

Street Vendors in the Urban Informal Economy: Socio-Economic Conditions and Livelihood Challenges in Walayatabad, Multan, Pakistan

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Abstract

This study investigates the demographic and socio-economic features of street sellers along with their way of life, family structure, work areas, monetary problems, and products and services sold by them in Walayatabad, Multan. Structured questionnaires were used to collect data from 212 street vendors. The findings have revealed the significance of street vending in the informal sector in the city and emphasized that the majority of street vendors are from poor households and work long hours with little chance of formal employment. In order to strengthen regulatory and supervisory frameworks, make microfinance services more accessible, and provide more infrastructure support, the paper ends with policy interventions.

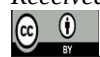
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Introduction

Street vending is a major part of the informal economy in the urban context, especially in developing countries where formal jobs are scarce (Martínez & Short, 2022). It is a significant source of employment to millions of people and makes the availability of goods and services possible for urban people at an affordable price (Escamilla et al., 2021). The informal economy is gaining importance as cities continue to grow, following the process of rapid urbanization and population growth, in order to sustain livelihoods of many households and to support local economic activity (Thulare et al., 2021). Street vendors therefore play an important role in providing jobs as well as the social and economic life of cities (Mramba, 2022).

Street vendors are one of the most vulnerable groups in the city labor force, but they hold an important place in the economic life of the city (Martínez & Short, 2022). They frequently work in precarious situations, have low pay, poor working conditions, lack financial and social protection, and lack legal status (Shin et al., 2023). Often, they face eviction, harassment, and inability to use public spaces, decreasing their economic security and opportunities for sustainable livelihood development (Ndaba & Reddy, 2024). The structural and institutional factors are key drivers of these challenges (Hossain et al., 2022).

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Street Vending has come into the spotlight in Pakistan, becoming more visible and economically relevant, thanks to the rise of the informal sector(Dharejo et al., 2022). Street Vending has become more visible and economical in Pakistan due to the rise in informal sector(Dharejo et al., 2022). Nevertheless, there is limited empirical data about the demographic characteristics, socioeconomic status and livelihood problems of street vendors, especially at a local level(Hoque, 2023). The introduction of street vendors or street hawkers in urban areas like Walayatabad, Multan is a significant phenomenon, both economically and in terms of the community's needs, but has received little scholarly attention(Rehman & Sulaiman, 2025; Sharma, 2015). Thus, the current study explores the demographic and socioeconomic profile, livelihood status and financial problems of street vendors of Walayatabad, Multan(Shabbir et al., 2024). The findings provide evidence to support inclusive urban planning and policies that enhance the welfare and economic security of informal workers(Chen, 2023).

Study Area

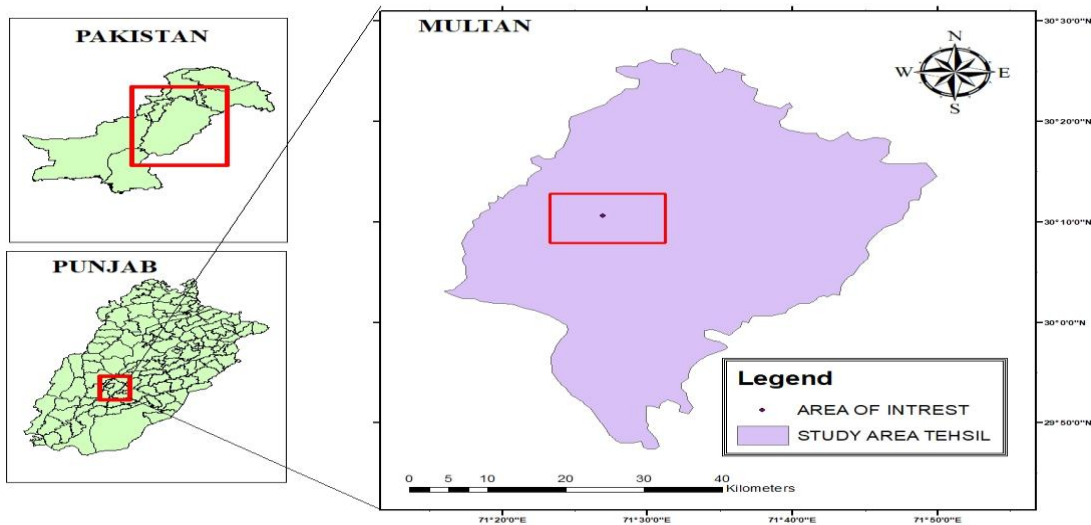
The fifth-largest city in Pakistan, Multan, is situated at a latitude of 30°11'50' North and a longitude of 71°28'13' East(Mubashir et al., 2023). Geographically, Muzaffargarh is located across the Chenab River to the west, Khanewal District to the north, Vehari to the east, and Lodhran to the south(Haseeb et al., 2023). Because of its location, Multan has been able to serve as a vital commercial and cultural link between Pakistan's various regions. Multan has a historical significance as a center of Sufi scholarship during the 11th and 12th centuries, which entitles it as the "City of Saints" and the scholars widely recognize it as the cultural, religious, and economic hub of the southern Punjab(Armeen & Bashir, 2025; Gillani, 2024). Residents throughout this area primarily speak the Saraiki language, a language that is a combination of Balochi, Sindhi, and Punjabi influences(Abdullah et al., 2025).

