Exploring Socio-Economic Realities: Women in Street Coffee Vending in Bahir Dar City

Workineh Simachew[1] and Getachew Tilahun[2]

Corresponding Author: **Workineh Simachew (**e-mail: workineh.simachew@dku.edu.et**)**

Abstract

Street coffee vending is an important source of income for many poor segments of urban society, particularly women. Rural-urban migration is identified as the primary cause for the emergence of street coffee vending. This study aims to explore the major socio-economic challenges faced by street coffee vendors and their livelihoods. Employing a qualitative research design and an ethnographic approach, the study analyses and interprets data anthropologically, primarily through the use of primary sources. Observer participation, focus group discussions (FGDs), and in-depth interviews were utilized to gather reliable and valid data on the vendors' livelihoods and daily lives. The study employed purposive sampling, selecting thirty-six women street coffee vendors for in-depth interviews and twenty-one individuals for FGDs from various strata within the target population. Coffee vending represents the largest portion of street vending among informal economic activities in Bahir Dar, Ethiopia. This is attributed to the special cultural significance of coffee in Ethiopia, with its unique ceremonies and meanings, making it a preferred choice for many women seeking self-sufficiency. In the study area, women are the primary and sole actors in street coffee vending. The study identifies both pull and push factors motivating women to engage in this activity. However, the income generated from street coffee vending often proves to be hand-to-mouth and insufficient. Women street vendors face numerous challenges, including natural, social, economic, and health-related issues, rendering them vulnerable. In light of these significant challenges, this study delves into the socio-economic lives of women street coffee vendors in Bahir Dar City.

*Key Words: **Street, Social Capital, Coffee Vending, Informal Sector, Survival, Threats and Risks***

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[1] *Head of Department at Social Anthropology, Debark University, Debark, Ethiopia, ORCID id: 0000-0003-3423-1483, LinkedIn:* (2) Workineh Simachew | LinkedIn *e-mail:* workineh.simachew@dku.edu.et *or* workineh.simachew@gmail.com
[2] *Lecturer in Social Anthropology, Debark University, Debark, Ethiopia.* getachew.tilahun@dku.edu.et

1. Introduction
1.1. Background of the Study

Street vending falls within the category of economic activities generally referred to as the informal sector (Tinker, 1997 and Cross, 1998). Among these activities, street coffee making and selling is prominent among migrants and economically small-scale societies, such as slum area residents. Such economic activities are most common in Ethiopian cities and towns. Notwithstanding this diversity, in general terms, the informal sector can be defined as "legal and ethically sound" economic and commercial activities that occur outside the government's licensing and regulatory framework, with entrepreneurs regulating their activities themselves. Street vending, being one of the most visible informal sector activities, constitutes 'unregulated' trading in public spaces such as streets, sidewalks, bridges, and pavements.

Street vending is one of the most visible activities in the informal economy and is found worldwide, in both developed and developing countries. It has been defined in various ways by different authors, but a common theme among definitions is the location of trade, which may include trading without permits, trading outside formally designated locations, and non-payment of municipal/national taxes or self-allocation of shelter for trading (Seifu, 2005).

Street trade is rampant and serves as a source of employment and income for many urban dwellers, contributing significantly to the urban and national economies of African countries. However, in most countries, it remains unaccounted for and unrecognized in national economic statistics. Street trade has historically been viewed as an underground activity that undermines the healthy functioning of the formal economy, resulting in conflicts with urban authorities over licensing, taxation, site of operation, sanitation, and working conditions (Amsale, 2017). Street coffee making and selling are widespread, providing employment and income, particularly for female rural-urban migrants.

Street vending serves as an important source of income and employment, with many vendors engaging in it due to the lack of other sources of income and employment. Thus, street vending acts as a supplement to the formal employment sector of a country (Mithullah, 2003).

1.2. Statement of the Problem

Currently, making a living through informal sector activities, including engaging in street coffee making and selling in major Ethiopian cities and towns, has become a common phenomenon. Most of the main roads in these urban areas are overcrowded with street coffee vendors and other vendors offering various goods and services to consumers. This overcrowding contributes to the proliferation of informal activities, including street coffee making and vending, as strategies for livelihood survival. Many individuals in these cities and towns struggle to secure jobs in the formal economic sectors due to their limited education and lack of skills required for formal employment. Consequently, they often resort to street vending activities as a means of making a living.

Despite the prevalence of street vending, particularly street coffee vending, in Ethiopian cities and towns, there is a notable lack of research attention on this topic. Our study aims to address this gap by pioneering an investigation into this overlooked problem and contributing new knowledge to the field. For instance, while Tamirat (2012) attempted to assess the status of street vending in Addis Ababa, their methodology neglected the social, natural, and health-related issues specific to street coffee vending.

