



The Informal Economy as a Site of Empowerment: Experiences of Women Street Vendors in Delhi

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Abstract

The informal economy plays a crucial role in sustaining urban livelihoods, particularly for marginalized groups such as women street vendors. In Delhi, these women navigate socio-economic constraints, legal ambiguities, and gendered barriers while using street vending as a means of economic survival and empowerment. This study examines the status, challenges, and empowerment experiences of women street vendors in Delhi through a mixed-methods approach involving surveys, in-depth interviews, and secondary literature analysis. Findings reveal that while street vending provides income, autonomy, and bargaining power within households, systemic barriers such as harassment, lack of social security, and inadequate policy implementation continue to hinder full empowerment. The paper concludes by recommending targeted policy interventions that combine legal protection, skill development, and gender-sensitive urban planning.

Keywords: Marginalized Group, Informal Economy, Women Street Vendors, Empowerment

1. Introduction

The informal economy constitutes a substantial share of India's labour market, accounting for over 80% of total employment and serving as a cornerstone of both rural and urban economic activity [1]. Within this broad framework, street vending represents a highly visible and vital sub-sector, delivering low-cost goods and services to diverse consumer groups while simultaneously providing livelihoods to millions of marginalized workers [2]. In metropolitan regions such as Delhi, women street vendors form an increasingly important yet vulnerable subset of this workforce. Their economic contributions are significant—supporting household incomes, sustaining urban supply chains, and fostering local market ecosystems—yet their labour remains undervalued, under-recognized, and largely excluded from formal labour protections [3]. Street vending offers women more than a survival mechanism; it functions as a potential pathway to empowerment by enhancing their control over earnings, improving household decision-making authority, and expanding personal mobility [4]. However, the empowerment derived from such work is neither absolute nor guaranteed. It is shaped and often constrained by structural inequalities, including gender discrimination, precarious working conditions, inadequate infrastructure, and limited access to credit. The absence of effective policy enforcement—despite the existence of protective legislation such as the *Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014*—further exacerbates these vulnerabilities [5]. Against this backdrop, the present study critically examines the interplay between street vending, socio-economic empowerment, and the structural constraints faced by women vendors in the urban context of Delhi, aiming to highlight both the opportunities and challenges inherent in this segment of the informal economy.

According to the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2002b), the term “informal economy” encompasses all types of economic activities that operate either within or outside legally recognized and regulated frameworks. The concept of informality—often described as working in the “shadow economy”—has evolved significantly over the decades in response to changing global labour market dynamics. A milestone in this conceptual development came in 1993, when the Fifteenth International Conference of Labour Statisticians (15th ICLS) proposed a universal definition of informal employment. Under this definition, the informal sector consists of jobs that are not permanent in nature, including temporary, contractual, and part-time positions, as well as self-employment without secure contractual arrangements. The ILO (2013a) defines a business in this context as “any organisation engaged in the production, processing, storage, or distribution of goods or services, employing workers in exchange for

wages or other forms of compensation.” Workers in the informal sector may include self-employed individuals, home-based workers, and those without a permanent place of work—such as street vendors—whose enterprises often lack formal registration and adequate financial record-keeping (ILO, 1993). Importantly, the 15th ICLS shifted the definitional emphasis from the characteristics of individual workers to the nature of the enterprises themselves (the enterprise approach). This means that only those employed within informal enterprises are counted as informal sector workers. However, this definition presents limitations, as it complicates the classification of individuals whose livelihoods straddle multiple economic arrangements—for example, those who combine paid employment with freelance work (ILO, 2002b). Recognizing these gaps, the Delhi Expert Group on Informal Sector Statistics, in conjunction with the ILO’s Labour Statisticians, sought to broaden the conceptual scope in 2003 by integrating the notion of informal employment into the Seventeenth International Conference of Labour Statisticians (17th ICLS) framework (ILO, 2002b). This expanded definition included:

- Employers and own-account workers in informal enterprises;
- Employees working in informal enterprises without secure contracts;
- Unpaid family workers contributing to informal enterprises;
- Workers producing goods for own final use;

Part-time workers in both formal and informal enterprises who lack employment security (Husmanns, 2004). This broader framework acknowledged that the term “informal sector” alone could not capture the complexity, diversity, and fluidity of informal economic arrangements. The term “informal economy” was thus adopted to encompass a much wider array of enterprises and workers, covering both conventional and non-traditional forms of employment (ILO, 2002a). This distinction is critical, as it reflects different dimensions of “informalisation”—the process by which economic activity increasingly operates outside formal regulatory systems (ILO, 2013a).

