average of 4-5
dresses a day. Her monthly income was approximately RM 900 to RM1000.
Fong paid her weekly.

The case of SL, SG and AKS was a special one. SL was the main home-
based subcontractor and she got SG and their neighbour, AKS, to form a
workgroup. They split the gross income in the ratio of 5:3:2, with SL taking the
biggest share and Ah Kiew Soh the smallest portion. SL explained their work
and payment arrangement,

"Siew Gaik, Ah Kiew Soh and I have to trim off threads to
make the clothes look neat. We check the clothes for any faults e.g.
machining on wrong side, stitching wrong sides together, buttons
not properly done, any holes due to tear or accidental cuts and
mismatch of thread colour. I was told that the factory has already
done the inspection but we are asked just to look at it again. It is a
tedious job but after a while, the eyes can pick out the mistakes
quite fast. The three of us organize ourselves to inspect the quality
quickly, then iron the clothes and pack them in a required way
normally into plastic bags. We are paid between 40 cents to 80 cents
for each article of clothing. I take half of the payment and I give Siew Gaik 30% and Ah Kiew Soh 20%.”

SL also subcontracted to other workgroups in the new village if the load was beyond her capacity. She paid them 90% of the amount she received and kept 10% as her commission for these job assignments.

**Table 6.1: Earnings of the 30 Cases of Home-based Subcontractors for the Month of July 1995**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Average Monthly Income</th>
<th>Number of Cases</th>
<th>% of total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Below RM500</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RM501-RM750</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RM751-RM1000</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RM1001-RM1500</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Above RM1501</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The average income of a home-based subcontractor in the study ranged from the highest earner (YT) at RM1,800 gross a month to the lowest (AKS) at RM250. Of the thirty cases in the study for the month of July 1995, 16% earned below RM500; 40% received between RM501 to RM750; four women (14%) were paid between RM751 to RM1000. Six cases received RM1001 to RM1500 a month and for three cases, the earnings exceeded RM1501. The mode (most common) gross earnings was RM650 with a mean (average) of RM870 per month.

The majority (80%) of the home-based subcontractors were paid monthly on or around the 15th day of the following month based on assignments.
completed. One case (PC) was paid weekly. A few subcontractors requested for fortnightly payments. Those who preferred fortnightly mode of payment were mainly female heads of the households (SL, WAS, GY) dependent of this income to support their family.

Most of the women were unaware of the difference between gross and net income. They have not attempted to compute their incomes or calculate the cost incurred in the production. They assumed that what they have received, as compensation was full payment for their labour. They were amazed by my suggestion that their real compensation for their labour was after deducting the cost of the thread, electricity consumption and space rental of their workplace. Most of the subcontractors accorded little or no value to incidentals they provided for their parent companies. Most were pressured into submission by fear of withdrawal of subcontract and became unwilling to challenge the garment makers.

6.3.2 Other Benefits

Besides monetary payment for work done, there were no other benefits extended to the home-based subcontractors. The home-based subcontractors were not entitled to paid leave, maternity leave or sick leave. As explained by KP,

"We get money only when we work. No work, no money.

When I was sick and could not sew, I was not earning anything. The
factory was going to take back the old machine I bought from them through installments because I could not pay for three months. I appealed to them to let me take leave for a few months to recover but they said that the order was very urgent. If I could not fulfill the orders, they will have to give the job to others and they cannot guarantee that I will get my job back when I am well again. If my sister had not done the work in my place, I would have lost my machine and I would not be able to continue sewing at home any more. The factory can be heartless.”

The home-based subcontractors who have had children during the history of subcontracting, testified to the absence of maternity leave or benefits. LM who had three children during her twenty years of subcontracting shared her experience,

“Each time I delivered a child, I had to stop subcontracting. I could only resume after confinement and I was well again to sew. I was paid by piece rate and so if I did not sew, I was not paid. Only Cheng Chea came to visit me at the hospital and gave my baby a small gold anklet as a gift. The same when the time I fell down and hurt my right hand. I could not sew for about a month. Again I earned nothing. The factory did not give me any medical benefits or pay me.”
The home-based subcontractors did not contribute to the Employees Provident Fund. They were not regarded as employees and so the factories did not register them or contribute on their behalf. It was not an offence, as the Employee Provident Fund Act did not cover home-based subcontractors. Thus the subcontractor did not possess provision for old age. They also did not subscribe to Social Security to protect them against industrial accidents. Neither was there protection for the rest of the family against industrial accidents. SH recollected an industrial accident at home,

"Once when my son was small, he hurt himself playing with my sewing machine. The needle pierced his middle finger. He was screaming with pain. While rushing to help him I sustained a fall and hurt my leg, hand and head. Both of us had to be rushed to a nearby clinic. My husband had to pay for our medical expenses. He was very angry. He insisted that I stop work and care for his son. He said all that I earned sewing was not even enough to pay for the medical expenses. If anything more serious had happened to his son, he would not let me go off easily. He was very angry and he asked the factory to pay. They refused saying that the accident happened in our home and not at the factory. It was our own fault and they were not responsible. Ah Kit returned all the finished and unfinished
clothes to the factory. I was very frightened. I was afraid that I would not get to sew again.

After that incident, I went back to the boss and apologized. The boss scolded me and cursed Ah Kit for being so rude. Luckily, he accepted my apologies and allowed me to resume subcontracting. I hid the materials and dared not sew the clothes when Ah Kit was at home. I tried my best to please him and cared well for his son. He cooled down after a few weeks. Slowly things returned to normal. If not, I would have stopped subcontracting.

There was no added incentives offered by garment makers. Those who had worked long term with the same garment makers, might receive yearly *ang pows* (money in red packets). Some bigger factories, might give bonuses to the subcontractors. AK and YT who subcontracted from the same factory received a month’s pay the last two years and were invited to join the other staff at the company’s annual dinner at a big hotel. This was the exception rather than the rule. The discriminatory practice of the factory was obvious. The home-based workers, on the whole, were not entitled to bonus and other benefits like their fellow workers in the factory.

The recollections given below by three home-based subcontractors illustrate three examples of the quantum of compensation for work done both in the factory and at home. The other subcontractors had difficulty in recalling their
compensation history and so their cases are not included here. The three recollections of payments were not based on written records or accounts but rather from their memories. The amounts were casually verified through discussions with other subcontractors and garment makers. The occasional sharing and partial recollections of other subcontractors were useful for verification of the amounts quoted by the three cases. The compensation history might not be an accurate representation of the amounts paid but nevertheless, it presented an overall picture of the compensation pattern of the industry.

