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To cite this article: Ravail Hassan & Sara Rizvi Jafree (08 Jun 2025): Empowered by survival: women street vendors in Pakistan's informal patriarchal economy, *Development in Practice*, DOI: [10.1080/09614524.2025.2515217](https://doi.org/10.1080/09614524.2025.2515217)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09614524.2025.2515217>



Published online: 08 Jun 2025.



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Empowered by survival: women street vendors in Pakistan's informal patriarchal economy

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ABSTRACT

Street vending in Pakistan serves as a vital survival enterprise for many women marginalised by the formal education sector and employment structures, driven by poverty and the urgent need to support their households. Operating within the informal economy, these women lack social security and institutional protection. This study aimed to highlight their challenges and inform protective policy measures. Purposive in-depth interviews were conducted with 17 women street vendors from Lahore and Gujranwala, two major cities in Central Punjab. Findings reveal 16 key challenges grouped into five core areas: (1) financial instability, (2) work environment challenges, (3) safety and harassment issues, (4) work-family problems, and (5) health concerns. The study underscores the need for targeted interventions by the state, private sector, and civil society actors, including subsidisation, rent caps, increased surveillance and prompt accountability measures, deployment of women security personnel, and childcare support. These recommendations have broader implications, extending beyond women street vendors to benefit the wider informal workforce in Pakistan and other developing regions.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 18 December 2024
Accepted 17 April 2025

KEYWORDS

Women street vendors;
informal economy;
challenges; survival; Pakistan

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

SDG 1: No poverty; SDG 3:
Good health and well-being;
SDG 5: Gender equality; SDG
8: Decent work and
economic growth

Introduction

The informal sector plays a critical role in shaping the global economy, particularly in developing nations where it supports livelihoods and contributes to local economies (Peimani and Kamalipour 2022). Street vendors play a crucial role in Pakistan's informal economy, employing approximately 71.7 per cent of the labour force and significantly contributing to urban livelihoods (PBS 2019). Within this sector, women are overrepresented, often facing significant challenges that affect their wellbeing, safety, and economic stability (UN Women Pakistan 2023).

Many women street vendors enter this line of work due to poverty and limited or restricted access to formal education, which hinders their opportunities for formal employment, and leads them to pursue self-employment as a means of survival and income generation (Khan et al. 2021). By earning additional income, Women street vendors contribute to their family's economic stability, but this comes at the cost of working in the informal sector, without employment benefits and social security (WEF 2023). Research on the lived experiences of marginalised Women street vendors in Pakistan is limited. This study aims to explore the challenges they face and provide gender-specific policy recommendations for their protection.

Known challenges facing street vendors

Women street vendors are known to commonly report challenges such as uncertain daily income, minimal profits, long working hours, and reliance on external suppliers, which expose them to unfair prices, unsupportive attitudes of regional authorities, and other challenges such as eviction and rising rents (Iqbal, Nawaz, and Anwar 2022). Additionally, the roadside nature of their work exposes Women street vendors to substantial risks, including frequent accidents caused by heavy traffic, reckless driving, adverse weather conditions, and poor road maintenance (Rahman 2019). The physically demanding nature of their work, which involves carrying heavy loads and working long hours, often leads to musculoskeletal issues such as back pain, joint strain, and fatigue (Idyorough and Ishor 2014). Furthermore, many Women street vendors continue to work during pregnancy and well into old age, often facing significant health challenges due to the lack of employee welfare provisions, savings, or a health insurance safety net (Naicker et al. 2021).

Operating in an unregulated environment, street vendors confront numerous issues, particularly in accessing capital for their businesses (Siwela and Njaya 2018). Formal banking services are out of reach due to the absence of collateral and the inability to repay high-interest loans. Additionally, limited financial literacy and difficulty in navigating loan processes force many Women street vendors to rely on informal moneylenders and unlicensed wholesalers, who charge exploitative interest rates, deepening their debt cycles (Recchi 2021).

Women street vendors often face physical and territorial disputes over prime vending locations (Khamrang et al. 2022). Inadequate infrastructure exposes them to harsh weather, affecting both their health and product quality (Rahman 2019). The physical strain of transporting and setting up stalls sometimes leads to merchandise damage and excessive bodily stress. Studies show that pregnant Women street vendors, subjected to heavy labour and environmental pollutants, face higher risks of adverse reproductive outcomes (Kumar, Sharma, and Kshetrimayum 2019).

