

# Chapter 16

## Silent Struggle of the Informal Workers: Everyday Lived Experiences, Challenges and Negotiation of the Women Street Vendors in Thimphu City, Bhutan



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**Abstract** This chapter analyses the everyday lived experiences and challenges of women street vendors in Thimphu City. Unlike other cities in the world, street vending is relatively a recent phenomenon in Thimphu City, though trading activities of different types are practiced since the early days in the country. The country has no established rules and regulations regarding street vending; nonetheless, such activity is not permitted in Thimphu City. This chapter presents the findings of a study conducted, involving questionnaire survey, in-depth interviews, participant observation and focus group discussion (FGD), in Thimphu City. Challenges and concerns of the women street vendors are multifaceted in nature, brought on by the lack of administrative support system, social limitation and physical aspects such as harsh weather and climatic condition inter alia. Challenges faced by the women street vendors are therefore seldom discussed in the public discourse. In the shadow of threats and uncertainties posed by social stigmatisation, lack of administrative support system and harsh climatic conditions, street vending persists having no

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alternatives available in the city. Given the potential of street vending activities and the role women in the Bhutanese society, it is argued that integration of such invisible entrepreneurship in the mainstream urban economy is crucial to achieving economic and social sustainability.

**Keywords** Urbanisation · Informal economy · Women street vendors · Livelihood · Challenges · Thimphu city

## 16.1 Introduction

Thimphu City, the capital of Bhutan, is one of the fastest-growing cities in Asia. The city population increased by 44.6% between 2005 and 2017 (census years). The entire Thimphu valley was a swathe of paddy fields dotted with a few villages until the capital was shifted from the ancient capital, Punakha, in the 1950s (Norbu 2008). When the first modern development activity was taken place as a result of the country's first five-year plan in the 1960s, the population of the town was roughly 3,500 including labourers, seasonal migrant workers, monks and members of the assembly and district and national administration (Sinha 2001). The first census of Bhutan, Population and Housing Census of Bhutan (PHCB) 2005, recorded 79,185 population which increased to 114,551 in 2017, accounting for 41.65% of Bhutan's total urban population and 15.75% of the country's total population (OCC 2017). The city municipal limit has also increased from 8 sq. km in the 1970s to 26.13 sq. km in 2001 (MoWHS 2018), with a population density of 4,389 persons per sq. km (OCC 2017). Such phenomenal growth is the result of successive implementation of the comprehensive Thimphu Structure Plan (TSP) 2002–2027 (MoWHS 2004). Further, with the aim of making Thimphu City a 'clean, green and liveable city', the Royal Government of Bhutan allocated Nu.7.856 billion (about 105 million US dollars) in the 12th FYP (2018–2023) to the *Thromde* (municipal corporation), an increase of more than three times from the 11th FYP (Nu. 2.27 billion (about 30 million US dollars) (GNHC 2019). Thimphu City today serves as both the 'economic and governance hub of Bhutan' (MoWHS 2018).

Implementation of the most comprehensive urban planning of the country, the Thimphu Structure Plan (TSP) 2002–2027 since it got approved by the Royal Government of Bhutan in 2004, set off a massive urban transformation of Thimphu City. Labelled as 'humble city' (Benninger 2002), 'future direction of the country' (Walcot 2009) and 'dream city of all the Bhutanese' (MoWHS 2004), urban development projects are systematically aligned to the 'principles of intelligent urbanism' (PIU) that guide urban growth, planning and management (Benninger 2002), further conforming to the country's unique development philosophy, the Gross National Happiness (GNH). Discarding the logic of modern development that is rooted deeply in the notion of material well-being, the country opted for the middle

path to development, deemed as distinctive Bhutanese path of development, which balances economic development with environmental protection and cultural preservation, a strategy integral to fostering Gross National Happiness. The middle path of development is embraced in all development policies that aim to ‘raise the living standards of the present population without compromising the country’s cultural integrity, historical heritage and the quality of life for future generations’ (NECS 2019, p. 13). Today, the country is generally understood as one of the happiest countries in the world so does the capital Thimphu City.

Central to the Thimphu Structure Plan (TSP) 2002–2027 is the aim of turning Thimphu into a dream city of all Bhutanese, the symbol of the country with the image of a unique culture embodied in a nation that sends out the meaning and substance of the very idea of Bhutan. ‘The image of Thimphu city is intricately linked with the enrichment and the survival of the very idea of Bhutan’ (MoWHS 2004, p. 4), thereby manifesting a composite image of what defines Bhutan that is built inherently on vibrant Bhutanese culture, local customs and traditions; religion and monastic practices; traditional and modern music, dance, arts and literature; languages and dialects; and cuisine (MoWHS 2018, p. 4). Underpinned by the development philosophy of Gross National Happiness (GNH), Thimphu City epitomises a happy city, perhaps the happiest city in South Asia, with low poverty rate (0.4%) (NSB 2017), city without slum, relatively better air quality and absence of noise pollution inter alia. It is a model city and future direction of the country (Walcot 2009) and a potential model for cities of the Himalayan region as well. The city is fairly less crowded, free from air and noise pollution with rigorous traffic rule and ‘no honking culture’, which makes Thimphu city distinct from other cities of South Asia. A pristine and eco-friendly city, and being the capital of the only ‘carbon neutral’ (Yangka et al. 2019) country in the world, its development policies and programme are guided by the institutionalised development policy, including the Thimphu Structure Plan (TSP) 2002–2027 that aims to transform Thimphu City into a culturally vibrant, an environmentally friendly and a convivial city (MoWHS 2004). It is the only capital city without slum, probably the most peaceful, tranquil and calmest city in South Asia.

