

Original Research Article

Effect of COVID-19 lockdown on the livelihood of street vendors in Maharashtra, India

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ABSTRACT

Background: 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 under one of the most stringent nationwide lockdowns which affected the workers of the informal sector the most. This study aims to explore the impact of the COVID-19 and lockdown on the livelihood of street vendors in the Maharashtra state, one of the severely affected states, of India.

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

Results: There were a total of twelve food vendors and eight fruits and vegetable vendors in the study sample. The mean age of food vendors recorded was 36.91 years; the average years of working recorded were 12.25; the mean education level was 7.83; and the average household size recorded was 5.25. Out of the total food vendors, 10 were males and two were females. The majority of the food vendors belong to the Vidarbha region, followed by Khandesh and Western Maharashtra.

Conclusions: Findings of the study show that lockdown affected street vendors multidimensionally. Street vendors had to stop working and many had to change their profession to selling fruits and vegetables within a limited time zone with greater livelihood challenges and financial hardships.

Keywords: Street vendors, COVID-19, Maharashtra, Lockdown, Perishable goods vendors, India

INTRODUCTION

Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) has taken the world by storm. More than 200 countries have been affected by this first non-influenza pandemic. The cumulative number of cases exceeded 184 million as on July 7th, 2021. India is one of the severely affected countries with the second highest (30.6 million) number of infected cases in the world after the United States (33.3 million).¹ Among all Indian States, Maharashtra is the

worst affected- compromising to a total of 6.12 million confirmed cases of COVID-19, and the death toll up to 1,30,622 by 7th July, 2021.²

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, 2020.³ However, the government of Maharashtra declared the order of shutdown of all

workplaces excluding the essential services after its first case detection on March 9, 2020.⁴

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 individuals lost their jobs.⁵ The major share of this was from the informal sector. The spread of viruses leads to panic in the migrant workers, who work far from home in urban areas, started returning to rural areas, which lead to a humanitarian crisis.⁶

In India, more than 90% of the workforce is engaged in the informal sector for their livelihoods and 14% of the informal sector, works as street vendors.^{7,8} Street vending can be segregated based on their employment status, location of workplace, product category, and type of premise.⁹

After the lockdown, Centre and state governments issued various guidelines which regulated the vegetables and fruits vendors to sell goods within restricted time slots.¹⁰ Similarly, other economically vulnerable groups such as food vendors were barred from the essential goods and services during the initial phase of lockdown.¹¹ Which impacted their livelihood considerably.¹² The current COVID-19 pandemic allows us to study the consequences of the pandemic on human lives and livelihood. These studies will help us to prepare for future pandemic which is not going to be uncommon.¹³ In this context, current research aims to study the impact of COVID-19 lockdown on the livelihood of street vendors in India.

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. Selection of participants and data collection was done through an iterative process till data saturation reached.

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 had limited our data collection for a specific duration, May 16, 2020, to

June 1, 2020, when India was in its fourth phase of lockdown.¹⁴ These street vendors were reached through various contacts obtained from the key informants in fourteen different districts of Maharashtra state. Telephonic interviews were conducted in vernacular language (Marathi) which were recorded with their consent on the promise of maintaining anonymity and confidentiality. The topics discussed through the interviews were: Street vendors’ pre-lockdown livelihood activities, challenges being faced by them due to lockdown and 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

Background characteristics

There was a total of twelve food vendors and eight fruits and vegetable vendors in the study sample. The mean age of food vendors recorded was 36.91 years, the average years of working recorded were 12.25, the mean education level was 7.83, and the average household size recorded was 5.25 (Table 1). Out of the total food vendors, 10 were males and two were females. The majority of the food vendors belong to the Vidarbha region, followed by Khandesh and Western Maharashtra. Around one in three food vendors were migrants either from other states or their home villages to districts of Maharashtra. Only one food vendor mentioned that he was able to conduct the vending activity rest were not allowed to carry it out during lockdown.

On the other hand, mean age of fruit and vegetable vendors recorded was 42 years, average year of working was 16.37, mean education level was 9.25, and average household size was 4.87 (Table 1). Out of all, seven were male and one was female. The majority of the fruit and vegetable vendors belong to the Vidarbha region followed by Marathwada of Maharashtra. Only one vegetable vendor was a migrant from another state to Maharashtra.

