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Women Street Vendors in South Kamrup: Issues and challenges

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Abstract:

Street vending represents a significant aspect of the informal economy in South Kamrup, serving as a crucial source of livelihood for women while simultaneously subjecting them to notable socio-economic vulnerabilities. This study, entitled "Women Street Vendors in South Kamrup: Issues and Challenges," investigates the socio-economic conditions, livelihood patterns, occupational experiences, and primary challenges encountered by women street vendors in the region. The research is anchored in the Informal Economy and Gender and Labour frameworks and utilizes primary data collected from 25 women street vendors through a field survey conducted between December 2025 and July 2026. The findings indicate that street vending is primarily a livelihood strategy driven by economic necessity, with 88% of respondents entering the occupation for economic reasons. The majority of respondents have limited educational attainment and long-term involvement in vending. Furthermore, the study reveals that 68% of the respondents contribute their entire earnings to household income, yet only 32% have full control over their earnings, highlighting significant gender-based economic vulnerability. A considerable proportion of vendors are engaged in selling vegetables and fruits, with 44% working up to seven days a week. Access to formal finance is limited, with only 8% obtaining capital from banks, while 52% rely on moneylenders. Major challenges include inadequate storage, insecure vending spaces, poor sanitation, insufficient workplace facilities, adverse weather, restricted credit, harassment, health concerns, and market competition. The study advocates for gender-responsive and livelihood-oriented interventions, such as secure vending spaces, improved infrastructure, accessible institutional credit, social protection, collective organization, and climate-resilient

market facilities, to enhance the livelihood security and socio-economic well-being of women street vendors in South Kamrup.

Introduction

Street vending is a fundamental livelihood source within South Kamrup's informal economy, with many women relying on weekly and daily markets to support their families. The study finds that 88% of participants began street vending from economic necessity, and 68% contributed entirely to household income, underscoring women vendors' significant economic role. Despite their crucial contributions to local markets and household welfare, their work remains largely unrecognized in policy discussions and academic research, especially in rural and semi-urban Assam. Female street vendors in South Kamrup face major socio-economic challenges, including inadequate vending infrastructure, lack of storage, poor sanitation, and absence of amenities such as drinking water, electricity, and shelters, insecure locations, limited access to formal credit, dependence on moneylenders, seasonal variation, adverse weather, health issues, and harassment from authorities. These challenges reduce earnings and intensify economic insecurity and occupational vulnerability. Furthermore, women vendors must balance income-generating work with unpaid domestic responsibilities, creating a dual burden that impedes economic advancement. Although research on street vending in India has mainly focused on metropolitan and urban areas, limited attention has been paid to women vendors in South Kamrup weekly and daily markets. Consequently, a substantial gap remains in understanding their socio-economic conditions, livelihood strategies, and daily challenges in this historically significant market region. This study addresses it.

Review of Literature

The study of street vending and informal markets has garnered significant scholarly interest within the broader discourse on the informal economy. However, existing research predominantly centers on urban contexts and contemporary analyses, often overlooking rural market systems and historical perspectives. This literature review critically synthesizes

scholarship across three interrelated themes—informal economy and street vending, gender and labor in informal sectors, and traditional markets and local exchange systems—to contextualize the present study on women street vendors in South Kamrup.The concept of the informal economy emerged prominently through Keith Hart's pioneering work (1973), which distinguished informal income-generating activities from formal employment in urban Ghana. The International Labour Organization (1972) further underscored the informal sector's vital role in employment generation within developing countries.

Subsequent scholarship has expanded this framework, with Hernando de Soto (1989) emphasizing the entrepreneurial potential constrained by regulatory burdens, while Jan Breman (1996) highlighted the precarious and exploitative nature of informal labor, especially in the Global South. Within this spectrum, street vending is recognized as a critical livelihood strategy. Influential studies by Sharit K. Bhowmik (2005, 2010) in India foreground the economic importance of street vendors alongside their marginalization and legal invisibility. Further research by Keshri and Bhagat (2012) examines the interplay of urban space, regulation, and livelihood insecurity, collectively illustrating street vending's centrality for economically vulnerable populations.Gendered dimensions of informal work constitute a significant focus in the literature. Esther Boserup's foundational analysis (1970) highlighted women's crucial but often unacknowledged economic contributions, particularly in agrarian and informal sectors. Building on this, feminist scholars such as Maria Mies (1986) and Silvia Federici (2004) argue that women's labor is systematically undervalued due to its dual association with productive and reproductive roles.

