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Sharma, S. orcid.org/0000-0002-1954-7415 (2024) Gendered barriers to accessing jobs in the formal sector: a study of women street vendors in Delhi, India. *IRA-International Journal of Management & Social Sciences*, 20 (3). pp. 23-44. ISSN 2455-2267

<https://doi.org/10.21013/jmss.v20.n3.p1>

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Gendered Barriers to Accessing Jobs in the Formal Sector: A Study of Women Street Vendors in Delhi, India

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Type of Work: Peer Reviewed.

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.21013/jmss.v20.n3.p1>

Review history: Submitted: June 11, 2024; Revised: August 16, 2024; Accepted: August 28, 2024

How to cite this paper:

Sharma, S. (2024). Gendered Barriers to Accessing Jobs in the Formal Sector: A Study of Women Street Vendors in Delhi, India *IRA-International Journal of Management & Social Sciences* (ISSN 2455-2267), 20(3), 23-44. DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.21013/jmss.v20.n3.p1>

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This paper is peer-reviewed following IRA Academico Research's [Peer Review Program](#).

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ABSTRACT

Occupational segregation by gender deserves particular attention because it excludes women from most livelihood options (Anker, 1997). This research presents a holistic picture of gendered occupational segregation that collectively studies life cycle concepts of transitions, trajectories, life events, and turning points, along with the life cycle parameters of age, education level and marital status to understand barriers women face in exercising their agency to access jobs in the formal sector. Analysis of 105 semi-structured interviews with vendors in Delhi highlights the role of patriarchal norms in public and private spheres in structuring women's entry into street vending. Key issues to access jobs in the formal sector include the patriarchal norms, stigmatisation, and societal expectations that limit women's access to education, their ability to work, and the type of work they engage in, thus creating segmentation in the labour market. This study concludes that the structural conditions lead to transitions, life events, and turning points in women's lives, determining their access to employment in the formal or informal sector.

Keywords: Access, Critical realism, Delhi, formal economy, India, Informal economy, Life Course Theory, Women

Introduction

The informal economy is marked by decent work deficits, such as poor job quality, low pay, illegal work status, absence of social protection or rights at work, and a lack of opportunities for workers (especially women and young workers) to have a voice in decision-making (ILO, 2002). The ILO emphasises that formalising the informal economy is vital to achieving decent work for all (Termine & Percic, 2015). The meaning of 'formalisation of informal work' depends on where workers are within the hierarchy. For informal workers, it may mean creating new jobs in the formal economy (Hearle et al., 2019). Thus, before exploring ways to achieve decent work for informal workers, one must understand the barriers preventing vendors from accessing jobs in the formal economy. This article discusses these barriers at length.

Literature Review

This section identifies the literature on occupational segregation by gender with a particular reference to the life course theory. It identifies the research gap in the existing literature and defines the broad aim and research question answered through this study. Occupational segregation by gender deserves particular attention because it excludes women from most livelihood options and affects how women perceive themselves, affecting their income and status (Anker, 1997). Gender inequality in the labour market becomes more acute during different stages of a woman's life. Multiple factors shape women's lives from birth to death. Therefore, placing women and their decisions in cultural and historical contexts is crucial, as proposed by Life Course Theory (LCT), more commonly called the Life Course Perspective (Mitchell, 2003). Four fundamental concepts are associated with this theory: cohorts, transitions, trajectories, life events, and turning points (Hutchison, 2011). A cohort denotes a group of people born at the same historical time and who experience specific social

changes in a given culture in the same sequence. Individuals experience discrete transitions in their roles and statuses related to their family life, such as birth, death, marriage, divorce, etc. Trajectories involve multiple transitions leading to long-term patterns in an individual's life, such as family life trajectory, work-life trajectory, etc. Transitions and trajectories are influenced by life events and turning points that involve abrupt changes with potentially long-term consequences, such as those that either close or open opportunities, cause a long-term change to an individual's environment or change a person's beliefs and expectations (Rutter, 1996). Of the four main concepts associated with the LCT, it was transitions, life events and turning points that were most useful to this research. The transition of women from one marital status to another (unmarried to married or married to divorced or widowed) and the associated life events requiring adaptation to their new status (such as in the case of widows) were important life course concepts in the context of this research. Some of the life events were turning points for women, such as the sudden demise of their husbands, which required them to transform from docile homemakers to astute street vendors. The concepts of cohorts and trajectories required longitudinal study to recognize their effects, which was impossible for this research as it was conducted at a single point in time (i.e. it was a cross-sectional design). The vulnerabilities associated with the transitions in women workers' life are intensified by structural gender inequalities that intersect and accrue over their life course. The LCT proposes six fundamental principles, viz socio-historical and geographical location; timing of lives; heterogeneity or variability; "linked lives" and social ties to others; human agency and personal control; and how the past shapes the future (Hutchison, 2011). Of these six principles, the last two are highly relevant to this research and explain the underlying reasons for gender inequality. According to LCT, individuals are active agents mediating the effect of social structure and shaping these social structures through their decisions. However, the ability of the agents to make decisions depends on the opportunities and constraints they are exposed to (Clausen, 1991; Mitchell, 2003). For example, the historical circumstances shaping the life history of one generation are transmitted to the other through several movements or conditions under which life events occur (such as dropping out of school), setting up a chain reaction of experiences for individuals and their families reflected in their socioeconomic status or marital patterns (O'Rand, 1996). Existing literature discusses each life cycle aspect concerning women's access to work. For example, Floro and Meurs' (2009) global study on women's access to work found that women's access is closely associated with the roles ascribed to each gender and the subsequent partition of work in the household. Married women tend to work longer hours than men; their choice of workplace and employment is decided by the demands of reproductive and care work of married women, and marital status also influences the propensity of women to participate in the workforce. Iversen and Rosenbluth (2010) argue that women's marriage and divorce status affects their economic decision to work outside the home. Begari (2017), in a study of street vendors in Hyderabad, concludes that lower educational levels in general and a shortage of access to vocational and technical education, in particular, compel women to work in low-skilled occupations

