reviewed paper

Spatialisation of Women Street Traders in Cities: Lessons of Newcastle

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DOI: 10.48494/REALCORP2025.4176

1 ABSTRACT

Gender remains an underexplored dimension in urban development, with dominant "right to the city" frameworks often failing to account for gendered experiences. Women street traders play a vital role in urban economies by fostering job creation, enhancing economic activity, and strengthening social networks that contribute to urban vibrancy. Their presence in public spaces enriches social interactions and improves the overall urban environment. However, their spatial practices also expose significant barriers, including regulatory constraints, inadequate infrastructure, accessibility challenges, and insufficient essential services. The allocation of designated market spaces underscores the necessity of creating environments that cater to their unique needs while promoting inclusivity. Analyzing the spatial distribution of women street traders provides key insights into the extent to which cities are inclusive and accessible, aligning with the objectives of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This study examines the intersection of gender, urban planning, and spatial rights, highlighting the need for more gender-responsive and accessible urban spaces. Using qualitative methods – including interviews with women street traders and municipal officials, alongside observational data from various cities – the research argues that existing urban planning approaches frequently overlook women's specific needs, resulting in their marginalisation in public spaces. The paper concludes by offering policy recommendations and urban design strategies to create equitable and supportive environments for women street traders, contributing to the broader discourse on the "right to the city" and advocating for urban planning that accommodates diverse populations.

Keywords: street trade, Inclusivity, spatialisation, public space, women

2 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The informal economy is a vital source of employment and income worldwide, particularly in developing regions, where it constitutes a significant portion of non-agricultural employment (ILO, 2018a). In Sub-Saharan Africa, around 72% of non-agricultural jobs fall within this sector, highlighting its economic significance. Women street traders play a crucial role in this economy, yet they face spatial and regulatory challenges that shape their access to urban spaces and economic opportunities (Roever & Skinner, 2016). In South Africa, the informal sector employed approximately 2.5 million people in 2019, contributing around 8% to the national GDP (Statistics South Africa, 2021). Despite their contributions, women traders frequently encounter constraints such as inadequate infrastructure, legal barriers, and competition that limit their ability to operate effectively.

The spatial dynamics of women street traders are central to achieving gender equality and inclusive urban development, as reflected in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goals 5 and 8, which promote gender equity and economic empowerment (UN, 2015). However, urban planning and policy often fail to accommodate the needs of women traders, restricting their ability to access prime trading locations and essential services (Brown et al., 2017). Addressing these challenges is crucial for ensuring sustainable and inclusive urban development that supports women's economic participation and their "right to the city" (Mitullah, 2003).

The concept of spatialisation provides a framework for analyzing how women traders engage with and adapt to urban environments. Spatialization refers to the way social and economic interactions are structured within space, shaping how individuals navigate and experience the urban landscape (Lefebvre, 1991). Women traders' spatial practices reflect broader gendered inequalities in access to resources, trading opportunities, and regulatory protections (McDowell, 1999). They often operate in contested spaces, where they must negotiate their presence amidst legal restrictions and competition (Baud, 2016). Understanding spatialization

not only reveals these challenges but also highlights how women traders contribute to the vibrancy of urban spaces, providing valuable insights for inclusive urban planning (UN-Habitat, 2016).

The paper will explore these themes through the lens of public space, drawing on literature that discusses the role of women in the informal economy, the "right to the city", and the legal frameworks governing street trade. It will present findings on trader locations, access to services, legal obstacles, and competition within markets, ultimately informing policies that foster inclusive and equitable urban spaces for women street traders. The study concludes with recommendations aimed at enhancing women's economic participation, addressing structural inequalities, and advocating for urban policies that recognize the diverse needs of informal traders.

