

***'It is lockdown but homes are not closed. Income has been shut down but expenses continue.'* Impact of lockdown due to COVID-19 on the livelihood of Street Vendors in Maharashtra**

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Abstract

Background: WHO declared COVID-19 as a pandemic on 11th March 2020. As the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded, the lockdown was implemented as the main preventive measure to contain the spread of the virus across the world. India also went to one of the most stringent nationwide lockdowns on March 24, 2020, which affected the informal sector worker the most. This study aims to explore the impact of COVID-19 and lockdown on the livelihood of street vendors in the Maharashtra state of India.

Methods: Telephonic in-depth interviews were conducted from 16th May to 1st June 2020 with 20 street vendors who sell perishable goods for their livelihood. Interviews were transcribed and thematic analysis was used in analyzing the data.

Results: Lockdown affected street vendors multidimensionally. Many street vendors stopped working and many had to change their profession to selling fruits and vegetables within a limited time zone which had its repercussions. Some participants have shared experiences of being helped in the form of free rations by the government. Along with bearing monetary loss, street vendors also had to undergo mental stress due to restrictions imposed by the local authorities. Participants expressed their expectations of receiving aid in the form of direct financial aid and protective equipment to practice their work safely.

Conclusion: India went for one of the most stringent lockdowns with wider socio-economic repercussions, and street vendors were one of the most affected occupational groups. Since they are one most vulnerable sections of society it is a crucial responsibility of the government to aim for their overall welfare.

Introduction

Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome coronavirus-2 (SARS-CoV-2), also called coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), has taken the world by storm. World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 as a pandemic on March 11, 2020 (WHO 2020). More than 200 countries are affected by this first non-influenza pandemic. The cumulative number of cases exceeded 13 million as of July 31, 2020. India is one of the severely affected countries with the number of cases rising every day and situation worsening rapidly (The Economist 2020a). Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Delhi, Gujarat, Rajasthan, and Madhya Pradesh are the six worst-affected states in India (Government of India 2020a). Out of these, Maharashtra state is the worst affected- compromising to a total of 2.7 lakh confirmed cases of COVID-19, and the death toll up to 11,000 by the July 15, 2020 (Government of India 2020a).

As the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded, the lockdown was implemented as the main preventive measure to contain the spread of the virus across the world. India also went to one of the most stringent nationwide lockdowns on March 24, 2020 (Lancet 2020). However, the government of Maharashtra had declared the

order of shutdown of all workplaces excluding the essential services after its first case detection on March 9, 2020 (The Hindu 2020a).

For India and its States, like other developing countries, lockdown came with a huge social and economic cost, and in April 2020 alone, 12 crore individual lost their jobs (BBC 2020). The major share of this was in the informal sector (The Economist 2020b). The spread of viruses lead to panic in the migrant worker who works far from home in urban areas, started returning to rural areas, which lead to a humanitarian crisis (Prasad, Vandana, Sri, and Gaitonde 2020).

In India, more than 90% of the workforce is engaged in the informal sector for their livelihoods (Government of India 2018) and 14% of the informal sector, works as street vendors in India (ILO 2014). Street vending is differentiated in various categories based on their employment status, location of workplace, product category, and type of premise (WIEGO 2013).

After the lockdown on March 24, 2020, Centre and State governments issued various guidelines which regulated the vegetables and fruits vendors to sell goods within restricted time slots (The Times of India 2020; The Hindu 2020b). Similarly, other economically vulnerable groups such as food vendors were barred from the essential goods services during the initial phase of lockdown, which impacted their livelihood considerably (SEWA 2020). Current COVID-19 allows studying the consequences of the pandemic on human lives and livelihood which should not be wasted. These studies will help us to prepare for future pandemic which is not going to be uncommon (Sundaraman 2020). In this context, current research aims to study the impact of COVID-19 and lockdown on the livelihood of street vendors in India. To the best of the authors' knowledge, there have been limited studies available on street vendors which have explored this dimension.

