

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Gender and employment: Recalibrating women's position in work, organizations and society in times of COVID-19

Merging the public and private spheres of women's work: Narratives from women street food vendors during Covid-19 crisis

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Abstract

Feminist economists have long questioned the dichotomy between the “private” versus “public” spheres of women's work and have argued for a more nuanced understanding of the marketable paid work and the unpaid work of household caregiving. This paper focuses on women street food vendors' (SFVs) experiences before and during Covid-19 pandemic to understand how street food vending as a livelihood activity interacts with social dimensions like gender and division of labor. Through multiple in-depth interviews with 23 women street vendors in Bengaluru, India, before and during the pandemic, we show that there is a blurring of the dichotomy between the work done in the private and public spaces before the pandemic, which is disrupted by Covid-19 crisis. The first half of the paper explores the household labor dynamics in the context of paid and unpaid work of women and explains how the women SFVs, capitalizing on their existing skills of “cooking,” were able to gain agency and recognition for themselves within the households. The second half of the paper focuses on the narratives of the same women SFVs during the first wave of the Covid pandemic and the subsequent lockdown. We find that the Covid crisis brought back the dichotomy between private and public spheres, making it more pronounced, with women losing their control over

The names of the respondents have been changed to protect their anonymity. The interviews were conducted in local languages which were then translated into English.

the public sphere and their work being restricted only to the private sphere.

KEYWORDS

Covid crisis, household labor, India, informal enterprises, paid work, street food vendors, unpaid work, women's work

1 | INTRODUCTION

Revathi,¹ a street food vendor (SFV) in her mid 30s in Bengaluru, India, is struggling to make ends meet. She confides

At one point, we were feeding 100–110 people a day. Now, for the past three months we have been doing nothing, just sitting at home and we ourselves are struggling to have even one meal a day.²

Anandhi, another SFV shares,

For the past 35yrs, I have been working on the footpath and leading life quite well. Now, it looks like my hands are tied and I am not able to do anything. We don't know who will live or die due to this. Suddenly, the streets of Bengaluru became empty.

These are the stories of not just Revathi and Anandhi, but every SFV in Bengaluru in the wake of the coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) pandemic crisis (Covid-19). With the country in a complete lockdown and the streets being devoid of people for nearly four months, the livelihood of many street vendors, who represent the largest segment of self-employed informal entrepreneurs of India, has completely shut down.

A report by the International Labor Organization suggested that out of an estimated 2 billion workers in the informal sector worldwide, 76% are affected severely due to the country-wide lockdowns and closure of businesses. The most vulnerable are the own-account workers³ who constitute 47% of the affected informal workers.⁴ The sectors facing serious disruptions are trade, manufacturing, accommodation and food and real estate, and estimates show that 42% of women work in these sectors as compared to 32% of men.⁵

In India, women's involvement in the informal sector is significant. Of all unincorporated non-agricultural enterprises (informal enterprises), 24% are owned by women (as own-account enterprises and establishments), and women owned enterprises have shown a consistent increase in urban areas over the years. Thus, any crisis affecting the informal sector of the country will have a significant impact on the women workers, putting them in the highest poverty risk (Chen et al., 2006).

This paper attempts to understand the vulnerabilities of self-employed women in the informal sector, particularly in the times of crisis. It focuses on SFVs and specifically looks at how street food vending as a livelihood activity interacts with social dimensions like gender and division of labor. The first half of the paper explores the household labor dynamics in the context of paid and unpaid work and explains how the women SFVs have been able to gain visibilisation for themselves within the households. The second half of the paper focuses on the narratives of the same women SFVs during and after the lockdown to highlight the impact of the pandemic on their livelihood and their agency within the household. Using the "before and after" narratives of these women, the paper examines how the pandemic is resulting in a gradual erosion of the visibility that these women have gained in their households over the years.

2 | THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: WOMEN'S WORK AND CONTROL OVER HOUSEHOLD LABOR

Neoclassical economics, in its way of defining the “allocation of scarce resources,” has completely left out the women's perspective, especially if the women have been out of the paid-work category (Ferber & Nelson, 1993; May, 2002). Ever since Barbara Bergmann (1973) confronted the gender-blind economic theories, many feminist economists have provided for a critique for the neoclassical economic theory which often takes a very narrow approach of valuing the well-being of women, based on women's contribution to paid economic work and her own income. However, a woman's well-being is also dependent on her share of family income, if any, and the amount of time she spends working, both in paid and unpaid work (Woolley, 1993).

Marxist feminists such as Silvia Federici (1975) and Leopoldina Fortunati (1995) have vigorously argued that undervaluation of women's unpaid work is an outcome of male-centric capitalism and have strongly advocated for incorporation of unwaged domestic work into productive capital. They have also challenged the dichotomy in the “public” (the “outside” work – political and power negotiations) and “private” (the “inside” work – familial relations and caregiving) spheres of women's work, and the notion that women's involvement is largely restricted to the “household sphere” and work on family farms, whereas the men are mostly engaged with the market economy (Acharya & Bennet, 1983). It is often argued that these two spheres cannot be described as “two spatially separate, functionally independent activities” (Peterson, 2000). Such a dichotomous separation of women's productive (paid) and reproductive (unpaid) work has been also contested by the proponents of Social Reproduction Theory who argue that this categorization has obscured women's contribution in the production process and devalued their work (Mezzadri, 2019).

