



SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS OF WOMEN FLOWER VENDORS IN PURBA MEDINIPUR, WEST BENGAL

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ABSTRACT:

The paper seeks to analyze how the socio-economic conditions faced by the women flower vendors act as an influential dynamic of empowerment. It is observed that the flower vending business affords relatively subsistence level of income to the women flower vendors. The income generating activities allow them to make economics as well as household decisions. The saving pattern makes them psychologically secure and the debt pattern reduces dependence on money lenders. However, for achieving such kind of transformation and security women are to grind themselves for five to six hours per day in the flower market. This article explores the scope of women in the value addition of flowers, the steps they can take to start a business, how they can generate income, and their critical roles in this flourishing sector. Statistical data and trends are also provided to underscore the growth potential in this field. This growth is primarily driven by increasing demand for cut flowers, ornamental plants, and value-added floral products such as dried flowers, floral fragrances, cosmetics, and wedding decor. Women account for a significant portion of the workforce in this industry, particularly in flower harvesting, arranging, and processing. However, the shift towards entrepreneurial ventures in value-added floral products presents a new avenue for women to generate income and build sustainable businesses. In this backdrop, this paper seeks to analyze the socio-economic status of women flower vendors of the Purba Medinipur District.

KEYWORDS:

WOMEN EMPOWER, WOMEN FLOWER VENDORS, SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE, AND FINANCIAL PERSPECTIVE.

1. INTRODUCTION:

In West Bengal, Purba Medinipur District flower markets have taken a leading role in the commercialization of flower vending. These markets tries to satisfy the local demand which has been used for worshipping and occasions such as marriage etc as well as in the others state and international markets greatly. Flower vending started to emerge as a reliable economic option mainly in Panskura I and Kolaghat (Panskura II Block) of Purba Medinipur District. In its early stage of development, flower vending used to be practiced in combination with agriculture along infertile banks of river Kasai and Khirai (a tributary of River Kasai). Later the practice gradually spread over the whole Purba Medinipur District as the flower vendors become attracted to it due to its lucrative return. Many others types of vendors came into this field. Major types of flower produced are Jasmine, Rose, Chrysanthemum, Aster, Tuberoses, Gladiolus, Jarbera, Juhi, Beli, and Marigold etc., which have large demand in national and international market. This tremendous growth of flower vending in the Purba Medinipur District has strengthened the economic base and quality of flower vendors' life. Value addition in floriculture opens numerous business possibilities for women. These ventures often require lower capital investment compared to large-scale flower farming or fresh flower exports, making them accessible for women in both rural and urban settings. Additionally, value-added floral products

have a longer shelf life, are less perishable, and can be sold through multiple channels, including local markets, online platforms, and export opportunities. This research could provide valuable insights into the lives of women flower vendors, highlighting opportunities for empowerment and development. Perspective from Purba Medinipur, West Bengal.

An important feature of the informal sector in India is vending. Vendors are those traders who operate from the streets or occupy legally distributed stalls at a given area selling different goods (Mitullah, 2003; Cohen et al., 2000). These range from traders in fruit and vegetables, to those selling crafted products, traditional herbs, pottery, sculpture, fabrics, cosmetics, flowers, kitchen-ware etc. The market for vendors is largely the pedestrians. In a few cases, especially when they have done business in one spot for a long time, customer relations develop, thereby expanding the market beyond the general pedestrians. Some vendors look for customers in offices, homes and beyond the urban areas where they are based. This is quite dominant among those who have invested substantially in street trade, especially those who use trucks, pick-ups and bicycles. Such vendors trade in cooked food, fruits, vegetables and clothes. Overall, however, high transport costs and low profits prohibit street traders from accessing alternative and better markets (Mitullah, 2003; Motala, 2002; Cohen et al., 2000). Market relations are usually

mutual, except in cases where there is intense competition among street vendors. Poor location of business, low purchasing power among customers and unreliability of customers who take goods on credit also affects the market. In addition, low levels of professionalism due to low technical education among vendors and low access to modern information communication technologies on productivity information hinders their performance in business marketing (Motala, 2002).

