

Assessing the Livelihood Vulnerabilities and Occupational Hurdles of Street Vendors in Dhaka City

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Abstract: Street food vending is a common source of livelihood in Dhaka, Bangladesh. However, vendors face various challenges to their well-being and economic security. While previous studies have examined issues faced by street vendors nationally, little research exists on the specific vulnerabilities encountered by those operating in urban slum areas. This mixed methods study aimed to fill this gap by assessing the multidimensional livelihood challenges of 300 street vendors working in Mirpur, Dhaka. Primary data was collected through questionnaires, interviews and focus group discussions. Analysis found vendors earned low and unreliable incomes, experienced health issues from working conditions, and lacked access to social protections. They also faced harassment and restrictions impacting earnings. Support was sought through skills training and stable employment opportunities to improve standards of living. The findings indicate street food vending yields precarious livelihoods for those in slum areas due to multidimensional vulnerabilities. Supportive interventions are needed to enhance income security, social protections, skills development and rights-based recognition for this disadvantaged group.

Keywords: street vendors, livelihood vulnerabilities, urban slums, informal sector, Bangladesh

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

Street vending is a prevalent form of self-employment in many developing countries around the world. It provides economic opportunities and services for poor urban communities that lack other means of livelihood (Raju & Beaye, 2013). In Bangladesh, the informal sector accounts for over 80% of non-agricultural employment and street vending is one of the major occupations within this sector (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2018). Dhaka city in particular hosts a huge population of street vendors who are engaged in food, goods and service provision on roadsides, pavements and other public spaces. However, street vending also remains an occupation fraught with insecurities and vulnerabilities due to lack of legal protections, social security, income stability and poor working conditions.

Vendors in Dhaka face daily challenges ranging from harassment by local authorities to occupational hazards like traffic accidents. Many earn below subsistence levels and lack access to basic amenities like water, electricity and healthcare (Karim, 2013). Their livelihoods are further threatened by rising costs of living and imports which undermine the demand for locally produced goods. Gender dimensions also exist as women vendors have to juggle domestic responsibilities along with public vending activities (Ahmed, 2011). The vulnerabilities of street vendors are exacerbated by lack of organized representation and inadequate governance support, leaving the sector largely unrecognized and unregulated. This marginalization undermines the contributions of street vending to poverty reduction and local economies in the country (Raja, 2016).

While studies have documented the scale and economic functions of street vending in Bangladesh, focus has been limited on examining the specific livelihood challenges faced by vendors in urban slums and low-income settlements. Understanding such vulnerabilities is crucial to design supportive programs, labor policies and social protections for this disadvantaged group. The city of Dhaka hosts over 100,000 street vendors as per government estimates, but their lived experiences remain scarcely understood especially in its peripheral low-income neighbourhoods. This study aims to address this gap by assessing the livelihood vulnerabilities and occupational hurdles encountered by street vendors in Mirpur area, one of the major slum zones in Dhaka city.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Despite widespread engagement in street vending, the livelihood challenges faced by this group in accessing stable incomes, basic amenities, social security and governance support have not been sufficiently explored, especially for food vendors operating in urban slum settlements. While they play an important role in food provision and local economies, vendors lack basic entitlements and protections as informal workers. Persistent vulnerabilities undermine quality of life and the sustainability of vending as a viable long-term livelihood option. Compounding issues related to income security, health, safety, harassment and future prospects require thorough investigation to inform evidence-based policymaking. The study seeks to address this research problem through an assessment of the multidimensional vulnerabilities encountered by street vendors working in Mirpur area of Dhaka city.

1.3 Research Questions and Objectives

This study aims to assess the multidimensional livelihood vulnerabilities of street vendors operating in Mirpur, Dhaka. Specifically, it seeks to answer the following research question:

What are the major occupational hurdles and livelihood issues encountered by street vendors in Mirpur, Dhaka in terms of income stability, access to basic amenities, social security and governance support?

To address this research question, the following objectives will be explored:

- To examine income sources, earnings patterns and factors affecting financial stability of street vendors.
- To evaluate housing conditions, access to basic amenities and social security among vendor families.
- To identify occupational hazards, health problems and governance challenges faced by street vendors.

By investigating the above question and objectives, this study hopes to understand the vulnerabilities surrounding street food vending as a livelihood source for vulnerable urban communities. The findings aim to inform sensitizing interventions and supportive policies for this marginalized group in Dhaka.