South Asian women often bear the dual burden of both income-generating work and domestic responsibilities, which hinders their economic advancement, well-being, and dependence on relatives (Moussie 2021). Patriarchal norms reinforce gendered division of labour, limiting women's opportunities for financial independence and increasing time poverty. Despite contributing significantly to the family income, women are excluded from decision-making processes related to economic matters (Hassan and Farooq 2015). Even family-planning decisions are also often made by men, leaving many working women unable to control their work or predict their income stream due to fertility burdens in a society that prefers large families and multiple sons (Sarfraz et al. 2023). Additionally, the combination of inadequate antenatal and postnatal care, home births, and limited medical support exacerbates maternal and child health risks (Hameed, Uddin, and Avan 2021).

In Pakistan, the employment-to-population ratio is 42.1 per cent, with men at 64.1 per cent, and women at 19.4 per cent, reflecting persistent socio-cultural and structural barriers limiting women's labour market participation (Government of Pakistan 2023). Women street vendors experience stress, anxiety, and frustration from conflicts with law enforcement and customers (Fonceca et al. 2022). Additionally, sexual harassment, domestic violence, and derogatory remarks remain pervasive challenges for these women (Ismail and Umar 2018). Gender inequality in Pakistan remains a deeply entrenched issue that significantly obstructs the country's socio-economic development and progress.

Legislation and existing legal protection for street vendors in Pakistan

While the *Pakistan Occupational Health and Safety Act* safeguards formal workers, informal workers remain unprotected. This results in poor safety conditions, lack of clean water, distant or absent toilets, and inadequate sanitation. With limited access to healthcare, informal workers face heightened vulnerability to infectious diseases, while public health services remain underfunded and

ineffective (Jafree and Barlow 2023). Safety Acts in the country also fail to consider women informal workers and their distinct challenges, such as the need for maternal health support or child support.

In addition, Pakistan lacks comprehensive legislation for street vending. Though street vending is often labelled as illegal, the trade is allowed so that informal taxation can be levied by municipal officers, development inspectors, and traffic police, who are known to extract payments from vendors (Banday 2021).

In 2021, the Ehsaas Rehribaan pilot program was launched in Islamabad to support street vendors, but there was no progress made. In August 2023, the *Rehribaan (Street Vendors) Livelihood Protection Act* was introduced in the Senate as Pakistan's first potential law dedicated to protecting street vending, with hopes to inspire future national and provincial frameworks (HRC Pakistan 2024). However, again efforts remained confined to Islamabad, with no broader national strategy, and not practical work beyond the drafting of an Act. Ultimately, there is little recognition in the country that women street vendors face distinct challenges from men, demanding gender-responsive policy. This study, therefore, seeks to explore the complex barriers Women street vendors face and contribute evidence to advocate for their inclusion and protection.

Theoretical grounding

Occupational segregation by gender provides a structural framework for understanding how women are systematically confined to low-paid, insecure, and informal jobs. Deep-rooted gender norms restrict mobility and prevent access to education, with women being pushed into occupations such as street vending for income-generating opportunities and survival (Anker 1997). Despite playing a central role in sustaining household economies, women's labour is often regarded as supplementary, thereby excluding them from institutional recognition. This marginalisation not only limits their income potential but also entrenches gendered hierarchies in the labour market.

The life course perspective further contextualises how women navigate a series of transitions such as marriage, caregiving responsibilities, or becoming primary earners. These transitions are embedded within broader social contexts characterised by poverty, patriarchal expectations, and minimal institutional support (Hutchison 2010). In Pakistan, these realities lead many women into informal economic roles early in life, making informal vending a long-term livelihood strategy.

The theory of survivalist entrepreneurship further contributes to the understanding of women informal workers establishing informal businesses to tackle economic adversity, and for daily survival and not for profit maximisation (Gudeta 2018). In Pakistan, where women face rising financial pressures and persistent poverty, street vending becomes a critical mechanism of economic subsistence (Iwu and Opute 2019). These businesses typically operate on the margins, constrained by instability and constant exposure to regulatory threats, yet they are essential for household resilience.

