



Mapping Social- Legal Identity and Inequality: A Sociological Exploration of the Impact of Covid-19 Pandemic on Women Street Vendors in Urban Areas

Manish K. Verma^{1*}, Riya Singh²

^{1*}Dean, Ambedkar School of Social Science & Professor, Department of Sociology,
Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar University, Lucknow, India.

²Doctoral Research Scholar, Ambedkar School of Social Science, Department of Sociology,
Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar University, Lucknow, India.

Email: ²riyasi8585d@gmail.com

Corresponding Email: ^{1*}mkvbbau@gmail.com

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Abstract: *Gendered development is a critical factor for inclusive development. The inclusion of women in central policies is indispensable for any country's development. India, with its vast economic and socio-cultural diversity, also faces socio-cultural inequality. Street vendors, who provide essential goods and services at affordable prices, are a marginalized and neglected group in our society. Despite their significant contribution, they remain impoverished and excluded from the mainstream. The COVID-19 pandemic aggravated the existing social inequalities, particularly for street vendors. Lockdowns and lack of economic opportunities led to forceful migration and economic struggles for these vendors, especially women. In this background, this study focuses on two research questions: the socio-economic and legal status of women street vendors during the pandemic and an assessment of legal enactments for their protection. The study utilizes secondary sources and follows a descriptive approach. The main argument of the paper is that addressing gendered development is crucial for the progress of India. COVID-19 Pandemic has exacerbated the challenges faced by women street vendors, emphasizing the necessity of comprehensive measures to ensure their socio economic wellbeing and legal protection. It is essential to evaluate legal frameworks in order to protect socio-legal rights.*

Keywords: *Street Vendors Migration, Social Identity, Legal Rights Social Distance, Marginalization, COVID-19 Pandemic.*



1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected different social groups in various ways, but its impact on urban women street vendors has been particularly notable. The crisis has acted as an inequality amplifier, exacerbating the structural inequalities that shape the identities of these women (Mathias et al.'s 2017). The pandemic has also affected the capacity of these women to earn a livelihood, which has affected their social identities and their relationships. They serve as a fundamental means of livelihood, particularly in densely populated countries like India, where it constitutes a significant portion of the informal economy, covering over 50 percent of the market. However, the Covid-19 pandemic has brought about a dramatic reduction in the informal sector's contribution to the country's GDP, shrinking from 52 percent to 15-20 percent (Patnaik, 2021). Various factors, including the formalization of the sector through online payment systems, have contributed to this decline. However, one of the most crucial factors has been the migration and displacement of a substantial number of informal workers during the pandemic.

The outbreak of the severe Covid-19, has led to a global crisis. The World Health Organization (WHO) declared it a pandemic on March 11, 2020, affecting more than 200 countries. India has been significantly impacted, with the number of cases rising daily and the situation rapidly deteriorating. Street vendors play a vital role in providing essential services, particularly in developing countries like India, where residents rely on them for basic necessities. Street vending serves as a viable occupation for those at the bottom rungs of the economy, offering a socially accepted means of earning a livelihood. Traditionally, individuals have migrated from rural India to urban centers in search of better opportunities. However, the pandemic has devastated the livelihoods of street vendors, disrupting their ability to work and leaving them in a struggle for survival (WIEGO). Consequently, they find themselves grappling with the quest for socio-legal recognition and support.

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted society, affecting health, the economy, and daily life. This paper explores how migrant women street vendors' identities are shaped by societal reactions. Sociologist Phil Strong highlights fear, stigma, panic, and calls to action during crises. Established norms are questioned as institutions and relationships change. Sociology helps us understand these disruptions. This research delves into the lives of women street vendors during pandemics, addressing socio-economic status, working conditions, challenges, violence, and legal remedies. It relies on secondary sources to explore this marginalized group's experiences and focuses on their challenges, social-legal identity implications, and necessary measures to address inequalities.

