

# Women Food Vendors in the Hills of Manipur: An Empirical Study

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**Abstract** - Ukhrul a hill district in Manipur State, India was selected for a study of women food vendors. One of the key objectives of the study was to find out the many reasons that drive them into food vending venture and to draw a light upon their everyday struggle. Purposive sampling method was used for the study. The investigator used in-depth interview method with the help of structured interview schedule. The leading factor that came up when looked into the reason that drives them into this business was for them to be able to provide for their family livelihood. Most of the women belonged to a less privilege backgrounds and for them to be able to have a means to make available the needs for their family and be independent financially is a strong hold of empowerment and motivation. Poor educational background and lack of other employment opportunities compel most of these women to look for an occupation like food vending that does not require much start-up capital and requires little or no educational qualification. Major management of their family needs was met by their income. Food variety and availability for their own family consumption significantly magnifies when women enters this venture. The major challenges experience by them in their business was their constant everyday struggle to get profit from their perishable food items before they get spoiled while keeping up with their fellow competitors. Dealing with complains and disapproval of occupation of certain space by permanent shop keepers and local authorities are also their common struggle. They make the food preferred by the people in the region easily available in the street at cheap affordable prices and making the street effortlessly lively as well with their presence. But yet their contribution for the society in which they exist still seems to be invisible or ignored in general with hardly any provision of basic facilities such as vending sheds or toilets, etc. Measures to meet their basic necessities and improving their social security, needs to be urgently addressed by the concerned authorities.

**Keywords:** Women Vendors, Hill District of Manipur, Struggles, Motivation

## I. INTRODUCTION

The general numbers of street vendors in India are dramatically increasing; the exact numbers are hard or even impossible to tally because of the nature of their existence and spread all over the nooks and corners but according to Bhowmik<sup>1</sup> (2000) an estimate of around 10 million of population in India are street vendors. They are one of the most widely and visibly found unorganized service providers. Daily food items that are necessary and preferred by the people in particular region are made readily available by street vendors. Cohen, Bhatt & Horn, (2000) rightly mentioned that we often take them for granted and realize

their importance only when we do not find them in the place where we expect them to be, sitting under a temporary shed in the street or carrying out their business in a particular pathway. National Policy of Urban Street Vendors (2004) defines street vendors as, “A street vendor is a person who offers goods or services for sale to the public without having a permanently built structure but with a temporary static structure or mobile stall (or head-load). Street vendors could be stationary and occupy space on the pavements or other public/private areas, or could be mobile, and move from place to place carrying their wares on push carts or in cycles or baskets on their heads, or could sell their wares in moving buses.”

### A. Women Food Vendors

As it is in most of the unorganized sector of work studies have shown that in vending business too women vendors earn less than their male counterparts. Vendors work over 10 hours a day in an unpleasant condition earning an average income of 40 Rs. and 80 Rs. as according to the study of vendors in 7 metropolitan cities of India. Women vendors average earning is even lesser (Bhowmik<sup>2</sup>, 2000). Njaya and Murangwa (2016) observed that women vendors try to keep up with stiff competition from other street vendors like they have to take key responsibilities in child care and other household chores; men occupy bigger vending space and more strategic vending area; low investment of start-up capital or investment during their course of business; most women opting for perishable good like vegetables and fruits for vending due to gender bias between buying some items such as electronics, leather or motor vehicles are some of the contributing factors of low income for women vendors. Women enter this venture as a survival strategy when they have no other venture that they can rely on as they required low capital investment, rather only working capital.

Roever, S. (2014) quoted, “In many countries the larger numbers of street vendors are women”. Destombes (2010) suggested that in most of the households of these vendors, women tend to contribute the major or equal part of the income as their husbands or other income contributors in the family. When women earns and have control over their household spending most of the money spent is targeted towards household needs. Women tends to pay back loans faster, and the share of money spend within the family is

more fair (Thompson, 2011). Their roles does not only ends in providing the livelihoods for their family but they play an integral part in the economy in which they exist.

**II. RESEARCH DESIGN**

Ukhrul District, Manipur. A hill district located in Manipur state which is in the the North Eastern region of India. It is a land majorly occupied by the ethnic tribe called the Tangkhul tribe. 2011 census of GOI shows the district with a population of 183,115. Only tribal women vendors were selected as it is a study of the original occupants of the hills who are tribal.

*A. Data Collection*

1. FGD to get the general idea of over-all nature of the venture of women vendors.
2. In-depth interview using structured interview schedule to get hands-on information relating to the objectives of the study from each of the women vendors.
3. Observations were made to identify any salient features of the community and the women.

