

Marginal Livelihoods and Gendered Realities: A Study of Women Street Vendors in Delhi

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Abstract

Street selling is one of the oldest and most visible types of informal economic activity in Indian cities, however the women who make up a large part of this workforce are still on the outside of both the economy and the policy conversation. This article analyzes the socio-economic situations, working environment, health challenges, and empowerment status of women street vendors in Delhi, India's National Capital Territory. The paper utilizes primary data gathered from 195 women street vendors across six zones of Delhi through structured interviews, comprehensive discussions, and field observations conducted between January and June 2023. It contextualizes its findings within the extensive geographical literature concerning urban informality, gendered livelihoods, and the right to the city. The results show that women street sellers face a lot of structural problems, such as low salaries, bad housing and sanitation, a lot of harassment from institutions, a lack of knowledge about their legal rights, and being shut out of official credit markets. The survey also shows important aspects of agency and empowerment, such as making more financial decisions, feeling more confident, and wanting to build their enterprises. The study contends that street vending areas are not solely economic zones but gendered spatial locations where women simultaneously endure exploitation and assert agency. It ends with suggestions based on evidence for city planners, lawmakers, and groups in civil society.

Keywords: Women street vendors, Delhi, urban informality, gendered livelihoods, urban geography, empowerment, Street Vendors Act 2014, informal economy.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the Global South, informal economies are just as important to cities as formal ones. According to the ILO (2019), between 10 and 12 million people in India make a living as street vendors. They sell clothes, flowers, vegetables, fruits, prepared food, and home products on the sidewalks and footpaths of cities. The National Association of Street sellers of India (NASVI, 2018) says that there are between 3 and 4 lakh active street sellers in Delhi alone. About 30 to 35 percent of these vendors are women. Street vending is more than just an economic activity; it's also a spatial practice. Every day, vendors take over, negotiate, and fight for space in cities. They make a living in the spaces between the official city, like on the sides of roads, under flyovers, near metro station exits, and in market lanes. Bhowmik (2012) labels these "micro-geographies of survival." This job is even more complicated for women. They labor in public places that aren't meant for them, in a social setting that often questions why they're there, and under institutional rules that don't give them the legal protections they deserve.

Delhi is a really interesting place to study for a number of reasons. As India's capital city, it has the most political authority and the most extreme urban poverty and inequality. The city's street markets, including the vegetable booths in Azadpur and the flower merchants in Sarojini Nagar, are very important to its food system and everyday economy. But the women who run these stalls are still not counted in official records, are not protected by social programs, and are at risk of being evicted every day, which is against the law. This study examines the subsequent research inquiries: What are the socio-economic traits of female street vendors in Delhi? What kinds of problems do they have with space and institutions in their regular work? What is their level of legal knowledge and access to government assistance services? What does the geographical study of their circumstances reveal about the interplay between gender, informality, and urban space in Indian cities?

The paper is organized like this: Section 2 goes over the important literature. Section 3 talks

about the area of study and the methods used. Section 4 shows the most important results. Part 5 is about geography and how to understand it. Section 6 ends with suggestions for policies.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Urban Informality and the Geography of Survival

Keith Hart first talked about the informal economy in his 1973 study of urban Ghana. Later, the International Labour Organization made it official. In India, the informal sector constitutes over 90 percent of employment and considerably contributes to urban GDP; nonetheless, it receives just a small portion of the policy focus allocated to the official sector (NSSO, 2011-12). Geographers have advanced this area by investigating how informality constitutes not only an economic phenomenon but also a spatial one, influenced by the configuration of urban land, infrastructure, and governance (Roy, 2005; Simone, 2010).

Sassen (1994) contended that in global cities, the expansion of a high-income service sector concurrently creates a demand for low-wage informal service workers. Delhi is a good example of this approach. As its formal economy and middle-class consumer culture have grown, so has the need for cheap fresh food, street food, and other commodities. Almost all of this need is met by informal sellers. Women vendors are mostly at the bottom of this supply chain, where they sell the cheapest goods that go bad the fastest and make the least money.

