

# **Female Railway Hawkers in Kolkata: Navigating Gender and Economic Opportunities**

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## FEMALE RAILWAY HAWKERS IN KOLKATA: NAVIGATING GENDER AND ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES

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**Acknowledgements:**

We would like to extend our heartfelt gratitude towards the railway hawkers of West Bengal, railway officials, hawkers' union representatives, and commuters using railway services. We are extremely grateful to Mr. Morad Hossain, Secretary, of the National Hawkers' Federation, and Mr. Siddhabrata Das, president and founder of Jatiyo Bangla Sommelan for helping us with our research. We are also grateful to our faculty advisors Prof. Anirban Kar, Prof. Sudha Vasan, and Prof. Anindita Dutta for guiding us throughout our project. Lastly, we want to thank the Center for Development Economics, Delhi School of Economics and Krishna Raj Fellowship for giving us this golden opportunity of such enriching research in this field.

## **Abstract**

This paper explores the lives and livelihoods of railway hawkers in West Bengal, India, in light of socio-economic challenges and opportunities for informal sector workers. We use a mixed-methods approach that combines surveys, interviews, and observations of 123 railway hawkers operating on suburban train routes in Kolkata. We find that, under the conditions of work, there is a huge difference in gender in terms of the level of income and safety. The women hawking vendors are fettered by societal and cultural problems that have burdened them. This research also takes a look at the product mix of railway hawkers wherein it has discussed the advantages and disadvantages of providing diverse products while facing competition. We do acknowledge the role of hawker unions in the provision of security and support but highlight the need for more effective policy interventions in redressing the vulnerabilities of these workers.

## Introduction

An Indian train is a marketplace on wheels. Hawkers are undoubtedly an important element of any Indian railway experience. They transform platforms and trains into bustling bazaars, selling everything from essentials to unique local products and services. The female hawkers in Bengal's local trains are important to the railway ecosystem. These women mostly hail from low-income households, and support their family by selling a wide range of commodities to commuters.

This research project aims to investigate the impact of gender on the experiences and opportunities of female railway hawkers in West Bengal as opposed to their male counterparts. Gender dynamics in the informal sector can have a huge impact on female hawkers' working conditions, income levels, safety, and overall productivity. In this paper, over three weeks we interviewed railway hawkers in train routes of the suburban Kolkata- Sealdah-Bongaon route, Sealdah-Gede route, Ranaghat Jn - Bongaon route, Howrah-Bandel route, and other sub-routes like Barasat-Hasnabad, Ranaghat- Bongaon and Ranaghat-Krishnanagar, covering districts of North 24 Parganas, Howrah, Hooghly, and Nadia, from where most of the working class comes to work and is a vast business network for the railway hawkers selling a multitude of goods ranging from Achaars to Electronic Gadgets. This study not only adds to the academic understanding but also provides real ground-level knowledge to policymakers, NGOs, and other stakeholders working to improve the livelihood of female hawkers in the region.

## Literature Review

Mazumdar and Ghosh (2019) have discussed the socio-economic characteristics and the working conditions of hawkers in the informal sector with their study on the railway hawkers of Northeast India. Although it is located within a space outside Kolkata, there are various key points discussed that help broaden the understanding of railway hawkers. The core functions that route and socio-economic profiles of these unorganized sellers reveal that more numbers of hawkers fall into this trade not finding suitable alternatives. Perhaps for rail hawkers, it can similarly be so, more on this part for an understandable case. Findings from the research on marginalization and vulnerabilities of railway hawkers, such as lack of legal protection and harassment, would suggest that gender-specific barriers may compound challenges faced by female railway hawkers in Kolkata. Therefore, this research would bring out the need to study the gender dynamics in the informal sector of railway hawkers to fully understand the disparities and vulnerabilities faced by women in this occupation.

Even though literature relating to railway hawkers is sparse, there are works by Mandal (2019) and Roy and Mitra (2018) on railway hawkers in regions like Mumbai and Indian Sundarban. They studied the livelihood patterns, and buyer-seller dynamics and addressed the socio-economic conditions of railway hawkers. Hawking in the train requires a product portfolio that makes them stay in the competition in a dynamic market where many other hawkers offer similar products.