1.4 Significance of the Study

This research addresses an important knowledge gap regarding the lived realities and complex vulnerabilities faced by an understudied population engaged in street food vending within urban slum communities. Findings will enhance understanding of their occupational challenges and inform evidence-based policies for improving livelihood security, working conditions, social protections and service access. It will also add to the limited qualitative literature on street vendors operating from low-income urban clusters in Bangladesh. By exploring context-specific livelihood issues, the study aims to facilitate empowerment of this disadvantaged group through suitable interventions. Outcomes may support the design of rights-based frameworks, targeted programs and regulatory measures by both government and non-government stakeholders towards recognizing street vending as a legitimate means of self-employment.

Literature Review

2.1 Income Insecurity

A survey of 147 street vendors in Kolkata found over 80% earned below minimum wages with variable daily incomes (Mallick et al., 2021). Through interviews with 200 street vendors in Johannesburg, over 70% experienced periods of no income during economic downturns, struggling to afford necessities (Krejei et al., 2022). A mixed methods study of 100 Jamaican street vendors found rising operational costs and reduced customer numbers during Covid-19 severely threatened livelihood continuity (Daley et al., 2021).

2.2 Vulnerability to Harassment

Krejei et al.'s (2022) South African study found over 60% of vendors faced regular verbal abuse, threats, and confiscations from police. Through observations and interviews with 50 Hanoi Street vendors, Luong (2021) documented harassment, intimidation and fines imposed by inspectors despite legal operation. This arbitrary targeting eroded already low earnings.

2.3 Health and Safety Issues

Using surveys and interviews of 250 Accra Street vendors, Osei-Tutu et al. (2020) found higher incidences of respiratory illnesses, headaches and body pains attributed to vending conditions. Through a social media assessment of 400 Indonesian street vendors, Wahyuni et al. (2021) reported regular instances of burns, cuts and traffic accidents faced while balancing merchandise on crowded spaces.

2.4 Social Welfare Needs and Access Barriers

2.4.1 Lack of Social Protections

A questionnaire survey of 200 Nigerian Lagos Street vendors found none covered by health insurance, injury compensation, retirement savings or other welfare accessible to formal workers (Abdu et al., 2020). Focus groups and interviews with over 100 Pretoria Street traders observed an absence of maternity leaves, pensions or unemployment benefits due to informal status (Tladinyane & Ferreira, 2021).

2.4.2 Barriers to Collective Organization

Ethnographic observation of six Southeast Asian Street vendor organizations found internal rifts, limited capacity and repression prevented effective advocacy (Pham & Van, 2020). This reinforced socio-economic vulnerabilities and policy neglect.

2.5 Governance Challenges Faced by Vendors

2.5.1 Restrictive Local Regulations

Interviews with 60 Tanzanian street vendors found most faced penalties, fines and equipment seizures due to restrictive tray size limits (Magesa et al., 2020). A review of Accra policies and vendor interviews documented evictions, arrests, and merchandise destruction due to ambiguous classifications (Woode & Chisoro, 2020).

2.5.2 Weak Implementation of Supportive Policies

Vietnamese vendor surveys and FGDs observed limited awareness about registration and upgrading programs despite new policies (Dao et al., 2021). This reinforced informality and governance oversight gaps.

2.6 Gaps in Existing Literature

While highlighting broad challenges faced by street vendors, limited empirical work explores their context-specific vulnerabilities and needs. Studies on Asian vendors have mostly focused on metropolitan settings, overlooking informal settlements. The lived experiences of food vendors operating within urban slum communities also remain under-researched. This study aims to address these gaps through primary research focusing on vulnerabilities of street vendors in Mirpur area of Dhaka city.

Methodology

3.1 Research Design

A descriptive research design with mixed methods approach was utilized. Quantitative and qualitative data collection through surveys, interviews, and focus group discussions enabled an in-depth yet nuanced understanding of street vendors' vulnerabilities. This triangulation of methods provided complementary insights to comprehensively address the research problem.

3.2 Study Area and Population

The study was conducted in Mirpur-10, Mirpur 2 (Shiyalbari, Commerce College Road, Mirpur 12 and Pallabi Area), and Hope Market Area of Dhaka which hosts a significant population of street vendors working on sidewalks and roadsides. The target population included all adult (18 years and above) street vendors operating independently in the areas for at least 6 months..