Multan district has a population of 4,746,166, with 2,687,246 residents living in rural areas and 2,058,920 in urban centers, according to the 2017 census. The region's arid climate produces scorching summers and chilly winters(Tasawar et al.). Temperatures fluctuate from a peak of roughly 49°C in the summer to a low of 1°C in the winter, while the area receives a modest average yearly rainfall of approximately 127 mm(Tasawar et al.). The city frequently faces unpredictable weather patterns and common dust storms(Awan & Ali, 2026).

Extensive agricultural activity, especially citrus and mango cultivation, is supported by the extremely fertile flat alluvial plains that surround Multan(Munir et al., 2025). Farmlands receive water from a vast canal irrigation system, but during the monsoon season, regions close to the Chenab River are susceptible to flooding(Waqas et al., 2021). The Sutlej and Chenab rivers form natural boundaries separating Multan from the Bahawalpur and Muzaffargarh districts, respectively(Chuadhary, 2021).

Street hawking is a major part of the informal economic system of Multan(Banday, 2021). This has been common in South Asian cities. Due to a lack of proper job opportunities, a major section of the people relies on the informal economic system(Chen, 2023; Dell'Anno, 2022). The street vendors are playing a vital role in the business of the cities(Sultana et al., 2022). They offer commodities and services at a very low price. But they are constantly facing tremendous difficulties(Barrett, 2021).

The focus of this research is on Walayatabad, Multan, where the local economy is characterized by a very dense business activity and the excessive reliance on the informal sector (Nadeem et al., 2022). This study examines their lifestyle, activity pattern, products traded and the existing constraints as well as analyses their socioeconomic profile (Yu et al., 2026). Such things become critical in the Pakistani setting where the state is not providing much welfare facility to the citizens and street vending may respond to the poverty, unemployment and urban migration (Hassan & Rizvi Jafree, 2025).



Literature Review

The study and exploration of street vending is studied by many researchers. Street vending is an important mechanism for enabling people to secure employment, to make a living, and to overcome the precarious nature of their poverty (Allison et al., 2021; Recchi, 2021). The street vendors in particular can be shown to be contributing to the economies of the cities by selling affordable goods which are easily accessible to the public (Martínez & Short, 2022; Patel et al., 2021). Street vending becomes a crucial part of the people's feeding mechanisms in the absence of a formal economy and jobs (Masuku, 2023).

Street vending in South Asia is influenced by elements such as people migrating to cities, social inequalities, and the absence of schools (Behera & Mohanty, 2025). Research in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan reveals that the street vendors are generally excluded from the formal sector (Peimani & Kamalipour, 2022). Typically becomes a street vendor due to a need to survive, rather than an intention to go into business as a vendor (Crush et al., 2023).