The present study is undertaken to assess the economic empowerment of women through vending of flowers in Purba Medinipur district of West Bengal, where a large section of women are engaged in vending flowers in the urban areas of Purba Medinipur, Howrah and Metropolitan Kolkata. This study seems to be important in that successful entrepreneurship for rural women in floriculture, who are almost still in the informal sector and remain invisible in the official national statistics, is very crucial to the agricultural development of the economy in general and empowerment of women in agriculture in particular.

1.1 MEANING OF EMPOWERMENT:

Empowerment of women is the development by which women achieve power and manage over their own lives and acquire the capability to make strategic choices. Women's empowerment has five components: women's sense of self-worth; their right to have and to determine choices; their right to have access to opportunities and resources; their right to have power to control their own lives, both within and outside the home; and their ability to influence the direction of social change to create a more just social and economic order, nationally and internationally. In this context, education, training, awareness rising, building self-confidence, expansion of choices, improved access to and control over resources, and actions to transform the structures and societies that reinforce and constant gender discrimination and inequality are important tools for empowering women and girls to claim their rights (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2008).

1.2 MEANING OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT:

Women's empowerment is the process by which women become aware of gender-based unequal power relationships and acquire a greater voice in which to speak out against the inequality found in the home, workplace, and community.

1.3 KEY ASPECTS OF EMPOWERMENT:

1. Economic Independence: Flower vending provides women with a source of income, reducing financial dependence on family members and enhancing their decision-making power within households.

2. Social Mobility: Engaging in flower vending can elevate their social status in the community, especially when they become financially stable and respected entrepreneurs.

3. Skill Development: Women develop entrepreneurial skills, such as managing finances, marketing, and customer

relations, which can boost their confidence and self-esteem.

4. Community Impact: Empowered women often become role models, inspiring others in their community to pursue similar ventures and challenge traditional gender norms.

SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE:

1. Gender Roles: The study could examine how flower vending challenges or reinforces traditional gender roles in Purba Medinipur. For instance, women taking up vending roles might shift perceptions of their capabilities in the workforce.

2. Caste and Class Dynamics: Flower vending might intersect with caste and class structures, influencing access to resources, markets, and social networks. Understanding these dynamics can highlight barriers to empowerment.

3. Support Systems: The role of family, community organizations, and government initiatives in supporting women flower vendors could be critical. Sociological analysis might reveal how these systems enable or hinder empowerment.

1.4 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:

Major objectives of the study are:

- i) To study the socio-economic pattern of the women flower vendors
- ii) To analyze how socio-economic status helps women flower vendors to be empowered.

1.5 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM:

The flower vendors in Purba Medinipur face many problems such as wastage of flowers due to mishandling, uncertainty of demand, quality of flowers, and change of season, transportation and lack of adequate storage facility as it is perishable by nature, fluctuating price and buyer charges of flower agents. In Addition to this, number of migrants who had a new start up in this business created a competitive spirit among the flower vendors in this district. Despite the problems; flower vending is a viable source of employment for the people of Purba Medinipur district in West Bengal. So, an attempt was made to study the living conditions and socio-economic challenges of flower vendors and the factors determining their Socio-Economic and Health status of these Vendors through this study.

1.6 DELIMITATION:

Our observatory findings help us to choose proper sample size of women flower vendors from each market on the basis of their participation rate. We found that in Kolaghat and Keshapat flower market the participation rate of women is very high when compared with the Deulia flower market. So we choose 80 samples from each of the two markets (i.e., Kolaghat & Keshapat) and only 40 samples were drawn from Deulia flower market of Purba Medinipur District.

1.7 SIGNIFICANT:

Empowering women flower vendors can have a ripple effect, contributing to community development, social change, and economic growth. Flower vendors are an integral part of many cultures, bringing beauty, tradition, and economic value. Here are some aspects of their role:

1. Tradition and Heritage: In many cultures, flowers are deeply embedded in traditions, rituals, and celebrations. For example, marigolds in Indian festivals, roses in romantic gestures, or orchids in Southeast Asian ceremonies.

2. Symbolism: Flowers often carry symbolic meanings (e.g., lilies for purity, red roses for love). Vendors help preserve and promote these cultural symbols.

3. Community Hubs: Flower markets or street vendors often serve as gathering places, fostering social interactions and community bonding.

4. Livelihoods: Flower vending provides income for many individuals and families, especially in rural or informal economies.

