

Livelihood Strategies of Marginalized Women Street Vendors: An Intersectional Study from Machhapokhari, Kathmandu

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Abstract: Street vending under the metropolitan restrictions in Kathmandu has been more regulated especially since 2022. Previous studies have illuminated the financial contributions and the difficulties faced by vendors. But little attention has been given to the livelihood strategies of women vendors through an intersectional lens. This study focuses on Machhapokhari, one of the busiest transit hub areas where women vendors are highly visible. This study draws on qualitative methods including participants' observations and in-depth interviews with 21 women vendors across multiple categories based on gender, migration status, class, marital status and age to examine how these interacting factors influence survival strategies. The finding indicates that women street vendors rely on an informal network for entry, guidance and support. As well as adopt useful decision-making tactics for what to sell, where to set up for vending and how to juggle multiple tasks to thrive in a city that can be harsh and unwelcoming. These strategies depict that it's both a strength and a part of resilience and expose compound vulnerabilities faced by single mothers with age and migrant women without husband support, kinship backing. By understanding each individual's surreal experiences through intersectionality. The study contributes on intersectional sociology and feminist urban studies by promoting inclusive urban government that acknowledges vendors as essential to the social and economic fabric of the city.

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1. Introduction

Rapid urbanization, rural migrants, locational benefits, the expansion of informal businesses and the role of municipal authorities are some of the factors that have shaped street vending in the Kathmandu Valley (Sharma, 2018). The Kathmandu Metropolitan City (KMC) has enforced restrictions and issued warnings against street hawking in public area since 2022 (Shrestha and Shrestha, 2024). These actions directly affect the livelihood of vendors with marginalized women disproportionately impacted due to intersecting categories of gender, migration background, age, marital status and single motherhood.

The Nepal Street Vendor Trade Union (NEST) estimates that there are currently 50,000 street vendors operating in KMC (Dahal & Sharma, 2023). However, NEST does not collect gender-specific data. Understanding who among vendors is most vulnerable and what livelihood strategies they employ for survival are the most essential to grasping the complex social reality of the urban informal economy in Nepal. Widely discussed general street vendors' issues in existing articles and media platforms fail to recognize the specific issue of the most vulnerable marginalized women vendors. Even among women vendors' differences exist where women tend to earn less than men for two main reasons. Firstly, they belonged to poorer families with less capital to invest and secondly they face time constraints due to caregiving responsibilities (Bhowmik, 2005).

Scholarship on street vending in Nepal and across the Global South has developed along three interconnected thematic lines relevant to this study: a) gendered vulnerabilities and economic benefits of vending b) municipal crackdowns and policy exclusion and c) theoretical frameworks of livelihood strategies and social network.

Theme A: Gendered Vulnerabilities and economic benefits of street vending.

Empirical studies reveal that while street vending provides crucial economic opportunities for marginalized populations, gendered disparities persist. Gajurel et al. (2024) highlight the fact that investing capacity, marital status and education all affect profitability despite people continue to engage in order to support family, repay debt and sustainability. Bhattarai and Pathak (2020) reveal that while vending certainly lift some households out of poverty. However, still nearly half remain below poverty line and persistently facing structural challenges. In pokhara, Khawas (2022) discloses how women vendors continuously face harassment and exclusion, symbolizing a silent resistance to urban authority. Women vendors continue vending despite claims that vending is illegal and strictly banned by the metropolitan police authority. It is all because of their main source of livelihood. They are doing it out of compulsion rather than choice. Extending this discourse, Sepadi (2025) shows how climate change worsen gender-specific vulnerabilities across Asia and Africa. Collectively, these several studies highlight the intersection of economic survival, policy exclusion and gendered resilience in street vending while Saxena (2024) advances discussion by situating vending within feminist geography arguing on how caste and gender co-constitute spatial experiences and access to urban power.

Theme B: Municipal crackdown and policy exclusion

Regarding policy issue in Kathmandu where the eviction of vendors under the municipal mandates has led to livelihood loss and constitutional disputes (Dahal and Sharma, 2023). Similarly, Thapa-Parajuli et al. (2024) identify vending as a survival strategy in Kirtipur and noting out its economic viability, exposure to municipal crackdown and weak infrastructure. Recio and Dovey (2021) noted that neoliberal urban planning is based on an economic agenda to enhance the city's competitiveness and attract investment. Consequently, cities promote only tall, shining buildings, large malls, high-rise apartments, luxury houses and prior infrastructure. While at the same time evicting poor communities and limiting the right to the city. Similarly, Lauermaann & Mallak (2023) show how neoliberal city-production strategies prioritize elite interests over the needs of marginalized groups, limiting their right to the city and reinforcing exclusionary governance. These scholars collectively call for inclusive approaches that recognize vendors as integral to the social and economic fabric of cities.