The majority of vendors mentioned that have no other source of income other than street vending (Table 1).

Table 1: Background characteristics of the studied participants.

Characteristics	Mean (±SD) Frequency (%)	
	Food, (n=12)	Fruit-vegetable, (n=8)
Vendors’ type		
Mean age (Years)	36.91	42
Mean experience of working as a vendor	12.25	16.37
Mean education	7.83	9.25
Mean household size	5.25	4.87

Continued.

Characteristics		Mean (\pm SD) Frequency (%)	
		Food, (n=12)	Fruit-vegetable, (n=8)
Gender	Female	2	1
	Male	10	7
Region	Konkan	0	1
	Vidarbha	7	5
	Khandesh	2	0
	Marathwada	1	2
	Western Maharashtra	2	0
Migrated	Yes	4	1
	No	8	7
Local authority	Municipal corporation	6	2
	Municipal council	6	4
	Nagar Panchayat	0	2
Other source of income	Yes	1	1
	No	11	7
Vending activity during lockdown	Opened	1	8
	Closed	11	0

Street vendors' pre-lockdown livelihood activities (foods, fruits and vegetable vendors)

Working hours and earnings: Participants unanimously mentioned that before lockdown, they used to work around 16-18 hours daily. Over half of them mentioned that they were earning a profit of up to rupees 200 per day whereas others earned more than Rs. 300 and sometimes up to rupees 800-1000 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 27-year-old migrated participants with seven years of experience stated that, *"usually, on daily basis, I earn rupees 600-800 out of which after deducting expenses I am left with 5-6 K (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."*

Tax and loans: Before lockdown, approximately half of the participants were paying tax in between 5-20 rupees daily to the local authority. Most of the vendors had to take loans from relatives, friends, or self-help groups to either set up their business or to keep it running.

Challenges before lockdown: The majority of the vendors mentioned, they were able to work before lockdown freely but few (1/20), mentioned that they had to face the problem of frequent eviction by the local authority. Some participants (3/20) mentioned that due to competition from financially sound vendors they were unable to sell their goods. All agreed that if they fail to sell off the goods, it gets spoilt and has to be thrown away because of its perishable nature leading to financial loss. One of the 50 years old female vegetable vendors with 2 years of experience stated that *"When I am unable to sell particular goods on the same day, I have no other option than to throw it away. And this only incurs the loss."*

Challenges being faced by them due to lockdown

Working hours and earnings of 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 had been impelled to turn into vegetable vendors. This resulted in a greater number of suppliers with declined demand from the customers. Fruits and vegetable vendors also faced difficulties since, as per the government orders, they had to roam and sell their goods rather than being stationary. Vendors mentioned that in their traditional stationary kind of shop customers were familiar but during the lockdown, they had to go around the colonies to find new customers. It was naturally time-consuming and due to high competition vendors were compelled to sell their goods cheap, leading to losses. Also, customers preferred buying from vendors who were reaching their doorsteps. As a result, many regular customers of these vendors had reduced. The majority expressed that their daily income had reduced to less than half.

A 45-year male vegetable vendor with 16 years' experience 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 new 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 unable to sell all the goods."*

Working hours and earnings of non-essential perishable goods (food) vendors: The majority of the food vendors (11/12) 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 (1/12) started selling vegetables and fruits; others (2/12) started their food vending activity through home and parcel service.

A 30-year male food vendor with 6 years of experience 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.”*

Loans: During the lockdown, approximately half (9/20) of the participants had to take a loan to cover their daily expenses. Months of continuous lockdown has brought their businesses to a standstill leaving no option to repay the loan.

A 19 years male food vendor with 2 years of experience stated that *“Lockdown has a huge effect on how we manage our home, no income; we have credits and loans to pay back. We have taken a loan from a self-help group. I was managing to pay back its instalments through my business, but now as everything is closed and no income, we are not able to pay its instalments.”*

Precautions against COVID-19 pandemic: Vendors who could somehow work amidst lockdown have reported usage of sanitisers and masks as a precautionary measure against COVID-19. They also followed the rule of physical distancing. The majority (13/20) mentioned that they were not able to wash their hands regularly at the workplace due to the absence of a water facility. About half of the vendors (9/20) who lost their daily bread and butter, felt worried and reported that it might be the biggest health crisis for the entire world but it is a huge financial crisis for them.

