

# Women Street Vendors in Imphal: Conflicts and Challenges

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**Abstract**— Street vending is one of the common practices in most of the developing countries of the world where the high rate of growth of urbanisation is often coupled with lack of job opportunities among the workforce. Hence, street vending becomes an integral part of urbanisation in the developing countries where urban poor not only make their living from the vending sector but also provide goods and services at an affordable price to urban dwellers. However, street vending is perceived negatively because of the congestion resulting out of the ever-increasing number of street vendors working in the sidewalks and streets, creating an intense struggle for space among the vendors and pedestrians. There is always confrontation among the street vendors and city authorities or regulators over space for business, conditions of works, sanitation and licensing. The competition or contradiction among the street vendors and city's authorities led to negotiations with buyers, regulators and also among the vendors themselves. The lack of voice of informal workers is one of the factors affecting hundreds of millions of vending workers around the world. On the other hand, under-representation from the informal women workers also pose a serious problem of gender equality even though the principle of gender equality is widely accepted among the members of a trade union. The present paper is an attempt in this direction to document the various challenges faced by the women vendors in the city of Imphal and also examines the ways of negotiation with the urban authorities in Imphal. The paper questions the status of women livelihood in the context of urban informal market space in Imphal

**Keywords**— Informal, Livelihood, Negotiation, Women Street Vendors

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Street vending is one of the most common practices in most developing countries of the world where the rate of growth of urbanisation is high, coupled with a lack of job opportunities among the workforce [1]. Hence, street vending becomes part and parcel of urbanisation in developing countries where urban poor are making their living from this sector as well as providing cheap goods and services at affordable prices to urban dwellers. Among the street vendors, the proportion of women in the informal sector is huge in the developing countries of Africa and South Asia [1]. However, street vending is perceived negatively because of congestion resulting out of the ever-increasing number of street vendors working in the sidewalks and street, creating an intense struggle for space among the vendors and pedestrians [2].

There is always confrontation among the street vendors and city authorities or regulators over space for business, conditions of works, sanitation and licensing etc. The competition or contradiction among the street vendors and city's authority led to making negotiations with buyers, regulators and also among the vendors themselves [3]. The street vendors resort to many strategies when they face eviction or relocation of their vending places in the urban

space. They renegotiate with other stakeholders at an individual level and organise themselves in groups to lay their claims over the physical space and other economic opportunities formally as well as informally. For instance, taking the legal route in the court, political rights through voting, mass demonstration, network and communication, use of modern technologies are some of the tools and strategies used by them [3], [4], [5]. Despite this, the lack of voice of informal workers is one of the factors affecting millions of workers in the world. On the other hand, under-representation of women informal workers also poses a serious problem of gender equality even though the principle of gender equality is widely accepted among the members of a trade union [6].

## II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- i. To document various challenges faced by women street vendors in Imphal.
- ii. To examine the techniques of negotiation between women street vendors and the urban authorities in Imphal to gain access to the urban space.

## III. DATABASE AND METHODOLOGY

The primary data had been collected through structured questionnaires in Imphal comprising 140 women street

vendors working in Allu Gali, BT Road, Thangal Road and sidewalks around Khwairamband Keithel and also semi-structured interviews of key informants such as City police officer, Municipality staff, executive members of an informal organisation of the street vendors and women license holders to understand the conflicts among them and ways by which such conflicts are negotiated. The methodology adopted in the present study is a mixed approach, both qualitative as well as quantitative. Descriptive statistics have been used to show the socio-economic profile of the vendors.

#### **IV. SOCIO-ECONOMIC PROFILES OF THE VENDORS**

There is a rapid increase in the numbers of street vendors in the country due to the lack of opportunities in the rural areas couple with the lack of skills among the labour and shrinking of formal and organised sector employments[7]. Such a trend is also visible in the case of Imphal City where, street vending activities intensified in the early 2000s and increased to around 10000 in numbers at present as reported by one of Secretaries of Urban Street Vendors, Imphal City .

The study found that the average age of the women street vendors of the market is 46 years, where only 3.5 per cent falls in the age group of 20-30 years. Among them, 74.7 per cent are currently married, 22.8 per cent are widow and 2.5 per cent are divorced. More than half of them are illiterates (52.8 per cent), and 4.2 per cent and 7.7 per cent of vendors are higher secondary and graduate passed respectively.

