



Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing

Inclusive Cities Project

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Better OHS for Market Traders and Street Vendors in Accra, Ghana

Historically, market traders and street vendors in Accra have faced unsafe and unhygienic working conditions, which arise out of institutional and governance challenges. The majority of vendors, many of them women, sell food and related items, cooked food, and cloths, or are artisans like hairdressers, carpenters, tailors, and seamstresses.

These traders and vendors belong to the informal economy—as do 73 per cent of Ghana's workers—and their earnings are often below the national minimum wage. They face high levels of economic and financial risk, job insecurity, harassment by local authorities, lack of access to credit, and lack of involvement in national and policymaking processes.

Because of this lack of institutionalized channels of communication, a lack of information delivered to informal workers, a system of patronage and deference to authorities, and a system in which misuse and embezzlement of revenue from the market is common, market traders and street vendors face many occupational health and safety hazards:

- Poor drainage and waste disposal and inadequate cleaning (personnel and equipment), which lead to the breeding of disease vectors, food poisoning, and diarrhoea;
- Frequent fire outbreaks in markets;
- Insecurity of the traders and their wares because of inadequate lighting in many market areas, the lack of safe and sufficient storage facilities, and the presence of criminals;
- Harassment from local government officials;
- Physical and psychological effects resulting from the unhealthy and unsafe work environments.

What Changed

Two trader associations—the Makola Market Traders Union (MMTU) and the Ga East Traders Union (GETU)—recognized that as individuals, traders are weak when dealing with the local government or city authorities. Over the course of years, they mobilized other traders, often at their own expense.

Then, they conducted a study that revealed OHS issues and the institutional challenges needed to be tackled from above and from below. But pressure from below can't be effective without adequate information—a principle that informed the traders' subsequent strategies.

The next steps were to disseminate information to traders' associations, to build workers' skills (through workshops and dialogue sessions), and to engage effectively and proactively with the local authorities.

Both unions, together with nine other informal workers' associations, also formed the Council of Informal Workers Association (CIWA) to act as an umbrella organization. In the long term, this organization will be well positioned to support the traders in their struggle for recognition and for safe and healthy working conditions.

Policy and Legal Environment

The Policy framework that most impacts vendors in Ghana is Article 35 (6d) of the 1992 Constitution, which requires the State 'to take appropriate measures to ensure decentralisation in administrative and financial machinery of government and to give opportunities to people to participate in decision-making at every level in national life and government'.

Chapter 20, Article 240 (2e) states that, "to ensure the accountability of local government authorities, people in particular local government areas shall, as far as practicable, be afforded the opportunity to participate effectively in their governance."



For many vendors, their vending income is their sole means of providing for their families. Photo: P. Carney

Results

For the workers, the series of workshops and the dialogue sessions with the city authorities and service providers reinforced the importance of mobilization, networking, coalition-building, and direct representation in local government structures.

The workers also gained knowledge of how to engage with the city authorities, who, in turn, are responding positively.

Workers also gained:

- Better awareness of OHS issues;
- The importance of registering with the NHIS;
- How to douse small fires before they get out of control;
- Basic bookkeeping, financial management, and how to access credit, which means vendors have improved on savings;
- The confidence and ability to speak in public forums and to engage with city authorities, which has resulted in new infrastructure.

For its part, better OHS in the market benefited the city by:

- Minimizing the spread of communicable diseases;
- Citizens' continued access to basic services and necessities;
- Improved infrastructure and services;
- Continues revenue from markets, which contribute an average of 20 per cent to the AMA's internally generated funds.

Suggestions for Future Efforts: What Made It Work?

- A decentralized local government, which gives citizens the courage to come together without fear and allows them to engage with local authorities;
- Committed and selfless leaders;
- Research that helped explain real and pressing issues;
- Bottom up and top down approaches to tackling challenges;
- The involvement of progressive institutions like the Ghana TUC, the ILGS and People's Dialogue on Human Settlement, who are already engaged with the informal workers and their needs;
- A facilitative organization that knows how to harness and motivate other institutions;
- Joining a trade union (Ghana TUC), which has international links;
- Learning lobbying and negotiation skills.



A kayayei (head porter) sheltering from the sun. Photo: M. Chen

“Any organization that wants to replicate what [we] have achieved as an association must remember that [we] started small with only seven members and grew overtime. It is a gradual process which is not done and achieved overnight”.

- Enoch Bio, Secretary for the Ga East Traders Union

About WIEGO: Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing is a global network focused on securing livelihoods for the working poor, especially women, in the informal economy. We believe all workers should have equal economic opportunities and rights. WIEGO creates change by building capacity among informal worker organizations, expanding the knowledge base about the informal economy and influencing local, national and international policies. Visit www.wiego.org.