Gender and Informal Work

Feminist geographers have long contended that urban geography is gendered, asserting that women and men navigate the city distinctively according to their roles, mobility, and social position (McDowell, 1993; Massey, 1994). The gendering of space is most evident in the informal sector. Women informal workers endure a 'triple burden': the obligations of paid employment, unpaid domestic responsibilities, and societal constraints that restrict their mobility, decision-making authority, and resource accessibility (Chen, 2001).

Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) has done a lot of research on how women in the informal sector earn less than males doing the same labor, have less assets, less access to credit, and are more likely to be evicted or harassed (WIEGO, 2020). In India, Nair (2013) found that women street vendors in Delhi face even more problems than other informal vendors. For example, they are more likely to be sexually harassed, not be able to work at night, and have a lower social status, which makes it harder for them to negotiate with authorities.

The Right to the City

Lefebvre's (1968) idea of "the right to the city"—the right of all city dwellers to actively participate in city life and change the areas they live in—gives this study a strong moral basis. Women street vendors have the same right to Delhi's public areas and the jobs that such venues offer. The Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014 might be seen as an effort by the Indian government to put this right into action. The results of this study will demonstrate that the disparity between the articulated right and the experienced right is substantial.

3. STUDY AREA AND METHODOLOGY

Delhi as Study Area

According to the 2011 Census, Delhi, India's National Capital Territory (NCT), is 1,484 square kilometres big and has a population of about 1.68 crore (16.8 million). Delhi is one of the most densely inhabited cities in the world, with a population density of 11,297 people per square kilometre and an urbanisation rate of 97.5 percent. There are also big differences in the city: world-class infrastructure next to enormous jhuggi communities, and the formal sector next to one of India's largest groups of informal workers.

This study gathered data from six geographical zones in Delhi: South Delhi (Sarojini Nagar, Lajpat Nagar, Okhla), Central Delhi (Chandni Chowk, Sadar Bazaar, Paharganj), East Delhi (Shahdara, Laxmi Nagar, Trilokpuri), North Delhi (Azadpur, Model Town, Rohini), West Delhi

(Janakpuri, Uttam Nagar, Vikaspuri), and the Trans-Yamuna area (Seemapuri, Kondli, Mandawali). This multi-zone strategy makes sure that the sample includes a wide range of vending situations throughout the city, from busy center markets to quieter suburban places.

Table 1: Study Zones, Key Markets, and Sample Distribution

Zone	Key Markets / Areas	Type of Goods Sold	Respondents	%
South Delhi	Sarojini Nagar, Lajpat Nagar, Okhla	Vegetables, clothes, flowers	40	20.5%
Central Delhi	Chandni Chowk, Sadar Bazaar	Food, bangles, household goods	38	19.5%
East Delhi	Shahdara, Laxmi Nagar, Trilokpuri	Vegetables, daily items	35	17.9%
North Delhi	Azadpur, Model Town, Rohini	Vegetables, fruits, flowers	30	15.4%
West Delhi	Janakpuri, Uttam Nagar	Vegetables, street food	28	14.4%
Trans-Yamuna	Seemapuri, Kondli, Mandawali	Vegetables, plastic goods	24	12.3%
Total	Six zones, Delhi NCT	All types	195	100%

Source: Researcher's primary fieldwork, January–June 2023

Methodology

The research utilized a mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative survey data with qualitative insights derived from comprehensive interviews and field observations. Primary data was obtained from 195 female street vendors chosen using purposive sampling, based on the criteria that participants must be women currently employed as street vendors in Delhi for a minimum of six months and willing to engage willingly. The organized interview schedule was given in Hindi and Bhojpuri, which are the languages that majority of the people who answered spoke. The interviews took about 60 to 90 minutes each. In addition to the poll, the researcher spent significant periods of time watching what happened in all six zones, looking at how vendors and authorities interacted, how they worked, and what they did every day. Fifteen in-depth case studies were gathered from individual suppliers to elucidate the human aspects underlying the aggregate statistics. Secondary data was sourced from the Census of India 2011, NSSO employment surveys, NASVI reports, ILO publications, and policy papers such as the Street Vendors Act 2014 and PM SVANidhi plan guidelines.