Another struggle that feminist economics has been confronted with is the lack of empirical data. While it is able to build a large body of theoretical literature around recognizing women's work, there is a dearth of data to validate the theories. There is a need to use empirical data to measure women's work, especially in the unpaid category, trace the intrahousehold resource allocation and assess the gendered processes in the paid labor market (Macdonald, 1995).

This paper attempts to understand women's work, both paid and unpaid, and the household level labor dynamics in the context of household enterprises. The paper dwells on dismantling the dichotomy between the private and public spheres of women's work and uses empirical evidence to show that in some cases, women are able to blend the two spheres by smoothly transitioning the unpaid work into a paid economic activity. However, in a situation of serious livelihood crisis, the women's work in the public sphere ceases to exist, and their work becomes solely restricted to the private sphere, thus causing the dichotomy to reappear.

2.1 | The Indian context

India has one of lowest women's labor-force participation rate of just 22%,⁶ which has gradually declined over the last few decades, ironically suggesting that women in India “do not work.” Deshpande and Kabeer (2019) identify that the primary constraints to women's participation in the labor force are their complete involvement in the routine domestic work of cooking, cleaning and household maintenance, and providing household care-work for the elders. Women often spend long hours on their domestic and reproductive roles which makes it difficult for them to engage in paid work. Similar findings were observed in a recent survey where the women reported their reasons for being out of the workforce as “attending to domestic duties only”.⁷

In reality however, Indian women are always involved in productive and reproductive activities, and a significant number of women are employed in the informal sector. Given the varied nature of informal work (household duties, home-based work, or own-account enterprises), women's contribution is either unrecognized or is undervalued.

For instance, household duties include direct and indirect contribution of labor by the women to the household enterprises in addition to their regular household chores. However, such work done by women is considered to be outside the boundaries of paid work and employment, as it is difficult to delineate it from services for their own household

consumption versus production of goods for the market. Thus, often the women's labor that goes toward the household enterprises is often unrecognized (Nunez, 1993). In effect, not only is the production by women for household consumption invisibilized, but so is their contribution to household economic activity.

For the women who are self-employed and are engaged in home-based informal work (such as beedi or agarbatti rolling, embroidery, zari work), it is tangled in traditional social and gender constructs of work and is marginalized (Raju, 2013). As Maria Mies (1982) finds in one of her older studies on the women lacemakers of Narsapur in Andhra Pradesh, India, women who make laces that are recognized as a luxury good in the global market, are not recognized as producers but merely as "housewives" producing lace as a leisure activity. Such "housewification" (as Mies calls it) of women's labor is still pertinent in most of the home-based informal work.

In the case of self-employed women with own-account enterprises, even though their economic contribution may be visible, it is undervalued. While often the women entrepreneurs may have a projected image of an independent, self-governed individual, in reality they are in a constant state of anxiety and repudiation of their vulnerability (Scharff, 2014) to be able to gain agency within the household.

Invisibilization of women's work not only results in low economic returns to their work, but also significantly adds to their overall working time. Most women who are involved in household livelihood activity or have their own enterprises or engage in wage work, do so with a steep increase in their total number of working hours both paid and unpaid, leaving very little time for themselves. This is because there is a distinct "*feminization of obligations/responsibilities*," which the women cannot escape, and any contribution to household economic activity does not increase the rights and rewards for them within the household (Chant, 2014).

2.2 | The context of the paper – women street food vendors

This paper is situated in the context of street food vending in India, which is a self-owned household-level informal enterprise, involving labor from the household members. The paper specifically focuses on the women SFVs in the city of Bengaluru in India, who are either the owners or co-owners of the enterprise along with their spouse.

Street vendors in India sell a range of goods and services from fruits and vegetables to cooked food, consumer electronics, garments, books, haircuts and repairs of various goods and so on. Street vending offers a way for small retailers and home-based producers to sell their products, provides migrants with "low-end steady employment" and a place for urban consumers to buy goods and services at low prices (Chen et al., 2014). However, street vendors are seen as operating outside the regulatory frameworks and formal economy and their ability to pursue their livelihoods is often undermined by the dynamic relation with the local authorities (Roever, 2016). Harassment, demand of bribes, confiscation of merchandise and evictions are some of the ways in which local government officials (municipality and traffic police) exert their position of power (ibid.).

Street food vending is diverse in terms of the type of food vended, the geographical locations of the cart and the type of cart, as well as the socio-demographic profile of the vendors. Type of food varied significantly, from carts selling local food, to carts vending food from other regions of India, and a few carts selling food which was a fusion of international and Indian cuisine. The geographical locations of street food vending varied from residential areas to commercial spaces and also industrial areas. The type of cart used by the food vendors also varied: while often street food vending is done on mobile carts or motorized vans, in some cases the food is vended in make-shift temporary structures built on the pavements (footpaths) of the street.⁸ Even though the carts have cooking facilities, the food sold is mostly pre-cooked or semi-cooked which is assembled in the carts. Most of the preparatory work such as cutting vegetables and semi-cooking of the dishes is done at the vendor's home.

