

The Challenges of Women Street Vendors in Urban Spaces of Guwahati

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ABSTRACT

Women street vendors represent both systemic neglect and economic necessity in contemporary urban landscapes. These women street vendors continue to be structurally marginalized regardless of their critical role in maintaining the urban informal economies; there is a conflux of economic precarity, spatial violence, systematic exclusion of gender and regulatory indifferences. This abstract tries to critically examine the ingrained power disparities that influence their everyday struggles, revealing how patriarchal norms, institutional barriers combine together to make their identities invisible as they strive to earn a livelihood. The study highlights the structural violence entrenched in urban governance practices as well as tenacity of women street vendors through an intersectional and feminist political lens. For the women working in an informal sector economy, it demands a radical re-thinking of the policy framework which goes beyond inclusion to real recognition, right-based protection, and socio-economic justice. For obtaining relevant data observation and semi-structured interview method have been used.

KEYWORDS: gendered precarity, informal labour, systemic exclusion, women street vendors.

INTRODUCTION

“There is no chance for the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved. It is not possible for a bird to fly on one wing.”

— Swami Vivekananda

Street vendors are considered as the lifeblood of the urban informal economy, especially for the urban poor for their sustenance. National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector (NCEUS) in its National Policy on urban Street Vendors in May, 2006 has widely defined the concept of Street Vendors as a person who offers goods or services for sale to the public without any permanent build up structure in a street or on footpath. The policy recognised that there are three categories of Street Vendors; firstly, who carry out vending activities on a regular basis with specific locations. Secondly, who do not vend on a regular basis and without any permanent or specific locations i.e. (weekly bazaars, holidays, festivals) and thirdly, who move from one place to another for vending i.e. (mobile vendors) (Bhushan, 2022). An important part of the urban economy is street vending, where a variety of goods and services are easily and quickly accessible in public spaces. Street vending is a common source of income and livelihood for many people because of lack of formal job opportunities. In Indian cities, those who are marked by precarity, street vending had brought life and a market outlet over the years. Street vending as a growing phenomenon is not only seen in India but across the world. The Ministry of Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation estimates that 10 million people work as street vendors in India’s cities. The majority of these

workers who have made street vending their career are those who have moved from rural to urban areas in pursuit of better job prospects, a better quality of life and a better lifestyle. Before the Street Vending Act of 2014 was put into effect, street vending was illegal in urban areas for nearly 60 years. The urban poor find street vending as one of the most viable sources of income as it requires less financial input. Street vending gives urban streets a life, offers a flexible link in economic supply chains and makes goods affordable for a large number of city dwellers. They make goods and services easily accessible to everyone, including low income families who cannot afford to shop at traditional retail establishments and they offer them at a reasonable price. Although the names of street vendors vary depending on the location, hawkers are a common one. Fresh fruits, vegetables, cooked food, building supplies, clothing, handicrafts, stationary items and more are all sold by the street vendors.

Street vending is seen as detrimental to city life because it causes chaos, traffic jams, noise pollution and sometimes even violence. Although street vending serves as a source of self-employment, the occupation remains a tough one as it is fraught with challenges like societal stigma, legal restrictions, and insufficient institutional support. For the women street vendors this occupation is even more precarious and the difficulties they bear are even higher stemming from intersectional identities as women and informal workers.

The participation of female vendors in street vending is a notable aspect. In India, women street vendors are independent contractors who sell goods and services in public areas like streets, sidewalks and marketplaces without a permanent building. They contribute to the affordability and accessibility of necessities for the urban populace by making up a sizable portion of the informal urban economy. About 40 percent of India's 10 million street vendors are women, according to the Ministry of Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation. Women are engaged in this occupation in order to meet the basic needs of their families. Women street vendors are mainly found selling perishable goods like vegetables, fruits and flowers.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To understand the socio-economic conditions of the women street vendors in Guwahati.
- To understand the challenges faced by women street vendors in the city.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Area of the Study

The present study has been conducted on women street vendors of a daily market in Kahilipara, Guwahati, where majority of the women street vendors sell their goods including fruits, vegetables, flowers.

Research Design

Descriptive mode of research has been carried out in this study.

