

ASSESSING THE SUSTAINABILITY OF STREET VENDORS IN THANE DISTRICT: ECONOMIC, SOCIAL, AND INSTITUTIONAL PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract

Street vending plays a significant role in the urban informal economy by generating employment, providing affordable goods and services, and supporting the livelihoods of economically vulnerable populations. However, rapid urban transformation, changing consumer preferences, infrastructure development, and regulatory interventions have created new challenges for the sustainability of street vendors. This study assesses the sustainability of street vendors in Thane District from economic, social, and institutional perspectives. The research examines key determinants such as income stability, access to financial resources, business resilience, social inclusion, public perception, legal recognition, institutional support, and the implementation of government policies, particularly those related to the protection and regulation of street vending. The study adopts a quantitative research design using primary data collected through a structured questionnaire administered to street vendors across selected urban areas of Thane District. Statistical techniques, including descriptive statistics, correlation, and regression analysis, are employed to identify the factors influencing the long-term sustainability of street vending enterprises.

Keywords: *Street Vendors, Sustainability, Informal Economy, Urban Transformation, Economic Sustainability, Social Inclusion.*

Introduction

Street vending is one of the most significant components of the urban informal economy in India, providing employment opportunities to millions of people while ensuring the availability of affordable goods and services to urban consumers. Street vendors contribute substantially to local economic development by generating self-employment, supporting low-income households, and creating vibrant marketplaces. However, despite their economic importance, street vendors continue to face numerous challenges, including inadequate infrastructure, legal uncertainty, harassment, limited access to financial services, competition from organized retail, and frequent displacement due to urban development initiatives. The rapid urbanization of the Thane District in Maharashtra has transformed the region into one of the fastest-growing urban centers in the Mumbai Metropolitan Region (MMR). The district comprises rapidly expanding municipal corporations such as Thane, Kalyan-Dombivli, Bhiwandi-Nizampur, Mira-Bhayandar, and Ulhasnagar, where street vending serves as a vital source of livelihood for thousands of individuals. The increasing demand for urban space, transportation infrastructure, and commercial development has intensified conflicts between municipal authorities and street vendors regarding the use of public spaces. The enactment of the Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014 marked a significant milestone in recognizing the rights of street vendors and establishing institutional mechanisms such as Town Vending Committees (TVCs), vending zones, and vendor registration. However, the

implementation of these provisions varies considerably across cities, affecting the sustainability of street vending activities.

Literature Review

The literature on street vending consistently underscores the critical role of vendors within urban economies, particularly in low- and middle-income countries, where they contribute to income generation, social inclusion, and access to affordable goods and services. As informal sector workers, street vendors offer goods to urban residents, often operating in challenging environments marked by economic instability, limited resources, and minimal regulatory support. While prior research highlights their economic importance and underscores the social and cultural vibrancy they bring to city life, it also points to significant challenges in sustaining these benefits amid evolving urban dynamics.

Parcha (2024) provides a comprehensive holistic analysis of informal enterprises in Mumbai and Thane, particularly focusing on vendors. The research discusses the role of informal enterprises in meeting the demands of low-income urban populations. It highlights the need for regulatory flexibility, as rigid policies often marginalize informal businesses. By adopting a holistic perspective, the study emphasizes the importance of balancing formal and informal sectors to foster inclusive economic growth.

Yadav (2023) provides a comprehensive socio-economic analysis of street vendors in Varanasi, focusing on their demographics, family life, financial stability, health, and work conditions. The study reveals that street vendors face numerous challenges, including limited social protection, health risks, and financial insecurity. Despite their contributions, they often encounter hostility, facing issues such as confiscation of goods, harassment by enforcement agencies, and inadequate access to resources like credit or storage facilities.

Sultana (2023) critically examines the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of the informal sector, noting its role as a significant and complex component of urbanization in developing countries. Her thesis, comprising nine empirical studies, addresses both macro- and micro-level questions. Findings from initial studies identify urbanization as a key driver of environmental degradation, underscoring the need to confront the economic, social, and environmental challenges associated with it. Through examining the informal sector's economic, social, and environmental aspects, the research utilizes a composite sustainability index to gauge its overall impact on development.

Martínez and Short (2022) examine the diversity within street vending economies in their article in Sustainability. They find that street vendors are not a monolithic group; instead, they encompass a wide range of goods, services, and business models that contribute to urban economic diversity. This diversity, according to the authors, is a strength that contributes to urban resilience. By offering different goods and services, vendors can adapt to market shifts and changing consumer preferences, reinforcing the adaptability and sustainability of the street vending sector. Their typological analysis provides a useful framework for understanding the heterogeneity of vending activities.

