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## Women as street food vendors in India: An uncertain workspace

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### Abstract

Part of the informal sector, street vending is a common method of sale and purchase of goods and services in India, of which food vending forms a significant portion owing to its daily requirement. Women in this occupational domain often run food vending stalls with their male kin such as husbands, fathers, or in-laws, and rely on their male counterparts for handling financial aspects and legal matters. The role of cooking is taken up by women, which can be seen as an extension of their role in the domestic space and illustrative of a gendered division of labor. To outline the challenges that women face as street vendors in India as embedded in a patriarchal social matrix and the multifarious factors that contribute to these challenges forms the core aim of this study. Adopting an exploratory approach, this paper would draw from secondary sources focusing on the conditions of women street vendors in India while also encompassing a few observations made during the ongoing fieldwork for my doctoral work based on the entrepreneurial aspect of street food vendors in Kolkata. Food vending businesses often hire individuals as apprentices, the latter often being women. They are assigned tasks such as preparing the food, washing utensils, and cleaning up. This group is more prone to exploitation of labor along with ill-treatment and harassment by employers and other vendors. Street vending as a part of urban society is considered a barrier for smooth traffic and pedestrian movement which makes street vendors vulnerable to legal action, to deal with which negotiations may be made with local authority structures. Women from lower socio-economic backgrounds have lesser access to education than men from the same background, which leads to a lack of awareness regarding vending rights and other resource avenues. Street vendors are often migrants who come to urban centres in search of better employment opportunities. It is difficult, however, for most women to migrate due to caretaking responsibilities that they have to perform for their offspring and in-laws. The few women who independently start vending businesses are faced with the struggle of building social networks due to gender biases and hesitation around interactions with the opposite sex.

**Keywords:** Street food vending, informal sector, gendered division of labor, gender relations, Kolkata

### Introduction

Street vendors are individuals who undertake business activities in goods and services from a temporary setup. (NPUSV, 2006 as cited in Bhowmik & Saha, 2011) <sup>[3]</sup> The scale of business is often small and they can be categorized under the self-employed section of the informal sector, which includes both self-generated employment and wage labor. (Kalpagam, 1987) <sup>[12]</sup> As compared to other developing countries, India has an exceptionally large informal sector with the formal sector constituting a rather nominal part. (Desai, 2013) <sup>[5]</sup> Street vending, like most informal sector professions, does not require specific educational qualifications and training prerequisites, which explains why many from rural areas and relatively lower economic capital take to street vending. (Bhowmik, 2003) <sup>[2]</sup> The informal sector is, however, characterized by a lack of security and protective measures that are available to formal sector employees and workers. This position of disadvantage increases manifold in the case of women working in the informal sector due to their vulnerability in a patriarchal society.

The economic role of women in rural society can be traced back to their predominant role in crop harvesting and agricultural food production. This sphere then also witnessed the introduction of women in rural areas making and selling items such as *papad* which has now transcended into the urban sphere as street food vending, the latter marked by the expansive street food trade in urban cities and towns.

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(Cohen) Women street vendors often engage in selling fruits and vegetables (Kambara & R, 2018) <sup>[11]</sup>, that is, unprocessed food. Street food is a significant part of the food culture of India with urban centres having a high number of vendors selling both processed and unprocessed street food. Women are more readily drawn to street food vending businesses since most have been taught how to cook from a very young age. The experiences of women street food vendors are also shaped by existing socio-cultural perceptions around gender. The idea of the kitchen as the domain of women is still prevalent in modern society and are thus, assigned the task of cooking in vending setups which are family businesses. In most socio-cultural settings in India, women are taught how to cook. Thus, their key role in the household can be seamlessly incorporated into the division of labor in the street vending setup.

Street vending hubs form in locations where there is a strong consumer base, which may be around educational institutions, commercial hubs, and other public areas in cities and towns. A street vending hub is a large marketplace in urban centres. These marketplaces are usually male-dominated, with men exercising an unspoken control over the space and also within relationships and links that constitute the market. (Neti, Guha & Lobo, 2021) <sup>[10]</sup> Women street vendors thus, face challenges in the occupational domain such as harassment, limited resources and facilities, lack of agency, and associated problems emerging from a patriarchal social matrix. Despite these challenges, street vending as an occupation allows women to use their cooking skills in the sphere of work and employment while also managing their domestic and familial sphere. The resulting setting then depicts a blurring of the private and public spheres. (Neti, Guha and Lobo, 2021) <sup>[10]</sup>.