(primarily the informal sector). A joint study conducted on the workers of Indonesia by the ILO and IFC (2012) found that employers prefer to hire young single women because of their lower risk of pregnancy and, thus, greater availability to join the workforce. Also, young and middle-aged married women must seek approval from their husbands or parents-in-law to work outside their homes (Fontana et al., 2010; Kabeer, 2000b; Oya, 2010).

However, there is an absence of a holistic study that collectively studies life cycle concepts of transitions, trajectories, life events, and turning points along with the life cycle parameters of age, education level and marital status to understand barriers women face in exercising their agency to access jobs in the formal sector. This study precisely aims to present this holistic study from the perspective of the life course theory and the three main life cycle aspects, namely age, education level and marital status of women. To achieve this aim, this research asks, 'What barriers prevent women from accessing formal work?'. To elicit the motives of interviewees to engage in the formal sector, they were asked, 'Did you ever apply for formal work?' A subsequent question was asked based on their responses, 'If you did get a formal job, what were the reasons for shifting from that job to vending?' or 'If you did not get a formal job, what were the reasons for that?' The interviewees' responses were finally analysed for the structure/ agency dualism of the barriers faced by women.

Methodology

This section discusses the methodology used to answer the research questions and examines the philosophical assumptions underpinning the chosen methodological approach. First, the section discusses the research philosophy adopted for this study. It then discusses the research strategy developed to accomplish the research objective and the researcher's data collection and analysis process.

Research Philosophy, Strategy, Data Collection, and Analysis Methods

Adopting a critical realist ontology, the fieldwork was conducted accepting that women's beliefs (and the researcher's own) are produced, transient, and fallible. The choice of critical realism for this research was guided by the fundamental premise that the world of work of the women vendors has depth (beyond the narrations of women about their experiences) and that 'the real' cannot be reduced simply to the experiences of these women. 'The real' domain of work of these women is understood by looking at the structures of women's oppression in society and identifying the mechanisms that create barriers that prevent them from accessing formal jobs to ensure decent work. Following the critical realist ontology and epistemology, moving back and forth between the best possible explanation of collected data and reality through an iterative process was essential. The researcher followed a retroduction process to produce multiple possible explanations of causal mechanisms. This necessitated collecting empirical data about women's rich experiences and moving beyond the observed to the theoretical description of their behaviour and choices.

The decision to select a qualitative research strategy was essentially based on the focus of this research. The research's focus was intensive because the context (vendors and their working patterns) was known to the researcher. Still, there was a need to explore and explain the mechanisms of discrimination (such as patriarchy and labour market segmentation) deterring these vendors from applying for formal jobs. To understand these hidden mechanisms and achieve the research objectives, knowing how vendors interpreted and made sense of their experiences was necessary to explain the significant barriers they faced to accessing formal jobs. Thus, the intention was to understand and recognise the factors enabling or preventing access, which could only be acquired through a qualitative research strategy. It was essential to inductively move (from the specific to the general) from the data to describe underlying reasons for vendors' choices regarding their access to formal jobs.

Following previous studies on the informal economy where the critical method for data collection was face-to-face interviews (Chen, Vanek, & Carr, 2004; Gurtoo & Williams, 2009; Williams & Nadin, 2012; Williams & Williams, 2014), the fieldwork for this study also involved the use of interviews. The subjective perceptions, attitudes, and rationales for the interviewees' behaviour helped explain differences in their access to decent work according to age, marital status, and educational background. The semi-structured interviews reflected the researcher's critical realist outlook, where she predominantly used the 'why' and 'how' questions based on her prior theoretical ideas. The interviews were self-evolving and flexible, which allowed the women to raise new topics and partially determined the direction of the discussions.

Study Area, Target Population, and Sampling

The chosen study area for this research was Delhi, a metropolitan capital city of India. There were two primary reasons for choosing Delhi as the study area. Firstly, street vendors comprise 2.7 percent (0.45 million) of Delhi's population, which is more than the maximum vending population (of 2.5 percent of the city's population) allowed in any Indian city, as per the Street Vendors Act passed by the Government of India (2014a). Secondly, Delhi is the only city in India that has an extensive range of vending markets, from the exclusive 'ladies' market' where only the women vendors work to the 'natural/ regular markets' and weekly markets where both male and female vendors work together (Sankrit, 2015).

The sampling frame for this research was drawn from the street vendors' list available with the most prominent street vendor association in Delhi, namely the NHF. It is a 20-year-old national federation of street vendors with branches spread all over India. The federation does not directly offer membership to the vendors but gives membership to the unions registered with the federation. Within Delhi, there are 51 vendor unions associated with the NHF. These unions record their members' basic demographic information, such as their name, age and gender, and information about their location and the type of goods they sell. During the initial meetings over the first three weeks of the fieldwork, the NHF shared the list of vendors

registered with their associated trade unions. The researcher could choose participants from the registered vendor's list based on the maximum variation sampling.

