



The Impact of COVID 19 on the Women Vendors of Ima Market, Manipur

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Abstract

The Ima Market in Manipur is an all-women market which is also regarded as the largest in Asia. Men are not permitted to sell, do business or own a store of their own, but they can buy anything they wish, and they are often allowed to work as labourers for transporting heavy goods. Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) began in Wuhan, Hubei Province, China, and spread around the world, causing a global pandemic. Lockdowns were enforced in many parts of the world, and their effects were felt by everyone, including the women vendors of Ima Market. They also play an important part in the state's economy. However, this specific market was closed for ten months. As a result, it is vital to investigate the impact of its closure due to the lockdown including their socioeconomic situation and the resulting financial instability.

The study delves into the difficulties faced by the women sellers of Ima market during the lockdown. It also analyses the impact of their income drop; the hardships faced by their families along with the alternative ways they opted for in order to earn their livelihood. In addition to this, the paper also studies the socio-economic impact of the lockdown including the availability of food during the closure of the market.

Introduction

Manipur's Ima Keithel is one-of-a-kind. "Ima" means "mother," and "Keithel" means "marketplace" therefore translating it to "Mother's Market". It is, as the name implies, an inimitable market managed entirely by women. Situated right at the heart of Imphal city, it also symbolises women's empowerment and financial independence. In the early days, when the males were forced to leave their homes for work, the obligation of providing for the family rested on the women, sparking an economic fervour within them. Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19), as we all know, is an infectious disease in which the virus spreads mostly by droplets of saliva or discharge from the nose when an afflicted person coughs or sneezes. Many governments throughout the world declared lockdowns and restrictions in attempt to slow the spread of the virus, and India did the same on March 24, 2020. The pandemic's impact and the subsequent lockdown

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were felt by all throughout the world, but these women traders felt it harder. While the sale of basic commodities was permitted, and prohibitions on markets selling such products were relaxed, the Ima Market, Manipur's largest and busiest market, was compelled to remain closed for a period of ten months. Since the place was not only meant for selling and buying goods but also a platform to exchange the political and economic views of the women vendors, the closure of this marketplace affected the women vendors both socially and economically. But the economic impact was far larger compared to the social impact. There was extreme drop in their incomes, thus leading to hunger and more sufferings. While many studies were conducted with respect to the formal sectors, there was less information about the impact of COVID-19 on the informal workers. The study will explore the hardships underwent by the women vendors of Ima market whose livelihood depends on their daily wages. It will also present the various suggestions and opinions from their side as to ease their sufferings.

Objectives

- To study the impact of COVID-19 on the women vendors of Ima Market.
- To examine the socio-economic status of the women vendors of Ima Market.
- To analyse the challenges underwent by the women vendors of Ima Market during the lockdown.

Significance of the Study

The study focuses on analysing the impact of the lockdown experienced by the women vendors of the Ima market as a result of the market's closure for a period of 10 months. It also delves into the difficulties and challenges they encountered in feeding their families, since many of these vendors were the sole breadwinners for their households. It also illustrates how, regardless of their backgrounds, many women rely on this market for a living. Some of the study's mentioned features are important for future studies to comprehend the socioeconomic function of the women sellers in this market, their social status, the impact of the pandemic along with the ways in which they cope up during the closure of the market.

Review of Literature

Tripti Panwar in her research paper titled "*Women Market, Social Economic Impact, Case study on Ema Keithel (Women Market) Manipur India*" studies the role of women in society as well as the financial support of Ima Keithel's female merchants. The study demonstrated how women are an integral component of a country's social economy and growth. It was discovered that the majority of the female merchants are between the ages of 30 and 60. Many come from low-income households and are deeply in debt as a result of low-profit margins and a lack of suitable savings accounts, this study focused more on the economic position rather than the social and political implications of these women sellers in society.