5. Local Economies: Flower vendors contribute to the local economy by sourcing flowers from local farmers and selling to residents and tourists.

6. Tourism: In tourist-heavy areas, flower vendors often cater to visitors, adding to the local charm and appeal.

MODERN TRENDS:

1. Sustainability: There is a growing trend toward eco-friendly and locally sourced flowers, with vendors adopting sustainable practices.

2. Digital Marketing: Some vendors are leveraging social media and online platforms to reach a broader audience and promote their products.

3. Customization: Personalized flower arrangements and bouquets are becoming popular, allowing vendors to cater to individual preferences.

2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE:

According to National Association of Street Vendors of India, Mumbai has the largest number of street vendors numbering around 250,000, Delhi falls second numbering 200,000 and Calcutta stands third with 150,000 street vendors.

According to (Mathivanan) opined that flower enterprise is an age-old enterprise in India. There is a growing demand for this field and a concerted effort is needed to develop this field on scientific lines.

Mishra and Mishra opined that floriculture provides a great employment opportunity and also help in promotion of entrepreneurship in both rural and urban areas. According to this study, the flower vending type of informal work has a great scope to strengthen the domestic economy particularly the economically marginalized sector. Further the author opined that the vending zone should be given care along with changing time and need of the vendors particularly in highly populated areas like Bhubaneswar.

According to (Mou), flower-farming improved the socio-economic condition, employability and also helped in promotion of entrepreneurship in urban and rural areas. This boosts export-trade and helps to earn more foreign currency. This in turn helps in poverty alleviation and sustainable growth in the economy of Bangladesh. This study also found out that if properly nurtured, Bangladesh has potential to claim a better share of the price of global floriculture trade which is a huge industry today.

3. Methodology: Cross sectional sampling survey method is used through scheduled questionnaire. In drawing of samples, the simple random sampling without replacement technique has been used in this study.

3.1 Sampling: A simple random sample from finite population is a sample selected such that each possible sample combination has equal probability of being chosen. It is also called unrestricted random sampling.

Now, in simple random sampling without replacement technique the population elements can enter the sample only once i.e., the units once selected is not returned to the population before the next draw.

In this backdrop, total 200 women flower vendors are surveyed through the investigator scheduled questionnaire from the above mentioned three major flower markets.

3.2 RESEARCH DESIGN

1. QUALITATIVE APPROACH:

In-depth Interviews: Conduct interviews with women flower vendors to understand their experiences, challenges, and perceptions of empowerment.

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs): Organize FGDs to capture collective voices and shared experiences.

2. QUANTITATIVE APPROACH:

Surveys: Use structured questionnaires to gather data on socio-economic backgrounds, income levels, business operations, and challenges faced by women flower vendors.

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION:

Given the dominance of economic thinking within the World Bank, it is not surprising it was one of the first agencies to explicitly adopt the language of women's economic empowerment: 'Economic empowerment is about making markets work for women (at the policy level) and empowering women to compete in markets (at the agency level)' (World Bank 2006: p.4). Now, those women who enter into the market with minimum level of investment must rely on their physical labour & luck to meet their daily needs. They are seldom in a position to negotiate the price of their flower products or opt for leisure if they do not receive their asking price. Those with considerable investment in the flower vending business, on the other hand, are not only better able to determine the price at which they will engage in market transactions and to take advantage of any new opportunities that may emerge, they are also in a position to close off such

opportunities to less fortunate groups. In this backdrop, in our study, the socio-economic status mainly comprises five aspects. First; monthly income of the flower vendor, second; saving pattern of the vendor, third; debt status, fourth, property holding & living conditions and lastly the working hour per day in the flower market by them.

Monthly Income: Generally, women who working in the informal sector like the flower vending business earns less than their husband and sometimes when she plays the role of family head (in case of divorcee or widow women) they have to fight for their subsistence. Though in both cases, those women gets significance in the family as they are also earning members too. Working in the vending business generally adds more workload on women as they also have to perform the household chores. Nevertheless, it helps them to gain respect and provide them scope for active participation in the process of decision making. In this regard, though the data on the income through flower vending business cannot perfectly reflect their original standard of living structure but it can help us to understand the basic livelihood status of the women flower vendors.