The criteria for drawing such a sample were geographical variation among the markets and demographic variation among the vendors. Interviewees were selected from the (only) ladies' market situated at Janpath, eight weekly markets, and twelve regular markets spread all over the city to fulfill the criterion of geographical variation. The locations of the markets are shown in Figure 1.

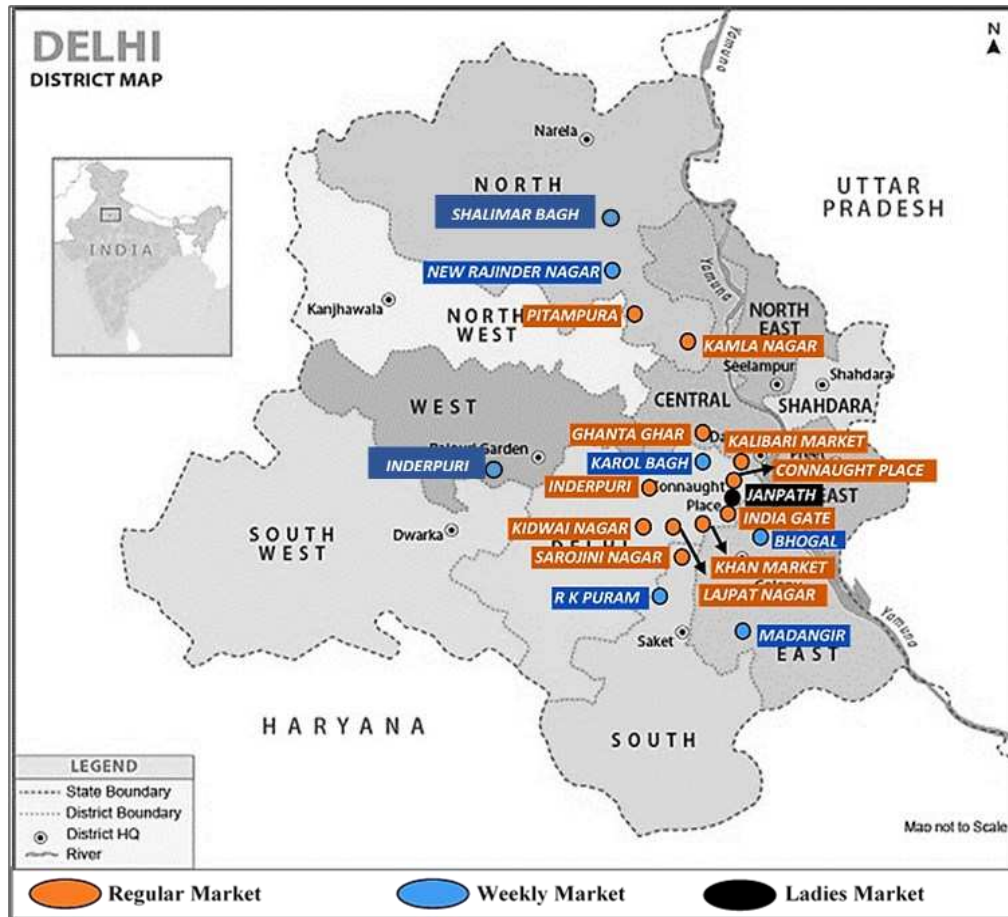


Figure 1: Vending market locations of the interviewees

The regular markets of Delhi had the most significant number of registered women vendors with the NHF, and the ladies' market had the least number of registrations.

The interviewees were identified based on three life cycle parameters: age, literacy level and marital status. In this study, 105 vendors were interviewed, bearing in mind all thinkable variations of the geographical and demographic criteria for sampling. The distribution of the samples is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Distribution of interviewees across various types of markets

Parameters		Type of market	Ladies Market (9 samples)	Weekly markets (25 samples)	Regular markets (71 samples)	Total samples
Literacy	Literate		3	15	23	41
	Illiterate		6	10	48	64
Age	20s & below		1	1	3	5
	30s		4	8	15	27
	40s		3	9	22	34
	50s		0	6	18	24
	60s & above		1	1	13	15
Marital status	Unmarried		1	1	3	5
	Married		7	16	43	66
	Divorced		0	3	2	5
	Widow		1	4	22	27
	Abandoned		0	1	1	2

The data analysis method used in this research was Thematic Analysis. A critical realist ontology and epistemology determined the focus of the data analysis process, which was to understand the 'context' (social, systemic, cultural, etc.) giving rise to various experiences of women. An approach to thematic analysis, known as Template Analysis, was used to analyse the interviews. Central to this analytical technique was creating a coding template based on a data subsection, which was later applied to further data. An inductive approach was adopted to capture and find patterns within the data and explore the codes and themes emerging from and strongly linked to the data. On the other hand, the deductive process produced a set of codes from an extensive literature search. The data collection and analysis exercises were carried out simultaneously. The following section presents the analysis of barriers identified by the interviewees to apply for formal jobs.

Results

The face-to-face interviews with the vendors revealed five significant barriers to accessing formal jobs: illiteracy, age, marital status, long search times for formal employment, and corrupt recruitment practices. These barriers disproportionately obstructed women's access to formal jobs. This section examines the impact of each barrier identified by the respondents in influencing their access to employment in the formal economy.