The ethnographic work of Bhattacharyya, 2020 on the hawkers who are trading between Howrah and Bandel in the Eastern Division of Indian Railways presents rich details of their day-to-day lives and struggles. The study outlines social intricacies, routines, and challenges faced by hawkers about policing, competition, and passenger behavior. Of great importance, it pointed out the extreme gender gaps when it comes to hawkers. For instance, Malati, a woman hawker, shows that female hawkers are most affected in these areas. The male passengers are abusive and unwilling to purchase commodities from women out of apprehension that the other peers might mock them. There is also an issue of switching between different compartments by moving trains; female hawkers are stigmatized as 'bad women ', making it impossible for them to compete on the same ground as male hawkers.

This study highlights the significance of considering the specific issues and vulnerabilities that women hawkers in Kolkata experience, especially in the context of railway hawkers. Women face additional challenges than the general problems of poverty, health issues, and social stigma that hawkers endure daily due to societal and cultural constraints. Bhattacharyya's work underlines the dynamic, processual nature of social existence among hawkers by calling for a more sophisticated and subtle understanding of everyday life and interactions that go on to shape their existence. This research contributes meaningfully to the literature on gender disparities in the informal sector, especially in railway hawking in Kolkata.

Ghosh and Das (2017), though their study is relevant to street vendors in Kolkata, although not hawking around the rail station, provide excellent information about the general case of women in the city's informal sector. Their research focuses on the economic precariousness of the women as they are mainly driven into street vending, partly because of poverty or a lack of education coupled with few job opportunities. The authors focus on the vulnerabilities of women hawkers by pointing out that they often suffer harassment at the hands of police, lack easy access to credit, and are stigmatized within society. Although the present study does not specifically touch upon railway hawkers, these observations would likely hold for this subgroup due to their similar operating environments. The focus of the study on the necessity of social security measures, better working conditions, and legal recognition among street vendors underlines the need to address gender inequalities within this specific sector and among railway hawkers. In this sense, such a study is useful for providing a framework through which to explore issues of informality and inequality of gender in Kolkata.

The informal sector comprises a large portion of the workforce, but Bhowmik(2003, 2009) and Adhikari (2011) expose the lack of basic protections and legal ambiguities that the informal workforce has to face. Studies by Shen Lin(2018) and Powel and Baker(2011) address the need for resilience and adaptability among informal entrepreneurs.

Scholars like C.K. Prahalad have emphasized that large corporations should engage with the bottom of the pyramid to create wealth and reduce poverty. He argues that private enterprises can benefit by trading with the underprivileged, thus contributing to poverty alleviation. When it comes to the case of India, hawking in railways is a large employment sector. This occupation is attractive

due to the minimal capital requirements and low entry barriers, making it a viable livelihood for those with little or no formal education. Despite the lack of formal recognition, these hawkers play a crucial role in bridging the gap between producers and consumers, especially for small-scale industries producing goods like synthetic items, cosmetics, and food. Our research focuses on the socio-economic characteristics and unique challenges of female railway hawkers in West Bengal, particularly their comparison with their male counterparts. The role of product portfolios in the sales and adaptability of hawkers to a competitive market environment has also been studied to identify how such choices shape their livelihood strategies. Besides, we examined how gender impacts railway expenditure by hawkers and noticed that there was a disparity in the expenditure between male and female hawkers. Finally, we reflect on the general impacts that growth in the informal sector may have on the livelihoods of railway hawkers and discuss possible policy instruments that can be adopted to facilitate their development, train them, and improve their capacity-building



## **Methodology**

The study is based on primary data. To achieve the objectives of the study, primary data has been collected through the well-tested questionnaire and personal interviews from 123 unauthorized hawkers from several different routes of Kolkata Suburban Railways (Sealdah-Bongaon, Sealdah-Gede, Howrah-Bandel, Barasat-Hasnabad, Ranaghat-Bongaon, Ranaghat-Krishnanagar). Both closed and open-ended questions are included in the questionnaire. We have divided our analysis into two parts - objective and subjective. Objective analysis is drawn from survey responses that we have collected from hawkers and travelers on the suburban railway. This data is then compared and normalized with the Population survey of 2011 to get a better understanding of certain aspects within the study like caste and population composition. The narrative analysis is drawn through our observations we took over 20 days of surveying and includes our view of various articles and interviews relevant to the issue. The conclusion is drawn by combining both objective and subjective analysis to get a complete picture of the situation in-ground.

