

Covid-19 and Women Street Vendors in Manipur

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic and the resultant lockdown led to the closure of all markets in Manipur as a measure to curb the spread of the disease. The world has been crying ever since the virus emerged in Wuhan, China. This pandemic has greatly impacted the lives of the street vendors' women and subsequently impacted on running the family. Street vendors face a lot of hurdles and turmoil. This study the magnitude of their sufferings and strives that women carried on especially during this pandemic and some initiatives that have been taken by the government during pre-pandemic and pandemic times. However, it does not meet all the requirements of the most affected sections of society. It requires more welfare schemes and their fullest implementations.

Keywords: Women; Street; Vendors; Manipur; Covid-19

INTRODUCTION

As a part of the government's measures to curb and mitigate the spread of this contagious disease several total lockdowns, partial lockdowns, curfew, etc. are followed. This led to the heavy burdened on the women society particularly engaging on income generation for smooth functioning of the family which is mainly from the poor background. Women's workforce in the state includes agriculture, handlooms, and handicrafts, stationary/market vendors, and mobile/street vendor, as well as service and tertiary sectors. This study mainly emphasis the section of women's society engaging in street vendors which is a major constituent in the workforce of the state. This type of workforce is prevalent in every nook and corner of the capital, municipal areas, district headquarter areas, etc. However, the outbreak of this contagious disease compels to stay indoors which brings hardship affected the livelihood and daily bread earnings, and other utilities of the women street vendors.

Recount the Stereotype

Manipuri intellectuals began writing on the old social structure of Manipur and what Manipur society was like under self-rule, mostly as a result of socialist ideas. Many felt that women's position in Manipur was comparatively high, especially when contrasted to the Indian Sati Savitri paradigm, which measures a woman's virtue by her devotion to her husband. They said that in the past, women in Manipur were able to exert a positive effect on societal processes. Manipuri intellectuals aspired to involve women in a novel social transformation concept. According to the academicians:

Their idea was not to scrap away the traditional social system and all its values, but rather to overcome contemporary gender biases and disparities to create an inclusive society. Some argued that it was Hinduization which was the real problem, and that in ancient Manipuri history there were no chapters of sexism. They highlighted how women of Manipur were treated as equal, interdependent, and undeniable parts of the traditional society. In their histories, women of Manipur participated relentlessly in every social sphere, and therefore they occupied high social positions (Meitei, 2016, p. 6).

The state is renowned for its "Women Markets". From time immemorial women were engaged in the work of vendors which primarily consists of vegetables, fish, junk food, fruits, and toys, etc. These were owned and operated by the married and elderly women and still today it follows the legacy of this culture willingly and largely. Women also usually run and manage the family not just entirely rely on the bread earned by the husband or male members of the family. Men on the contrary, from the early period onwards, didn't involve in street/ mobile vending and this stereotype persists till current days. Men can be said to more or less refrain from these activities and account for almost nil in the state except by the increasing numbers of male street vendors from the mainland parts of the country. The activities of vendors and markets become a means of livelihood and way of life which contributed to the economy of the state.

Concepts and Nature of Street Vendors in the State

According to the Ministry of Law (2014) " street vendor means a person engaged in vending of articles, goods, wares, food items or merchandise of everyday use or offering services to the general public, in a street, lane, sidewalk, footpath, pavement, public park or any other public place or private area, from a temporary built-up structure or by moving from place to place and includes

hawker, peddler, squatter and all other synonymous terms which may be local or region-specific; and the words “street vending” with their grammatical variations and cognate expressions, shall be construed accordingly” (pp.2-3). Bhowmik (as cited in Haokip et al., 2020, p.19) stated that the term “street vendor” encompasses both stationary and mobile vendors, as well as all other local/regional words used to describe them. In Manipur, there is a distinction between market/stationary vendors and street/mobile vendors: those who operate outside the purview of license holders are known as street vendors or hawkers, and despite being granted legal status by municipalities, street vendors are more likely to be harassed by authorities than licensed market vendors. (Government of Manipur, 2021; Haokip, 2020). Furthermore, the routines and practices of women street vendors, particularly in Imphal city, are constantly fraught with conflict and challenges. Women from several Manipur groups, including Meiteis, Pangal (Manipuri Muslims), Kukis, and Nagas, run street vendors. They are generally from distant locations, and they travel early in the morning, usually on the first public transportation trip, and return home after selling their items for a minuscule amount that would earn them a living and managing their budget for their children's education, etc.