Illiteracy

One-third of the interviewees identified illiteracy as the most critical barrier to applying for formal jobs. A majority of the illiterate vendors can be grouped into two broad categories: first, the ones who attended primary school and later dropped out because they were overburdened with domestic responsibilities and hence faced the problem of time poverty, and second, the ones who never went to school due to dire poverty or patriarchal discrimination at home where the daughters were not allowed to go to school but their brothers were allowed. The interviews highlighted that several factors collectively acted as deterrents to accessing formal education for these women. For example, Lalita, a middle-aged Gujarati woman, attained only primary education because her parents could not afford the fees to send her to secondary school. Moreover, being the family's eldest child, she cared for her younger siblings while her parents went to work. Lalita said, *'I had to sacrifice my education for domestic responsibilities because I am a girl'*. She stated, *'I am not educated enough; thus, I know I can never get a regular office job'*. On the other hand, Kanchana, a Gujarati woman working at the Janpath market, was considered a 'burden' by her brother and was forcibly married six months after her mother died in 2017. She stated, *'If given a chance, I would like to continue my studies to become eligible for a formal job in the future'*.

Some vendors never went to school due to the safety concerns of their parents. For example, Hirani Devi was born in a small village in Uttar Pradesh. She explained that due to the absence of a school in her village, the children were supposed to travel ten kilometres to another village for an education, which the parents did not consider safe for their daughters. Thus, these girls could not continue their education, the repercussions they faced later in life. Their parents made critical decisions about their early lives, which had irreversible consequences for the rest of their lives.

Another issue was the type of education received by the vendors. In the case of Muslims, the young girls went to *Madrasas* (religious, educational institutions), where they learned to read the Quran (the holy book of the Muslims), with no formal education whatsoever. The absence of formal education was a barrier to employment for Muslim women because jobs in the formal sector necessitated a specified level of formal education and training. Irrespective of the literacy level of the vendors, all the vendors associated a high literacy level with better job opportunities in the formal economy and a lack of literacy with informal work. This was particularly relevant for younger unmarried women (below 20) who had either finished their schooling or were pursuing higher education in a college. One such vendor was Shireen, an 18-year-old unmarried woman who worked as a vendor in the evening and attended college in the morning. She was hopeful of becoming a teacher upon completion of her higher education.

The interviews revealed that the patriarchal norms within the house encouraged sons' education compared to daughters and were also responsible for a gendered division of work at home, which allocated domestic work to young unmarried girls and indirectly excluded them from accessing education by using the time to their disadvantage. Public patriarchy was

reflected in the risk of harm to girls, discouraging their parents from sending them to school in far-off locations. A deeper analysis of vendors' narratives about underlying reasons for their lack of access to education revealed that patriarchal norms and gender stereotypes were the main barriers restricting their access to education and, subsequently, their access to formal employment. These norms created a segmentation in the labour market where the less educated or uneducated women were stuck in informal jobs due to their low human capital endowments.

Age

During the interviews, the vendors often mentioned age as a significant barrier to applying for a job in the formal sector. Middle-aged and older women considered age an impediment to applying for a formal job. Middle-aged women can be bifurcated into women under 50 years of age and those above 51 years. The women in their 40s or 50s hesitated to apply for a formal job because of less or no education levels and a mental block to try new jobs at their age. These women were employed as construction workers before becoming street vendors. They could not continue working in them as they aged, and their health deteriorated. One such case in my research was Sushma, a middle-aged woman who never got to attend a school or enroll in a training course. She was married at sixteen, and due to the poor financial circumstances of her family, she had to commence paid work soon after her marriage. Despite her aversion to street vending, Sushma continued to work as a vendor because of the fear of trying a new formal job and added, *'I would have done a regular formal job if I had been young and educated. But considering my age, this work is fine'*.

The women above 51 were widows and could not apply to jobs in the formal sector of their liking due to the age criteria sometimes attached to such employment. For example, Mohini, a 55-year-old widow with primary education, went out of her house to work for the first time after her husband died in 2005. She was already forty and could not apply for a housekeeping job in a government school as the maximum age to apply for such a job is 40 years in India. Women like Mohini began working outside the home quite late, forced by unforeseen circumstances such as the husband's death. Such women were not eligible to apply for decent jobs in the formal sector due to their age and thus missed the opportunity to work there. The prospects of entry to good formal sector jobs were marred right from childhood when their parents did not allow them access to formal education. The government's policies further constrained their chances of employment in the formal sector, which put a maximum age cap on the entry eligibility criterion for government jobs.

Women above 51 also comprised a group engaged in construction work before becoming street vendors. The poor physical condition of these women due to continuous exposure to strenuous work conditions and repeated pregnancies further segmented the labour market. Due to poor physical and emotional states, these women were not hired for other informal jobs, such as domestic workers, which also required a lot of physical strength and lengthy working hours where they would have to stay away from their children. These women were, therefore,

compelled to seek self-employment avenues within the informal economy where they could have flexible working hours and prioritise their domestic responsibilities over professional ones.

