



Safety and Vulnerability of Women Street Vendors: A Sociological Analysis of Gendered Networks and Community Support in Urban India

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Abstract:

Women street vendors of India face a myriad of challenges, including gender-based violence, harassment, and economic precarity, aggravated by the informal nature of their work. Despite the absence of formal institutional safeguards, these women often depend on gendered networks of solidarity to navigate and mitigate risks inherent to their occupation. These networks, composed of other vendors, family members, and local community actors, function as a means of social protection, providing both practical and emotional support. The study also aims to interrogate the intersection between these networks and broader societal factors, such as cultural expectations of gender roles, public perceptions of street vendors, and urban regulatory environments. It is argued that these community-based support mechanisms are critical in fostering resilience among women vendors, while also serving as a collective response to the vulnerabilities imposed by their gender and occupational status. Therefore, this sociological study examines the critical role of gendered networks and community support systems in ensuring the safety of women street vendors in urban spaces. The study explores how public policies and urban governance structures either reinforce or diminish the efficacy of these networks. This paper method includes synthesizing existing literature and employs a theoretical framework to examine how women street vendors establish and sustain informal support systems. The findings suggest that the intersection of gender, informality, and urban policy must be carefully considered to ensure that women street vendors are not marginalized further. This study contributes to the growing body of sociological literature on informal economies and gender, highlighting the need for a gender-sensitive approach to urban policy design and implementation to protect the livelihoods and well-being of women street vendors.

Keywords: *Gender, Indian Society, Street Vendors, Sociological Perspective*

INTRODUCTION

Women street vendors in India navigate a unique set of challenges due to their dual marginalization—both as informal laborers and as women operating in public spaces. The informal economy, where these vendors primarily operate, is characterized by precarious employment, lack of social security, and minimal state oversight. In India, women make up about 40% of street vendors, and 30% of them are the sole earning members of their families (Kambara and Mutharayappa, 2018). Women street vendors sell a variety of products, including vegetables, fruits, flowers, broomsticks, cane baskets, utensils, cosmetics, bangles, and

tea. In this context, women vendors are exposed to risks such as harassment, economic instability, and the absence of basic services like sanitation and legal protection. Despite these adversities, informal networks of family, community members, and other vendors play a crucial role in mitigating risks and fostering resilience.

In urban India, street vending is not just a livelihood option but also a survival strategy for many. However, public perceptions and urban regulatory frameworks often stigmatize street vendors, treating them as encroachments rather than contributors to the urban economy. Women, in particular, bear additional burdens, such as balancing caregiving roles, managing familial responsibilities, and confronting gender-based violence in public spaces. While the Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014, aims to secure their rights, it falls short in addressing gender-specific challenges (ManasiChaudhari, 2014). This study explores how women street vendors rely on community support systems and informal networks to navigate these challenges, with a focus on the intersection of gender, informality, and urban governance.

The informal economy constitutes a significant part of the global labor force, particularly in developing countries. For women, informal work provides economic opportunities but often perpetuates gender-based inequalities (Chen, 2012). In India, the informal sector employs a considerable proportion of women, yet the absence of social security mechanisms exacerbates their vulnerability. Studies show that women street vendors face additional risks such as harassment from authorities and customers, lack of access to sanitation, and exclusion from formal credit systems (Chaudhari, 2014; International Labour Organization, 2018). The Street Vendors Act (2014) attempted to regulate street vending and safeguard vendors' rights. However, it has been critiqued for its gender-neutral stance, overlooking the specific needs of women vendors, such as childcare and protection against harassment. Though the Act mandates representation for women in Town Vending Committees, it remains insufficient to address the daily challenges faced by women in urban markets (Chaudhari, 2014).

Women street vendors in India occupy a precarious space at the intersection of gender, informality, and urban governance. Although street vending is a vital part of urban economies, contributing to job creation and access to affordable goods, it remains poorly regulated and socially stigmatized (Chaudhari, 2014; ILO, 2018). Gender-specific challenges such as harassment, insecurity, and the dual burden of economic and domestic responsibilities compound the difficulties faced by women vendors, making their livelihoods particularly fragile (Chen, 2012). Existing studies primarily focus on the economic aspects of informal work, often overlooking the gendered risks women vendors encounter daily. This study addresses this gap by examining the role of community-based support systems in providing safety and resilience to these women, thereby highlighting the interplay between social networks and urban policies.

