

Livelihood Challenges of Vegetable Vendors in Rural Weekly Market: Insights from Tamil Nadu

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Abstract — Vegetable vending in weekly rural markets constitutes a livelihood strategy for a significant section of India's informal workforce. Despite its significance in ensuring food availability and income generation, vegetable vending remains acclaimed by income insecurity, occupational vulnerability, and limited institutional support. This study examines the livelihood challenges faced by vegetable vendors operating in the Vadipatti Weekly Market of Madurai District, Tamil Nadu. Using primary data collected from 50 vegetable vendors through focus group discussions, structured interviews, and field observations, the study analyses market risks, infrastructural constraints, income patterns, price volatility, access to social security, and digital exclusion. The findings reveal that vegetable vending is predominantly a survival-based livelihood, particularly for women, elderly individuals, and widows. Income instability due to seasonal fluctuations, absence of government intervention, lack of storage facilities, and dependence on bargaining significantly undermine livelihood sustainability. The study states that strengthening rural market infrastructure, extending welfare coverage, and formally recognising vegetable vendors are essential for enhancing livelihood security and encouraging inclusive rural development.

Keywords — *Livelihood Security; Vegetable Vendors; Rural Weekly Markets; Informal Sector.*

1. Introduction

Livelihood security remains a central concern in developing economies where a crucial proportion of the workforce is engaged in unorganised employment. In India, the unorganized sector accounts for more than 85 percent of total employment, encompassing agricultural laborers, street vendors, self-employed workers, and market traders. As Chen (2012) observes, "Informal workers are not a peripheral group but constitute the core of employment in developing countries."

Among these, vegetable vendors in rural weekly markets constitute a vital yet under-recognized occupational group. Vegetable vending needs minimal capital investment and limited formal education, making it accessible to marginalized populations such as women, elderly persons, widows, and landless households. Weekly markets function as critical economic and social institutions in rural areas, facilitating the exchange of agricultural produce while sustaining local livelihoods. However, the informal nature of these markets uncovers vendors to multiple livelihood risks, absence of social protection, including income volatility, infrastructural deficiencies, and policy neglect. According to Bromley (2000), "Street and market vending should be understood as a rational response to limited employment opportunities rather than as a problem of urban or rural disorder."

In Tamil Nadu, although initiatives like Uzhavar Santhai aims to strengthen farmer-consumer linkages, rural weekly markets continue to operate largely outside formal regulatory frameworks. Vendors in these markets remain excluded from institutional support mechanisms and welfare schemes. Vadipatti Weekly Market, one of the oldest weekly markets in Madurai district, represents these dynamics. This study investigates the livelihood challenges faced by vegetable vendors in this rural weekly market, underlines structural vulnerabilities and policy gaps.

Conceptual Framework: Livelihood Perspective

The study adopts a livelihood framework to examine the conditions of vegetable vendors. Livelihood refers to the capabilities, assets, and activities required for a means of living. A livelihood is considered sustainable when it can cope with stresses and shocks, maintain or enhance capabilities, and provide opportunities for future generations.

The livelihood framework furnishes a useful lens for understanding the vulnerabilities faced by vegetable vendors. Chambers and Conway (1992) define livelihood as: "The capabilities, assets (stores, resources, claims, and access) and activities required for a means of living." In the context of informal vendors, Ellis (2000) notes, "Livelihood diversification is often not a matter of choice but a necessity driven by economic vulnerability."

Vegetable vendors in rural weekly markets depend on:

- Human capital: age, education, skills, and experience
- Financial capital: income, savings, access to credit
- Physical capital: market infrastructure, storage facilities
- Social capital: customer relationships, trust, informal networks
- Institutional support: welfare schemes, government intervention

The absence or weakness of these assets increases livelihood vulnerability. This framework helps explain why vegetable vending, though widespread, remains precarious and insecure.