In contrast, our study focuses specifically on the socio-economic challenges faced by street coffee vendors, as well as their adaptive livelihood strategies, taking into account social, economic, health, and environmental challenges. Given the vulnerability of street coffee making to various health, social, environmental, and economic hazards, our study aims to shed light on the specific constraints associated with coffee vending in street environments.

2. Overview of the Study Area

Bahir Dar: A Cultural and Economic Hub in North-western Ethiopia

Bahir Dar, the capital of the Amhara National Regional State in north-western Ethiopia, boasts a rich history, favourable geography, and a burgeoning economy. Situated approximately 485 km northwest of Addis Ababa, the city covers 42,000 hectares and lies on the southern tip of Lake Tana. Its flat terrain and temperate climate, with an average temperature of 18°C and an annual rainfall of 1531 mm, make it an attractive urban centre (ANRSCTPDB, 2020).

The city's historical significance dates back to the 14th century when it flourished due to early Christian missionary activities. Emperors and monks established churches and monasteries on the islands of Lake Tana, contributing to the city's cultural heritage. The name "Bahir Dar" stems from a historical narrative involving the relocation of a religious artifact to the lakeshore, marking the city's beginnings (Seifu, 2005).

During the Italian occupation from 1936 to 1941, Bahir Dar experienced urbanization and demographic shifts. The Italians introduced modern infrastructure, including roads, a motorway connecting Dejen and Mota, and a lake port on Lake Tana. However, their presence also brought social changes and economic activities like prostitution. The town saw significant infrastructural development between 1959 and 1967, laying the groundwork for its potential as a capital city (ANRSCTPDB, 2020).

Today, Bahir Dar encompasses six sub-cities and eight rural kebeles, with a total population estimated at 266,363 (CSA, 2017). Agriculture, fishery, and trade are the primary economic activities, supported by the city's fertile soil and proximity to Lake Tana. The city's fishery sector, dominated by Negede Wayto ethnic groups, contributes significantly to Ethiopia's annual fish production. Trade flourishes, facilitated by surplus agricultural products from surrounding areas and craft products from local communities (Seifu, 2005).

Infrastructural developments, including housing projects and hospitality facilities like Kuriftu Resort and Spa Lake Tana, have fuelled tourism and residential migration. The city's expanding telecommunication services and access to electricity from the Tisissat Hydro Electric Power Station further enhance its appeal. Bahir Dar is well-connected by air, water, and road transport, with an airport, water transport to lake islands, and a network of buses, taxis, and bicycles serving residents and tourists (ANRSCTPDB, 2020).

Tourism plays a vital role in Bahir Dar's economy, with state and federal governments collaborating on infrastructural projects to enhance the city's appeal to visitors. Natural attractions like Lake Tana and Tisisat Falls, along with cultural sites such as Emperor Haile Sellassie's palace, draw tourists to the city (Abraham et al., 2011). Additionally, Bahir Dar boasts a robust healthcare sector, with hospitals like Felege Hiwot Referral Hospital and Tibebe Gion offering medical services to residents and visitors (Seifu, 2005).

Overall, Bahir Dar's strategic location, rich cultural heritage, and economic opportunities make it a thriving urban centre in Ethiopia's Amhara region. With continued investment in

infrastructure and tourism, the city is poised for further growth and development in the years to come.

4. Research Methodologies

4.1. Research Design

The research has employed a qualitative research design, with in-depth interviews and observer participation being highly involved. Understanding the everyday life and livelihood of street coffee making and selling was the focus, utilizing qualitative research methods. To comprehend the challenges of street coffee making and selling, the study utilized an explanatory descriptive approach.

4.2. Study Population

The target population of the study was the female street coffee vendors. The population was selected by the researchers among street coffee makers and sellers, a sector currently expanding in Bahir Dar City, specifically around Kebelle 04, mostly operating as informal economic activities.

4.3. Sampling Size and Sampling Technique

The target population was women street coffee makers and sellers; the sample population of five street coffee makers and sellers was drawn from this group. The researchers used purposive sampling method to gather reliable first-hand data for the research.

Purposive sampling focuses on individuals with specific characteristics who are better positioned to contribute to the study's success. For this study, the researchers purposively selected thirty-six different street coffee vendors from the same Kebele.

4.4. Source of Data

To enhance the quality of the data, the researchers utilized both primary and secondary sources. Primary data were collected through in-depth interviews with street coffee makers and sellers separately, and through observer participation, wherein researchers observed while engaging with participants, such as by drinking tea and coffee to maintain contact. Additionally, researchers gathered data from secondary sources such as reading various published books, journals, and internet articles.