YL remembered vaguely a scheme of payment at the factory and home-based subcontracting given as follows:

"1975 - sewing shirts at the factory for RM5.50 a day

   estimated monthly income was  RM180

1986 - sewing shirts at home for RM1.80 per dozen shirt collars,

   estimated monthly income was RM 325

1989 - sewing shirts at home for RM1.80 per dozen shirt collars

   estimated monthly income was  RM430

1992 - sewing shirts at home for about RM1.90 per dozen dress sleeves

   gross monthly income was about  RM500

1996 - sewing uniforms at home for RM2.10 per dozen shirt collars

   average monthly income was about  RM530"
KH recalled starting work as a sweeper in a garment factory earning thirty dollars a month. She was a sewing machine operator in two different garment factories from the period 1981 - 1985 receiving income estimated as below. From the home-based sub-contracting jobs she received gross income stated below:

"1981- working as sweeper earning RM30 a month,

1982- sewing in the factory as a casual laborer earning RM 80 a month

1985 - sewing pockets for men’s trousers monthly income - RM180

1986 - subcontracting at home – sewing parts of house coats

paid piece rate about 80 sen per dozen,

estimated daily income of RM8

estimated average monthly income - RM200

1989 - subcontracting at home – sewing house coats

paid by piece rate of about RM1.10 per house coat

estimated daily income about RM11

estimated average monthly income was RM300

1993 - subcontracting clothes for pasar malam

paid by piece rate at about RM 1.80 per dress

estimated daily income was RM20

estimated average monthly income was RM500

1996 - subcontracting clothes for pasar malam
paid about RM2.50 for per piece

estimated daily income was RM30

estimated average monthly income was RM600”

GY recounted the different types of payment schemes and income from sewing she received over the years. Currently she sewed for 8-10 hours on the four days she was not working at the Moral Upliftment Society.

“1973 - working in the factory sewing for RM 4.80 per day,

estimated average monthly income was about RM 125

1974 - sewing in the factory – paid by piece rate of about 7 sen,

estimated daily income was about RM6.00

estimated average monthly income was about RM 150

1975 - tailoring dresses for RM8 per dress and RM6 per blouse

estimated average monthly income - RM400

(not taking into account losses due to paying back for spoilt stitching)

1983 - subcontracting at home – paid by piece rate at 12 sen a piece,

estimated daily income was approximately RM12

estimated average monthly income was about RM320

1989 - subcontracting (embroidery) at home - paid RM1.10 per flower bouquet

estimated daily income about RM15

279
estimated average monthly income was about RM400

1992 - sub-contracting sewing uniforms at home

paid about RM3 to RM4.50 per dress

Average daily income was about RM25

Average monthly gross income was RM500 (part-time)

1996 - sub-contracting sewing uniforms at home

paid RM3.50 to RM5 per dress

Estimated daily gross income was about RM30

Estimated average monthly gross income was

RM500 (part-time)"

It is apparent from the above three recollections of payments and work compensations that the payment per piece had hardly increased over the years. The piece-rates were adjusted occasionally based on the complication of design. Experienced and higher skilled subcontractors were more likely to be offered these complicated designs thus resulting in higher earnings for them. Another reason for increases in earnings received was the greater number of completed pieces as a result of faster speed developed over time. Another possibility was longer working hours of the subcontractor or reduced distraction from children as they grew up. It was probably that the older children assisted with the work. In reality, the piece-rate paid to subcontractors had hardly increased over the years despite inflation and cost of living.
6.4 Relationship Between Garment Makers and Home-based Subcontractors

Most subcontractors reported a relationship that reflected good ‘gan qing’ (consanguinity) and reciprocity between them and the garment makers especially the owner operated ones. The subcontractors addressed the owners or supervisors as ‘Ko’ (elder brother) or ‘Chea’ (elder sister) even in cases where the subcontractor were physically older. The children of the subcontractors referred to the garment makers as ‘auntie’ or ‘uncle’. There was a certain degree of mutual respect and politeness typical of consanguinity expressed in traditional customary practices of generous ang pows to the subcontractors’ children or gift giving. KH reported that,

"During all these years I have not received any bonus. But the boss gives my children very generous ang pows during Chinese New Year. She sometimes brings some gifts of expensive Chinese delicacies for our family during the festive season or occasional fruits or food she bought from outstation or overseas. We are like a family."

The interaction between the home-based subcontractors and garment makers occasionally extended beyond the business nature. The home-based subcontractors might consult or seek the help of the garment makers on family, legal and financial matters. XL sought the advice of the supervisor regarding the application for a passport. LM received advice from the factory owner, Cheng
Chea, regarding the education of her children. AC and BL sought financial advice from their respective supervisors. When YL needed some extra money for her mother’s medical treatment, she appealed to her supervisor for assistance. She received a small loan from her factory.

The home-based subcontractors sometimes experienced threats of withdrawal of work or unfair penalties. They were fearful of challenging the garment makers. If they voiced too much of their grievances to the husbands, a possible reaction would be their husband stopping them from subcontracting. They grumbled but found a few avenues for recourse. This antagonistic relationship was quite well hidden under the superficial ‘gan qing’ (consanguinity) of both parties being of Chinese descent.

6.5 Bargaining Power of Home-based Subcontractors

There was little room for bargaining for higher payment. Most of the home-based subcontractors expressed fear of losing their source of primary or supplementary income. They were generally under the impression that there were many people waiting in queue to take over their work. They had limited information about the garment industry and the vital role subcontracting played in the industry. They were generally uninformed of the piece-rate paid to other home-based subcontractors. There was limited exchange of information even among fellow subcontractors. There was reservation to exchange information
for fear her acquaintances would request to be introduced to the particular factory paying more. This might increase competition and even out the advantages. Thus the subcontractors remained isolated and atomized. The home-based subcontractors are not unionized. All of them had never been a member of a union even while were working at the factory. None of them were aware of the power of collective bargaining.

The majority of the home-based subcontractors were reluctant to ask for more money or higher rates. Most felt that for the sake of a long-term relationship, they should accept the going rate. A few like SL, LA, XL and YT had occasionally requested for higher rates. Often they asked jokingly or hinted to the boss but not directly. When work was in abundance, highly skilled subcontractors like YT and CW were in a position to successfully demand a higher price.