Theme C: Theoretical Frameworks - Livelihood Strategies, Social Networks and Urban Governance

Livelihood strategies refer to the diverse activities individuals adopt to sustain themselves within socio-economic and environmental settings. Scoones (1998) identifies three types of rural livelihood strategies: agricultural intensification or extensification, livelihood diversification and migration. Street vending itself is a livelihood strategy chosen to secure a sufficient and secure living (Peimani & Kamalipour, 2022). Recent scholarship emphasizes the importance of sustainable livelihood models for women entrepreneurs and highlights ability to access five elements of sustainable livelihood pentagon: Human Capital, Social Capital, Financial Capital, Physical Capital and Intellectual Capital. These capitals positively relate to business strategy under conditions such as volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (VUCA) (Hendratmi et al., 2022).

Social networks and decision-making tactics are pivotal components in shaping the livelihood strategies of marginalized women street vendors. Informal networks such as family, community members and other vendors play a crucial role in mitigating risks and fostering resilience (Ramya & Harisha, 2025). For marginalized women vendors, the guidance of neighbours and fellow vendors, acquaintances and informal connections, provide access to information, opportunities, resources, and facilitate entry into vending, production selection, and strategy to avoid municipal surveillance (Granovetter, 1973; Rai & Belbase, 2025). Bourdieu's (1986) concept of social capital highlights that access to resources embedded within networks and such networks are unequally distributed even among women vendors. Decision-making practices such as building loyal customer relationships, managing limited resources and navigating haggling situations. These strategies are essential for survival (Pugoy et al., 2025).

Despite this rich literature, this research study illustrates that important gap remain. The specific livelihood strategies of women street vendors in Machhapokhari, Kathmandu a densely populated urban transit hub and one of the busiest inter district terminals where women vendors are highly visible remain unexplored through an intersectional framework. This constitutes a theoretical and empirical research gap. To address this gap, this study draws on intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) which posits that multiple identities gender, migration status, class, marital status, age, single motherhood interacts to produce compounded vulnerabilities and distinct experience. Rather than treating "women vendors" as a homogenous group, this study examines how overlapping social positions shape livelihood strategies in a restrictive urban environment.

The aims of this research is to examine the livelihood strategies of marginalized women street vendors in Machhapokhari, Kathmandu. The study is guided by two central research questions:

- (1) How do social network support the livelihood strategies of marginalized women street vendors?

(2) How do decision-making practices in vending contribute to their livelihood strategies?

The specific objectives are to:

(i) assess how intersecting categories (migration status, age, marital status, single motherhood) shape social network support for women vendors.

(ii) examine how decision making practices that they employ as livelihood strategies.

The research attempts to capture the complex reality of each individual regarding daily experiences of these most marginalized women vendors. It provides an intersectional perspective highlights multiple obstacles which female vendors face and compel to overcome in order to make a living. In essence, this study aims not only document paper on the struggles of marginalized women street vendors but also to amplify the voices of these women who are excluded in policy discourse. The research contributes to feminist urban studies, the informal economy and intersectional sociology. And urging planners and policymakers to see street vendors not as problems but as integral parts of the city's social and economic fabric. As well as advocating for inclusive urban governance.

2. Materials and methods

The research was conducted using qualitative methods to uncover the livelihood strategies of disadvantaged women vendors. The analysis is guided by an intersectional framework focuses on how migration status, gender, single motherhood, class, and age interact to compound marginalization which plays a crucial role in shaping the complex realities of these women. And purposive sampling strategies were used to select participants based on the intersecting criteria of gender, age, migrant status, marital status and single motherhood.

The research involved 21 women street vendors representing diverse ages, classes, castes, regional and educational backgrounds. Most respondents were between 30 and 55 years old and with one younger participant aged 24. The respondents were Janajati (Tamang, Magar, Rajbansi), Chhetri, and Brahmin who represent both marginalized and privileged castes engaged in vending. All respondent vendors reported belonging to lower socio-economic backgrounds and described their lives as marked by rural hardship, poverty, and exclusion from formal job opportunities. Most respondents had no formal education while a few had completed up to the plus-two level. Despite limited schooling, they displayed strong adaptive skills in sustaining livelihoods through vending. All were rural to urban migrants from districts such as Nuwakot, Dhading, Ramechhap, Jhapa with vending experience from 3 months to twenty years. Migration decisions were shaped by limited rural opportunities, poverty, gendered family responsibilities, and economic hardship.