### Objectives

1. The core objective of this research is to outline the challenges that women face as street food vendors in the Indian context.
2. The factors causing these challenges and their impact on the everyday life of women street food vendors.
3. To highlight the role of gender in the occupational domain of street food vending in India through narratives and observations emerging from my ongoing doctoral fieldwork in a few areas of Kolkata among street food vendors.

### Methodology

The methodology of this research study is exploratory and qualitative in nature. It encompasses insights from my ongoing doctoral research on street food vendors as micro-entrepreneurs based in Kolkata along with secondary sources through books, academic articles, and research papers on women as street vendors and the informal sector. The research method used in my field study is that of semi-structured interviews. Since the field-based narratives I have presented are based in Kolkata, I have substantiated the study with other secondary sources on the concerned subject such as a study on the female street vendors of Bangalore by Kambara and Mutharayappa R (2018) <sup>[11]</sup>. The paper consists of a few narratives that I have observed and come across in the field that is Kolkata. Since my field-based

experiences are limited to the city of Kolkata, I have also drawn insights from other research articles and readings on street vendors in India to evaluate the conditions of women as street food vendors. This study thus, refrains from making generalizations on the basis since the fieldwork is limited to only selective areas of Kolkata and focuses on street food vendors engaging in the sale of processed food.

### Analysis

Working women in most socio-cultural settings experience the dual responsibility of both household chores and work-related tasks and duties. Women as street food vendors are not an exception to the aforementioned trend. They are assigned the task of cooking and cleaning both in the sphere of the home and the vending setup. A number of street vendors are migrants who either travel daily to urban centres or reside in the city itself while only paying occasional visits to their hometowns. However, it is difficult for women to do so because their mobility is restricted. (Kalpagam, 1987) <sup>[12]</sup> They are expected to perform care-giving duties for their spouse, children, in-laws and other kin. It is also difficult for women to travel on a daily basis or to undertake street vending away from their home in the absence of sanitation facilities. (Doda, 2022) <sup>[6]</sup> and washrooms may be at a significant distance from their stalls. Women also undergo biological processes such as menstruation, pregnancy, and childbirth which increases the necessity for easy access to health and sanitation provisions outside the home. Furthermore, street food vending involves conducting business on busy roads and harsh environmental conditions, leaving both male and female street vendors with higher health risks. (Kambara & R, 2018) <sup>[11]</sup>.

In a study conducted among female street vendors in Bangalore, over ninety-eight percent of respondents belonged to scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, other backward classes, and minority religious communities. (Kambara, R, 2018) <sup>[11]</sup> This is illustrative of how women street vendors are often from socially and economically vulnerable sections of society. During my field study in Kolkata, some women running the stall with their spouses were hesitant to talk about their businesses and socio-economic conditions in the absence of their husbands. This is illustrative of their limited control and lack of ownership over the business enterprise. A few street vendors have been able to expand their scale of business and often hire apprentices to help out in the shop, most of whom are women. Women as employees of vending setups are prone to ill-treatment by both the employer or owner of the vending stall along with other vendors. In an interview with one such hired female worker, she revealed that the street food vendor owned two other shops in the same area. In this particular stall, he has employed three women to do the cooking, cleaning, and serving while he occasionally visits the stall. During the interview, one of the women employees was subjected to verbal abuse by fellow vendors. Similarly, in Bangalore, street vendors including women face threats of eviction from civic bodies such as the Bangalore Bruhat Mahanagara Palike and police officials. (Kambara, R, 2018) <sup>[11]</sup> In an interview conducted by IndiaSpend, a widowed female street vendor in Nagaland said that her goods are stolen and times and she operates under the threat of eviction. (Bharadwaj, 2022) <sup>[1]</sup>.

Women may also be rendered invisible in the vending setup. A male *phuchka*<sup>1</sup> vendor from North 24 Parganas district of West Bengal revealed that he purchases the raw materials required and gives them to his wife, who then makes the dough, rolls it out and fries the *phuchkas* every day. The vendor only travels with them to the vending location to sell them. Even though the woman performs the major task of making and frying the *phuchkas*, the ownership of the vending setup continues to lie with the husband. It can be observed that most street food stalls have women from the family performing the act of cooking. This corroborates the misconception that the involvement of women in work is said to be decreasing, the reason for which is the non-recognition of household work. (Neti, Guha & Lobo, 2021)<sup>[10]</sup> Women are dependent on their male counterparts for the management of the financial dimensions of street food vending. Men can be seen either undertaking transactions, managing accounts, or engaging in only subsidiary tasks of food preparation. The main cooking and cleaning task is done by the women. This occurrence can also be associated with the difficulties women face with obtaining loans and other credit facilities. They may not be aware of them or may face discriminatory behavior while trying to access them, both reasons related to the lack of social networks in a male-dominated market space. They may thus, be more prone to falling prey to moneylenders. They prefer to borrow from family members and other unreliable and informal sources of credit. (Doda, 2022)<sup>[6]</sup>.