TABLE 1
LEVEL OF MONTHLY INCOME OF THE FLOWER VENDORS

Monthly Income (Rs.)	Kolaghat Flower Market	Keshapat Flower Market	Deulia Flower Market	Total
<1000	1	3	4	8
1000-4999	23	41	19	83
5000-9999	34	21	12	67
10000-14999	13	11	12	17
15000-19999	6	3	1	10
>20000	3	1	1	5
Total	80	80	40	200

Monthly Savings: Our study reveals that savings act as a vital ingredient of investment in the flower vending business. Table 3.2, depicts that 47 per cent of women flower vendors saves less than 500 rupees per month. 28 per cent women flower vendors save rupees 500 to 999 rupees per month while only 24 per cent of women flower vendors saves more than one thousand rupees. We found that the respondents in our study whenever they earn some extra amount through this business. In this regard, they also use their savings for future precautions. Generally, maximum women flower vendors save their money in rural banks & post office.

TABLE 2
SAVING PATTERN OF FLOWER VENDORS

Monthly Saving (Rs.)	Kolaghat Flower Market	Keshapat Flower Market	Deulia Flower Market	Total
<500	33	39	22	94
500-999	26	21	11	58

1000-1499	12	9	4	25
1500-1999	5	3	1	9
2000-2499	2	5	1	8
>2500	2	3	1	6
Total	80	80	40	200

Debt Status: As far as finance for their business was concerned, in most of the flower markets, a majority of the vendors either dipped into their own savings as mentioned earlier or by taken money on interest from money lenders to do their business. The alternative sources of funding carry high rates of interest, which often ruin the vendors or as is the case of the female vendors in the flower markets, they live from hand to mouth and not able to alleviate themselves from poverty. The most frequent source is from moneylenders. From our study, we found that, in these flower markets of Purba Medinipur districts, a majority of the vendors relied on their own sources. We found that the reliance on money lenders is much lower.

TABLE 3
DEBT BURDEN STATUS OF THE FLOWER VENDORS

Monthly Debt	Kolaghat Flower Market	Keshapat Flower Market	Deulia Flower Market	Total
Yes	12	7	2	21
No	68	73	38	179
Total	80	80	40	200

5. CONCLUSION:

The study on Living Conditions and Socio-Economic Challenges of Flower Vendors in Purba Medinipur District, West Bengal has found that middle aged men and women in large numbers are involved in the Flower Vending activity. They are from Hindu and Muslim families and belong to different caste categories. They are less educated, they have adapted to this kind of informal activity for their survival. As their family is small in size of four members, the income they earn out of this informal activity is sufficient to meet only food expenditure. They work throughout the day every month for more than two to three decades which shows their untiring effort to support their family economically. They are still struggling to establish their life in study district. The income they earn is spent on food and other consumption expenditure, but nothing remains in the hands for saving. So they rely on indigenous money lenders to continue the business. Though they are dependent on this particular informal activity income earned through this activity with which they could meet only need for the survival of their family.

The lives of women have been changing through the participation in flower vending business in Purba Medinipur district. Their high self worth to decision is a sign of growing consciousness. Over time, women have

been increasingly involved in decision making. Their mobility is unconvincing, but is close to our expectation. We hope that the mobility of women will increase along with the improvements in facilities, such as reserved seats for women in public transport and law enforcement to stop sexual harassment against women. We found that the women do well in regulating and controlling their lives as the overall performance is at the highest satisfactory level. Thus, we can conclude that the women related to flower vending business in flower markets of Purba Medinipur district achieve and increase their level of empowerment through this job. The main factor affecting their level of empowerment is mainly the power to make economic decisions in their life as well as in the society.

Using the results of this study, we recommend certain steps to improve the power practice of women. Women have perceptions about their rights and abilities. Sustained support from the state and society is necessary to motivate their perceptions. The education of women should not be compromised, and the ongoing support for women's education should be intensified. Involvement in income-generating activities should be expanded because of its supportive role in women power practice and because it has a correlation with their empowerment. Support to women should be provided in the form of income-related activities to make them active stakeholders of the economy. A good working environment, as well as reliable traffic and security systems, should be provided to encourage the mobility of women related to the flower vending business.

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