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Sociology of Street Vendors: Identity, Risk, and Regulation in Delhi

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ABSTRACT

This manuscript examines the sociological dimensions of street vending in Delhi, focusing on how vendors construct their identities, navigate multifaceted risks, and respond to formal and informal regulatory regimes. Drawing on a mixed-methods study of 200 street vendors across two major markets in Delhi—Chandni Chowk and Sarojini Nagar—this research integrates survey data, semi-structured interviews, and participant observation. Findings reveal that street vendors articulate a strong collective identity rooted in community solidarity and entrepreneurial pride. Simultaneously, they employ diverse risk-management strategies to cope with economic volatility, health hazards, and periodic harassment by civic authorities.

Fig.1 Sociology of Street Vendors,Source([1])

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Beyond these core insights, the study uncovers how evolving urban redevelopment projects and consumer preferences are reshaping vending practices: younger vendors incorporate digital payments and social media marketing into their itineraries, while older vendors draw on intergenerational networks for informal credit. The implementation of the Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014, emerges as a double-edged sword: while it offers legal recognition and organized vending zones, bureaucratic delays, and uneven enforcement perpetuate uncertainty. Interviews with association leaders underscore the importance of intermediary governance bodies (e.g., municipal vending committees) in mediating between vendors and the state.

This research argues that sustainable urban policy must move beyond static zoning maps to embrace dynamic, participatory frameworks that align with vendors' lived realities. In doing so, cities like Delhi can harness the economic vitality and cultural vibrancy that street vending contributes, while mitigating risks through inclusive, context-sensitive regulation.

KEYWORDS

street vending, identity, risk management, regulation, Delhi

INTRODUCTION

Street vending is a ubiquitous feature of urban life in Delhi, providing low-cost goods and services to millions daily while offering livelihood opportunities to marginalized populations. Despite its visibility, street vending occupies a contentious space: celebrated for its contribution to informal employment and urban culture, yet frequently stigmatized as a source of congestion, litter, and unregulated commerce. This ambivalence reflects deeper tensions over urban space allocation, class relations, and governance. In Delhi—estimated to host over 500,000 street vendors—these tensions play out in crowded bazaars, pavement encroachments, and contested negotiations with municipal authorities.