Without a written contract or terms of payment, the payment arrangement was principally based on verbal exchange. Most did not have records of assignments or payments. Only those who were more meticulous like MC and YT kept careful records and occasionally checked the accounts when in doubt. Most home-based subcontractors have seldom disputed the amounts paid to them. Even when their record showed a difference, they normally believed that they had made a mistake in recording rather than the factory. As explained by LA,
"Maybe I was forgetful and made a mistake in recording. Since the factory is a big business enterprise and they have so many people just checking all these accounts, they must be right. I am also too lazy to check. 'Fai Si-lah Sai Hei' (no need to waste my breath)."

That was also true in the case of PC and Ah Fong. In principal Ah Fong has agreed to share with PC on the basis of 40/60 or 30/70. Nevertheless, it was Ah Fong who usually determined the quantum to be shared for each of the designs. PC basically accepted whatever Ah Fong paid her without disputing.

Similarly was the case of SL with SG and AKS. Again it was SL who received the money fortnightly from the factory. She in turn apportioned the payment to SG and AKS. From observation neither SG nor AKS maintained any records of the work done or the expected amounts due to them. They accepted whatever was paid to them without demanding to see the records. The nature of work involved ironing and hence, consumed a lot of electricity. SG's family being the main tenant of the house, was responsible for paying the electric bill. Thus in actual fact, SG was the most disadvantaged in this arrangement since she had to absorb the cost of the electricity.

Most of home-based subcontractors felt obligated to the factory owners for offering them work and helping them to be gainfully employed even though they were not able to go to work in the factory. As explained by SL,
"I am so lucky that to have this job. It was so difficult for me to find work since I have low education and no skills. Now I can look after my daughter and earn a living. If not I will be doing nothing and starving at home."

WAS for example, felt that even if the factory paid her low rates, she would not mind. She commented,

"Sometimes I feel the piece-rate payment is too low. My daughter often asks me to stop sewing because she says that the factory is exploiting me. Maybe it is true but at least it gives me a job and I can earn something for the family. Never mind-lah. It is alright. The factory also has to make money."

The home-based subcontractors were apparently unresisting and vulnerable, believing that they were fortunate to be gainfully employed though restricted to the confines of the home due to domesticity. While the home-based subcontractors were linked to the garment industry and the international trade through the factories, they remained atomized and isolated. Without information and unionization, they lacked the information to gain bargaining power and remained on the lower end of the power balance.
6.6 Time Use for Sub-contracting

There was no rigid time schedule or time separation for housework and homework. The productive work was interspersed with reproductive work. The woman home-based subcontractor faced the challenge of maximizing time use for productive work without neglecting domestic duty. 90% of them expressed the desire to allocate more time for the financially rewarding subcontracting work but felt the pressure of their domestic responsibility.

6.6.1 Subcontracting and Domestic Work

A home-based subcontractor would ensure the basic chores of the day are done, even though carelessly. Because of the pressure for time, all of the subcontractors equipped their home with time and labour saving appliances. They all had washing machines. They purchased for themselves and their family clothing, which did not require ironing. Their kitchens were equipped with many modern appliances for quick cooking. Often they relied on convenience food, fast food or ready-made meals supplied by nearby hawker stalls or by the tiffin-carrier caterers. Mei Lin explained how she managed her time,

"I work in the mornings after the children have left for kindergarten and school. I put the clothes into the washing machine while I work at the sewing machine from about 8.30 am to 11.30 a.m. taking brief breaks for coffee and to hang out the clothes to dry. I stop at about 11.30 a.m. to prepare a simple one-dish meal"
for lunch, normally fried bee hoon or fried rice. If I am busy, I buy food from the nearby hawker stall.

After my sons return and have had lunch, they will take a short nap for about an hour. After their nap, they will do their homework or play. During this time I will wash up and clean the house. It is often too hot to work in the afternoon, so I use the time to clean the house. Sewing needs concentration or else I will make mistakes, so it is better to use the afternoon for housework. I resume sewing after a short rest. At about 5.30 p.m. or so, I will prepare dinner while my sons watch TV or play by themselves. I have bought many kitchen equipment and to help me prepare quick and delicious meals. Dinner is at about 6.30p.m. If work is urgent, I will continue sewing while the children again watch TV or complete their homework. If there is not much work, I will join the children to watch TV. The children go to bed at around 10.30 p.m. but I normally retire just before midnight.”

Because home-based subcontractors faced the pressure of deadlines for their assignments, they maintained some form of work routine for sub-contracting work. They gave little priority for their own leisure or recreation even to the extent of reducing the number of hours for sleep and rest.
The routines and schedules of other members of the family especially the
children and husband encroached into a home-based subcontractor’s time use.
Their demands and needs had great influence on her work routine. The waking
and sleeping hours of the children, the school hours, the work schedule of the
husband had an impact on the work schedule of the subcontractor. If the
children were in morning school, she had to ensure preparation of early
breakfast, late lunch and early dinners to accommodate the children’s schedules.
If they were in the afternoon school, she had to prepare an early lunch and
perhaps a late dinner. PC’s work routine was a an example of how a home-based
subcontractor fitted her own schedule into that of the other members of the
family:

‘My two sons wake up at 6.30 a.m., wash and dress. They
consume whatever food they like for breakfast and go off to school
by school bus. My routine begins at 7 in the morning, waking up
slightly earlier than my husband to prepare his morning coffee. Ah
Keong normally takes his breakfast of noodles at the noodle stall
near his work place. He leaves for work on his motorcycle at about
8 a.m. I may leave the house before or after Ah Keong for Ah
Fong’s house enroute to the morning market to deliver the clothes. I
normally return at about 9 a.m. with the breakfast which I buy from
the market. After that, I start my sewing, stopping when I am tired to
cook or clean the house and resuming after lunch-time. The boys
return about 1.20 p.m. Lunch will be ready for them. After lunch, they will rest or entertain themselves. I normally take a nap after having lunch with my sons. When I wake up, I help my sons to finish their homework or studies. Often, I have to remind/nag them to do their homework and study. At about 4 p.m. my sons walk to a nearby house for group tuition for English and Bahasa Malaysia for one and half hours. I will continue sewing, stopping to clean the house and prepare dinner in between when I am tired. I have to walk around and rest my eyes once in a while. After returning at about 6 p.m., my sons normally have a game of badminton or football in the front garden of our house till about 7 p.m. They then wash up and get ready for dinner together with the rest of family after their father comes home at around 7 or 8 p.m. If I have urgent sewing to complete, I will continue sewing. If not, I will relax, watch television or do some cleaning. The family often watches television together for the rest of the night. We normally sleep at about 11 p.m.‘