Empirical studies by Martha Chen (2012) and others reveal women's disproportionate representation in low-income, insecure informal employment, including street vending. Urban case studies in Delhi and Mumbai (Bhowmik, 2010; Keshri & Bhagat, 2012) identify factors driving women's engagement in vending—limited formal employment, household economic pressures, and mobility restrictions—while documenting challenges such as low income, harassment, inadequate infrastructure, and lack of credit access. These findings underscore

women's pivotal role in sustaining household livelihoods amidst regulatory uncertainty and socio-economic precocity.

Recent research in Tamil Nadu (Karthick & Chinnu, 2025) further elucidates the everyday constraints faced by street vendors, highlighting regulatory harassment, financial instability, infrastructural deficits, and competition from organized retail as exacerbating vulnerabilities. Their survey of 180 vendors, including 45 women primarily engaged in food vending, advocates for strengthened policy frameworks, improved market infrastructure, and vendor associations to enhance socio-economic security. Parallel studies on financial inclusion address the potential of digital banking to empower women vendors, while also noting barriers such as digital illiteracy and limited awareness (Khandaagale & Shetiya, 2024). Similarly, research on differently-abled women entrepreneurs in Tamil Nadu (Fathima Bee, 2024) documents intersecting barriers related to education, social support, and institutional access, emphasizing resilience and the need for inclusive policies.

Complementing work on street vending and gender, literature on traditional markets—particularly weekly rural haats—highlights their role in local trade of agricultural and artisanal goods. These markets integrate production, distribution, and consumption within rural economies, yet studies often emphasize aspects with limited attention to women's contributions. Despite these insights, gaps persist. Most research on street vending focuses on urban settings, with insufficient exploration of rural contexts like South Kamrup. Additionally, a lens on market practices and women's evolving roles remains underdeveloped. This study addresses these lacunae through historical and empirical analysis of women street vendors in South Kamrup's weekly and daily markets, using field data to inform policy interventions enhancing livelihoods and socio-economic security.

Conceptual Framework

The study, titled "Women Street Vendors in South Kamrup: Issues and Challenges," is anchored in two frameworks: the Informal Economy Framework and the Gender and Labour

Framework. These guide analysis of the socio-economic conditions, occupational hazards, and gender-specific challenges faced by women street vendors in South Kamrup, and show how informal employment and gender dynamics shape their livelihoods and experiences.

Informal Economy

The concept of the informal economy gained importance in development studies in the 1970s. Keith Hart (1973) introduced it through research on urban employment in Ghana, distinguishing informal income-generating activities from formal wage employment. The International Labour Organization (ILO), in its Kenya Report (1972), recognized the informal sector as a source of employment and livelihood in developing countries.

Later scholars expanded understanding. Hernando de Soto (1989) viewed informality as a result of state regulation and highlighted entrepreneurial potential. Jan Breman argued that informal employment involves insecurity, exploitation, and lack of labour protection. Martha Chen emphasized the gendered nature of informal work and the overrepresentation of women in low-income, insecure jobs such as street vending.

Within this framework, women street vendors in South Kamrup are essential to the informal economy and livelihoods, yet work under unstable conditions with inadequate infrastructure, insecure locations, limited credit, poor sanitation, and no social security. The framework helps examine structural constraints, vulnerabilities, and the resilience and strategies these women use to sustain their livelihoods.

Gender and Labour

The Gender and Labour framework originates in feminist scholarship critiquing the marginalization of women's contributions in conventional economic analyses. Esther Boserup's seminal work, "Woman's Role in Economic Development" (1970), showed that women play a role in economic production, yet their contributions are often undervalued and inadequately

recognized. Her research challenged development theories that overlooked women's roles in production. Subsequent feminist scholars, including Silvia Federici and Maria Mies, focused on reproductive labour, arguing that women's productive and domestic responsibilities are connected. Their research highlighted how women's unpaid household tasks sustain family life and the broader economy while remaining unacknowledged in economic policies and planning. Building on these insights, Martha Chen emphasized that women are disproportionately represented in informal employment due to limited educational opportunities, restricted access to resources, societal norms, and family obligations. Although informal work provides income-earning opportunities, it also exposes women to insecurity, discrimination, and inadequate social protection.