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### Data Analysis

For the objective analysis, we have taken mainly variables such as gender, age, daily expenses, sales, distance from home, work experience, and items sold by them. We believe that these data points give us an all-round picture of the socio-economic condition of workers and also help us get a better picture of the gender dynamics in play.

### Age

Row Labels	21-30	30-40	40-50	50-60	60 Above	Below 21	Unspecified	Grand Total
Female	9.38%	21.88%	18.75%	25.00%	18.75%	3.13%	3.13%	100.00%
Male	4.60%	22.99%	28.74%	22.99%	17.24%	3.45%	0.00%	100.00%
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>5.88%</b>	<b>22.69%</b>	<b>26.05%</b>	<b>23.53%</b>	<b>17.65%</b>	<b>3.36%</b>	<b>0.84%</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

The table indicates that respondents aged 50 and above account for more than 40% of the total, while those aged 30 or below make up less than 10%. This goes in line with the conclusion drawn by K. P Kannan and G. Raveendran of young people shifting towards the formal sector of employment even when the informal sector is the driving force of the economy. They discovered that this change was associated with higher education levels and the increased stability provided by formal sector jobs.

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### Expense Ratio and Distance

Gender List	Distance				
Expense Ratio	Far	Near	Very Far	Very Near	Grand Total
<b>25-50</b>	<b>7.46%</b>	<b>11.94%</b>	<b>0.00%</b>	<b>4.48%</b>	<b>23.88%</b>
Female	0.00%	1.49%	0.00%	0.00%	1.49%
Male	7.46%	10.45%	0.00%	4.48%	22.39%
<b>50-75</b>	<b>0.00%</b>	<b>2.99%</b>	<b>0.00%</b>	<b>0.00%</b>	<b>2.99%</b>
Female	0.00%	1.49%	0.00%	0.00%	1.49%
Male	0.00%	1.49%	0.00%	0.00%	1.49%
<b>75 and Above</b>	<b>0.00%</b>	<b>0.00%</b>	<b>1.49%</b>	<b>1.49%</b>	<b>2.99%</b>
Male	0.00%	0.00%	1.49%	1.49%	2.99%
<b>Less than 25</b>	<b>16.42%</b>	<b>34.33%</b>	<b>7.46%</b>	<b>11.94%</b>	<b>70.15%</b>
Female	2.99%	5.97%	2.99%	5.97%	17.91%
Male	13.43%	28.36%	4.48%	5.97%	52.24%
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>23.88%</b>	<b>49.25%</b>	<b>8.96%</b>	<b>17.91%</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

The table shows us the relationship between the daily expenses of respondents and their gender. Here we have devised a ratio called expense ratio which looks into respondents' expenses to respondents' daily income. For a given level of income, the table indicates that men spend more than their female counterparts. This observation is in line with Aiman Haque et al. article on how women working in the informal sector have less discretionary spending than men. An argument against this conclusion might arise because men tend to live further away from the workplace as compared to women, but we can see from the table that distance from the workplace has little to do with their spending habits, thereby cementing the observation.

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### Sales and Work Experience

	Sales						
% of people involved	<200	>800	200-400	400-600	600-800	Not Available	Grand Total
10-20 Years	0.00%	9.09%	63.64%	13.64%	4.55%	9.09%	100.00%
Less than 10 Years	12.50%	6.25%	53.13%	15.63%	3.13%	9.38%	100.00%
More than 20 Years	10.20%	6.12%	42.86%	32.65%	0.00%	8.16%	100.00%
Unspecified	18.75%	6.25%	50.00%	6.25%	0.00%	18.75%	100.00%
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>10.08%</b>	<b>6.72%</b>	<b>50.42%</b>	<b>21.01%</b>	<b>1.68%</b>	<b>10.08%</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

This table shows the relationship between the percentage of people working and daily sales. The minimum wage for unskilled workers in West Bengal 2024 is Rs. 376. As we observe from the table, about 60% of the total respondents live below this threshold. Another alarming fact we can observe is that about 50% of respondents who have been in this profession for more than 20 years also live below the minimum wage. This observation is in line with the conclusion drawn by Kanika Mahajan (2019) and Ravi Kanbur and Jan Svejnar (2009) that most of the workers in the informal sector earn less than the minimum wage. This can be an indication that individuals must have minimal opportunity or scope to switch their jobs to higher-paying jobs, even within the informal sector.