In practice, informal economy participation extends far beyond the stereotypical image of street vending. For example, the activities of a street vendor may involve assistance from family members or the hiring of casual workers. Furthermore, the occupational diversity within street vending is vast, ranging from stall owners selling food and clothing to service providers such as cobblers, fruit sellers, and roadside barbers. Informality is not confined to any one country or economic system. While it is more prevalent in developing economies, it is a global phenomenon. Bonnet, Leung, and Chacaltana (2018), writing for the ILO, observed that informal employment accounts for just 18.3% of the working-age population in industrialized nations, compared to a staggering 69% in emerging and developing economies. In absolute terms, nearly 2 billion people worldwide are engaged in informal employment. The highest regional concentrations are found in Africa (85.8%), the Arab States (68.6%), and Asia (68.2%) of the working-age population (Bonnet et al., 2018). Despite its lack of legal recognition and its association with precarious working conditions, exploitation, and marginalization, the informal sector remains a crucial contributor to the economies of developing nations (Darbi et al., 2018). It provides essential income-generating opportunities for millions, sustains household livelihoods, and plays an integral role in urban economies, particularly in sectors like street vending, where the lines between survival strategies and entrepreneurial activities are often blurred.

Objectives of the Study

1. To assess the socio-economic profile of women street vendors in Delhi.
2. To examine how street vending contributes to women’s economic and social empowerment.
3. To identify the challenges and barriers faced by women street vendors.
4. To propose policy measures for improving their status and empowerment.

2. Review of Literature

Jain (2002) – Gendered Dimensions of Urban Informality[6] in her seminal exploration of the gendered dimensions of urban informality, investigated the socio-economic positioning of women street vendors in Delhi, shedding light on how entrenched gender norms shape their access to space, capital, and informal networks. Drawing on detailed ethnographic interviews, her research revealed that women's entry into vending was often driven by necessity—triggered by household financial crises, widowhood, or lack of alternative employment opportunities—yet this transition into self-employment received little to no support from formal institutions. While street vending offered them a degree of income autonomy and work flexibility compatible with domestic responsibilities, it also exposed them to unsafe working conditions, precarious earnings, and exclusion from urban policy planning. Through the lens of *Feminist Political Economy Theory*, Jain argued that women's economic agency in the informal economy is not merely shaped by market forces but deeply constrained by structural patriarchy and the governance failures of urban authorities, which perpetuate gendered marginalization in public workspaces.

Bhowmik (2005) – Street Vending as Livelihood Security[7] conducted one of the most comprehensive empirical surveys on street vending in Indian cities, covering Mumbai, Ahmedabad, and Delhi, to understand its role as a livelihood strategy. His study revealed that women constituted a significant proportion—exceeding 30% in some locations—of the total vendor population, with most belonging to marginalized caste groups and migrant families lacking formal education. Street vending emerged as a critical survival mechanism, enabling these women to contribute substantially to household sustenance, urban food distribution, and local economies. However, Bhowmik documented that women vendors are disproportionately vulnerable to eviction drives, police harassment, confiscation of goods, and arbitrary fines, given their weaker bargaining power in male-dominated vendor associations and absence of secure vending rights. Employing *Informal Sector Theory* (Hart, 1973) within the Indian context, the study concluded that despite its indispensable role in urban sustenance, the informal sector remains a site of deep economic vulnerability for women unless legal recognition, protective regulations, and inclusive urban planning frameworks are implemented.

Mitra (2008) – Gender, Migration, and Informal Work[8] further expanded the discourse by examining the intersections of gender, migration, and informal work in the street vending sector of Kolkata and Howrah. Using life history narratives, she traced how rural-to-urban migration—often triggered by agrarian distress, crop failures, or debt cycles—pushed women into vending through kinship and community networks in the city. While these networks provided initial entry into the trade, they rarely translated into long-term economic security. Migrant women, in particular, faced heightened precarity as migration severed their ties to rural land rights, leaving them without a fallback asset base, while the urban informal economy offered no legal or social security safeguards. Mitra concluded that the disadvantages these women face are not the result of a single factor but the cumulative effect of intersecting identities—gender, caste, migration status, and poverty—which compound their marginalization in both rural and urban contexts. Drawing on *Intersectionality Theory* (Crenshaw, 1989), she argued that policies addressing women vendors' challenges must account for these overlapping axes of disadvantage to avoid superficial interventions that fail to address structural inequities.

