

# Identifying Livelihood issues of Women street vendors in Puducherry: A Case Study Approach

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## ABSTRACT

India's working class is known to be dominated by individuals who labour in the unorganized sector. Female work forces are often found to be associated with these unorganised trades in good numbers. Often, poverty, illiteracy, familial situations and better economic interests have been increasingly forcing women to work as vendors in the streets. Some have chosen it for an additional income, however, for many; this trade seems to be mere hope for making a living. The current study is an attempt to identify the livelihood predicaments of women street vendors in Puducherry region. The study involved qualitative approach. In-depth interviews with twelve cases under consideration revealed the existing livelihood challenges of women street vendors. Through this paper, the researchers envisage to make the voices of the women street vendors heard in the scientific platform which could potentially urge the research community in framing better models to mitigate the current problems.

## 1. Introduction

Nearly half the adult population of the world comprises of women. They contribute two third of the total working hours and yet earn just 1% of the world's property (Diwakar & Anand, 2014). The reality in third-world or undeveloped nations is that women are constrained by poverty to seek income, either as the family's sole earner or to support/complement the family's income. The quality of employment for many ladies is poor because they lack relevant skills or access. The increase of female involvement or participation in the informal sector is on the high side because of the economic pressure than any alteration in work philosophy. Street vending or hawking has been an integral part of India's culture and tradition, ever since India civilization developed to the nascent trading. Therefore, street vending is just as old as trading in India. Years back, considering when population pressure on geographies was much less, street vending was either seen as a part of normal trade or was recognized as one of the methods of trading. Vending has always been a profession, with street vendors as an essential part of our urban culture and history. From a traditional Indian perspective, shopping and marketing have primarily been informal.

In contrast to the mechanized and sterile concept of shopping favoring modern markets and supermarket structures, social interaction is integral to Indian markets (Balasubramanian, Srinivasan, & Vaidhyasubramaniam, 2012). The most visible part of the informal economy is street vendors (Nidan, 2010). Public spaces, like the streets, are contested as it changes and assumes different forms for various marginalized groups. One of the biggest and most visible occupational groups in the informal economy located in public places is occupied by street vendors (Sharma & Konwar, 2014). In the informal sector, street vendors are recognized as self-employed individuals offering their labour in selling goods and services in the streets without having any permanent built-up structure.

Vendors possess incredible entrepreneurial skills. With the constant fluctuations in the market, buying commodities is a difficult task. Moreover, middlemen contribute significantly to wholesale markets. Commodities need to be in harmony with consumer tastes and paying capacity. Since most vendors handle perishable products, they need to sell them at the right time. A large number of street vendors are migrants from rural areas where poverty, lack of employment and other factors have inspired them to search for better opportunities in urban areas.

A substantial proportion of the urban informal sector constitutes of hawkers and street vendors; this accounts for two-thirds of employment in urban areas. Nearly 10 million street vendors were found in India (Bhowmik, 2001). And the interesting thing to note here is that in certain developing countries, this sector is usually a large source of employment for females than males, with over 60% of female workers being employed (Chen et al., 2004). In developing nations like India, the urban public space is a valuable resource as a means of livelihood and living for the urban working poor (Bhowmil, 2010). In India, women worker forms an important segment of the total labour force. For a long time, women contributions in the informal sectors in the development of the Indian economy were not recognized as their activities had been restricted from their household (Sen & Gupta, 2017).

Our society has benefited from the services offered by female street vendors. These women took to street vending as a source of income in order to support or contribute to their family's finance. Besides that, this trade has an entry and exit barrier that is negligible, and it requires only a little amount of capital and skills. These women are so hard working to earn their livelihood. But in order to sustain this trade, they must encounter several challenges on a daily basis (Mishra, 2018). Regulations, harassment, and new urban initiative often limit the rights of street vendors to ply their trade, making women more vulnerable. It's expected that the volume of demand and

vendor numbers will grow as urbanization continues. Downsizing in both private and public sectors, as well as economic reforms over the past twenty years, have cursed a lot of people, men, in particular, to adopt this highly competitive market as employment in the formal sector diminishes.