4.5. Data Collection Instrument

This study was primarily conducted through in-depth interviews and observations as data collection instruments. Through in-depth interviews, the study gained insights into the everyday lives of street coffee makers and sellers, while observations provided an understanding of their economic livelihoods. The study employed limited participant involvement and extensive observation to achieve its objectives.

4.6. Method of Data Analysis

After data collection, the researchers analyzed the data qualitatively. Both primary and secondary data were subjected to qualitative data analysis techniques. The analysis involved sorting, coding, translating, transcribing, and interpreting field notes and voice records.

5. Result and Discussion

5.1 What is Coffee Vending?

The informal economic sector, often referred to as the largest tree, serves as an umbrella for numerous economic activities, ranging from gum sales to the activities of intercontinental, universally known border-crossing companies involved in selling and buying goods and services. Consequently, street coffee vending falls under the informal economic sector of the overall economy.

Street coffee vending involves the practice of making and selling coffee and its substitutes along the streets of urban centres, including here in Bahir Dar. Many individuals, and sometimes groups of people, adopt this informal economic

livelihood strategy as their way of life. These individuals typically select areas according to their preferences, and unless compelled by the government, investors, or area owners to vacate, they continue to sustain their emerging livelihood system.

The selection of the area is based on the availability of:

- Supermarkets,
- Other market places,
- Entertainment places,
- Green areas
- Schools,
- Universities,
- Institutions,
- Residential and
- Governmental or
- Non-governmental offices are the most preferable places by SCV service providers.

5.2 The Need to Focus on Street Coffee Vending

Among all other formal and informal economic sectors, the development of street coffee vending (SCV) has exhibited a rapid and significant growth over a short period, covering various geographical locations across the country. This surge in SCV is attributed to Ethiopians' deep affection and attachment to coffee, which holds unique cultural ceremonies and meanings.

Given the prevalence of numerous vulnerabilities in the working sites themselves, focusing on this study area has become exceptionally significant. The chosen location is plagued by issues such as pickpocketing, impostors, and organized theft by local gangsters, exacerbating the situation. Since SCV workers, predominantly women from rural areas surrounding Bahir Dar, are relatively new to the urban environment and lifestyle, they arrive with hopes of improving their lives but are instead exposed to numerous mental, emotional, physical, social, and economic challenges. For instance, they face significant health risks such as HIV/AIDS, unwanted pregnancies, rape, abortion, abduction, fistula, and other sexually transmitted diseases due to sexual harassment.

Moreover, they often return home empty-handed, having been deprived of their hard-earned income by these groups. Additionally, they encounter problems such as loss or theft of their working materials, including stools, charcoal burners, coffee pots, cups, and chassis.

One study participant shared her work experience as follows:

Please don't ask me to describe how my workplace looks; you're seeing it just as I do. The place is filled with waste, and the smell of human urine and feces permeates everything. It's quite distressing, especially when it rains lightly and the sun is at its peak. Please, don't even try to imagine it.
We're here carrying all these burdens just to survive, to secure a better tomorrow for ourselves and our families. That's why we keep working here, despite being directly exposed to natural elements like rain, wind, and sun, as well as facing the harshness of certain individuals…

The lack of sanitation along the roadsides presents significant challenges that worsen their working conditions.

5.3.   SCV Actors

Gender and gender-related issues seem to persist even in the modern era of global equality. Despite global efforts toward gender equality, including those of globalization, disparities

remain in mental, physical, decision-making, political skills, and other abilities. Consequently, there is no longer a strict division of jobs solely for men or women. This has led to the development of terminology that acknowledges dualities in certain roles.

Manly Terms

- Policeman
- Businessman
- Chairman
- Mailman
- Congressman
- Freshman
- Fireman

Womanly Terms

- Policewoman
- Businesswoman
- Chairwoman
- Mailwoman
- Congresswoman
- Freshwoman
- Firewoman

For example, we believe one should adopt cultural relativism to comprehend our findings from the study on SCV in Bahir Dar City. As a matter of fact, all street coffee vendors we have encountered are women; we have observed no men practicing this specific livelihood strategy. However, street coffee vending is not solely the realm of women; customers, coffee bean producers, and sellers are also involved in this informal economic sector. Nonetheless, we have given due emphasis to women street coffee vendors because they are the focal point of our study.