Saha (2013) – Economic Contributions of Women Vendors[9] conducted a critical analysis of municipal planning policies in Jaipur to examine their implications for women street vendors, with a particular focus on how urban renewal and beautification projects alter the spatial dynamics of vending. Her findings revealed that redevelopment initiatives—such as widening roads, constructing commercial complexes, and enforcing zoning changes—often led to the systematic displacement of vending zones without providing viable relocation sites. This

process disproportionately impacted women vendors who depended on fixed, community-based clientele and lacked the mobility or resources to shift operations to new, high-traffic areas. Sharma argued that the treatment of street vending as an act of illegal encroachment, rather than as a legitimate form of livelihood, reflects a persistent failure to recognize the economic and social contributions of women in the informal sector. Guided by *Right to the City Theory* (Lefebvre, 1968), her work framed this exclusion as a form of spatial injustice, where women's claims to urban public spaces are systematically denied by planning regimes that prioritize commercial capital over inclusive livelihood strategies.

Tripathi & Singh (2015) – Policy Impact of Street Vendors Act 2014[10] undertook an evaluative study on the early implementation of the *Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014* in Lucknow, focusing specifically on its impact on women vendors. Their field survey revealed a stark gap between the Act's promise of legal recognition and its on-ground execution. Procedural delays in forming Town Vending Committees, the absence of gender-sensitive licensing mechanisms, and weak enforcement of designated vending zones meant that women vendors continued to face eviction threats, harassment, and income instability. Moreover, the male-dominated nature of decision-making bodies often excluded women's voices from critical planning processes. The authors concluded that in the absence of gender-specific safeguards, such legal reforms risk replicating pre-existing structural inequities instead of dismantling them. Drawing on *Critical Legal Theory*, Tripathi and Singh argued that when laws are enacted without addressing deeper socio-political power imbalances, they often serve as symbolic gestures—projecting reformist intent without producing transformative change for marginalized groups.

Kumari (2017) – Violence and Gendered Risks in Informal Vending[11] shifted the analytical focus towards the lived realities of gender-based violence in the informal vending sector, with a detailed study of women street vendors in Patna. Through in-depth interviews, she documented a pervasive spectrum of abuse ranging from verbal humiliation and extortion of protection money to sexual harassment, largely perpetrated by municipal staff, police, and local strongmen. Kumari's research revealed that most women refrained from reporting such incidents due to the fear of losing their vending spots or being targeted for further harassment, creating a cycle of silence and vulnerability. She concluded that gendered violence operates not merely as a byproduct of informality but as a deliberate regulatory mechanism to control and discipline women's economic participation in public spaces. Using the lens of *Feminist Urban Theory*, Kumari argued that public spaces in Indian cities remain deeply male-dominated arenas, where women's presence is tolerated only under restrictive conditions, thereby perpetuating spatial and economic exclusion.

Menon (2019) – Digital Technologies and Women Vendors[12] examined the role of digital financial technologies in shaping the business practices of women street vendors in Bengaluru, with a focus on the adoption of mobile payment platforms. Her research found that integrating digital payment systems into vending transactions expanded women vendors' customer base by attracting tech-savvy consumers and tourists, while also reducing theft risk by minimizing cash handling. However, uptake was uneven and often limited among older women, those from lower-income backgrounds, and vendors with limited literacy. Barriers such as language incompatibility in payment apps, lack of affordable smartphones, and insufficient digital training further deepened the gap between potential and actual adoption. Menon concluded that while digital technology offers a pathway to partial formalization and enhanced economic security, it simultaneously reproduces and amplifies gendered digital divides. Drawing on *Technofeminism* (Wajcman, 2004), she argued that technological interventions must be designed with a nuanced understanding of the intersecting barriers of class, literacy, and gender in order to avoid excluding the very populations they aim to empower.

Das & Banerjee (2021) – COVID-19 and Informal Women Workers[13] explored the socio-economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic for women street vendors in Kolkata and Delhi, focusing on how lockdown measures disrupted informal livelihoods. Conducting telephonic surveys, they found that 80% of respondents lost their income entirely during the lockdown, with many unable to resume vending even months later due to reduced consumer footfall, mobility restrictions, and heightened police enforcement. Access to government relief schemes was negligible, largely due to bureaucratic barriers, lack of formal registration, and the exclusionary design of welfare programs. The study concluded that crises such as the pandemic intensify pre-existing vulnerabilities in the informal sector, particularly for women without savings, formal credit access, or social protection. Using *Crisis Feminism* as a critical lens, Das and Banerjee emphasized the urgent need for gender-responsive social protection policies that recognize informal livelihoods, safeguard women’s economic participation in times of disruption, and integrate resilience planning into urban governance frameworks.