In South Kamrup, this framework sees women street vendors as balancing productive and reproductive roles. Besides generating income through vending, they manage household responsibilities, childcare, and family welfare. This dual responsibility increases their workload and limits their capacity to expand businesses or improve economic status. The framework also highlights gender-specific challenges identified during the field study, including limited control over financial resources, dependence on informal credit, health issues from long working hours, vulnerability to harassment, and lack of institutional support. These challenges reflect structural inequalities affecting women's participation in the informal economy.

The integration of the Informal Economy and Gender and Labour frameworks provides the theoretical basis for analyzing the socio-economic realities of women street vendors and identifying policy measures to enhance livelihood security, working conditions, and well-being.

Area of the Study

This study was conducted in South Kamrup, Assam, a region characterized by its rural and semi-urban composition, forming the southern part of the current Kamrup district. For the purposes of this research, South Kamrup is defined as the southern belt of Kamrup, which includes key localities and market centers such as Boko, Chhaygaon, and Palashbari. These areas

serve as significant hubs for settlement, commerce, and local exchange, providing an ideal context for investigating women's participation in informal economic activities.

The Government of Assam recognizes Boko, Chhaygaon, and Palashbari as important locations within the Kamrup district, and they fall under the current administrative jurisdictions of Boko–Chhaygaon and Palashbari co-districts.According to official data from the Government of Assam, Kamrup district spans approximately 2,740.74 square kilometers and had a population of 1,517,542 as per the 2011 Census. Of this population, 1,375,148 resided in rural areas, while 142,394 lived in urban areas. The district exhibited a population density of 489 persons per square kilometer and an overall literacy rate of 75.55%, with female literacy at 69.47%. The sex ratio was recorded at 949 females per 1,000 males. The predominantly rural nature of Kamrup is particularly pertinent to this research. The 2011 District Census Handbook indicates that 41.4% of the district's population were engaged in work, with women representing a significantly smaller portion of the workforce compared to men. Employment was distributed across cultivation, agricultural labor, household industry, and other occupations.

The geographical context is also noteworthy. Kamrup is situated between 25°46′ and 26°49′ N latitude and 90°48′ and 91°50′ E longitude, bordered by Meghalaya to the south, Goalpara and Nalbari to the west, and Darrang and Kamrup Metropolitan districts to the east and northeast. These demographic, geographical, and economic characteristics render South Kamrup a pertinent field setting for examining women's street vending, livelihood dependence, economic contributions, and the socio-economic challenges associated with informal employment.

Discussion

This field study investigates street vending as a significant yet precarious livelihood activity among women in Kamrup. Primary data collected from 25 female vendors offer empirical insights into the socio-economic factors influencing their engagement in the informal economy. The study focuses on their educational and family backgrounds, duration of involvement in vending, income and contribution to household livelihood, work intensity,

control over earnings, motivations for entering the occupation, and access to capital. The findings elucidate the intricate relationship between women's economic participation and their socio-economic vulnerability, demonstrating that while street vending provides essential

livelihood support, it is constrained by limited resources, financial insecurity, and restricted economic autonomy

Table 1: Socio-economic characteristics of the respondents

Variable	Characteristics				
Age	Below 30	31-40	41-50	51-60	Above 60
	3	10	5	5	2
Educational level	Illiterate	Upto Class V	Class VI & above		
	6	14	5		
No of Family members	Up to 3	4-6	6 & above		
	7	16	2		
Marital Status	Unmarried	Married	Widow		
	Nil	18	7		
Years in Business	Below 5	6-10	11-20	21 & above	
	3	8	10	4	
Daily Incomes	Below 200	200-400	400-600	600 & above	
	Nil	8	12	5	
Contribution to Household income	Full	Partial			
	17	08			
Control over earning	Full	Partial	No		
	8	12	5		

Source: Field Survey conducted during December 2025 –July 2026

Table 1 delineates the socio-economic characteristics of the 25 women street vendors surveyed. The predominant age group is 31–40 years, comprising 10 respondents, which underscores the prevalence of women in their economically active years. Educational attainment is notably low, with 6 respondents being illiterate and 14 having education only up to Class V. A majority of the respondents belong to households consisting of 4–6 members, totaling 16

respondents. The marital status distribution reveals that 18 respondents are married, while 7 are widows.