Women have been significantly affected by this, resulting in downward pressure on earnings and evicting the weakest hawkers, mostly females. Among street vendors, females are usually found in large numbers selling perishable products like flowers, fruits, and vegetables plus other drawbacks linked with the informal sector. Female vendors are more vulnerable in street vending activities due to the perishable nature of the items sold. Street vending poses more problems or challenges to women such as insecurity, harassment in public areas, and so on (Sekar, 2008). They find themselves positioned in a wide range of activities with the lowest returns.

Nevertheless, since the entry and exit norm in the informal sector is negligible, women can still go on with their reproductive responsibilities, and this form of trade is more

suitable for women who lack relevant skills and education to participate in an organized workforce. Street vending for poor people in urban areas is one of the means of earning money because it requires minimum skills and very little capital although the income is not substantial. Also, there is a gender dimension to poverty because the poor woman has to face a double burden by being poor and being disadvantaged because she is a woman. Only a small section of this trade associates with organisations, thus they are barely unionized (Banerjee, 2014).

## 2. Objectives of the study

- To know about the livelihood issues of women street vendors in Puducherry.
- To identify the challenges faced by women street vendors with regard to their work environment.

### Particulars of the respondents

Table no:1

SI No	Type of Enterprise	Age of the respondent	Educational qualification	Marital Status	Experience (in years)
1.	Fruit stall	48	3 <sup>rd</sup> std	Married	12
2.	Vegetable stall	46	7 <sup>th</sup> std	Married	8
3.	Flower stall	39	9 <sup>th</sup> std	Married	7
4.	Vegetable stall	36	8 <sup>th</sup> std	Separated	3
5.	Betal/Tobacco	57	nil	Widow	30
6.	Fruit stall	52	3 <sup>rd</sup> std	Married	26
7.	Street food	58	3 <sup>rd</sup> std	Married	4
8.	Flower stall	42	7 <sup>th</sup> std	Married	14
9.	Fish vendor	39	10 <sup>th</sup> std	Married	8
10.	Fruit & Flowers	38	10 <sup>th</sup> std	Married	5
11.	Fish vendor	56	3 <sup>rd</sup> std	Married	23
12.	Flowers/Puja items	37	9 <sup>th</sup> Std	Married	6

## 3. Methodology

The study was Qualitative in nature, envisioned to understand the livelihood issues of women street vendors of Puducherry. Case study method was put to use in this social investigation. Twelve cases that represent the characteristics of life situations of typical women street vendors were carefully chosen using purposive sampling technique. The researchers have secured Verbal consent from all subjects admitted in this study.

The case studies involved in-depth interviews based on a semi structured interview guide. Through the thematic analysis of the cases under observation, systematic interpretations were drawn.

## 4. Analysis & Interpretation

### Long hours of work

With an average of 8-12 working hours daily, street vendors still do not earn as much as the vendors in the organized sector. After getting the goods from the wholesale market and perfecting the sales plan, street vendors are expected to prepare for the following day. Considering that they do not earn enough, it is practically impossible for them to employ extra hands. Thus they resort to help offered by family members. All these highlights the immense stress and physical labour a vendor is going through. It is important for a vendor to set out early every day, to arrive at the market place, which is usually far from their residence, early. The responses from most of the subjects under this study, points out this fact.

*"I work from, early morning till late in the dusk"*(Case No. 6)

*"I start early from home and spends the whole day in the scorching sun...I reach late at home"*(Case No.1)

After moving around the market and acquiring the large sacks of vegetable and fruits, they will need to load them in a rickshaw cart. This is followed by the cleaning, sorting, weighing, and attending to the customers who want the goods. Despite the uncondusive weather, hawkers are always on the go, trying to get to all the lanes before the end of the day. A hawker on the move is always very vocal, making loud calls at intervals to alert consumers of their presence. All of these require enormous time and energy.