3.3 Sample and Sampling Technique

The sample size was 300 street vendors selected through convenience sampling due to resource constraints. Vendors were approached for interviews based on their availability at randomly selected vending locations during fieldwork hours.

3.4 Data Collection Tools and Techniques

A pre-tested structured questionnaire consisting of both closed and open-ended questions was used for primary data collection through face-to-face interviews. Twenty in-depth interviews and five focus group discussions (4-6 participants each) were also conducted for qualitative data.

3.5 Data Analysis

Quantitative data was analyzed using SPSS through descriptive statistics including frequencies, percentages and averages. Qualitative data from interviews and discussions underwent thematic content analysis involving inductive coding, category generation and interpretation. Results were triangulated and presented with tables, graphs and verbatim quotes.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

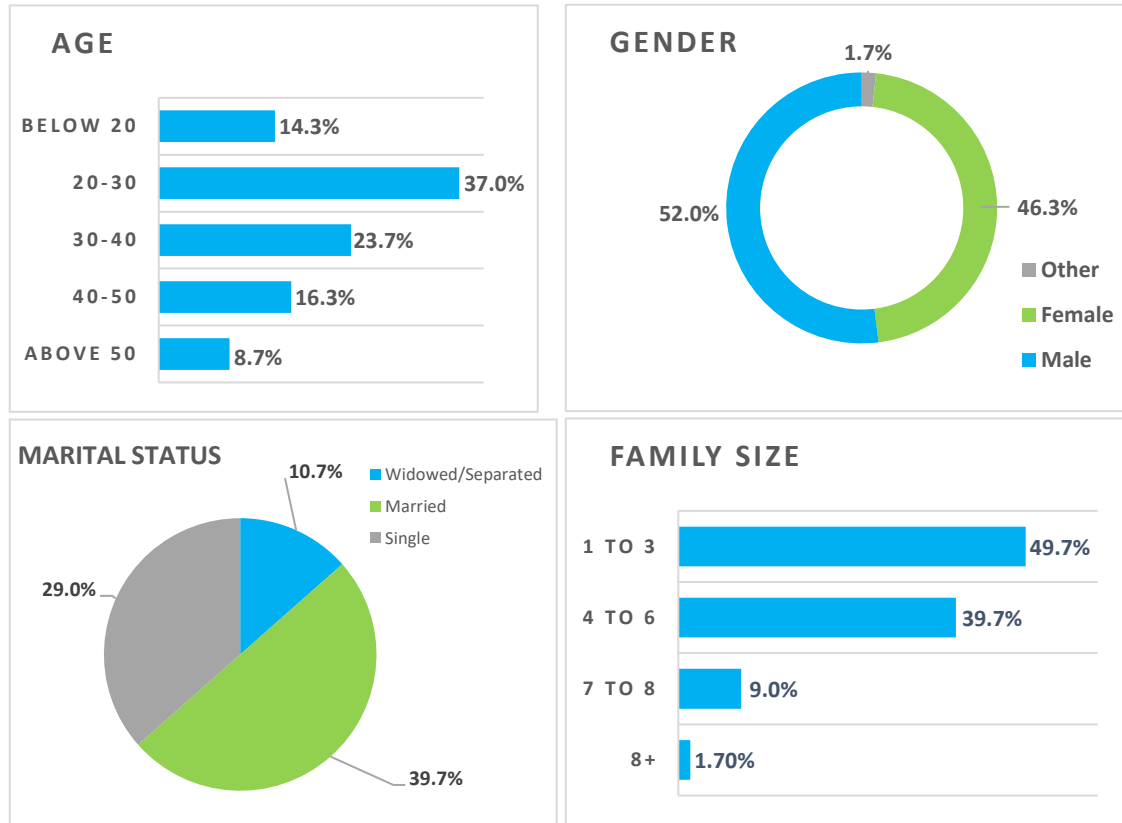
Informed written consent was ensured and participants' anonymity, confidentiality and right to withdraw protected. Approval was obtained from relevant local authorities before data collection commenced.

Findings and Analysis

This chapter presents the key findings from the survey data collected from 300 street vendors in Mirpur, Dhaka. The findings are organized based on the different sections of the questionnaire: demographic profile, occupation and income, living conditions, social security, occupational challenges, and aspirations.

