

# WORKERS IN INFORMAL EMPLOYMENT AND INCLUSIVITY

*This article is dedicated to Asakhe Nonzwakazi Sisilana, a home-based worker (HBW) who fought tirelessly for the rights of HBWs. Asakhe passed away 4th September 2022*



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*This article explains informal workers' exclusion from the mainstream, indeed from being recognised and valued as 'workers.'*

This exclusion includes being harassed and ill-treated in numerous ways. The article exposes some misperceptions and myths about the informal economy and about workers in informal employment. In addition, it looks at the importance of organising and the role of education in the lives of workers in informal employment. It draws specifically from my experience working with a group of workers from 10 African countries from May to July 2022 as part of the Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO)<sup>1</sup> Inaugural School. Twelve participants contributed to this article, through interviews and images, sharing their years of experience – the barriers, exclusion, struggles and pain. They also shared their strengths, successes and hopes.

## Unseen and undervalued

For many people, workers in the informal economy are 'invisible.'

Many, such as street vendors or waste pickers are 'seen,' and seen often, but perhaps no interest is taken in them. There are many others who are never seen, such as home-based workers (mostly female), whose homes double up as a place to live and a space to work. There are many people who feel negatively towards informal workers - maybe a street vendor has 'blocked' their way; maybe a waste picker has gone through their trash; maybe a domestic worker has arrived late for work. Maybe they think workers in the informal economy operate 'outside of the law' avoiding regulations and not paying taxes; maybe they believe that what informal workers do is illegal. The informal economy, just like workers who work in it, is often overlooked, undervalued and not seen as part of the 'economy,' locally, nationally or globally.

Following is a poem written by Bamidele Frances Onokpe (of the Federation of Informal Workers' Organisations of Nigeria). In it she describes a day in the life of a street vendor.

# A STREET VENDOR'S DIARY

Sun up with unbearable heat...it's hot today

Heavy rains pouring down  
with the air, damp and cold  
Another day

My little umbrella shade wasn't much help!  
It's a miserable day  
Few customers coming out because of the rains....  
Little Sam, my 9 year old, also came back from school shivering...

We haven't changed his worn out school uniform yet...

Today there's stampede  
I need to pack fast before they come  
The government Task Force...some call them Loot Force

They seize our wares  
And still have to pay  
To get back to work!

It's a disaster when they get you.

Mama Chidi,  
my neighbor that had her goods seized last month  
is yet to get back,  
Looking for funds to get started again

And yesterday  
I had to settle the Market Leader  
She has been there since the current government came in...

But she can't help us stop the Task Force, and the Police from  
taking their toll...

So I ran with my big bowl of wares  
on my head  
I must escape the Task Force...

Then the okada man driving with his fat passenger  
from the opposite side  
ran into me...

I opened my eyes  
in the dark of my room  
Little Sam was there  
His hands on my pounding head

Sorry Mama

But all that raced in my mind  
What happened to my wares!



While perceptions, assumptions and myths abound, today the informal economy accounts for 61 percent of all employment globally. 93 percent of the world's informal employment is in 'emerging'<sup>2</sup> and 'developing'<sup>3</sup> countries. In Africa, 85.8 percent of employment is informal. Women are more exposed to informal employment in most low- and lower-middle income countries and are more often found in the most vulnerable situations (ILO, 2018). The informal economy is vast and should not be understood as something in the margins or on the periphery. It is where you will find 90 percent of the working population in developing countries (Bonnet, et al., 2019). And they are hard at work.

### 'Access to justice'

While workers in informal employment make up a very large percentage of the working population, they do not have the same rights and protections as workers who are formally employed<sup>4</sup>. Dr Sally Roever (International Coordinator: WIEGO) states: "Informal employment refers to the very large labor force that

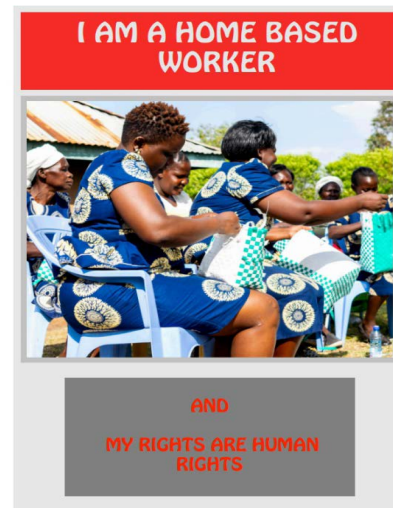
falls outside of protective labor laws, outside of different forms of social protection and really outside of access to justice. The majority of workers in the informal economy are trying to make a living against great odds" (Ford Foundation, 2021). The COVID-19 crisis has exacerbated an already precarious situation of low earnings and high costs and risks for workers in informal employment, and made it even harder for the poor to work their way out of poverty.