Samarpreet Kaur (2020) in her article *“What Does COVID-19 Mean for The Livelihood of Women Street Vendors?”* emphasizes the economic hardships encountered by women street sellers, as well as the difficulty they face in getting healthcare, food, water, and sanitation during the epidemic, as well as the gender-based abuse. It goes on to say that the effects are exacerbated in underprivileged and oppressed communities, having a negative long-term impact on women's social and economic equality and contributing to their vulnerability. The article concluded that street vendors are an essential element of the economy and should be given special attention, particularly women street vendors, who are suffering a severe problem.

Shiney Chakraborty (2020) in her report titled *“Impact of COVID 19 National Lockdown on Women Informal Workers in Delhi”* addresses the impact of COVID-19 on women's paid and unpaid employment along with the obstacles they encounter as well as their methods in dealing with the pandemic and lockdown. Due to the drastic drop in revenue, more than half of the women street sellers sought loans from moneylenders. According to the survey, the inability to leave the house due to the lockdown was the leading cause of the substantial revenue reduction. The study recommends that the government should implement a minimum employment guarantee scheme (s) for informal workers, as well as specific reservations for women, a PDS to increase the quantity of food distributed and set up additional distribution centres, and direct cash transfers for the most vulnerable families.

Angana Chakrabarti, Yimkumla Longkumer (2020) in their article *“Caught between Covid & hunger, women at Imphal ‘mother’s market’ are struggling to survive”* emphasized the problems suffered by the women vendors of Ima Market as a result of the imposed lockdown, as well as their expectations from the government to provide some type of assistance to alleviate their sufferings to some level. The article highlights the diverse perspectives voiced by some Ima Market women traders discussing their hardships as a result of the lockdown. It further claims that some of the sellers have turned to other sources of income and have even created tiny shops in other locations to supplement their income.

In an article by Khabar Lahariya (2020) published on Breakthrough titled *“COVID-19 Spells Doom for an Already Shrinking Rural Female Workforce”* describes how COVID 19 and subsequent lockdowns have impacted the livelihoods of India's rural women the most, followed by income loss and instability. The article emphasizes the broad loss of jobs throughout the country, and how it is exacerbated for women in rural regions, who were already at a disadvantage prior to the pandemic. They have grown very vulnerable as a result of the imposed lockdown, owing to their increased reliance on spouses and relatives.

Research Methodology

The study employs a combination of descriptive and quantitative methods. A substantial portion of the research is descriptive of nature since it involves a comprehensive analysis of the women sellers' hardships, as well as the alternative tactics they opted for survival. Quantitative analytic methods were also employed to learn about the

pandemic's consequences. The universe of the study was 30 women vendors of Ima market whose major source of income comes from this market. The method of the structured questionnaire was implied under the primary data collection method. Various academic papers, newspaper articles, journals and documents have also been read in order to gain more knowledge and information about the pandemic and its impact. Tools such as t-test and Chi square test were used for data analysis.

Results and Discussions

1. Hypothesis 1 – t-test

Ho: Women vendors do not face severe economic crisis due to the pandemic of COVID-19.

H1: Women vendors face severe economic crisis due to the pandemic of COVID-19.

For testing this, we took into consideration the daily incomes of the vendors for three different periods and then divided it into two cases. In the first case, we draw a comparison between the average daily incomes of the vendors before the pandemic and during the lockdown. In the second case, we compare the average daily incomes of the vendors before the pandemic and during the relaxation. Paired t-test for difference of mean is applied in both the cases.

Ist case: Before the pandemic and during the lockdown

Table 1: t-test result of the hypothesis formulated between the average incomes of the vendors before the pandemic and during the lockdown

Period	N	<u>d</u>	SD	df	t-cal	t-crit	p-value	Decision
Before COVID-19	30	1250	1345.5	29	5.088	2.05	<0.00001	Ho is rejected
During lockdown	30							

Source: Primary data

In the above table, the calculated value of t (=5.088) is greater than the critical value of t (=2.05). The p-value (<0.00001) is less than 0.05. Thus, **Ho is rejected and H1 is accepted** at a 5% level of significance and 29 degrees of freedom. Hence, **H1: “Women vendors face severe economic crisis due to the pandemic of COVID-19” is accepted.**