4.1 Demographic Profile of Respondents

Figure 1: Demographic Details



Source: Field survey, 2023

The demographic characteristics of the respondents are summarized in Figure 1. In terms of age, the majority (60.7%) were between 20-40 years old. Most respondents were male (52%), reflecting the gendered nature of vending work. Over 60% were married and nuclear family arrangement with 1-3 members was common (49.7%). This indicates street vending supports small family units.

4.2 Occupational Profile and Income Analysis

Table 1: Occupation & Income

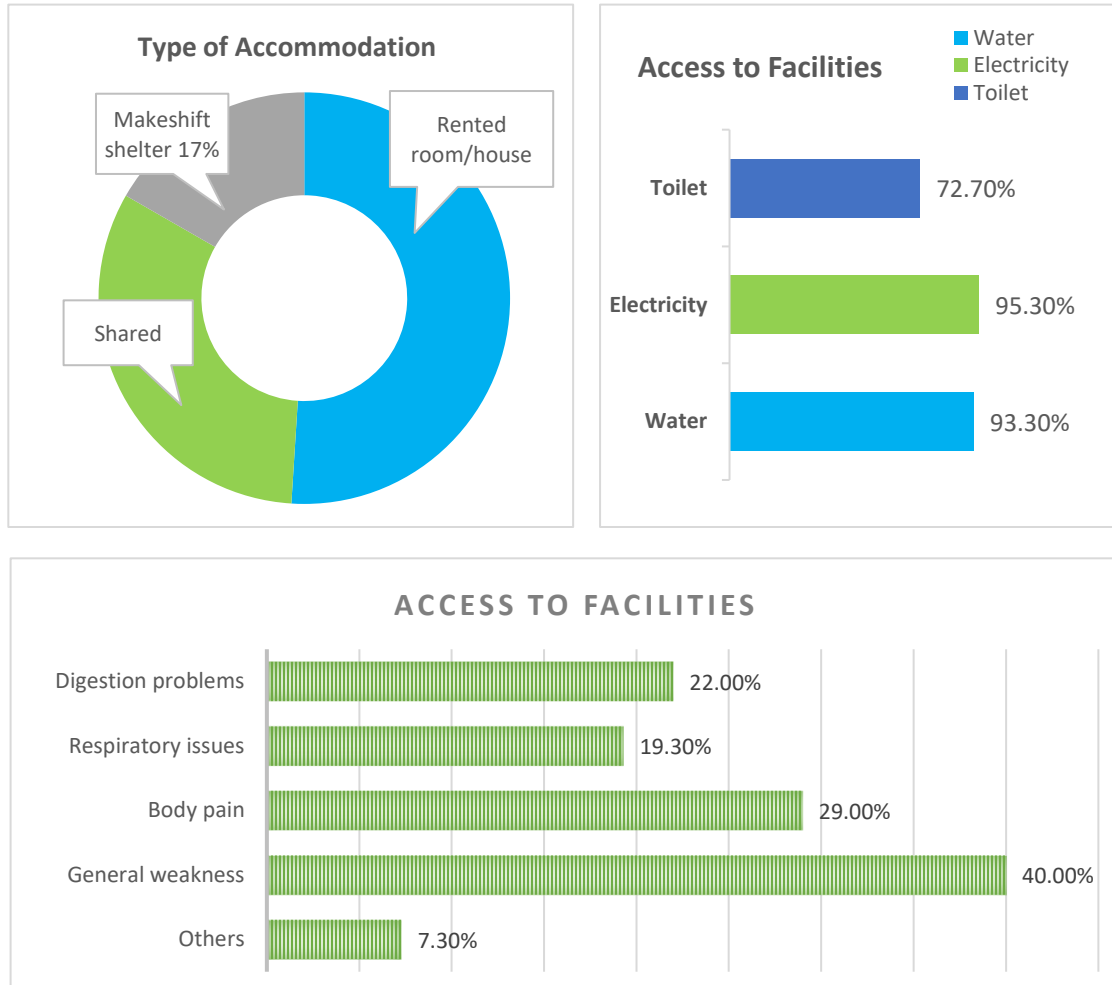
Question	Response	Frequency	Percentage
Education Level	- No formal education	26	8.7%
	- Primary (1-5)	57	19.0%
	- Secondary (6-10)	81	27.0%
	- Higher Secondary (11-12)	66	22.0%
	- Graduate or above	70	23.3%
Type of Goods/Services Sold	- Food items	220	73.3%
	- Clothes	41	13.7%
	- Household items	15	5.0%
	- Services	14	4.7%
	- Others	10	3.3%
Years of Experience	- Less than 1 year	40	13.3%
	- 1-5 years	108	36.0%
	- 5-10 years	83	27.7%
	- More than 10 years	69	23.0%
Average Daily Income	- Below Tk. 200	29	9.7%
	- Tk. 201-500	121	40.3%
	- Tk. 501-1000	105	35.0%
	- Above Tk. 1000	45	15.0%
Main Expenses	- Rent	96	32.0%
	- Food	176	58.7%
	- Children's education	50	16.7%
	- Medical expenses	48	16.0%
	- Others	65	21.7%