### The product portfolio of Railway Hawkers

In this section, we start our discussion by taking into account the product diversity of railway hawkers and its overall impact on their sales and adaptability. Product portfolio can be defined in a broad sense as the assemblage of products and services presented by the business to the end market. In their paper on product variety, Xiang et al.(2012) examine the effects of product variety on an operational measure, through which an evaluation of specific aspects of day-to-day operations can be done. This enables organizations to ensure efficiency, productivity, and quality within their activities. And here it is expected to explain the benefits and shortcomings of offering assorted products. In the case of railway hawkers, passenger demographics and preferences are changing constantly. Assorted product portfolio helps enterprises to achieve higher levels of sales

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is one of the two conclusions Wan et al(2012) make. But it has been also agreed upon that wide product variety can lead to accumulation of perplexity amongst the consumers and in turn, it affects negatively sales.

The study is done for a firm-level practice. Here we try to bring it to the informal sector and see if it has an impact. By assuming railway hawkers as micro-entrepreneurs whose livelihood situation is decided by selling items in a competitive market where there is always a possibility of losing their target customers to other hawkers. So it is important to understand this and decide on their product line accordingly. The passengers form a diverse base of customers than any other stationary location. This section will introduce the basic aspects of the railway hawkers in the surveyed region and analyze the pattern of distribution of the railway hawkers operating in the major routes done in the study. By using the Roman Pichler Matrix to understand the low-benefit and high-benefit products we can examine the product portfolio of the railway hawkers in the surveyed region. The table below shows the distribution of the items on sale

% of people							
Income Levels	<200	>800	200-400	400-600	600-800	Not Available	Grand Total
Crafts	7.14%	7.14%	50.00%	14.29%	0.00%	21.43%	100.00%
Packed Items	14.29%	6.12%	55.10%	16.33%	2.04%	6.12%	100.00%
Unpacked items	5.88%	5.88%	47.06%	23.53%	2.94%	14.71%	100.00%
Utility Items	9.09%	9.09%	45.45%	31.82%	0.00%	4.55%	100.00%
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>10.08%</b>	<b>6.72%</b>	<b>50.42%</b>	<b>21.01%</b>	<b>1.68%</b>	<b>10.08%</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

The packed items are mostly small packs of snacks. As a result, the sales of these packed items are more in the less than 200 and 200-400 range. These items are procured from the wholesale sellers present in the stations themselves. The hawkers buy the packed items from these sellers and take

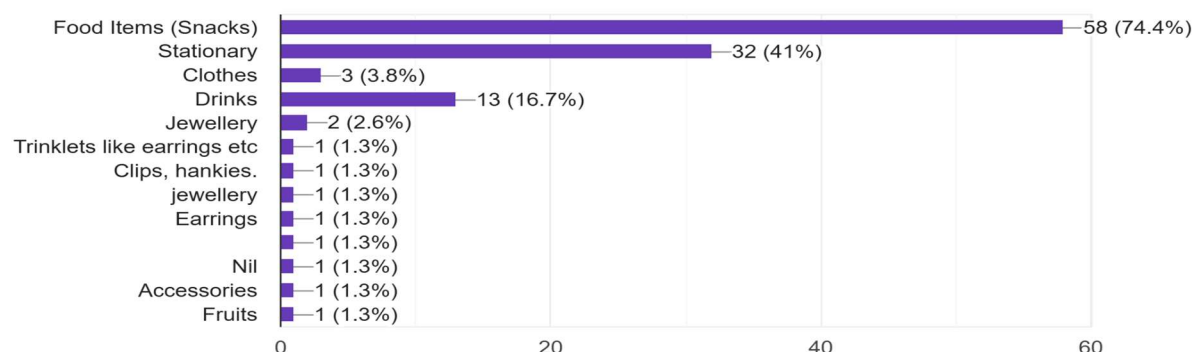
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them to moving trains. Mobility with packed items is relatively easy compared to all other groups. Usually, hawkers use the handlebars on the trains to carry out the sales while the train moves.