3 LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 A Spatial Review: Women In the Informal Economy

Research highlights the gendered dimensions of street trading, revealing the impact of social norms on women's experiences (McDowell, 1999). Women traders come from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds and have diverse responsibilities at home and in society, with differing levels of education, marital statuses, and ages. Despite their differences, they confront similar challenges at work, such as poverty, the necessity to support their families, and a lack of alternative job opportunities. Through selling a plate of food, clothes, vegetables, and other essential goods on the streets and providing services on the pavement, these individuals make a living, regardless of the economy's condition. While activities enhance livelihoods and urban vibrancy, women street traders operate in a legal gray area, risking eviction and loss of goods, hindering business profit and investments (Bromley, 2000; Roy, 2011). Discrimination and harassment in public spaces are order of the day, which further marginalises them (Amnesty International, 2022). Even though this is, statistics reveal that high rates of informal employment serve as a survival strategy for marginalised populations, with 92% of women in developing countries engaged in informal work (Bonnet & Chen, 2019; World Bank, 2023). It is important to recognise street trade in cities as a significant urban issue, as this acknowledgment can offer new insights into the changing norms of urban life. If anything, the above is proof that the informal sector carries the potential and ability to sustain livelihoods, provide employment, and alleviate poverty. A turn in perspective and government collaboration, local economic development, and social protection for women traders may be fostered. It is essential to advocate for the inclusion of marginalised groups in planning and decision-making processes to achieve sustainable development. Development plans should be designed to create regulations and policies that are relevant to those who engage in street trade.

3.2 The "Right to The City"

Cities have historically been designed by men, for men, reinforcing spatial and economic exclusion, particularly for Black women. In the South African context, urban spaces were initially structured to serve the elite, predominantly white populations, with infrastructure and resources distributed along racial and gendered lines (Parnell & Pieterse, 2014). Apartheid-era policies further marginalized Black women, restricting their access to urban opportunities (Miraftab, 2009). Even as industrialization enabled Black men to enter urban economies, planning frameworks continued to prioritize male-centric labour markets, overlooking the spatial needs of women (Turok, 2016). Consequently, Black women continue to grapple with urban environments that do not facilitate their full participation, reflecting persistent inequities in access, infrastructure, and spatial design.

Initially articulated by Lefebvre (1968), the "right to the city" serves as a framework for understanding urban social justice and inclusivity. It asserts that all urban inhabitants should participate in shaping and using urban spaces, emphasizing access to resources and decision-making (Harvey, 2008). Challenges in securing trading spaces arise from restrictive by-laws, competition, and limited access to essential services (Skinner, 2018; SERI & SALGA, 2018). For women, the "right to the city" is particularly significant, as their experiences are often influenced by gendered power dynamics and social inequalities (McDowell, 1999). Their access to urban spaces is frequently restricted by safety concerns and social norms (Matrix, 1985). In this context "the right to the city" entails not only the right to occupy urban spaces but also the right to influence spatial planning and design that meets the needs of women as well. This is especially relevant for women street traders, whose livelihoods rely on public space (Baud, 2016). The framework of the right to

alludes the need to recognise the needs of women's contributions to the urban economy and to include them in planning processes. It advocates for the creation of safe and supportive urban spaces for women's economic activities (UN-Habitat, 2016). Claiming of "right to the city," women street traders can challenge exclusionary practices and seek recognition for their essential role in shaping urban life (Roy, 2011).

3.3 Spatial Distribution and Access

Street trading serves as a crucial livelihood strategy for many urban residents, particularly marginalized groups such as women, migrants, and the unemployed (Huang et al., 2018). It provides a flexible and accessible source of income, especially for individuals with limited formal education or employment opportunities. Mitullah's (2004) study on African street trade highlights that the sector is predominantly female-dominated, with fewer men and underage children involved. Traders often travel from various parts of the city to the CBD, where consumer demand is concentrated. Due to high transportation costs, many choose to live within walking distance of their trading sites or operate close to their residential areas.

Access to central business districts is typically straightforward; however, legally securing trading sites and permits poses significant challenges for many street traders. Navigating street trading or trading by-laws can be perplexing, and obtaining permits from municipal authorities is often difficult, leaving numerous street traders vulnerable to evictions, harassment, and confiscation of goods (Ndaba & Reddy, 2024). Municipalities worldwide implement various strategies to regulate informal trading in public spaces, with permitting systems being particularly prevalent. Traders are generally required to acquire licenses to operate in designated areas, specifying locations, operating hours, and authorised merchandise. In South Africa, national legislation such as the Business Act provides a framework, but individual municipalities develop their own policies to balance the economic contributions of informal traders with effective public space management. Durban, a major city in KwaZulu-Natal, exemplifies these complexities; its substantial informal economy features numerous street traders. The city employs a licensing system for traders, yet accessing public spaces remains challenging. Globally, approaches range from strict permitting to more flexible policies. Highlighting participatory planning, collaboration with trader organisations, and integrating technology can enhance the inclusivity and sustainability of urban environments.