With babies and infants, the subcontractor had more flexible but less predictable and consistent time schedules, having to snatch available time while the children were playing or napping to work, as SL explained,

‘Having small children is not conducive to work. It is difficult to make a one-year old child sleep and wake up according
to my work routine. The only way is to follow her sleeping and waking time. I wake up with my daughter, normally at 9a.m.. We eat together and I let her play while I sweep the house and start work. As I work I keep an eye on her, stopping and starting according to her needs. At about 11.30a.m., I make a simple lunch and we eat together. By then she is normally tired and takes a short nap. If she naps, well and good, I continue working. If not, I will have to find something for her to do and stopping and starting work like before till dinner time. I have to keep working to make enough money for us to live. I cannot work less. Sometimes, my sister, Siew Gaik and AKS will join me in the afternoon to snip the threads from the ready garments, iron and pack them. Afternoon is better for all of us. We will work while listening to the RFM (Redifusion Channel) or Radio 5 Chinese program. We normally work and talk and share news or gossip. At around 5.30p.m. we will stop to do our cooking and have dinner. The night is for resting, TV or shopping at the pasar malam. My daughter and I sleep late, often after 11.30p.m.

Thus, the timing of the work of a home-based subcontractor is influenced by the other members of the households. The two oral accounts above exemplified the patterns of integrated productive and domestic work routine in the home-based subcontractors’ households.
60% of the 30 cases worked between six to eight hours per day, for five to six days a week. Two persons (AC, YY) worked between eight to ten hours per day with slightly less hours on Sunday. The other one third spent between three to six hours per day with lesser hours on Saturdays and Sundays. All except the three cases with infants had fixed routines with some degree of flexibility. Those with infants worked whenever they could find time.

6.6.2 Sharing of Domestic Work Between Husband and Wife

In all 30 cases studied, both men and women including members of the extended families interviewed believed that the women’s role was predominantly a reproductive one with primary responsibility for childbearing / rearing responsibilities and domestic tasks. This included the work of childcare, cooking, washing, cleaning, and caring for the elderly and the sick, keeping and maintaining the home.

In 85% of the cases, the gender division of work at home was strictly along traditional lines. The wife did almost all the domestic work. This was taken for granted, even by the children, especially the sons, as the woman’s duty to do so. The husband and the sons and even the women and the daughters believed that if these domestic chores were not performed by the mother, these chores should be done by the other women in the household.
When asked if the husband helped around the house, twenty percent of the respondents especially the older ones believed that the men would not know how to undertake the domestic chores. As explained by PC,

"Men won't know how to do the kitchen work. They are not the ones who give birth so how would they know the way to care for children? Only women would know these things."

Husbands in eight cases verbalized that domestic work is 'women's work' and they should not be expected to do them. KC's husband was very adamant that it was unbecoming of his wife to expect the man of the house to do the 'woman's work'. KC revealed that her husband would not go to the kitchen to boil water or make his own tea or coffee. ML faced a similar situation where her husband expected to be waited on when home. YT's husband felt strongly that all his needs should be taken care off by his wife or the maid. He felt he deserved such treatment since he worked so diligently to earn a good income.

CS commented this about her husband,

"Even when I was sick, he did not offer to help with the housework. He bought cooked food from outside for the children and I to eat. The house was just left dirty till I was well enough to clean it."

There were, however, 13% of the cases (KF, MH, LA and XL) where the husbands were supportive and had broken traditional patterns. They helped in
most of the housework including cooking, setting and clearing the dining table and mopping the house. These husbands also helped with the nurturing of the children.

MH’s husband, Kit Meng, obviously enjoyed his fatherhood. He remarked enthusiastically,

"I like to play with my son. It is such a joy to see him grow up and be able to do things. I am happy to come home and play with him. He likes to go for a walk and sometimes for a ride on my motorcycle around the neighbourhood. Often we ride over to my parents’ home. My parents are always happy to see Xiao Long. It also gives Mei Hua a break to do her own thing. I am not good at other housework but I can take care of my son. I hope the next child is also a son. Then we can play together."

KF was proud of her husband of 17 years. He worked as a chief clerk in one of the Ministries of the Government of Malaysia. He hurried home after work daily to assist KF with housework. He cooked and tutored his son. KF commented on her good fortune with a happy smile,

"Wong prepares better dinner than I can. He likes cooking. As soon as he comes home from office, he changes into casual clothes and works in the garden. He has grown vegetables using hydroponics. He then prepares a good meal for the family. After that he washes up and cleans
the kitchen and sometimes sweeps and mops the floors. He is a neat and tidy person and likes to have a clean environment.”

Plate 6.3: Husband Cooking Dinner while Wife Sews

Photo taken by Lee Lee Loh-Ludher, 1995

L.A. also shared the joy of having a supportive husband,

"Yap is a very supportive husband. He appreciates very much my efforts to earn more for the well-being of our family. He helps with housework even after a hard day's work. He goes to the kitchen and helps to dish out the rice and lay the table. He helps to clear the table after the meal. He was a great help when the children were small. He and his mother have been very kind to me, helping with housework as well as nurturing the children. The children are also concerned about
well as nurturing the children. The children are also concerned about me and often help me around the house. Often, when they see me hard at work, the children will make me a drink or get me a glass of water. All the children and Yap take turns in caring for my mother-in-law who is suffering from kidney failure.

XL praised her husband for being a great help around the house.

"My husband is very helpful around the house. He likes to clean and wash the children. He does it better than me. He does not mind doing domestic chores. After dinner, he sits with the children at the dining table, inspecting their home-work and listening to the happenings at the schools. I listen to their conversations while I continue to sew. Sometimes he even helps me with my work, bundling the clothes."

Besides these three cases, fifteen of the husbands actually claimed that they were capable of performing housework. Some even believed that they could manage the households better than their wives. Some said they could cook better than their wives. They said that they were not doing domestic work mainly because they worked hard outside and were too tired to work or help at home. Some explained that they did not undertake domestic chores because their wives and children are 'free' to take care of them. If they were asked or when necessary they would be willing to contribute to housework.
LM’s daughter gave us an insight to the situation,

“My father always says he is too tired from work to help my mother with housework. We children especially the daughters should help my mother. Sometimes when he comes home and the food is not delicious, he will scold my mother and claim that he can cook better than her. He will tell her what ingredients are lacking that led to the lack of taste in the food. My mother sometimes is hurt by his unkind remarks. At times, especially when he is in a bad mood and finds the house in a mess, he will shout at my mother for not being able to manage the house like a good housewife. He will then act like a ‘captain’ directing us like soldiers to clean up the house. He always claims that he can do a better job than my mother managing the house.”