Source: Field survey, 2023

As shown in Table 1, the most popular item sold was food (73.3%). Regarding experience, 36% had 1-5 years in the occupation. The average daily income for many (40.3%) was Tk. 201-500. Food emerged as the main household expense (58.7%). This underscores the uncertain nature of vending income to support basic living costs.

4.3 Living Condition Analysis

Figure 2: Living Conditions



Source: Field survey, 2023

Analysis of living conditions revealed over half of vendors lived in rented rooms/houses (51%), demonstrating marginal housing security. However, access to basic amenities like water and electricity was good overall (Figure 2). Common health issues reported were general weakness (40%) and body pain (29%), indicative of health impacts from vending work.

4.4 Social Security and Support System Analysis

Table 2: Social Security

Question	Response	Frequency	Percentage
Receive Social Benefits	- Yes	98	32.7%
	- No	202	67.3%
Type of Benefits	- Cash assistance	54	18.0%
	- Food assistance	89	29.7%
	- Healthcare support	42	14.0%
	- Housing support	33	11.0%
	- Others	22	7.3%
Emergency Expense Management	- Personal savings	116	38.7%
	- Family support	103	34.3%
	- Loans	33	11.0%
	- Don't have any means	20	6.7%
	- Others	28	9.3%

Source: Field survey, 2023

As per Table 2, the majority (67.3%) did not avail any social security benefits. Among those who did, food assistance was most prevalent (29.7%). Personal savings (38.7%) emerged as the dominant source to manage emergencies, showing limited alternative coping mechanisms.

