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## Struggles and Strength: The Story of Cambodia's Female Street Vendors

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*Street vending in Cambodia remains **essential**, vital for everyday life, especially in urban areas, providing crucial income for many, particularly women. Post-pandemic dynamics have further strained vendors, with decreased incomes and rising costs. The CNES's ethnographic study in Prey Toteung and Phnom Penh highlights the significant challenges faced by female vendors, including lack of support, financial burdens, and societal isolation. Despite*

*these hardships, many vendors remain optimistic, hoping for better government intervention and support to sustain their livelihoods. This is the second part in a series of research commentaries sharing the research observations and findings from an ethnographic study of street vendors of markets across Phnom Penh (Cambodia).*

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Street vending remains crucial in Cambodia, where the growing participation of the young work force thrives in the growing space of its large *informal sector*. It remains an important source of livelihood in urban spaces, and new avenues of study have broadened the understanding of post-pandemic dynamics.

To understand these ever-changing post-COVID-19 dynamics for vendors, the Centre for New Economics Studies (CNES) conducted research in the markets in the town of Prey Toteung and near the Phnom Penh International Airport to glean the narratives of these vendors. In our data collection, we found the stories of women to be notable, highlighting their economic woes and ambitions. Quite a large portion of street vendors are women and are not provided with adequate support for their problems.

A participatory-observation based ethnographic approach was used to gather primary data, with semi-structured oral interviews using in-depth questionnaires, allowing us to gain a better understanding of people's social, cultural, and economic contexts. The interviewee was able to control the flow of the conversation, ensuring comfort and ease in the conversation. Some findings from these interviews prove insightful in uncovering the daily realities of women and their businesses.



Photo1: The interviewer engaging with female street vendors at Prey Toteung Street Market

Most of the vendors, aged forty to forty-five years old, lack family support and shoulder the burden of their children's education. This financial strain has intensified since the pandemic. One vendor near the University of Cambodia shared how, pre-pandemic, due to factories around, they were able to earn a stable income of \$10-\$12.50 daily. However, factory closures and reduced worker numbers have significantly dropped customer spending, impacting their income by 30-40%.

Street vending is considered by many to be a job for women. It is largely seen as an extension of the work a woman does at home, providing and feeding her family. However, in this role it can be a lonely job, isolating from family, and requiring women to spend hours daily on the road alone working. The money these women bring in is incredibly useful; poorer families especially rely on this income to support children.

Their contributions, though necessary, are not always received with support. Running street vending stalls poses complex challenges for women vendors. They have to run their stalls single-handedly with no man to help them, making it difficult to take breaks or attend to personal needs. Besides, cultivating trust among competitors in the informal sector is

difficult, adding to the sense of isolation. It is also key to note here that most women vendors interviewed highlighted that in addition to their vending responsibilities, they are still expected to work and to carry out unpaid domestic work at home, largely unaided by other family members.

*"I am a victim of domestic violence; I hardly have any support from my relatives. They do not want to socialize with me as I am poor. For social and traditional occasions, I often have to borrow money to cover the related fees, such as clothes and contribution fees."* says Nguon Ngeun with tears in her eyes, a 45-year-old female who sells seasonal fruits on the streets of Phnom Penh. Her story, along with those of sixteen other female vendors interviewed, reveals a troubling reality.

The work itself, being an extension of a female-dominated space, is introduced to women by other women. Many individuals initially entered into street vending either upon the recommendation of others or by observing the success of fellow street vendors. Success in such situations can be determined by the ability to support one's children through school; this provides a high sense of satisfaction in business.

Many female vendors reported a drastic drop in income. Previously earning \$500-\$600 monthly, they now struggle to make ends meet. This financial hardship is compounded by rising material costs, creating a situation where expenses soar while income dwindles. Women, while experiencing some mobility through earning their own income, face issues with decreased bargaining power when pooling their income with their husbands' and making decisions on expenditures. They are seen as supporting their husbands, although their own contributions are significant.



Photo 2: The interviewer engaging with female street vendors at Prey Toteung Street Market

The post-pandemic reality shows a surplus of sellers competing for a limited customer base. To overcome this, vendors have shown a willingness to adapt and train themselves to remain relevant, as some have started selling beauty products online. Vendors have realized that while food will always be sold, it is crucial to their survival to branch out and pursue reliable customer bases to support their families.

Despite the crucial role education plays in securing better jobs, the average vendor completed only up to fifth grade of primary school. With the cost of education and the need for an income source playing a major role, Chhoeun Nita, a 17-year-old running her family's clothing store, stated that currently she was at a public school, whose fees were affordable.

However, her extra English class at American Bridge International School costs her family \$25 per month. This fee increases once she passes the fifth grade. While there have been strides made in Cambodia for women, still, many women with limited education work as street vendors when they move to the informal sector.

Despite this oversaturation, a significant portion of these individuals intend to persist in their current ventures due to a lack of alternative skills

and opportunities. Interestingly, for some, the pandemic served as a catalyst for change, prompting them to reassess their current business and consider expansion or choose alternative livelihood paths. There are many who feel the advantages of **running their own business**. They enjoy the autonomy of earning their own income, likening themselves to entrepreneurs. This perceived autonomy becomes important for the mobility of poorer families as they work to put themselves or their families through school for higher-income employment. They are officially considered "**self-employed**" and can avail certain benefits for themselves and their family.

While these sentiments are observed among many, the government lacks support for this necessary occupation. Spaces for conducting business are zoned off or restricted, legal representation is poor, and any advocacy is sluggish. Street vendors are required to make payments in order to operate in many urban areas and are sometimes also faced with outright **hostility** where the sentiment is one of hope that workers will remain in their designated rural spaces.

It is important to note that street vendors are likened to temporary workers, and that women in particular are not expected to keep working for long. For various reasons, street vendors are seen as almost a hindrance to city development, as they occupy large swathes of space with no key way to document them. Street vendors provide unmatched employment and income for many marginalized people. **Efforts** are being made to provide economic support to poor workers, particularly women.

Some vendors, like those with government-issued 'poor citizen cards,' enjoy certain benefits. These cards provide monthly stipends and hospital discounts, offering a safety net. However, these benefits come with a social cost, as vendors experienced discrimination from medical

professionals due to their card status. Though policymakers recognize the importance and permanency of such markets and vendors, the support provided is limited, and whatever is available is often accompanied by stipulations and social stigma.

There is also a **lack of childcare consideration** given to these workers. Vendors with young children are left without choice or guidance as to where to take their children when working and end up bringing them along to their work. Such constant consideration of the family and its situation, depending on one's financial situation, becomes a heavy burden, especially when faced alone.

Despite these obstacles, there remains a sense of optimism regarding the future of street vending. Many vendors express hope that the government will intervene by providing them with designated fee-free spaces to conduct their business. Street vendors in these markets are crucial to the flow of any urban market, and they generate incredible employment for many. Street vending even provides some sense of autonomy and generational mobility among those who would be otherwise resigned to employment reflecting their education level. Policy frameworks must be designed in such a manner that the welfare of these marginalized groups is taken care of rather than forgotten in the name of urban development. Women face a society that does not value their work and sends their businesses off with tedious policy support, even when they may enjoy the necessary work they do.

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*\* Banner photo from author.*

*\*The views expressed in the blog are those of the author alone. They do not reflect the position of the Saw Swee Hock Southeast Asia Centre, nor*

*that of the London School of Economics and Political Science.*

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