While food production has always been a gendered activity (Webster & Zhang, 2020), the market linkage has always been dominated by men. Kashyap's (1987) work on Indian street food vending also highlights that food is primarily sold by men, with women supporting their male partners in assembling the food or in cleaning at their vending carts. Thus, while it is men who are mostly visible on the street, the women take care of most of the background work

for the cart at home (preparing food, cleaning etc.), along with the regular household chores. Hence the women have to spend longer hours on both domestic and paid work, which is most often not recognized.

However, the last few decades have witnessed more women taking on an active role in street food vending. This is evident from the significant number of women food vendors visible on the street as compared to earlier, either with their spouse, or even alone. Such visibility of women on the street indicates certain changes in the household labor dynamics, especially the control over household labor.

Street food vending is often a household level activity, entailing labor from all the household members. Women who spend long hours on the street preparing and vending food may be able to delegate some of their household work as well as the preparatory work for street food to other members (most often they are the spouses), suggesting a greater control over household labor. Verschoor (2008) observes a similar control over household labor by women in the context of agricultural households. He finds that when a woman's hours of paid work increase, she is able to delegate household chores or farm work to other members of the household. Since allocation of work within a household is gendered and mostly influenced by the social norms, women are able to seek assistance from other family members only when their work is recognized both socially and economically within the household.

Using the example of the women SFVs, this paper examines the visibility of the women SFVs through three broad themes: gender roles in the household-level economic activity, dignity of work and sense of identity, and control over the household labor in households engaged in street food vending. The paper then highlights the vulnerability of these women when their livelihood comes to a halt, potentially eroding their agency and recognition within the household.

3 | METHODOLOGY FOR THE STUDY

This paper is part of an ongoing larger qualitative study initiated in 2019 to explore the lives and livelihoods of SFVs in Bengaluru across three themes: understanding the socio-economic profile of SFVs, exploring the challenges faced by the vendors in the light of the day-to-day negotiations with state and non-state authorities, and exploring the issue of dignity and inclusion associated with selling food on the "street." The respondents for the larger study were identified from 11 well-known street food vending locations in Bengaluru.

After choosing the 11 food vending locations, we adopted two approaches to identify our respondents. Firstly, we conducted a non-participant observational study of each location during different times of the day to understand the number of vendors, process of vending, type of food and gender composition of the vendors. Secondly, based on the observational study, we conducted in-depth interviews of participants, who were selected based on their willingness to participate.

The current paper is based on the in-depth interviews conducted with 23 women SFVs.⁹ The interviews were conducted in three rounds: (a) before the pandemic (June 2019-January 2020) (b) during the first wave of the pandemic and the lockdown period (during April and May 2020), and (c) post lockdown (during October 2020).

All the interviews were semi-structured and exploratory in nature. The interviews were conducted in Kannada (the local language) or Hindi, transcribed and translated into English and anonymized. Emerging themes in each of the narratives were identified and patterns and relationships as well as commonalities and differences across narratives were established.

3.1 | Description of the respondents

Of the 23 women respondents selected for the study, 4 were sole owners of the food cart and 19 women vended jointly along with their spouses. For 22 of them, street food vending was a household level activity involving household labor and one respondent was running the enterprise on her own without any help from household members.

The nature of work done by the women at the cart varied from cart to cart. In some carts, women were mostly observed to be involved in the support activities like cooking and cleaning both at the cart as well as at home, and

not directly interacting with the customers. In other cases, women were seen more actively involved in almost all the work at the cart, especially dealing with the customers and managing sales and finances. These women were often the co-owners and partners in the business. Six vendors also employed women as hired help to clean the vessels. However, the hired helpers were not interviewed for the study.

Eighteen of these women are migrants from within Karnataka or other states. Three have taken up vending recently, in the last 2 years, whereas eight had been vending for 10–15 years. Seven of these women were prior home-makers, and after migrating to the city, got involved in food vending. Ten of them were either working as domestic help or in garment manufacturing and transitioned to street food vending. All these women belong to nuclear families and many of them rely on the support of their spouse or children of an employable age. Please see Appendix 1 for a brief profile of the respondents.

4 | VISIBILISATION OF WOMEN'S WORK: NARRATIVES FROM “BEFORE THE PANDEMIC”

This section draws from the interviews conducted with the women SFVs before the pandemic (during June 2019–January 2020), to understand their role and agency over their livelihood, and also their imagination about their work and life. Household cooking has always been recognized as unpaid feminine work (Demos & Segal, 2016). However, vending food on the street has helped these women to blend their domestic unpaid activity of cooking with a market-based activity and at same time, given them the flexibility and autonomy to manage other household commitments. As our interviews show, for many of the vendors, engaging in street food vending did not necessitate learning a new skill. In fact, it is a way to capitalize on their existing skills of cooking.

Devi, one of our respondents in her early twenties, from the North Eastern part of India and vending street food in Bengaluru for the last 7 years, said that as a daughter she had to learn cooking for her family at a very young age. Now she was able to use that skill to be economically productive for her family.