And as our consumer survey indicates

What type of goods do you buy ?

78 responses



The passengers most prefer snacks. From the customer's perspective, it is the cheapest and most visibly hygienic product they can buy. From the hawker's perspective selling the packed items only gives below-average or average sales. But it gives consistent sales more than any other products. So the non-risk-taking type of railway hawkers prefers packed items than any other.

Unpacked item sellers are mostly fruit-selling hawkers. Their mobility is much harder because they use big baskets. Unpacked item sellers obtain above-average sales compared to packed item sellers.

Crafts items are mostly sold by station hawkers as it is more convenient for the customers to take the time and choose the items they want to buy. Even the train hawkers who sell craft items sell the items when the train is stationary at their final destination or starting point.

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	Product line			
	Packed	Unpacked	Crafts	Utility Items
Product Line	Pappad	Fruits	Duppatta	Daily Tools
	Kot Kotli	Oranges	Jwellery	Combs
	Groundnut	Mosambi	Churidar	Lock
	Toffees	Cocunut	Nightwears	Bags
		Guava	Handtowels	Safty Pin
	Drinking Water	Amla		Naphthaline balls
	Local Brands		Toys	Umbrella
	Rail Neer	Boiling Items		Incense Sticks
	Popular Brands	Eggs		Pain relief Balms
		Masala chhola		
		Chana		Daily Hygiene
				Earbud
				Nailcutters
				Stationary items
				Electric items
				Blenders
				Light bulb
				Shoe repair

After a close examination of the share of sales from the items a product portfolio matrix plotting was done with their response to the quadrants showing high growth and low growth along with high benefits and low benefits.

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### Market share

Type of Item	Income level				Grand Total
	Crafts	Packed Items	Unpacked items	Utility Items	
<200	8.33%	58.33%	16.67%	16.67%	100.00%
>800	12.50%	37.50%	25.00%	25.00%	100.00%
200-400	11.67%	45.00%	26.67%	16.67%	100.00%
400-600	8.00%	32.00%	32.00%	28.00%	100.00%
600-800	0.00%	50.00%	50.00%	0.00%	100.00%
Not Available	25.00%	25.00%	41.67%	8.33%	100.00%
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>11.76%</b>	<b>41.18%</b>	<b>28.57%</b>	<b>18.49%</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

Even Though Utility items show higher sales in the 200-400 and 400-600 ranges, they only capture 18.49% of the market share, hence higher benefits but low growth. Packed items have 41% of the market share, but the sales are in lower ranges. It shows low benefits and higher growth. Unpacked items have higher benefits and when compared to crafts, high growth.

According to this data, a product portfolio matrix is formed. This is an adapted form of a Roman Pichler matrix, This defines the potential of a product to make profits for the seller by placing it in the matrix based on its market share, in this context the railway network and the future growth in the industry.



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<b>High Growth</b>	Packed Items	Unpacked Items
<b>Low Growth</b>	Crafts	Utility Items
	<b>Low Benefits</b>	<b>High Benefits</b>

<b>Job type</b>	<b>No. of People</b>
Crafts	14
Packed Items	49
Unpacked items	34
Utility Items	22
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>119</b>

It is uncertain that more hawkers are choosing unpacked items when entering this profession because of the limitation in the data frame in our analysis. However, interviews with the hawkers who are pursuing sales of Unpacked Items seem to have consistent and moderately high sales. Since these items are prepared from their households with the help of family members and most of the food preparations are done in between low sales hours like noon time enables them to have low costs compared to other product portfolios. All other items are procured from a different wholesale market and it requires extra effort from the railway hawkers.

Crafts and Utility items are not chosen by all customers/passengers, whereas food items are mostly opted by all. Focusing on food can drive high sales growth. As indicated in the table, in the total of 119 hawkers most of them focus on sales of packed or unpacked food items. The product portfolio suggests that the hawkers are acting as a bridge between the local wholesale seller and the passengers, except for chana-based unpacked items. The policies should focus on capacity development for these micro units rather than reacting unfavorably to the freedom of sales of the railway hawkers.