2. Review of Literature

A growing body of literature highlights the socio-economic vulnerability of vegetable vendors. Gazala Bhoje (2023) observed that vegetable vendors remain marginalized despite urban and regional economic growth. Parimala. M, Ashmitha. V, Rubashree. J, these three (2023) identified low-income levels, lack of welfare support and price fluctuations among vendors in Tamil Nadu's organized markets. Mohanta (2021) examined the inefficiencies in India's fruit and vegetable supply chain, arguing that vendors bear disproportionate risks without adequate institutional backing.

Chandralekha (2021) and Unnamalai (2017) highlighted gendered vulnerabilities in vegetable vending, noting that women vendors face longer working hours, lower earnings, and limited social protection. Mishra (2018) emphasized that street vending often serves as a survival strategy rather than a voluntary occupation.

However, most studies focus on urban or semi-urban settings. Micro-level studies on rural weekly markets remain limited. This study addresses this gap by examining livelihood challenges in a rural weekly market context in Tamil Nadu.

3. Methodology

The study engages a descriptive research design. Primary data were collected from 50 vegetable vendors in T. Vadipatti Weekly Market using a structured interview schedule. Direct Observations and Focus group discussions supplemented the survey data. Convenience sampling was adopted due to the informal and mobile nature of vendors.

Both male and female vendors were included, representing different age groups and years of experience. Secondary data were sourced from academic journals, government reports, books, and previous research studies.

Data were analysed using percentage analysis and interpreted through a livelihood perspective.

Study Area: T. Vadipatti Weekly Market:

T. Vadipatti is a town panchayat located in Madurai district, Tamil Nadu, which means as the "Gateway to Madurai", according to the locals Agriculture is the primary occupation, supported by fertile land and irrigation from the Vaigai River. According to census data of 2011, the population of T. Vadipatti town was around 26,830. The T. Vadipatti Weekly Market, held every Tuesday for more than 112 years, attracts vendors and consumers from Madurai, Dindigul, Theni, and nearby districts.

4. Livelihood Challenges of Vegetable Vendors

Income Instability and Low earnings - Income instability is the remarkable livelihood challenge. Most vendors earn modest daily incomes that fluctuate widely depending on season, supply, and consumer demand. Rising household expenses and inflation further erode income adequacy, making it difficult to sustain livelihoods. As Standing (2011) notes, "The precariat lives with chronic uncertainty, fluctuating incomes, and minimal control over working conditions."

Price Fluctuation and Seasonal Risks - The lack of basic infrastructure remarkably affects vendor livelihoods. Skinner (2008) argues that: "Inadequate infrastructure in informal markets increases both economic vulnerability and health risks for vendors." Vegetables such as onion, tomato, and ginger experience sharp price fluctuations. Vendors often purchase vegetables at higher prices during scarcity but fail to recover costs due to reduced consumer demand. Seasonal risks thus expose vendors to financial losses.

Infrastructural Deficiencies and Wastage - The absence of storage and warehouse facilities leads to remarkable wastage of perishable vegetables. Poor sanitation, lack of shelter, and inadequate maintenance of the market space further exacerbate livelihood insecurity.

Digital Exclusion - A majority of vendors revealed the need for assistance in digital transactions. Limited digital literacy restricts access to cashless payments and government initiatives, further marginalizing vendors in a rapidly digitizing economy.

Dependence on Bargaining and Low Profit Margins - Bargaining is universal in the market. While it helps maintain customer relationships, it crucially reduces profit margins. Bhowmik (2010) notes: "The power imbalance between vendors and consumers often results in squeezed profit margins for informal traders." Vendors prioritize

long-term relationships and trust over immediate profits, limiting savings accumulation.