### **Competitive market**

The unorganised sector has continued to grow in the workforce. Likewise, the increase in the number of people in the vending business triggers a corresponding rise in competition. A vendor that intends to thrive in such a competitive market must come up with innovative operational ideas that will yield maximum profits. Vendors have had to contend with local shops and supermarkets, and even among themselves, considering that the vendors sell at different prices. A street vendor needs a considerable level of skills to survive and compete effectively with other vendors for space and access to customers. Due to the competing interests between regulators and street vendors, street vending now thrives on unending negotiation among regulators, buyers, and vendors. Almost all the respondents of this study were apprehensive about the competitive nature of their trade.

*"We sell for meagre profits, still the customers look for maximum profit...everyone bargain and look for competitive prices"*(Case No.2)

*"People open up more and more shops everyday...there are lot of people in the same trade"*(Case No.3)

### **Harassment from authorities**

The police and municipality officials have continued to harass street vendors, who have had to protect themselves from the constant harassment and illegality threats, and also save their space on the street by paying bribes to the authorities. The shameful act entails the extortion of fixed weekly, fortnightly, or monthly payments from the struggling vendors. The extortionists are also in the habit of taking the goods of the vendors without paying. It is even worse that these authorities come under different roles - the municipality, police, regional development authorities, district administration, and others. While a couple of these authorities have taken positive steps, the same have been defeated by the actions of other authorities.

*"The authorities are changing the rules, day by day, as per their convenience.....to make a living, we have to satisfy the demands of every person in power"* (Case No. 1)

The outdated municipal law, which still follows the century old practices, also contradicts the smooth running of business by the vendors. Considering that street selling is not officially or legally recognized, and the vendors have no political or economic power, the harassments seem impossible to stop. The municipal authorities who should have served as regulatory bodies, see and treat street vendors as nuisances, and thus create unfavourable policies backed by unacceptable actions towards the vendors.

The municipal workers and the police, as well as some public members, object to the use of public spaces by vendors for their vending activities. Thus, the vendors are usually forcefully removed from their various spots to allow vehicles and people to move freely. Despite the almost constant eviction, the poor vendors have persisted in staying on the streets to make sales and get some money to fend for themselves. It is clear that the on-the-street vending activity is a source of discord between the vendors and the authorities. One of the cases states..

*"I don't harm anyone, but some people including the natives don't want me to function..this may be due to some other interests which even I don't know"* (Case No.11)

### **Balancing family and work life**

The secondary societal status of women workers puts them at the risk of double marginalization and workload. They are expected to give care and fend for the family, and this leaves women street vendors with twice the burden of work. After waking very early in the morning to complete household chores, they proceed to sell their goods. And while at it, they are faced by the hardships that come with trying to survive as a woman in a male-dominant society. The unfavorable economic condition also highlights the vulnerability of women. They literally move from one problem to another – low income, denial of life-changing opportunities, and sometimes, poverty. Over one-third of the women who invest more time on domestic duties, under principal status, indicate their readiness to take part in productive activities, if it were available within their homes. Almost all the cases in this study find it difficult to make a balance between their work life and family life.

### **Sanitation Facilities at Working place**

Due to the absence of basic sanitation facilities at their places of business, street vendors are usually forced to bring drinking water from home and buy other comfort items from shops around. Toilet facilities are also not available – this is, even more, telling on the women sellers, considering that they cannot use the open place. Even in urgent situations, the social inhibition usually prevents them from doing so. Vending for a whole day in the market that lacks basic facilities can be very difficult for a woman, and most times, they are forced to use distant public toilets or nearby houses, leaving their business. Although they ask nearby vendors to look after their goods while they are away, this still puts their goods at risk, considering that the other vendors too are busy watching over their personal goods. So, to reduce their chances of using the toilet, women vendors have resorted to drinking less water.