On average, daily earning of women street vendors is around 300-1000 rupees. Among them, traders who sell costly items like fashionable and luxurious clothing earn nearly 1000-2000 rupees per day. Their earning also depends upon the location of the vending along with the types of the products being sold and season. In order to finance their daily requirement of quick cash as working capital, they borrow from a moneylender at exorbitant rates as the process of borrowing as well as the method of payback is very easy. There is no provision for loans from the formal bank as of now. But it was reported that the street vendors are exploited by the moneylenders who charge a higher interest rate than the banks. The study found that some street vendors are unable to pay back the debt of the money lenders. So, whatever little they earn in a day goes to the pocket of the money lenders. Thus, leaving them with an insufficient amount to maintain their family. This shows the power dynamics among the women vendors themselves as women money lenders always exploit their debtors. In this scenario, formal banks should play a vital role in combatting this issue of women vendors for sustainable livelihoods.

**Figure 1: Women street vendors selling Vegetables in front of the Khwairamband Keithel Imphal**



*Source: Author, 21<sup>st</sup> December 2019*

It was observed during the fieldwork that among the women street vendors, vegetable sellers begin their day at 3 am to 4:30 am by collecting vegetables and other goods from their suppliers and undertakes a long journey to Imphal. While cloth traders regularly come very late at around 10–11 am and continue to conduct business till late around 6–6:30 pm which means, they work for nearly 8-10 hours a day. Despite their busy and arduous life, they usually attend the rituals and other social activities of the society. They weave a close bond among themselves as they never miss any events of the neighbouring vendors. Moreover, when vendors need a favour at the time of sickness or any emergency, they collect money among themselves so that they can donate to the person in need. This shows that women vendors tend to develop strong network among themselves and are able to sustain by mutually helping each other.

They are the voice of the state when it comes to crucial issues such as Inner Line Permit system, Naga Accord, issues related to women in the state. However, they hardly believe that they could collectively make any meaningful demands since many of them cannot afford to close their stalls and lose their daily earning as many of them are the breadwinner of the family. Among the vendors, educated married women have a lesser say in household decision-making as they are likely to consult their husband and children. However, in contrast to them, widows in their 40s and 50s make their own choices in any decision-making process.

#### **V. CONFLICTS AND CHALLENGES AND NEGOTIATIONS OF THE VENDORS**

Street vendors face different types of conflicts and challenges pertaining to vending zones and also face harassments (100 percent) from different agencies. These problems of the street vendors include various actors such as the urban authorities (Municipality and Town planners), police, the local urban bodies, women licensed vendors,

pedestrians, and vendors themselves. Their conflicts are solved through negotiations such as negotiations with the politicians or urban authority or ULBs, network of people including shopkeepers through their members and various others means including legal ones. Their attempts to lay claim over the urban space can be seen as a strategy to make to gain access to the vending space which is an crucial aspect in order to sustain their means of livelihood. These conflicts and challenges of the women street vendors have been discussed below based on the actors involved in the conflicts.

Law and order of the city is under the jurisdiction of the Imphal city police. So, any untoward incidents such as fights between street vendors and licensed women vendors or with shopkeepers etc. that happens in and around the market will have some impact on the livelihoods of the vendors regardless of the fact whether the vendor is a licensed holder or street vendors. In some instances, during the field survey, it was observed that many places around the Khwairamband Keithel where street vendors used to conduct business were cracked down, and eviction is the most common method used by police while handling the street vendors in the city. Upon enquiring the Police officer, it was found that the Allu Gali street vendors were evicted as the police got a complaint from the owners of the shops against them as they sell the same items, and the shop owners could not sell their products. Such a response brings forth the power relation embedded in the spatial arrangement of Keithel, where shopkeepers have necessary means to influence the police action on vending spaces.

It was observed that police try to clear major vending spots nearly three-four times a day, but sometimes a particular spot is also closed down for many days. They used to vacate the vending areas around 9 am, 1 pm -2 pm and 4 pm.