The above vantage point, however, is not established on the notion that the city is without challenges. True to the fact that the socio-spatial structure of the city has become more complex in the last few decades, a combined result of imbalance population growth and urban infrastructure development. Continued urban growth and development also witness urban socio-spatial structure of different forms hitherto not seen in the Bhutanese society characterised by plodding socio-spatial polarisation. Meanwhile, job saturation in service sectors has induced burgeoning informal activities in the city. Of all the myriad informal activities, women reckon street vending as the most viable given its low capital investment and limited opportunities available in Thimphu City. However, the absence of administrative support system, social stigmatisation and unfavorable climatic condition inter alia impede free operation of street vending that consequently heighten the challenges of the women street vendors. At times like global pandemic or any crises, the worst-hit workers are apparently the street vendors. Closure of the sheds (constructed by

Bhutan Association of Women Entrepreneurs with a purpose to support women street vendors) near the Jigme Dorji Wangchuck National Referral Hospital (JDWNRH) has severely impacted the livelihood of the women street vendors (Dolkar 2021). Under the directive of the JDWNRH, the outlets were closed as a measure to contain possible COVID-19 transmission. Absence of state's regulation on street vending activities triggers oftentimes altercation between officers on duty and the street vendors, most common cases include giving warning with dire consequences of seizing and destroying the merchandise if not immediately vacate the place/street. In brief, the state power relation combined with 'social reservation', the negative societal impression towards such street vending activities or for that matter any other footloose business, and unfavorable climatic condition pose threat to the sustainability of street vending. Threat to such vending activity is a threat to the livelihood of the marginalised section of the society who for survival mainly rely on street vending. The nature of state power relation besmirches the logic of inclusive development. In against this backdrop, challenges and concerns in terms of state power relation, social relation and physical constraint, amongst others, constitute the core arguments of this chapter.

## 16.2 Urban Informal Economy and Street Vending

Informal economy is a global phenomenon manifested in unique ways across countries and regions (OECD/ILO 2019, p. 26). It has become a permanent, but subordinate and dependent, feature of capitalist development (Hart 1973; Portes et al. 1989; De Soto 1989; Fernandez-Kelly 2006; Alderslade et al. 2006; Bhowmik 2010; Chen and Skinner 2014). Informal economy is not restrictive or distinctive to developing countries, but in all the ambiguity of its connotations, informality has come to constitute a major structural feature of society both in industrialised and less developed countries (Portes et al. 1989; Zlolinski 1994; Sassen 1994; Thomas 2001; ILO 2002; McLain et al. 2008; Williams and Nadin 2011; Williams 2014; OECD/ILO 2019; Recchi 2020). Chen (2012, p. 3) stated that 'in the process of informalisation of employment relation, by the 1980s, productions in both developed and developing countries are reorganised into small-scale, decentralised, and more flexible units, resulting in turning of standard jobs into non-standard jobs with or atypical jobs with hourly wages but few benefits, or into piece-rate jobs with no benefits'. Production of goods and services is being subcontracted to small-scale informal units and industrial outworkers. This process of extensive downsizing, outsourcing and restructuring in various sectors has diminished the availability of formal sector employment opportunities (McLain et al. 2008).

Seemingly, the main economic theories with its presumptuous theoretical presupposition of informal economy transitioning to the formal economy failed to foresee the growth of informal economy in industrialised countries (Sassen 1997). Evidences serve that contemporary economic restructuring processes do not, in true sense, produce opportunities for assimilation of 'informal employment' within

‘formal sector’ (Singer 1970). It is also argued that Lewis’s idea of gradual ‘assimilation of traditional sector into formal sector’ (Lewis 1954), commonly referred to as ‘Lewis turning point’, didn’t actually occur in developing countries for the fact that international dualism, rooted in the progress of science and technology, has given rise to internal dualism in developing countries, all of which is manifested in continuous increase of unemployed proportion and employment crisis (Singer 1970). Even the flow of surplus labour across borders, traditional to modern or rural to urban economy, along with the impact of remittances remains one of the more controversial issues in development theory and policy to this day (Ranis 2004).

Street vending is a predominant informal economic activity in many cities of the global south, a survival strategy of the marginalised urban poor who are excluded from the formal work and welfare provision (Castells and Portes 1989; Sassen 1996; Bhowmik 2010). Labelled by different terms such as hidden, underground economy, illegal and invisible enterprise (Slavnic 2010; Williams 2014; Sekhania and Mohan 2019), it is lately perceived as undesirable and obstacle to achieving ‘world class-ness’ or ‘modernity’ (Chen and Skinner 2014; Anjaria 2006). Arguably, ‘informality’ in urban sector is inscribed in the ever-shifting relationship between what is legal and illegal, legitimate and illegitimate and authorised and unauthorised. Such differentiation, between the informal and the formal, is a fundamental axis of inequality in a country like India (Roy 2009).

While debate continues on legitimacy or legality of such practices under various laws and acts in different countries, street vending business has always remained an integral part of economies around the world (Bhowmik 2005; Anyidoho 2013; Chen and Skinner 2014; Amoah-Mensah 2016; Sekhania et al. 2019; Jayana and Narang 2020). In most urban centres, global south in particular, it is a prominent activity that provides employment, goods and services at an affordable rate to many urban poor and offers goods or services for sale from public spaces primarily streets and pavements (McGee and Yeung 1977; Mitullah 2003; Bhowmik 2005; Chen and Skinner 2014). Street vending benefits not only the vendors; their contribution to urban life goes beyond their own self-employment (Roever and Skinner 2016). Despite its potential of making a significant contribution to the urban economy, street vendors and their rights to space have not been integrated into urban planning (Kusakabe 2006); instead, street vending is often regarded as an illegal activity in many Asian cities, e.g. Dhaka, Manila, Bangkok, Mumbai and Colombo (Bhowmik 2005; Bhowmik and Saha 2012; Lata et al. 2019). Civic authorities in most urban areas treat them as intruders and criminals (Bhowmik 2005), menace and eyesore who inappropriately use streets and footpaths, block traffics and depress even real estate values (Anjaria 2006). Notwithstanding all these prevailing prejudices and restrictions against street vending, it serves as a survival strategy to thousands of urban poor in many Asian cities.