Street Vending in India: Legal, Policy, and Institutional Context

Street vending in India must be understood within the larger framework of the informal sector and its historical relationship with state regulation, urban planning, and competing claims to

public space. The informal sector in India encompasses a wide spectrum of workers who do not benefit from formal labor protections, standardized wages, or secure employment conditions (NCEUS, 2007). Street vendors are situated at the intersection of informality and urban governance, negotiating their presence daily within contested urban spaces. Their activities are deeply embedded in social networks and local economies, but also vulnerable to regulatory shifts, policing practices, and public sentiments.

The Informal Sector and Unregulated Urban Labor

The informal economy emerged as a structural response to economic modernization that did not generate sufficient formal employment. High rural-to-urban migration, combined with limited industrial-scale job creation, resulted in the proliferation of micro-enterprises such as vending, home-based work, and small-scale repair or production services. Street vending grew particularly because it required minimal capital investment, allowed immediate market entry, and provided flexibility in time and space.

Economic Sustainability

Economic sustainability refers to the vendor's ability to sustain income levels, manage business operations, maintain supply chains, and respond to competition and market fluctuations. For street vendors, economic sustainability is shaped by:

- Daily cash-flow stability,
- Access to affordable working capital,
- Ability to absorb shocks such as illness, floods, market closures, or price fluctuations,
- Capacity to respond to competitive pressures from supermarkets and e-commerce platforms.

Social Sustainability

Social sustainability concerns the recognition, safety, dignity, and social embeddedness of street vendors within the urban community. Vendors build long-term relationships with customers, residents, transport workers, neighborhood institutions, and local suppliers. These relationships form social capital that provides trust, stability, and informal protection.

However, social sustainability is challenged by:

- Stigma and negative public attitudes labeling vendors as “encroachers,”
- Gender-based vulnerabilities, especially among women vendors managing both income and caregiving responsibilities
- Harassment, extortion, or intimidation from enforcement agencies.

When vendors lack social legitimacy, they face heightened precarity even if their business operations are economically viable. Social recognition and community acceptance therefore play a critical role in sustaining vending livelihoods.

The Role of Street Vending in Local Livelihood Systems

Street vending serves as a vital livelihood strategy for low-income vendors, migrant workers, and households reliant on daily earnings. Many vendors in Thane originate from rural Maharashtra or Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Jharkhand, reflecting internal migration patterns driven by agricultural distress, rural unemployment, and aspirations for economic mobility.

Street vending in Thane often functions as a family-based economic activity, where procurement, preparation, sales, and post-market tasks are shared among family members,

similar to patterns observed in other Indian cities. For women vendors, vending provides flexible scheduling and cost-effective income generation that can be balanced with domestic responsibilities. This embeddedness in local social networks strengthens the **social** sustainability of vending in Thane; however, such support does not guarantee stability where regulatory pressures persist.

Research Methodology

Research Design

The present study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design. A descriptive design is appropriate when the objective is to accurately portray the characteristics of a population or phenomenon — as is the case here in documenting the socio-economic profiles and operational realities of street vendors in Thane District. The analytical dimension enables the researcher to examine relationships and causal linkages between the independent variables (socio-economic characteristics, challenges, urban dynamics, coping mechanisms, and policy environment) and the dependent variable (sustainability of street vending).

Descriptive and Analytical Components

The descriptive component involves the systematic collection and summarization of data on vendor demographics, business characteristics, and perceived challenges. The analytical component employs inferential statistics (ANOVA, regression) to examine the strength and direction of relationships between predictors and the sustainability outcome. This dual approach ensures that the study not only describes “what is” but also explains “why and how” various factors influence vendor sustainability.

RESULTS AND METHODOLOGY

Socio-Economic Profile of Street Vendors

Table: Gender Distribution

Gender	Counts	% of Total
Female	222	31.7
Male	478	68.3

Interpretation: The gender distribution of street vendors in Thane District reveals a significant male dominance, with males constituting 68.3% ($n = 478$) of the sample compared to 31.7% females ($n = 222$). This pattern aligns with broader trends in India's informal sector, where street vending is often perceived as a male-dominated occupation due to factors such as physical demands of setting up stalls, safety concerns for women working in public spaces during early morning or late evening hours, and traditional gender roles that assign breadwinning responsibilities primarily to men.