In order to capture the space for vending, the vendors commonly stay near to their vending spots, which they acquire again, once the police move to another spot. Their return to the vending space is mostly possible by bribing which is also the only method to prevent them from eviction. They have two secretaries in each vending areas who collect a sum of amount to pay to the police in order to prevent eviction, damaging of commodities or confiscation which is a common sight in the vending spaces of Imphal. Once their goods are confiscated, they will be charged 500 INR in the magistrate office in order to take back their items. Therefore, in most cases, the contribution to bribery is the preferred option in order to avoid such circumstances in their vending activities.

**Figure 2: Street vendors about to vacate their vending places due to the presence of city police in BT Road, Imphal.**



*Source: Author, 12<sup>th</sup> October 2018.*

In addition to this, there were conflicts among the licensed women vendors of the market and other street vendors, especially women vendors, because street vendors tend to sell the same goods as of the licensed vendors. They also attract higher number of customers as they conduct their business on the footpath, which is more convenient to the customers. It is also to be noted that the licensed vendors and shop owners are municipal taxpayers, but street vendors do not pay any tax or GST that contribute towards the economy of the state. It is just on the part of the police to discharge their duties in order to create an environment where everyone in the city can lead a good life free from congestion and encroachment of the streets. Therefore, street vendors had filed a PIL against their eviction in the HIGH COURT of Manipur. The verdict of the PIL says that police should clear the road to maintain free from the encroachment of footpath and uphold to the public convenience. The same order also directed Imphal Municipal Corporation, MAHUD and City police not to evict the street vendors till they make a new alternative for

them by constituting Town Vending Committee under the Street Vendors Act, 2014 [6].

On one side, representatives of the street vendors claim that the police and other party are making troubles to them by evictions. They further claimed that licensed holders do not want them to conduct business in the Khwairamband Keithel as licensed holders thought that the Keithel is only meant for them. But, on the other hand, street vendors and many licensed women vendors of the Khwairamband Keithel consider the market should be available for all the people of the state. Therefore, there are some women license holders, and many other people from some agency, including NGOs, are trying to resolve the issue through dialogue among themselves. One such example is the initiative of Indigenous Perspective which conducted a capacity building workshop on Development Dialogue and Diplomacy Skill in which many of the participants were the executives of the Street Vendors and licensed women vendors of Khwairamband Keithel.

Renubala, Secretary of Street Vendors sitting along the BT Road reported that they were doing a protest against the eviction of vendors by keeping their products on the first floor of the three markets. Then, suddenly, licensed women vendors threw away their products from that floor to the ground. After that, the two parties quarrelled each other by abusing street vendors. In retaliation to that, street vendors pulled down the clothes, and other stuff from cardholders' stalls led to the incident of 26<sup>th</sup> July 2018. In this incident, some vendors from both the parties were injured and hospitalised. After this incident, there were no initiatives from any party for negotiation among them. However, such conflicts will only lead to havoc in the functioning of the market where both parties will suffer from the consequences. Moreover, such an incident is not only the first one but many times, street vendors were assaulted and meted out atrocities by licensed women vendors in the past too. They used to throw plastics or package of eatables to the area where street vendors are conducting their business. Such behaviour of the licensed women vendors also creates an atmosphere where any time quarrelling or even fight among them might happen in the market.

Similar kinds of complaints were put up from the licensed women vendors against street vendors of the Khwairamband Keithel. They reported that street vendors polluted the environment by littering their leftover vegetables and other plastic bags in the market area. Since they conduct business throughout the day, municipal staffs are unable to sweep the market area (roadside) where they are conducting business resulting in piling up of the garbage in the improper area of the market. So, cleanliness and hygiene become a critical issue. They also claimed that their customers have reduce drastically because of the street vendors conducting their

business in the roadside in and around the Khwairamband Keithel and selling the same products. Their income has gone down, and they are unable to run their families. In order to maintain the family and to educate their children, many fish and vegetable licensed women vendors are selling their products at the junction of the market where other street vendors are conducting the business.

Such conflicts among licensed women vendors and street vendors will ultimately have a great impact on their livelihoods. This can be solved through negotiation among them. There should be a third party in the process of the negotiation whether it may be executive of IMC or politician or any non-governmental organisation so, that required solution is brought in the market for the sustainable livelihoods of the vendors. Also, a proper zone should be demarcated for the street vendors through the Town Vending Committee which can be formed only when Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014 is implemented in the state of Manipur.