IInd case: Before the pandemic and during the relaxation of lockdown

Table 2: t-test result of the hypothesis formulated between the average incomes of the vendors before the pandemic and during the relaxation of lockdown

Period	n	$\bar{d}$	SD	df	t-cal	t-crit	p-value	Decision
Before COVID-19	30	75	1165.506	29	0.3524	2.05	0.7271	Ho is accepted
During relaxation	30							

Source: Primary data

In the above table, the calculated value of t (=0.3524) is less than the critical value of t (=2.05). The p-value (=0.7271) is greater than 0.05. Thus, **H1 is rejected and Ho is accepted** at 5% level of significance and 29 degrees of freedom. Hence, **Ho: “Women vendors do not face severe economic crisis due to the pandemic of COVID-19” is accepted.**

In the first case, because the market was closed during the shutdown, there were no earnings. Thus, when comparing between the period of lockdown and that prior to the pandemic, it is reasonable to state that the women vendors had a serious economic crisis as a result of the pandemic, which was mostly due to the market's closure during the lockdown period.

In the second case, several vendors earned more money after the lockdown was lifted than they had before the pandemic. This was mostly due to the surge in seasonal demand for their items around the time of the market's reopening after a lengthy period of closure. Thus, comparing before the pandemic and during the relaxation, it can be concluded that the women vendors do not face severe economic crisis.

2. Hypothesis 2 – Percentage Analysis

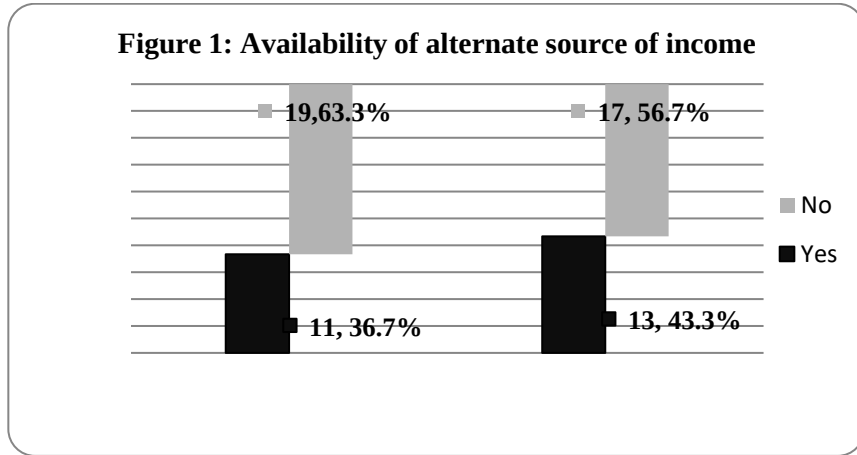
Ho: There are no alternative means to earn livelihood during the closure of Ima Market.

H1: There are alternative means to earn livelihood during the closure of Ima Market.

For testing this hypothesis, the availability of alternate source of income to the vendors for two different periods i.e. during the lockdown and during the relaxation is taken into account.

As shown in the figure 1 below, 63.3% of the vendors did not have any alternative source of income during the lockdown while the remaining 36.7% had other sources of earning

money. During the relaxation of lockdown, 56.7% did not have any alternate ways to earn money while the other 43.3% had alternative sources of income.



Source: Primary data

Since the percentage of vendors with no alternate source of income during the lockdown is greater compared to the period of relaxation, it can be said that there were no alternate means to earn during the closure of the market.

Hence, Ho: “There are no alternative means to earn livelihood during the closure of Ima Market” is accepted.

Thus, there are no alternative means to earn livelihood for the women vendors during the closure of Ima Market.

3. Hypothesis 3 – Chi square test

Ho: The families of the women vendors do not suffer from hunger during the closure of the market.