Theoretical Background:

There are various theories for comprehensive understanding of gendered development and street vending in India by examining the intersections of gender with other social categories such as class, caste, power and globalization. Incorporating these perspectives into the theoretical framework enriches the analysis of power dynamics, social structures, and agency within the context of female street vendors' lives and livelihood.



Street Vendors and Urban Informal Sector

The theoretical framework surrounding street vendors in the urban informal sector encompasses various perspectives. Various sociological and economic theories underpinning gendered development in the specific context of street vendors in India are;

Neoclassical economics thinkers like Gary Becker (1964) views Street vending as a response to economic opportunities and constraints, emphasizing individual entrepreneurship and choice. Urban informality theory argued by Keith Hart (1973) and Jan Breman (1996) recognizes street vending as a survival strategy for marginalized individuals, offering self-employment and income generation. Scholars like Amartya Sen (1999) and Ruth Lister (2004) also highlight in social exclusion theory the barriers faced by street vendors, such as limited access to formal employment, social protection, and essential resources. In addition to some more theories such as Social stratification theories underscore the unequal distribution of resources that lead to street vending, reinforcing social inequalities. Feminist theories shed light on gender-based inequalities experienced by female street vendors, including unequal pay, limited mobility, and sexual harassment. Structural violence theory reveals the systemic forms of violence inflicted upon street vendors through the absence of legal recognition, lack of social protection, and harassment by authorities. However the other theories like capability approach focuses on empowering street vendors to achieve their full potential by improving their capabilities and agency. These theories collectively explain the socio-economic position, challenges, and dynamics surrounding street vendors in the urban informal sector, contributing to discussions on inequality and social justice.

Legal Framework:

Legal Safeguards for Women Street Vendors in India

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the legal status of women street vendors in India has been influenced by various measures and guidelines issued by the government. While there is no specific legislation addressing the pandemic's impact on street vendors, certain measures have been taken to mitigate their challenges. These measures include:

Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014:

This Act provides legal recognition and protection to street vendors, including women, by establishing town vending committees and regulating the vending process. However, during the pandemic, the Act did not specifically address the unique challenges faced by women street vendors. (Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014)

National Urban Livelihoods Mission (NULM): A government program that provides skill development, credit access, and social security support for urban poor, including women street vendors. (NULM)

Relief Measures During Lockdown: The government announced relief measures to support vulnerable populations, including street vendors, during the pandemic-induced lockdowns. These measures included financial assistance, food distribution, and access to healthcare. However, the implementation and effectiveness of these measures varied across states.



(Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs)

COVID-19 Guidelines for Street Vendors: The government issued guidelines for street vendors to ensure adherence to COVID-19 protocols, including physical distancing, hygiene practices, and the use of personal protective equipment. These guidelines aimed to protect the health and safety of all street vendors, including women. (Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs)

Pradhan Mantri Street Vendor's Atmanirbhar Nidhi (PM Svanidhi) Scheme: Launched by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, this scheme aims to provide affordable working capital loans to street vendors, including women, who were affected by the pandemic. It facilitates access to credit and helps street vendors revive their businesses. (Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs)

Microcredit and Interest Subvention: The government provided microcredit facilities and interest subvention to street vendors, enabling them to access affordable credit for restarting their businesses during and after the pandemic. These measures aimed to alleviate financial burdens and promote self-reliance among women street vendors. (Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs)

Ease of Doing Business Reforms: The government implemented various ease of doing business reforms to simplify regulatory processes and improve the business environment for street vendors, including women. These reforms aimed to reduce bureaucratic hurdles and promote formalization of street vending activities. (Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs)

Mahila-E-Haat: It is an online platform that provides a digital marketplace for women entrepreneurs, including street vendors, to showcase and sell their products. The platform supports women street vendors in reaching a wider customer base and expanding their business opportunities. (Ministry of Women and Child Development)

These policies and initiatives have aimed to provide support, financial assistance, and avenues for economic recovery to women street vendors during the pandemic, acknowledging their unique challenges and vulnerabilities. In this shed this paper also explored various cases in order to give rooted reality.