4. KEY FINDINGS

4.1 Socio-Economic Profile

34.4% of the people who answered are between the ages of 30 and 39, and 26.2% are between the ages of 40 and 49. These are women in their peak working years who have to balance career and family responsibilities. The educational profile is very bad: 31.3% are fully illiterate, and 11.3% have never been to school. More than 42% of the people who answered had not had any formal schooling. Just 1% are grads. This serious lack of education makes it hard for them to get formal jobs, deal with government procedures, or interpret legal papers. According to marital status data, 60.5 percent of women street vendors are currently married, while 36.4 percent are widowed, separated, deserted, or divorced. This means that more than one in three women street vendors is the only breadwinner in her household, with no male income assistance. Most of these women had to sell things on the street because of a family issue, not because they wanted to.

Table 2: Socio-Economic Profile of Women Street Vendors in Delhi (N=195)

Indicator	Category	No. of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Age Group	30–39 years (largest group)	67	34.4%
Education	Illiterate (no reading/writing)	61	31.3%
Education	No formal schooling	22	11.3%
Marital Status	Married	118	60.5%
Marital Status	Widowed / Separated / Deserted / Divorced	71	36.4%
Family Size	5–6 members	79	40.5%
Monthly HH Income	Below Rs. 8,000	110	56.4%
Daily Income (Vending)	Rs. 200 or less per day	80	41.0%

Source: Researcher's primary fieldwork, January–June 2023

The data about income is quite sad. More than 56% of the people who answered live in homes where the total monthly income is less than Rs. 8,000. For 41% of women, vending only brings in Rs. 200 or less per day, which is about Rs. 5,000 to Rs. 6,000 per month at most. Most families have five or more individuals, therefore the daily income per person is generally less than Rs. 40, which is only a little above the basic minimum needed to survive. Most of the people who answered said that these income levels put their family in a state of chronic urban poverty.

4.2 Working Conditions and Spatial Challenges

Street vending in Delhi is dangerous because of where it happens. Women set up shop in places like footpaths, median strips, and market alleys that aren't official vending areas. This unstable living situation puts them in danger of being evicted at any time. Respondents described the most common problems at work in Table 3 and Figure 1 below.

Table 3: Major Challenges Faced by Women Street Vendors at Work (N=195, Multiple Responses)

Challenge	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Eviction / demolition of vending spot by police or MCD	148	75.9%
No toilet or clean water near vending spot	139	71.3%
No shelter from sun, rain, or cold	127	65.1%
Harassment by police (verbal / physical)	121	62.1%
Difficulty getting loans or credit	112	57.4%
Not allowed to park cart / goods on road	98	50.3%
No proper storage for perishable goods	88	45.1%
Sexual harassment / eve-teasing	64	32.8%

Source: Researcher's primary fieldwork, January–June 2023







Eviction by Police / MCD		75.9%
No Toilet / Water at Site		71.3%
No Shelter from Weather		65.1%
Police Harassment		62.1%
Difficulty Getting Loans		57.4%
Sexual Harassment		32.8%

Figure 1: Key Workplace Challenges (% of Respondents Reporting)

The most common difficulty is eviction, which affects 75.9% of those who answered. The frequency of eviction is seen in Table 4. Only 14.9% of people had never been evicted in the last year; 55.4% had been evicted three times or more in the same year.