*"I am scared to drink water, even if I have to work a whole day"*(Case No.10)

*"Public toilet facilities are not operational in this area"* (Case No.12)

### **Seasonal Difference in Sales**

The sales and income of the vendors are affected by seasonal differences. The trend is such that there is higher demand in the first and second week of the month, considering

that this is the period when salary earners get paid. However, the sales drop to the average for the third and fourth week. The rainy season is usually unfavourable for sellers due to the challenge of shelter, and this, in turn, affects their sales. During the summer, sales also drop considerably, since markets resume late in the evening.

*“Sales go up and down with the availability of flowers...festival seasons etc. Actually, no one can predict the demands”*(Case No.3)

### **Health problems**

By selling in crowded places and roadsides, vendors are exposed to harsh conditions that cause fever, cold, dust allergy, and other adverse health conditions, and this limits them and their activities. Considering the rare availability of accidental government insurance, most vendors rely on private hospitals for treatment – only a privileged few enjoy health insurance. The vulnerability of these women to the hard labour and physical hard work that comes with street vending, coupled with high pollution levels in these public places, further worsens the already poor health situation of street vendors. On average, a street vendor works for over eight hours daily in the open space, and hence, are exposed to work-related problems. Another observation among respondents is the hesitation in seeking treatment for their adverse health conditions, and an excessive reliance on self-medication and over-the-counter medicines. These options are preferred because they are cheaper and readily available. The unorganized sector does not enjoy any form of formal social security, unlike the organized or formal sector, where workers enjoy adequate social security. The responses from the cases point out to the fact that they most often neglect their health issues.

*“I always have pain in my legs...when I reach back home”* (Case No.7)

*“I wants to take care of my health properly...but if I rest for one day, there is no one to look after my family”*(Case 4)

### **Economic support from spouse**

More married female vendors are in the business of street vending. The economic situation has informed the decisions of most of the women to become a street vendor, especially when their husbands' income cannot cater for all the household needs. And this is why most women join the business rather late. Likewise, the double burden associated with being a woman means they do not have enough time to invest in their work. The husbands of most of these women work with the informal sector or self-employed, or they are not employed at all. Some of the employed men either spend the bulk of their earnings on alcohols or do not commit their earnings to the running of the household. In such cases, women step into responsibility and are forced to work to meet the needs of their children, especially education- and health-wise. For some respondents, the death of their husbands makes them resort to street vending to make ends meet.

*“My husband used to drink and beat me every day ...but now I am now standing in my on feet, I no longer depends on him”*(Case No.2)

*“After my husband’s death, I was able to get at least some earning only because of this trade”* (Case No.5)

The most common reason for women joining the informal sector is to earn their livelihood, and not to make a career. This shows that such decisions are not made willingly, but due to the absence of opportunities or appropriate support to sustain them. Another significant influence on the decision of the women vendors to join the street vending business is the occupational background of their parents and that of their in-laws, as well as the economic background of their husband's family.

### **Other Themes**

Other themes identified through this study are lack of proper credit facilities, lack of governmental support etc. Few of the vendors had the vision of augmenting their trade by making better investments by acquiring appropriate credit facilities at minimal rate of interests. Few vendors also had the opinion that through appropriate organisations, they could fight for their rights and demands.

### **5. Discussion**

According to this study, harassment and exploitation by municipal authorities, police and other authorities poses a major threat to female street vendors. This fact is attested by several studies across the globe. Street vendors, who are operational with inadequate or no infrastructural amenities and restricted entree to modest space for trade are often found to be discomfited by the conditions put down by the urban ruling classes and watchdogs who regulate the public space (Forkuor, Akuoko, & Yeboah, 2017). In the current state of affairs, eviction and repositioning operations are taken on by the metropolitan authorities to clean up the town and to style it more beautifully (Anjaria, 2006). Sometimes, vendors are even purported as an annoyance, an icon of disarray and chaos, expulsion is every so often very extreme, involving the use of earthmovers, and vindicated as an obligatory practice to reinstate order and stability back to urban life (Rajagopal, 2001). Evictions are reported to be very common throughout the world, particularly in developing countries (Donovan, 2008). The street vendors often have very tough time, considering the mode of commutation or their operational hours, it spares barely any hour for recreation and relaxation, which indeed have undesirable impacts on their health.(Sonawane, 2017). While considering both groundwork and the time for retailing the articles, it is observed that an typical a street vendor devotes upto fifteen hours daily in his or her undertakings in order to earn a few hundred rupees.(CUE Report,2014). Thus pointing to the current study, street vendors often have long hours of labour without relaxation and at the dearth of necessary amenities. Weather often adds to their miseries through rain, burning temperature and frosty winter climate by damage to one's merchandises and added peripheral requisites. Street vendors additionally face difficulties of absence of shelters and loading space (Kurniawati, 2012).