5. Findings

- **Survival-Oriented Livelihoods:** Vegetable vending primarily serves as a survival-based occupation rather than a growth-oriented enterprise, with most vendors engaging in it due to limited alternative employment opportunities.
- **Women's Economic Participation:** Women constitute an important proportion of vendors, underlining the role of vegetable vending in promoting women's empowerment and economic participation, particularly among widows and middle-aged women.
- **Elderly Dependence:** A notable number of vendors are elderly, relying only on vending for survival due to limited family support or lack of formal pension coverage.
- **Income Instability:** Vendor earnings remain fluctuate and low daily depending on seasonality, supply, and consumer demand, though this income is crucial for household survival.
- **Price Volatility:** Frequent fluctuations in vegetable prices create undetermined returns, occasional financial losses, and wastage of produce.
- **Bargaining Pressures:** Lack of government-fixed prices leads to aggressive bargaining, further narrowing profit margins.
- **Poor Infrastructure:** Insufficient market facilities—such as proper flooring, storage, sanitation, and allocated vending spaces—leads to unsafe working conditions and post-harvest losses, especially during adverse weather.
- **Exclusion from Welfare Schemes:** Vendors operating in privately owned markets are often prohibited from regulatory protections available in public markets and government welfare programs.
- **Limited Social Security Awareness:** Awareness about Unorganized Workers' Welfare Boards and social security schemes is limited, leaving vendors without pensions, health insurance, or accident coverage.
- **Digital Challenges:** Limited access to smartphones and low digital literacy reduce vendor participation in digital payment systems, negatively affecting sales.
- **Strong Social Capital:** Despite economic vulnerability, vendors maintain trust-based relationships with regular customers, reflecting strong social capital.
- **Weak Collective Bargaining:** Lack of vendor associations or unions weakens their negotiating power with landowners and authorities.

6. Suggestions

- a) **Formal Recognition of Vendors:** Vendors should be recognized as informal workers under state and local

governance frameworks to enable access to welfare schemes, development initiatives and social security programs.

- b) **Regulation of Privately Owned Markets:** A hybrid regulatory framework should be introduced, permitting local authorities to oversee minimum standards for maintenance, vendor protection, and price transparency, without compromising private ownership rights.
- c) **Improvement of Market Infrastructure:** Investments should be made in essential infrastructure, including:
- (1) Common storage and warehouse facilities
 - (2) Non-slippery flooring
 - (3) Improved infrastructure can reduce wastage, health risks, and income loss.
 - (4) Drinking water and sanitation facilities
- d) **Price Stabilization and income Protection:** Indicative price bands or minimum price guidelines for essential vegetables should be introduced, with display boards showing daily prices to reduce exploitation and excessive bargaining.
- e) **Inclusion Under Unorganized Worker's Welfare Boards:** Enrolment drives should register vendors under Unorganized Workers' Welfare Boards, providing access to:
- (1) Old-age pensions
 - (2) Priority should be given to widows, elderly vendors, and sole breadwinners.
 - (3) Accident and disability coverage
 - (4) Health insurance
- f) **Gender Sensitive:** Given the high proportion of women vendors, gender-focused policies should include:
- (1) Formation of women vendor self-help groups
 - (2) Access to microcredit and revolving funds
 - (3) Financial literacy and savings programs
 - (4) These measures enhance women's financial independence and livelihood resilience.
- g) **Digital Literacy and Financial Inclusion:** Market-level programs should focus on:
- (1) Digital payment usage
 - (2) Mobile banking
 - (3) Access to government digital platforms
 - (4) Temporary support desks on market days can aid digital transitions.
- h) **Formation of Vendor Associations or Cooperatives:** Encouraging vendor cooperatives can:
- (1) Improve access to welfare schemes
 - (2) Strengthen collective bargaining power
 - (3) Represent vendor interests
 - (4) Facilitate negotiations with landowners and authorities.
- i) **Integration with Rural Development Policies:** Rural weekly markets should be recognized as key economic institutions and integrated into broader rural livelihood and development programs, contributing to food security, employment generation, and local economic growth.

7. Conclusion

Vegetable vendors in rural weekly markets play a significant role in sustaining rural economies and food distribution systems. However, their livelihoods remain fragile because of income instability, infrastructural neglect, and policy exclusion. The case of Vadipatti Weekly Market underlines the urgent need for inclusive policies that acknowledge vegetable vendors as key contributors to rural development. Strengthening institutional support, improving infrastructure, and ensuring social security are crucial for transforming vegetable vending from a survival-based activity into a sustainable livelihood.

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