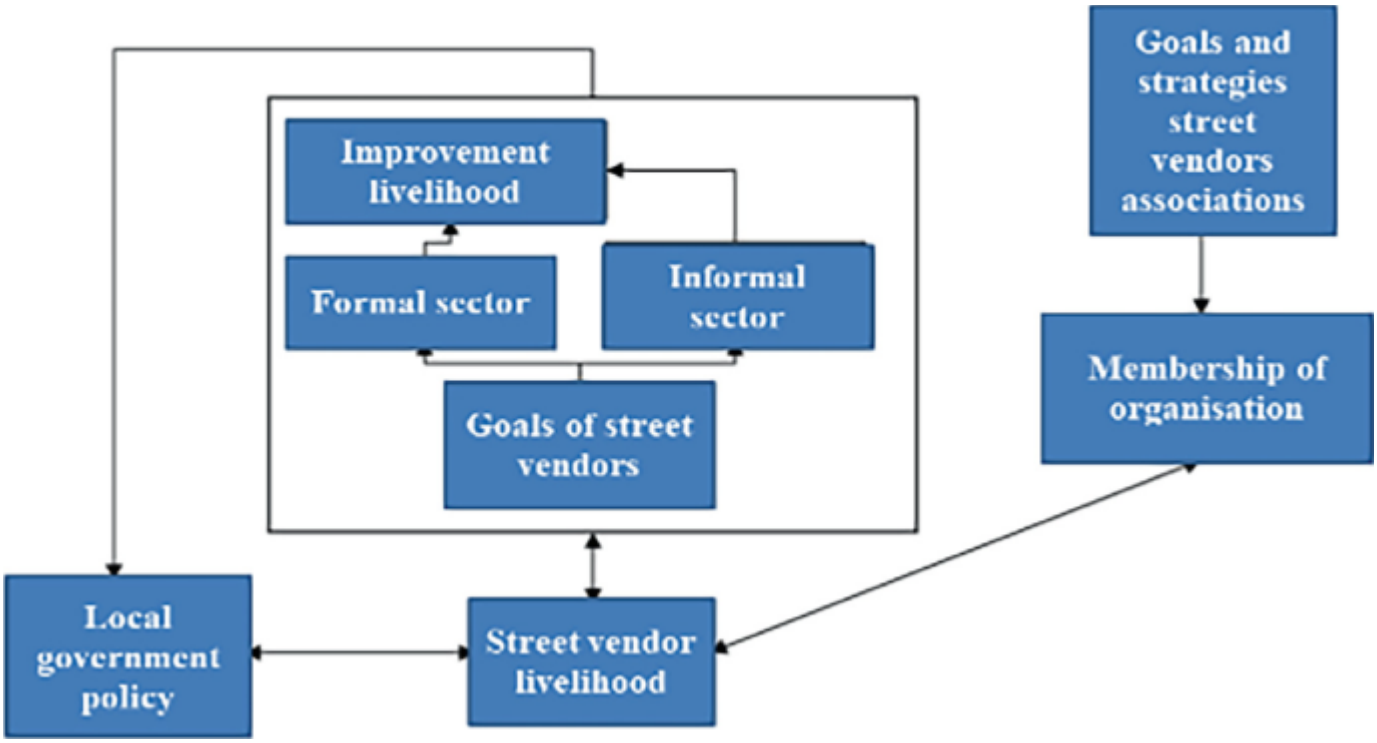

Fig.2 Identity, Risk, and Regulation in Delhi,Source([2])

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Vendors' identities are shaped by intersections of class, migration status, caste, and gender. For many, vending is not merely a survival strategy but a source of dignity and community belonging. However, the livelihoods of street vendors are perennially precarious. Economic risks—stemming from fluctuating customer demand, supply chain disruptions, and seasonal variations—are compounded by health risks (exposure to air pollution, extreme weather, and occupational injuries) and legal-administrative risks such as harassment, sudden evictions, and bribe demands by law enforcement agencies.

Urban redevelopment initiatives, such as the DDA's pavement improvement projects, often target vendor clusters for clearance or relocation, generating waves of protest and legal challenges. These conflicts highlight a fundamental question: whose vision of public space prevails? This study contends that vendors are not passive victims but active claimants of urban space, employing sophisticated tactics to assert their rights—ranging from filing Public Interest Litigations to staging flash-mob demonstrations.

In response to these challenges, vendors have developed intricate risk-management strategies: informal savings groups, adaptive mobility across vending sites, and collective bargaining through vendor associations. At the same time, regulatory interventions—most notably the Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014—aim to formalize vending activities, delineate vending zones, and grant legal rights. Yet implementation remains uneven across Delhi's municipalities, with many vendors still excluded from the formal process due to bureaucratic hurdles or lack of awareness.

This study explores three intertwined dimensions of street vending in Delhi: identity, risk, and regulation. By combining quantitative and qualitative methods, it seeks to capture the lived realities of vendors and assess the impacts of regulatory frameworks on their social and economic well-being. The research addresses the following questions:

- How do vendors construct and express their individual and collective identities within the urban informal economy?
- What are the principal risks vendors face, and how do they navigate them?
- To what extent has formal regulation under the Street Vendors Act altered vendors' practices, security, and sense of legitimacy?

Through these inquiries, the manuscript contributes to sociological debates on informality, urban governance, and the politics of livelihood in Global South cities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Street vending in Delhi sits at the intersection of livelihood, public space and urban governance. Scholarship before 2013 frames vendors simultaneously as informal entrepreneurs whose everyday practices reproduce urban life and as a politically and legally contested population, exposed to evictions, police harassment and ad-hoc regulation. Early empirical and policy work — notably large surveys and case studies produced with NASVI, SEWA, and WIEGO partners — maps the magnitude of vending, the gendered composition of vendor work, and the recurrent conflict between vendors and municipal authorities.

Identity, everyday practice and the social embeddedness of vending. Ethnographic and historical treatments emphasise that vending is more than "informal work": it is deeply embedded in kinship, migration networks and neighbourhood markets, and it shapes vendors' public identities. Scholars show how vending provides dignity, social visibility and a route to urban belonging even as it often reproduces precarious class and caste positions. Works that excavate the social history and politics of the urban poor (e.g., Gooptu; Breman on informal labour dynamics) help situate Delhi vendors within longer patterns of labour mobility and livelihood adaptation.

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Risk, precarity and everyday insecurity. The risk/precocity literature frames street vending as a precarious livelihood characterized by episodic earnings, exposure to confiscation and eviction, health and safety risks, and lack of social protection. Theorists of risk (Beck) and empirical accounts of informal work underline how vendors manage uncertainty through informal networks, daily coping strategies and, where possible, collective action. This literature highlights the gendered forms of vulnerability (women vendors face particular harassment and lack of services) documented in Delhi case studies.