Sample method

The study was conducted on the basis of a simple random sampling method and the sample size included 20 women street vendors in Kahilipara daily market.

Data collection

For the present study data has been collected from both primary and secondary sources. The primary data was collected with the help of semi-structured interviews and observation methods. Secondary sources of data include websites, journals, and articles.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In the present study we have tried to highlight the socio-economic conditions and the challenges faced by women street vendors of daily markets in Kahilipara, Guwahati. Guwahati is a major hub for trade and commerce. The renowned markets in Guwahati are: Karchari Basti market, Fancy Bazar, Uzan Bazar, Ulubari Bazar, Beltola Bazar, Ganeshguri Bazar, Kahilipara Bazar. All these markets are run by the street vendors, small traders who come to the city with food items like fruits, vegetables, poultry items, etc.

Demographic profile

In the present study the street vendors include a good number of tribal/indigenous women coming from Dhupdhora region which is a village in Rongjuli located in the Goalpara district of Assam and Boko region belonging to the Garo community. Most of the street vendors generally do not reside in the city; they tend to migrate in urban areas for their occupation and after selling their goods they go back to their own villages. Out of 20 women street vendors 10 were tribals from Dhupdhora, 4 were Hindu from Nagaon and Kharupetia region and 6 were Bengali -Muslim from Baihata Chariali. The table below analyses the various demographic profiles of the women street vendors of the study which includes their age, educational qualification, marital status, caste background.

Table 1: Demographic profile

SI No.	Demographic profile	Number of female street vendors (N=20)
1	Age	
	Below 30	2
	30-35	4
	35-40	12
	40 and above	2
2	Educational Qualification	
	Did not go to school	10
	Primary education	4
	Under matriculation	6
3	Marital Status	
	Married	15
	Unmarried	4
	Widow/Divorce	1
4	Caste	

	OBC	2
	ST	14
	SC	4

In the present study it has been found that most of the women engaged in this profession were mostly found to be of 35-40 years of age who entered into this occupation as they had no choice left to support their families. It suggests that women in their mid-to-late working years are the main participants in this activity. The fact that there are few younger (below 30 years) or older (above 40 years) suggests that they are either entering this field for the very first time or leaving because of physical limitations or other reasons. In the case of education, high levels of educational deprivation are reflected in the fact that half of the vendors have never gone to school. Only 6 women street vendors have completed education beyond primary school but have not completed matriculation status due to their insufficient economic capital and lack of family support which may force them to take on informal jobs street vending. In terms of the marital status, it can be illustrated that most of them are married which highlights that even after marriage they were living an economically poor livelihood which led them to engage in this occupation as a source of income and support their families. The majority of the women street vendors belong from Scheduled Tribes followed by Scheduled Caste and Other Backward Castes.

Table 2: Reasons for choosing street vending

Sl. No.	Reason	Number of female street vendors
1.	Lack of Employment Opportunities	11
2.	Absence of Earning Member in the Family	5
3.	Needs less Skills and investment	4

In the present study, lack of employment opportunities is the most frequently mentioned factor for women choosing street vending as their profession. It points out that the lack of formal or respectable work especially for the low-educated women makes them subject to double marginalisation. And as a result, more than half of the respondents are forced into unofficial jobs. Also, the absence of a primary breadwinner forces the women to work in such a situation. Economic hardship and possibly female-headed households as a result of male members' illness, death or abandonment are reflected in this interpretation. Lastly, street vending needs less skills and investment in comparison to other formal jobs and this becomes a feasible choice for women who are economically and educationally lagging behind.

Table 3: Daily Income

Sl. No.	Daily Income	Number of female street vendors
1.	Below 500	7
2.	500-1000	10
3.	1000-2000	3

Out of 20 Women Street vendors, 7 of them earn below Rs 500 every day, 10 of them earn from Rs 500-1000 and only 3 of them earn Rs 1000-2000. Women who are engaged in street vending mentioned that they do not have a fixed daily income and it keeps fluctuating. On some days they have very little income and sometimes they earn little more. However, their daily income is not enough for their sustenance. These women mentioned that they tend to work for 9-12 hours continuously in a day but the amount of earnings is considerably very low. On a lighter note some of the women street vendors are expected to reach home early as their husband and family expects them to do all the household chores which underscores the concept of double burden on the women as a provider and caregiver to the family. It also highlights that in a patriarchal society domestic work is seen as women's work only which is undervalued in most of the societies.