The primary data were collected from field observation and in-depth interviews with 21 vendors until thematic saturation was achieved. These tools facilitate capturing diverse perspectives, contextual nuances, knowledge of regulation and enforcement, everyday interactions with street vendors and the lived experiences of respondents. Field observation (non-participant and participant) provided visual and contextual insights into highly active and contested urban informal spaces. Fieldwork was conducted over three months (April–June 2025), during which rapport-building and informal conversations helped build trust and deepen understanding. Verbal consent was obtained and confidentiality was maintained through pseudonyms.

The research is limited to a specific group of women vendors at a single field location which may limit generalizability to other locations. Another is due to vendors' time constraints and demand for their vending work which affects the depth and duration of interviews. Despite these challenges, the study offers in-depth insights into the livelihood strategies and challenges of women street vendors in a dynamic urban context.

3. Results

The findings of this research revealed that women street vendors particularly in the area of Machhapokhari, navigate their livelihoods through a range of migration histories, gendered, class-based, age, marital status, and support levels from family, kinship, etc. The research results were obtained through thematic analysis of interviews and field observation on the livelihood strategies dimension of the marginal women street vendors. In which two major themes emerged and these explain how the women vendors relied on the social network and relationships, decision-making strategy from production selections to space selection through multitasking to sustain their livelihood in the restrictive environment in the urban area.

Women street vendors develop livelihood plans to sustain their day-to-day lives in the informal urban economy. For them, a livelihood strategy is a backbone for navigating urban space for survival. In the case of women vendors in field locations, these techniques are determined not only by economic need but also influenced by factors such as gender norms, migration histories, and household duties. As formal employment opportunities remain inaccessible due to a lack of education, skills, training, or systemic exclusion, women adopt street vending as a viable means of sustaining daily life. Under the livelihood strategies, there are two major themes which are given below:

3.1. Reliance on Informal Social Networks

Women street vendors mostly relied on the informal social relations and networks to survive their livelihood in the urban informal economy sector. These networks included elder sisters, husbands, relatives, neighbors, friends and co-vendors who provided guidance, skills, information and emotional support. During their beginning phases as a new vendor they depended particularly on others' experiences.

One vendor shared how her sister guided for entry into vending as like selling green leafy vegetable: *"I had never done this work before. It was my younger sister (maili didi) who taught me. She used to sell green leafy vegetables."* And she added, her fellow vendor whose location of vending was quite little ahead then her, she pre-informed if metropolitan authority came under surveillance in the road. (S. Tamang, Personal interview, 1 June 2025)

Another respondent described how past experience of family member eased in the process: *"My husband used to sell potatoes and onions. I learned from him and he supported me. And if some problem happens in the vending, next vendors assist him in calculation, weight and balancing price while confusion happen on the spot"*. (L.G. Timilsena, Personal interview, 2 June 2025)

Similarly, informal social ties facilitated proper guidance for survival to respondent. Respondent shifted into vending after her husband fell ill: *"I asked the corn-selling sister to find work for me but she encouraged me to start vending like her... She guided me when I needed it the most."* In addition, support of kinship, her both sons have gone to school. (Vendor A, Personal interview, 8 June 2025)

The findings disclose that one respondent explained that her younger sister taught her how to sell products and fellow vendor who even pre-informed her when authorities were patrolling nearby which helped her skip surveillance and protect goods from confiscation. Another vendor described how her husband support her and even he had past experience of selling potatoes and onions that eased her to enter into vending. She added that fellow vendors helped in calculations, weighing and balancing prices when confusion arose on the vending spot. Likewise, another woman shared how she moved into vending after her husband fell ill and one corn-selling encouraged her to start vending and guided her during the most difficult period. Even she mentioned that her sons were able to attend school due to support of kinship. Other respondents highlighted how neighbors and co-vendors assist by sharing information related to customer demand and strategy of escaping while police patrols and neighbor shop lending space for adjusting equipment of weighing when needed. These informal ties were not only limited with family members but also extended to community members and fellow vendors and creating a network for mutual support helped to navigate with daily challenges and way of alternatives for sustain livelihood which is tactful. Respondents consistently emphasized that without such guidance and assistance, it would be far more difficult to entry into vending. Across interviews women explained how these informal social connections provide mentorship, emotional encouragement and practical solution regarding vending. All respondents emphasize the importance of the social relationship in a restrictive urban environment for survival. Overall the findings show that informal networks functioned as crucial source of knowledge, skill, backbone while having problem, guidance and support systems for women vendors which enable to continue vending despite the absence of formal institutional assistance.

