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Shoes, Glues and Homework: Dangerous Work in the Global Footwear Industry (Work, Health, and Environment)

Pia Markkanen

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This study of working conditions in shoemaking in the informal sector in Indonesia and the Philippines, along with their gender dimensions and national and international policy implications, is based on the author's experience in both countries during 2002, with applied qualitative research techniques: in-depth interviews and worksite visits. The use of organic solvents makes shoemaking a particularly hazardous occupation. The book illustrates the global need for safe and healthy chemical alternatives and for their introduction at the beginning of use and supply chain applications. The study also presents the complexity of the problem when considering the introduction of safer alternatives at the source. While home-based shoemakers may influence certain aspects of their work environment, they seldom can undertake efficient preventive measures to mitigate chemical and dust exposures at the bottom of the production process. Homes have been converted into unsafe footwear-manufacturing units, with serious solvent and dust exposures and a spectrum of other hazards. All family members, adults and children, may work in home-based footwear production. Low-cost shoe production takes advantage of sex-segregated job tasks and minimal investments in working conditions. Use of chemicals in shoemaking is just one example of how global markets have introduced chemicals, materials, and production processes into developing nations. Hazardous working conditions and inadequate health protection are the product of complex relationships among diverse actors or agents at international, national, community, and industry levels. Intended Audience: Occupational and environmental health policymakers, practitioners, and researchers; work environment specialists at international organizations; chemical safety specialists; footwear industry representatives; trade unions representing footwear employees.

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