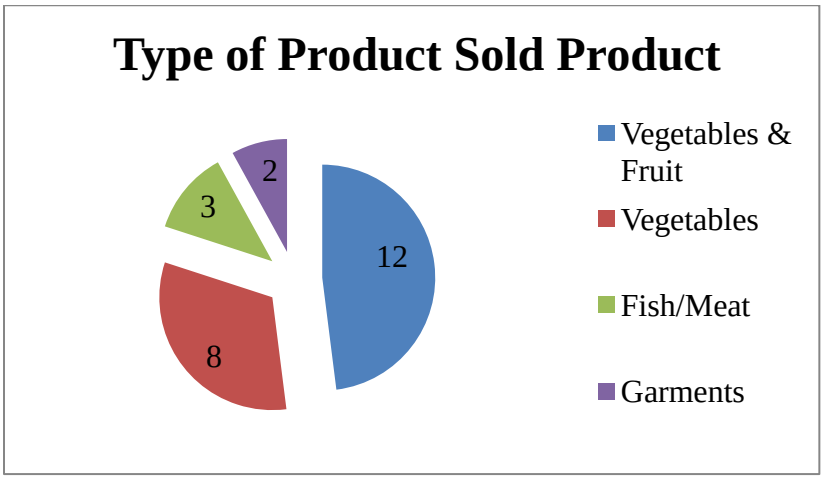
The occupational data suggest that vending is primarily a long-term livelihood activity, with 10 respondents possessing 11–20 years of experience and 4 having more than 21 years. In terms of income, 12 respondents earn ₹400–600 per day, 8 earn ₹200–400, and 5 earn ₹600 or more. Notably, 17 respondents contribute fully to household income, yet only 8 have complete control over their earnings.

Interpretation: The table illustrates that street vending serves as a significant and sustained livelihood for women with limited educational opportunities. Although their earnings substantially contribute to household income, the limited control over their earnings highlights a critical aspect of economic vulnerability and gender inequality.

Table 2: Types of product sold

Product		Percentage (%)
Vegetables & Fruit	12	48%
Vegetables	8	32%
Fish/Meat	3	12%
Garments	2	8%
Total	25	100%

Figure 1: Types of Vendors



Source: Field Survey conducted during December 2025 –July 2026

Table 2 indicates that women vendors predominantly engage in the sale of food and agricultural products. Vegetables and fruits represent the largest category at 48%, followed by vegetables alone at 32%, fish and meat at 12%, and garments at 8%. Consequently, 80% of the respondents are involved in vending vegetables and fruits.

Interpretation: The focus on essential food commodities suggests that women vendors primarily participate in small-scale trade catering to everyday consumer needs. Their reliance on these products implies that their livelihoods are closely tied to regular market demand and the risks associated with perishable goods.

Table 3: Working Days in a week

Working days in a week	No of Respondents	Percentage
Up to 5 days	05	20
Up to 6 days	09	36
Up to 7 days	11	44

Source: Field Survey conducted during December 2025 –July 2026

Table 3 demonstrates a significant level of work participation among the respondents. Specifically, 11 women (44%) engage in work up to seven days per week, 9 women (36%) work up to six days, and 5 women (20%) work up to five days. This data suggests that the prevalence of six- and seven-day working patterns signifies that street vending constitutes a regular and intensive livelihood activity, rather than an occasional occupation. Such continuous involvement underscores the considerable labour commitment necessary to maintain household income through vending.

Table 4: Reason for entering street vending

Reason for entering street vending	No of respondents	Percentage
Family Business	03	12
Economic Necessity	22	88

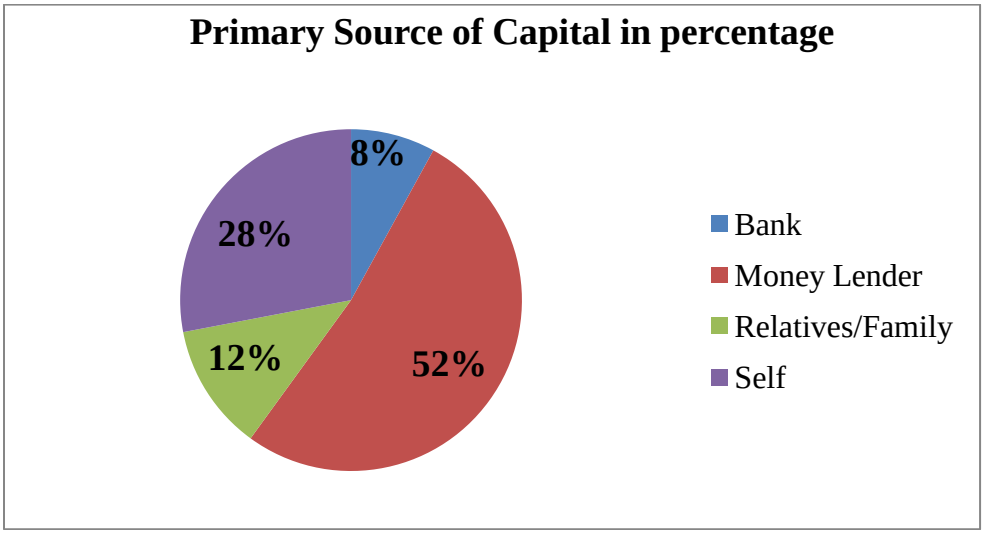
Source: Field Survey conducted during December 2025 –July 2026