3.2. Adaptive Decision-Making in Contested Urban Space

Women street vendors use a variety of strategic decisions and adaptable business methods to survive in a highly regulated and frequently unfriendly urban environment. Their decisions for goods, locations, mobility, and timing are informed by both practical factors and the structural constraints they face on a daily basis. The results show that women's ability to make such decisions is influenced by domestic duties, economic pressures and safety concerns.

One vendor described how she organizes vending goods to quickly avoid authorities and also utilizing support from local residents:

"All these vegetable products are from my own garden. I display them in large plastic containers rather than using a mat, as it's quicker to pack and escape when authorities patrol the area. I keep my weighing scale inside the gate; the house owner here is friendly, so I have access to keep it there. Whenever I need to weigh the products, I go inside, weigh them, and then give them to the customers." (S. Tamang, 2nd June, 2025)

Another respondent emphasized the importance of choosing seasonal and lighter goods which is appropriate to reduce physical strain and for profit margin as well:

"I don't sell vegetables or fruits because they are heavy to carry. Instead, I sell corn in summer, flower during festivals, and peanuts in winter, wisely selecting products because they are lighter and still sell well. I use a crate in front of my rented room. But on holidays I take a pushcart because there is less surveillance. To bring products every day, I go along with other vendors' friends on the same bus; it's easier and safer that way." (S. Giri, 2nd June 2025)

A third vendor described how she chose different places based on the time of day, diversified her product line, and combined vending with tailoring work:

"I deliberately choose to sell clothes, which are non-perishable items; if they don't sell today, they will sell tomorrow. And in the daytime, I do tailoring in a clothes shop and even sew clothes in my room; I have a machine if some customer asks for tailoring. In the morning and evening I do vending in two different locations. In the morning sitting in a vegetable vending location and in the evening a different field location at the point of the pedestrian bridge but both are within the Basantanagar area." (Vendor C, Personal Interview, 3rd June 2025)

Another participant explained for juggling multiple type of labors due to financial necessity and a lack of household support:

"I do whatever work I can find. In the morning, I sell green leafy vegetables during the day, I work as a house helper, and I sell grilled corn in the evening hours. My husband's income never reaches home. He wastes it on gambling." (M. Khadka, Personal Interview, 4th June 2025).

Vendors story reveal that they use several common strategies and practices to navigate with the situation that emerged in vending activities while balancing livelihood needs, mobility and surveillance pressures. One vendor emphasized the importance of organizing goods in such ways that allow for fast departure when authorities arrive, revealing how she utilizes large plastic containers instead of mats to speed up packing and exit. She also emphasized the importance of local support, mentioning that the house owner near her vending spot where let her store a weighing scale inside the gate. It enables her to weigh products discreetly and continue transactions without drawing attention. Another respondent emphasized the significance of product selection explaining that she avoids selling heavy items like vegetables or fruits instead choose seasonal and lighter products such as corn in summer, flowers during festivals and peanuts in winter. This choice decrease physical strain while maintaining profitability. She further explained how she adapts her vending setup according on surveillance levels and utilizing a crate in front of her rented room on ordinary days. But she uses pushcart during holidays when monitoring is less strict. She also described the collective strategies vendors employ such as going together market on the same bus to transport things daily which she finds easier and safer.

A third woman vendors explained diversification in vending location and with the decision to sell clothing as non-perishable items that do not spoil if unsold. Her vending time were one in the morning and one in the evening around differ location of Basantanagar. She even sewed and tailored clothes in shop during the day and at home when customers requested. Another participant described how she had to balance several form of labor such as working as a housekeeper during the day, selling grilled corn in the evening and selling green leafy vegetable in the morning due to financial necessity. She noted that her husband's income was unreliable due to gambling which made her own earnings essential for household survival.

These narratives illustrate a range of practices including organizing goods for mobility, selecting products according to convenience, profitability, mitigation risk as per their idea and relying on community support. Vendors adapt to authority surveillance and adjust their vending methods depending on context. As well balancing multiple responsibilities for income security. The findings show that vending is not a singular activity but a flexible livelihood strategy, structured around daily adjustments, seasonal variations, diverse labors to meet household needs. All together, these stories demonstrate how vendors navigate mobility, surveillance, product choices and labor diversification in order to survive themselves within challenging urban contexts.