**III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS**

TABLE I SOCIO- ECONOMIC AND DEMOGRAPHIC BACKGROUND

Ownership of house		
Ownership	N=30	Percentage
Rented	15	50
Own House	15	50
Total	30	100.00
Types of Family		
Type	N=30	Percentage
Nuclear family	24	80
Joint family	6	20
Total	30	100.00
Source of start-up Capital		
Source	N=30	Percentage
Own money	22	73.34
Borrowed from family or friends	12	40
Loans//Credit	17	56.67
Others	0	0
Total	30	100.00
Duration of being a part of the venture		
Duration	N=30	Percentage
Less than 2 years	8	26.67
2-5 years	8	26.67
More than 5 years	14	46.67

The hilly region of Manipur is majorly resided by tribal. It was observed that vending of food items on the road or in temporary/kaccha shed in the area is mostly done by

women. Out of the women selected for the study 76% of the women were married. These women generally venture into this business after they get married, their motivation for which was to earn livelihood as they have to add-on to the income of the family or take charge of the expense and needs of the family. In tribal household with poor economic background it is generally considered equal responsibility of women as it is of men to be the bread winner of the family. Most of the women vendors hold low educational qualification, out of the women interviewed 43% of the women dropped out after primary school, only few i.e. 26% reached secondary school and the rest were illiterates.

During the past few decades family dynamics have changed and more joint family has broken down into nuclear families due to many aspects. In this study 80% of the women vendor families were living in a nuclear family set up, many of them moved from their village to the town either temporarily or permanently looking for better opportunity of work and education of their children. Half of them owned their own house and the other half were living in rented apartments.

It was also seen that 46% of the women had been in the business for a longer period of time for about 5 years and had the better privilege of occupying a more permanent spots despite the spot being occupied by them are more or less a temporary set up and they also have their own number of regular loyal customers.

TABLE II SOURCE OF GOODS FOR SELLING

Source of goods for selling						
Source	Own garden/farm		Whole sellers		Agents	
	N=30	%	N=30	%	N=30	%
Yes	10	33.34	27	90.00	2	6.67
No	20	66.66	3	10.00	28	93.33
Total	30	100	30	100	30	100.00

90% of the women respondents chose to get their supplies of food items from whole sellers who produce in small scale. Number of these women gets vegetables, fruits, fish or meat etc. from their kitchen garden, farms or directly collected from the forest for sell. The relation of tribal women with their forest is unimpeachable; forest provides them with all the resources that are needed in their everyday life whether it is food, fodder, or medicine, etc.

In an article by Manipadma Jena about tribal women of Gunduribadi it is mentioned that the forest is like an old friend that never fails to provide them with seasonal food or medicines and saving them from starvation during droughts and when their harvest is low. (Jena, M. 2016).

First of all the key motivation for women to enter this venture is for them to be able to earn livelihood for their family, 93% of the women interviewed had the same reason for starting this business as they come from a low economic background. Many of them thought they were not the only

income generator of the family were major provider and income contributor of their family. They save up whatever they can through a system of money pooling called “Marup” in Manipuri language, a very common and successful saving method for those women. They save the money daily, weekly, monthly or yearly and make use of their savings mostly for their children’s education and for expanding their household assets.

TABLE III MOTIVATION FOR WOMEN VENDORS

Source of start-up Capital		
Source	N=30	%
Own money	22	73.34
Borrowed from family or friends	12	40
Loans/Credit	17	56.67
Others	0	0
Total	30	100.00
Part of Marup		
	N=30	%
Yes	25	84
No	5	16
Total	30	100
Work Satisfaction		
	N=30	%
Not satisfied	0	0
Satisfied	11	36.67
Satisfied but had there been other opportunities they would have taken up different occupation.	19	63.33
Total	30	100

All the women (100%) respondents mentioned that they were satisfied with their work even though they opted for this venture as a survival strategy. 63% expressed that even though they are satisfied had there been other better opportunity they would not hesitate to grab it. Being financially and emotionally independent; and being able to provide for the needs of her children and family gave them satisfaction that motivates them to carry out their modest endeavor.

For most women vending is a more feasible option in the region because of its easy earning and requirement of low capital investment for start-up and for running the business, when a better paying jobs opportunity is also hard to come by with their low educational qualification. These women vendors also channel’s their motivation through the members of the family who supports them and helps them out in their household chores and relieves them with their dual work burden, 90% mentioned of the help they get from their family. Not only that but 73% of the women noted that one of their key motivation was their family members being adjustable and being ok with their work timings. A 55 years old vendor Rose from Lungshang village mentioned, “Sometimes to sell of all my food items for maximum profit

before they get spoiled I start early from home and use to come back after sunset, but my family members do not complain but rather they help in cooking, cleaning and all other household chores. Every time it reassures me that what I do is appreciated and it encourages me to work with joy.”