More recent work focuses on issues of female street vendors (Tuffour et al., 2022). These women deal with issues like safety risks, trouble in moving around, and lower wages as compared to men (Khumalo & Ntini, 2021). The food vendors, in particular, pose some health hazards in the city due to insufficient stalls and hygienic working environment (Salamandane et al., 2023). Research indicates the significance of street vending in terms of economic contribution, but also many difficulties of street vendors in the informal sector in the city (The Duy & Tien Thanh, 2024).

Methodology

Research Design: Mixed-Methods Approach

A mixed methods study design will be utilized to support the proposed research. This will be a mix of survey data and field observation. This will be based on triangulation for the reason of the proposed combination of these two methodologies. This will be essential in increasing the reliability and validity of the results. The quantitative results will give a quantifiable percentage of the most critical socioeconomic factors. This will encompass family size, working hours and income levels. This will help create a larger trend with the street hawkers. This will be compared to the observations.

The use of both quantitative and qualitative methods leads to more robust internal validation of findings through cross validation and results in a more robust set of findings than if one of the two methods was used. Informal economy research has been increasing around the world; however, a lack of empirical research on Pakistani cities, specifically medium-sized ones such as Multan, has been perceived. The mixed-methodology research framework helps to fill this research gap and conduct a thorough analysis of the socioeconomic environment in which street food vendors operate.

Study Area and Sampling

Study population

The street vendors functioning within Walayatatabad, Multan, were considered the population of interest. The sample included a total of 212 street vendors randomly chosen to ensure a representative snapshot of the region of interest.

Sampling frame

The sampling frame resulted from field reconnaissance and GIS mapping for major roads, market areas, hawker centers, and locales served by public transportation (see Section 4). The sampling frame consisted of the locations selected from the above.

Justification for sample size.

The sample size would be 212, which would give equal weightage to feasibility as well as precision while studying respondents in a sample survey, as it would enable comparisons within subgroups, such as by age groups or product, for a frequency study in a local population.

Random selection process.

To avoid bias in the selection of study subjects in the mapped hotspots, systematic random walk techniques were employed by the enumerators, wherein they would choose to interview a vendor after a set interval (for example, the third or nth vendor), especially in situations where the hot.

Instrument: Structured Questionnaire**Overview:**

The data was collected with the aid of a structured questionnaire for respondents. The structured questionnaire was used to ensure the collection of standard data for the research study. The

Content:

The variables in the questionnaire are categorized based on their nature: economic variables (daily, weekly, and monthly income, as well as the number of earning members in the households), institutional variables (licensing, relations with the authorities), occupational variables (types of products hawked, years hawked, daily working hours, days worked per week), and demographic variables (age, gender, size, level of education).

Types of Questions

A mix of closed-ended questions, such as multiple-choice options, categorized ranges, as well as brief open-ended questions, has been used for gathering data, as well as acquiring key insights, like challenges from vendors, through research.

Design Principles

In order to minimize respondent error and maximize the response rate, the survey questionnaire consisted of clear-cut, non-leading, and context-dependent research questions with the use of terms specific to the region and the values stated in Pakistani Rupees (PKR).

Language and Translation

The questionnaire was prepared in English, and then translated into Saraiki and Urdu. For its accuracy, back translation was used.

Validation of Instruments and Pilot Testing**Pilot Testing**

The question used was pre-tested prior to the survey for clarity and feasibility.

Purpose

The aims of the pilot were to clarify unclear items, to set up an average completion time, to verify the skip pattern, and to set up cultural relevance.

Adjustments

Some questions were restructured by changing the wording and/or the categorical ranges (such as income bands and age groupings) of the questions in response to feedback received from the pilot test.

Reliability checks

Where appropriate, internal consistency of multi-item constructs such as perceived-risk scales was determined with Cronbach's alpha.

Field Procedures and Data Collection

Training of Enumerators

The trainers conducted training on the goals of the study, the informed consent process, non-discriminatory interviewing methods, and proper documentation of responses. For orientation, enumerators were exposed to role plays and mock interviews.