Unlike other cities in the world, street vending in Bhutan is relatively a recent phenomenon, though trading activities of different types and forms are practiced in the country since the early days. According to Mr. Tshering, a 65-year-old man, regular street vending activity was first noticed in and around the present ‘Centenary Farmers Market’ (CFM) in the early 1980s in Thimphu City, where most of the

vendors were Tibetan. The merchandises were all locals drawn as far as from the highlands like Lingzhi and Soe. Items such as dairy products, yak's butter, dry cheese, fermented cheese, local clothes such as *Gho* (Bhutanese traditional and national dress for men) and *Kira* (Bhutanese traditional and national dress for women) wooden products and meat were the common items sold in the market. In a similar vein, Ms. Dema, a 60-year-old woman, stated that the merchandises changed season to season and the only common item available throughout the year was dry red chilies. Rapid growth of city population, increasing number of vendors and demand for space necessitated the construction of proper market centre. Subsequently, the 'Centenary Farmers Market' (CFM) was constructed in 2008 as part of national celebrations of three significant milestones in the country's history: 100 years of monarchy, the coronation of His Majesty the fifth king and the first democratic elections. The main purpose of establishment of CFM is to provide a platform for Bhutanese farmers to sell their agricultural produce and its products in a vibrant marketplace (DAMC n.d.). To address the continued demand for market space, *Thromde* (municipal corporation) has also initiated construction of mini vegetable markets at different locations within the city, e.g. Taba, Jungshina, Kalabazar, Babesa and Norzin Lam (Dem 2020). The eligibility criteria for conducting business in all these markets follow a registration system with the management under Bhutan Agriculture and Food Regulatory Authority (BAFRA). While many vendors are fortunate to get avail such formalized vending permits, there are still considerable number of street vendors in and around the city. While most of the women street vendors conduct business during the day, there are also quite a few women street vendors who carry out their routine vending activities only at night, mostly the street food vendors.

Street vending is of particular concern in urban society because it is endemic amongst particular demographic group with low education and poor households. Generally, most of the women entrepreneurs engaged in informal sector, in particular in Bhutan, are either illiterate or lowly educated; therefore, they lack long-term business vision and innovative ideas for which they cannot move out of the subsistence level (Dorji 2018). Progress of women entrepreneurship is further constrained by the lack of support system such as training, business skills, marketing services and policy measures. Working condition of informal workers thus remains seemingly unchanged as the inclusive development plans and policies initiated meant to improve living conditions of all workers rarely reach into the informal economy (WB and RGoB 2016; Dorji 2018). Given the vital role being played by women in the household economy where they are primarily responsible for household's tasks in the Bhutanese society, empowerment of women is deemed crucial to the well-being and social upliftment in the larger context. For families where menfolk earn little or nothing, the task of supplementing family income and sustaining the family's livelihood falls on the women in urban community. In such situations, women usually opted for informal activities, with predominant ones including weaving, making home-brewed alcohol and home-based food items and gardening (Choden 1999).

Women street vendors are seen at different localities in the city. Interestingly, while in many South Asian cities, women remain home at night for security and safety reason, women street food vendors in Thimphu City against all odds carry out their routine street vending activities at night—most of them begin at 6:30 p.m. and continue till 5:00 a.m. the next day. Spatial dimension of urban space, social relation and accessibility to urban opportunities thus inform how the questions ‘who’, ‘what’, ‘when’ and ‘where’ matter in shaping and reshaping the cityscape. In many urban centers, access to urban opportunities for women is significantly less as compared to that of men due to differences in space–time constraints (Kwan 1999, 2000). ‘Space–time privilege’ that women avail in urban areas is commonly identified as unfavourable, inferior and insecure (Bhowmik 2010, p. 12), yet they make the best out of it for their survival. Therefore, inclusivity, a watchword of all development plan, requires robust reflection on the urban spatial relation constituted by the ‘who’, people; ‘what’, economic activity; ‘where’, location attributes; and ‘when’, attribute of time. Pertinent points are also the high risk and susceptibility of women to various threats that considerably limits the use of space by women within a city (Roberts 1998). This chapter analyses the associate challenges of women street vendors in Thimphu City and asserts that inclusion of street vending in urban planning is crucial largely in the context of economic potential of women (Scott 2014). In most cases, major contribution made by the street vendors are unaccounted for, and they are infrequently valued in policy terms as economic assets to cities (Roever and Skinner 2016).

### 16.3 Materials and Methods

There is no official data on street vendors in the country as local government does not maintain any official record. During a meeting organised by the Bhutan Agriculture and Food Regulatory Authority (BAFRA) for street vendors in Thimphu City on 19 December, 2019, around 32 street food vendors participated in the meeting (Yonten 2019). Until 2011, there were fewer than 30 street food vendors in the capital and an estimated national total of 100 street food vendors (WHO 2012). The data gathered and analysed of the present study were therefore exclusively primary data collected through various research tools and instruments. A mixed methods approach was employed to analyse the data. While quantitative data were collected through schedule methods of structured questionnaire survey, qualitative data were collected through in-depth interviews, focus group discussion and participant observation. The structured questionnaire, consisting of open-ended and closed-ended survey, captured aspects such as sources of income, education, migration, socio-economic challenges and perception of the respondents on the impacts of climate change. The sample size of this study comprised of 50 women street vendors (25 vegetable vendors and 25 street food vendors). While street food vendors were all from the main Thimphu City, vegetable vendors included 13 vendors from the city periphery, Thimphu–Paro highway, who did not outsource their merchandises.