3. Methodology

Research Design: A mixed-methods approach was adopted to capture both quantitative trends and qualitative insights.

Sample:

Survey: 200 women street vendors from five major vending hubs in Delhi (Chandni Chowk, Lajpat Nagar, Sarojini Nagar, Seelampur, and INA Market).

Interviews: 30 in-depth interviews to explore personal empowerment experiences.

Data Collection Tools:

- Structured questionnaires (income, working hours, family background, decision-making participation).
- Semi-structured interviews (perceptions of empowerment, challenges, aspirations).

Data Analysis: Quantitative data analyzed through descriptive statistics; qualitative data analyzed using thematic coding.

5. Findings and Discussion

Table 1: Socio-Economic Profile of Women Street Vendors in Delhi
(Objective 1 – Quantitative Analysis)

Socio-Economic Variable	Category	Frequency (n=200)	Percentage (%)
Age Group	18–25	28	14.0
	26–35	74	37.0
	36–45	58	29.0
	46+	40	20.0
Education Level	Illiterate	72	36.0
	Primary	88	44.0
	Secondary	34	17.0
	Higher Sec+	6	3.0
Marital Status	Married	160	80.0
	Widowed	22	11.0
	Single	18	9.0

The socio-economic profile of women street vendors in Delhi reveals that the majority fall within the 26–35 age group (37%), followed by those aged 36–45 (29%), indicating that street vending is predominantly undertaken by women in their prime working years, often balancing both economic and family responsibilities. A significant proportion of respondents (80%) are married, while 11% are widowed and 9% are single, suggesting that vending is an important livelihood option for women with dependents as well as those without spousal support. Educational attainment among the respondents is generally low, with 36% being illiterate and 44% having only primary-level education, reflecting limited formal qualifications that restrict access to alternative employment opportunities in the formal sector. The income-generating necessity, combined with limited educational and professional options, appears to be a key

driver pushing women into street vending as a means to sustain household livelihoods and secure some degree of financial autonomy despite structural constraints.

Table 2: Contribution of Street Vending to Economic Empowerment
(Objective 2 – Quantitative Pre/Post Comparison)

Economic Indicator	Before Vending (%)	After Vending (%)	Change (%)
Own Income Source	12.0	100.0	+88.0
Savings Habit	18.5	62.0	+43.5
Household Expense Contribution	25.0	85.0	+60.0
Loan Repayment Capability	8.0	48.0	+40.0

The data clearly demonstrates that street vending has played a transformative role in enhancing the economic empowerment of women vendors in Delhi. Before engaging in vending, only 12% of the respondents reported having their own source of income, whereas post-engagement, this figure rose dramatically to 100%, indicating complete financial participation and independence. Similarly, the habit of saving, which was previously observed in just 18.5% of the respondents, increased to 62% after taking up vending, reflecting improved financial planning and security. The ability to contribute to household expenses also saw a substantial rise from 25% to 85%, suggesting that women are now playing a more significant role in meeting family needs and reducing economic dependency on other members. Furthermore, loan repayment capability improved from a mere 8% to 48%, indicating not only enhanced earning capacity but also better financial credibility. Overall, these shifts highlight that street vending serves as a vital economic activity that not only generates income but also promotes financial stability, independence, and active participation in household economic decision-making.

Table 3: Social Empowerment Indicators
(Objective 2 – Social Dimension)

Social Indicator	Before (%)	After (%)	Change (%)
Participation in Community Events	10.0	48.0	+38.0
Decision-Making Role in Family	15.0	56.0	+41.0
Independent Travel Ability	22.0	64.0	+42.0
Awareness of Legal Rights	9.0	38.0	+29.0

The findings indicate a significant positive shift in the social empowerment of women street vendors after engaging in vending activities. Participation in community events increased from just 10% before vending to 48% afterward, reflecting a stronger sense of social inclusion and community engagement. The proportion of women involved in family decision-making rose notably from 15% to 56%, highlighting enhanced influence and authority within the household. Similarly, the ability to travel independently, which is a crucial marker of personal freedom and mobility, increased from 22% to 64%, suggesting greater confidence and reduced dependency on others. Awareness of legal rights also improved from a low 9% to 38%, indicating that vending activities may provide exposure to information networks and peer learning that enhance legal literacy. Collectively, these changes underscore that street vending not only contributes to women's economic stability but also strengthens their social standing, autonomy, and active participation in both family and community life.