The middle-aged and older women interviewed had never had the option to choose their educational qualifications or decide about marriage. Instead, their parents had made choices for their daughters quite early on in their lives, and these initial choices restricted the options (in terms of their decision to work and the choice of their occupation) available to these women later on in their lives. Because these women were not allowed to study and were married at quite a young age without their permission, they had fewer opportunities to be employed in the formal sector later in their lives. These examples illustrate how patriarchal structures constrain the possibilities of poor women in India to access work outside of the informal sector. The life course decisions taken by these women's parents impacted their choices later in life. Their decisions regarding education and marriage, constrained by the structural arrangements in their childhood, had a domino effect on their present and future lives, reflected in their low self-efficacy (Bandura, 2006) regarding getting a 'good' job in the formal sector and performing well in their workplace.

Marital Status

Women of four different marital statuses were studied to understand the impact of marital status on their choice of occupation: unmarried, married, divorced, and widowed women. The unmarried vendors included two groups of women: the literate unmarried vendors and the illiterate ones. The literate unmarried vendors were in their 20s and were still pursuing education or had temporarily taken a break in their education to support their families financially. They did not identify any barrier to accessing formal work and intended to apply for a quality formal job after completing their higher education. The illiterate unmarried vendors were in their 40s or 50s and never had a chance to go to school due to their disability or the burden of their domestic responsibilities. Their illiteracy and lack of awareness about jobs in the formal sector were the main reasons for not applying.

Some women in the same age group (the 40s and 50s) had become the sole income-earning members of their family after the death of their parents and had assumed responsibility for caring for their younger siblings. They were so desperate to get a job to feed their siblings that they did odd jobs, such as construction labourers and domestic workers. They believed that, given their circumstances, they did not get a chance to choose their occupation. They took whatever jobs were available; all available jobs were informal.

The interviews with married vendors revealed that these women were scared to work alone without their husbands or were compelled to work with their husbands by their in-laws. Thus, the lack of confidence to work in a formal job and the family compulsion to work with their spouses were identified as the significant access barriers to formal employment by married vendors. The restrictions imposed on married women by their in-laws to work only with their spouse compelled these women to internalise gender roles as their gender identity. This

internalisation of gender roles, in turn, impacted their confidence to apply for a formal job where they would have to work without their spouse amidst unknown men. For example, Kira Garg, a woman well-qualified with a Tool & Die Making (Engineering) degree from the Indian Technical Institute (ITI) in Delhi, was forbidden to continue working as a teacher after marriage. She stated, *'I cannot sit idle at home. I am only allowed to work with my husband. If I could choose between teaching and sitting at the stall, I would choose to teach. But I would never be allowed to do that work, so I must continue working as a street vendor'*. The social condemnation of married women like Kira, working outside their homes, was a major cultural constraint preventing them from applying for a job in the formal sector, irrespective of their age. Similarly, Ramya, a married woman, was not allowed by her parents to go to school before marriage and was not allowed to choose the paid work of her preference by her husband after marriage. On the other hand, Seemanti, a married woman, faced harassment in her first formal job as a factory worker, which led her to opt for street vending. Seemanti's narrative reveals that concerns for women's safety are genuine in India. Experiences of harassment in the workplace firmly compel women to leave their jobs in the formal sector (Satyam and Pickup, 2018). Ramya's and Seemanti's stories re-iterated the argument of the feminist socio-economists that the opportunities for women in the labour market are shaped by gender discrimination, gender disparities in the division of household labour and the interaction of domestic and workplace power relations. The married women faced obstacles in exercising their autonomy within the household and at work and were often victims of dual disadvantage.

The labour market in India is closely aligned with the social institutions and these institutions play an important role in allocating vocations to individuals according to their connection to the community they are born (Mhaskar, 2019). In other words, membership in a given community determines occupational opportunities. One such community is that of the Gujaratis, a business community in India. Rakhi, a middle-aged married Gujarati woman, was inclined to be a street entrepreneur since childhood. She stated, *'I never thought of doing a job. Gujaratis do not like to do a job, but we prefer doing business. Business is in our blood'*. Thus, cultural norms, as in the case of the vendors belonging to the Gujarati community, subtly discouraged women from this particular community from applying for formal jobs. In such communities, the women's structural norms were so well internalised that they did not consider alternative possibilities. It is also imperative to understand the link between gender inequality in the labour market and the ethnicity of working women. Vendors from certain ethnicities faced multiple disadvantages where their ethnicity, gender and marital status were barriers to their entry into the formal labour market. An example of such intersectional disadvantages was evident in a particular community of Rajasthan called the *Gadia Lohar*, a nomadic community involved in the manufacture of iron utensils and tools by the men of the house and the sale of these items by the women of the house (Ayushmaan & Pandey, 2019). One of the interviewees from this community, Basant, explained, *'I cannot do any housekeeping work in an office or a school because no one hires us; the Rajasthani people...everyone believes we are dirty and cannot work in the house. This is the ancestral and only work I can do'*. Basant highlighted a critical factor of

'stigmatisation', which is associated with 200 such De-notified and Nomadic Tribes (Ayushmaan & Pandey, 2019) in India and is a significant barrier that prevents women from accessing formal jobs. The intersectional discrimination against women of certain ethnicities (tribes) further segmented the labour market, where these women survived at the bottom rungs of the employment market. Even though the country's legal system has de-notified these tribes, these women are stigmatised by employers and intentionally deprived of access to education and formal or informal jobs. Thus, the barriers to entry of these women into the employment market were pre-decided by the multiple disadvantages they faced on account of their ethnicity and gender.