CHALLENGES FACED BY THE WOMEN STREET VENDORS

Job insecurity: The main problem faced by each and every street vendor is their livelihood security (Bhowmik, 2005). Job insecurity is one of the most pervasive challenges for the women engaged in street vending which stems from the informal nature of the occupation as they lack legal protections. The women vendors often work in precarious conditions and are subject to evictions and harassment by different authorities. Also, the income instability throws them into vulnerable positions in society.

Gendered expectations: The experiences of the women street vendors are mostly shaped by the gendered expectations of the society which have adverse effects on their work and livelihood. The existing societal standards systematically excluded the women from living an equitable life like men. In the present study it is found that even in contemporary times, women who come for occupation like street vending to support their families, ironically themselves do not get any support from their husbands and in-laws. One of the respondents reveals that her husband is alcoholic and does not earn a single penny and her in-laws want her to manage household work alone without going out. Such a situation explains the marginalized position of a woman in a family where they face pressure to balance out their roles both in private and public space.

Health and sanitation: Most of the respondents reveal that they have to sit in the hot scorching sun for hours to sell their goods due to which some of them suffer from severe headaches and migraines. There is also a lack of safe drinking water at their workplace as the water they collect from the taps are not purified. Some of them mentioned that they face the issue of sanitation due to poor quality of toilets in the nearby spaces due to which they sometimes openly defecate in an unhygienic landscape.

Gender Discrimination: The challenges faced by the women street vendors are often layered due to their gendered precarity, heightening their vulnerabilities in the workplace. Women street vendors face discrimination from the male counterparts as their competition. As some of them manage to make a profit of Rs 200-300 only, it does not suffice their market price and this financial strain is further compounded by harassment by their own alcoholic husbands. Additionally, the stereotypical position of women in the society pushes them to face discrimination in the public spaces, some of the women street vendors revealed that they are subjected to ill-treatment and derogatory comments from various customers while interacting and bargaining as they find women street vendors to be the easy targets to exploit and discriminate.

Lack of adequate infrastructure: Most of the women street vendors face hurdles due to lack of basic infrastructure exacerbating the vulnerabilities of women and pushing them into more marginalized positions. Space congestion is a major issue. The women street vendors sell their goods in footpaths in an unregulated area due to lack of designated vending zones. The lack of proper storage facilities creates a

burden to the vendors as most of the goods they sell are perishable. Additionally, lack of proper transport facilities do not adhere to their needs (like carrying the goods carefully) and disrupting their mobility during harsh weather conditions.

The challenges faced by women street vendors are not only economic, they navigate everyday struggles like job precarity and insecurity, gender discrimination, exploitation. It is important to give immediate attention to the issues of the women street vendors by creating policies which not only will give recognition to their work but will also help in upliftment of their living standards. Socio-economic justice for women means ensuring that their needs are met with respect and dignity in the society.

CONCLUSION

The present study delves into the demographic profile, socio-economic conditions and the challenges faced by women street vendors in the daily market of Kahailipara. Financial strain due to less economic and social capital is one of the major reasons for their precarious status in the society. The women street vendors hold a vulnerable position at the nexus of informality, class and gender. According to the demographic analysis, the majority are middle-aged, low-educated, tribal or marginalised caste women who entered vending out of need rather than choice. They work long hours and are exposed to the heat, have poor sanitation and are constantly in danger of being evicted. These stresses are exacerbated by gendered expectations at home where they bear the ‘double burden’ of unpaid domestic work and precarious street work, frequently without assistance from husbands or in-laws.

The 2014 Street Vending Act of India offers a framework for recognition however its practical application is still lacking as most of the women are not being able to avail its benefits since they are not aware of the act due to lack of knowledge. Women street vendors play an integral role to the urban economies, however, they remain structurally and systematically excluded and are marginalized by precarity of gender. The challenges faced by the women street vendors needs to be properly addressed with recognition of their selfless contributions and right based protections. There must be policies that prioritize and cater to the needs of the women street vendors in the urban spaces, creating a supportive environment.

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