Protection of participant's identity is considered central to the design and practice of ethical research in qualitative research (Grinyer 2002; Baez 2002; Wiles et al. 2008; Kaiser 2009); therefore, the names reflected in the text are pseudonyms. In addition to the data collected through questionnaire survey, focus group discussion (FGD) was conducted separately for vegetable vendors and street food vendors, each group consisting of 6–8 members. This has helped draw diverse experiences and challenges of the street vendors based on the types of merchandises and also places. Further, participant observation was also conducted two times with the help of a research assistant: the first observation was conducted on 25th June, 2019, by selling street foods at night, 9:00 p.m.–6:00 a.m., like any other street food vendors near the clock tower (centre point of Thimphu City), while the second participant observation was conducted on 10th July, 2019, by stationing at one of the vendor's stall at the Bhutan Association of Women Entrepreneurs (BAOWE) Livelihood Centre, JDWNR Hospital. Data collected were systematically thematised and analysed concomitantly the quantitative and the qualitative data. This research is an outcome of a research project conducted from August 2018 to November 2019.

## 16.4 Finding and Discussion

### 16.4.1 *Socio-Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents*

Respondents comprised of a diverse socio-economic background and demographic characteristics. The age of the respondents ranged from 20 years old to 67 years old with majority (34 %) of the respondents in the age group of 30–39 years, while eight respondents were above 60 years of age. Of the total respondents, 74% were currently married women, 22% were divorced and 4% were widowed. Education is a major concern with a large proportion (68%) of the respondents having not attained even basic education. Amongst the literates, only one respondent completed high school (Class X), while the rest attained primary level of education (Table 16.1).

Majority of the respondents (66%) migrated to the city for various reasons of which 'employment' (48.3%) was cited as one of the main reasons, followed by 'family moved' (30.3%) and marriage (21.2%), respectively (Table 16.2). Urbanisation trends in Bhutan suggest that migration is driven more by the 'pull' factors of urban areas, such as employment opportunities, than by 'push' factors such as infrastructure scarcity, landlessness or conflict in rural areas (WB 2019). What comes along with the changing urban spatial pattern is the spiralling informal activity as a result of saturation of employment opportunities in the urban centres (Chen et al. 2018). Absorption patterns of migrants, females in particular, in the urban labour market have strong connection with the informal sector (Koo and Smith 1983). Mismatch of skills, ill-equipped and unprepared for mainstream jobs are the common reasons of many migrants entering into the informal sector. Interestingly, street vending serves as the main source of family income for a large



**Table 16.1** Socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents (in percentage)

Types	Marital status				Literacy			Income		
	Married	Divorced	Widow	Total	Literate	Illiterate	Total	Supplement	Main	Total
Only food	6	6	0	12	6	6	12	4	8	12
Only vegetables	20	4	2	26	6	20	26	8	18	26
Only <i>doma</i> <sup>a</sup>	2	2	2	6	0	6	6	0	6	6
Only fruits	8	2	0	10	2	8	10	6	4	10
Vegetables and fruits	14	0	0	14	10	4	14	4	10	14
Food and <i>doma</i>	6	6	0	12	4	8	12	6	6	12
Food and tea	6	0	0	6	0	6	6	2	4	6
Tea and others	2	2	0	4	2	2	4	0	4	4
Food, tea and <i>doma</i>	10	0	0	10	2	8	10	10	0	10
Total	74	22	4	100	32	68	100	40	60	100
Age										
Below 30	20	4	0	24	14	10	24	14	10	24
30-39	24	12	0	36	8	28	36	14	22	36
40-49	14	4	2	20	4	16	20	10	10	20
50-59	10	2	0	12	4	8	12	0	12	12
60 and above	6	0	2	8	2	6	8	2	6	8
Total	74	22	4	100	32	68	100	40	60	100

<sup>a</sup> Areca nut and betel leaf.

**Table 16.2** Migration status, reasons of migration and socio-economic condition (in percentage)

		Migration status			Reasons form migration			
		Migrant	Non-migrant	Total	Marriage	Employment	Family moved	Total
Types	Food	12	0	12	9.1	9.1	0	18.2
	Only vegetables	18	8	26	6.1	12.1	9.1	27.3
	Only fruits	2	8	10	0	9.1	6.1	15.2
	Only <i>doma</i>	4	2	6	0	3	3	6
	Vegetables and fruits	4	10	14	0	3	3	6
	Food and <i>doma</i>	10	2	12	0	3	0	9.1
	Food and tea	6	0	6	6.1	3	0	3
	Tea and others	2	2	4	0	3	9.1	12.1
	Food, tea and <i>doma</i>	8	2	10	0	3	0	3
	Total	66	34	100	21.3	48.3	30.3	100
Literacy	Literate	16	16	32	3	15.2	6.1	24.2
	Illiterate	50	18	68	18.2	33.3	24.2	75.8
	Total	66	34	100	21.2	48.5	30.3	100
Income	Suppl.	24	16	40	12.1	12.1	12.1	36.3
	Main	42	18	60	9.1	36.4	18.2	63.7
	Total	66	34	100	21.2	48.5	30.3	100

number of migrants. Of the total migrants who moved to the city on employment reason, 36.4% stated that street vending is the only source of family income. Further, most of them were engaged in street food vending, deemed as less capital intensive.

Influx of migrants, rural to urban, continues at a rapid pace as people, women in particular, look to the city as a place of opportunities and better livelihood through employment and favourable marriage (Choden 1999). Street vending activity in urban thus manifests people's 'spontaneous and creative response to the state's incapacity to satisfy the basic needs of the impoverished masses' (De Soto 1989). Urban stress heightens in the process as urban centres are not well equipped to provide quality services, which affects the urban liveability and competitiveness (WB 2019). In light of the government's restriction, yet condoned to a certain extent, street vending activity is not a daily affair in Thimphu. Some of the vegetable vendors come only on Saturday and Sunday afternoon citing restriction by the state agencies, while a considerable number of street food vendors conduct their business at night. There is, however, no established rule and regulation that prohibits street vending (Yonten 2019); therefore, success and sustainability of such activities hinge on the leniency of the state's agencies and the officers on duty at times.