Table 4 indicates that 22 respondents (88%) engaged in street vending due to economic necessity, whereas only 3 respondents (12%) did so as part of a family business. This interpretation underscores that economic necessity is the predominant motivation for entering street vending. The findings imply that, for the vast majority of respondents, vending serves primarily as a livelihood strategy influenced by economic conditions, rather than merely a continuation of a traditional family occupation. Consequently, this provides a significant foundation for understanding the economic vulnerability of women vendors.

Table 5: Distribution of Respondents According to Primary Source of Capital

Primary source of Capitals	Nos. of respondents	Percentage
Bank	2	8%
Money Lender	13	52%
Relatives/Family	3	12%
Self	7	28%

Figure 2: Primary source of income



Source: Field Survey conducted during December 2025 –July 2026

Table 5 indicates that moneylenders constitute the primary source of capital, supplying working capital to 13 respondents, which accounts for 52% of the sample. Seven respondents, representing 28%, rely on personal funds, while 3 respondents (12%) acquire capital from relatives or family members. Only 2 respondents (8%) utilize bank financing. This pattern suggests a significant reliance on moneylenders and a minimal engagement with bank finance,

highlighting the limited access to formal credit sources among the surveyed women vendors. Consequently, dependence on informal borrowing emerges as a critical financial challenge, potentially exacerbating their economic vulnerability.

Major Challenges Encountered by Women Street Vendors in South Kamrup

1. **Insufficient Storage Facilities** : The field study identifies a significant challenge for women street vendors in South Kamrup as the inadequate storage facilities. With 80% of participants engaged in selling perishable goods such as vegetables, fruits, fish, and meat, proper storage is essential to maintain freshness and quality. The absence of cold storage or secure storage areas results in rapid spoilage of unsold items, leading to financial losses and reduced daily income. Consequently, vendors often lower prices at the end of the day to avoid spoilage, adversely affecting overall profitability.

2. **Unstable Business Locations**: The research indicates that women street vendors operate in highly unstable and temporary locations. Most vendors utilize public spaces, roadside pavements, or market corners without permanent legal status. This uncertainty fosters a constant fear of eviction, relocation, and disruption of daily operations. The insecurity of vending spaces discourages investment in long-term business infrastructure improvements, thereby impacting economic stability.

3. **Poor Sanitation in Vending Areas**: The study also reveals inadequate sanitation facilities around vending areas as a significant issue. The lack of proper waste disposal systems, drainage, and clean surroundings negatively affects both vendors and customers. Women vendors, who spend extended hours in these unhygienic conditions, are particularly vulnerable to health issues. Poor sanitation diminishes customer satisfaction and affects the marketability of fresh food items.

4. **Effects of Seasonal Changes**: Seasonal variations significantly impact the livelihoods of women street vendors. The study finds that weather changes directly affect both product availability and consumer demand. Agricultural products like vegetables and fruits fluctuate with

the seasons, leading to variable prices and inconsistent income. Given that 88% of respondents turned to street vending out of economic necessity, the instability of seasonal income further exacerbates their financial vulnerability.

5. **Restricted Access to Formal Credit**: Access to institutional credit presents a substantial hurdle for women street vendors. Field data show that only two respondents received financial support from banks, while over half (52%) relied on money lenders for business capital. Additionally, 28% used personal savings, and 12% borrowed from relatives or family members. This heavy reliance on informal financial sources exposes vendors to high interest rates and debt burdens, limiting their ability to expand or modernize their businesses.