Methods

A cross-sectional qualitative study was conducted between May 16, 2020, and June 1, 2020, in the State of Maharashtra, India. A purposive sample of 20 street vendors, breadwinners of their families, who sold essential perishable goods including food items was selected for the study. Their experiences during lockdown were documented.

Overall, 20 in-depth interviews of street vendors from four regions of Maharashtra, namely Konkan, Vidarbha, Khandesh, Marathwada, and Western Maharashtra were conducted. Given the dynamic situation and constant changes in public policy measures, we have limited our data collection for a specific duration, May 16, 2020, to June 1, 2020, when India was in its second phase of lockdown. These street vendors were reached through various contacts obtained from the key informants in each district. Telephonic interviews were conducted in vernacular language (Marathi) which was recorded with their consent on the promise of maintaining anonymity. The topics discussed through the interviews were:-

1. Their pre-lockdown livelihood activities
2. Challenges being faced by them due to lockdown
3. Governmental aid received by them, if any

Interviews were first transcribed in vernacular language and then translated into English. The relevant texts were identified and encoded with the codes which were derived from the data. Further, interpretation of similarly coded texts was carried out and summarized under various themes. The quotes were generated by identifying the most important statements in the transcript. The entire analysis was carried out on MS Word and MS Excel.

Results

1. Background Characteristics

As shown in Table-1, out of total participants, 17 males and 3 females participated in the study from 14 different districts of Maharashtra ranging from age 19-59 years. The average age was 38.95 years (sd ± 10.45). Their education level ranged from no schooling to 12th standard. Out of 20 street vendors, 15 were non-migrant, whereas two were migrant workers from the States of Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan and three were migrated from their home villages to district places within Maharashtra state. Almost all the participants were working as street vendors for more than three years, and it was their sole source of income. Out of all, eight were fruit or vegetable vendors whereas rest (12) were food vendors. Less than 50% (9) participants were able to continue their vending activity during the lockdown period (see Table 1).

2. Before Lockdown

i. Working hours and Earnings: Before lockdown, street vendors used to work around 16-18 hours a day. Over half of them mentioned that they were earning a profit of up to rupees 200 per day (USD 2.66) whereas others earned more than Rs.300 (USD 4) and sometimes up to rupees 800-1000 (10-13 USD) per day. However, they also mentioned that their business did not yield consistent profit and they had to incur losses at times. One of the migrated participants stated that, *Usually, on daily basis, I earn rupees 600-800 out of which after cutting expenses I am left with 5-6K (Indian rupees) by the end of the month. In case of an emergency, such as health issues, I am not able to save even this much. How much ever it is, I send it to my family.*

ii. Tax: Before lockdown, approximately half of the participants were paying tax in between 5-20 rupees (less than half USD) daily to the local authority.

iii. Loans: Most of the vendors (13) had to take loans from relatives, friends, or self-help groups to either set up their business or to keep it running.

iv. Challenges before lockdown: The majority of the vendors mentioned, they were able to work before lockdown freely but few mentioned that they had to face the problem of frequent evictions by the local authority. Some participants mentioned that due to competition from financially sound vendors they were unable to sell their goods. In this study, the participants are those who sell perishable goods. All agreed that if they fail to sell off the goods, it gets spoilt and has to be thrown away leading to financial loss. One of the vegetable vendors stated that *"When I am unable to sell particular goods on the same day, I have no other option than to throw away. But this only incurs the loss."*

3. After Lockdown

i. Essential perishable goods (fruits and vegetables) vendors: After the announcement of the lockdown, fruits and vegetable vendors were given limited time to sell their goods. Also, other daily wage earners have been impelled to turn into vegetable vendors; this resulted in more number of suppliers with declined demand from the customers. This affected their regular work. Fruit and vegetable vendors were also facing difficulties since as per the government orders they had to roam and sell their goods rather than being stationary. Vendors have mentioned that in their traditional stationary kind of shop, customers were familiar, now they have to go around the colonies to find new customers. It is time-consuming and due to high competition, the vendors were compelled to sell their goods in cheap, leading to loss.