## 16.4.2 Livelihood and Challenges of the Women Street Vendors

### 16.4.2.1 Mode of Business Operation and Sales

Street vending is a female-dominated activity in Thimphu City. The items of street vendors consist of vegetables, fruits and carry-out items such as *thukpa* (local porridge), dumpling and tea. While vendors who deal with agriculture products (captured in the present study) conduct their business during daytime or evening, most of the street food vendors who conduct their business at night usually begin their routine activities around 6:30 p.m. and continue till 5:00 a.m. the next day. In addition, while vendors along the Thimphu–Paro highway conduct their business during daytime on a regular basis and on all days of the week, street vegetable vendors in the main city conduct mostly on Saturday and Sunday. Street food vendors follow a rota prepared by the coordinator nominated amongst themselves, except on Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays. Night clubs and other entertainment industries open till late night on these days; therefore, they have an understanding and agreement amongst themselves that everyone may be allowed to conduct business on these days. Since March 2019, regulated time for discotheque has been relaxed and the owners are permitted to operate till 5:00 a.m. (Pem 2019). Quite a few street food vendors thus operate vending activity nearby night clubs. As all the shutters of eateries are down by 10:00 p.m. in the city, party-goers have no choice but to look for those street food vendors.

Street vending is a primary source of family income for a large number of street vendors. A staggering 60% of the respondents reported having no source of family income other than street vending business (Table 16.2). Prohibition against such activity will therefore have severe impact on the livelihood of the households relying on street vending business. Table 16.3 shows the daily average profit margin. Margin of profit differs widely with vegetable vendors earning the highest. Street food vendors usually sell more than one item. Most of the vegetable vendors follow a regular business routine with a fix location, whereas street food vendors conduct their business on a rotation basis, days and places allocated by the coordinator. Daily earning fluctuates depending on the days and places they are allocated and also the weather condition.

**Table 16.3** Daily profit margin (in Ngultrum: Bhutanese currency, is pegged at par with the Indian rupees in terms of its value)

	Paneer thukpa	Non-veg thukpa	Veg momo	Non-veg momo	Vegetables	Fruits	Tea	Doma
Mean	1459	1268	1141	1657	3850	3117	477	210
Std. deviation	1342	284	771	2425	2337	1377	376	337
Variance	3608260	373503	946318	7347500	28133158	5982121	316754	113810
Skewness	0	-1	0	0	0	0	0	0.46

Potential of street vending is quite discernible given the profit margin and contribution to the family income. Most of the vegetable vendors grow products of their own and sell directly for which their earning is relatively higher. Besides, they conduct their business during daytime, whereas majority of the street food vendors conduct their business at night. Space and time accessibility is thus what concerns most to the street food vendors.

#### 16.4.2.2 Climatic and Weather Condition

Climate change disproportionately affects women and girls (UNEP, UNW, UNDP and UNDPGA 2020); therefore, differential impacts of climate change on men and women are widely discussed across the global platforms (Datey et al. 2021). Women obviously are not inherently vulnerable to climate change impacts; ‘they are actually made so by the inequitable social structures and gendered-blind attitudes and behaviours’ (Fordham et al. 2011, p. 9). Common reasons include ‘discrimination, patriarchal laws, norms, customs and institutions that resulted in women’s exclusion from participating in decision-making and community processes; limited awareness of legal rights, including human rights; limited or no access to or control over resources and assets; unequal burden of unpaid domestic and care responsibilities; limited access to necessary sexual and reproductive health care (particularly in natural disaster situations); increased exposure to gender-based harassment and violence; and impoverishment, including when a male spouse migrates or otherwise leaves the household’ (UNFCCC 2019, p. 7). Unfortunately, gender dimensions of climate change impacts are still poorly understood at the international level and are generally lacking in climate security policymaking and practice to date (UNEP, UNW, UNDP and UNDPGA 2020). Present study shows multiple climate-related challenges of the street vendors. Of the various challenges they have encountered, climate change-related threats appear the most severe to sustaining street vending and livelihood (Table 16.4). Extreme climatic and weather conditions frequently hamper smooth operation of the business. Severity of climate-related challenges

**Table 16.4** Major challenges based on severity and potential of threats

Issues	Percentage of respondents
Climate and weather condition	22.0
Competition amongst the vendors	20.0
Eviction by the authority	20.0
Market space	16.0
Lack of family support	10.0
Harassment from unruly customer	6.0
Conflict amongst vendors	2.0
Others	4.0
Total	100.0

compounds during winter and rainy season. During winter, Thimphu City features cold winds, low temperatures at night, moderate temperatures during the day, cloudiness, light showers and snowfall, while in summer, the climatic condition of the city is characterised by warm and temperate climate and several days of continuous rainfall, with an average rainfall of 500–1000 mm (MoWHS 2004). Conducting business under such harsh climatic and weather condition speaks for itself, including but not limited to job saturation in the formal sector, selectiveness and its competitive nature, with the job's requirement being mostly modern skill based. Temperature during the winter, particularly at night, frequently falls below freezing point making it extremely difficult to conduct the business. Kinley, a 35-year-old street food vendor said,

During winter, we can barely move our hands to give even change to the customers, our hands often become numb due to extreme cold. As we are not allowed to lit fire, I have to bear this hardship having no option and wait for the day-dawn.

