



Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing

INFORMAL WORKERS IN FOCUS: STREET VENDORS



Around the world, a large and perhaps growing share of the informal workforce operates on city streets, on sidewalks, and in other public spaces, selling everything from fresh produce to electronic equipment. Broadly defined, street vendors include all those selling goods or services in public spaces. While not all street vendors work without licences or legal protection, the majority do.

Most street vending businesses are one-person operations that use unpaid family labor on an as-needed basis. Some sell from the comfort of covered stalls; others simply squat on the ground beside a basket or blanket displaying their merchandise. In the developing world, millions of poor people who cannot afford to buy from retail stores depend on the affordable goods that street vendors provide.

Statistics On Street Vendors

It is difficult to estimate the number of people employed as street vendors, due to their high mobility and the marked seasonal variation in their work.

In one study of ten developing countries, employment in street vending as a share of total non-agricultural employment was found to range from two to nine percent.¹ Brazil and Mexico were estimated to each have over one million street vendors, and India, more than three million.² Recent research that goes beyond official labour force statistics suggests that India has closer to ten million street vendors.³

In another study of nine African and Asian countries, street vending accounted for 73 to 99 percent of total employment in trade, and for 50 to 90 percent of total GDP from trade.⁴

Women In Street Vending

Street vending is one of the largest categories of informal work employing women. The low costs of entry and flexible hours make street vending an attractive option for poor women; for many, it is the only option they have.

Women account for the majority of street vendors in many countries, especially in Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America. In Benin, for example, 92 percent of informal traders are women.⁵ Although men form the majority of street vendors in North African, Middle Eastern, and South Asian countries where social norms restrict women's mobility outside the home,⁶ these male vendors often sell goods prepared by women at home, especially in the food trade.⁷

Compared to men, female street vendors are more likely to operate in insecure or illegal spaces, trade in less lucrative goods, generate a lower volume of trade, and work as commission agents or employees of other vendors. As a result, they tend to earn less than male vendors.⁸



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Hazards of Selling In Public Places

Like all informal workers, informal street vendors lack legal status, representation, and voice. With a few notable exceptions, they earn low incomes, usually close to the poverty level.⁹

Furthermore, they experience several problems specific to their trade:

- Difficulty finding secure spaces to sell from
- Harassment, demands for bribes, evictions from selling places, arrest, and confiscation of goods by authorities, who often see street vendors as a nuisance or obstruction to other commerce and to traffic
- Lack of services and infrastructure, such as water, electricity, waste removal, latrines, shelter, storage space, and financial services
- High risk for diseases transmitted by vermin, lead poisoning and respiratory problems from vehicle fumes, and musculoskeletal problems associated with static posture and other ergonomic hazards

Organizing Among Street Vendors

As with other informal workers, the ability of street vendors to improve their lives and working conditions rests on their ability to organize.

Street vendors' organizations across the world have had some success in defending the rights of members, securing access to services, and influencing public policy. The National Association of Street Vendors of India, for example, was instrumental in persuading the Indian government to adopt a supportive national policy on street vendors.

At the international level, important educational, research, advocacy, and capacity-building work is being done by StreetNet International, a global alliance of more than 25 street vendors' organizations.

Despite these positive developments, though, the vast majority of street vendors remain isolated, unprotected, and unorganized. There is an enormous need to build and strengthen all forms of street vendors' organizations, and to link them through national, regional and international networks.

WIEGO Secretariat Harvard University

79 John F. Kennedy Street,
Cambridge, MA 01238 USA
Tel: 1-617-496-1310
Fax: 1-617-496-2828
Email: wiego@ksg.harvard.edu



¹ International Labour Organization. 2002. *Women and Men in the Informal Economy: A Statistical Picture*. Geneva: ILO. p. 52

² Ibid.

³ Bhowmik, Sharit K. 2005. "Street Vendors in Asia: A Review." *Economic and Political Weekly*, May 28-June 4, 2005. p. 2256

⁴ International Labour Organization, p. 53

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Cohen, Monique, with Mihir Bhatt and Pat Horn. 2000. "Women Street Vendors: The Road to Recognition." *SEEDS*, No. 20. p. 4

⁸ International Labour Organization, p. 51

⁹ Cohen, p. 4

HOW WIEGO HELPS

Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing is a global research-policy network that seeks to improve the status of informal workers, especially women, by:

- Conducting research and collecting statistics on the informal economy
- Strengthening the organizational capacity and increasing the visibility of informal workers' groups
- Promoting policy processes that include representatives of informal workers' groups
- Promoting policies that benefit those working in the informal economy

WIEGO has played an important role in the support of street vendors worldwide. It helped facilitate the formation of the National Association of Street Vendors in India (NASVI) in 1998, the Kenya National Alliance of Street Vendors and Informal Traders in 2003, and StreetNet International, officially launched in 2002, by helping to raise funds and carrying out background research on street vendors and their organizations. Through its Urban Policies Programme, WIEGO continues to provide research on street vendors, facilitate policy dialogues between street vendors and civic authorities, and organize seminars and conferences on street vending.