Table 4: Challenges Faced by Women Street Vendors
(Objective 3 – Quantitative)

Challenge Type	Frequency (n=200)	Percentage (%)
Harassment by Authorities	128	64.0
Lack of Storage Facilities	112	56.0
Weather Disruptions	104	52.0
Competition from Vendors	98	49.0
Credit Access Limitations	88	44.0

The data reveals that women street vendors in Delhi face a range of persistent and multifaceted challenges that hinder their occupational stability and growth. Harassment by authorities emerges as the most critical issue, affecting 64% of respondents, often in the form of eviction threats, bribe demands, or confiscation of goods, which not only disrupts their work but also creates a sense of insecurity. Lack of storage facilities, reported by 56% of the vendors, forces them to transport goods daily or risk damage and theft, increasing both physical strain and operational costs. Weather-related disruptions impact 52% of the respondents, as open-air vending exposes them to heat, rain, and cold, leading to income losses and health problems. Competition from other vendors is also significant, with 49% noting reduced earnings due to market saturation and price undercutting. Furthermore, 44% reported limited access to credit, which restricts their ability to expand stock, invest in better infrastructure, or manage emergencies. Overall, these findings highlight that women vendors operate in a highly vulnerable environment, where legal, infrastructural, environmental, and financial constraints collectively impede their empowerment and livelihood security.

Table 5: Qualitative Themes from In-Depth Interviews
(Objective 3 – Qualitative Analysis)

Theme	Description	Example Quote
Gender Discrimination	Male vendors get prime selling spots	“Men get the better spots; we are pushed aside.”
Police Harassment	Eviction threats or bribes demanded	“If we don’t pay, they throw our goods.”
Family-Work Balance	Managing dual roles of homemaker and vendor	“I start my day at 5 am and end at 10 pm.”
Health Strain	Long hours under extreme weather	“Standing all day gives me back pain.”

The qualitative insights from in-depth interviews provide a deeper understanding of the structural and personal challenges faced by women street vendors, complementing the quantitative findings. Gender discrimination was a recurring theme, with many women expressing frustration over male vendors being allocated prime selling spots, limiting their access to high-footfall areas and potential earnings. Police harassment emerged as another prominent issue, where women reported frequent eviction threats or demands for bribes, creating an atmosphere of fear and instability in their work. Balancing family responsibilities with vending duties posed a significant struggle, as women described the exhausting routine of managing household chores alongside long hours in the market, often from early morning until late at night. Additionally, the physical strain of working under harsh weather conditions—be it extreme heat, cold, or rain—was cited as a major health challenge, leading to fatigue, pain, and long-term health issues. Collectively, these themes reveal that women vendors face a complex interplay of gender bias, institutional pressures, domestic burdens, and physical hardships, all of which undermine their occupational security and overall well-being.

Table 6: Awareness of Policies and Legal Provisions
(Objective 4 – Quantitative)

Policy/Act Known	Aware (%)	Not Aware (%)
Street Vendors Act, 2014	12.0	88.0
Right to Information Act	22.0	78.0
Microfinance/SHG Schemes	35.0	65.0
Municipal Licensing Process	40.0	60.0

The results indicate that awareness of policies and legal provisions among women street vendors in Delhi is generally low, which limits their ability to claim rights, access benefits, and protect themselves from exploitation. Only 12% of respondents were aware of the *Street*

Vendors (*Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending*) Act, 2014, a critical piece of legislation designed specifically to safeguard their livelihood and regulate vending practices. Awareness of the *Right to Information (RTI) Act* was slightly higher at 22%, suggesting limited use of this tool to obtain information about policies, licensing, or grievance mechanisms. Knowledge about microfinance and Self-Help Group (SHG) schemes stood at 35%, indicating some level of exposure to financial inclusion programs, but still leaving a majority unable to benefit from such opportunities. The highest awareness level was recorded for the municipal licensing process at 40%, yet this still leaves 60% of vendors vulnerable to penalties or harassment due to lack of formal authorization. Overall, these figures highlight a significant information gap, underscoring the urgent need for targeted awareness campaigns and training initiatives to empower women vendors with the legal and institutional knowledge necessary for securing their livelihoods.