Erratic weather is a great challenge for sustenance of their business. All the respondents reported to have experienced several extreme weather events. Hardship abounds during rainy season and cold winter causing drastic decline on sales, and at times, they had to give the merchandise at a throwaway price or even threw at nearby places as the produces get spoiled due to unexpected downpour of rains.

Climate change is a phenomenon that each individual can feel, experience and narrate irrespective of levels or degree of education. Further, traditional knowledge, inherent in every community, has its own dynamism that helps individuals relate themselves with the environment and the changes occurring around them including the phenomena associated with the impacts of climate change. Interestingly, 56% of the respondents reported a rise in temperature, change in rainfall pattern, crop failures, drought, windstorm and flash flood, all of which attributed to the climate change. Vegetable vendors who procured products from their own farms stated severe impact of climate change on agriculture productions in the last few years. There were incidences of crop damages triggered by diseases and erratic rainfall leading to a drastic drop in production. A significant proportion, 54% of the respondents, reported crop damages due to climate change-related disaster. Such responses from them do not come as surprise as Bhutan, of late, has been witnessing extreme weather events, causing widespread crop damages; yet the agricultural production management system of Bhutan does not show a resilient picture (Chhogyel and Kumar 2018, p. 7). To get better insight about the various challenges of the street vendors, we conducted participant observation on 25th June, 2019, with the help of one research assistant who made *thukpa* (local porridge) and sold near the clock tower (central point of the city) between 9:00 p.m. and 6:00 a.m.:

This participant observation helps me understand better the hardship women street food vendors are encountering every night. On that night, temperature dropped drastically and became extremely cold around 3:00 a.m. I didn't expect night would be that cold since it was summer time. This was conducted in the month of June and I can't imagine how terrible it will be during winter. The street vendors therefore usually wear thick jackets and carry hot water bags even in summer. (T. Dema, participant observation, June 25, 2019)

Participant observation was also conducted at the Bhutan Association of Women Entrepreneur (BAOWE) livelihood centre, near JDWNR hospital, women open market sheds constructed for women street vendors by the Bhutan Association of Women Entrepreneurs. It is a non-profitable organisation registered under Bhutan CSO Act 2007 that provides assistance to women entrepreneurs at the grassroots levels since its inception in 2010. One of the vendors allowed our research assistant to stay with her one whole day in her stall for participant observation:

Daily ordeals these women vendors are going through are barely noticeable from outside. The lady (vendor) started preparation her items - *thukpa* (rice porridge), dumpling, tea, and *Juma* (sausage), in the morning at 4:00 a.m. and reached the stall at 7:00 a.m. Since this market is located next to the main hospital and memorial *chorten*, they expect customers throughout the day – from early morning till late evening, for which they open their shops as early as 7:00 AM despite severe cold. The nature of their work is quite tedious, tiresome and challenging. All the items are prepared at home and bring to the stall in big hot cases with the required utensils. Given all these challenges, the number of hours and labour they invest every day, hardship they are enduring, I feel, they are the strongest women in the town. (T. Dema, participant observation, July 10, 2019)

### 16.4.2.3 Competition and Conflict

At the core of any commercial activity lies intention of profit making which in due course exerts competition that may occur in different domains including but not confined to price, advertising and promotion, quality (Chaganti et al. 1989) and space. Apparently, street vendors face competition in one or more of the domains indicated. Competition triggers conflict and tensions amongst the street vendors over territory and space, enduring in nature (Agadjanian 2002), for which social relation amongst the vendors are very dynamic and unsteady, and their social relationships can therefore change from day to day. ‘Friendships in the streets have their limits because even friends are potential competitors yet they have to continually maintain balance between competition and cooperation to sustain their business’ (Steel 2012, p. 11). To avoid conflict amongst themselves, street food vendors (night vendors) follow a schedule at some places. Kumari (personal communication, May 10, 2019) said,

We have a rotation system; it is only during party days that all vendors in our group are allowed to come here. During non-party days we have to come according to the schedule prepared by the coordinator of our group.

This helps them not only avoid conflict over space and location, but they also get a fair opportunity to conduct business at the more happening places in the city. The research assistant of this project reported that one of the vendors feverishly threw anger at her while conducting participant observation owing to significant drop in her sales:

In the beginning I was the only street vendor in this area but now many vendors have come which has severely impacted my business. The last time we met, you were conducting a

research and asking questions and now you are selling *thukpa* today? (T. Dema, participant observation, June 25, 2019)

The vendor was, however, not convinced that it was for a participant observation purpose. Argument continued forcing our research assistant to leave the place for another area in the town—Barz Brother. Apparently, such argument over the vending spot is quite common amongst the street food vendors with the increasing number of street vendors (Yonten 2019) which people/customers don't really see or understand:

Before I conducted participant observation I thought street vendors did not have major issues with one another but I was wrong. After going to the field I found out that the street vendors fight often for vending spot and even for customers. It was a great experience and exercise; helped me to examine and understand the various challenges women street vendors are facing as interview and survey only provide information of the surface. I found out that street vendors are very competitive and they have limited space to sell. (T. Dema, participant observation)

Concerns related to limited space and conflict between the street vendors and regular vegetable vendors (licenced vendors) were also highlighted during the focus group discussion:

Sometimes licenced holders inside the market complained about the street vendors to the police, who come in disguise, and if we are caught, police would throw all our vegetables in the dustbin. In addition, since selling outside the market is illegal, we are compelled to sell our merchandizes at the cheaper rate. (Focus group discussion, June 2, 2019)

Street food vendors have also similar cases of complains from the shop owners. Street food vendors, along with their main items, sell water, tea and *paan* (betel quid) that are commonly sold by the established shop owners:

We can start selling these items only after the established shops nearby are closed or else they will complain against us. Street food vendors are perceived as creating unfair competition for established shop owners. We also have to sell all these items since these items are the most sought after items at night. (Focus group discussion, June 2, 2019)

Established shop owners have greater control over space; therefore, they don't easily tolerate the presence of street vendors during business hours. In many Indian cities, street vendors are often blamed for the losses of business of the established shop owners and label them as 'illegitimate competition and a drain on the legitimate economy' (Rajagopal 2001).