CS asserted great efforts to ensure a comfortable home for her husband, Boon Haw. She felt that he had a hard time at work to earn for the family and deserved to rest at home. She did not expect any assistance from him at home. AL and YY felt that they should be always concerned about their husband’s wellbeing. They were daily paid workers. If they should fall ill, they would be without any means of subsistence.

6.6.3 Assistance of Children in Home-based Work

Most of the thirty respondents, in their childhood, had done substantial amount of housework and unpaid family labour and so, were of the opinion that
it was normal for children too to bear responsibility for household chores and
family business. The majority had experienced poverty in their childhood. Their
current standard of living, though some may still be bordering on the poverty
line, was better than that of their parents. It was regarded as necessary and usual
to cajole, encourage or even chastise children into assisting the sub-contracting
work. It was seen as a lesson in life and taught as a skill and business. AF
explained,

"My two elder sons, had learnt to handle scissors to trim off
thread ends, fold and pack the finished garments. They will sit
around me when they are free and help me. My daughter also does
simple marketing, sweeping, washing vegetables and utensils. My
son will help to collect the washing, throw the garbage out and
carry my bundles for me. They know we have to work together to
earn money for the family. With their help, I can earn up to
RM1,000 a month from my sewing. They know I am saving this
money for their education so that they will not have to go through
what I have gone through".

None of these jobs were frowned upon as child labour or child
exploitation. The work, according to them, was never to the extent of depriving
the child of his/her childhood and leisure or of time for their homework or
studies. The majority believed that a child needed discipline and should not be
average of 6-8 hours of productive work, these women still have to do 4-6 hours of domestic work. While the subcontractor has some flexibility and limited control over her time use, she is unable to reduce her commitment to her household duties. With household members not recognizing the significance of her productive work, her leisure and rest is often non-priority and sacrificed for productive work.

6.7 Supplementing Household Income

In all cases studied, the subcontractors contributed substantially to the disposable income of families. Only five said they spent a substantial amount of their earnings on themselves for purchasing clothing, make-up and accessories. In 30% of cases, women were the sole providers, as they had been abandoned by their husbands, divorced or widowed. Although the other subcontractors were regarded as supplementary earners, in many of the cases, their earnings supplemented the household income substantially, lifting the family above the poverty line.

In all cases, husbands did not ask money from their wives. The wives did not inform the husbands how much they earned either. In 80% of the cases, the women were unaware of the quantum of the husband’s income. Only six of them knew because their husbands had told them. It is the cultural norm that wives or children do not ask about the men’s earnings. Husbands’ replies to inquiries about their incomes were evasive and probably inaccurate. It was the
norm for husbands to decide on the amount he would give for household use without consulting his wife. She happily or unhappily just accepted it with or without complaints. If she found it difficult to manage, she could ask for more. However, asking for more could be very unpleasant. Forty-three percent reported being verbally abused when they requested additional money. In seven cases it sometimes resulted in physical abuse.

PYM confided,

"When there is not enough money, I am always afraid to ask for more. I worry a lot and become very stressed. I have to watch my husband's 'face' (mood) each time. If he is in a good mood, he shouts a bit but he may give me some— not the full amount. So each time, I know I have to ask for more. But if I ask for more, the sum seems so big, that he is likely to be angry. When I am forced to ask even though he is in a bad mood, I must be ready for lots of verbal abuse. I learn to keep quiet and let him scold till he is satisfied, then he gives the money. Sometimes, his accusations are more than I can tolerate. If I dare to answer back, he is likely even to beat me. But sometimes, I just cannot control myself."

AC shared her situation,

"During the last 15 years, Ah Seng has definitely changed. He has gradually become more disinterested in our family's
welfare. I suspect he has other women outside. I can no longer depend on him. I have to care for myself and save for the future of my children. Every time, I ask him for money, he shouts and scolds me. He even threatens to beat me. What he gives for the maintenance of the family is inadequate and infrequent. Without the income from subcontracting, we all will have to beg for food."

KC narrated with eyes filled with tears, showing the bruises she had sustained,

"It is really shameful to be abused when I have to ask for more housekeeping money. Sometimes he shouts so loudly, the children are frightened and the neighbors can hear. It is worse when my mother-in-law also joins in and accuses me of spending more to beautify myself and being a 'loose' woman. Now my eldest son is also beginning to call me names and shout at me. How can I continue to suffer like this?"

Cases of abuse were more prominent in those homes with marital disharmony. The lack of love and respect for the wives weakened the family foundation and disharmony set in. There was no evident correlation between occurrence of the physical abuse and the education level or social status of the husband.
Among those receiving household expenses from the husbands, most received the money on a weekly basis. Most husbands perceived the women as being incapable of saving money or managing it properly. All except five cases, did not allowed access to their saving / current accounts. If there were any fixed deposits or investments made for the children’s future, it would often be in joint names.

In the five cases (KF, LA, AF, KP, and XL) the husbands gave the wives access to their earnings. They were given cash as well as access to joint saving accounts for household management. The housekeeping money was normally sufficient for household expenditure. However, if the wives overspent, they would, voluntarily, top it up with the money they earned.

ML spoke of how she managed the household,

"My husband gives me housekeeping money irregularly. I am thankful that I have this house to live. I really cannot ask him for money without being abused. My income per month from sewing is around RM550 – RM600. To supplement this income, I take in students from the nearby college as tenants. I am much relieved to have this steady income of RM600. I am planning to rent out the room downstairs for RM250. With this our life will become more comfortable."

SL explained how she used the earnings from subcontracting to live,
"The amount paid for my work is about 40 to 80 sen per piece. Working alone for about 6 hours a day I can manage to earn about RM500 a month. With the help of Siew Gaik and Ah Kiew Soh and taking commission for securing work for other workgroup, I can gross up to about RM650 a month.

With this income from sub-contracting, I pay my rent of RM150 and hardly have money for my daughter and I to live. Eating with Siew Gaik's family helps me to cut expenses on food and gas. Siew Gaik has been very kind and generous. If not for her generosity, I don't think we can survive. The piece rate is just too low. Often, we, two sisters, have to help each other out."