Sharma and Kunduri (2016), in their study of Indian society, observed men are always the heads of the household, and women are supposed to contribute to domestic work and reproduction in India. These roles, however, change when a woman is divorced. Kercheval et al. (2013) state that only when a woman is divorced does she consider pursuing an education and learning skills required for the labour market. However, none of the interviewees considered educating themselves or learning new skills. This was because they were overburdened with caring responsibilities at home, leaving them with no time to invest in formal or informal education or training programmes. These women applied for formal jobs with whatever skills they acquired. For example, Karuna Khanna, a divorcee, attended primary school and then quit her studies because she preferred to work rather than continue her education. Karuna learned communication, networking, and numeracy skills through her numerous jobs working for an NGO, at a petrol pump and later as a security guard in a cinema hall. Another case was of *Mala*, a 35-year-old woman who started working at fifteen. She started applying for jobs without prerequisites for educational qualifications but required specific skill sets that she had already learned from her mother at home. She worked as a cook and became a beautician before shifting to street vending.

The abandoned women were usually married at a young age and had to step into the labour market only when they were separated from their husbands. For example, Tabassum, a middle-aged Muslim woman, was married at eighteen and abandoned by her husband when she was 27. Tabassum was not given formal education; instead, she was sent to a *Madrasa* (an Islamic religious school), where she was only given religious education. Tabassum was taught by her mother the skills of stitching and making handicrafts, which were extremely useful when she had to leave the house to earn money for the first time. Another example was Neelu, who was married at fifteen and abandoned by her husband just two years after marriage. Neelu was seven months pregnant with her only daughter when her husband left her. She did not have the option to return to her natal home, nor could she go to her marital home as her husband had deserted her. Her low education level (she finished secondary school) and caring responsibilities as a single parent deterred her from applying for formal jobs with stringent work hours. She preferred to work as a vendor because she needed the most flexible working hours as a single parent. Among the divorced and abandoned women, the decisive factor for their choice of work was that the demands of the dual burden of work (care of family members

and work responsibilities) restricted their mobility. Moreover, the lower remuneration offered by formal jobs was a deciding factor for these women to opt for street vending as their preferred work. Religion surprisingly did not impact the differences in women's participation in the labour market. Both the Hindu and the Muslim women were prevented by their parents from working before marriage and their husbands after marriage. Only after being divorced, abandoned by their husband, or widowed were women free of this patriarchal bargain and could choose to work in the formal or informal economy. However, the dual responsibilities of caring for their children and being the breadwinners of their families compelled these women to remain in secondary jobs. These jobs did not allow them to earn well but offered them flexible work hours or the option of working as self-employment.

Illiteracy was a significant barrier the older unmarried and widowed vendors faced in applying for jobs in the formal sector. However, the underlying reason for their illiteracy was the social constraints imposed by their parents through the gendered division of labour at home. The cultural norm of married women being allowed to work only with their spouses was a significant barrier for these women to apply for formal jobs. The divorced and abandoned women were not constrained by familial norms and gender stereotypes in their paid work choices. However, they had caring responsibilities for their children as single parents, which compelled them to look for work with flexible hours and near their homes, thus deterring them from applying for formal jobs. Like the divorced and abandoned women, the widows were deprived of the right to education by their parents, who decided to marry them at a young age. Thus, women faced these social prejudices, resulting in labour market discrimination from childhood. The negative impact of these prejudices was reflected in women's lack of access to education, travel options and social networks outside the home. Such restrictions subsequently lowered their self-esteem and confidence to apply for work in the formal sector.

Long Search Times for Formal Jobs

The often-substantial time required to find a formal job discouraged abandoned or divorced women with children from seeking formal employment. These women were the sole income-earning members of their families and were struck by a financial crisis. It was much more reasonable for these women to take the first opportunity to improve their economic condition rather than wait for a formal job. One of the interviewees, Hima Devi, a widow, said she tried to apply for school housekeeping jobs after her husband's death. However, Hima could not even get a casual job in any of the schools in Delhi and turned to street vending in desperation to feed her children.

Similarly, Neela, a young migrant from Kolkata, argued that the employment market did not have enough formal jobs for Delhi's burgeoning migrant working population. Neela was married at fifteen and migrated to Delhi with her husband soon after marriage. Unfortunately, her husband abandoned her five years after their marriage when she was pregnant with her only daughter. With no one to support her, she had to find a suitable job to feed herself and her

newborn daughter. Despite several attempts to find a formal job, Neela could not find one and became a street vendor to care for her daughter.