While the Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014 was designed to safeguard the rights of vendors, it fails to account for gender-specific vulnerabilities adequately (Chaudhari, 2014). Many women vendors remain unaware of the provisions available to them or find them difficult to access due to the informal and scattered nature of their work (Mishra, 2018). In the absence of robust institutional support, informal networks—comprising family, peer vendors, and local associations—serve as critical sources of protection. However, these networks are poorly understood and insufficiently recognized in policy frameworks. Understanding how these networks operate and identifying ways in which governance structures can support them is essential for developing gender-sensitive urban policies.

This study contributes to the growing body of sociological literature on informal economies by focusing on the lived experiences of women street vendors in urban India. It emphasizes the importance of gendered networks and informal community support systems as strategies for coping with the vulnerabilities posed by informal employment and urban marginalization. Previous research has established that social capital plays a crucial role in sustaining informal workers (Chen, 2012), but the specific dynamics of women's networks in the street-vending context remain underexplored. By analyzing how these networks mitigate gender-based risks, this study provides valuable insights for policymakers and urban planners. It argues for the need to incorporate gender-sensitive approaches in urban governance, which are essential to addressing the structural challenges faced by women vendors. Moreover, the research aligns with broader developmental goals, including sustainable urban development and women's economic empowerment. Insights from this study can inform the design of interventions aimed at improving the safety and well-being of women in the informal economy, thus contributing to both academic knowledge and practical policy solutions.

Despite the critical role of women street vendors in urban economies, they remain highly vulnerable to economic instability, harassment, and social exclusion. Public policies and urban governance structures often fail to protect them adequately, with the result that women vendors must rely on informal networks for support and safety. The Street Vendors Act (2014) offers some legal protections but falls short of addressing the gendered realities faced by these women on a daily basis (Chaudhari, 2014). Moreover, societal perceptions continue to stigmatize street vendors as illegitimate participants in the economy, further marginalizing them.

The absence of formal safety nets and the growing pressures of urbanization intensify the challenges faced by women street vendors. These challenges include balancing domestic responsibilities with economic activities, negotiating with authorities, and navigating unsafe public spaces. In this context, the problem lies not only in the inadequacy of policies but also in the invisibility of informal support systems that sustain women vendors. There is a need to examine how these networks operate, what factors influence their effectiveness, and how urban policies can be reoriented to strengthen them. This study aims to address these questions by investigating the intersection of gender, informality, and urban governance through the lens of women's experiences as street vendors in urban India.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The following are the objectives undertaken for this study to discuss the gendered networks and community support for the safety of women street vendors in urban spaces of India:

- To explore the challenges faced by women street vendors in urban India, including gender-based violence, harassment, and economic precarity.
- To examine the role of gendered networks and community support systems in ensuring the safety and resilience of women street vendors.
- To analyze how public policies and urban governance impact the effectiveness of informal support systems for women street vendors.

GENDERED CHALLENGES IN THE INFORMAL ECONOMY

The informal economy forms a substantial part of the global labor market, particularly in developing countries, providing employment to millions. However, it is marked by irregular income, a lack of social security, and minimal legal oversight. Within this informal sector, women face compounded disadvantages due to systemic gender inequalities that intersect with the precarity of informal work. In India, where street vending and other informal occupations offer essential livelihood options for women, the challenges of harassment, economic instability, and the burden of caregiving often restrict their ability to participate equally in economic activities.

One of the defining characteristics of the informal economy is its inherent economic insecurity. Women in informal jobs, including street vending, domestic work, and small-scale entrepreneurship, often earn low wages and lack access to formal financial systems. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2018), women in informal work tend to earn significantly less than men, with wage disparities rooted in gender norms that devalue women's labor. Access to formal credit remains limited, and women vendors are often forced to depend on informal lending practices with high-interest rates, leaving them trapped in cycles of debt (Chen, 2012). Additionally, they lack access to essential services like healthcare and pensions, further heightening their economic vulnerability (Kabeer, 2021).