Another young respondent Aruna, who is in her late twenties and helping her spouse in vending food for the last 3 years said:

We could have tried something else, but we did not as we did not have any other experience. We knew only this (work)... and this (food cart) requires only a small financial investment, so we started this.

Aruna takes care of most of the cooking done at home, with a little help from her husband. At the cart, the husband is involved in selling, while she assembles the food. Prior to street vending, she worked as a garment worker for a few years and then as a part-time helper in a school.

Another vendor Radha, a 50-year-old woman who has been vending for the last 23 years, shares that she was earlier engaged in domestic work in addition to street food vending, which she had to let go once they expanded their street food activity. However, giving up her other work did not really decrease her workload. She still had to take care of the family obligations. As she narrates how she manages both her livelihood activity and household duties:

Prior to full time food vending, I was going to 2–3 houses for domestic work. I used to get up at 5am to do the housework like preparing breakfast, and other household chores, then go to work in other houses and prepare the food (for the cart) after coming back. That time we were only serving lunch. Then we started to serve breakfast and it was difficult to do (paid) domestic work (along with the household chores), so I dropped it. (Once we expanded our cart) I was going to the cart in the morning after preparing breakfast for children, and then again for serving lunch.... Other household chores like washing clothes, utensils etc., are possible only at night. There isn't anyone to support me at home.

Even though for these women, getting into a second job (in this case full time food vending) has not released them from the first job (other household responsibilities) (Cox & Federici, 1975), they still see a merit in continuing with the work. For many women who were earlier not involved in any paid work, food vending along with their partners gave them an opportunity to contribute to the household income. For the other women who had multiple informal wage-jobs, food vending was stable work, which gave them the flexibility of working on their own terms. Even though preparing and vending food on the street added to their working hours, most of them viewed it as an extension of their household work.

The narratives in the following sections indicate how this livelihood has given them a sense of dignity and identity which in turn is giving them a greater sense of power.

4.1 | Vending food associated with dignity and identity

For the women SFVs, serving food to people is not merely an economic transaction or yet another informal income generating activity, but the very nature of the work is integrally linked to their identity and it gives them a sense of dignity. Through this livelihood, they are able to blend their work in the private sphere, like “cooking” and “care-giving” with that of the market-level activity of food vending which lies in the public sphere. This highlights that these women vendors are, in fact, blurring the dichotomy between their “public” and “private” spheres.

The women described how they assessed the needs of the customers in order to reduce wastage of food. As some of the vendors said, they serve different quantities of food to different customers, based on the nature of their labor-intensive work – people who work as construction laborers would require more quantity than someone who holds a formal office-job. Interestingly, in their way of conducting their business, these women were also addressing the important issue of urban food security. As many of their customers are informal sector workers from the poorer sections of the urban society, these vendors are their only source of affordable and nutritious food near their site of work.

Hygiene practices of SFVs and the quality and safety of street food has always been questioned. Many policies around street food have fore-fronted hygiene as one of the important criteria for allowing operation of street food carts. Our interviews with the SFVs reveal that even without any prior training, the vendors are quite conscious and aware about the hygiene as well as the nutritional aspect of their food. They pay very close attention to the quality of ingredients, cleanliness and taste preferences of the customers. As Shikha, a food vendor in her late thirties and vending food along with her spouse for the last 10 years explains that her food is healthier compared to similar food served at restaurants:

In the restaurants they add soda powder (baking soda)¹⁰ to the rice, we do not do that... We do it very neatly (hygienically) because we eat the same food.... It (the hygiene) will also affect the number of customers we have.

Similarly, another vendor Shantamma, an elderly woman in her early fifties and vending food for the last 25 years, very interestingly narrates how she decides on the daily menu at her cart. She explains:

Vegetables are very important (in diet). I buy fresh (vegetables) because it gives good taste... we prepare leafy vegetables and sprouted pulses. I cook whatever is nutritious and good (healthy).

While preparing food is core to the identity of these women, feeding the hungry is culturally perceived by them as a sacred job, and ascribes a strong sense of dignity to this work. As Seetha, one of the women in her late twenties who has been vending food on street with her husband for the past 8 years said,

We feel happy that we are serving food to people. People express satisfaction of having food when they come to us hungry..... It's a sacred job.

Another aspect of food vending which imparts dignity in the women's perception of this work is the acceptability and appreciation for their food from their customers. This is evident from the vendors' narratives when they talk with pride about their customers who come from different economic and social classes. A stable customer base also indicates acceptability. It adds to their self-esteem. As Radha, said:

Many big people come by car, take food and sit in the car and eat. Do you know the Mayor from (location)? He too comes. He says, "it is tasty." He calls me "Akka" (elder sister)

Similarly, Devi, the migrant vendor from North East India narrated how customers from different cities and even cities from abroad have visited her stall and appreciated her food. Seetha narrates that she had to close her cart for two months due to a family health emergency. When they reopened, all her old customers continued to visit her stall and were happy to eat food from her cart.