The domain of street vending as a part of the informal sector is often under the scrutiny of both the public eye and local authorities. Street vending is often considered responsible for urban problems such as traffic jams and road blockages. (Sarkar, 2016)<sup>[14]</sup> This has also led to occasional evictions of street vendors and confiscation of their goods in a few instances. Street vendors thus, enter into negotiations and mediations with local authorities such as traffic police, police officials, councillors, and other political actors. It may be understood as an empirical illustration of tactics (De Certeau, 1980)<sup>[7]</sup> wherein social actors who do not have significant power negotiate with social institutions and related power structures. Legislations around street vending are taking place along with changing rules and regulations. Town vending committees are necessitated by the Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending Act) of 2014, wherein forty percent of the total strength is reserved for street vendors. Among this section, one-third are to be women street vendors (GOI, 2014)<sup>[9]</sup>. However, the implementation of the legislation has no scope to ensure the active participation and involvement of women. In addition, women street vendors may not be aware of new regulations due to their non-inclusion into vendor unions, leaving them with lesser scope for legal recognition. (Kumar, 2023)<sup>[13]</sup>.

A number of women are only temporarily engaged in food vending, often taking care of the business on behalf of their paternal family or in-laws. In the Sector 5 area of Salt Lake in Kolkata, a female respondent in her mid-twenties looks

after a tea and coffee stall owned by her husband and in-laws. She said that once her infant daughter starts going to school, she will not be able to come to the stall in which case her husband and father-in-law would look after the business daily. In some cases, however, women take to street food vending to enable a dual income for the family. A female street food vendor in Salt Lake mentioned that her husband works as a driver while she sells tea, coffee, and biscuits to sustain their family and send their two children to secondary school. A number of male respondents revealed that the stall earlier belonged to their father after which they inherited the same. It would be much easier for such individuals to undertake business because of their familiarity with the vending area and ways. This illustrates how inheritance plays a role in the domain of street food vending. It would be a rare situation where the daughter has inherited the stall from her father and is now running it autonomously. In a few cases, women have taken to street vending after separation from the husband or demise of their father or husband, in which case they are responsible for earning a livelihood. A female street vendor from Nagaland admitted that she resorted to vending after her husband's death to sustain herself and her three children since she lacked the educational qualifications required for other jobs. (Bharadwaj, 2022)<sup>[1]</sup>.

## Conclusion

Some of the challenges faced by street vendors are common for most occupations in the informal sector. Women constitute a vulnerable section of society and work in the volatile informal sector only doubles their everyday struggles, which have been amplified by the recent COVID-19 pandemic with street vendors experiencing a serious lack of consumers even in the current period. The lived experiences of women as street food vendors are significantly distinct and challenging from their male counterparts due to their subordinate position in family and society, both of which arise from patriarchy. Both spheres are marked by instances of male domination which leaves women with limited mobility, resources, and opportunities. Active discrimination against women vendors and the creation of an unfavorable environment for their inclusion and participation in vending areas and hawker unions also take place. The autonomy and decision-making capacities of women as daughters, wives, and mothers take a backseat in the familial sphere, a phenomenon more emphasized in the lower-income sections of society. This status is extended to the domain of work as well. Women may also have no control over the money that they are earning through street food vending. The money may be utilized for needs and purposes that the family deems important and for the general sustenance of the family. The vending set up may be owned by the natal or affinal male family members with women members preparing the food as an unpaid employee without a wage. She may be rendered further invisible in the business when she performs the food preparation tasks at home instead of at the vending location. Street vending is a feasible occupation for a large section of women which not only enables them to harness their cooking skills to earn an income but is also compatible with their familial responsibilities. However, women street vendors face discrimination from multiple sources and in multiple social settings. They are prone to exploitation and harassment by family members, fellow vendors, customers, and local

<sup>1</sup>*Phuchkas* are a popular flour-based snack in West Bengal with a filling of potatoes and tamarind water. A number of local and migrant individuals engage in the vending of *this processed food item*. *Phuchkasellers* may be both stationary and mobile since their vending set up consists of only a small stool, a basket and a few containers

authorities in the contextual backdrop of both the family and the workspace. Lawmaking at the national and state level along with vending rules and guidelines at the grassroots level does not have separate provisions for women vendors. Implementation of these policies should aim to create a niche for women street food vendors to focus on their needs and rights as both women and street vendors.

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