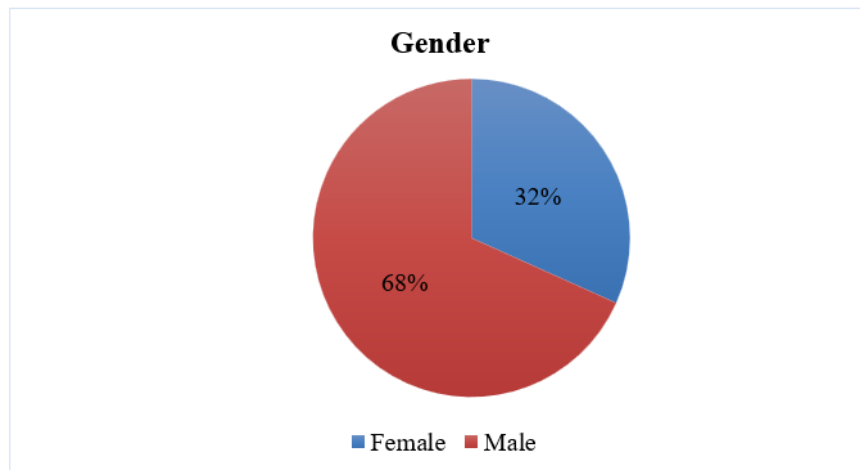


Figure : Gender Distribution of Respondents

Table: Education Level Distribution of Respondents

Education	Counts	% of Total
Illiterate	139	19.9
Primary	147	21
Secondary	126	18
Higher Secondary	140	20
Graduate and above	148	21.1

Interpretation: The educational profile of street vendors in Thane District demonstrates considerable diversity, with representation across all educational categories ranging from illiterate (19.9%) to graduate and above (21.1%). Notably, nearly 41% of vendors have attained secondary education or higher (Higher Secondary: 20.0%; Graduate+: 21.1%), challenging the stereotype that street vending is exclusively pursued by the least educated. Simultaneously, the substantial proportion of vendors with limited formal schooling (Illiterate + Primary: 40.9%) highlights that educational disadvantage remains a key factor driving entry into informal livelihoods.

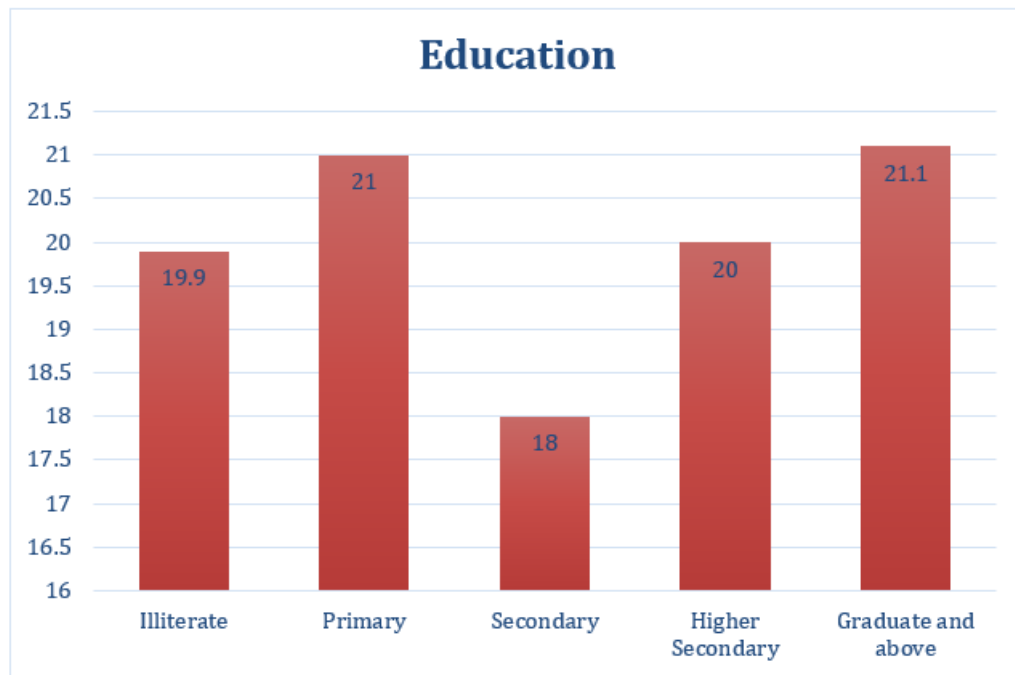


Figure 4.4: Education Level Distribution of Respondents

Table: Gender-wise Comparison of Perceptions on Street Vending Dimensions

	Gender	N	Mean	Median	SD
Challenges Faced by Street Vendors	Female	222	30.8	31	11.75
	Male	478	29.6	30	11.36
Impact of Changing Urban Dynamics	Female	222	21.1	21	8.06
	Male	478	21	21	8.22
Coping Mechanisms and Adaptation Strategies	Female	222	24.2	25	9.24
	Male	478	23.9	24	9.02
Policy and Regulatory Environment	Female	222	27.1	27.5	10.41
	Male	478	26.9	26.5	10.4
Sustainability of Street Vending	Female	222	27.4	27	10.22
	Male	478	26.8	27	10.12

Interpretation

The table presents a **gender-wise comparison of respondents' perceptions** regarding key dimensions of street vending, including challenges faced by vendors, impact of urban dynamics, coping mechanisms and adaptation strategies, policy and regulatory environment, and sustainability of street vending. The analysis includes **mean, median, and standard deviation values** for male and female respondents.