The women perceive food vending as not just another paid work, but as a dignified livelihood. The satisfaction of feeding the hungry and the pride in being accepted by customers from different economic classes, gives the women vendors a sense of dignity. Such dignity and self-esteem translate into these women identifying themselves not just as vendors, but as businesswomen. Rajashri, in her forties and vending food for the last 8 years with her spouse and a bunch of hired help said confidently:

We are not street vendors, we are business people who do business on the footpath.¹¹

4.2 | Blurring of gendered notion of work

We have mentioned in the previous sections about the gendered division of labor in street food vending, where the cooking and preparation of food is mostly done by the women in the "household" space, and the selling of the food is done by the men in the "market" space. However, contrary to this, we found that the women SFVs, even though accompanied by their spouses, were visibly active participants involved not only in cooking and cleaning, but also in deciding what is to be cooked, planning the procurement, serving food, employing helpers, and even handling cash. Often, women SFVs could be found selling food with their partners even at 11 PM in the night. A few women also owned and managed the carts independently.

We also found that men were actively participating in work which earlier was considered as only women's domain, for example preparing and cooking food for vending, cleaning etc. An example is that of Shikha where she was responsible for vending while her husband cooked and prepared the food for vending. Similarly, as Simi, another migrant vendor from North East India and vending for the last 8 years narrated, she asked her husband to quit his job as a restaurant cook to help her with preparing momos at home while she vended them on the street. Such participation is also indicated by Nageshwari, a vendor in the late thirties who started vending food for the last 2 years after her husband's pork meat shop incurred losses. Her husband continued to have the pork meat shop; however, the pork meat is used mostly for their food cart, and very little was sold outside. As Nageshwari said, both she and her husband have divided the workload: "*He gets (cooks) the pork ready here at home, brings it to the cart and comes back home*" while she sells the food from 12.00 to 11.00 PM at the cart.

The cases of Shikha, Simi, Nageshwari and many other women SFVs, highlight that rather than being a passive labor, these women actively participate in decision making regarding the livelihood activity. Men sharing the workload at home indicates better recognition and valuation of women's work. While this is true for paid work, our study also found a few examples where women were able to delegate household work and care work to their spouses. For example, in Shikha's case, her husband took care of their children when Shikha was vending at the cart.

Many of our women respondents were also actively engaged in hiring and training other workers to support in cooking and cleaning. Hiring and training other helpers gives these women a sense of confidence and authority over their livelihood. Shantamma's pride was evident when she narrated:

I have taught this boy (a helper) everything... He knows how to cook as tasty as I do.

Given the street-based nature of their work and long working hours, these women had to negotiate with exploitative authorities and unruly customers, and we found that they did not shy away from these uncomfortable situations. Interestingly, often it was the women who managed such circumstances, rather than leaving it to their husbands.

Nageshwari believes that she was much better in handling such situations than her husband. Similarly, Devi shares her experience when there was an anonymous complaint from other street vendors against their cart and she went to the police station with her husband:

I didn't let him (husband) speak as there were 15 to 25 men. If everyone slaps him, what would happen to him? We are not from this place. So, I told him to keep quiet. They can't raise their hands at me, can they?

Similarly, Shikha shared:

I can resolve (my problems) on my own.... Police are a little hesitant to demand money from women but if there are men at the cart, they threaten them and take the money. They call men as "Yeh" (Hey) but address women as "madam". That is why I don't leave the business to my husband... I stay at the cart and do the selling.

These women exude a sense of authority and confidence. Such negotiations with authorities, competing food vendors and unruly customers, were handled by the women themselves because they felt they were better able to deal with them than the men.

Shikha also had her ways to manage unruly customers:

There are good people and there are bad people. I am managing with everyone and continuing to work. If I give them a little freedom, they come and sit on my head (meaning they will take advantage and misbehave) ... I wear a full sleeved shirt, I cover myself fully, only my face and hands can be seen... there are people who look at me with bad feeling. I know how to behave with them.

Streets are gendered public spaces and it appears that the women street vendors' claim to safety in a public space is contingent on their production of respectability (Ranade, 2007). This is more so in the case of Shikha, who vends food near a transport office that sees more footfalls of men than women. These women use the notion of femininity, like by covering themselves to appear "good" (Twamley & Sidharth, 2019), and through their conduct, are able to produce respectability and safety for themselves, and are able legitimize their conditional claim to the public space (Phadka et al., 2011; Ranade, 2007).

4.3 | Women's control over household labor

The narratives in the previous section highlight that women have an active and visible role in all aspects of street food vending, and there is a blurring of gender roles with men engaging in tasks involving drudgery (cooking and cleaning) and women participating in decision making, that is, kind of food to be cooked, household labor utilization etc.

One important observation from our study was the increasing control of women SFVs over household labor. They not only took decisions regarding the livelihood activity but were also delegating tasks to their spouses, enlisting the support of family members and hiring people to help with vending and cleaning. As in the case of Shikha, Simi and Nageshwari explained above, they decided to work at the cart while delegating the household level work to their spouses. Similarly, Shantamma decided to hire people to help her with her livelihood.

However, this appears to be true for households where street vending is the only livelihood for the household. For example, in the case of Chandini, who is the sole owner of the food cart and her husband is employed as a construction worker, she does not have any control over household labor. As Chandini explains how she managed both her household work and street food cart:

I get up at 4.30am, cut the vegetables, prepare for sambar, idli and chutney. Then I come here (to the food cart) at 7am. In the afternoon I go back and clean everything, prepare lunch for my daughter and pick her up from school.... In the evening after I go back home, I wash all these vessels, wash clothes, start cooking for the next day, soak the rice and in the evening, take it to the grinding mill and prepare the batter.