## Narrative Analysis

Over the 20 days of our survey, we met and talked to almost 120 hawkers, traveling for over 100 kilometers every day. The response rate to our surprise was quite high. It increased as we traveled towards the interiors. We also spoke to several representatives from hawkers' unions and commuters who travel on these trains daily and who comprise the primary consumer base for the hawkers. The survey responses from railway hawkers present a complex picture of the challenges and experiences faced by these individuals in their line of work.

Take for example the case of 9-year-old Suraiya (name changed). She studies in a madrasa and takes care of her younger siblings. In her free time, she sells toffees on the platform to earn some extra money to help her mother who works as a housemaid and is the only source of income for the family. When asked if she was suffering from any illness, she simply replied, "*Bas sardi lagi hai*" (it's just a cold). Perhaps she is too young to grasp the dangers associated with her work. For her, safety is a negligible concern; her primary focus is on selling all her toffees. There are several young children like Suraiya who are involved in this business, indicating a cycle of family dependence on this line of work from a very young age. Education is frequently put on hold or completely abandoned due to the need to earn a living.

The gender aspect reveals that female hawkers face particular challenges, though some express feeling safe within their environment. One approach we took to address the safety issue was to ask female hawkers how late they work and, if they work late hours, whether they have someone to accompany them on their way home. Most female hawkers aim to finish their shifts by 8 PM, though we observed some selling vegetables on trains as late as 10 PM. In terms of product procurement, a few female respondents indicated that they feel safer going to the wholesale market in groups. Nonetheless, we observed that female hawkers were generally hesitant to respond to questions about harassment, possibly due to the prevailing stigma surrounding the issue. One respondent claimed that they remain so engrossed in their work that they fail to notice harassment, saying "*amra khete khawa manush bapu, amader osob dike lokkhyo thake na*" meaning 'we are hard-working people, we have no time to pay attention to such things (harassment)'. Most female hawkers try to sell their commodities within the ladies' compartment claiming that there is more safety and ease of doing business and also more sales as compared to other compartments. One

customer pointed out that the presence of male hawkers in female compartments makes her feel unsafe, especially during peak hours when the trains are overcrowded. She advocated for allowing only female hawkers to sell in ladies' compartments.

Working conditions for these hawkers appear harsh, especially for women. Female hawkers are often compelled to enter this profession out of urgent necessity, balancing family obligations alongside their work commitments. “.... *bari phire ranna banna toh kortei hobe, meye der kaaj je*” (I’ve to cook when I get back home, it’s a woman’s job) says one female hawker when asked about her daily routine. Another respondent, who is nearly blind, brings her 4-year-old daughter along to sell toffees on trains because there is no one at home to look after the child. Most female respondents claimed that they wake up as early as 3 or 4 AM to perform household chores before starting their business day. Sarada Devi (name changed), 67, who claims to be the first female hawker in Bongaon junction, continues to work even after her hip surgery because her sons do not take care of her financial needs. One hawker told us how she was forced to take up this job after her husband fled to Bangladesh leaving her alone with their two years old daughter. Another female hawker claimed the same reasons for entering into the business, when her husband left home one day, unannounced, leaving her to feed a family of 7 people. One female hawker, who mainly supports her husband in managing their business, explained that they depend on their son, who sends money sporadically, as their earnings from the business are very limited and barely enough to sustain even two people. Health problems are also common among these hawkers, with many citing chronic illnesses or physical impairments. A few hawkers mentioned suffering from neurological issues, a condition we found to be notably common among female hawkers or referenced by male hawkers regarding their female family members. The lack of medical care or funds for health-related expenses is evident, as one hawker shared his disappointment about being unable to afford basic medical treatments. A fruit seller at Gobardanga station expressed her despair over her inability to afford medical treatment for her disabled grandson and her deaf-mute daughter. With her daily sales dwindling, she finds herself reliant on her son, the sole other earning member of the family. Government initiatives such as Lakshmir Bhandar, a flagship program introduced by the West Bengal Government in February 2021 to offer financial assistance to women from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, have proven to be widespread and accessible. However, they have failed to substantially improve the financial circumstances of these individuals. Even initiatives such as the widow allowance and old age allowance have provided

some measure of sustenance for these individuals, yet they have not been able to extricate them from their precarious circumstances.