YY explained how her contribution to household income has uplifted the life of the family,

"It is lucky that I can work from home. Two years ago, my husband was ill with stomach problems and could not work. I was the only income earner. It was a very difficult time for us. I had to cook special food for him and look after his needs. The herbal concoctions were expensive, but what could I do? Health is more important. During that time, I had to work to find money to upkeep the house. Luckily, the children are good and obedient and were willing to help. So all of us worked together to complete more
sewing consignments. It made it worthwhile to stay home to bring up such good children."

PC shared how she managed her household money,

"I keep my own earnings in a box under lock and key. My husband gives me RM1300 as housekeeping money. My other source of income is the room rent of RM200 from the two lodgers. With this money I have to take care of two sons' schoolbus fare (RM50 per month) and pocket money (RM1.50 each per day), tuition (RM200 per child per month) and all household purchases, marketing, house rent, telephone, water and electricity bills."

CS on the other hand, was not sure how much her earnings was utilized for her household,

"From sewing for this well-known tailor shop, I receive RM8-RM10 for quality work. At most I can finish one and a half pairs of men's trousers a day. This piece rate is higher than mass production, but the risk is higher. My boss expects me to pay compensation if I make a mistake or rework if a customer is dissatisfied. I have to do alterations without extra charges. So, I am very careful with my work. To maintain my income of around RM800 per month, I do not want to have another child, one is enough. Fortunately, my first born is a son (aged 3) and my
husband and in-laws have not placed any pressure on me to have more children thus far.

My husband gives me RM 1000 a month. I have to pay rent of RM 300 for the flat. The rest is for utilities, household purchases and daily food. I have total control of my earnings, using it as I please. What I don't understand is where my money goes? I hardly spend any on myself and yet I still do not have any savings. I just do not understand. It just seems so strange."

LM is an example of a home-based subcontractor who contributes her earnings for the expenses of the children and upliftment of the family. She talked about her contributions to household income,

"When my children were smaller, I used to work much harder to help pay for their tuition and other needs. Now with the children grown up and my husband earning well, I work fewer hours and spend more time watching TV, and laser discs and socializing with friends and neighbors. My current income is about RM1000 a month.

My husband gives me about RM2,000 a month to pay for most of the household expenses and the needs of the five children. The decision on the use of the money is left very much to me as Chan has little interest in the affairs of the household. He likes good food and on days that he is home, he expects to be served a
sumptuous dinner. I appreciate the fact that Chan has been a good provider and he sometimes gives me expensive gifts like gold jewelry. He likes me to look beautiful especially when he takes me out. I give much importance to his needs, making sure he is happy to come home and stay home. The children have also learnt well to please their father whenever, he is home. They know that their good behavior is often rewarded with outings to shopping complexes and good restaurants. Our family is close-knit and happy.

All through those years when the children were growing up and in school, I had taken more clothes home to sew. I used most of the money for their tuition. When Chan did not agree to let my daughter go for tuition, I paid for it myself. She did well in her exams and now she is in college.

My husband has become a successful building contractor, specializing in renovating houses. Recently he bought an old Mercedes-Benz and he let my son and daughter drive the old Proton Saga.

He spends more time at home now than before. He used to spend little time at home when the children were younger. He seldom spent time with the children, leaving them almost totally to his mother and I. He would come home for dinner, then go out right after with his friends or business contacts. Often he would spend
days away from home. I have stopped asking him where he was going or where he spent the nights. My solace and consolation are my children. I talk to them and enjoy listening to their conversations.

My children have been my helpers all these years, from an early age. Even my sons are used to helping me. I am proud of them and pleased with the love they show to me. All my sacrifices of working from home, earning and looking after them are well worth it. What is more important than good children?

Our family has prospered over the years and we now live in this newly purchased, very much-renovated terrace house. The house has an attic added and a home entertainment room built adjoining the sitting room. The home entertainment room is sound proof and air-conditioned with a laser disc player and a powerful music system. We spend much of our time in this room in the evening watching borrowed laser discs or television. I will continue to take home clothes to sew. Extra money is always handy for emergencies."

In XL’s case, her contribution to the household expenses was substantial. It was obvious without her income, the husband’s earnings would be insufficient,
Without my average RM600 monthly income, my husband’s salary as a machinist will not be sufficient for our family. He hands over to me almost three quarters of his pay at the end of each month. Together with the money I earn, I manage the household. Monthly we put aside about RM150 as savings. We managed to use the ‘hue’ (tontine / kutu) fund to put as down payment for a 3-room terrace house in Puchong, three years ago. The house was ready for the family to move in five months ago. However, we decided to continue to stay in this wooden house and rent out our terrace house. The rent of RM750 helps to subsidize the monthly loan repayment. We are determined to save for our growing children’s education. I have re-invested some earnings to purchase a sewing and lining machine and make a work bench in one of the bedrooms so that I can take in more work when my youngest child starts school."

It was difficult to ascertain what portion of the household expenses were borne by the subcontractors as all thirty did not keep track of expenses or keep accounts of their expenditures. In 30% of the cases, undoubtedly, the income of the women constituted the means of survival. In other cases, though not obvious, these women’s earnings made the crucial difference between poverty and rising
above the subsistence level. It was definitely a contributory factor in uplifting the family to a better quality of life.

Table 6.2: Projected Income and Expenditure of Pik Ching’s Family

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Monthly Income</th>
<th>RM</th>
<th>Monthly Expenditure</th>
<th>RM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>From Husband</td>
<td>1300</td>
<td>House Rent</td>
<td>600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From Rent</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>Utilities (water, tel., elect.)</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Subtotal</strong></td>
<td><strong>1500</strong></td>
<td>Children schooling, bus, tuition</td>
<td><strong>600</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Food, Marketing, Eating out</td>
<td>500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From PC’s earnings</td>
<td>1000</td>
<td>Household</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Personal</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>2500</strong></td>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>1970</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Using a projection of income and expenditure of PC’s family as in Table 6.2, it was unlikely that the housekeeping money from her husband was adequate to cover their monthly expenses. It was highly probable PC had to actually supplement the expenses from her own earnings. Although PC maintained that she kept the money she earned separately, observation of her habit showed otherwise. Following her routine for a few times, it was observed that she would deliver her stitched clothing to Ah Fong and collect her payments on her way to market. Habitually she would keep this money in her purse and proceed to the morning market. When marketing, payments would be made
from this same purse. Upon her return, she would transfer the remaining money to her moneybox, which she kept under lock and key. When she ran out of money before the end of the week, instead of asking her husband, she would go to her moneybox and take out some. Thus she was definitely supplementing family expenses without consciously realizing it.