Major Organizational Support for Women Street Vendors:

Several organizations in India have recognized the challenges faced by women street vendors and have been working to provide support, empowerment, and advocacy for their rights. Here are some major organizational initiatives:

Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA): SEWA is a trade union and women's organization that has been actively working with informal workers, including street vendors. They provide various services such as organizing vendors into cooperatives, providing access to financial services, offering skills training, advocating for policy reforms, and promoting women's empowerment in the informal economy (SEWA, n.d.).



National Association of Street Vendors of India (NASVI): NASVI is a national federation that aims to protect and promote the rights of street vendors. They work towards creating a conducive environment for street vendors through advocacy, policy interventions, capacity building, and networking. NASVI also focuses on empowering women street vendors by addressing their specific needs and challenges (NASVI, n.d.).

Centre for Civil Society (CCS): CCS is a research and advocacy organization that focuses on promoting economic freedom, individual rights, and free markets. They have undertaken initiatives to support street vendors, including advocating for the implementation of the Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, conducting research on the challenges faced by vendors, and providing policy recommendations (CCS, n.d.).

Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO): WIEGO is a global network that works towards improving the status of informal workers, including women street vendors. They conduct research, provide technical support, and advocate for policy changes to enhance the livelihoods and rights of informal workers. WIEGO also focuses on gender issues within the informal economy, highlighting the specific challenges faced by women street vendors (WIEGO, n.d.).

Society for the Promotion of Area Resource Centers (SPARC): SPARC is a non-governmental organization that works towards improving the living conditions of urban poor communities, including street vendors. They focus on issues related to housing, livelihoods, and urban development. SPARC supports the formation of cooperatives and self-help groups for street vendors, facilitates access to credit and financial services, and advocates for their rights (SPARC, n.d.).

National Urban Livelihoods Mission (NULM): NULM is a government initiative launched by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs in India. It aims to reduce poverty and vulnerability among the urban poor, including street vendors. NULM provides support for skill development, access to credit, social security schemes, and capacity building for street vendors. The mission also focuses on promoting gender equity and women's empowerment in the informal sector (NULM, n.d.).

Working People's Charter (WPC): WPC is a network of organizations and individuals working towards the rights of informal workers, including street vendors. They advocate for policy reforms, social protection, and inclusive urban planning. WPC emphasizes the rights of women street vendors and their inclusion in decision-making processes that affect their livelihoods (WPC, n.d.).

SEWA Bharat: SEWA Bharat is an affiliate of SEWA and operates in various states across India. They work to empower women in the informal sector, including street vendors, by providing training, organizing self-help groups, and advocating for their rights and social security. SEWA Bharat focuses on building solidarity among women street vendors and



enabling their collective voice (SEWA Bharat, n.d.).

These organizations, along with several other local and grassroots initiatives, play a crucial role in providing organizational support, creating awareness, advocating for policy changes, and empowering women street vendors in India. Their efforts contribute to addressing the structural inequalities and improving the socio-economic conditions of women engaged in street vending.

Objective of the Study

- To critically examine socio-economic and legal status of women street vendors during pandemic
- To assess the legal enactment to safeguard women street vendors during pandemic.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper is inherently exploratory and descriptive, aiming to shed light on the subject matter. It relies on secondary sources of data, specifically the analysis of multiple government acts and policies pertaining to the protection and well-being of women street vendors. Additionally, the paper draws upon a range of case studies conducted by previous researchers in various regions of India. To ensure a comprehensive and thorough examination, a systematic literature review has been conducted.