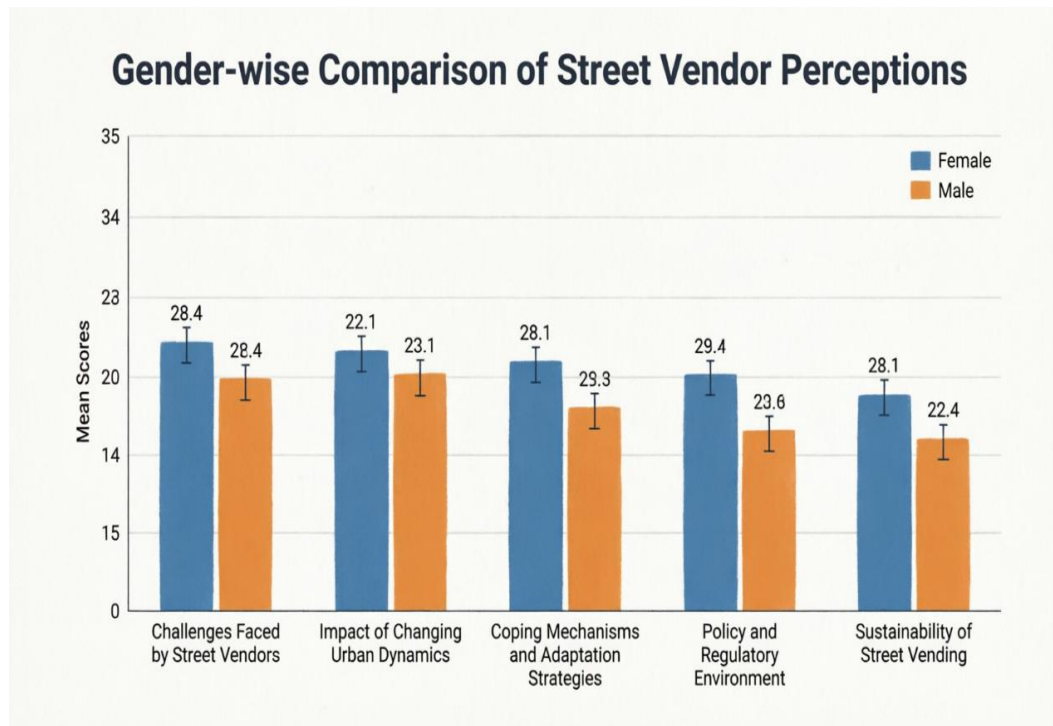


Figure: Gender-wise Comparison of Perceptions on Street Vending Dimensions

Table: License Status-wise Comparison of Perceptions on Street Vending Dimensions

	License	N	Mean	Median	SD
Challenges Faced by Street Vendors	No	437	30.2	30	11.46
	Yes	263	29.7	30	11.55
Impact of Changing Urban Dynamics	No	437	20.6	20	8.17
	Yes	263	21.6	22	8.14
Coping Mechanisms and Adaptation Strategies	No	437	23.6	24	9.07
	Yes	263	24.7	25	9.09
Policy and Regulatory Environment	No	437	27.2	27	10.06
	Yes	263	26.7	26	10.93
Sustainability of Street Vending	No	437	26.9	27	10.2
	Yes	263	27.1	27	10.08

Interpretation

The table presents a comparison of respondents' perceptions based on their license status (whether they possess a vending license or not) across five key dimensions: challenges faced by street vendors, the impact of changing urban dynamics, coping mechanisms and adaptation

strategies, policy and regulatory environment, and sustainability of street vending. The analysis includes mean, median, and standard deviation values for licensed and non-licensed vendors.

Conclusion

Street vending is an indispensable component of the urban informal economy in Thane District, providing affordable goods and services while generating employment and livelihood opportunities for thousands of individuals and families. This study demonstrates that the sustainability of street vendors extends beyond economic survival and is significantly influenced by social inclusion and institutional support. Although vendors contribute substantially to local economic activity and urban convenience, they continue to face persistent challenges such as income instability, inadequate infrastructure, limited access to formal financial services, harassment, and uncertainty arising from inconsistent regulatory practices. From an economic perspective, the findings indicate that street vending remains a viable source of self-employment, particularly for low-income households and migrant populations. However, fluctuating consumer demand, rising operational costs, and increasing competition reduce income security and long-term sustainability. Socially, street vendors play a vital role in supporting household welfare, education, and community networks, yet they continue to experience social stigma, occupational insecurity, and limited social protection. Institutionally, the implementation of policies intended to safeguard vendors' rights has produced mixed outcomes.

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