#### 16.4.2.4 State Authority

The manner in which concerned authority deals with the street vendors is perceived often harsh and extreme in most metropolitan cities in the global south (Bhowmik 2005). Eviction, imposing fines and confiscation of goods are some of the common actions initiated by the state authorities in urban areas where street vending is considered illegal. Therefore, street vendors conduct their business every day in the shadow of fear, uncertainty and inhospitable condition. There were incidences of

authorities giving warning to impose fines or dispose off all the merchandises if found selling on the streets in Thimphu City (Zangmo 2017):

The only reason I feel insecure of my business is because of the officers who are on duty. They would just come and seize my merchandizes and I could not do anything. (S. Adhikari, personal communication, May 10, 2019)

Similar feeling of insecurity was also shared by an elderly woman:

The state authorities do not let us sell the products in the market as this business is considered illegal, this is the only concern I have.

Vendors themselves too admit the illegality of such activity and anticipate incidences of encountering not just with the officials on duty but also with the unruly customers, yet situation forced them to continue in this occupation having no other option left to support their family:

I am conducting this business not because I want to make money. I am conducting this business because I am not able to get job with the qualification I have. I have to support my family that is why I am conducting this business though not permitted by the Government. (Ms. Namgay, personal communication, May 20, 2019)

A lady expressed her hardship before she got a membership in the Bhutan Association of Women Entrepreneurs (BAOWE), an organisation that helps women who are engaged in informal activity:

The organisation gave me a shed. It has really helped me as I can sell without any threat or harassment. In the past when I was conducting my business on the streets, authorities would come and seize my merchandizes. It was a big loss not just for me but for my family as whole. I am able to carry out my business now without any fear and concerns. I am grateful to BAOWE. (Ms. Kinley, personal communication, June 10, 2019)

While debates and discussions continue on the legality of street vending activities, concerns on such activity and livelihood of the street vendors are very much in the government's agenda. In an attempt to address street vending issues, a meeting for street vendors was organised by the Bhutan Agriculture and Food Regulatory Authority (BAFRA) on November 28<sup>th</sup>, 2019, an initiative that came as part of the Government's pledge to formalise, legalise and support the informal sectors such as street vendors, roadside fruit vendors, vegetable vendors, home-based bakers, amongst others (Tshering 2019).

#### **16.4.2.5 Social Stigma and Lack of Family Support**

Challenges faced by the street vendors are not identical, but social stigma and lack of family support are apparently common amongst the respondents. Some of them stated of not being encouraged even by their immediate family members and relatives. Of the total respondents, 60% felt that they are in one way or the other restricted by the social stigma, norms and belief systems of the community. A significant proportion of the respondents (46%) felt that people in the community still



have the notion about female's main responsibility as cooking and doing domestic chores. A respondent said,

My children sometimes pretend not to know me when they pass by my stall because they are ashamed of what I am doing. They don't understand the suffering I am going through and the concern I have for them. I want them to excel in life so that they do not have to sell *thukpa*, momo, tea, and *Juma* (local made sausage) like me.

While in a few cases husbands assist wives in processing the items at home, ultimately, it is the wives who take the merchandises to the market and face the brunt of the authorities and other inauspicious situations. What happens with those items once processing is done and taken to the market becomes the sole responsibility of the wives. Despite the lack of family support and social stigmatisation against such business, economic situation compelled them to continue in the same occupation. A vegetable vendor said,

No one wants to become a street vendor on purpose. It is actually shameful to sell vegetable on the streets when people look down upon you. It is a hard work but we have to do it in order to support our family and to have something to eat.

Challenges of single parents and divorced women are enormous. Challenges to raise singlehandedly their own children and the community's stigmatization against such women at times restrict their rights to live a dignified life. Single parents or divorced women are often subject to negative judgements. They are even subject to scrutiny and questioning to their failed marriage as the community deems it inappropriate to have children outside wedlock (GNHC and UNDP 2017). The lack of family support makes them more vulnerable and susceptible to various kinds of stresses. While a few women may disclose and share their concerns, generally, Bhutanese women have predisposition, embedded in the culture, of concealing personal problems within themselves and deal it in silence. There are unwritten laws and customary practices in every society that direct individual's feeling and decision and Bhutanese society is no exception. A national survey report on 'violence against women and girls' (2017) by the National Commission for Women and Children (NCWC) of Bhutan shows that majority of the respondents do not tend to tell about their experience of 'intimate partner violence' to other nor sought help from anywhere. The report further states that many victims did not seek help for the reasons such as social stigmatisation, fear of having to depart from children and fear of threats/consequence/repercussion (NCWC 2018, p. 89). Women thus bear the brunt of social stigmatisation in silence in order to protect their dignity—a locally valued form of a true Bhutanese woman. Quality, dignity and prestige of a true woman in many societies are seemingly still measured and determined by the degree of tolerance of women towards social stigma and discrimination or any form of abuses. Silence, in times of altercation between husband and wife, is one that women consider the best mechanism of conflict resolution and restoration of normalcy in the family or personal life. There are number of organizations for women in the country, such as, Respect, Educate, Nurture and Empower Women (RENEW), National Women's Association of Bhutan (NWAB), etc. working for women and children. At the highest national level of the country's development policy, gender

dimension of development policies have been regularly featured in the country's Five-Year Plans since the 5th Five-Year Plan, yet gender disparity remains one of the Bhutan's biggest challenges. Global Gender Gap Report (GGGR) show declining trends in term of country's performance with a score of 0.665 in 2013, 0.646 in 2015, 0.638 in 2018 and 0.635 in 2020 respectively. The score slightly improved in 2021 (0.639) and Bhutan ranked 130 out of 156 countries in the Global Gender Gap Index (World Economic Forum 2021). Lack of integration of gender dimension in disaster management is also conspicuous with related policies do not yield any favourable outcomes for women; none of the policy documents of disaster management talk about the differential experiences, needs, and roles of women and men with respect to early warning system (EWS), nor do they discuss why we need to consider gender in disaster risk reduction (Shrestha et al. 2016). Unequal participation of women in the highest decision making body, governance and leadership is also quite evidence in the country (Chhoden and Lhamu 2018).