Table 4: Eviction Frequency in the Last 12 Months

Times Evicted	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Never	29	14.9%
1–2 times	58	29.7%
3–5 times	71	36.4%
6–10 times	28	14.4%
More than 10 times	9	4.6%
Total	195	100%

Source: Researcher's primary fieldwork, January–June 2023

Each eviction means not only losing a day's labor but also losing the day's stock, which might be anywhere from Rs. 1,000 to Rs. 5,000 for a vendor who makes Rs. 300 a day. Several merchants told stories about times when their carts were taken and they had to pay unofficial fees to get them back. The Street Vendors Act 2014 says that these evictions are against the law because they don't follow the right steps and give notice. But they keep doing it without fear of punishment since merchants don't know the law is there.

4.3 Health and Living Conditions

The spatial characteristics of women's workplaces and residences directly influence their health results. 34.4% of them live in rented kachcha (semi-permanent) homes, while 26.7% live in jhuggi slum settlements. Only 9.2 percent have a permanent pucca home. Only 21.5% of people have running water in their homes. A terrible 59.5 percent don't have access to any toilets near their vending location, which means they have to go to the bathroom in fields, on train tracks, and in drains. The health effects are bad and can be measured.

Table 5: Health Problems Reported by Respondents (Multiple Responses, N=195)

Health Problem	% Affected	Geographical / Environmental Cause
Back pain and joint pain	65.6%	Sitting on ground, heavy loads, no ergonomic support
Anaemia / fatigue	50.3%	Poor nutrition, overwork, skipping meals

Health Problem	% Affected	Geographical / Environmental Cause
Skin infections / rashes	45.6%	No clean water, heat, rain, open exposure
Respiratory illness	39.0%	Roadside air pollution, vehicle exhaust, dust
Urinary tract infections	37.4%	No toilet facilities at vending site
Reproductive health problems	31.3%	Poor sanitation, no rest, physical overwork

Source: Researcher's primary fieldwork, January–June 2023

The data indicates that the health challenges faced by female street vendors are not due to personal lifestyle decisions but rather their geographical work location. Not having essential office infrastructure like proper seating, enough food, and clean bathrooms can directly lead to back discomfort (65.6%), anemia (50.3%), and urinary tract infections (37.4%). These are conditions that can be avoided. The fact that they are so common among women vendors shows that the government is not doing its job.

4.4 Credit Access and Financial Situation

A vendor's capacity to invest in stock, get through a bad day, and slowly build her firm depends a lot on how easy it is for her to get credit. The research shows that relying on the informal credit sector is a big problem. 36.4% of people borrow money from sahuks, or moneylenders, at interest rates between 36% and 120% each year. Only 7.2% of people have taken out a formal bank loan, and only 5.6% have used the PM SVANidhi micro-credit scheme, which was set up to help this group of people with low-interest loans. The main reason people can't get formal credit is because they need a Certificate of Vending from the Town Vending Committee (TVC) to use the PM SVANidhi scheme. But in most Delhi wards, TVCs don't work very well, and most merchants can't get the certificate. You can't use the scheme without the certificate. This is a bureaucratic catch-22 that makes the program useless. One good thing is that Self-Help Groups (SHGs) have a role: 22.6% of respondents who are SHG members are far more likely to be aware of PM SVANidhi (77.3% vs. 32.5% among non-members) and to take out a loan (22.7% vs. 1.3%). SHGs function as information networks, credit guarantors, and social support systems concurrently.

4.5 Legal Awareness and Government Schemes

PM Jan Dhan Yojana	68%
Ujjwala LPG Scheme	62%
Ayushman Bharat (Health)	44%
PM SVANidhi Loan	46%
Street Vendors Act 2014	37%
Delhi Mahila Samridhi Yojana	22%

Figure 2: Awareness of Key Government Schemes and Legal Rights (% of 195 Respondents)

Figure 2 shows how much people know about major government programs. Only 37.4% of respondents knew about the Street Vendors Act 2014, which is the main law that protects

vendors. Only 4.6% of respondents know all of the rights it gives them. 62.6% of people have never heard of this law, which was passed nine years before the data was collected. 53.8 percent of people don't aware about the PM SVANidhi plan, which started in 2020. Jan Dhan bank accounts (68.2%) and Ujjwala LPG (61.5%) are examples of schemes that have gotten more attention through media and field outreach. This shows that the information gap is not a problem with the population itself, but rather with the attempt to reach them.