Law, rights and regulation: courts to policy. The jurisprudential axis is crucial: Supreme Court rulings such as *Olga Tellis* (1985) and *Sodan Singh* (1989) set important precedents by recognising livelihood and conditional rights for pavement traders while permitting reasonable regulation. These cases put pressure on the state to move from ad-hoc clearances and evictions toward more transparent regulatory architectures; they also increased vendor organisations' litigation and advocacy strategies. By the early 2000s this legal momentum contributed to the formulation of a National Policy on Urban Street Vendors (2004). Yet implementation in cities like Delhi remained problematic: surveys and NGO reports show continued forced removals, harassment and inconsistent recognition of vendors' space rights.

Organising, collective action and political claims. From the 1990s onward, organised vendor federations (NASVI) and women's unions (SEWA) became central actors in the politics of vending — documenting needs, lobbying for policy change, and pressing municipal bodies for representation in vending committees. Case studies of SEWA's Delhi work illustrate strategies that range from establishing women's markets to legal support for evicted vendors; these mobilisations reframed vendor claims as citizenship and livelihood rights rather than as mere nuisance problems.

Urban governance, informality and planning theory. The policy and planning literature uses vendors to test broader theories of informality. Ananya Roy's influential thesis on informality argues that informality is not a peripheral failure of planning but a mode of urbanisation that planners must engage with — a conceptual move that reframes vendor regulation as a question of how cities produce and manage "exceptions" to formal norms. Studies of Delhi show how municipal responses oscillate between punitive removal (bulldozing/evictions) and partial accommodation (designated vending zones, ad hoc licences), revealing the institutional incoherence of urban governance.

Gaps and directions: Before 2013 the literature offered rich qualitative description and policy briefs, but comparatively fewer systematic longitudinal or large-N quantitative studies tracing how regulation, legal rulings and vendor organising change livelihood outcomes over time in Delhi specifically. Other gaps included fine-grained gendered and caste analyses of access to vending space, and comparative work linking formal municipal planning processes to street-level enforcement practices.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a mixed-methods design to capture both breadth and depth of street vending dynamics. Quantitative data were collected via structured questionnaires administered to 200 street vendors selected through purposive sampling from two major Delhi markets—Chandni Chowk (a historic wholesale hub) and Sarojini Nagar (a popular retail bazaar). Qualitative insights were gathered through semi-structured interviews with 20 vendors (10 from each market) and participant observation conducted over three months (January–March 2025).

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Sampling and Participant Recruitment

Vendors were approached discreetly at vending sites during off-peak hours to minimize business disruption and build rapport. Inclusion criteria included a minimum of six months' continuous vending in the market and willingness to participate. The sample captures diversity in gender (68% male, 32% female), age (21–60 years), migration status (45% intra-state migrants, 35% inter-state migrants, 20% Delhi natives), and product category (food, textiles, electronics, and services).

Data Collection Instruments

The survey instrument comprised closed- and open-ended questions covering demographics, livelihood history, income patterns, risk perceptions, coping strategies, and awareness of the Street Vendors Act. Interviews probed deeper into personal narratives: motivations for choosing vending, negotiations with municipal authorities, community support mechanisms, and aspirations for the future. Field notes recorded spatial arrangements, customer interactions, and periodic enforcement actions.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board at [University Name]. Participants provided informed consent, assured confidentiality, and the option to withdraw at any point. Pseudonyms protect identities. Data storage followed GDPR-equivalent protocols, with encrypted files and restricted access.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (means, frequencies) and cross-tabulations to map risk profiles and regulatory awareness across demographics. Qualitative transcripts were coded thematically using NVivo, following an iterative process: open coding for emergent themes, axial coding to link categories (identity, risk, regulation), and selective coding to refine core narratives. Triangulation across surveys, interviews, and observations enhanced validity. Negative case analysis identified outliers—vendors with atypical coping strategies or regulatory experiences.

Limitations

Purposive sampling limits generalizability beyond the selected markets; self-reported data may introduce recall and social-desirability biases. Time constraints precluded longitudinal follow-up to track regulatory impacts over multiple seasons. Nevertheless, the mixed-methods approach provides a robust, contextualized portrait of street vending in Delhi's complex urban ecosystem.

RESULTS

Constructing Vendor Identity

Survey results indicate that 82% of vendors view their work as more than mere income generation; they describe it as a source of pride, autonomy, and community belonging. Interviews reveal two identity dimensions: "entrepreneurial self" and "collective solidarity." The entrepreneurial self reflects individual aspirations for upward mobility—evident in vendors who reinvest profits into expanding their carts or diversifying product lines. Collective solidarity emerges through participation in local vendor associations and informal support groups, which provide emotional backing during evictions or health crises.