But, for other households, women appear to be the key orchestrators of this livelihood. This highlights an important point about the changes in intra-household power relations which is reflected in greater control over household labor and increased decision-making in activities both outside and within the household.

5 | SURVIVING THE CRISIS: NARRATIVES ON HOW THE WOMEN VENDORS ARE COPING WITH THE PANDEMIC

This section is based on interviews with the women SFVs conducted during and after the first wave of the pandemic and country-wide lockdown. Our pre-lockdown interviews with the women SFVs provided interesting insights about how these women, utilizing their skills of cooking, were able to make themselves visible in the livelihood domain and gain agency within the household. However, the current crisis is turning the tides back. With abrupt stopping of their only livelihood and no alternate means of cash flow, their future remains uncertain. As Shikha confesses,

We don't have money and there is no support. We are not getting anything... I could have managed this situation if I was working in a place with a monthly salary. But for us we get money only if we work.... Our life will move only when we put the cart and do business.

Along with the ongoing crisis, these women were worried about the future of this livelihood. Even when the lockdown in the country was eased, it was difficult for the SFVs to reclaim their livelihood. With most of the office-based-work shifted to a work-from-home model, the vendors are left with very few customers. The struggle is also about regaining the trust with their customers, as the people are hesitant to eat outside due to the ongoing pandemic; and finally, their struggle to retain their physical space of vending on the street. As one of our respondents Bhagya, a 45-year-old migrant food vendor from adjacent state of Andhra Pradesh, vending food in a quiet residential area of Bengaluru pointed out, with the food vendors no longer operating in the area, the public space was gradually being appropriated by the residents for parking their private cars.

5.1 | Women's double-burden of the crisis

The pandemic has imposed a double burden on these women food vendors: sustenance of their livelihoods as well as managing their current household needs. These women have dual roles – making core decisions about the livelihood

and that of the primary caregiver of the household. In the times of scarcity, the women are the ones who give up their share of food. As Revathi said

Even if I drink the kanji (rice water), others should eat rice.

Taking care of other household expenditures (house rent, children's education fees, family medical expenses) also falls under the purview of their responsibilities. The current crisis almost completely eroded their meager savings and even managing basic needs such as food was a problem for a few vendors.

On the livelihood front, several studies suggest how such a crisis is going to be particularly grim for women, given the disproportionate household burden the women may have to face. A recent study by Deshpande (2020) on the impact of Covid on the gender gaps in India both in employment and household work, highlights that while there was a drop in employment due to the pandemic, the drop was not gender-neutral and women incurred a greater job loss when compared to the pre-lockdown period. In terms of household work distribution, the burden continued to be disproportionately skewed toward the women. While this study focused largely on women in the urban formal sector, one can expect that the picture will be far more dismal for the women in the informal sector.

For example, Champa is a vendor from West Bengal in her early twenties. She and her husband both had separate carts vending at different locations. Post lockdown, while her husband restarted the cart, Champa was discouraged by family members to do so because of the fear of pandemic and her responsibility toward her small child.

5.2 | Threats to a dignified living

As was indicated by some of the respondents in our earlier conversations, serving food was considered as a sacred and dignified livelihood. However, the current crisis and lack of any governmental support has ironically made them dependent on others for food. As Champa said:

No one supported us in the beginning. Later a few neighbors and local people came and gave us some food ration.

This was a severe blow to their dignified living. As Revathi narrated, she was not comfortable asking for or receiving grants from others:

We did not ask or request anyone. We had some ration left (from the cart) because the cart was not operating anymore. We got some rice from the government shop which was of poor quality. But we managed with that.

Similarly, Shikha too was quite hesitant approaching local groups providing relief as she could not come to terms with the fact that she was once feeding others and is now dependent on others for her food. One can draw parallels with Poppendieck's (1998) critique on hunger relief programmes and the erosion of human dignity as a result of a sense of dependency and inadequacy.

With an eight-month lockdown, and uncertainty in restarting the carts, some SFVs were forced to look for other livelihood alternatives. While the men were able to find some odd casual jobs, for women it has been particularly challenging. Some of our women SFVs desperately looked for other jobs, like housekeeping and domestic work, and for jobs in the garment sector, which would have severely compromised their agency over their livelihood. However, none of our women respondents were able to find alternative employment. As mentioned earlier, several of our respondents moved to street food vending after working for many years as domestic workers, garment workers and others. It is important to note here that many of these women also rejected such opportunities earlier in housekeeping or garment sectors in favor of street food vending.

Anandhi and Aruna's narratives highlight the desperation that these women had to face in finding an alternative means of income. As Anandhi recounted,

What to do, I have been looking for a job of housekeeping, but not getting it. Every day I go out looking for a job and come back home without getting any. I am tired of asking for a job. No job is available now, earlier at one point when people called us for work, we didn't want it, now I need it, but they aren't hiring anyone.