In the current situation, customers' confidence has waned. They prefer buying from vendors who are reaching their doorsteps. As a result, many regular customers of these vendors had been reduced. One of the vendors quoted, *Earlier, when working, there was a stationary vegetable shop, so the customers used to know it, and this yielded some profit to us. But at present, it takes time to find a customer as we have to roam through the colonies with our vegetable cart. In that too, if the customer buys the goods within the time allotted by the government, there is no profit as they ask for less than half of the actual rate and we are not able to sell all the goods.*

ii. Non-essential perishable goods (food) vendors: Half of the food vendors (10) could do nothing during the lockdown period. With the loss of income, they faced financial difficulties which forced them to consider starting other businesses. It was easy to sell only vegetables and fruits at that time, so few food vendors (1) started selling vegetables and fruits; one such participant stated that *"After one month of lockdown, I started selling vegetables...as only this was allowed. Opening a grocery store would have required more investment which was out of the question for me."*

Others (2) have started their food vending activity through home and parcel service.

iii. Loans: During the lockdown, approximately half (9) of the participants had to take a loan to cover their daily expenses. Two months of lockdown has brought their businesses to a standstill leaving no option to repay the loan.

iv. Precautions against COVID-19 pandemic: Vendors who could somehow work amidst lockdown have reported usage of sanitizers and masks as a precautionary measure against COVID-19. They also follow the rule of physical distancing. The majority (13) mentioned that they are not able to wash their hands regularly at the workplace due to the absence of water.

Most vendors (16) say that COVID 19 is a pandemic disease that has spread all over the world, so the crisis is everywhere. We will have to endure until this time is over and they mentioned that they have to face this crisis with courage.

"This disease is different, what to do? We should all save our lives first; a business can be started later. Life is more important than anything else. Once the situation is under control, I will be able to resume my work," quoted by one vendor.

But about half of the vendors (9) who have lost their daily bread & butter and feel worried said that it may be the biggest health crisis for the entire world but it is a huge financial crisis for them.

v. Home environment: Most of the vendors (17) mentioned that the home environment has changed drastically. They had to reduce their household expenditure to less than half. Over half of the vendors (12) said that their income had stopped during the lockdown so they did not have money to buy rations at home. *"I am not allowed to open my shop; hence, there is no income. A neighbor's aunt offered to help me with wheat, and a friend gave me some money. This is how I run my house,"* one of the vendors stated. **vi. Health issue:** During the study, it was found that some (6) of the vendors' household members suffer from diseases like diabetes and hypertension, so the cost of treatment became unaffordable. Few (2) expressed their fear of inefficiency in getting any treatment if any family member falls sick. They can hardly afford it.

vii. Hoarding of food and other necessary items: Many of the participants (18) mentioned that they make money daily and run household expenses by buying daily needs on an everyday basis. But the lockdown has created a problem for them as they don't have enough money to buy daily needs in bulk. Almost all of the participants have mentioned that they cannot afford to stock commodities.

viii. Experience of Migrated workers on their journey to their homes: Some vendors (3) said that when they reached their village, they were sent to a nearby government hospital for examination. Some migrants (6) received masks, train tickets, biscuits, water bottles free of cost for their journey. Six migrants returned from Maharashtra to Uttar Pradesh. It took them 3 days to reach. He said that to earn a living he has migrated to Maharashtra where he spends most of the year. As a result, his family members' names have been removed from the ration card by the village Sarpanch. He complains that the Gram Panchayat does not pay attention to the plight of poor people like him.

In another case, the family of a vendor was renting a house in Maharashtra. The inability to pay rent during lockdown compelled them to return to their village. In the absence of public transport, his relatives had to spend a fortune to rent a private car to return to their home village.