Informed Consent

Each respondent was informed of the purpose of the study and that all information disclosed would be kept confidential. They were also told that participation in the interview was voluntary. Verbal consent was documented, as literacy levels are low; signed consent was obtained where possible.

Administrative Mode

Data collection was done through face-to-face interviews conducted at the respondents' locations during non-peak hours of operation to minimize disruption to business activities.

Quality Control

Supervisors re-interviewed about 5–10% of the respondents to check the consistency and reviewed the completed questionnaires daily for missing and inconsistent responses.

GIS Mapping (Google Earth & ArcMap)

Spatial Analysis Overview

To complement the socioeconomic survey, spatial analysis was used as an element.

Reconnaissance and digitizing.

The study uses imagery from the Google Earth Station to monitor and identify major vending areas and points of interest. All the key points, routes, and market polygons are digitized in this process.

Add in ArcMap

Then imported the KML/KMZ file, which was exported from Google Earth, into ArcMap and then referenced the layers related to roads, routes, markets, and hawker centers while using the local coordinate system.

Hotspot Identification

Then, kernel density estimation and point counting were used to identify areas that have a high density of vending stations (hotspots) for sampling.

Outputs

Then created distribution maps of hawkers, showing their concentration around transportation nodes, and the surrounding land use context for incorporation of this study.

Data Entry, Cleaning, and Management

Data entry

Then entered the survey responses into a digital format using a spreadsheet format or SPSS and performed double data entry or selective cross checks to minimize transcription errors.

Data Cleaning

Data cleaning procedures included checks for out-of-range values, inconsistent responses, missing values, and logical inconsistencies. For example, checks were made for the reported number of daily working hours exceeding 24 and age in relation to the number of years of hawking.

Coding and Documentation

Themes were then identified from the open-ended responses and were coded for quantitative analysis. Variable naming, value labeling, and coding procedures were documented within a codebook to ensure transparency and reproducibility.

Quantitative Analysis (SPSS)

Overview

Descriptive and bivariate analyses were conducted using SPSS.

Descriptive Statistics

Frequency distributions, measures of central tendency (mean/median for continuous variables), and percentages (for categorical variables) were employed in profiling respondents.

Cross-tab

Cross-tabulations were used to explore associations between selected variables (e.g., gender by type of goods sold, income group by household size). Chi-square tests for Independence were used to establish if associations between categorical variables are statistically significant.

Correlation Analysis

Pearson or Spearman, depending on the distribution of the variables, correlation coefficients were employed to check the relationship between the number of working hours and the corresponding income.

Optional Multivariate Analysis

Where applicable, simple regression analysis or logistic regression analysis has been done to test for predictors of low income, with covariates such as education levels, household size, and working hours. The assumptions of the models were verified to be true whenever such tests are done.

Qualitative Observations and Analysis

Methods

The data was gathered through non-participant observation at vending spots, informal interviewing, and observation notes. The observation notes involved documenting the interaction with the customers and ways the vendors coped with the situation, as well as how the municipality was enforcing the bylaw.

Recording

The observations were dated and summarized daily and geolocated by correlating observations with mapped vending hotspots.

Discussion

This thematic coding assisted in the identification of the recurring themes, some of which include harassment, issues relating to weather conditions, and the constraint of storage. Anonymous quotes were used for the purpose of explanation.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical Safeguards

Ethical considerations were integral to the study design and implementation.

Informed Consent.

The participants gave their free consent before participating after learning about the study's aim, procedures, and benefits.

Confidentiality & Anonymization

The data was presented in aggregate format to ensure participant anonymity, then removed and coded individual identifiers in order to prevent identification.

Reducing Harm

Interviews were organized in a manner it did not interrupt the livelihood of the participants, and allowed participants to refuse to any question, and sensitive questions were asked with consent and caution.

Institutional Approvals

Ethical approval or local institutional review was obtained, if possible.

Validity, Dependability, and Constraints

Reliability

Measurement reliability was enhanced by pre-testing questionnaires, training enumerators, and conducting supervisory rechecks.