Home environment: Most of the vendors (17/20) mentioned that the home environment has changed drastically. They had to reduce their household expenditure to less than half. Over half of the vendors (12/20) said that their income had stopped during the lockdown so they did not have money to buy rations for home. *“I am not allowed to open my shop; hence, there is no income. A neighbour offered to help me with wheat, and a friend gave me some money. This is how I am running my house,”* 49-year female food vendors with 7 years of experience stated.

Those who could not work (9/20) have mentioned they had to suffer severe mental stress during this period. A 35-year male street vendor with 18 years of experience explained that *“It is lockdown but homes are not closed. Income has been shut down but expenses continue.”*

Health issue: During the study, it was found that some (6/20) of the vendors' household members suffered from diseases like diabetes and hypertension, so the cost of treatment became unaffordable. Few (2/20) expressed

their fear of inefficiency in getting any treatment if any family member falls sick. They can hardly afford it.

Experience of migrated workers on their journey to their homes: The majority of the migrant vendors (3/5) said that when they reached their village, they were sent to a nearby government hospital for examination. Some migrants (1/5) received masks, train tickets, biscuits, water bottles free of cost for their journey. They migrated to Maharashtra to earn their living and stayed most of the years there. As a result, their family members' names had been removed from their ration card. In another case, the family of a vendor was renting a house in Maharashtra and was unable to pay rent during lockdown which 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.

Governmental aid during COVID-19

Help received from the government: Eleven of the twenty participant vendors mentioned receiving free rations from Public Distribution System (PDS) shops or political leaders. Some vendors responded well in this regard. A 27-year male with 10-year experience food vendor 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 (6/20) who approached the PDS shopkeeper were warded off since they did not have a ration card or needed documents. Few PDS beneficiaries (2/20) complained that their ration cards have been damaged or they need to be replaced with new ones. Nineteen out of twenty participants neither have an idea about Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana nor do they have Jan Dhan Yojana account in the banks.

The behaviour of police and local authority towards street vendors: According to some vendors (9/20), despite following norms of physical distancing at their stationery shops, police confiscate their weighing machines and goods. One 56-year fruit vendor with 20-years of experience stated, *“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.”*

Street vendors' perspective towards government welfare initiative during COVID-19: Street vendors felt that the government should work out vaccination against COVID-19 with all its might. Those vendors (7/20) 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 (3/20) 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.

Packages and schemes announced by the government: Most of the participants (17/20) were not aware of the schemes announced by the central government. Some (4/20) said that due to prevailing loopholes at various levels, there was no guarantee that government schemes would benefit them. During the period when the data was collected, the relief fund of Rs. 20 lakh crores to overcome COVID-19 has been announced, but no concrete and visible steps have been taken for street vendors. The aware vendors (2/20) knew 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 52-year male vendors 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.*”

DISCUSSION

The current study explored the hardships faced by the street vendors due to the COVID-19 lockdown in Maharashtra. Generally, the urban poor, migrants who find difficulty in engaging in the formal sector gets engaged into the informal sector and especially in street vending as it requires less investment and skills.^{15,16} This study was carried out to understand various issues regarding the effect of lockdown on the livelihood of the street vendor in Maharashtra. The study participants were the perishable goods’ vendors which included fruits, vegetables, and food vendors. Among them, only fruits and vegetable vendors were allowed to carry out their vending activity. Very few among the food vendors who could not work had managed 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. The income generation depends upon nature, volume of the goods and the location of vending.^{16,17} Previous studies have reported that the street vendors from developing countries like Bangladesh, India, Kinshasa and Lubumbashi work for long hours and conduct their vending activity till late evening.^{16,17} Similarly, our study observed that the street vendors were working for more than 12 hours a day before lockdown.