4. Governmental aid during COVID-19

a. Help received from the government: Eleven of the twenty participant vendors told about receiving free rations from Public Distribution System (PDS) shops or political leaders. Some vendors responded well in this regard. One of the vendors said, *"Even without a ration card, our Sarpanch used to give me grains, etc. He is a good man. He always helps me and he helped me exceptionally in this situation."*

But the rest of the participants who approached the PDS shopkeeper were warded off since they did not have a ration card or needed documents. Few PDS beneficiaries complained that their ration cards have been damaged or they need to be replaced with new ones.

"I have not received any ration. I lost my old ration card. I have applied to the authorities to get a new card but the process has stopped due to lockdown. So I could not get free ration."

The migrated families (3) who returned to the village were denied free ration as few of them did not have a card stating they belong to below the poverty line. Most of them (2) had heard in the news that they would get free ration without the card, but it did not happen. Nineteen out of 20 participants neither have an idea about Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana nor do they have Jan Dhan Yojana account in the banks.

b. The behavior of police and local authority towards street vendors: According to some vendors (9), despite following norms of social distancing at their stationery shops, police confiscate their weighing machines and goods. One vendor states, *"We cannot walk around the colony and sell our goods. Even though we try to sell our goods within the norms, the police seize our measuring machines and items. We are asked to pay a penalty for our goods in return. But if we can't sell anything during the day, we can't pay the penalty. By the time we get our goods back they are spoilt and have to be thrown."* Very few vendors (2) reported that they received cooperation from the police. In some areas, the government has issued identity cards to vendors and laid down some rules. Violation of those rules was punishable.

c. Street vendors' perspective towards government welfare initiative during COVID-19. The government is managing this time of crisis quite well but the major responsibility lies on the shoulders of the people in the loop i.e., to cooperate with the government. One of the vendors states *"Government facilities are reaching out to many places for the public hence their lives are better to some extent. But in other places people's life is pathetic."*

Concerning the current situation, *"The government should work out vaccination against COVID-19 with all its might,"* the reaction of one of the vendors. Those vendors who have procured loans expect that the government should provide loan assistance or debt forgiveness to them or politicians should come forward and offer some financial help individually. On the other hand, some vendors said that distributing ration alone is insufficient; instead, the government should assist them in terms of monetary help which will enable them to bear everyday household expenses crucial to sustaining life.

d. Packages and Schemes announced by the government. Most of the participants (17) are not aware of the schemes announced by the central government. Some said that due to prevailing loopholes at various levels, there is no guarantee that government schemes would benefit the needy. Even though the relief fund of Rs 20 lakh Crores to overcome COVID-19 has been announced, yet no concrete steps have been taken for street vendors. The aware vendors know that under this scheme there is a facility of availing loans up to rupees 10,000 but no further details have been issued. In this regard, one of the participants commented that *"People who do not repay their loans on time get short-term loans but the bank does not give loans to the honest and poor working people like us."*

Some vendors (3) say that the government does not pay much attention to street vendors. Even if the schemes are implemented, they get lost midway. And then there are never-ending procedures of documentation to be able to get benefitted. There is no guarantee of when the current declared plan will be implemented.

Discussion

This study was carried out to understand various issues regarding the effect of lockdown on the livelihood activity of the street vendor in Maharashtra. The current study depicts crucial findings on different aspects. The study was done on perishable goods vendors which include fruits, vegetables, and food vendors. Among them only fruits, vegetable vendors were allowed to carry out their vending activity. Those who could not work have mentioned severe mental stress they had to suffer during this period and the economic crisis has disrupted their livelihoods (SEWA 2020). Very few among them could manage to work from home or switch to some other work.

Though the street vendors were not earning much even before lockdown they were able to sustain themselves. About half of the participants pay taxes to the local authority to run their vending activity. The study carried out by WIEGO also showed the same findings. Globally, around 67% of the studied vendors pay a variety of taxes and fees to the local authorities (WIEGO 2015).