Aruna's experience has been very similar,

I tried at many places but did not get a job anywhere. I tried in a garment factory because I had prior experience, but they did not employ me as they were already reducing their workforce. I could not find any work elsewhere because I don't have so much education. Earlier I was also working part time in a school, now it is closed, so I do not have that job either.

Hence for these women it is not just a loss of income or erosion of savings, but their new found agency through this livelihood that is at stake.

6 | DISCUSSION: WILL THE COVID CRISIS SNATCH THE VISIBILITY OF WOMEN?

Starting with Gary Becker's (1965) classic study of "A theory of the allocation of time," to the neo-classical definition of *idle capacity* of labor (McKee, 2017), women's work has always been accounted either by the marketable production and/or the reproductive activities at home. Even though such theories have been strongly criticized by the Marxist Feminist Economists, very little empirical work exists to account for the unpaid work of women within the realms of the household and show how this unpaid work is connected to the household economic activity. This paper breaks the dichotomy between the paid and unpaid work and shows how the women SFVs are able to blur this difference, by extending their household cooking abilities into market-based production activities.

The reasons for the women to choose food vending as a sustainable livelihood can be understood by taking a look at their prior activities. Based on the prior activities of our respondents, we find that more than 50% of our respondents were homemakers, that is, unpaid labor, a few worked as domestic workers and others had jobs in garment factories, both of which are wage-employment.

For a homemaker, the ability of economically contributing to the household was a mode of securing their economic position at home as well as gaining recognition and agency within the household. For the women working as domestic workers, transitioning to food vending was an elevation in their perceived dignity. For the women who were earlier working in the garment sector, the transition was gaining agency and ownership over their livelihood. What is common for all these women is that the livelihood of food vending places these women in a domain which is natural to them, that is, cooking food. For most of them, food vending was just an "extension" of their household level activity, as many of them said they also consume the same food that they prepare at the carts. Thus, the blending of unpaid and paid work by the women in the case of street food vending is quite unique. Their transition from home-based work to entrepreneurship gave them visibility and recognition, both within and outside the household.

For these women, however, having paid work did not mean delegation of regular household chores to others. These women continued to be the primary caregivers for their household, thus adding to their number of working hours in a day. However, an interesting point which emerged through the narratives is that these women were able to delegate some household chores as well as the cooking activity (which is often considered feminine) for their livelihood to their spouses. Such a delegation can be understood in the context of resource exchange theories of family

power, especially when women's work is recognized as an important source of labor for the household economic activity (Safilios-Rothschild, 1976).

With the pandemic setting in and most of the women shutting down their only means of livelihood, the question is will they continue to gain the same level of recognition and agency at home?

The relationship between women's paid work and empowerment (Kabeer, 1999) has been well established in many Marxist as well as Liberal studies (Bergmann, 2005; Safilios-Rothschild, 1976). Paid work leads to women's empowerment. With the loss of women's income, the household agency of women decreases, women lose their self-esteem and the overall family well-being suffers (Blumberg, 1988). Reverting to home-based work may reduce their agency at home as it is found in studies that home-based work may be less empowering than sources of work outside of the home (Kantor, 2003).

For the women SFVs, not just the pandemic but the future uncertainties are adding to their precarity. These women, who were once feeding hundreds of people at their cart, are now struggling to manage even two square meals for their families. With their savings completely wiped off and mounting amounts of rents, children's education fees, and family health expenditures, many have been forced to borrow from money lenders, which has further pushed them into the depths of indebtedness and despair. While many of the male SFVs were able to find some alternative livelihood, most of the women SFVs have been struggling to find any alternative work. Some women who tried to restart their carts are facing an added challenge of reclaiming the physical space for vending.

A few women are also battling the intra-household gender disparity. With most of the family members staying at home due to lockdown, the caregiving activities of women have increased and prevent them from working outside their homes.

During a livelihood crisis, women are often the ones to deal with the double crisis – losing a job and an increase in care-giving responsibilities at home. It is difficult for these women to rebound as the family obligations take priority. Thus, for these women SFVs, who had managed to gain visibility on street as well as homes, with the now vanishing livelihood on street, are gradually going back to the realms of invisibility within the household. It is not just an erosion of their livelihood, but also that of their agency as well as their dream of a dignified living.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There is no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Names of all street food vendors have been changed to protect their identity. We have also not disclosed their vending location.
- ² The interviews were conducted either in Kannada (local language) or in Hindi and have been translated into English.
- ³ “An own account enterprise is an undertaking run by household labor, usually without any hired worker employed on a ‘fairly regular basis’. ‘Fairly regular basis’ means the major part of the period of operation(s) of the enterprise during the last 365 days” – Concepts and Definitions used in NSS, Ministry of Statistics & Programme Implementation, Government of India.