Validity

The study was reviewed by the experts to ensure face validity, content validity was achieved by comprehensive coverage of relevant constructs, and to establish construct validity, the researchers triangulated the qualitative and quantitative findings.

Limitations

Response bias for sensitive economic variables, sampling bias due to unavailable vendors, and seasonal effects might be included in these limitations. These limitations were minimized by mapping diverse hotspots, by conducting interviews at different times of the day, and by incorporating recall and recap questions whenever possible.

Data Presentation and Reproducibility

Documentation

The questionnaires, codebook, and GIS layers as appendices or supplementary materials were preserved by the researchers to improve and support reproducibility.

Transparency.

All of the key analytical decisions, including thresholds for income categories and statistical thresholds, are reported in the methods section to facilitate testing of robustness.

Data Analysis and Findings

The analysis gives a clear picture on the social, economic and demographic aspects which impact on street vendors. The environment in which hawkers conduct their businesses and the challenges they face in sustaining their livelihoods are shown by these variables.

Composition of Gender

The survey result indicates that the gender disparity in street vending is high, 92% of the respondents were male and 8% were female.

Reasons for Male Predominance

- Away from home sales and the transportation of merchandise on carts and the street are typically male occupations.
- Pakistan society does not allow women to freely venture out into public markets.
- Women avoid working in street-based sectors due to their perceived level of safety.

- Women who sell merchandise mostly operate from fixed or home-based stalls rather than roaming the streets.

Gradual Rise in Female Involvement

Even though the number of vendors is small, 8% are female, reflecting:

- Growing household financial pressures.
- Women contributing to family income due to male unemployment or inflation.
- Slow changes in gender relations in urban informal employment.

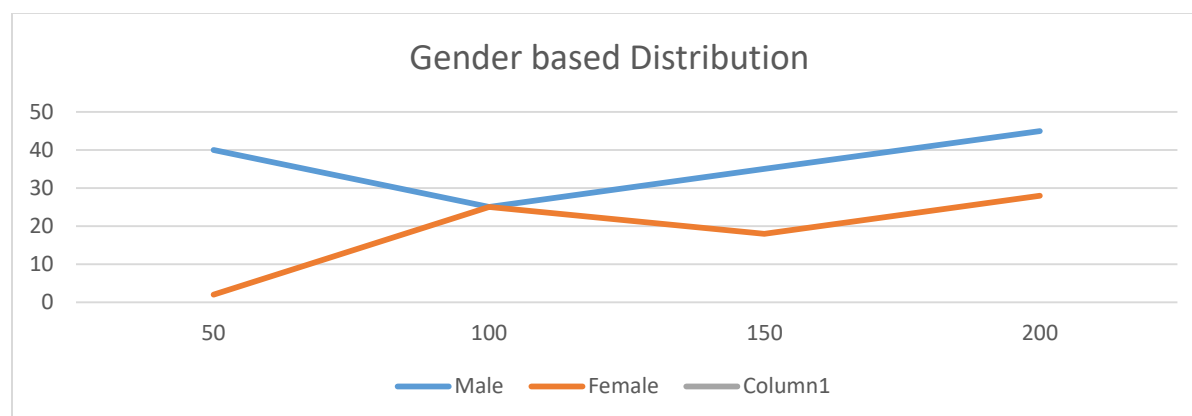


Figure: gender distribution among respondents.

Respondents' Age Distribution

Adults aged 31-64 made up the majority of respondents (69%), indicating that mature individuals primarily conduct street vending.

Interpretation

- Middle-aged adults rely heavily on street vending due to limited access to formal employment.
- Fewer younger individuals (ages 15–30) participate, suggesting that they often seek temporary or more secure employment when possible.
- Many individuals in this group have family responsibilities, which motivate them to engage in informal self-employment.

Elderly Participation

- The very low participation of older adults indicates that street vending demands physical effort and is less suitable for the elderly.