4. Discussion

From an intersectional perspective, the reliance of women vendors on social networks shows how class, gender, migration status, marriage status and family structure intersect to influence access of resources and opportunities. This is how defined less marginalized or more marginalized. Such women are little privileged who have supportive partner or come from families with previous market experience can more easily acquire skill, guidance, support and have smoother entry into informal vending. The same finding is also shown in another study conducted among women vendors in Delhi, India(Sharma,2024). In contrast, those women without such support from partner, relatives, and co-vendor friends face greater challenges navigating both economic pressures and gender expectation while doing vending. Likewise, similar result demonstrates while case study done regarding women vendors in Philippines (Langbid-Roda et al., 2024). Similarly, migrant women rely on their pre-existing kins or families on this unfamiliar urban environment which illustrates that how migration and urban marginalize intersect with gendered labor roles. Even though social network provides knowledge, mentorship and support (Wango et al., 2022), its access to all women are not uniformity. Rather shaped by women's overlapping social position.

Women with supportive husbands, use differ business tactics, frequently sharing financial obligations, get resources more easily but women who are the primary breadwinners due to an unsupportive husband or being single create adaptive survival strategies. As Medved (2016) shows that breadwinning mothers discursively reproduce, resist or challenge hegemonic gender relations which reflect the complexity of how women position themselves as earners. In our findings, most disadvantaged women diversify work throughout the day and focus on high demand product but in low quantity. They select daily sale items like corn and green vegetables or nonperishable items like small clothing pieces. This resonates with Jumiyaniti et al., (2024) who identify livelihood diversification and micro business development as common economic adaptation strategies among poor women heads of households those facing continuously poverty, gender discrimination and limited access to resources. This highlights how several categories gender, class, migration status, single mother, marital status, women with unsupportive husband, relatives and structural exclusion compound vulnerability and influence on decision making as well business tactics in the urban informal economy.

Evidence from Dhaka city reveals that migrant women in the informal sector face severe obstacles such as harassment, social stigma, financial exclusion and extortion which hindering their business growth and safety. The findings of this

article indicate that how social exclusion like limited access to credit, health insurance and social protection such reinforces their vulnerability (Sifullah et al., 2023). Even highlighting the need for policy interventions that address these intersecting barriers.

While doing critical analysis of strategies regarding decision making in vending such as choosing lighter goods, diversifying products and combining multiple form of work with vending depict women truly navigating structural exclusion. Side by side, these strategies show the limits of resilience. For instance, multiple wage labor, domestic work and children care reflects both adaptability and exhaustion due to unstable income stress. While observed their reliance on informal network due to absence of formal institutional support reflects how ignorant towards them and leave them to dependent on informal ties which might not be always reliable or equitable. This unequal access of network mirrors broader structural inequalities in urban governance and social protection.

5. Conclusion

This intersectional study of women street vendors moves in Machhapokhari, Kathmandu moves beyond treating vendors as a homogenous group. Moreover, women street vendors group reveal how overlapping identities particularly migration status, single motherhood, age, marital women with spouse support and class differentially shape access to informal social networks and adaptive decision making strategies. While existing literatures specifically focused on the gendered vulnerabilities in street vending. However, this research paper highlights that livelihood strategies of women street vendors are unfairly distributed within themselves. Such as women with supportive husbands or family vending histories enter more smoothly and access stronger networks whereas single mothers, migrant women without kinship backing and those with unsupportive partners must depend on exhausting multiple occupation juggling, product diversification and tactical mobility to survive. Everyday negotiations of the most marginalized vendors show these compound of vulnerabilities and surreal. This study contributes an intersectional analysis to feminist urban studies and informal economy scholarship. This research challenging one size fits all policy approaches and now affirms resilience should not obscure structural abandonment. Future research should conduct longitudinal and comparative studies tracking how livelihood strategies of women vendors shift over time with different intersectional profiles. Particularly, in response to changing municipal enforcement cycles, to determine whether adaptive strategies lead to upward mobility or producing chronic uncertainties. Additionally, intersectional policy research is needed to examine how Kathmandu Metropolitan City's anti-vending regulations disproportionately affect older migrants, single mothers, and young unmarried migrants through fines, confiscation, and harassment.

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