4.5 Occupational Challenge Analysis

Table 3: Occupational Challenges

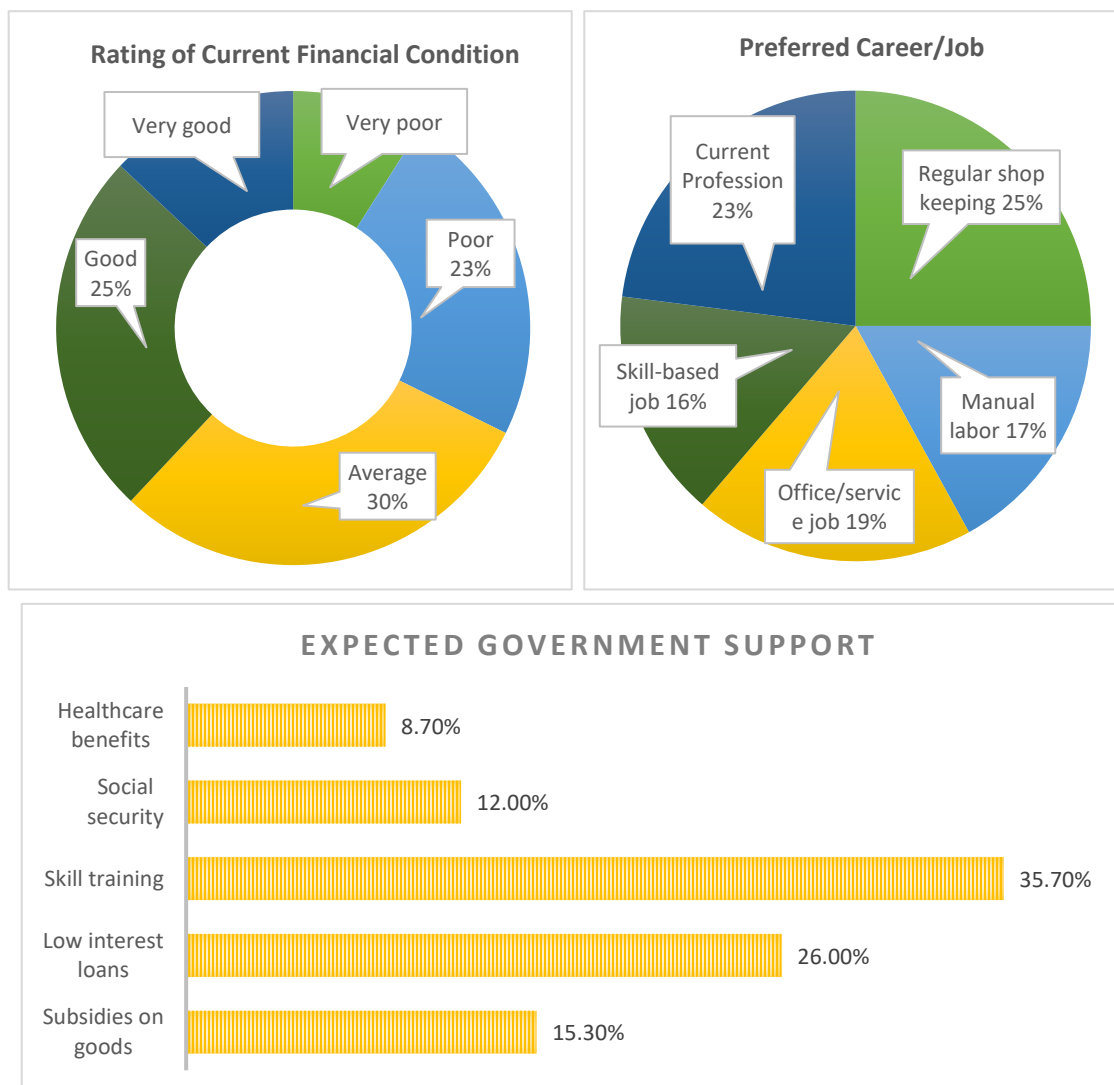
Question	Response	Frequency	Percentage
Problems from Local Authorities	- Yes	158	52.7%
	- No	142	47.3%
Type of Problems	- Harassment from local police	103	34.3%
	- Restrictions on selling	71	23.7%
	- Hassles in getting permits	62	20.7%
	- Fines or confiscation of goods	47	15.7%
	- Others	17	5.7%
Level of Competition	- A lot of competition	125	41.7%
	- Average competition	108	36.0%
	- Not much competition	47	15.7%
Impact of Price Fluctuations	- Decreases income a lot	54	18.0%
	- Decreases income slightly	98	32.7%
	- No major impact	92	30.7%
	- Sometimes increases income	32	10.7%

Source: Field survey, 2023

More than half (52.7%) faced regular challenges from local authorities as indicated in Table 3. Police harassment (34.3%) and restrictions on vending (23.7%) were common problems. Vendors also perceived a high level of competition (41.7%). These obstacles contributed to livelihood vulnerabilities.

4.6 Discussion of Key Findings

Figure 3: Aspirations



Source: Field survey, 2023

The ratings for current financial condition show that over 30% of vendors viewed it as poor or very poor, highlighting inadequate earnings. When asked about preferred career transitions, regular shop keeping was the most popular option chosen by 25% due to perceptions of stability. Other favourable alternatives included service and skill-based jobs. Regarding expectations from the government, skill training was the top support sought by 36% respondents, unveiling a lack of opportunities to diversify skills. Low interest loans and subsidies were also major demands. Together, these findings reveal the street vendors' desire to improve livelihood security through career changes, social safety nets and enhanced skill development support programs. Their ratings and responses expose the

vulnerabilities of street vending occupations and the need for strategic interventions to achieve better living standards.