Table 7: Suggested Policy Measures from Respondents
(Objective 4 – Qualitative & Quantitative)

Suggested Measure	Frequency (n=30)	Percentage (%)
Secure Vending Zones	24	80.0
Low-Interest Loan Access	20	66.7
Storage Facilities	18	60.0
Reduced Harassment	16	53.3
Training on Legal Rights	14	46.7

The responses from women street vendors highlight clear and practical policy priorities aimed at improving their working conditions and overall livelihood security. The most frequently suggested measure, cited by 80% of respondents, was the creation of secure vending zones, which would provide designated, protected spaces to conduct business without the constant threat of eviction or displacement. Access to low-interest loans was the second most common demand (66.7%), reflecting the need for affordable credit to purchase stock, invest in better infrastructure, and manage unforeseen expenses. Storage facilities, requested by 60% of the vendors, would help address the daily challenge of transporting goods and reduce losses due to damage or theft. More than half (53.3%) of respondents emphasized the need to reduce harassment, particularly from authorities, by implementing fair enforcement and grievance mechanisms. Finally, 46.7% recommended training on legal rights to equip them with the knowledge and confidence to navigate licensing, regulations, and protection under existing laws. Collectively, these suggestions point to a strong desire for institutional support, infrastructure improvements, and financial empowerment to ensure a safer, more sustainable vending environment.

Table 8: Correlation between Monthly Income and Empowerment
(Objective 2 – Statistical Analysis)

Variable Pair	Pearson's r	p-value
Monthly Income vs. Decision-Making Role	0.62	<0.01
Monthly Income vs. Independent Travel	0.54	<0.05
Monthly Income vs. Legal Awareness	0.49	<0.05

The correlation analysis reveals a strong and statistically significant relationship between women street vendors' monthly income and various indicators of empowerment, suggesting that higher earnings are closely tied to greater autonomy and agency in both personal and social spheres. The most pronounced association is observed between monthly income and decision-making role within the family ($r = 0.62, p < 0.01$), indicating that as women's earnings increase, their influence over household decisions also rises substantially. This reinforces the idea that economic contributions strengthen bargaining power within domestic settings. The correlation

between monthly income and independent travel ability is also notable ($r = 0.54, p < 0.05$), suggesting that financial capacity not only boosts mobility by covering travel expenses but also enhances confidence to navigate public spaces without reliance on others. Similarly, a positive correlation exists between monthly income and legal awareness ($r = 0.49, p < 0.05$), reflecting that higher-earning women are more likely to engage with information networks, peer groups, and training sessions where knowledge of laws and rights is shared. Overall, these findings underscore that economic empowerment through increased income acts as a catalyst for broader social empowerment, enabling women vendors to exercise greater control over their lives, expand their mobility, and enhance their civic awareness.

6. Policy Recommendations

1. Ensure strict enforcement of legal protections, prioritizing safety, fair licensing, and protection from eviction or harassment.
2. Strengthen collective voice, enhance market access, and facilitate low-interest loans through cooperative structures.
3. Provide training in product diversification, pricing, savings, investment, and digital payments to improve profitability.
4. Develop vending areas with adequate lighting, drinking water, storage, and waste disposal facilities to ensure safe and hygienic workspaces.
5. Link women vendors to government health insurance, maternity benefits, and pension schemes to reduce vulnerability to illness and income loss.
6. Promote the use of mobile payment systems, social media marketing, and e-commerce platforms to expand customer reach and reduce dependency on local footfall.

7. Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal that the informal economy in Delhi serves as a critical lifeline for women street vendors, offering them not only a means of economic survival but also a pathway to enhanced self-reliance, decision-making power, and community participation. Street vending has enabled many women to secure independent incomes, contribute significantly to household expenses, and improve their mobility and social visibility. However, this empowerment remains partial and fragile, shaped by persistent structural barriers such as harassment by authorities, lack of secure vending spaces, inadequate infrastructure, and limited awareness of legal rights. These vulnerabilities mean that while vending creates opportunities, it does not yet guarantee long-term stability or equal participation in urban economic life. For empowerment to be truly sustainable, it is imperative to move beyond viewing street vending as merely a subsistence activity and instead integrate it into formal urban planning and policy frameworks. This requires full enforcement of protective legislation, provision of basic facilities like sanitation, storage, and security, as well as financial inclusion measures and skill development programs tailored to women vendors. Additionally, fostering collective organizing through cooperatives and vendor associations can strengthen bargaining power, reduce exploitation, and facilitate access to markets and credit. Only through such comprehensive reforms can street vending evolve from a coping mechanism in the informal sector into a dignified, sustainable livelihood that fully empowers women as active economic agents in the city.

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