Lastly, James Scott's theory of everyday resistance sheds light on how marginalised individuals subvert dominant systems through subtle, everyday acts (Scott 1985, 2016). Rather than engaging in open defiance, these practices represent quiet but deliberate acts of resilience and autonomy within exclusionary public spaces. As Simi and Futrell (2009) argue, far from passive victims, women informal workers navigate, adapt, and persist in asserting agency within a system that is not built for their inclusion. In this way, informal labour becomes both a means of survival and a mode of empowerment for unprivileged women.

Methodology

Ethics and sampling

Ethics approval was provided by the Institutional Review Board of Forman Christian College University. The safety and anonymity of the participants was assured, and informed consent was taken before the interviews. All data is stored securely with the first author. The study selected currently

employed women street vendors with at least one year of vending experience, using purposive and snowball sampling. The study was conducted in Lahore and Gujranwala – two major cities in Punjab with populations of approximately 13 and 6 million, respectively (PBS 2023). Revealing the city names does not compromise anonymity, as these are large cities with many women street vendors across multiple locations, and only a small sample was taken for our study. Data collection took place over four months, from November 2023 to February 2024.

Though the first author approached 62 women, a total of 17 interviews were part of the final study. There are three main reasons for low participation including: (1) fear of potential government consequences, such as eviction, fines or confiscation, due to previous negative experiences with law enforcement; (2) concerns about the prospect of their interviews being captured on video by observers or fellow vendors and subsequent dissemination on various social media platforms for views and trends; and (3) preference of women vendors to maintain a low profile to protect their dignity and personal lives.

Demographic data of women participants is summarised in Table 1. The majority of women street vendors in our study earn a monthly income classified within the lowest societal class (LHRD Punjab 2024; World Bank 2023), are above the age of 40 years ($n = 12$), have been working for seven or more years ($n = 8$), have more than four children ($n = 11$), and more than five dependents ($n = 10$). The majority also have not attained any formal education ($n = 9$) and are either living in rented premises or in unclaimed slum areas without paying rent ($n = 14$).

Survey and data collection

A semi-structured interview guide was developed based on the literature review and the research experience of the second author, who has conducted studies on informal sector workers of Pakistan, including women microfinance borrowers who have taken loans for street vending (Jafree 2023). The

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of study participants.

		Frequency (N)
Age	19–28	01
	29–39	04
	≥ 40	12
Product	Fruit/vegetables/other food items	04
	Clothes and garments	07
	Books, stationary, and toys	02
	Beauty products	01
	Flowers and baskets	03
Years of work	1–3 years	05
	4–6 years	04
	≥ 7 years	08
Marital status	Currently married	09
	Divorced	02
	Widowed	06
Number of children	No child	01
	1–3	05
	4–7	11
Number of dependents	1–2	02
	3–4	05
	5–6	05
	≥ 7	05
House	Rented	11
	Owned	03
	Living in slum areas not owned by them without paying rent	03
Monthly earning	PKR 18,000/USD 64.84 to PKR 29,000/USD 104.46	03
	PKR 30,000/USD 107.64 to PKR 75,000/USD 269.10	14
Education	No formal education	09
	Primary/secondary	04
	Graduated	03
	Madrasa	01

questionnaire was administered in Urdu, the local language spoken by the participants. Data were collected in densely populated and crowded areas, during peak hours, where women street vendors are commonly found, including (i) bustling bazaars (open markets), (ii) food streets, and (iii) outside the gates of universities.

To accommodate vendors' schedules, interviews were conducted at their stalls during convenient times, such as when packing up at the end of the day or opening their stalls in the early morning. Interviews only took place when women were comfortable and gave permission. In the case of four women who chose to leave their stalls with the help of neighbouring vendors, interviews were held in nearby seating areas, such as benches or closed shop entrances. By the tenth interview, recurring themes and challenges emerged. Each interview lasted between 30–40 min.

Data analysis and reliability

The data were transcribed verbatim from audio recordings and then translated into English using the forward and backward method by the first author, with verification by the second author. Both authors independently coded the transcripts through repeated readings and confirmed themes in meetings. Thematic analysis, guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, was used to identify and report themes. NVIVO was also utilised to ensure no themes were overlooked. To ensure reliability, member checks were conducted by presenting the findings to participants. Seven participants confirmed the accuracy of the results.

Results

We found that women street vendors face 16 challenges that fall under the following five broad themes (Figure 1): (1) financial instability, (2) work environment challenges, (3) safety and harassment issues, (4) work–family problems, and (5) health concerns.