These economic challenges are exacerbated by their dual roles as workers and primary caregivers. Women are expected to balance income-generating activities with domestic responsibilities, including childcare and household management, which restrict their ability to invest time and energy into their businesses (Chaudhari, 2014). This dual burden leads to irregular working hours, making it harder for them to secure a stable income.

In public spaces where women operate as vendors, they are often subjected to gender-based harassment from multiple sources, including customers, male vendors, and law enforcement officers. Street harassment is a recurring challenge, limiting women's freedom to operate safely in the informal economy (ILO, 2018). Studies show that sexual harassment in urban marketplaces discourages women from participating fully and

can force them to adopt coping strategies, such as working in groups or relying on male family members for protection (Mishra, 2018).

Harassment also comes from municipal authorities, who see vendors—particularly women—as encroachments on public spaces, despite the vital role they play in urban economies. Evictions, confiscation of goods, and bribes demanded by local officials disproportionately impact women, further undermining their economic stability (Chaudhari, 2014). These issues highlight the intersection of gender and informality, where women face not only occupational risks but also personal insecurity.

In the absence of institutional support from the state or formal sector, women in the informal economy rely heavily on informal social networks for security and survival. Family members, friends, fellow vendors, and community-based organizations offer emotional and financial support, but these networks are often insufficient to meet the growing demands of urban life. Unlike their male counterparts, women are expected to engage in reciprocal support systems, which can place additional burdens on their already strained resources (Choithani et. al. 2021). For example, women vendors often form self-help groups (SHGs) to pool savings and access loans, but these groups do not always offer sustainable solutions to long-term economic challenges (Kabeer, 2021). Community networks, though essential, are not a substitute for formal social protection. Women street vendors need secure workspaces, legal recognition, and access to affordable childcare to balance their economic and domestic responsibilities effectively. However, the existing policy framework remains inadequate in addressing these needs.

Another gendered challenge in the informal economy is the limited access to essential public services and infrastructure. Basic amenities like public toilets, storage facilities, and childcare centers are often unavailable or insufficient for women working in informal spaces. This lack of infrastructure disproportionately affects women, as they are more likely to require safe spaces for children and sanitary facilities, especially during menstruation or pregnancy (Mishra, 2018). In many urban areas, male vendors dominate prime vending locations, forcing women to operate from less visible, more insecure areas. As a result, they are more vulnerable to harassment and theft, further exacerbating their economic and social precarity. Urban planning and governance practices rarely take these gendered dimensions into account, contributing to the systemic exclusion of women from safer and more profitable vending opportunities (ILO, 2018).

While the Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014 offers some legal protections, it fails to address the specific needs of women vendors. Although the Act mandates the inclusion of women in Town Vending Committees (TVCs), implementation is inconsistent, and many women remain unaware of their legal rights (Chaudhari, 2014). Furthermore, the Act does not explicitly address gender-based harassment or provide guidelines for creating safe working environments for women in informal spaces. The lack of a gender-sensitive policy framework leaves women dependent on informal coping mechanisms, which are not always sustainable. Municipal regulations often conflict with the realities of informal work, leading to frequent crackdowns on vending activities. These crackdowns disproportionately affect women vendors, who are less likely to have the resources or networks needed to contest fines and evictions (Suhartini& Jones, 2019).

To address the gendered challenges in the informal economy, there is a need for comprehensive policy interventions that recognize the unique vulnerabilities of women workers. Urban planning must integrate gender-sensitive approaches, including the provision of safe vending spaces, access to public amenities, and protection from harassment. Legal frameworks must also ensure the active participation of women in decision-making processes related to urban governance (Chen, 2012). Furthermore, financial inclusion programs targeted at women in the informal economy can help alleviate economic precarity. Providing access to formal credit, insurance, and savings mechanisms would empower women vendors to invest in their businesses and reduce their dependence on informal lending systems. The role of community-based organizations and self-help groups should be strengthened through capacity-building initiatives that equip women with the skills needed to manage their enterprises effectively. However, these efforts must be accompanied by institutional reforms to ensure that informal networks are complemented by formal social protection mechanisms.