Poor migrants to cities like Neela do not have the option to endure unemployment while waiting to obtain a job in the formal economy. They choose informal employment as a survival strategy. Migrant workers, in particular, faced problems accessing information about formal positions in the cities and thus preferred to take up casual work rather than wait for formal jobs. During the interviews, it was found that lack of access to a network of prospective employers was a significant factor responsible for women's inability to apply for formal jobs, especially for migrant vendors. Neeti, a married vendor selling purses in the Lajpat Nagar market, explained that she could not apply for a formal job as she was a migrant from her village in Bihar to Delhi, even though she finished secondary education. When asked about the reasons for her inability to apply for a formal job, Neeti stated *'When I stepped out of my house to earn money, I did not have any information about the formal jobs in the market matching my educational qualifications. Finding such jobs would have taken much time, and I desperately needed some income. So, I started my work of street selling'*. The migration of Neeti from her village to Delhi reflects how her spatial networks in the village affected her social networks in the city and her ability to find a formal job. The social networks Neeti had built in her village could not be transferred to Delhi when she migrated. In developing countries, accessing a formal job is highly dependent on networks of friends and relatives (Chari et al., 2017). The importance of social networks to women's ability to find a job was also explained by Rajsati, a middle-aged unmarried woman whose parents died when she was ten. Burdened with the financial responsibility of five younger siblings, Rajsati could not wait to apply for a job. After migrating from her village, she accepted any available position through the social network she developed in the city. Rajsati's network of friends in Delhi primarily worked in the informal sector. Thus, her friends could suggest jobs in the informal sector. Women like Rajsati face 'information asymmetry' (Baah-Boateng, 2016), where their poor knowledge of the labour market is a barrier to accessing jobs in the formal sector. The failure of the employment exchanges to spread information about job vacancies in the formal economy is responsible for this 'information asymmetry'. The fourteen such exchanges in Delhi have not advertised a single job vacancy over the past five years (Government of India, 2019a, 2019b, 2020, 2021). The reason for such poor performance of employment exchanges in Delhi is that Delhi has not been proactive in adopting modern techniques such as outreach programmes and organising job fairs (Raghavan, 2014). The experiences of these women regarding accessing jobs in the formal sector revealed that the gender inequalities in the labour market were deeply rooted in the policy and institutional frameworks that shaped employment opportunities for female workers. The state employment exchanges were not able to advertise enough employment opportunities and use effective outreach programmes to spread awareness about the limited job vacancies for migrant workers, which pushed these women towards informality.

Corrupt Recruitment Practices

Some vendors reported that when they did manage to find out about jobs in the formal sector through their informal networks, employers demanded bribes, which these women could not afford to pay. Corruption is a significant factor in the proliferation of the informal sector in developing countries. Dutta, Kar and Roy (2011), in their empirical analysis of the linkages between corruption and informality in India, concluded that extensive corruption among the police, decision-makers and other watchdogs of the economy leads to further bribery in the formal sector and growth in the size of the informal sector. One-tenth of the interviewees cited corrupt recruitment practices as a barrier to applying for a formal job. *Rajini*, a middle-aged widow, faced corruption in recruitment practices while applying for formal employment. She explained, *'I worked in a government school as a housekeeping staff for five years. When my contract with the school was over, I tried to get a job as a housekeeping staff in Anganwadi, but they demanded a bribe from me, which I could not give. There is much corruption in this formal job sector'*.

Similarly, *Seemanti*, a literate married vendor who worked in a regular market in Madangir, wished to find a formal job instead of being a vendor. Unfortunately, the open demands for bribery dissuaded her and forced her to take up vending as a livelihood option. It is difficult to conclude whether corruption as a barrier impacted women more than men in this research (as all the interviewees were women). However, the literature on malpractices in recruitment suggests that women's experiences of corruption tend to be more acute. This is because women are often less able to afford bribes than men, and their avenues to respond to bribery are limited because women have less power and authority to resist pressure and cannot report bribery cases (Chene & Fagan, 2014; United Nations, 2020). The migrant women and the women who were victims of corrupt recruitment practices were pushed to seek self-employment in the informal economy.

Discussion

The findings raise important questions about the relationship between structure and agency. The results suggest that women exercised agency within the constraints imposed by patriarchal social structures. Women were victims of both private and public patriarchy. At home, they were not allowed by the patriarchs to apply for paid work due to cultural norms, stereotypes, and prejudices. Outside the house, they were deterred from working for fear of sexual harassment or exclusion/ discrimination based on their ethnicity or human capital endowments. Specific categories of women, such as literate married women, were aware of their discomfort where they were not allowed to work outside the home by their in-laws. However, they were reluctant to challenge those patriarchal and cultural norms due to the fear of separation, divorce, or inflicting domestic violence if they resisted them. They were engaged in 'constant bargaining' (Agarwal, 1997), involving conflict and cooperation with their in-laws regarding their right to work outside the home. Some women had successfully convinced their

in-laws to allow them to work outside the home. However, these women were under the strict surveillance of their in-laws, who allowed them to work only with their husbands. These patriarchal norms held them back from finding work in the formal sector despite being graduates or technically trained to work in industrial workplaces.

In exercising their agency within these constraints, some women were successful in partially transforming patriarchal dynamics within the household. For example, the young unmarried women of this generation successfully changed (by agreeing to contribute to family income in exchange for continuing their education) the patriarchal structure at home. These young women consistently worked towards challenging the patriarchal norms and hoped to get a formal job. Gender binaries of dominant masculinity and subordinate femininity were more entrenched in the minds of older illiterate women, especially those born and brought up in a village. The exposure to constant discrimination at home, where their brothers were allowed to go to school and make significant decisions in the family while they were not, led them to believe in their subordination to males in the house. This was not the case with the young unmarried women staying with their parents, who were now allowed to attend school/college without discrimination. Transformation of the patriarchal norms is visible in the fathers allowing their daughters to travel alone to their educational institutes and workplace besides getting access to formal education. Thus, the marital status of women determined whether they could conform to or transform the generative mechanisms of patriarchal norms (deciding their place of work) and gender disparities in the division of household labour (forcing them to choose flexible paid work with low wages). The restrictions imposed on married women by their marital family to work only with their spouses to maintain the image of the 'honour of the house' was a significant barrier to seeking employment in the formal sector. It was much more difficult for married women to challenge these norms.