Financial instability

Inflationary pressures

Most of the women street vendors complained about the inflationary pressures and rising costs of living. They explained the difficulties of stretching their limited income to cover essential needs like vending rent, shelter, healthcare, and food. Their meagre earnings through street vending barely covered these basics, and they were incapable of investing in growth or expansion opportunities. Fatima¹ shared:

Last winter, I sold dry fruits, and people used to buy them. I managed to save some money and made a profit of 500 rupees (USD 1.78) daily. However, currently, I don't have enough money to buy those items again. Last year, I had some savings, but it's challenging as no one is willing to provide items on loan. (32, Married, Food vendor, Liberty, Gujranwala)

Mariam described her struggles with inflation:

The Sasta Bazar in People's Colony is the best place to run my stall and make a profit. But the rents there are too high. I used to have a stall there, but I had to leave due to inflationary pressures. (45, Married, Clothing vendor, People's Colony, Gujranwala)

No government support for subsidisation

Many women complained that political instability and bureaucratic inefficiency meant that the government neglected to support street vendors who needed the most help. They described how there was no government scheme for subsidies or aid for women small business owners, and some even

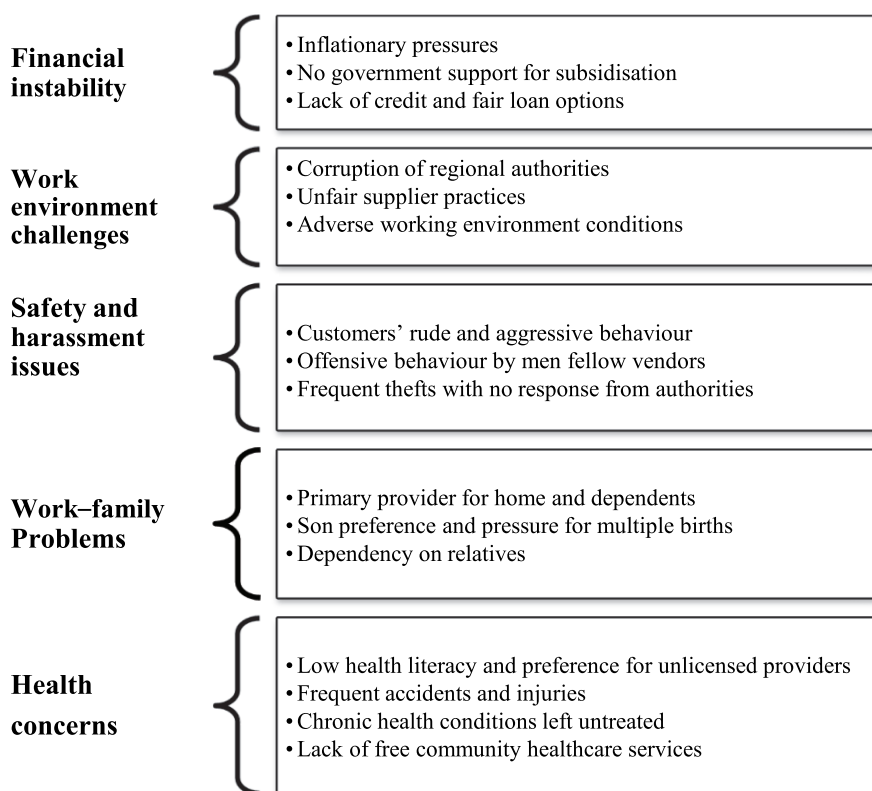


Figure 1. Summary of the themes and subthemes of challenges faced by women street vendors.

mentioned that agricultural workers were better off than them, as they still received some subsidies from the government. Ayesha shared:

There has never been any government support for subsidies or aid for us. Despite knowing how to increase my sales and profit, I am held back by lack of finances for investment. Agricultural workers get free fertilisers and subsidies, what do we get? Vendors should be at least provided subsidies or an allowance to survive during harsh winters when we cannot stand at the stall for long. (43, Widowed, Clothing vendor, Barkat Market, Lahore)

Lack of credit and fair loan options

Women street vendors shared their struggle to secure loans essential for business stability. As informal workers with no collateral, none of the participants could access bank loans. The only available financial services were informal community lenders who charged high-interest rates. Ayesha shared:

No one is willing to give me a loan and the banks won't help either because I don't meet their requirements. It feels like every door is shut. There are some local loan providers, but they are dangerous as they ask for nearly ten times the money back within a year. I could never repay them. I am considering an interest-free loan from Kashaf NGO, but the country's instability has held me back. (43, Widowed, Clothing vendor, Barkat Market, Lahore)