Life of Women Street Vendors' Pre and Post Pandemic

The life of women street vendors in India is characterized by sensitivity and challenges, both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Street vending, which constitutes a critical component of the informal economy, caters to the urban demand for affordable goods and services. However, despite their contribution to the urban economy, Female Street vendors are often considered unhygienic and carriers of viruses, leading to stigmatization and discrimination. They face frequent targeting, harassment, and eviction by government officials, highlighting the precarious nature of their lives on the streets (The Hindu & Sampath, 2016). Studies conducted prior to the pandemic shed light on the conditions of women street vendors. Bowmik (2010) explains that the increasing proportion of the urban informal sector, coupled with the shrinking of the organized sector, has contributed to the growth of street vending. It serves as a means of livelihood for low-skilled migrants seeking employment and provides access to affordable goods for the urban poor. R. M. Chakraborty (2015) highlights the double insecurity faced by women street vendors, as they confront not only economic struggles but also the constant threat of sexual harassment and compromised safety.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated the challenges faced by female street vendors. Displacement and economic struggles have been prominent during this time. Bhavnani et al. (2021) report a sharp fall in income for women vendors, with a significant percentage earning no income during the lockdown. Even after the resumption of operations, a considerable portion continued to experience a decline in income. The pandemic-induced lockdowns have also led to challenges in reverse migration, as women street vendors face



difficulties when returning to their hometowns (Bhavnnani et al., 2021). Health and safety concerns have emerged as critical issues during the pandemic. Women street vendors are more vulnerable to infections due to their work environments, and limited access to healthcare services further compounds their challenges (SEWA, 2020). Additionally, the social stigma and discrimination experienced by female street vendors have been exacerbated, with gender biases and societal perceptions influencing their treatment and opportunities (Bhavnnani et al., 2021).

Social Stigma and Discrimination: Questing for Social Identity

Women street vendors in India face significant social stigma and discrimination, which exacerbate the challenges they already encounter in their daily lives. Society often perceives street vending as a low-status occupation, leading to negative stereotypes and marginalization of these women. The gendered nature of street vending further compounds the discrimination they experience, as they navigate both gender biases and occupational biases. Studies and reports highlight the social stigma faced by women street vendors in India. The report by Citizens for Justice and Peace (CJP) et al. (2020) emphasizes the stigma associated with sitting on the street and peddling wares, contributing to the vulnerability of their situation. R. M. Chakraborty (2015) discusses how the stigma of street vending adds to the insecurity of women vendors, as they are subjected to harassment and face judgment from society. As Bina Agarwal's article highlights that, the effects extend beyond women's direct earnings and encompass intra-household dynamics and vulnerabilities, including food insecurity, depletion of savings and assets, social isolation, and mobility loss. The repercussions are not limited to women who have lost paid jobs but also affect those who were unpaid workers in family enterprises that have been severely affected. Furthermore, women can face disproportionate challenges due to the loss of male jobs and return migration, leading to occupational crowding, increased domestic work, hunger, and even domestic violence (Agarwal, 2021).

Government officials and law enforcement agencies also contribute to the discrimination faced by women street vendors. The Supreme Court of India, as mentioned in The Hindu & Sampath (2016), acknowledged that street vendors are often targeted, harassed, and victimized by officials. This further reinforces the unequal power dynamics and the systemic discrimination these women encounter. Furthermore, the lack of clarity on the rights and obligations of street vendors enables local authorities to engage in rent-seeking practices, as highlighted by the Centre for Civil Society (2019). This further perpetuates a climate of discrimination and exploitation, making it difficult for women street vendors to assert their rights and challenge discriminatory practices. Roever and Caroline (2016) also highlight the everyday challenges of workplace insecurity, harassment, and low earnings that these women endure. The study by P. Chakraborty and Koley (2018) reveals that women street vendors, particularly those from scheduled tribal communities, often face economic hardships and earn meager incomes. The stigma associated with their occupation further compounds their vulnerabilities and restricts their social mobility.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the social stigma and discrimination faced by women street vendors in India have been further intensified, exacerbating their already challenging