#### 16.4.2.6 Other Challenges

Challenges faced by the women street vendors are quite diverse. Internal challenges like domestic issues and personal problems are seldom discussed. At workplaces, they face challenges associated with the lack of administrative support systems, challenges from unruly customers and unfavourable weather condition. They deal with customers bearing different attitudes on a daily basis, yet they serve everyone with a maximum level of decency. Apparently, day customers and night customers have a quite distinct behaviour. While day customers buy items for family consumption and presumably more polite and understanding, night customers (late night customers) are mostly party-goers, most of whom are under the influence of alcohol. They have had frequent altercation with unruly customers. Some customers also take advantage and dine and dash. The risk of street food vendors (night vendors) thus involves not only losing sales but also threats from the unruly customers. At times, unruly customers under the influence of alcohol threw abusive languages and insulted them. The country has a strong legal enforcement on violence against women; however, such cases go unnoticed and unreported. They avoid taking up such issues to the authority concerned for the fear of repercussion since street vending is not permitted. The only help they can seek from are the passers-by or taxi drivers. Oftentimes, they are left alone to fend off burglars or attackers. A respondent said,

Sometimes customers fight and cause trouble and when that happens taxi drivers are the ones who help us. I am afraid to seek help from police since street vending is deemed illegal.

Further she added,

It is a stressful (street vending) work as we have to deal with different kinds of customers. Sometimes we have to protect our merchandizes when alcoholic customers start fighting yet all for survival and to support my family I have to carry on with this business.

Review of the official sanction of ‘operational time’ for entertainment industry has prompted significant gain in street food vending business. Given the crime rate of the city, a committee comprising of members from all the relevant stakeholders amended the ‘operational time’ and extended up to 5:00 a.m. to lessen crime rate of the city (Pem 2019). This decision came after a detailed assessment on incidence of crime in the past three years. Prior to this, entertainment industries, discotheques in particular, were allowed to operate up to 1:00 a.m. on Fridays and Saturdays (MOEA 2018:31). Many party-goers yet were found often loitering and creating nuisance at various places in the city even after the party hours presumably for want of more hours. Following this, since March 2019, the new strategy has been adopted considering people would spend longer time inside the party hall, if operational time is extended, and go home directly after they are exhausted. This will help reduce crime incidence in the city. Seemingly, this strategy is working well so far as per the authorities (Pem 2019); however, street vendors say otherwise. One vendor said,

Since the regulated timing for discotheque has extended till 5:00 a.m., number of customers has increased significantly. This has indeed helped me sell more amounts of items and gain significant jump in the profit margin. What comes however along with this is the rise in the frequency of altercation and fighting among the party goers. Most of them come often under the influence of alcohol and get into confrontation. It is very hard for us to sell when they fight as the authority will always give the blame to us. I always run away from the vending place whenever people fight.

## 16.5 Conclusion

Urbanisation can be a transformative force, idiomised as engine of economic growth and prosperity, and therefore widely captured the imagination of policymakers for decades (WB 1991; Spence et al. 2009; Colenbrander 2016). However, the counter-productive of such process predominantly characterised by rising informal economic activities necessitates for a revisit of policy measures and development plans. Informal economy is an integral part of the formal economy (Sassen 1997); therefore, development policies and programme require reorientation in the background of rapid growth of the informal economy in the urban sector. Underpinning the premises of the country’s development philosophy Gross National Happiness (GNH), Thimphu Structure Plan (TSP) 2002 –2027 emphasises on making Thimphu City a culturally vibrant, environmentally friendly and a convivial city. What makes such articulation more appealing is the inclusivity and comprehensiveness of development programmes that mirrored the aspirations and hopes of the people. Progress indeed has taken place in several sectors but not without compromising certain concerns. Increasing unemployment issue, youth and female in particular, requires special attention having recorded the highest in Thimphu City in the country (OCC 2017). Meanwhile, women require special attention given their significant contribution to the society and economy. Development of participatory platform, inclusion of the working poor in the municipal budget and engagement with the

membership-based organisation of informal workers can be a powerful catalyst in making the city for all (Carr 2019). The city has to be seen as the locus of citizenship and recognised the multiple levels of citizenship and levels of common destiny (Fester 2005, as cited in Fester and Yacobi 2005) to make it more convivial and inclusive. To address the rising concerns associated with urban issues and the like, it is argued that realisation of the potential of urban informal economy and integration of such invisible entrepreneurship in the mainstream urban economy are crucial to *achieving social and economic sustainability*. While informalisation of labour market has become a trend with a rising proportion of workers in the informal sector, developing countries to be precise, it is imperative for a small country like Bhutan to look at the sources of the strength of the country's economy that considerably come from the informal sectors. Strengthening policy measures to stimulate progress of the informal sectors is crucial to inclusive development. In addition, with the rapid urbanisation in the country, there is also a need for institution or reinstitution of urban policy framework that recognises and safeguards the privileges of the informal workers and poorer section of the urban society. Thimphu City will continue to grow, and to make the city more accommodative, further to achieving what is envisioned in the Thimphu Structure Plan (TSP) 2002–2027 as the dream city of all Bhutanese, alleviation of urban issues and challenges particularly of the urban poor is fundamental to inclusive development.

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