



Income, Vulnerability and Empowerment of Women Street Vendors in Haflong Town of Assam

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ABSTRACT: Street vending constitutes an important segment of urban labour market for a temporary source of subsistence self employment in India since time immemorial. The benefit of street vending is that, employment can be created without adequate government intervention except some regulatory mechanism like municipal board or parking fee etc. But, the income generated from such employment cannot be sustainable in most of the hilly areas of North Eastern States (NES) as it can provide only a bare minimum amount of income especially in the lower circuit of urban informal sector. In addition, women in such employment are really vulnerable when they are mostly engaged in vegetable vending like occupations in small hill towns. The present study seeks to understand the income and employment pattern of women engaged in vegetable vending in Haflong town of Assam. Haflong town is located in erstwhile North Cachar Hills (presently Dima Hasao district) of Assam. The survey has been conducted with pre tested schedule among thirty women vegetable vendors in the town to understand the income, vulnerability and empowerment pattern of the sample respondents. It is found that vulnerability and livelihood situation of the sample women vegetable sellers are not in a decent condition. By using basic statistical tools, from the discussion, it can be deduced that there is urgent need for facilitating access to suitable and adequate space, institutional credit, social security and skills to the urban vegetable women vendors.

Keywords: Women, vendors, hills, community, income, employment, vulnerability

I. INTRODUCTION

Both the home based workers and street vendors constitute a bulky set of workers in urban informal sector in small Indian cities. But, the street vendors are more visible in their workplace as they are seen in the roadside whereas home based workers are not visible because of their workplace inside the home and under four walls of Kitchen and homestead. The size and type of street vendors varies from place to place in Indian states. However, the situation is quite inimitable in the least pronounced areas like landlocked, small and poverty ridden Haflong town of Assam. A good number of indigenous communities do live in this town since long. Some of the communities are interstate migrants while others are native to the place. The migrants usually perceived to increase the urban population and they are mostly engaged in informal economy (Kundu, 2009). The sex ratio in the state of Assam has been calculated as 958 in 2011 census which is higher than all India figures of 940.

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This ratio is 932 in Dima Hasao district under which Haflong town is located. However, our study is mostly confined to the ST people who are indigenous to the town and their sex ration has been calculated as 984 which is one of the highest among all other castes (Ministry R.D, 2011).

II. WOMEN IN URBAN INFORMAL LABOUR MARKET

Women constitute nearly half of the population of the country and the development will not be inclusive if trickle down effects do not operate for women at large. The gender theorists of urban labour market (standing apart from the feminist perspective) stress the fundamental societal and cultural factors that put women in substandard position both at home and labour market. The subordinate position of women in the labour market and their families are inter-related. Gender theorists suggest that women's inferior position in the labour market can be traced to allocation of higher domestic duties (Rustagi, 2009; Neff et.al, 2012; Kulshreshtha and Singh, 2005). To recognise women as a growth agent in India's political economy across all sectors, the Committee of Feminist Economist (CFE) was constituted by planning commission to review the facts and analysis of the planning through a gender lens. There are only one third of the India's workforce consist of women out of whom 67 percent were engaged in agriculture (Papola & Sahu, 2012). As agriculture becomes an occupation of the marginalised basically performed by the poor, women in such occupation take it as a secondary or tertiary occupation. In small and less developed towns like Haflong, the predominance of self employment at subsistence level is very common. Street vending constitutes a lion's share of urban labour market in many metropolitan cities like Maharastra and Kolkata while it constitutes roughly 2 percent of the total city population in Indian cities. Women are mostly seen as a major percentage of the street vendors in urban centres which provide a source of employment for the poor and also seen as a convenient service to the urban consumers (Government, 2009).

III. ABOUT THE STUDY AREA

Haflong town is spread over 12.79 square kilometres with an elevation of nearly 3170 feet. It is situated in the Dima Hasao district of Assam (One of the North Eastern States of India). The town is basically a hill town with a good number of tribes and communities reside who are aborigines of the place. But, in recent time due to heavy influx from nearby districts and states, a large proportion of businessmen have temporally or sometime permanently settled in the town. It has raised the size of the population of the town in last few decades.

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According to Census 2011, Haflong town houses 15139 households with a population of 76721 of which 39764 are males and 36957 are females. Haflong town committee is divided into 14 wards. Of the total workers, female workers constitute 26 percent whereas marginal and non workers constitute 55 percent and 59 percent respectively.

The predominance of marginal workers, household industry workers and non workers roughly tend to be the participants of informal sector.