circumstances. As street vending activities were significantly affected by lockdowns and restrictions, these women encountered increased marginalization and hardship. The pandemic brought forth heightened concerns regarding hygiene and safety, and women street vendors were often unfairly singled out as carriers of the virus due to misconceptions about the cleanliness of their workspaces. This stigmatization not only impacted their ability to earn a livelihood but also subjected them to social exclusion and discrimination within their communities. Studies and reports have highlighted the adverse effects of the pandemic on women street vendors. The report by Citizens for Justice and Peace (CJP) et al. (2020) revealed that women street vendors lost their livelihoods during the lockdown, particularly those operating in weekly markets or roadside stalls. The closure of markets and restrictions on movement forced them to adapt and become mobile vendors, constantly evading authorities while trying to find customers and sustain their income. The lack of support and recognition from government authorities further compounded the challenges faced by these women. The United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women, 2020) emphasized that in times of crisis, structural inequalities are exposed, and women bear a disproportionate burden. The inadequate institutional response to the plight of women street vendors during the pandemic further perpetuated their marginalization and reinforced discriminatory practices.

Sociologically, this can be understood as the result of stigmatizing perceptions and power dynamics based on their social identity. The stigma associated with street vending, coupled with gendered expectations and marginalization, further disadvantaged these women during the crisis. The pandemic highlighted the intersection of gender, occupation, and social identity for women street vendors. They were disproportionately affected by stigmatization, being viewed as unhygienic and potential carriers of the virus due to their work environments. This social stigma further reinforced the existing discrimination they faced as women engaged in street vending, perpetuating negative stereotypes and social exclusion. The works of sociologists such as Erving Goffman shed light on the role of stigma in shaping social identities. Goffman's concept of "stigma" refers to the discrediting attributes or characteristics that mark individuals as deviant or socially undesirable. In the case of women street vendors, their occupation becomes a stigmatizing attribute that affects their social interactions, self-perception, and opportunities for social mobility.

3. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

These research studies offer valuable sociological insights into the realities faced by women street vendors in India during the COVID-19 pandemic. They provide critical examinations of various aspects related to street vending, including government schemes, economic impacts, social dynamics, gendered effects, and coping mechanisms.

The findings reveal that the pandemic has amplified existing social inequalities and vulnerabilities among women street vendors. The lack of awareness about government support schemes, such as the PM SAVNIDHI Yojana, coupled with inadequate financial assistance, has left many vendors struggling to sustain their businesses. This raises concerns



about the effectiveness and implementation of such schemes and the need for urgent reforms. Moreover, the studies highlight the multifaceted challenges faced by women street vendors. They not only experience direct economic impacts, such as decreased earnings, but also encounter indirect consequences that affect intra-household dynamics and vulnerabilities. Issues like food insecurity, depletion of savings and assets, social isolation, and mobility loss have been exacerbated during the pandemic. The disruptions caused by COVID-19 have also affected women who were previously engaged in unpaid work within family enterprises, leading to additional hardships.

Importantly, the research reveals that women street vendors are disproportionately affected by the erosion of their own livelihoods, as well as by the loss of male jobs and return migration from cities to villages. This has resulted in occupational crowding, increased domestic work burden, food insecurity, and even domestic violence. The gendered impacts of the pandemic highlight the interconnectedness of economic, social, and gender dynamics in shaping the experiences of women street vendors. However, amidst these challenges, the studies also acknowledge the resilience and adaptability demonstrated by women street vendors. Some women have shown entrepreneurial qualities by altering their goods or sales methods to cope with the crisis. The success of women-centric group approaches in certain states provides insights into potential pathways for addressing the adverse outcomes. The sociological examination of women street vendors in India during the COVID-19 pandemic reveals the profound impact on their livelihoods and the intricate dynamics at play. These research studies delve into the grounded realities faced by these vendors and shed light on the multifaceted challenges they encounter.

In conclusion, the sociological analysis of women street vendors in India during the COVID-19 pandemic reveals the intricate interplay of policies, gender dynamics, household relations, coping mechanisms, and urban structures. These studies provide valuable insights into the challenges faced by street vendors and underscore the need for inclusive and gender-responsive policies, financial inclusion, improved working conditions, and supportive measures to mitigate the adverse effects of crises and promote sustainable livelihoods.

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