It was observed that home-based subcontractors contributed substantially to their household expenditures. It was most certain that they used their earnings not on themselves but on food and daily necessities of the household and the education of their children. Seventy-six percent of the women had paid for tuition classes for their children, hoping that their children could be better educated and attain upward mobility. Careful and prudent management of the household income and expenditure by these women had definitely contributed to family prosperity.

6.8 The Value of Home-based Subcontracting

The research inquired into the views of the thirty respondents and their husbands on the value of home-based subcontracting. Most had not thought much about it except that it enabled them to earn an income within the confines of their home. They viewed home-based subcontracting as 'a means of earning an income' but did not consider themselves as 'workers'. Their identity as a 'housewife' was strong. They simply regarded themselves as 'housewives'
earning an income to sustain their family or a supplementary income for their family or for themselves.

6.8.1 Views of Home-based Subcontractors

The home-based subcontractors emphasized that the ability to earn and have control over money, even if it was a small sum, was important to them. They felt that possessing a personal disposable income gave them a sense of independence and self-reliance. The money provided a means of survival and thus, security and stability, especially to those without adequate support from their husbands. As SL explained,

"If I don't package these clothes, it would be difficult for Chai Ling and I to survive. Though I earn little it is enough for us from day to day. It is important I don't fall sick. As long as I have these clothes to pack, we can survive."

AC contributed her side of the story,

"If I only depend on Ah Seng to give us money, the children and I would have starved to death long ago. Sewing these clothes has kept us going."

All the 30 women claimed that their earnings from the sub-contracting were kept by them and not handed to their husbands or parents. According to
them, their husbands had never asked and did not know the quantum of the
wives' earnings. Most women kept their money aside in locked drawers or
secret hiding place not accessible to their husbands. Unknown to their husbands,
60% had their own saving accounts or fixed deposits. The remaining 40% said
they had very little surplus and so do not keep them in the bank. The money was
kept hidden at home.

Five of the cases believed that their capacity to earn has made them less
subjected to domestic violence. From their experiences, financial inadequacy
has been the main cause of quarrels between them and their husbands. These
earnings accorded their children and them some level of financial freedom and
security. YY's explanation exemplifies of this view:

"If I do not have my own money, I have to be careful about
my husband's mood every time I ask him for some money. If he is in
a good mood, it is O.K. He gives me part of the money, not always
all that I ask, after some grumbling. However, if he is in bad mood
because of something at work, I am in for lots of verbal abuse. Why
bother to ask and subject myself to such abuses? Better I earn for
myself. Work on my own and have some money in hand. Earn more,
spend more. Earn less, spend less. More freedom to decide how I
want to spend my money."

KP who has also suffered spouse abuse, could not agree more,
"Without money, you will not have respect. They will look down upon you. Even husbands will treat you badly. Having to extend your hand every time and ask for money for everything from your husband is very shameful. If he is in a good mood, it is O.K. If he is in a bad mood and he shouts, the people next door can hear. Very shameful."

AC who had been subjected to frequent abuses from her husband, now even has to suffer abuses by her son:

"During the last 10 years, my husband Ah Seng had changed. Every time, I asked for money, he would shout and scold me. He even threatened to beat me up.

Now even my eldest son will not listen to me and has little respect for me. He is like his father — has little respect for me, often using abusive language on me. My daughters are starting to work and earn for themselves. Each one is looking after herself.

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 eye sight 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, marry a pig, follow the pig, marry a dog, follow the dog. ( jia zhu, ken chu, jia ko, ken ko )“

With the command of disposable income, the subcontractors were empowered with financial decision capacity. It contributed to their sense of self-determination and self-worth.

KH felt a sense of dignity with this earning, as she explained,

“At least I do not have to ask my husband every time, I need some extra money.”

Similarly, Phang Yin Mooi remarked,

“Although my husband is doing well enough to support the family, I want to work or I will be bored. Besides, having my own income has made me feel confident and independent. Living in an extended family with parents-in-law and a better off brother-in-law
nearby can be very intimidating. I believe that being able to earn on my own gives me a good status and wins respect of my husband’s family."

ML, LM, XL and YT voiced their views on the current trend of the transient nature of marriage. They expressed the lack of trust in the husbands and insecurity about their marriages. They shared the same views that they should keep themselves fit and beautiful and take care good of themselves. YT expressed how she was using this extra earnings,

"I keep most of the money I earn for my own expenses. I have to look after my health. I must maintain a good figure and dress well. I have my hair done regularly at a nearby saloon or else, my husband will not come home and will fool around outside. We are all women, we must understand this fact. Don't be a fool and be fooled. There are plenty of beautiful women outside trying to take other people's husbands.

I have a group of five good friends. We gather together quite frequently (once in a month or so) for cooking demonstrations, direct sales activities and our own entertainment. Our husbands enjoy themselves, so why shouldn't we? We normally gather in the afternoons when the children are at school and our husbands are working. It is also too hot to work. Two of my friends, are also
home-based subcontractors like me and two are housewives dealing with direct sales. One owns a garment factory. After all we all work hard for our money. We should spend it on ourselves."

LM also expressed a similar view,

"We have to look out for ourselves. Working people have to look out for themselves. I have not forgotten those days when my husband seldom came home. Men are like that, when they have money they forget they have wives and children. Like my husband, he spent his money buying a Mercedes Benz. In name, he bought it for us to enjoy but really it was for him to show off. Even now, I dare not stop working. It is better to have some money for myself."

CW, having the bad of experience of being abandoned by her husband, expressed her inner fear,

"I have to look after myself. I cannot fully trust people. Now is not like before, even daughters may not look after parents when they are old. Better to earn for myself and look after myself."
It is noteworthy that there was a strong sense of self-determination amongst these women. These women had a great desire to self-manage and gain control of some part of their lives and that of their children’s. All had higher aspirations for their children to be upwardly mobile and were willing to sacrifice for their children. As XL explained this desire was held by ten of the subcontractors,

"Most of the women spend their money on their households; buying washing machines and things to make their work easier. Sometimes my friends recommend good gadgets for cooking like turbo ovens, heavy pots and pans especially those sold through direct sales. Those catalogues introduce very good things. They show me new catalogues each time and explain what will help me to cook better or look better. I buy them when I receive my pay. Sometimes, I can even pay by instalments if the things are expensive."