Women vendors were found to be very much aware of the significance of having a good relationship with the people they deal with every day in their business. They maintain good relationship with their fellow vendors and when asked about the quality of their relationship 70% mentioned it being good and 30% even rated their relation as very good. These women have also form themselves a union that had in the past and present help them in fighting for their rights and making their collective voice heard. During any big events or during funerals of any individual they make themselves available and present physically, emotionally and financially for the family. Luingamla 50 years from Longpi village said, “Now these women I sit together with are not just another vendor but they are like my family who I can rely on for everything. We have stood there for each other for many years.”

Regardless of the significant service they provide, their importance has continued to remain understated. Most of them still struggle to find a fix avenue to run their business. Street vendors are not covered under any legal provisions; the nature of their working state categorized them under unorganized/informal work sector. The environment in which they work in usually lack sufficient facilities sometimes even the basic facilities of toilets or proper work space, vending sheds, etc.

TABLE IV THE STRUGGLES OR CHALLENGES OF WOMEN VENDORS

Challenges		
	N=30	%
Competition from fellow vendors	28	93.34
Competition from permanent shop owners	24	80
Complaints and harassments from permanent shop owners and local authorities	6	20
High interest rate of loans and credits	17	56.67
Dealing with perishable items on a daily basis	30	100
Others	6	20
Various ways their business gets affected by bands and curfew		
	N=30	%
Spoilage of perishable food items	30	100
Affecting daily marup	26	86.67
Affecting profit	28	93.33
Others	2	26.67

The struggles or challenges of women vendors revealed by this study were as follows.

1. Complaints and harassments from permanent shop owners or some authorities of the town regarding the space they occupy. This problem is something that

remains unresolved and that which they regularly struggle to deal with in their business.

2. Financially the main struggles of women vendors was for them to keep up with the interest rate of loans from money lenders which at times reach 10% which do not leave them with much to take home after they pay the interest.
3. Every day they have to deal with unavailability of basic facilities such as public toilets in some areas or even if available the conditions of the toilets are such that there is no water or soaps, etc. available and it remains very dirty, but most of them have to use it as they have no other options.
4. Dealing with perishable food items- All food items have their own shelf lives and women have to continuously struggle to try to sell off their food items with short shelf life by any means before they get spoiled
5. The region of Manipur is very prone to bands and curfews this directly effects the business of women food vendors. They have to face a number of troubles such as their food getting spoiled, their daily “Marup”(money pooling) gets effected as they are not able to pay without their daily income, they gets to face numbers of such kinds of trouble every now and then.

TABLE V METHODS ADOPTED FOR REDUCING THE THREAT OF LOSSES

Methods adopted for reducing the threat of losses		
	N=30	%
Selling from home to home or at home	18	60
Distributing it to their neighbors	22	73.33
Adopting and learning methods to preserve food or keeping the food items fresh for longer period of time	27	90
Selling it in cheaper rate	14	46.67
Others	1	3.33

Women vendors have adopted various methods to cope with losses in their business and to deal with their problems. 60% of the women said that they sell their goods from home to home when they are not able to finish selling it off sitting at one place. They also sell their food products to their regular customers from their own home. From time to time they distribute the food items to their neighbors, this way instead of keeping their food and letting it get spoiled and get wasted they give them away which helps them with their social bonding and maintaining good relationship with their neighbors. Most importantly when these vendors start’s their business of food vending the availability of food in their own kitchen for their own family consumption is increased. Sometime they also sell it off at a cheaper rate at the end of the day so that they could earn some profit instead of taking home the leftovers. They have also adopted various methods of keeping food items fresh for longer. Fruit or vegetables are either dried or made into pickles, jams, juice, etc. which when sold can make better profit.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that women in the hills of Manipur who are making their living through food vending should be encouraged by looking into their welfare and providing better facilities for them. They are an informal entrepreneur who start up their own business and strives for their own independent livelihood earnings. They provide affordable food items for all including those in lower income groups. These vendors take an equivalent role as their male in providing livelihood for their family. There venture naturally ensures better health and nutrition for their children and family as they usually bring home the food item which they could not finish trading it off in market for their own family consumption. Many of them chose to enter this business because of lack of other good opportunities; they struggle to overcome tremendous amount of challenges like harassments, competition, lack of space and basic facilities, etc. in their business every day to fulfill the livelihood needs of their family. There should be improved law and order concerning in safeguarding their rights and providing better welfare for these women. The concerned local organizations and authorities should take proper actions for their well-being, there is a need to give trainings to these women to become more innovative and provide more service oriented strategies in their business to make them capable enough to carry out their important livelihood activities efficiently. They need to provide them with better facilities that are vendor friendly and that fulfill their basic needs to carry out their daily business smoothly and in a better secure environment.

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