H1: The families of the women vendors suffer from hunger during the closure of the market.

For testing, this hypothesis, the experience of shortage of food by the vendors for two different periods i.e. during the lockdown and during the relaxation is taken into account.

Table 3: Chi square test result formulated between two different periods and experience of shortage of food by the vendors

Period	Yes	No	df	χ^2 -cal	χ^2 -crit	p-value	Decision
During lockdown	11	19	1	7.95	3.84	0.004	Ho is rejected

During relaxat ion	2	28					
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Source: Primary data

In the above table, the calculated value of χ^2 (=7.95) is greater than the critical value of χ^2 (=3.84). The p-value (=0.004) is less than 0.05. Thus, **Ho is rejected and H1 is accepted** at 5% level of significance and 1 degree of freedom.

Hence, H1: “The families of the women vendors suffer from hunger during the closure of the market” is accepted.

Thus, comparing with the relaxation period, the families of these vendors suffer from hunger during the closure of the market.

Based on the hypotheses tested, it is evident that women vendors faced severe economic crisis due to the pandemic. Also, there is no alternative means to earn income for them due to the closure of the market. In addition to this, it is also seen that their families suffer from some shortage of food during the lockdown compared to the period of relaxation.

Suggestions

- There should be proper implementation of the Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana (PMMY) – SHISHU because many vendors are still left out without getting the loans provided under this scheme.
- The working and administration of the Municipality office should be improved so that the vendors will face less trouble while applying for the loan.
- The Public Distribution System should be universalized with a larger amount of food allocation to aid in the battle against hunger and dire poverty.
- As ration items are not enough for survival, other financial assistance should be provided along with essential commodities at subsidised rates till normalcy returns in the state.
- Municipality and other local government bodies should create a broader informal economy assistance package thus covering all the women vendors despite being license holders or not.
- The government should also try to bridge the communication gap between the women vendors and the state government so that their voices and opinions reach the ears of the policymakers.

Limitations of the study

- The sample size of 30 is not sufficient to represent the whole population of the women vendors of the Ima market.

- The study excludes the street vendors of Ima market who does not hold licenses but are also suffering no less than the license holder vendors.
- The study only covered the lockdown phase of the 1st wave of COVID-19 and excluded the lockdown period of the 2nd wave.
- Accuracy of the response cannot be guaranteed as there were no face to face interviews.
- Additional opinions and views of the vendors could not be recorded as the questions were structured and were submitted through google forms.
- Due to the use of the snowball sampling technique, many respondents were similar in traits and there were no much variations in the sample.
- While collecting data, the highest income was restricted to Rs.6000.

Conclusion

The study's key objective was to look into the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the women traders in Ima Market in Manipur. The government's various unlock phases omitted this market, and there had been no consideration of reopening it for almost a year. This plainly demonstrates that the state's lockdown standards were not ubiquitous. Thus, a dramatic economic crisis resulted in the lives of these vendors followed by enormous hunger and misery. It puts to light the cries of their sufferings and hardships. For them, the market is much more than just a place to trade. It serves as a safe refuge for them. They are really supportive of one another. They motivate one another to be more productive, independent, to depend on their own strengths, and to participate equally in decision-making. Their voices are heard and their opinions are considered regardless of their background or status. Thus, they feel empowered and safe. Considering all of these elements, the impact of the pandemic on their mental health and social well-being should not be overlooked when focusing solely on their economic sufferings and afflictions. During the pre-pandemic period, missing a single day at the market was rare. However, with the market's long-term closure, many people were depressed because they missed the vibrant interactions and chats, they had with their fellow vendors. They were deprived of their self-sufficiency and economic independence. This had a significant impact on their already frail mental state.

The challenges faced by them are enormous while the policy options are limited. This frequently leads to unresolved discussions about whether governments should prioritise health or the economy, as well as tremendous pressure to relax lockdown laws in order to encourage financial stability. Added collectively, our findings, along with those of other studies, indicate an urgent need for a significant policy intervention.

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