Imphal Municipal Corporation (IMC) staffs hardly intervene in the vending activities of the street vendors unless there are important events in the city or conflicts with the licensed women vendors. The Town Planning Department of Manipur also poses serious problems while carrying out the activities of infrastructural development in the city because of the delays in their project. Since they have not been provided any alternative place of vending during such projects, it often leads to conflicts.

However, the role of Urban Local Body remains insignificant even though this market comes under Ward 5 and ward 6 of the IMC. Any incidents or issue related to the market should be discussed by the executive members, along with some older respected women who have been vending in the market for a long time, with the Revenue Officer of IMC. But one of the most important issues with respect to the IMC is the implementation of national street vendors policy act 2014. The act has not been implemented in the city or state and therefore, town vending committee in the city or the state are yet to be formed. As a result street vendors in the city are facing hardships at the hands of multiple agencies.

There were many agitations against the state government on many occasions and issues related to the state affairs or directly related to women vendors of the market. This market is the arena of agitations, and many leaders of the political parties, protesters or civil society organisations try to take support and blessing from the women vendors.

If any tussle or conflict takes place, meetings, talks, discussions had been held among leaders of women vendors, government officials or politicians or with the leaders of civil organisations. One such example is the

negotiations for construction of the new buildings of the present markets where women vendors stood against the construction to preserve the traditional market structure. Radhesana, a leader of women vendors informed that they had many discussions with the Chief Minister of Manipur, officials of Town Planning Department, IMC and even with the group of scholars of Manipur Research Forum regarding the structure of the market.

The lack of financial assistance is also a main stumbling block among the street vendors. Since they are mostly illiterate, the formal banking system is beyond their access. Mudra Scheme is provided to the licensed women vendors but the street vendors are excluded from the scheme.

**Figure 3: Identity card distribution, Urban Street Vendors, Imphal City, James Hall, Imphal**



So, women vendors prefer money-lenders instead of banks even though they are exploited at the hands of the money-lenders. Therefore, the state should make arrangement for small credit system to finance the street vendors.

One of the main challenges among the women street vendors is their lack of union or representation. Since they have to contribute a sum of amount as membership fee, many of them reported that they could not spend that amount due to the meagre daily income. So, 70-80 per cent of the street vendors of Imphal are without any union or association. Therefore, they become helpless when prolonging eviction of the street vendors take place. On the other hand, those who are representatives of the union have to fight their cause in the courts or negotiate with the urban authority in order to gain access to the urban space for their sustainable livelihood activities. They used the collected membership fees in such legal battles. They are trying to strengthen their union through membership drive where vendors are registered, and identity card is issued [Figure 3].

One very important aspect of women street vendors in Imphal is being women. They carry out all the household chores and have tried to attain their activity in time before the presence of the police in the vending areas to avoid any damage or eviction. So, they play multiple roles in their life as a wife, mother and vendors. Though they work hard to maintain their families from the meagre earning from the vending, their vulnerabilities and the insecure nature of their informal vending activities pose serious and high risk in their livelihood activities.

## VI. CONCLUSIONS

Women street vendors in Imphal are hard-working women folk in the state. They are trying their best to maintain their family from the little profit they make with their vending activities in addition to their multiple responsibilities of being wife, mother in the home and a vendor in the streets of Imphal. But they are also facing many problems at the hands of multiple agencies. Since the National Street Vendors Policy Act, 2014 is not implemented in the state, they are not protected, secured and vulnerabilities and risks are very high. They are not provided with any proper zone of vending activities in case their vending areas are closed down. Therefore, their means of livelihoods at the heart of Imphal is at stake. On the other hand, due to the lack of financial assistance from the state or bank, they are exploited at the hands of the money-lenders with their exorbitant interest rates. Hence, it should be on the part of the state to recognise them and should be included in the policy framework of the state budget to secure and protect them. Their working environment should be made conducive and decent work place conditions should be made available to them. They can be an asset to the urban system once potential to development is tapped through opportunities. They should be included in the policy for the development of the state, only then sustainable development goals can be achieved.

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