Access to necessities, such as clean water and proper washroom facilities in the stations, remains a significant issue. The washrooms, especially for women, are described as unhygienic, and unusable. While the paid toilets are relatively well-maintained, the unpaid ones are severely neglected. When asked about water facilities at the platforms most of them showed their disappointment. One hawker claimed that almost half of his daily earnings go into purchasing bottled water because the platforms have no clean drinking water facilities. While interviewing hawkers in Sealdah station, one of India's major railway terminals, we found out that the station premises lack even basic medical facilities. In case of any medical emergency, people have to travel to the nearest Nil Ratan Sarkar Hospital.

Hawkers in the Howrah-Bandel route, however, face a special type of problem. Shortly after the eviction of street vendors from sidewalks in West Bengal, the new target was shifted to making the lives of railway hawkers worse by the RPF. There have been reports on such actions, very recently on 21 May 2024, one of the Railway hawkers unions handed over a memorandum to the Railway Protection Force officials testifying about RPF brutality on Hawkers at the New Jalpaiguri Railway station.

During our conversations with the hawkers, it was evident that RPF was making life difficult for these hawkers in some particular stations, particularly in junctions. Suvendu Roy, co-convenor of Jatiyo Bangla Sommelan, a hawker's union quite active in this route claims that the Railway Police Force is disrupting their business often resorting to hefty fines and even physical violence, in the name of maintaining law and order. There is a language barrier among the majorly Hindi-speaking RPF officials and Bengali-speaking hawkers. Laltu Dutta, 32, claims that the RPF officials are discriminating against them if they cannot communicate in Hindi. Babu Roy, 56, contends that if the government seeks to impose fines, it should direct its efforts towards those who vandalize public property, spit on platforms, or cross railway tracks while wearing headphones, rather than targeting innocent, hard-working hawkers. Although stations like Sealdah and Ranaghat offer substantial sales opportunities, hawkers face significant challenges due to exorbitant fines and violence from the Railway Protection Force (RPF). Each station is home to at least 50 hawkers

who earn their livelihood by selling goods on trains. The RPF frequently arrests them without just cause. Cities like Mumbai, Bhusawal, Nagpur, Pune, and Solapur have reported about 20000 cases and arrests with fines of 1 crore in Mumbai only and a huge enough amount from the subsequent cities from the hawkers. This clearly shows the invasion into the life of hawkers. About 100 hawkers are being apprehended every day in the Mumbai division alone. RPF's stand is that "Stringent action sends out a clear message that such activities will not be tolerated". There are 'Hawker free zones' boards put up by the authorities to ensure that no hawkers encroach on the railway premises. In response, unions are advocating for hawkers by facilitating protective measures such as issuing identification cards and licenses, enabling them to operate within railway stations legally. The presence of unions such as this significantly aids hawkers in maintaining an organized business framework. Each station is equipped with a hawker union office. In the event of a dispute between a hawker registered under the Barasat branch and one registered under the Habra branch of the same union, the leaders of the respective unions convene a meeting with the parties involved to resolve the issue amicably.

Upon inquiry, numerous hawkers reported a significant increase in their numbers following the COVID-19 pandemic. The hardships wrought by the pandemic pushed many individuals to their breaking point, obliterating their livelihoods. One hawker transitioned into this profession after the company he was employed with went bankrupt as a direct result of COVID-19, while another was forced into this livelihood after the handloom factory where he worked was permanently closed down during the pandemic. This surge in hawkers reflects a broader trend of economic desperation, as countless individuals, unable to secure stable employment, have turned to informal sectors for survival. The resilience demonstrated by these hawkers is emblematic of their determination to adapt in the face of adversity. However, this influx has also intensified competition and heightened the scrutiny from authorities, further complicating their struggle for economic stability.