4.6 Dimensions of Empowerment

The empowerment data shows that there are some major good aspects, even though there are structural problems. Fifty-five percent of those who answered said they had some say in home financial decisions, either on their own or with their husband. More than 71% indicated they felt more self-sufficient after starting vending, and 74.4% said their confidence had grown. 70.2 percent said that their family's finances had gotten better since they started vending.

But the picture of organizational empowerment is weak: 64.6% of people are not members of any group, union, or association. Only 16.4 percent are members of a vendor union who are active. This separation makes it harder for people to work together to get better pay, fight for their rights in court, and get information. Women who are part of self-help groups or unions always do better on all the measures included in this study. Sixty percent of people said they wanted to grow their firm, which shows that they really want to be entrepreneurs. These women don't want to give up; they want to grow, but they don't have the safe environment, credit, or legal protection they need to do so.

5. GEOGRAPHICAL DISCUSSION

Gendered Urban Space: Employment, Marginalization, and Defiance

The results of this study corroborate and enhance the feminist geography discourse concerning gendered urban space. Delhi's streets are not neutral; they are places where gender, class, and institutional power come together to create quite varied results for different people in the city. Women who sell things on the street take up public space in two ways: they work in public and their labor is public. They are visible and important to the city's daily life, yet the government sees them as intruders instead of contributors.

Seventy-five percent of respondents said that the systematic expulsion of vendors is not just an administrative act. It is a spatial act that says some people don't belong in some places. This statement is very classist and sexist when it comes to Delhi. Urban beautification programs, the building of flyovers, and "smart city" projects always go for the vending sites of poor men and women while leaving the spots where middle-class people buy things alone. Roy's (2005) idea of "urban informality as a mode of spatial governance" fits perfectly here: informality is not only a failure of planning; it is an intentional political choice that makes some groups vulnerable and hence easier to manage.

The Triple Burden and Time-Space Geography

Hagerstrand's time-geography paradigm delineates the spatial-temporal limitations on individual mobility and activities, elucidating the specific spatial patterns identified in this study. Women who sell things on the street tend to work close to where they live (60% work within 1 km of home). This is not a choice; it is a restriction imposed by their domestic duties. They have to be available to take care of children, cook, and manage the family, which limits how far they may travel for work. This residential proximity constraint keeps women from shopping in city centers, where there are more people, and instead keeps them in lower-income neighborhoods. Sarojini Nagar in South Delhi and Chandni Chowk in Central Delhi have more clients and better sales potential, but they are farther away, which means that many women can't get there without giving up their family responsibilities or paying for childcare they can't afford. The outcome is a geography of income disparity that is directly generated by the gendered distribution of household labor.

Informality, Legal Precarity, and the State

The fact that 62.6% of sellers had never heard of the Street sellers Act 2014 shows that it is a problem in both geography and administration. Legislation is a piece of paper that comes from the halls of power in New Delhi. It needs to go to the sidewalks of Sarojini Nagar, the vegetable carts of Seemapuri, and the flower merchants of Azadpur in order for it to have any real influence. This trip doesn't happen on its own. The State has not put enough money on deliberate outreach, such workers in the field, campaigns in marketplaces, and partnerships with SHGs and NGOs. The outcome is a legal landscape characterized by instability, where progressive national legislation exists alongside pervasive violations of the rights it aims to safeguard. This research describes the fundamental policy-geography of women street vending in Delhi as effective legislation formulated at the center, however failing to extend to the peripheries.