For instance, Ramesh (45, vegetable vendor) stated:

"I started at fifteen with a borrowed cart. Now I own one. Selling vegetables isn't easy, but it gives me dignity—you see people rely on me for daily groceries."

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Female vendors emphasized empowerment: Kavita (32, clothing vendor) noted that vending afforded her financial independence within a patriarchal setting, fostering self-confidence and bargaining power within her household. Younger vendors (under 30) integrate social media—posting product photos on WhatsApp groups—to cultivate a small but loyal customer base.

Economic and Health Risks

Quantitative data show pronounced income volatility: 67% reported earning below INR 500 per day in off-peak seasons (monsoons, major festivals), while peak-season earnings (weddings, holidays) could exceed INR 1,500. Debt burdens mount as 58% borrow from informal moneylenders at high interest. Health risks are widespread: 74% experienced respiratory issues attributed to vehicular pollution; 38% reported work-related injuries (cuts, slips). Few (12%) hold any form of health insurance, relying instead on ROSCA payouts or family savings for medical bills.

Interactions with Authorities

About 58% of vendors reported harassment by municipal inspectors or police—ranging from verbal abuse to confiscation of goods—especially during "beautification drives." Harassment surges in pre-election periods when authorities seek to "clean" public spaces. Despite the Street Vendors Act, only 35% of respondents held identity cards. Barriers include lack of residence proof, high application fees, and opaque renewal procedures. Several vendors recounted bribe-based "fast-track" registration schemes that cost up to INR 2,000.

Risk-Management Strategies

Three primary strategies emerged:

- **Mobility**: shifting vending locations throughout the day or week to evade crackdowns. Vendors maintain mental "maps" of safe zones and police patrol schedules.
- **Collective Action**: pooling resources in ROSCAs to cushion income shocks. These savings circles, often organized along kinship or neighborhood lines, also serve as informal credit sources.
- **Informal Alliances**: cultivating relationships with local councilors, parking attendants, or police through small "tokens" or periodic refreshments. Such alliances provide advance warnings of enforcement actions.

Regulatory Impacts

Card-holding vendors (35% of sample) report greater security: 78% feel confident to invest in better carts or display equipment, citing fewer eviction threats and occasional discount access to municipal sheds. However, cardless vendors feel further marginalized, perceiving the Act as favoring those with political connections or established addresses. Registration processes often require proof of residence—difficult for migrants without formal leases—leading to systematic exclusion.

Market Differences

Chandni Chowk vendors enjoy stronger association networks and higher card-holding rates (42%) compared to Sarojini Nagar (27%). The former benefits from legacy trader unions dating to colonial municipal councils; the latter is characterized by rapid turnover and lower collective cohesion, heightening precarity.

CONCLUSION

This study illuminates how street vendors in Delhi navigate the intertwined realms of identity, risk, and regulation. Vendors craft identities that blend entrepreneurial ambition with collective solidarity, drawing on community networks to sustain livelihoods and

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assert dignity. Yet their work remains fraught with economic instability, health hazards, and unpredictable enforcement of regulations. Emerging digital tools—mobile wallets, WhatsApp marketing—offer new avenues for resilience but also introduce inequalities between tech-savvy youth and traditional vendors.

The Street Vendors Act, 2014, provides a valuable legal framework but falls short in practice: uneven enforcement, exclusionary documentation requirements, and sporadic corruption dilute its protective aims. Policy implications include:

- **Participatory Governance**: Empower vendor associations to co-design vending zones and application processes, ensuring that regulations reflect on-the-ground realities.
- **Simplified Documentation**: Accept alternative residence proofs (e.g., utility bills, community affidavits) to include migrant vendors.
- **Social Protection**: Facilitate access to affordable health insurance, low-interest microcredit, and skill-upgradation programs to diversify income streams.
- **Digital Inclusion**: Provide training hubs where vendors can learn mobile payment systems and basic digital marketing.
- **Urban Design Integration**: Collaborate with urban planners to create shared vendors' plazas with shelter, sanitation, and waste disposal—balancing public order with economic vitality.

Recognizing street vending as integral to Delhi's urban fabric—rather than a nuisance—can foster more inclusive governance and support sustainable livelihoods. By foregrounding vendors' voices and lived experiences, this research advances sociological understanding of informality in megacities and offers actionable insights for policymakers striving to balance urban order with social justice.

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