6**. Impact of Abrupt Weather Changes on Daily Sales**: Participants reported that sudden weather events, such as rain, storms, and extreme heat, significantly reduce customer visits and disrupt daily sales operations. Many vendors, operating in open areas without adequate protection, are often forced to cease business activities due to these abrupt weather changes. Perishable goods are particularly vulnerable to spoilage, leading to additional financial losses.

7**. Limitations Due to Space**: The research identifies insufficient vending space as a common operational challenge. Crowded market environments impede the effective display of products and complicate efficient customer service. The competition for limited space frequently results in disputes among vendors and diminishes the market's overall attractiveness. The absence of designated vending areas further exacerbates this issue.

8. **Absence of Essential Workplace Facilities**: Female street vendors face significant deficiencies in workplace infrastructure. Field observations reveal a lack of essential amenities, including adequate shelters, safe drinking water, sanitation facilities, electricity, and sufficient parking. These deficiencies render the work environment uncomfortable, particularly during summer and monsoon seasons. The lack of protective shelters exposes vendors and their goods to direct sunlight and rain, adversely affecting both health and business outcomes.

9. **Harassment by Authorities**: Numerous respondents expressed concerns regarding harassment from local authorities and periodic eviction efforts. The absence of secure vending rights creates an environment of uncertainty, where vendors are constantly anxious about losing their business locations. This harassment not only disrupts their livelihoods but also contributes to psychological stress and economic instability.

10. **Health Challenges**: Health issues emerged as a significant challenge for female street vendors. Most respondents work continuously for six to seven days a week, with 44% working daily without a weekly break. Extended working hours under challenging environmental conditions result in physical exhaustion, musculoskeletal pain, dehydration, and other occupational health issues. Limited access to healthcare and the absence of social security further increase their vulnerability.

11. **Intensifying Market Competition**: The study also revealed that increasing competition among vendors has reduced profit margins. As many respondents sell similar items, such as fruits and vegetables, customers have numerous purchasing options, intensifying price competition. Consequently, vendors often lower prices to attract customers, thereby diminishing their daily earnings.

12. **Challenges from Adverse Weather Conditions**: Weather-related difficulties are among the most persistent challenges for street vendors. Heavy rain, flooding, and extreme temperatures not only reduce customer turnout but also damage perishable goods. Women vendors without permanent shelters are particularly vulnerable to these weather conditions. This issue is critical because street vending is the primary source of household income for most respondents, with 68% fully contributing to their family income. Therefore, disruptions caused by weather directly threaten household economic stability.

Policy Recommendations

The study's findings suggest that addressing the vulnerabilities faced by women street vendors in South Kamrup necessitates an integrated, gender-responsive, and livelihood-oriented policy framework, as opposed to isolated welfare measures. **Firstly**, local authorities should conduct a comprehensive identification and registration of women street vendors and provide secure, designated vending spaces in both weekly and daily markets. These spaces should be equipped with essential infrastructure, including weather-protective shelters, safe drinking water, sanitation, drainage, electricity, waste-disposal facilities, and adequate storage. This is crucial, given that 80% of respondents trade in perishable goods such as vegetables and fruits, rendering them highly susceptible to spoilage and income loss.

Secondly, financial inclusion must be prioritized within policy frameworks. With 52% of respondents relying on moneylenders and only 8% accessing bank finance, it is imperative to simplify access to low-interest institutional credit, savings facilities, financial literacy programs, and digital banking services. **Thirdly**, the promotion of dedicated women-vendor cooperatives or self-help groups is essential to facilitate collective purchasing, access to credit, storage, marketing, and enhanced bargaining power.

Fourthly, social protection measures should be strengthened through the provision of health insurance, maternity support, occupational health services, and pension coverage. This is particularly important as 44% of respondents work seven days a week and report physical exhaustion and occupational health issues. **Fifthly**, local vending governance should implement transparent and gender-sensitive grievance redressal mechanisms to reduce harassment and arbitrary eviction, while ensuring the participatory representation of women vendors in market-management committees.

Finally, climate- and disaster-resilient vending infrastructure should be integrated into local planning, including the construction of elevated platforms, temporary shelters, and secure storage facilities for use during monsoon and flood periods. Such measures would not only protect

individual livelihoods but also enhance the economic security of households that significantly depend on women's vending income. Overall, policy should recognize women street vendors as productive economic actors and rights-bearing participants in the local economy, rather than as marginal informal workers.

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