NETWORKS OF SOLIDARITY

Solidarity networks are informal, community-based systems through which individuals and groups provide mutual support, particularly in contexts of social, economic, or political exclusion. In the informal economy, such networks are critical, especially for marginalized groups like women street vendors, who often lack access to institutional support. These networks play a crucial role in mitigating risks, fostering resilience, and offering emotional, financial, and logistical assistance (Díaz, 2017; Debnath, n.d.).

Solidarity networks among informal workers, especially women, are characterized by mutual cooperation and trust, which serve as alternative safety nets in precarious environments (Suhartini & Jones, 2019). These networks can take various forms, such as kinship-based support, peer associations, savings groups, and informal cooperatives. In many cases, they emerge organically in response to the absence of formal social protection mechanisms (Chen, 2012). For women street vendors, these networks provide crucial resources such as access to credit, childcare, and emotional support, enabling them to navigate challenges in their work and personal lives.

In urban spaces, solidarity networks help vendors secure better working conditions and collective bargaining power. Peer support plays a role not only in safeguarding physical safety but also in sharing information about market opportunities, policies, and strategies to avoid harassment from authorities (Bonner & Spooner, 2013). These networks also function as channels through which women can voice their concerns, organize protests, and lobby for rights, as seen in movements led by organizations like the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in India (Lahiri-Dutt, 2019).

Solidarity among women vendors is often shaped by gender norms, which both enable and constrain their participation in these networks. On the one hand, shared experiences of gendered oppression foster mutual empathy and collective action, leading to stronger solidarity (Kabeer, 2021). On the other hand, gendered expectations regarding caregiving and household responsibilities limit the extent to which women can engage actively in these networks (Mitra, 2020). For example, while male vendors may focus solely on economic activities, women must often juggle work with domestic duties, which can restrict their time and energy for collective initiatives. Moreover, solidarity networks can perpetuate existing power imbalances. Some studies suggest that male-dominated informal associations may marginalize women's voices, limiting their access to resources and leadership roles within these networks (Meagher, 2018). This dynamic highlights the importance of fostering gender-sensitive solidarity mechanisms that address the unique needs and challenges faced by women in the informal economy.

In contexts where institutional support is weak, collective action becomes essential for securing basic rights and protections. Women street vendors often organize themselves into cooperatives, unions, or associations to gain collective bargaining power and negotiate with municipal authorities (Bonner & Spooner, 2013). These groups enable vendors to pool resources, resist evictions, and demand better access to vending spaces, sanitation facilities, and security.

The role of SEWA in India exemplifies how solidarity networks can drive social change through advocacy and policy interventions. Founded in 1972, SEWA has successfully mobilized women workers from the informal sector to demand legal recognition, better working conditions, and access to credit (Lahiri-Dutt, 2019). SEWA's approach combines advocacy with service delivery, offering its members access to healthcare, insurance, and financial services. This dual strategy strengthens women's capacity to sustain their livelihoods while challenging structural inequalities within urban governance frameworks.

However, collective action is not always straightforward. Urban governance structures and policies can sometimes obstruct the efforts of informal workers to organize. For example, municipal authorities may criminalize street vending or refuse to recognize informal associations, thereby undermining the effectiveness of solidarity networks (Choithani et al. 2021). In such cases, women's networks must adopt innovative strategies, such as forming alliances with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or leveraging digital platforms to amplify their voices.

Beyond economic and political advocacy, solidarity networks offer emotional and social support, which is critical for sustaining the well-being of women in precarious occupations. Informal work, especially in public spaces, exposes women to various stressors, including harassment, fatigue, and social stigma. The

support provided by peer networks helps women cope with these challenges by fostering a sense of belonging and shared identity (Debnath, n.d.).

Kinship-based networks play a significant role in this context, as family members often step in to assist with childcare and other domestic responsibilities, allowing women more time to focus on their economic activities. However, reliance on family support can also reinforce traditional gender roles, limiting women's autonomy and decision-making power (Meagher, 2018). Social support from other vendors is equally important, as it creates informal safety mechanisms in public spaces. Women vendors often look out for one another, warn each other about potential dangers, and offer assistance during times of crisis. These acts of solidarity contribute to building trust and resilience, enabling women to continue working despite the risks associated with informal labor (Díaz, 2017).