*"Informal workers are always excluded and our work is not recognised."*  
Sophia Bweya Karingo, Zimbabwe Domestic and Allied Workers Union

*"We are excluded from decision-making with regard to waste management policies that affect us."*  
Mohammed Rekiyatu Racheal, National Association of Scraps and Wastepickers of Nigeria

*"Since we are 'invisible' to our home governments, we are not registered with the available social services providers for: loans, healthcare, etc. We therefore lose out when we need such services."*  
Kabuye Agnes, Envirojewels, Uganda

Jemimah Nyakongo, a home-based worker from Rachuonyo Moyie Women Group (Kenya) designed this poster, highlighting the urgent need for recognition and to be treated with decency and dignity as workers and human beings:



Participants attending the WIEGO Inaugural School put together lists of demands per sector. From a much longer list, following is a selection of their demands:

### List of demands to authorities

DOMESTIC WORKERS	HOME-BASED WORKERS	STREET VENDORS	WASTE PICKERS
<p>We demand recognition of domestic workers like any other workers. We demand decent work and working conditions. We demand the ratification of Conventions 189 and 190.</p> <p>We need a fair living wage. The minimum wage must be revised, increased and implemented for domestic workers.</p>	<p>We need spacious and ample working space that takes into account the number of personnel and machines being used; child safety (homes are work spaces too); safe storage and sanitation.</p> <p>There needs to be infrastructural development, like roads - to ease transportation of raw materials and finished products to and from HBWs.</p>	<p>In public spaces, authorities should put up decent structures and shelters for street and market vendors. The health and safety of the workers should be protected (e.g. being included in social protection services). Our commodities should also be protected.</p> <p>Authorities should refrain from the use of force when engaging with vendors (e.g. confiscating merchandise), and rather use dialogue and consultation.</p>	<p>We need protective gear and affordable health insurance as we are at high risk of getting sick.</p> <p>Waste pickers should be involved in environmental policy discussions from local to national level.</p>



The Domestic Workers Union of Zambia demands social protection



Green Waste Pickers Cooperative Society Limited. Photos courtesy Johnson Doe, Kpone Landfill Waste Pickers Association

## Stronger together

*"We do not have a common voice; the togetherness that is required to amplify our labour rights."*

Joan Cherop Gloria, Kenya Union of Domestic, Hotels, Educational Institutions, Hospitals and Allied Workers

Workers in informal employment, like all workers, are stronger together. Workers in the informal economy are at a disadvantage when it comes to forming unions and/or negotiating collective bargaining agreements. Many do not have an employer (for example, street vendors and waste pickers) or do not know their employer (some home-based workers) or are one person working for an employer (domestic workers). Workers in the informal economy do engage in forms of collective bargaining through their membership-based organisations (MBOs)<sup>5</sup>. However, the 'counterparts' they negotiate with are often not employers. They might be local authorities or different municipal departments.

Despite the many difficulties and obstacles, workers in informal employment have organised, and continue to do so, in a variety of ways and at multiple levels. Here is one such example. This is the first waste pickers group to register a cooperative in Ghana (2 September 2022).

Gladys Mponda (Malawi Union for the Informal Sector), states that "growing membership is important for an organisation so that it will have a strong voice when lobbying and negotiating with authorities and government."

*Through organization, informal workers can pool their own considerable knowledge and skills. They can broaden this by building contacts with other organizations and by gaining access to new information sources and support. This helps them to bridge the knowledge and resource gaps between informal workers and those with power over them, who come from more privileged backgrounds and/or have greater resources to draw on. It helps build confidence to speak out, to develop strategies and strong arguments (Bonnet & Spooner, 2012).*

Workers in informal employment do not all have exactly the same issues and demands as the sectors they work in are different. However, there are many similarities in their struggles. Reflecting on the WIEGO Inaugural

School, Batte Charles Sseruyidde (Uganda Markets and Allied Employees Union) said: "At the end of the training, it was evidently clear that informal workers have common needs regardless of boundaries or location."

## The role of worker education

*"Paper qualifications as a means of getting employed - currently is for the privileged few. What is now important is acquiring skills through which one may earn a living sustainably."*

Kabuye Agnes, Envirojewels, Uganda

The Inaugural WIEGO School brought together informal workers from different sectors in a virtual space – domestic workers, home-based workers, street vendors and waste pickers. Participants came from Brazil and various countries in Africa and Asia. The first non-formal course took place over a few months. Participants learned about organising, particularly in



the current context; the right to social protection; inclusive urban planning and access to public space; collective negotiations; and collective action by workers in the informal economy.

Following are some inputs by participants on what they think the role of education is for workers in informal employment, drawing on their experience of participating in the School:

*“Education supports informal workers by empowering them on their rights at the workplace, the importance of being organised and joining a union for the purposes of representation, and the strength of togetherness to have a common voice to be heard.”*

Joan Cherop Gloria, Kenya Union of Domestic, Hotels, Educational Institutions, Hospitals and Allied Workers

*“It helps them to get to know their rights.”*

Nabirye Loy Tubirabire, AfriYouth Support Organisation, Uganda

*“Learning and discussing together offered many insights to each sector to learn from each other.”*

Kabuye Agnes, Envirojewels, Uganda

*“I learned how to be with different people.”*

Abdulai Rukaya, Kayayei Youth Association, Ghana

The School served as a space for people to ‘meet’ and share similar and different experiences with one another. It served to deepen participants’ existing knowledge of issues which affect their lives

and those with whom they work. It also reinforced the idea of working collectively to make sure that the struggles of workers in informal employment are heard and action is taken in order to improve their lives and livelihoods. Coming together across sectors, countries and continents strengthened and supported the common struggle and rightful demand for inclusivity.

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Endnotes:

- 1 Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing.
- 2 Though there is no single definition, emerging economies are (mostly) middle-income countries that have been or are growing and developing rapidly (ILO).
- 3 According to the United Nations, a developing country is a country with a relatively low standard of living, undeveloped industrial base, and moderate to low Human Development Index (HDI). This index is a comparative measure of poverty, literacy, education, life expectancy, and other factors for countries worldwide.
- 4 NOTE: This is a context of increasing precarity for many formally employed workers.
- 5 For example, the Self-Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) (India) - the largest trade union of informal workers in the world with over 1.6 million participating women.

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