Covid-19 and Women Street Vendors

The outbreak of Covid-19 throughout the country brings a negative impact on the economy. This pandemic has had a significant impact on women who work as street vendors in Manipur, adding to an already heavy load. It's like pouring gasoline into the fire. Vendors on the street confront a multitude of challenges and issues linked to vending zones. Even before the pandemic, they were subjected to persecution from several agencies. Various players are involved in these issues, including city officials, police, local urban planners, women licensed sellers, passersby, and vendors themselves. In Imphal city, police have been observed manhandling street vendors and confiscating and destroying their merchandise regularly, yet the street vendors appear to have little choice but to accept it from time to time. Imphal city police are in charge of maintaining law and order in the city. Any unpleasant occurrences, such as those between street vendors and licensed women vendors, or shopkeepers, will influence the vendors' livelihoods, whether they are licensed or street vendors. However, the good thing about women street vendors in Imphal is that they are hardworking women in the state who are doing their best to support their families from the comparatively tiny profit they make from their vending activities, on top of their multiple responsibilities as a wife, mother in the home, and a vendor on the streets of Imphal (Salimuddin, 2020). Again, when the Covid-19 pandemic strikes, things get more severe, and they suffer much more dramatically.

“Financially, we are shattered and that has led to a near mental breakdown with stress and tension building up every passing day,” said Devi, 64, who had been selling the handwoven shawls for four decades before the lockdown hit in March. Devi and several thousand fellow vendors at a market run by women in the remote northeastern state of Manipur have still not been able to return to their stalls because authorities ruled that the many elderly vendors were at high risk from the virus. “Making ends meet and having two meals a day is now a big problem... life for many of us has been hell,” Devi, the sole breadwinner in her household, said by phone from the state capital, Imphal (Banerji, 2020, para. 4).

Despite financial drawbacks, there are multiple problems and this pandemic create the vulnerability to this disease and risk their life for a meager of profit.

National Policy and Street Vendors Act, 2014

The requirements of the section, according to a proposed national policy on street vendors, are critical for urban planning objectives. Some people consider street vendors to be a nuisance in numerous Indian cities. A proposal to include them in the urban development policy is being considered by the government. The government has made attention to achieve a major fraction of the self-employed into compliance. If adopted, one may expect legal recognition for this important sector of the urban economy. It is a milestone for the urban informal sector since the government has finally legalized a major fraction of the street vendors. According to Sharit K Bhowmik (2003) who was a member of the task force as an expert and also a member of the national policy drafting committee stated that the policy was developed by the national task force for street vendors, which was established by the ministry of urban development and poverty alleviation and led by the minister of state for urban development and poverty alleviation; and other members were Senior ministry officials, mayors, municipal commissioners, senior police officers, and trade union leaders. This National Policy for Street Vendors took a decade to form into The Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014. Even if it takes a long time, things become a reality. The Street Vendors Act, 2014 is a ground-breaking initiative to protect the livelihood rights and social security of urban street vendors in the country, thereby assisting the government's

poverty alleviation efforts. It aims to foster a conducive environment for urban street vendors to carry out their activities without harassment from any quarter, and it also regulates urban street vendors (Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, n.d.). However, it is astonishing that in a state like Manipur, the Act is not implemented or safeguarded, and as a result, problems arise from this marginalized section of society, although it contributed to the state's economy. And the question has surfaced as to whether the current BJP-led coalition government's promise to promote public welfare entails disregarding the concerns of street vendors. Sh Rajendro Meeitei, secretary of the All Manipur Street Vendors Federation (AMSVF) stated that:

As per Street vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act 2014, the rights of streets vendors should be protected, he said. However, police personnel and Imphal Municipal Corporation personnel have been chasing away the street vendors from Khwairamband market areas in Manipur instead of protecting their rights (IFB Bureau, 2021, para. 3).

Despite the Supreme Court's notice, the Street Vendors Act of 2014 has not been implemented in the state. It asked the State Government to implement the Act as soon as possible and for the various unions and stakeholders to give adequate space for street vendors. The grievances of the women street vendors in the state couldn't be solved yet. "Since the National Street Vendors Policy Act, 2014 is not implemented in the state, they are not protected, secured and vulnerabilities and risks are very high" (Salimuddin, 2020, p. 30).

Government's Initiatives and Aids

Although there has been much criticism and dissatisfaction with the non-fulfillment of the goals of the various developmental schemes related to the street vendors, the government of India and the state governments have taken many initiatives and schemes for the upliftment and welfare of the street vendors since the pre-pandemic period. During the pandemic, increasing criticism is being leveled at the government.