Work environment challenges

Corruption of regional authorities

Many participants reported that police and private security guards demanded bribes or took their goods without payment. If women street vendors refused to pay, they were forced to vacate their selling spots or faced harassment until they complied. Fatima shared:

The traffic police take food from my stall when they are hungry. Other police officers have done this to me in the past as well and I have already shifted thrice now. I've pleaded with them multiple times but they do not have any morals or a conscience. (32, Married, Food vendor, Liberty, Gujranwala)

Unfair supplier practices

Women participants described how suppliers intentionally delayed deliveries, hindering their ability to run their businesses, earn sufficient income, or build a steady customer base. They believed these delays were due to suppliers prioritising male buyers or larger customers, like shopkeepers. Iqra stated:

Dealing with my supplier is always problematic due to frequent delays, even though I pay them immediately and never delay dues to them like some male vendors. These delays disrupt timely deliveries and hinder building trust with clients. (45, Widowed, Clothing vendor, Sabzazar, Lahore)

Adverse working environment conditions

Women vendors described working in poorly maintained areas with inadequate cleaning, garbage clearance, shade, lighting, sanitation, and restroom facilities. These harsh conditions negatively impacted their health and work efficiency, making daily labour even more challenging. Afifa shared:

There is no shade to place our vending stalls under, or any lights as evening approaches. The surroundings are dirty with no support for frequent garbage clearance or sanitation by the municipality. This area is a breeding ground for illness. (49, Divorced, Clothing vendor, Peoples colony, Gujranwala)

Amna described the difficulty accessing washrooms:

There are no washrooms nearby, so I have to travel quite a bit to access one. Many times, the distant public bathroom is locked. The men just use open spaces, tell us what should we women do? (35, Divorced, Vegetable vendor, Delta road, Gujranwala)

Safety and harassment issues

Customers' rude and aggressive behaviour

Many women street vendors reported facing rude or aggressive behaviour from customers, which required them to remain calm and professional, adding immense stress. The pressure to stay polite in a toxic work environment, coupled with frequent disputes over pricing and refunds, significantly impacted the profit margins of already struggling vendors. Afifa shared:

While I am willing to accept unused items, there are customers who return the next day after using and damaging clothes that they have bought. They claim that the item was torn and I should exchange it or give them a refund. There is so much dishonesty from customers that I am in constant stress. (49, Divorced, Clothing vendor, Peoples colony, Gujranwala)

Misbah shared:

Some customers are very rude and argumentative. They have no consideration that we are females, struggling to earn a *halal* (legitimate) income and deserving of respect. I wish I had a job that gave me respect in society. I work as hard as teacher or a doctor. (49, Widowed, Books Vendor, Gill road, Gujranwala)

Offensive behaviour by men fellow vendors

Women street vendors frequently face substantial challenges in their dealings with men competitors, who are aggressive and cutthroat. Men workers often provoke conflicts, forcing women to shift stalls. They also generally display disrespectful attitudes and make inappropriate comments during the day. Participants also explained how men vendors stole customers from their women counterparts through aggressive networking.

Shiza described this aggression:

Fellow male vendors sometimes argue, saying I shouldn't sell near their stalls. I explain that our fates are different, and Allah will provide for all. We don't even sell the same products. But they are so aggressive and hostile, that I try and stay far away from them out of fear. (40, Widowed, Toys vendor, Satellite Town, Gujranwala)

Iqra shared:

Male vendors often make offensive remarks, and conflict regularly arises over space allocation and selling the same products. They also steal clients. As you know men can talk more freely with the public. We cannot network the same way as them. (45, Widowed, Clothing vendor, Sabzazar, Lahore)

Frequent thefts with no response from authorities

Women vendors described theft as a common security risk, with both goods and cash stolen, either in their presence or when they briefly left their stalls. All participants agreed that contacting police or security was unhelpful, as authorities blamed them for not being more cautious and claimed they couldn't catch the thieves.