Discussion

5.1 Key Findings

The key findings of the study based on primary data collection and analysis include:

- Street food vending provides livelihood opportunities but yields uncertain daily incomes ranging from Tk. 201-500 for many. Over 30% find their financial condition poor.
- Common health issues among vendors are general body weakness, pains and respiratory problems attributed to vending conditions and lack of safety gears.
- Majority of vendors rely on rented rooms with good access to basic amenities but lack formal social security benefits.
- Key livelihood vulnerabilities stem from income fluctuations due to price changes, high competition and restrictions imposed by local authorities.
- Harassment, fines and confiscations by local police undermine an already unstable income. Only a third receive occasional food assistance.
- Most vendors lack organization and alternate savings sources during emergencies beyond personal means or family support.
- Common aspirations include diversifying to stable jobs like retail shops but lack state support and skill development opportunities.

5.2 Relationship to Literature

The findings resonate with several studies highlighting income insecurity, health issues and lack of social protections among street vendors in global South contexts (Abdu et al., 2020; Osei-Tutu et al., 2020). Restrictions and arbitrary targeting by local authorities documented previously is also prevalent (Magesa et al., 2020; Wahyuni et al., 2021).

However, the study contributes context-specific insights on vulnerabilities faced within a major Dhaka slum community not explored before. It also finds vocational training and stable alternative jobs as key priorities differing from previous reports of imperfect vendor collectives.

5.3 Implications of Findings

The multidimensional vulnerabilities revealed have serious policy and programmatic implications. If unaddressed, street food vending may not ensure sustainable poverty reduction for many urban poor.

Strategic interventions are needed to boost income stability, social security, skills and affordable housing options. Recognizing vending through supportive registration coupled with traders' inclusion can curb harassment issues.

Findings also call for tailored development programs in slum vendor clusters with community-led models for basic amenities, healthcare access and emergency savings mechanisms.

5.4 Addressing Research Objectives

Through primary data collection using mixed methods, the study achieved its objectives. It evaluated income sources, instability factors, living conditions, social security access, and major occupational challenges of Mirpur Street vendors.

Findings provide rich empirical understanding of their context-specific vulnerabilities informing the recommendations for improving livelihood outcomes. All research questions

5.5 Limitations

Limitations include use of non-probability sampling within one slum location restricting generalizability. Language barriers posed challenges in some interviews. Reliance on self-reported quantitative data and potential response biases cannot be ruled out. Seasonal variations in income and challenges were also not captured.

Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1 Conclusion

This study aimed to assess the livelihood vulnerabilities and occupational hurdles faced by street vendors in Mirpur, Dhaka. Based on the findings from primary data collection and analysis, several key conclusions can be drawn:

- Street food vending provides a means of self-employment but yields uncertain incomes that fail to meet basic household expenses for many. Livelihoods suffer from lack of income stability and economic shocks.
- Vendors experience multidimensional vulnerabilities relating to their occupational health and safety, access to social security, accommodations, and harassment by local authorities.
- Weak support systems force overreliance on personal savings during emergencies with few alternatives like insurance or loans.
- Major hurdles include public space restrictions, costly permits and barriers to skill development limiting career progression from street vending.
- Current living standards remain poor for a significant proportion despite years of experience in vending. Aspirations to improve livelihoods through stable jobs or shops remain unfulfilled.

Thus, street food vending as an occupation is fraught with vulnerabilities that undermine the ability to earn sustainable livelihoods from it, especially within urban slum communities. Strategic interventions are required to address these vulnerabilities.

6.2 Recommendations

Based on the study's findings and conclusions, the following policy recommendations are proposed:

- Formulation of a clear vending policy and implementation of supportive registration programs to recognize street food vending as a legal occupation.
- Provision of subsidized healthcare, life and accident insurance, maternity benefits, pension schemes for vendors under a social security framework.
- Vocational skill development trainings, interest-free microloans and subsidies on equipment/safety gear to diversify income sources and reduce health hazards.
- Consultative mechanisms involving vendor organizations to resolve issues of permits, space allocation and restrictions imposed arbitrarily by local authorities.
- Community development programs focused on upgrading shelters, sanitation facilities and access to basic amenities in vendor clusters.
- Poverty alleviation initiatives through conditional cash transfers, livelihood grants and supply chain linkage opportunities for street vendors.

6.3 Scope for Future Research

There is need for continued research on street vendors within different city contexts, exploring gendered vulnerabilities, impacts of external shocks, and successful community-led interventions. Large scale quantitative surveys could provide more generalizable insights on living standards. Comparative policy analyses across countries may inform progressive legalization efforts. Addressing these research gaps will strengthen evidence-based actions towards sustainable informal vending.

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