I also use my money to buy things for the children such as badminton rackets, sports shoes and roller blades. Their father will not buy them these expensive items but the children want them and so I use my own money to buy them. I also pay for tuition and for extra curricular activities and school excursions."

Besides the financial aspect, subcontracting also provided these women restricted by domestic responsibility, with a linkage to the world outside their
immediate environment, both psychological as well as spatial. To some extent it reduced their isolation and increased their socializing with others. It gave them pride to know that their handiwork was sold in European or American market. AK expressed with great delight her encounter with a batch of dresses she sewed in Singapore.

6.8.2 Views of Husbands

Only 8% of the men acknowledged that without the wives’ supplementary income from sub-contracting, it would be hard on the family. The husbands in some cases (LA, KP, AF) appreciated their wives’ contribution but they rarely verbalized this. Only in the case of KF, did her husband who was a chief clerk in a government office, acknowledge that KF’s income had made a significant difference to their lives. Being a fixed salary person with substantial taxes to pay, KF’s tax-free income was a great asset. He admitted that during festive seasons, her gross income might far exceed his.

However, the majority of the husbands still dismissed the significance of these contributions. In 70% of the cases, the husbands viewed their wives involvement in subcontracting as ‘unnecessary’ and ‘unimportant’. They perceived their wives’ monetary contributions to the households as insignificant ‘kuh’ (cake) money, just enough for dessert and not for the main meal.
BL's husband adamantly commented:

"What my wife is doing cannot be considered as work. It is only a hobby, not serious stuff. She earns money for her own expenditure. It is for her to use for herself not the house. She may buy some toys for the children but it is not really to help the family."

Similarly, PC's husband, Ah Keong believed that what PC did was not significant. He said,

"Pik Ching's sub-contracting is just to keep her from being bored and have some money for herself and not bother me for money all the time. It is not serious like we, men's work. After all, we, men, are still the providers of the house and the breadwinners. I have adequately provided for my wife and two sons. She may, once in a while, spend some money for the children or some extra food on festive seasons. But mostly she is spending on herself. I don't know and I don't want to know how much she is paid for sewing each garment. It is just small money, cannot be much. It is probably a few dollars a dress. Bosses won't pay a lot for such simple work. She has been complaining that all her money is used for housekeeping. How can it be? I give her RM1300 a month. That is a substantial sum. Why should she need to use her own money. It is more than enough."
Another example is YT's husband. He remarked,

"Yi Ting is a very good cook. She looks after the home and family well. I am generally supportive of her work. It is good she works at home. Better for the children. We do not need her to work to earn money for the house but she just likes to. So I let her. But sometimes, she has so much work and she becomes too busy working that she forgets us. As long as it does not interfere with her duties towards the children and the family, it is all right for her to work. It's only sometimes, when she becomes so involved with her embroidery, that she does not even know if the children or I have come home. She leaves too many things to the maid. I know she has an obligation and commitment to the company for long term relationship and continued work; she has to meet her target. But making that little money is not important. We cannot grow rich with her money. It is my earnings that matter. I know she thinks she has performed her duty well as a good mother and wife. But children are more important. If the children are naughty and become gangsters, all that money will be useless. If she does not take care of me and I fall ill, how are we going to live? Her earnings will not be enough. We don't need her income. More important are the children and I. "

The ability to provide adequately for the family has a deep-rooted connotation associated with masculinity. As BL explained,

"Of course, it is embarrassing for the men to acknowledge that their wives earn money to help support the family. They may be regarded by others as one of those who eat 'soft rice'. Their men friends will not respect them. It will be even worse if others find out that his wife earns more than him."

Evidently, these subcontractors' contributions are not valued by their husbands and in some cases, their in-laws and children especially the sons. While the home-based subcontractors were keenly aware of that their earnings liberated and empowered them, they were unable to fathom its quantum or its significance. Their contributions were minimized or ignored. The value of their work was then perceived as insignificant.

6.9 Conclusion

A crucial aspect of home-based subcontracting was the fact that home-based subcontractors identified themselves more as 'housewives' than as 'workers'. This was unlike factory workers whose primary identity was as 'workers'. This is very similar to the study of the lacemakers of Narsapur by Maria Mies (1982). The lacemakers confined to their homes by the rules of
*purdah*, perceived themselves as housewives rather than workers even though they produce for the global market.

The garment makers too did not consider the subcontractor as their worker and thus felt unobligated to provide adequately for their protection, safety, security and compensations. The government too did not recognize that home-based subcontractors should be entitled to protection under existing labour legislations.

Because their home were their workplace, the home-based subcontractors absorbed and subsidized much of the cost of production including space rental, variable costs of production and equipment costs. The low piece-rate paid to them did not impute these costs externalized to them. The rates have not been justly revised to commensurate with inflation or rising cost of living. The increased earnings of the subcontractor over the years were primarily due to sewing greater volume of work or more complicated designs.

Most home-based subcontractors restricted by domesticity are grateful to the garment makers for the opportunity to be gainfully employed even though poorly compensated. Being not unionized and isolated, the home-based subcontractors remained vulnerable. The subcontractors were unaware of labour legislations or their rights for benefits and protection. They were kept submissive with occasional threat of withdrawal of work or penalties. The traditional and customary practices based ‘*gan qing*’ (consanguinity) and their
common cultural roots with the garment makers hid the power imbalance and softened the harshness of their exploitation.

At home, their productive work was basically minimized or even ignored. The traditional gender division of labour placed a physical and psychological burden on them to bear primary responsibility for domestic work with little assistance from their husbands. Because the traditional influence was so pervasive, both they and their husbands believed that men should not be expected to share in the domestic work. Only a few men have broken the traditional pattern of gender division of labour to share domestic responsibility. With a heavy load of reproductive work, they exchanged leisure and rest for productive work.

While the earnings empowered them, the majority worked to provide or supplement household income. They accorded priority to the education of the children, and were determined that assist their children to attain higher education and secure good jobs, unlike themselves.

Despite the substantial contributions of the home-based subcontractors to the household income, most husbands still perceived the work of the subcontractors as a ‘hobby’ or to reduce their boredom and so transient and insignificant. These Chinese husbands probably trivialized the earnings and contributions of their wives in order not to hurt their male pride and honour. They would not want the earnings of their wives to threaten their masculine
identity as *yi jia zi zhu*, providers and breadwinners. The majority thus failed to recognize and acknowledge the contributions of these women.