• The Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana (PMMY)

The Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana (PMMY) is a scheme that was already implemented for sellers, but there was a need to consider the public assistance of street vendors who did not own licenses. On April 8, 2015, the Hon'ble Prime Minister of India, Shri Narendra Modi, announced the establishment of the PMMY, which would provide loans up to ten lakh rupees to non-corporate, non-farm small, or micro-enterprises. There are three loan programs under the umbrella of PMMY: Shishu, Kishore, and Tarun, which represent the stage of growth or development and financing prerequisites of the recipients, as well as a frame of reference for the next step of graduation/growth. Shri N Biren Singh, the Chief Minister of Manipur, has been taking an active part in addressing the state's economic requirements. There was an urgent need to offer financing for operating capital to street vendors in rural regions so that they could restart the operations of their businesses.

• The PM Street Vendor's AtmaNirbhar Nidhi (PM SVANidhi)

The PM Street Vendor's AtmaNirbhar Nidhi (PM SVANidhi) initiative to empower street vendors by not only giving loans to them but also by focusing on their comprehensive and integrated development and economic upliftment launched by The Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs on 1st June 2020. The initiative aims to provide securities working capital loans of up to INR10,000/- with a one-year repayment period to roughly 50 lakh street vendors to assist them to restart their operations in urban regions, including adjacent peri-urban/rural areas. This scheme provides incentives in the form of interest subsidy of 7% per annum on regular loan repayment; cashback of up to INR1200/- per annum on defined digital purchases; and eligibility for expanded next tranche of loans and this initiative has received over 2 million applications, of which 752191 have been sanctioned and 218751 loans have already been issued (Ministry of Housing & Urban Affairs, n.d.). The Manipur government's implementation of the PM-SVANidhi plan for street vendors would go a long way toward revitalizing and improving the state's economic activities and financial situation, particularly for the significant section of the vending community, who are largely women. The state government has begun to provide loans to street vendors to assist them to recover from the financial crisis caused by the global pandemic and return to normalcy (Government of India, 2021). Despite numerous assistance initiatives such as providing loans amid the pandemic, street vendors are not permitted to vend in the city, which is a burden for them to repay the loan.

• State Government Aid and Initiatives

The second wave of Covid-19 has had a significant impact on Manipur. As a result of the severe impact on the lives of those who work as street vendors, the state government has granted loans to

thousands of market vendors and street vendors whose livelihoods have been impacted by the Covid-19 lockdown in the state. The loans are given to vendors to help them relaunch their small enterprises under two central schemes: the PM Street Vendor's AtmaNirbhar Nidhi (PM SVANidhi) and the Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana (PMMY). Moreover, the government of Manipur has authorized a scheme called 'Chief Minister's Covid-19 Affected Livelihood Support Scheme' that would pay Rs. 5,000 to people whose livelihoods have been adversely disrupted by the coronavirus pandemic. Street vendors, farmers, daily wage workers, construction site workers, public transportation drivers, school van drivers, shop assistants, artisans, weavers, performing artists, home-based business owners, and others are among the eligible occupations and the scheme, which will be administered by the state social welfare department, will avail only one beneficiary per family (Karmakar, 2021).

Some Suggestive Measures

Multiple assistance and programs for the welfare of the marginalized have been launched, which is a positive start. The issue represented, however, is the uncertain absolute execution at the grassroots level. The implementation of the Street Vendors Act, 2014 is lagging in a state like Manipur. As a result, there are outbursts of hostility among various sections, even among street vendors. The state expeditiously needs this Act to alleviate Covid-19 mitigation and grievances of street vendors in general, and women street vendors in particular. The favoritism of bureaucrats, policemen, and other high-ranking authorities in the management of vendors, marketplaces, and other entrepreneurs should be reviewed by the government. Equal opportunities and rights for all should be a mandate. More subsidized interests should be considered to aid and promote this marginal section. Simple and short procedures are suggested to avail all those credits given by the government rather than complicated applications just to get meager benefits. Since the majority of them are ignorant and illiterate. For successful planning and application of these schemes, there is also a necessity for collaboration with various representatives of related traits or stakeholders. This will avoid a proliferation of organizations criticizing the government's deficits and activities.

CONCLUSION

Women are real peacemakers who also make significant contributions to the nation-building process. Despite various obstacles, women street vendors contribute to the economy of the country in general and Manipur in particular. However, they are not recognized and granted respect till today. To achieve maximal prospects for our country or state, a better platform should be established for them. Women in Manipur have immense potential in every aspect of their lives. Since then, history has proven it. In every aspect, equality and equity would provide opportunities and development to the country and state.

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