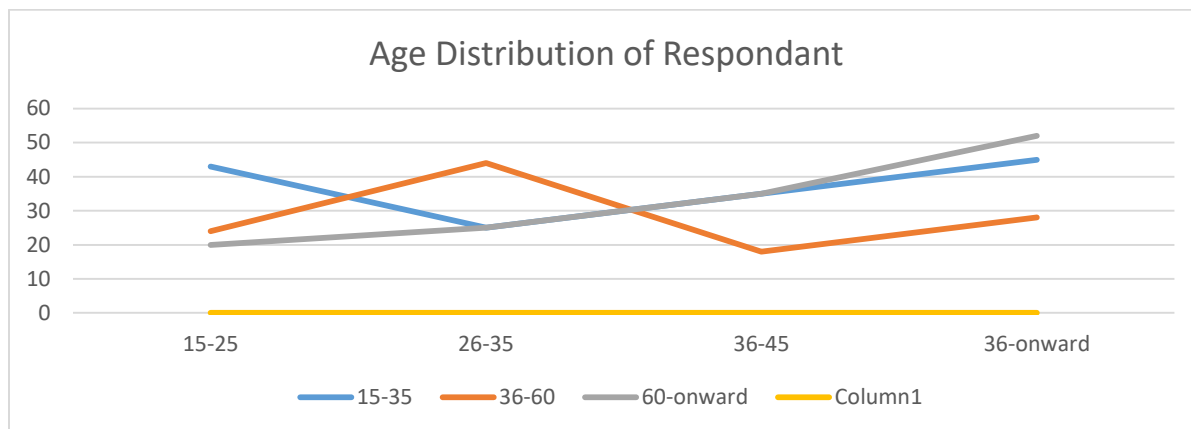


Figure: age distribution among respondents

Household Size and Dependency

The study revealed that 54% of the hawkers were found in large size of families of nine to fifteen members.

Importance of Large Households

- Larger families have more dependents that can put a significant financial burden on the primary earner.
- Hawkers in low income neighborhoods may be part of a multigenerational family as they need to work long hours to get money to support their families.

Number of Earning Members

- Most households have only one to five wage earners, indicating:
 - High economic vulnerability
 - Financial instability
 - Heavy dependency ratios
- This underscores the crucial role of street vending in sustaining household livelihoods.

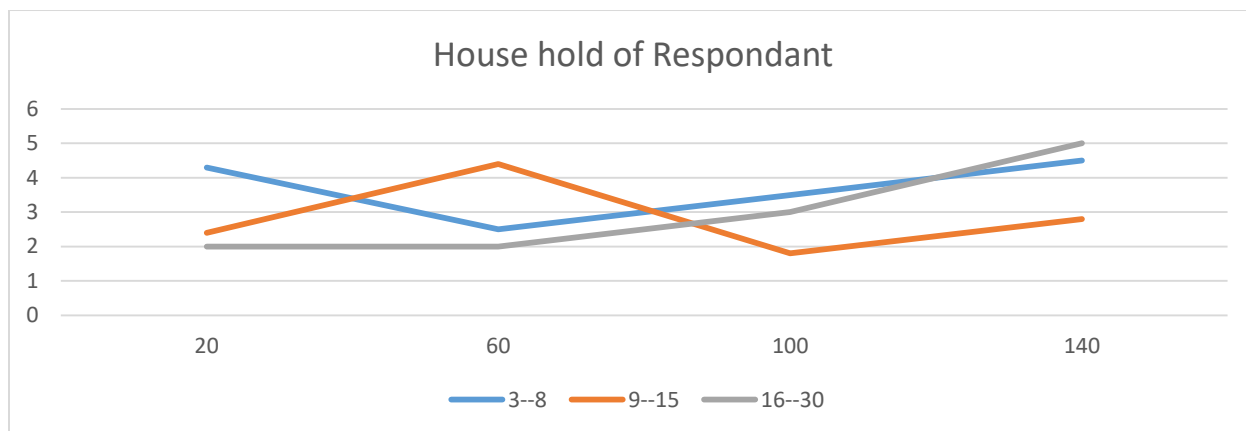


Figure: household distribution among respondents.