Fatima described the following theft:

I went to the washroom and left my money with my children. When I returned, my kids were crying and told me that someone had snatched the money. This is not the first time that theft and snatching has happened at my stall. I have stopped complaining to the police, as they don't do anything. It appears as if small mafia groups with connections to police are involved in these daily thefts. (32, Married, Food vendor, Liberty, Gujranwala)

Work-family problems

Primary provider for home and dependents

For many women street vendors, the responsibility of supporting their family falls entirely on them. As sole breadwinners, they spend long hours selling on the streets, then return home to care for the house, children, and aging dependents. While some bring their children along, most leave them at home, expressing anxiety over leaving them unattended. Iqra shared:

I started this job when my husband passed away. I had to earn money so my children could eat. There are three of them at home alone right now, waiting for me to return. I feel constant worry and guilt about leaving them alone, about their safety, and about not being able to put them in school. (45, Widowed, Clothing vendor, Sabzazar, Lahore)

Son preference and pressure for multiple births

Societal pressure to conform to traditional gender expectations shapes family planning decisions among women street vendors in Pakistan, with a strong preference for sons. This cultural bias leads many women to have multiple children, increasing their financial strain and health challenges. Rida explained:

We were hoping for a boy, and after having five girls, we finally had a boy. However, the pressure to have a second son was immense and so after having two more girls, we were blessed with another boy. This is why I have nine children and look like an old woman in my seventies. People who knew me thirty years ago don't recognize me. (57, Married, Clothing vendor, Satellite Town, Gujranwala)

Dependency on relatives

For many women vendors, business success relied on the support from relatives, such as funds for initial investment, and assistance in childcare and home management. However, in return, relatives expected repayment and made non-monetary demands, including profit shares, groceries, clothes, and extra attention and time. Women expressed anxiety over the obligation to continually repay favours and feeling trapped in an endless cycle of debt with relatives. Rubina shared:

While I sell vegetables my younger children stay with my mother, and the elder ones with my mother-in-law. I started vending with my sister's financial help and this is why I have to give a portion of my money to her. My sister-in-law helps with cooking food. I am in debt to all these relatives and have to pay them back in some form or the other. I am left with almost nothing for my children and myself. (25, married, Vegetable vendor, Delta Road, Gujranwala)

Health concerns

Low health literacy and preference for unlicensed providers

Many participants relied on local healers, religious figures, and spiritual advisors for remedies, a practice rooted in cultural and religious beliefs. However, this reliance delays access to formal healthcare, hindering effective treatment for serious conditions. Participants shared that, apart from the cultural reasons, they opted for traditional healers as they were less costly and easily accessible in their communities. Fazeela described seeking healthcare for children:

I seek advice from our local *Baba* (religious notable) whenever the children get sick. The prayers he gives is the best remedy and sometimes he gives a powder which I give to my husband with water. This makes my husband more lenient to me. (41, Married, Flower vendor, Johar town, Lahore)

Esha shared:

My first two children, born in the hospital, didn't survive. The local midwife and the local *Pir* (religious notable) had warned me that hospitals have infections and babies don't survive there. I now prefer home deliveries and visit the *Pir* in case of any health issue. (42, Married, Flower/ Basket vendor, Fatomand Bazar, Gujranwala)

Frequent accidents and injuries

Women street vendor participants described their work as a battleground, with frequent injuries from carrying heavy materials, managing stalls, and wearing unsuitable footwear. Navigating chaotic traffic also led to frequent accidents involving motor vehicles, cycles, and rickshaws (two- or three-wheeled carts). Abda shared:

I experience joint pain from carrying heavy stuff and navigating the heavy vending stall. My legs hurt from walking all the time and you can see how my feet are injured with cuts. Last year, I had an accident with a motor-bike; I was hit from behind, and the person fled. Passersby helped me, and rescue services gave me medicine and took me home. After that I've fallen on the road a few times, the most recent being a month ago. (41, Married, Basket vendor, Johar town, Lahore)

Chronic health conditions left untreated

Many women vendors reported regular headaches and fatigue, linked to constant work stress, dual burdens, income uncertainty, and unsafe environments. Most accepted these issues as routine, affecting their overall well-being and quality of life. Mariam said:

Due to work, I have frequent headaches. When I return home, I feel drained and lack the energy to engage in conversations with my children. The stress and responsibilities, especially after the death of my husband, have taken a toll on my health and I feel tired all the time. I've experienced weakness due to this and people who knew me from the past, fail to recognize me now. (45, Married, Clothing vendor, People's Colony, Gujranwala)