The caring responsibilities of the widowed, divorced, and abandoned women further constrained their agency. The dual burden of being the primary earners and domestic work forced them to opt for less remunerative jobs. The non-monetary benefits of flexibility partially compensated for the better working conditions of formal employment. The lack of familial or governmental support for these women, combined with the need to labour in a capitalist society, compelled them to accept work in the informal economy with flexible working hours rather than spend time searching for a job in the formal sector with fixed working hours. These women could not opt for better-paying jobs within the informal economy because of their social reproduction responsibilities. Thus, these women were willing to accept casual work, which offered them flexible work hours, such as being domestic or construction labourers. However, these jobs were associated with a high risk of experiencing sexual harassment or pay discrimination based on gender.

The stratified organisation of society, especially regarding ethnic inequalities (Lengermann and Niebrugge-Brantley, 2001), further limited the opportunities for women who were members of the discriminated against ethnicity. For example, societal norms often forced the women of the Gadia Lohar community away from formal or informal jobs. Because of the

constant discrimination faced by this community, their children never went to school or were school dropouts. Thus, illiteracy coupled with stigmatisation translated into these women being stuck in their ancestral work of selling ironware, further limiting their potential to break the vicious cycle of stigmatisation. These intersecting inequalities against women belonging to such ethnic communities did not generate a linear model of marginalisation but multiple layers of deprivation. These women were excluded entirely from the labour market, which left them no choice but to be self-employed.

Conclusion

A significant contribution of this study is that it has presented a critical review of the gendered labour market segmentation from the lens of the life course theory. The structural constraints arising from the patriarchal norms and personal characteristics of the women, such as ethnicity, lead to further labour market segmentation within street vending in the Indian context. This research identified two distinct segments within street vending. One segment represented women who, despite being educated, were not allowed to enter formal jobs due to patriarchal norms. These were primarily married women whose transition in marital status required their adaptation to the new family set-up and associated norms and traditions. The other segment represented women who never got access to education due to patriarchal norms and their ethnicity. This was a much larger segment, including women of different marital statuses and educational backgrounds. However, within this segment, the most disadvantaged were the women belonging to specific ethnic communities, such as the Gadia Lohars, who were doubly disadvantaged. These women deserve more attention from policymakers and civil society organisations to collectively challenge the patriarchal norms and stigmatisation attached to their ethnicity.

The inter-related structures, such as patriarchy, marriage, religion, ethnicity, etc., predated the existence of agents (women vendors in this study); however, the agents recreated, reproduced, or transformed these structures according to their age, education, and marital status transitions. Middle-aged and older women who never got a chance to go to school due to patriarchal norms were conditioned to believe that they could not seek education or learn new skills later in life, which deterred them from breaking the cycle of being stuck in the informal economy. However, young women below the age of twenty had learned to engage in a patriarchal bargain with their parents to allow them to attend school in return for contributing economically to the family. The individualised active resistance strategies such as arguing, raising objections, or negotiating used by these women transformed the patriarchal structures through a morphogenetic cycle (Archer, 1995) by adopting dynamic mechanisms of communication and negotiation. These women were gradually transforming the patriarchal structures.

The critical realist philosophy helped the researcher delve more deeply into the 'empirical' domain of working for these women. Their 'empirical domain' depicted these women as stuck in the street vending. However, a deeper interrogation revealed that the 'real' domain of the

working lives of these young women was witnessing a gradual shift in their mindset to seek jobs in formal jobs in the future. This shift in perspective was made possible through their access to formal education, which was denied to their mothers or grandmothers. This finding contradicts the existing literature (Kabeer, 2000a; Lindahl et al., 2011), arguing that human capital benefits or deficits are transferred from generation to generation. This study also refuted earlier claims of the impact of reproductive labour and care work on the choice of workplace and employment of married women (Floro & Meurs, 2009; Johanson & Adams, 2004; Lund, 2009). Instead, married women faced substantial barriers to exercising agency within the workplace due to the patriarchal norms of their husbands and in-laws. Although widowed, divorced and abandoned women were free from the marital contract and subsequently private patriarchal norms and, thus, seemed to be free to choose their preferred paid work outside the home, these women were more constrained in their choice of work as they were not only single parents but also sole income-earning members of their family. Due to the dual burden, these women chose flexible, informal work compared to employment in the formal sector, which would probably have required them to work strict time schedules. This study concludes that the women's individual constraints (age, education, and marital status) to access formal work are primarily shaped by the structural constraints (patriarchal norms, ethnicity, religion) they are exposed to since childhood coupled with the institutional failure (long wait times to find a job and corrupt recruitment practices) to offer them adequate and timely jobs in the formal sector.

Acknowledgment

Thank you to the research participants and the National Hawkers Federation (NHF), with whom this work was possible. I am enormously grateful to Sheffield University Management School for awarding me the publication scholarship to prepare this manuscript.

Funding

The publication of this manuscript is funded by the publication scholarship awarded to the author by the Sheffield University Management School, The University of Sheffield, in 2022.

Submission Declaration Statement

This manuscript is not under consideration elsewhere or has not already been published and will not be submitted for publication elsewhere without the agreement of the Managing Editor.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author has no conflict of interest, financial or otherwise, that might be perceived as influencing the author's objectivity.

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