Previous Indian studies reported that the average daily income of the street vendors was 50-80 Indian rupees per day and even lower for women.^{15,16} Over this, the COVID-19 pandemic is more of a financial crisis than a health crisis for the informal sector including street vendors.¹⁸ The perishable goods vendors faced the problem of reduced customers as the jobless customers were forced to remain at their homes during the lockdown.¹⁹

Street vendors took a loan to run their business but lockdown created a serious existential crisis in front of them. Those who could work during the lockdown reported that their earnings dropped by more than 50%, similar to the study findings in Bangkok, where street vendors noted the fall of 80% income during lockdown.²⁰ Other studies also show, the lockdown has severely hit the street vendors financially, which has resulted in a disturbed home environment.¹² 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.

Before pandemic, it was widely reported by many studies that in countries where street vending is not legally regulated, street vendors are harassed by police and local authorities.^{17,21,22} Which becomes a major challenge to conduct the vending activity in a free manner. We also found that during the lockdown, the vendors had to face police harassment in terms of forced eviction, confiscation of goods, and or imposing fines.

Lockdown raised a serious question of livelihood in front of many people who entered into the profession of selling essential perishable goods and created tough competition with the pre-existing vendors.

During lockdown phase 4, the government announced the distribution of free ration for all migrant workers in all Indian states where they have been working without ration cards.²³ We found that out of all the participants, among the migrant street vendors only one was able to receive free ration under the mentioned scheme. Very few working vendors mentioned receiving ID cards, masks, and sanitiser from the government. This is similar to the findings mentioned by women in informal employment: globalizing and organizing. WIEGO in its impact analysis paper on informal sector workers found workers not receive any protective equipment from the government to work within safety measures.²⁴

After the announcement of the lockdown, bitter experiences of street vendors posed serious questions before the government. They did not have any access to social protection scheme unlike the formal sector.^{15,25} For them, no work opportunity means zero income but the household expense continue. Hence, there was an urgent need of providing relief on a humanitarian basis to them.¹¹

During the lockdown, the government 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 10,000.²⁶ In our study, we observed that street vendors did 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 benefits to reach the needy, the government should have issue direct benefit in terms of grants or loans without

interest. A global network, WEIGO estimated that 85% of the workforce in Indian cities is informal workers with the majority working as street vendors.²⁷ The number of street vendors is far more than just 50 lakh in India, where, about 2-2.5% of the urban population is involved in such jobs.¹⁵ Keeping this in mind, the benefits provided by the government under this scheme is highly insufficient. The informal sector which is already facing challenges of legalization, licensing, social security, etc., there is an urgency to provide financial and humanitarian support to street vendors not only for sustaining during this pandemic but also to bounce back to their normal livelihood activities.^{12,18}

As per the street vendors (protection of livelihood and regulation of street vending) act, 2014, there should be a town vending committee (TVC) under the local authority with censoring of the street vendors as prior responsibility.²⁸ But except in a few cities, such committees are not formed in India, and wherever it has been formed, TVC is facing challenges to carry out a census because of numerous political issues.²⁹ Also, there is a need to make the strategy for inclusion of street vendors in informal planning by providing vending zones, issuing ID cards, offering SHGs' and bank credits to improve economic status, infrastructure provision like garbage collection, public toilet and sanitation facilities, water supply network, etc.³⁰

CONCLUSION

The widest lockdown ever imposed in the history of India has led to a devastating impact on the lives of daily wage earners in terms of lost livelihoods, shortage of food and accommodation. The major impact has occurred to the employment activities. Since most of these workers are migrants, several had been left stranded on the streets. Even though the government in its endeavours has launched employment schemes for those who have lost their occupation during the nationwide lockdown, we only hope that the intended relief brings these workers out of their prolonged distress and misery fairly.

At the same time, it is also important on the part of government and policymakers, to formulate evidence-based holistic schemes after taking proper consultation with street vendors' representatives across India. Along with this, 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 but also during their regular challenges like evictions, licensing, legalization and many other prevailing issues.

If such a well-planned and targeted programme is executed by the authorities, it will not only prove an instant relief to their current sufferings but also ensure their future security and boost the lost confidence and

self-respect, much essential and a basic right to every human being, low or high in status or eminence.

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