Lack of free community healthcare services

Limited access to affordable public healthcare worsens women street vendors' challenges. Relying on home deliveries and midwives due to financial constraints or inadequate services puts maternal and child health at risk. This lack of proper healthcare also hinders their ability to seek treatment, impacting their livelihood and productivity. Zainab shared:

All my deliveries have been done at home as it is cheaper. I had to resort to abortions multiple times due to a lack of financial stability. I am seeking forgiveness from God for these actions, acknowledging my sins. (37, Married, Clothing vendor, Satellite Town, Gujranwala)

Fatima described chronic pain:

Unfortunately, I suffer from chronic joint pain and getting out of breath very easily. The doctor at the hospital recommended a test, but given my limited finances, I couldn't afford the test. My primary focus is my children; and I save any money that I can for them. (32, Married, Food vendor, Liberty, Gujranwala)

Concluding discussion

The informal patriarchal economy, as experienced by women street vendors, is shaped by the intersection of gendered societal norms and economic vulnerabilities. In Pakistan, where patriarchal values govern many aspects of life, women are often confined to the informal sector due to limited access to formal education, lack of schooling opportunities, societal expectations, and caregiving responsibilities. This lack of education not only limits their income opportunities but also keeps them trapped in precarious, low-paying work, perpetuating their economic instability.

Moreover, the informal nature of their employment means women street vendors have no access to social security, healthcare, or employment benefits, which exacerbates their already fragile conditions, as mentioned by Peimani and Kamalipour (2022). Many women street vendors suffer from chronic illnesses, untreated infections, and reproductive health issues, all of which remain unmanaged due to time and financial poverty, leading to a vicious cycle of ill-health and economic disadvantage, a situation echoed in our findings and supported by Naicker et al. (2021). These challenges are not unique to our study population but reflect a broader global trend observed in informal economies, especially in regions with patriarchal socioeconomic structures.

Limited health literacy and reliance on unlicensed care providers reflect broader gender disparities in South Asian women, who often have fewer years of formal education and are socially conditioned to seek care from community-based healers or religious figures, findings supported by Jafree and Barlow (2023). Such patterns reveal how gender norms restrict women's autonomy in making informed health decisions, reinforcing poor health outcomes. This reality is compounded by an absence of basic infrastructure and unsafe public spaces, all of which heightens their mental and physical health risks, ultimately restricting their business, a finding consistent with our results and echoed by Rahman 2019.

Our findings indicate that the burden of poverty, lack of capital, and rising inflationary pressures serve as major barriers to both productivity and well-being. To aggravate the issue, there is a lack of support from both the government and private sector in terms of subsidisation or interest-free schemes. With Consumer Price Index inflation for urban areas rising by 19.4 per cent (PBS 2024), persistent inflation poses significant challenges for informal sector workers. This lack of financial support aligns with other research which confirms that inflationary pressures, coupled with the absence of government assistance, hinder vendors' ability to develop business opportunities or generate significant income for survival, as mentioned by Recchi (2021).

Gender plays a crucial role in shaping these experiences. Women are burdened not only with the responsibility for income generation but also with domestic duties and caregiving, often referred to as the "triple shift". This places them in a constant state of work-family conflict, limiting their time for self-care and rest, a pattern evident in our findings and affirmed by Moussie (2021) and Idyorough and Ishor (2014). Additionally, societal norms around son preferences and reproductive health exacerbate this burden, especially for women, who lack the knowledge and agency to manage birth spacing or to access quality healthcare. This places both women and their children at heightened risk of health complications and mortality, as also indicated by Sarfraz et al. (2023).

The challenges encountered by women street vendors in Pakistan reflect layered structural constraints rather than isolated individual struggles. Their entry into informal labour is often shaped by

pivotal life transitions, such as sole caregiving roles, economic shocks, or disrupted education. With scarce institutional support and minimal capital, their informal work becomes a strategy for survival centred more on stability and sustenance than growth or expansion. Despite systemic neglect, they navigate restrictive public spaces through adaptive strategies, reflecting power struggles enacted through quiet, routine acts. While the women street vendors in this study did not openly resist authority, their persistence in occupying public spaces, negotiating with officials, and managing work alongside caregiving responsibilities illustrates a quiet contestation of exclusion and an assertion of presence. Their concentration in insecure, low-income sectors further illustrates how enduring gender roles and restricted mobility continue to confine women to undervalued forms of labour. These patterns reveal how survival, resistance, and inequality are deeply interwoven in their everyday realities, demanding policy responses that move beyond surface-level interventions and engage with the structural roots of informality and gendered marginalisation.

