



# Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing

## Street Vendors

Street vendors play key roles in urban economies around the world. They provide easy access to a wide range of goods and services in public spaces: from fresh fruits and vegetables to building materials; garments and crafts to consumer electronics; prepared food to auto parts and repairs. They also offer goods in small quantities that are affordable to people who live on daily earnings. Street vendors generate demand for rural and urban producers, as well as service providers including market porters, security guards, and waste recyclers.

Official statistics show that street vendors make up between 2 and 24 per cent of total urban informal employment in African, Asian and Latin American cities. In many countries, especially in Africa, women are overrepresented in the street vending sector.

### Frequently Asked Questions About Street Vendors

#### ***Why do people work as street vendors?***

Many people enter street vending because they cannot find a job in the formal economy. Low barriers to entry, limited start-up costs, and flexible hours are some of the factors that draw street vendors to the occupation.

#### ***Do street vendors pay taxes or rent?***

Yes. Many street vendors pay various kinds of taxes, fees and levies, including indirect taxes. Street vendors also pay a form of rent through daily fees levied (or bribes demanded) in exchange for their use of public space. Street vendors have different costs and fill a different need in the local economy than off-street businesses.

#### ***Are street vendors unregulated?***

No. In many cities, street vendors are subject to a multitude of formal regulations, many of which contradict one another or are hard to understand. In cities where formal

regulations are not implemented, social regulations govern who can vend what goods in which locations at what times.

#### ***Do street vendors have the right to use public space?***

Many constitutions guarantee the right to work and/or the right to carry on a trade or business. In some countries, street vending organizations have successfully argued in courts of law that governments cannot violate that right by banning street trade (see a recent verdict in the Supreme Court of India, 2009).

#### ***Do street vendors cause crime and grime in cities?***

Some cities have street markets that are poorly regulated, resulting in a deficiency of cleaning and security services. But often street vendors pool their own money to pay for cleaning services and security guards, and conscientious vendors work hard to keep their stalls clean and to provide the “eyes and ears” to help deter crime in the streets. The famous story of the New York City street vendor who foiled a bomb plot offers a colourful example, but vendors’ contributions to public life are more subtle and commonplace in the everyday life of cities.

#### ***Do street vendors register their businesses?***

Sometimes. Many cities do not have a registration system that is appropriate or accessible to the vast majority of street vendors. Registration can be linked to licensing, and many cities issue far fewer licenses than there are street vendors. For example, in 2009, São Paulo, Brazil, had about 100,000 vendors, but only 2,200 held licenses; as many as 23,000 vendors had held licenses between 2001 and 2004, but the city government stopped issuing new licenses and gradually revoked those already issued. In addition to the rules for registration and licensing being complicated, in some cities they are only published in a language that most street vendors do not speak.



Vendor selling clothes in a street market (or ‘paradita’) in the local municipality of the Independencia in Lima.

Photo by Juan Arredondo / Getty Images Reportage



Street vendors in Bangkok's Economy Square provide home-cooked food, household items, and fresh fruits and vegetables to the local neighbourhood.  
Photo by Paula Bronstein / Getty Images Reportage

### ***Are street vendors organized?***

In some cities, vendors have formed membership-based organizations to help street vendors navigate their relationship with the authorities, build solidarity and solve problems with other vendors. Several have developed innovative ways to work with cities to keep the streets clean and safe while securing a livelihood for their members.

### ***Are there examples of cities that have adopted inclusive approaches to street vending?***

Where street vending is viewed as an asset, cities have adopted more inclusive urban planning approaches. Good practice documentation shows vendors can help with urban management challenges like crime and cleaning. Also, basic infrastructure – shelters, toilets, electricity and water – can both improve vendor work environments and make public space safer, more comfortable and aesthetically pleasing.

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## **Facts from WIEGO's Informal Economy Monitoring Study (IEMS)**

WIEGO's research with 753 street vendors and market traders in five cities – Accra, Ghana; Ahmedabad, India; Durban, South Africa; Lima, Peru; and Nakuru, Kenya – generated the following findings:

### ***Dependence on Informal Work for Survival***

- 85% live in households for which the main source of income is informal work.
- 68% rely on street vending as the main source of income.

### ***Issues***

- 53% of street vendors said insecurity of their vending site and harassment by local authorities and thugs are significant problems.

- 70% of fruit and vegetable vendors said obtaining a license is a problem.

### ***Contributions***

- 51% acquire their goods primarily from formal enterprises and another 27% buy them primarily from informal enterprises. The remainder produce the goods they sell.
- 84% of street vendors in the sample pay for services provided by porters, security guards, transport operators and others, generating additional economic activity.
- About 66% in the sample pay fees for licenses, permits or the use of public space, creating revenue for local governments.



A market vendor stands proudly at her tomato stand in the Makola Market.  
Photo by Jonathan Torgovnik / Getty Images Reportage

**For more information, research and stories about street vendors, visit [www.wiego.org](http://www.wiego.org).**

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