Income Levels

According to income analysis, 71% of the hawkers have an income between PKR 16,000 to 25,000 per month.

Interpretation

- This is insufficient to cover any of Pakistan's urban living wages and is likely to be insufficient to sustain life on a day to day basis.
- Street vending provides unstable earnings, which fluctuate according to:
 - Daily sales
 - Seasonal changes
 - Market location
 - Customer flow

Low-Income Implications

- Hawkers either have little or no savings or they are not saving any money at all.
- They have trouble paying for education, housing, utilities or medical care.
- They are very vulnerable to poverty in emergencies.

The unevenness and the temporary nature of informal employment are reflected here.!

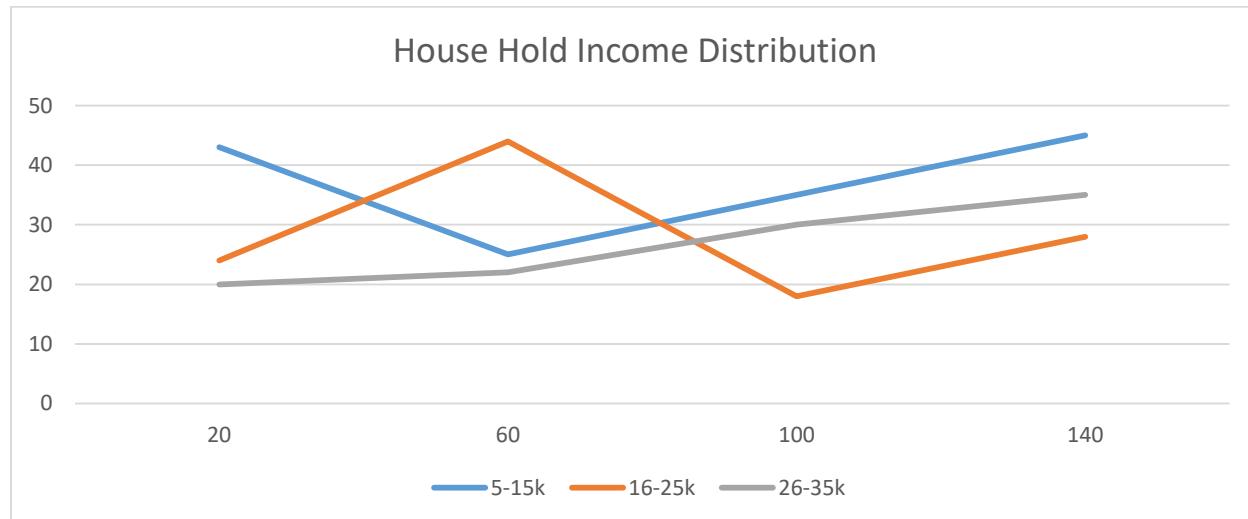


Figure: income distribution among respondents.

Working Hours and Work Routine

The findings indicate that 42% of the hawkers put in 8 hours of work a day and 36% work on all seven days of the week.

Interpretation

- Hawkers do not have fixed working hours or holidays on a weekly basis as their daily income is based on that.
- Stress, fatigue and poor health results from extended labor, which causes sleep deprivation.
- Work schedules are influenced by:
 - Competition with other vendors
 - Weather conditions
 - Municipal or police enforcement actions
 - Customer traffic patterns

Street vending is thus a labor-intensive and time-demanding occupation.