In this study, it has been found that most of the vendors had taken loans to run their business smoothly before lockdown. Similarly, the findings mentioned by Mini Bhattacharyaa Thakur showed that street vendors have to take loans to sustain their business (Bhattacharyya 1997).

We found that the vendors had to face police harassment the same as noted by WIEGO who highlighted that informal traders have reported facing forced eviction and police harassment by confiscation of goods, imposing fines, and or physical abuse (WIEGO 2020).

Lockdown has raised a serious question of livelihood in front of many people they entered into the profession of selling essential perishable goods (SEWA 2020). It thus created a tough competition with the pre-existing vendors. During Lockdown phase 4, the government announced free ration for all migrant workers in states where they have been working without ration cards (The Hindu 2020c). We found that out of all the participants, Migrant Street vendors only one was able to receive free ration under the mentioned scheme.

Very few working vendors mentioned that they received ID cards, masks, and sanitizer from the government. Most of them did not receive essential protective facilities from the government. This is similar to the findings mentioned by WIEGO in its impact analysis paper on informal sector workers where they found that these workers did not receive any protective equipment from the government to work within safety measures. (WIEGO 2020).

Lockdown has severely hit the street vendors financially (SEWA 2020), which has resulted in a disturbed home environment. They were forced to spend sleepless nights during the lockdown period. Many of them are unable to bear the cost of treatment of sick family members rather they are forced into a vicious cycle of taking loans for medical treatment.

After the announcement of lockdown, bitter experiences of street vendors are posing serious questions before the government. The government has declared a package under The Pradhan Mantri Street Vendor's Atma Nirbhar Nidhi Scheme: 5,000 crore special credit facility, which will benefit 50 lakh vendors with initial working capital of Rs 10,000 (Government of India 2020b). In our study, we have observed that street vendors do not

rely on any government scheme, because of inadequacies and uncertainties in the system at various levels and draining formalities involved in it. For the benefit to reach the needy, the government should issue direct benefit in terms of grants or loans without interest (The Indian Express 2020).

The number of street vendors is far more than just 50 lakh in this country, where, about 2-2.5% of the urban population is involved in such jobs (Bhowmik 2005). Keeping this in mind, the benefits provided by the government under this scheme is highly insufficient. There is an urgency to provide financial support to street vendors not only for sustaining during this pandemic but also to bounce back to their normal livelihood activities (SEWA 2020).

In our country, street vendors are hardly taken into consideration during the census. As per the street vendors (protection of livelihood and regulation of street vending) act, 2014, there should be Town Vending Committee (TVC) under the local authority with censusing of the street vendors as prior responsibility. But except in a few cities, these are absent in the rest of the country. And wherever it has been formed, TVC is facing challenges to carry out a census because of numerous political issues. (WIEGO 2020).

Conclusion

This lockdown has imposed walloping pressure on not only the street vendors who were unable to work amidst lockdown but also on those who perhaps were able to work yet were incurring more loss than profit in their business. Whatever schemes have been declared by the government are reaching only a few beneficiaries leaving behind the major chunk.

Lockdown has hit the street vendors distressingly. They have lost all their earnings and lockdown will have a long-term impact on their livelihood. Hence, for the policymakers, it is important to formulate the evidence-based schemes after taking proper consultation with street vendors' representatives across India. Also, there is an urgent need for the proper execution of the street vendors (protection of livelihood and regulation of street vending) act by compelling the local authorities to comprise the TVCs with fair representation of street vendors. These TVCs should act as a voice of the street vendors not only in tough situations like lockdown but also during their regular challenges like evictions, licensing, legalization, etc.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate: Informed consent was obtained from each participant before taking the interview.

Consent for publication: Consent for publication was obtained from every participant.

Availability of data and materials: Current data can be accessed [here](#)

Competing interests: None.

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Author's contributions: All authors helped in conceptualizing and designing the study. SM and LT did the data collection. SM and PS wrote the first draft. AR revised the draft critically for important intellectual content. All authors read and approved the manuscript for submission.

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Supplementary Files

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- [3.Table.docx](#)