Agency within Constraint

Even while structural disadvantage is quite serious, the results of this study warn against only seeing women street vendors as victims. The empowerment data—most of the women feel more self-reliant, more confident, and have more control over their household finances—shows that these women are active agents who are making smart choices and getting actual benefits even when things are tough. Their entrepreneurial drive (60.5% want to grow their firm), their extensive understanding of the market, and their everyday ability to deal with eviction, debt, and illness are all forms of agency that should be recognized. A feminist geographical analysis asserts the necessity of acknowledging two concurrent truths: that these women are structurally disadvantaged by systems of gender, class, and governance; and that they are also individuals possessing knowledge, goals, and capabilities that transcend their limitations. If the policy only sees people as poor victims and not as entrepreneurs who need specific help, it won't build on their capabilities.

6. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and geographical analysis presented above, the following evidence-based recommendations are proposed:

Table 6: Evidence-Based Policy Recommendations

Priority Area	Specific Recommendation	Responsible Body
Legal Awareness	Launch street-level Street Vendors Act awareness campaigns in all major Delhi markets through ward-level outreach workers. Target: 80% awareness within 2 years.	Delhi Govt / MCD / NASVI
Vending Zones	Implement the Town Vending Committee mandate in every Delhi ward. Designate permanent, women-friendly vending zones with shade, seating, and storage.	MCD / Delhi Urban Development
Credit Access	Deploy PM SVANidhi facilitators at major markets to guide vendors through the loan application process. Issue temporary Certificates of Vending as a stopgap.	Ministry of Housing / Banks / SHGs
Sanitation	Build free, women-only, clean toilets within 100m of every major vending zone under Swachh Bharat Mission. Conduct quarterly maintenance checks.	MCD / Delhi Jal Board

Priority Area	Specific Recommendation	Responsible Body
Health Support	Run quarterly health screening camps at markets for anaemia, UTIs, and respiratory illness. Expand Mohalla Clinic coverage to vendor-dense areas.	Delhi Health Dept / NGOs
SHG Expansion	Scale up SHG formation specifically among women vendors in all six Delhi zones, with training on financial literacy, legal rights, and digital payments.	Delhi Women & Child Dept / NGOs
Digital Inclusion	Run Hindi-language UPI and smartphone training workshops at markets. Partner with telecom CSR funds to provide subsidised smartphones.	Digital India / NASSCOM / Banks
Anti-Harassment	Establish women vendor help desks at police stations near major markets. Make CCTV coverage mandatory at vending zones.	Delhi Police / MCD

Source: Researcher's recommendations based on primary data analysis, 2023

7. CONCLUSION

This study has analyzed the precarious livelihoods and gendered experiences of women street vendors in Delhi from an urban geography perspective. The results show that there is a group of people that are very important to the city's economy and society, but the organizations that control urban space completely ignore them. Women who sell things on the street don't make enough money, live in bad conditions, work without basic facilities, and are kicked out of their homes in ways that most of them have never heard of. They are also stuck in informal credit markets that charge the poorest workers a lot of money. These are not personal shortcomings; they are systemic results arising from the convergence of gender inequality, urban poverty, and governance failure.

This study has also shown that women who refuse to let their obstacles define them are strong, independent, and want to start their own businesses. They are making a living, feeding their families, gaining confidence, and in many cases, they are becoming the main financial and emotional support for their families. They deserve a city that acknowledges their contribution and invests in their right to safely, lawfully, and with dignity occupy public space. The study shows that urban space is not a neutral platform for economic activity, but a place where gender, class, and institutional power fight for control. For women sellers, the street is a workplace, a way to make money, a place to be harassed, a place to meet people, and a place to deal with the government every day. To make urban policies that are truly fair and open to everyone, you need to understand this complicated spatial reality. The main point of this study is the difference between what the law says and what women vendors really experience on the street. There is no need for additional laws to close that gap. It takes political will to put into action what is already in place, such as the Street Vendors Act, the PM SVANidhi scheme, the Swachh Bharat Mission, and the Indian welfare state's larger framework. Women who sell things on the street are ready for such help. The question is if the State is ready to give it.

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