3.4 Arrangement and Services

While municipalities often designate specific areas for trading, other dynamics shape how traders, particularly women, arrange themselves in public spaces. Street traders strategically select their locations based on factors such as pedestrian traffic, proximity to essential amenities, competition, and visibility (Bromley et al., 2018). High-foot-traffic areas like transport hubs and commercial streets enhance their customer base, while access to water and sanitation is crucial for those selling food or perishables. Traders often cluster together to attract more customers; however, some may choose to locate away from competitors to secure niche markets (Brown et al., 2010). For women street traders, additional considerations significantly influence their spatial distribution; they prioritise safety and security, often seeking well-lit areas with visible policing and forming support networks (Cross, 2016). Cultural norms and societal expectations can restrict women's mobility, confining them to specific trading zones (Sutherland, 2015). The spatial distribution of street traders can reflect a complex interplay of economic, social, and cultural factors.

3.5 Competition

Competition in the informal sector, particularly in street trading, is influenced by various factors, including gender, resource access, and spatial dynamics. Women street traders encounter unique challenges within this landscape (Skinner, 2013). The dynamics of competition significantly affect trading practices and pricing strategies (Bromley, 2000). Traders often lower their prices to attract customers (Chant, 2006). Space also plays a vital role, as prime locations are frequently contested (Sampson et al., 2002), making it particularly difficult for women who may have limited access to resources and networks (Mitra, 2015). Furthermore, the presence of immigrant traders adds another layer of complexity to the competitive environment (Crush & Ramachandran, 2009). Tensions can emerge between local and immigrant traders, often exacerbated by xenophobic sentiments (Landau, 2012). These tensions may lead to disputes over space allocation, accusations of unfair pricing practices, and, in some cases, acts of violence. Thus, understanding the interplay of price, space, and the involvement of immigrant traders is crucial for analyzing the competitive challenges faced by women street traders on Terminus Street.

4 METHODOLOGY

This study examines the experiences and spatial navigation of women street traders along Terminus Street in Newcastle, KwaZulu-Natal, using a qualitative case study approach with a phenomenological lens. The research seeks to understand how these women navigate the urban environment, specifically focusing on their access to services, legal obstacles, and competition within market spaces. Data collection was conducted through a combination of methods to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the research context. Mapping street trader locations involved direct observation, and GIS visualisation was used to understand the spatial distribution of traders and operational spaces along Terminus Street. In-person semi-structured interviews were conducted with (n=18) women traders and took place at their trading locations, including roadside areas, containers, self-made shelters, and trading mortar houses. This was to allow for flexibility and in-depth exploration of the participants' experiences. Traders' questions revolved around the accessibility of services, resources, and public facilities in the area. They also expressed concerns about safety and security, as well as various challenges associated with public spaces in cities. Additionally, they sought to understand their relations with local authorities and to discuss interactions with other traders to uncover conflicts and competition. Field observations were conducted alongside the trader interviews to contextualise the interview data and capture the lived experiences of the traders within their operational environment. Online semi-structured interviews were conducted via TEAMS with (n=2) officials from the Department of Local Economic Development and the Department of Development Planning and Housing. These interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour. Legal obstacles were further investigated through the analysis of relevant municipal documents, complementing the interview data. Purposive sampling was used to select participants who could provide rich and diverse perspectives on the topic, including local authorities. Qualitative data from interviews and observations were analysed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and themes related to the traders' experiences and spatial navigation.

Ethical considerations included obtaining consent from all participants before the interviews and confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the research process. The study's narrow geographic focus on Terminus Street may limit the generalisability of the findings.