IV. OBJECTIVES

The present study seeks to attain the following objectives:

- To conceptualize street vendors as an informal sector employee in Haflong town of Assam
- To study the earnings and working hours of sample women vegetable vendors in the study town
- To understand vulnerability (in terms of carrying vegetables) and empowerment (in terms of decision making) of the study sample

V. DATA SOURCES AND METHODOLOGY

The present tiny study is based on both primary and secondary sources of information. The secondary data are gathered from Census of India, Dima Hasao Autonomous Council, reputed and referred Journals and articles in referred books. Primary data are collected from purposively selected women vegetable vendors in daily market of Haflong town. There is no specific data available to know the size of the population engaged in women vegetable vending and therefore, the researcher tries to collect from all the women vendors of the daily market excluding only three vendors who do not understand any national language. At last, a total of 30 women vegetable vendors were selected for the final survey and due attention was given to represent every tribes in the market. The collected data were recorded in SPSS and only percentages are calculated to achieve the objectives of the research.

VI. COMMUNITY WISE DISTRIBUTION OF THE SAMPLE

There are more than twelve ethnic tribes namely Dimasa, Zeme, Biata, Jaintia, Hrangkhoh, Hmar, Kuki, Vaiphei, Khelma, Rongmei, Lushai, Karbi etc., live harmoniously together within Dima Hasao district. A good number of non tribal groups like the Assamese, Bengali, Nepali, etc., also stay who are mostly government employees, traders, living in urban and semi-urban areas. Most of the villages of Haflong are situated far from modern conveniences and inaccessible by road or rail. The district is not seen to raise internal sources to meet the non developmental expenditure; there has been tendency to multiply both administrative units and employees beyond reasonable requirement. However, the present study sample can be segregated with the following community wise distribution

Table 1.1

Community wise Distribution of the Sample

Name of the Community	Frequency	Percentage
Bengali	10	33.3
Nepali	06	20
Naga	03	10
Kuki	03	10

Hrangkhoh	02	6.7
Dimasa	02	6.7
Khasi	02	6.7
Assamese	01	3.3
Hmar	01	3.3
Total	30	100

Source: Field Survey, 2019

In the total sample of thirty women vegetables vendors, highest share is occupied by the Bengali community (33.3 percent) followed by Nepali (20 percent) community. The lowest share is occupied by Assamese (3.3 percent) and Hmar (3.3 percent). The surveyed vendors were probed on their home location and it was found that more than 40 percent of the sample women vendors come from one to five kilometres distant from the market either on foot or by public transportation. But, most of them reported that they come on foot by which they can save their money spent on transportation. The vegetables which are sold by the sample respondents are mostly produced either at their kitchen garden or they collect some leafy vegetables from the jungles. But, due to lack of technological modernisation of agriculture, defective agricultural marketing and excessive dependence on monsoons, many vendors, now a days, are not interested to grow agricultural produce at their homes. Alternatively, they like to purchase vegetables from someone else in the village and sell them in the market. As far as the earnings are concerned, it was highly fluctuating as few large vendors from outside the town do come for selling many inorganic vegetables in recent time which has condensed their demand. Further, it has become difficult for them to feed the growing population as they produce only for sustaining their livelihood without any agricultural surplus.

VII. EARNINGS OF THE SAMPLE RESPONDENTS

Earning data is most vital and always difficult to get from the respondents like women vegetable street vendors. The survey was conducted during the market hour which basically starts from 15:00 hrs to 19:00 hrs in winter season. The respondents were not only asked directly on their earnings but observation was made by staying near the vendors more than three hours to know the absolute range of earnings for which our sample was comparatively less (although the size of the population is also smaller).

Table 1.2

Earnings of the Sample Respondents in Haflong Town

Earnings Per Month	Number of Vendors	Percentage
Less than 3000	15	50
3000-5000	06	20
5000-8000	07	23.3
Above 8000	02	6.7
Total	30	100

Source: Field Survey, 2019

The earnings of the sample women vegetable vendors reveal that 50 percent of the earners belong to the earnings less than 3000 per month.

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The daily earnings were converted to monthly basis which includes the non working days as well because it was not possible to know the exact number of working days in that locality (frequent public agitation and bandh call is common in Haflong town). Nearly 23 percent of the sample respondents reported that their earnings lie between Rs.5000 to Rs.8000 per month. The earnings of the women respondents are not in a good condition as it is very difficult to sustain a family only with income less than Rs.3000 per month in a small and hilly town like Haflong. The income insecurity is thus evident among the sample women respondents.

Table 1.3
Community wise distribution of Earnings of Sample Respondents

Name of the Community	How much do you earn per month				Total
	1000-3000	3000-5000	5000-8000	Above 10000	
Bengali	08	01	01	-	10
Nepali	03	02	01	-	06
Naga	01	-	1	1	03
Kuki	02	-	1	-	03
Hrangkhohol	-	-	1	1	02
Dimasa	-	02	-	-	02
Khasi	01	01	-	-	02
Assamese	-	-	01	-	01
Hmar	-	-	01	-	01
Total	15	06	07	02	30

Source: Field Survey, 2019

It is seen from the table that majority of the communities earn in the lowest slab of income that is between Rs.1000 to Rs.3000 per month (50 percent of the total sample respondents) followed by nearly 23 percent of the sample respondents earn between Rs.5000 to Rs.8000 per month. However, Naga, Assamese and Hmar people are found to get more income than that of other tribes and communities. This may be due to the fact that there are very less number of representation in the sample or they only sell those vegetables which are produced at their own kitchen garden where the cost of production is meagre. But, altogether, 50 percent of the sample respondents are in the lowest income slab indicating a financial hardship of the sample respondents.