- ⁴ Ref: Table A3. Number and percentages of informal workers, including those significantly impacted by level of risks associated with sectors and size of enterprises, ILO Monitor: COVID-19 and the world of work. Third edition Updated estimates and analysis, 29th April, 2020.
- ⁵ Ref: Figure A2. Gender differences in the impact of the crisis in the informal economy: Women are over-represented in high risk sectors, ILO Monitor: COVID-19 and the world of work. Third edition Updated estimates and analysis, 29th April, 2020.
- ⁶ Periodic Labor Force Survey (PLFS) 2017–18, NSO, MOSPI.
- ⁷ PLFS 2017–18, NSO, MOSPI.
- ⁸ Our study is limited to street food sold on mobile carts, or out of motorized vans and make-shift structures and excludes large food trucks run by affluent vendors.
- ⁹ The interviews before the pandemic (June 2019–January 2020) were conducted in two parts – the initial conversation that happened with the vendors in their “place of work” which is the street, during their work hours, and then it was followed up with an in-depth interview with the vendors, which was often carried out at the homes of the vendors or any other neutral place where the vendors were comfortable, outside their work hours. Eighty three vendors were interviewed before the pandemic during June 2019 to January 2020, out of which 28 were women vendors. During the pandemic we were able to get back in touch with 23 vendors whom we interviewed again. All interviews during and after the pandemic were conducted over telephone due to the pandemic related restrictions. Five women vendors did not share their phone numbers and hence could not be reached for the interviews during and after the lockdown.
- ¹⁰ Sodium Bicarbonate or baking soda is often added to rice to make it white and fluffier. It makes one feel satiated with a lesser quantity of cooked rice and is perceived to be an unhealthy practice.
- ¹¹ Rajashri told us in Kannada, the local language “*Naavu beedhi vyapari alla, footpath mele vyapara maadu avaru.*”

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APPENDIX 1

TABLE A1 Brief profile of the women respondents interviewed for the study

	Pseudo name	Years of vending	Age (range)	Migrant status	Role in vending (owner/partner/helper)	Family members involved in the livelihood	Employed people	Prior livelihood
1	Seetha	4 years	26 years	Non-migrants	Co-owner/partner	Spouse and kins	-	Domestic worker
2	Meena	5 years	30–40 years	Inter-state migrants	Co-owner/partner	Spouse	Employed 1 person	N.A ^a
3	Chaya	N.A	N.A	Inter-state migrants	Co-owner/partner	Spouse	-	Garment worker
4	Rajashri	8 years	40–45 years	Inter-state migrants	Co-owner/partner	Spouse	Employed 5 people	N.A
5	Nageshwari	2.5 years	35–40 years	Inter-state migrants	Co-owner/partner	Spouse	-	Homemaker
6	Shikha	10 years	35–40 years	Intra-state migrants	Co-owner/partner	Spouse	-	Homemaker
7	Champa	6 years	25–30 years	Inter-state migrants	Co-owner/partner	Spouse	-	Hired help as street food vendor
8	Bhagya	4 years	50–55 years	Inter-state migrants	Co-owner/partner	Spouse and kin	Employed 1 woman	Homemaker
9	Kavya	7 years	35–40 years	Intra-state migrants	Co-owner/partner	Spouse	-	Homemaker
10	Simi	8 years	40–45 years	Inter-state migrants	Co-owner/partner	Spouse	-	Homemaker
11	Pavitra	4 years	35–40 years	Intra-state migrants	Co-owner/partner	Spouse	Employed 3 women	Domestic worker
12	Revathi	2 years	35–40 years	Non-migrants	Co-owner/partner	Spouse	Employed 3 women	Domestic worker
13	Anandhi	15 years	45–50 years	N.A	Co-owner/partner	Spouse and daughter	-	N.A
14	Bhagyadevi	10 years	30 years	Intra-state migrants	Sole owner	Spouse	-	Garment worker
15	Siddhakka	14 years	65–70 years	Intra-state migrants	Sole owner	Daughter	Employed 1 woman	Homemaker
16	Meenakshi	12 years	40 years	Intra-state migrants	Sole owner	Sister	Employed 1 woman	Garment worker

TABLE A1 (Continued)

	Pseudo name	Years of vending	Age (range)	Migrant status	Role in vending (owner/helper)	Family members involved in the livelihood	Employed people	Prior livelihood
17	Devi	7 years	25–30 years	Inter-state migrants	Co-owner/partner	Spouse	-	Beautician
18	Netra	5 months	30–35 years	Intra-state migrants	Co-owner/partner	Spouse	-	Beautician
19	Shanthamma	23 years	55 years	Intra-state migrants	Co-owner/partner	Spouse and son	Employed 1 man and 1 woman	Homemaker
20	Chandini	2 years	30–35 years	Intra-state migrants	Sole owner	None	-	Domestic worker
21	Radha	23 years	45–50 years	Non-migrants	Co-owner/partner	Spouse	Employed 1 man	Domestic worker
22	Aruna	3 years	25–30 years	Intra-state migrants	Helper	Spouse	-	Garment worker
23	Janaki	13 years	40–45 years	Non-migrants	Co-owner/partner	Spouse	-	Garment worker
24	Bhavani	2 months	N.A	Intra-state migrants	Sole owner	None	-	Housekeeping
25	Gauri	6 months	N.A	Intra-state migrants	Co-owner/partner	Spouse	-	Homemaker
26	Fahima	3 months	25 years	Intra-state migrants	Helper	Spouse	-	Sales girl
27	Girijamma	3 years	40–45 years	Intra-state migrants	Helper	Spouse and son	-	Housekeeping
28	Maheshwari	6 months	40–45 years	Intra-state migrants	Helper	Spouse	-	Homemaker

^aData Not Available.