In this study, Competition is recognized as a major predicament of female street vendors in Puducherry. It is a fact that the bulk of the street vendors face the difficulty of taut competition (Selvakumar, Sathyalakshmi, & Murugan, 2014).

The street sellers frequently face stiff competition from the organized dealers besides fellow street vendors (Garg, Kulkarni, & Garg, 2014). The incomes of street vendors are often greatly affected by season, location and the hours of operation (Bromley, 2000).

As found in the study, minimal or no economic support from the male counterparts, often necessitate women to work as street vendors. Alcoholic husbands are a major menace at most cases (Chakraborty, 2018). Familial responsibilities often drag women to the goods trade on the streets (Torres, 2015). Female street hawkers are also struggling to balance their family life and work life. Most often, they are not getting enough breaks for proper childcare or take care of themselves after delivery. This indeed may have unfavourable results on prenatal, neonatal and postnatal wellbeing. The scarcity of capitals, unbalanced earnings, health problems, pitiable working and living environments often trouble these womenfolk (Chakraborty, 2018)

Health problem is explored as another major theme in this study. Adverse working environments are often a key challenge for the street vendors (Kaur & Kaur, 2017). Bodily condition chiefly depends on health and nutritive standing, however, these factors are rarely found to be in a satisfactory condition (Koley & Chakraborty, 2018).

Health care practices and safety measures are rarely adopted by street vendors which make them open to a variety of occupational health problems (Lund & Marriott, 2011). Health problems such as wounds, migraine, musculoskeletal troubles and optical disorders are often found to be common to peculiar age group of vendors. To exemplify, women of middle age and above are increasingly found to be encountering frequent headaches than younger hawkers (Pick et al., 2002). Psychosomatic disorders and stress related conditions are in high prevalence among women street vendors (WHO, Occupational health, 2013). It is identified that most of the

women who work as street hawkers are experiencing more than one occupation related disorder (Mishra, 2018).

Identical with the findings of this study, it has been reported that street vendors often face problems due to less availability of water, electricity, rest rooms, lodging and facilities (WIGEO, 2014) Sanitation and the availability of potable water are the key troubles, especially for women vendors (Manickavasagam, 2018)

## 6. Conclusion

Women Street vendors are vital human resources of our country. Even though they fall into informal or unorganized sector, their contribution towards national economy is highly significant. Moreover, it is a widely agreed fact that street vending is not only a means of self-employment to the deprived but also it encompasses the provision of affordable and appropriate facilities to a large section of urban population. With low skills and low literacy rates, the women street vendors engage themselves in long struggle to meet the economic demands in their lives. It is evident from this scientific investigation that these women street vendors face a lot of challenges and apprehensions while concerning factors related to their working hours, access to public toilet, health issues etc. Also, it is to be noted that the women are forced to work as vendors to support their families in every possible way. Many women are the single breadwinners of their families. Gender friendly public policies, legislation and access to better credit facilities can definitely improve the condition of street vendors in our country. The infrastructural growth as well as the developmental goals should be framed in such a manner that they meet the expectations of women entrepreneurs in the unorganized sector. Moreover, the scientific community has the responsibility to undertake more studies and develop solution based models to better handle the prevailing predicaments.

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