The hawkers surveyed present a picture of resilience amidst adversity. They form the backbone of the railway economy. Our interviews with customers revealed some intriguing insights. Most daily commuters expressed a clear preference for purchasing goods from hawkers rather than outside markets, citing the affordability and superior quality of items sold on trains. Many commuters have developed cordial relationships with the hawkers who are regular fixtures in their compartments,

fostering a valuable customer-seller bond. Additionally, these hawkers maintain extensive networks and often assist passengers in locating lost bags or children.

These narratives provide a profound insight into the socio-economic pressures the hawkers endure, shaped by poverty, illness, familial responsibilities, and gender dynamics. They underscore the remarkable adaptability and unwavering determination of hawkers striving to sustain their livelihoods in an exceedingly challenging environment.

## Conclusion

Our research contributes to and expands the existing literature on informal sector railway hawkers by addressing key gender-specific challenges faced by female railway hawkers in West Bengal, a focus that has been limited in previous studies. In the study conducted by Mazumdar and Ghosh, 2019 the socio-economic status of hawkers on the railway platforms across Northeast India was analyzed, while in 2020, Bhattacharyya recognized the gender-based misery suffered by hawkers operating on the Howrah to Bandel route, however our present research, considering all above points extends further, it makes its significance on disparities existing between the male and female hawkers of the railway ecosystem at Kolkata. This involves in-depth elaboration on the gender dimension involved in hawkers' expenditure ratios. Women seem to have lower expenses than the average man mainly because most are economically restrained and still enjoy fewer opportunities for means and resources.

Conversations during personal interviews revealed hardship experiences, income uncertainty, and strong determination from women involved in hawking who remain in such work although often exposed to much torture that includes muscle aches in carrying loads over long periods and little or no extended support from the family on many occasions and suffering social demeaning. Our results have illustrated that unions of hawkers provide some sort of security against harassment; however, the normalizing of risks and dangers in the railway environment underlines the need for stronger regulatory support. The study also covered the product portfolio of the hawker, which included both packed and unpacked commodities, crafts, and utility items, thus providing new insights into how product choices affect sales patterns, market shares, and adaptability to a highly competitive railway environment. This subtle understanding of product dynamics contributes to the livelihood analysis previously discussed by scholars such as Mandal (2019) and Roy and Mitra (2018).

Our study supports and extends Ghosh and Das's (2017) findings on the vulnerability of women street vendors in Kolkata, which would similarly benefit female railway hawkers in terms of social security measures, better working conditions, and legal recognition. In terms of the policy implications, our work underlines the necessity to provide formal support to railway hawkers. Similar recommendations were made by Bhowmik (2003 and 2009) for the protection and

recognition given to the informal workforce along with Adhikari (2011). Suggesting policy measures through a study on the impact that the growth of the informal sector has on the living conditions of railway hawkers, our work further introduces capacity building, skill development, and regulated hawking as potential sources of income for railway authorities. This rings with Prahalad's vision to engage bottom-of-the-pyramid entrepreneurs: that legalizing hawking on railway premises will work both ways for the benefit of hawkers and railway authorities.

Our analysis further depicts a gender imbalance in terms of spending. While, generally, men tend to spend more of their earnings on expenses compared to women, this may also be attributed to differences in levels of access to resources. We also positioned the policy landscape of railway hawkers, including the state's indifference and renewed attempts to remove informal hawkers from railway areas. Some facilitative measures, such as Central Railway's intention to legalize hawking, could not only be profitable in terms of handsome amounts but also improve their take-home earnings. While passenger perceptions regarding hawkers are varied, our study focuses on incorporation policies that consider the welfare and economic contributions of hawkers in railways.

The final point of our research is that even though literature related to railway hawkers is minimal, our study offers meaningfully by focusing attention on socio-economic characteristics, product portfolios, and expenditure patterns of railway hawkers in West Bengal, with an eye on gender-based disparities. A very fundamental limitation of the study will be its focus on one area. The need here might be for micro-level approaches to policy that heighten the informal sector's position in the railway ecosystem in semi-urban and rural areas from which a sizable proportion of the hawkers originates. Through the above multi-faceted approach, our research can thereby offer a holistic outlook on the livelihoods and difficulties of railway hawkers while laying down a framework supporting their growth and capacity building.



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