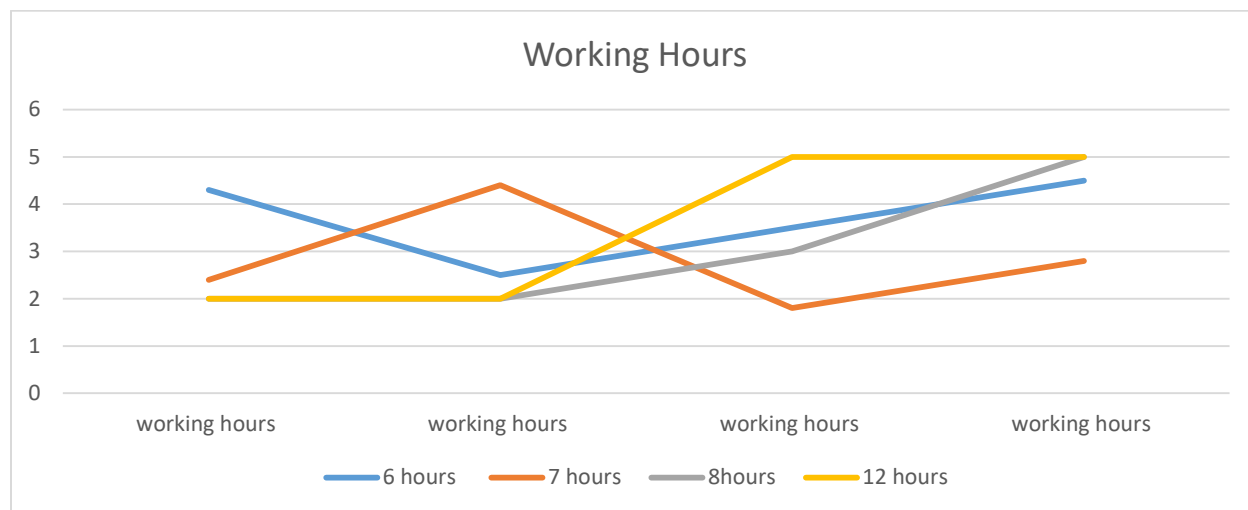


Figure: working hours distribution among respondents.

Types of Items Sold

Popular products sold are:

- **Fruits and vegetables (36%):** Daily essentials in high demand.
- **Food products (25%):** Profitable in crowded markets due to high turnover.
- **Repair services (13%):** Require skill rather than capital and have lower start-up costs.

This diversity reflects the ability of hawkers to adjust to the local market demand and competition.

Challenges Faced by Hawkers

Respondents reported several recurring challenges:

(a) Police harassment

- Confiscation of goods
- Forced bribes
- Fear of eviction from selling locations

(b) Weather exposure

- Lack of shelter during extreme heat, rain, or cold
- Loss of income during adverse weather conditions

(c) Lack of storage facilities

- Inability to store unsold items
- Spoilage of perishable goods
- Additional daily transportation costs

(d) Insecurity

- Theft
- Street crime
- Absence of legal protection

These challenges highlight that street vending is a precarious and vulnerable occupation.

Discussions

This indicates that there is a systemic issue with street vendors and not just an individual choice that is driving them towards poverty. It is difficult for these workers to change their jobs, so they do not have the opportunity to improve their lives. Besides that, a lack of government support and less social service make their situation even worse.

The majority of vendors have a big burden financial burden to support their huge families. They work “off the books” and this causes them to be bullied by government workers, landlords and middlemen. In spite of all these difficulties, the street vendors do play a significant role in the city, and they did make available to the public some of the necessities of daily life at an affordable price.

Finally, the outcome is that this community is in need of support and assistance. The government can provide security and improve the working conditions by providing small financial loans and establishing safe vending zones, and simplifying the permit process.

Conclusion

The street vendors of Walayatabad in Multan are the locomotives of the unorganized sector of the economy. They offer the residents and small businesses simple and cost-effective products and services that are satisfying and fulfilling. These vendors, though very important to the community, are highly vulnerable as the work is largely unorganized.

Street vending is strongly related to the lack of formal work. This is also worsened by the extra pressures of having to support large families and the physical toll of such work. These workers are not formally recognized and are constantly exploited and jobless. Besides this, they do not have access to any critical social security services.

A comprehensive policy needs to be put in place to improve the living conditions of hawkers. They can greatly enhance their working conditions by ensuring that their rights are protected and that basic municipal infrastructure is made available to satisfy their needs (such as toilet facilities and vending areas) and by establishing social support systems. Hawkers play a vital role in sustaining urban population, despite the constant challenge.

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