

Stories of Change

Fostering gender diversity and inclusiveness in street vendor associations in India

This project, led by the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), focuses on the effects of the socioeconomic crisis created by the Covid-19 pandemic on informal women workers in India, particularly street vendors in the context of shrinking state support and gaps in access to social security. The study emphasises the importance of understanding the specific opportunities and challenges faced by those engaged in informal work, especially women, so that policies are informed by and respond to their specific needs. It also provides valuable insights into how prevalent gender norms interact with gaps in state



A woman at a street market in India. Photo: [VPKyriacou](#)

support to disproportionately impact the conditions of informal women workers when compared to men. ICRW successfully engaged with grassroots organisations to advise them on how their programmes can be more inclusive and responsive to the differentiated needs of women street vendors.

The challenge

In India, there are an **estimated 11.9 million street vendors of which 1.2 million are women**. They are informal workers with low, irregular sources of income (daily wages), are often migrants who reside in informal urban settlements, have limited access to social security benefits, and often face harassment from municipal bodies and the police. Women also experience lower levels of education, limited access to sanitation facilities at work, heightened vulnerability to gender-based violence, and a greater burden of unpaid care work at home.

At the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, **India suffered the second highest number of cases in the world** and implemented stringent lockdown measures. Many women street vendors lost their primary source of income with little notice, and those who were the sole or chief wage earners in their families were severely impacted. Although the pandemic is no longer classified as a global health emergency, its lingering effects continue to negatively impact their lives and livelihoods.

The research

ICRW found that street vendors experienced a drastic loss in income and employment during the pandemic. This led to depleted savings, reduced food consumption, and heavy borrowing, often at high interest rates, to make ends meet. Many continue to face severe debt. Their economic precarity was further exacerbated by their informal status. For example,

///ICRW's research has given us a new perspective on how gender is central to the issue of street vendors and has encouraged us to work in that direction.///

Sangeeta Singh, Head of the Street Food Program, National Association of Street Vendors in India (NASVI)

limited possession of official documents, such as ration cards, meant that they could not access government subsidised food grains. Women faced additional challenges, such as difficulty accessing sexual and reproductive health services, as health services had been rerouted to deal with the pandemic. They also faced increased violence during their commute and at work, including verbal abuse and physical assault by police, which can be partly attributed to the mobility and transport restrictions imposed during lockdowns.

The impact

ICRW's research has helped grassroots organisations, who work directly with street vendors, become more sensitive and responsive towards the specific needs of women. In July 2022, ICRW convened six organisations and shared emerging findings about the specific challenges faced by women street vendors and how these negatively impact their livelihood opportunities compared to male street vendors. These challenges include fear of sexual harassment, lack of access to toilets and water at work, the burden of domestic care work, and intimate partner violence. The event was attended by representatives from the [National Association of Street Vendors in India \(NASVI\)](#) and highlighted the vital importance of having and collecting gender segregated data as part of NASVI's work. NASVI's Head of the Street Food Program, Sangeeta Singh, commented: *'ICRW's research has given us a new perspective on how gender is central to the issue of street vendors and has encouraged us to work in that direction'*.

NASVI, [which represents 528,645 members from 888 organisations across 25 Indian states](#), subsequently invited ICRW to conduct a workshop with approximately 50–60 of their programme staff to help them integrate a gender perspective in their work. By presenting findings from the research and undertaking a participatory experience-sharing exercise with the group, ICRW highlighted the criticality of bringing a gender and social inclusion lens to NASVI's frontline work.

It also emphasised the need for women street vendors to be able to articulate and assert themselves in front of male street vendors and government officials. To this end, ICRW recently conducted capacity building sessions for over 100 women street vendors who are members of the [Town Vending Committees \(TVC\)](#) in different states. The sessions built their confidence to attend TVC meetings more regularly and express their needs and concerns effectively, in the presence of male members of the committee.

Conclusion

The project successfully sensitised grassroots organisations in India, including representatives from NASVI, to the different realities of women street vendors, and enabled them to be responsive to their needs. For NASVI, this partnership with ICRW has highlighted the need for programming on the ground to be more responsive to these realities and intersectional needs.

Further reading

Banerjee, P.; Sharma, S.; Suri, M.; Howlader, A. and Nanda, S. (2022) [Informality and the Pandemic: Lives of Domestic Workers and Street Vendors in Delhi During Covid-19: A Rebuild Formative Research Report](#), New Delhi: International Center for Research on Women (ICRW)

Nanda, S.; Sengupta, N.; Anand, S.; Sharma, S. and Seth, K. (2021) [Covid-19 Policies and Women in Informal Work in India – A REBUILD Scoping Report](#), New Delhi: International Center for Research on Women (ICRW)

Pillai, S. et al. (2022) [India's Policy Response to Covid-19 and the Gendered Impact on Urban Informal Workers in Delhi NCR: A Policy Landscaping by The Quantum Hub and ICRW \(Asia\)](#), New Delhi: The Quantum Hub – International Center for Research on Women (ICRW)

REBUILD: Covid-19 & Women in the Informal Economy in Kenya, Uganda & India

Lead partner: International Center for Research on Women (ICRW)

Web: www.icrw.org Email: info.india@icrw.org Twitter: [@ICRW](https://twitter.com/ICRW)

This project focuses on urban informal economic activities in India, Kenya, and Uganda. Researchers explored the resilience of and challenges faced by women and their broader social 'ecosystem'. The aim is to inform policies and strategies that ensure vulnerable populations, such as women workers in urban informal economies affected by the Covid-19 pandemic can recover and rebuild their lives and livelihoods.

About this report

This Stories of Change was written by Aditi Vyas, Assistant Director for Gender, Youth and Development at ICRW, Priyanka Banerjee, Consultant at ICRW, Pranita Achyut, Director of Research and Programs at ICRW, and Emilie Wilson, Communications and Impact Officer in the Covid-19 Responses for Equity (CORE) Knowledge Translation Team at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS).

It was produced as part of the CORE KT Programme, which supports the translation of knowledge emerging from the CORE initiative. Supported by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), CORE brings together 20 projects to understand the socioeconomic impacts of the pandemic, improve existing responses, and generate better policy options for recovery.

The views expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of IDRC or its Board of Governors, or IDS.

It is distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International licence](#) (CC BY), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original authors and source are credited and any modifications or adaptations are indicated.

© Institute of Development Studies 2023

DOI: [10.19088/CORE.2023.001](https://doi.org/10.19088/CORE.2023.001)