Table 1.4
Working Hours of Sample Respondents per Day

Hours	Number of Workers	Percentage
Less than 6 hours	09	30
6-8 hours	03	10
More than 8 hours	18	60
Total	30	100

Source: Field Survey, 2019

Table 1.4 represents the working hours of the sample respondents. More than 60 percent workers reported that they used to work more than normal working hours that are eight hours per day. Only 40 percent of them work for normal working hours. The working hour includes the time devoted in cooking, cleaning, cultivation, maintenance of social relationship and all other unpaid work usually done

by women. The reason behind this is that women vendors come to their market area from distant places. It is also seen that more than 40 percent of them come in vehicles including carrier vans, mini trucks etc, since regular bus facilities are not available to those places. Moreover, 30 percent of them come on foot to their work places. Indecent working conditions are characterised by longer working hour, income insecurity, absence of social security etc, which are highly pronounced in globalised world of work (Kantor, et.al, 2006).

Table 1.5
Amount of Vegetables carried in the basket by the Sample Respondents

Name of the Community	How much vegetables do you carry at the basket						Total
	10	15	20	25	30	40	
Bengali	01	02	03	-	01	-	07
Nepali	02	03	01	-	01	01	08
Naga	01	-	-	-	01	01	03
Kuki	-	-	01	-	02	-	03
Hrangkhohol	-	-	01	01	-	01	03
Dimasa	-	-	01	-	01	-	02
Khasi	-	-	01	-	01	-	02
Assamese	-	-	-	-	01	-	01
Hmar	-	-	01	-	-	-	01
Total	04	03	06	01	08	03	30

Source: Field Survey, 2019

Sample women vendors carry their saleable vegetables in locally made baskets (made of bamboo with suitable handicraft). It is very difficult to measure the true magnitude of the basket they carry as most of the time the vendors do not sell their items in standard unit of measurement. More than 32 percent of the sample respondents reported that they carry 30 kilogram of vegetables (roughly) while about 24 percent reported that they carry more than 20 kilogram in their baskets. Surprisingly, three women told that they carry more than 35 kilogram in their baskets (Table 1.5). Thus, physical hardship is very common among the tribes in hilly areas which are comparatively more than plain areas (Papola, 2017).

Table 1.6
Empowerment Indicators of the Sample Vendors

Name of the Community	Do you make specific decision independently in households		Total
	Yes	No	
Bengali	10	-	10
Nepali	05	01	06
Naga	02	01	03
Kuki	02	01	03
Hrangkhohol	02	-	02
Dimasa	01	01	02
Khasi	-	02	02
Assamese	01	-	01

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Hmar	01	-	01
Total	24	06	30

Source: Field Survey, 2019

Four specific questions were asked to the sample respondents to understand the fundamental empowerment status.

The questions were on decision making power on one's own health care, purchasing major household products, purchasing of daily needs and visit to the family and relatives. The questions were asked specifically as time was very limited to probe them. It was the market workplace where survey was conducted and respondents do not feel good enough to answer very long questions. Such aspects were tried to understand by asking whether they can perform those independently or not. There are 80 percent of the sample respondents who stated that they participate in such affairs at households independently, rest 20 percent are found to be taken decision with the help of the other male family members. However, during the interview, sample women were telling that they also perform many other activities at the household like fetching of water, feeding domestic animals, taking care of children and elderly, drying of grains and seeds and cleanliness work. Thus, it can be argued that both simple and complex division of labour are in existence among women in urban informal sector.

VIII. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Most of the studies in urban informal sector are done basically in diversified categories. Such categories are Micro studies, Macro studies, studies on various aspects (social, economic, health securities), enterprise based studies and worker based studies etc. The present study can be categorised as a Micro study since it is conducted in a small town. Vegetable vending by women in small cities like Haflong are mainly done for subsistence living. Self employment is such an avenue of employment where government effort is almost absent otherwise the subsistence nature of self employment would not have been pronounced in many literatures. There are nine communities basically engaged in vending of vegetables in the daily market of Haflong among whom Bengali and Nepali occupies the highest share. Earnings of most of the sample respondents are less than Rs.3000 per month which is very low for sustaining a family in a hilly town. To earn such a meagre income, the respondents need to work for more than eight hours per day which include their travelling to the market place as well. Carrying of vegetables in bamboo baskets is another vulnerability observed during the survey. The respondents had to carry more than 30 kilogram of vegetables at their baskets which is an absolute physical hardship. However, the decision making power at the household independently among the sample women are found to be highly satisfactory. Development of market infrastructure of the vegetable vendors (especially public provisioning of vehicles, market shed etc..) is the need of the hour for district administration. This must be followed by creation of gainful employment in the small town should be an added attention that the government must intervene.

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