URBAN GOVERNANCE AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Urban governance plays a decisive role in shaping the experiences of women street vendors in India, determining not only their access to public spaces but also their safety, livelihoods, and well-being. As informal workers operating outside formal regulatory frameworks, women street vendors navigate a complex landscape of municipal policies, law enforcement, and social norms that often marginalize their contributions to the urban economy.

Indian cities generally treat street vending as a nuisance rather than an integral part of the economy, leading to frequent evictions, fines, and harassment from municipal authorities and law enforcement (Bhowmik, 2012). Women street vendors experience these challenges acutely due to their gender, as they face both economic marginalization and gender-based violence, including harassment by officials and customers (Roever & Skinner, 2016). Additionally, women's limited mobility due to safety concerns restricts their access to lucrative vending locations, further marginalizing them economically.

The 2014 Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act aimed to improve the situation by providing a legal framework for the protection of street vendors. The Act mandates the creation of Town Vending Committees (TVCs), which are meant to include vendors' representatives and local stakeholders to ensure fair allocation of vending zones (Saha, 2016). However, the implementation of the Act remains inconsistent across cities, with some municipalities ignoring TVCs or evicting vendors despite legal protections (Chen, 2023). Moreover, women vendors are underrepresented in these committees, limiting their influence in decision-making processes.

Women street vendors encounter specific governance challenges because of gendered norms governing access to public spaces. Safety concerns often restrict their operational hours, confining them to areas considered socially acceptable for women. Municipal policies often reinforce these gendered limitations by designating vending zones in ways that do not account for women's safety, such as poorly lit areas or zones far from their homes (Anjaria, 2016). These structural constraints not only increase women's vulnerability but also restrict their ability to compete effectively in the informal economy. Urban policies tend to focus more on beautification and order rather than inclusivity, leading to practices that criminalize street vending under the guise of maintaining public order. Women vendors often lose out during city beautification drives, as their stalls are targeted for removal to create sanitized urban spaces (Lahiri-Dutt, 2019). This exclusionary approach exacerbates gender inequalities by depriving women of essential livelihoods without offering viable alternatives.

SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

To improve the situation of women street vendors, urban policies must adopt a gender-sensitive lens that acknowledges their unique vulnerabilities and contributions. One key step is ensuring their participation in TVCs and other governance mechanisms, giving them a platform to voice their concerns and influence urban planning (Bharadwaj & Karan, 2020). Municipal authorities should collaborate with vendors' associations and women's advocacy groups to design vending zones that are accessible, safe, and economically viable for women. Additionally, public policies must integrate safety measures, such as improved street lighting and surveillance, to address the specific risks women face in public spaces (Roever & Skinner, 2016). Urban planning should also consider access to sanitation and childcare facilities, which are crucial for women vendors balancing work with domestic responsibilities.

Recognizing the contributions of informal workers, especially women, is essential for building inclusive urban economies. Policies that support women's access to formal banking services, microcredit, and cooperative models can further empower them economically. Collaborative governance frameworks that involve vendors, civil society organizations, and municipal authorities can foster trust, reduce conflict, and create a more enabling environment for women vendors to thrive.

CONCLUSION

Operating in the informal economy, these vendors confront multiple challenges, including economic insecurity, harassment, and exclusion from urban spaces. The study emphasizes how women leverage networks of solidarity—comprising family members, peers, and community actors—as essential mechanisms to mitigate risks and cope with vulnerabilities associated with their gender and occupational status. However, these networks alone are insufficient in the absence of effective public policies and governance frameworks. Despite the 2014 Street Vendors Act, inconsistent implementation across cities leaves women vendors vulnerable to eviction, exploitation, and exclusion. This study calls for a gender-sensitive approach to urban policy that ensures women's participation in governance processes, promotes safety in public spaces, and integrates support services such as childcare and financial inclusion. Addressing these concerns is essential not only for safeguarding livelihoods but also for building inclusive urban economies that recognize and value the contributions of women in the informal sector. Collaborative governance, involving all stakeholders, remains crucial in transforming these urban spaces into equitable environments.

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