5 RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Women street traders along Terminus Street in Newcastle, South Africa, navigate complex spatial, economic, and regulatory challenges within the informal economy. The study, based on interviews with municipal officials and eighteen women traders, reveals that women dominate this sector out of necessity rather than aspiration, often serving as primary breadwinners due to poverty and unemployment (Ngcobo et al., 2022; van Wyk & van Gaalen, 2021). This underscores the role of informal trade as a vital economic survival strategy for women who lack access to formal employment opportunities.

Fig. 1: Terminus Street Aerial View. Source: Author (2025)

This map shows the spatial distribution and visual representation of women operating as street traders. Further shows the dynamic existence of informal activities adjacent to formal, municipal-approved trading areas (storages and municipal shelters).

A key finding of this study is the influence of municipal permit systems on women traders' spatial access. Women primarily engage in fixed-location businesses, selling warm food "Iplayiti", which necessitates compliance with formal licensing processes. This contrasts with male traders, who often engage in mobile trade and frequently bypass permit requirements. However, despite adhering to regulations, women traders face inconsistencies in policy enforcement, including third-party permit rentals and inflated fees. These discrepancies highlight systemic regulatory shortcomings that contribute to the traders' economic vulnerability.

Strategic location choices play a crucial role in sustaining women's businesses. Women traders position themselves in high-traffic areas such as the Newcastle Taxi Rank and commercial centers to optimize visibility and customer access. Their choice of trading spaces is also influenced by proximity to essential services, yet access remains inconsistent. Many traders rely on informal and costly arrangements for services like sanitation and storage, revealing infrastructural deficiencies that exacerbate their economic insecurity.

The lack of gender considerations within Newcastle's urban planning framework further compounds these challenges. Poor infrastructure, inadequate sanitation, and minimal municipal intervention create an environment that undermines the sustainability of women's businesses. Additionally, competition from undocumented foreign traders intensifies market pressures, limiting economic opportunities for local women traders. Despite these obstacles, informal protection networks – comprising taxi drivers and the homeless – offer a degree of security, fostering a sense of street community and "ubuntu." This paradoxical reliance on informal safety mechanisms highlights the failure of formal urban governance to adequately support women traders. From a broader perspective, the study reinforces the significance of the informal economy in South Africa.

Applying a "Right to the City" framework to these findings emphasizes the need for inclusive urban policies that formally recognize and support informal traders. Enhancing infrastructure, security, and economic support would address systemic inequalities and promote the sustainable integration of women street traders into urban spaces. Municipal authorities must implement gender-responsive planning strategies that acknowledge the unique challenges women traders face, ensuring they have equitable access to resources and economic opportunities. By fostering a more inclusive urban economy, cities can contribute to reducing poverty and empowering women within the informal sector.

6 CONCLUSION AND LESSONS

The study emphasises the essential role of women street traders in Newcastle's informal economy, highlighting their reliance on this sector for financial survival. It identifies several challenges faced by these traders, including regulatory inconsistencies, inadequate infrastructure, and increasing economic insecurity, which collectively reveal systemic deficiencies in urban governance and planning. The exclusion of women traders from formal planning processes perpetuates inequalities, further limiting their access to crucial resources and economic opportunities.

Women engage in informal trade primarily out of necessity, underscoring the urgent need for economic inclusion. The inconsistencies in municipal regulations and enforcement create financial strain, hindering their ability to operate sustainably. Additionally, poor infrastructure, particularly insufficient sanitation and storage, poses significant risks to the safety and well-being of these traders. Informal protection networks play a critical role in providing security in the absence of formal municipal support. Furthermore, urban planning frameworks that neglect gender considerations contribute to systemic inequalities regarding access to public spaces.

To address these challenges, municipal authorities ought to develop gender-responsive urban policies that recognise and support informal traders as vital contributors to the economy. Necessary investments in sanitation, storage facilities, and designated trading spaces would enhance the sustainability of women traders. Establishing clear and consistent permit systems is essential to prevent financial exploitation and ensure equitable access to trading locations. Additionally, broadening financial assistance programs, skill development initiatives, and access to microfinance will better support women in the informal sector. For a

safer working environment, local authorities must implement formal safety measures that reduce reliance on informal protection networks. Lastly, it is crucial to actively include women traders in city planning discussions to ensure that their needs and challenges are adequately addressed in policy formulations.

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