The challenges faced by women street vendors in Pakistan are not isolated occurrences but mirror broader patterns among informal workers across the Global South. Recurring issues such as inadequate access to healthcare, harassment by authorities, absence of legal protections, and the disproportionate burden of unpaid caregiving are well-documented (Peimani and Kamalipour 2022). These shared experiences underscore how gendered dimensions of informality are shaped by intersecting inequalities, economic precarity, systemic neglect, and social exclusion. Positioning the Pakistani context within this global landscape highlights the urgent need for inclusive urban planning and transnational policy dialogues that confront the structural marginalisation of women in informal economies worldwide.

This study is limited by its focus on Central Punjab, excluding other provinces and men, elderly, or child street vendors, which restricts comparative insights. Further research is needed to amplify the voices of diverse women informal workers and the unique challenges they encounter across Pakistan.

Implications and further research

Our findings suggest that empowering women street vendors in Pakistan requires a holistic, multi-dimensional approach that tackles their socioeconomic, environmental, safety, and health challenges (Figure 2). Urgent state support is needed through subsidies, interest-free loans, rent-capping for stalls, regulatory checks on suppliers, and enhanced security measures (Ramasamy 2018). Deploying women security officers and installing CCTV cameras can help reduce threats

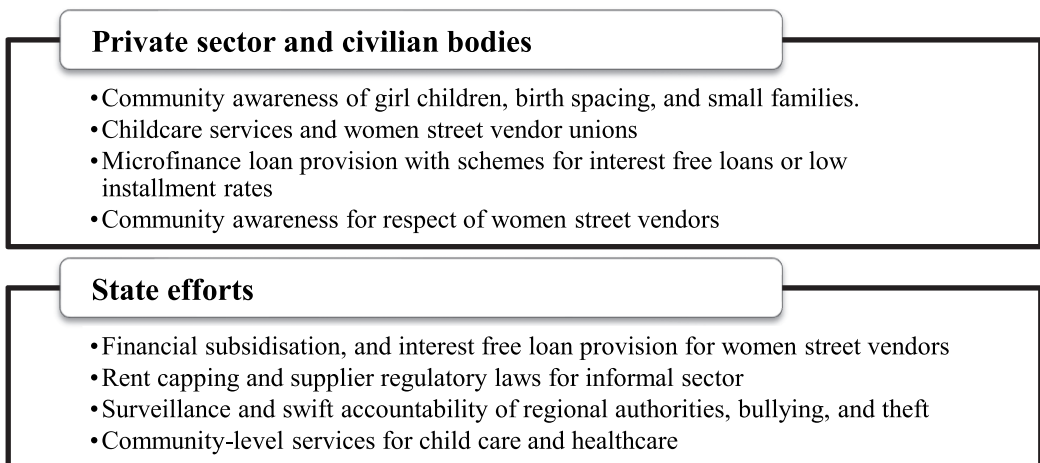


Figure 2. Recommended policy protection for women street vendors of Pakistan, based on findings of this study.

and foster a safer environment for women on public streets. Strict accountability of local authorities and suppliers is essential, alongside a dedicated helpline for women street vendors to seek immediate support. State childcare and healthcare services are essential and can be expanded through existing, yet under-resourced, basic health units in some local communities (Sarwar et al. 2018). Services must include free care for chronic, infectious, and mental-health needs of women and their dependents.

Pakistan is moving toward establishing social security and universal healthcare for formal workers, but this progress must urgently include the informal workforce (Khalid et al. 2020). The state should prioritise support for women street vendors by ensuring access to protective clothing, durable footwear, and improved workspaces featuring proper lighting, shade, and gender-sensitive infrastructure such as segregated spaces and functional public women's washrooms. The involvement of the private sectors, civil society, and community groups in promoting respect for women street vendors and advocating for girl children and smaller families is equally vital. These groups can offer microfinance loans, community childcare, and support the creation of informal women worker unions to strengthen safety nets while formal protection plans are implemented.

Note

1. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the anonymity of participants.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Data availability statement

Data is available at reasonable request.

Ethics approval

IRB ethics consent has been taken from the Forman Christian College University.

Author contribution

RH conceptualised the study and collected the data. SRJ supervised the study. Both authors analysed the data and wrote the manuscript together.

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