5.3.1. Why Only Women's

Since the beginning of the first livelihood strategies by foragers of Band society, according to the school of evolutionism in anthropology and its proponents like L. H. Morgan, there has been labor division. Men were tasked with hunting big game animals to provide meat for their community, while women were responsible for gathering fruits from tree branches, often with the help of their children. This division of labor was exemplified by the concept of "Big Man" or "Great Man" leadership in early traditional societies, as noted by Herbert Spencer and other anthropologists of the early 20th century.

Building upon these historical justifications and considering the traditional cultural trends of Ethiopians, particularly those in Bahir Dar and its surrounding countryside, there remains a belief in gendered labor division. Certain jobs are predominantly assigned to men, with some exceptions, while others are typically designated for women. One such role is coffee making, which is considered the responsibility of women from household chores to street vending, and even in elaborate coffee ceremonies in upscale hotels or for national events.

This perception of gender roles is deeply ingrained in the community's way of life, influencing women's choices and practices regarding employment. Street coffee vending

stands as a prominent example of a job subject to gendered criteria, reflecting the cultural norms and expectations surrounding women's roles and responsibilities.

5.4. Forcing Factors to Join SCV Livelihood

Not only in complex urban areas but also in rural areas, which are relatively simpler or at least less complex, life can be hard in demanding environments, especially for women, as they are often biologically weaker in terms of physical strength compared to men. Due to this fact, many women leave behind their valuable belongings and transition to urban lifestyles, which are starkly different from their previous rural settings. Consequently, adapting to the social structure becomes a daunting task for these women.

There are numerous explanations for why women migrate to cities at such a rapid rate and

- Unemployment
- Hopeless of better safe job
- Immediate response for their economic problem
- Deficit reviving
- For school fee and other payments
- Family breakdown

5.4.2. Pull Factors

These are enticing factors that entice and attract women to join street coffee vending. Some of the pull factors are as follows:

- Peer pressure
- Hearing only the good side
- Masquerade by evil friends
- Being attracted by playboys around street coffee makers and sellers

5.5. A Hand-to-Mouth or Surplus Outcomes

The growing number of women in street coffee vending primarily aims at survival. As a survival

choose to engage in street coffee vending as a means of coping and survival. Whether we attribute it to push factors, which compel women to leave harsh conditions and seek comfort elsewhere, or pull factors, which attract them to the job due to various appealing aspects, the adoption of street coffee vending as a livelihood strategy among women is on the rise. Below, we will attempt to discuss the combination of factors that lead women to join this informal economic sector, each with their own goals and motivations.

5.4.1. Push Factors

"Push factors" refer to the challenging lifestyle they endure in their demanding environment, where people heavily rely on human labor for survival. However, there are also women who reside in urban centres but choose street coffee vending as their survival strategy for reasons we've outlined under push factors. Some of these push factors include the following:

- Persecution from family
- Family death
- Divorce
- School dropout
- Unplanned pregnancy
- Family pressure
- Bearing over-responsibility

- Tricked by brokers
- To try if it can earn more than what they do before
- To get financial freedom

economic activity, it entails a cost-benefit relationship. Starting from the amount of money they spend to buy coffee beans per kilogram, purchasing sugar, spice ingredients, tea, and

other materials, including monthly security payments, they incur significant expenses to achieve the desired net income on which their lives depend.

In this survival strategy, where they live hand-to-mouth and cannot save for the future, it is difficult to say they are living; rather, surviving best describes their way of life. Hand-to-mouth living is the biggest factor causing socio-economic problems in the lives of street vending women.

A twenty-five-year-old street coffee vendor shared her cost-benefit balance with us:

...For this business, I can say I'm not entirely new, but I can say my earnings fluctuate depending on multiple factors. For example, on some unlucky days, I will earn from fifty to a hundred birr a day. However, during fasting days, seasons including summer, and on Sundays, or during special occasions, I can earn from a hundred to two hundred birr, and sometimes even two hundred up to five hundred birrs on the luckiest days. However, compared to my basic expenditures, the net income my business is producing is not enough. If it weren't for the support of my husband covering almost all costs, I would have quit this job long ago...

5.6. SCV and Social Capital

Social capital is an asset that is immeasurable and can be accumulated without limits. Social capitals are determining factors in identifying individuals within a community. The confidence and influence one holds in the community reflect the social capital they have accumulated. This demonstrates that throughout their lives, individuals accumulate not only tangible monetary assets but also intangible social assets.

In the culture of the study area, social capital is essential for running a business. Establishing a strong network of relationships and building trust with the community are imperative. Without this, a business is likely to fail quickly. Working on the streets as women has enabled these street coffee vendors to accumulate social capital with their customers. The accumulation of social capital and a large customer base depends largely on the skill, demeanour, and attractiveness of the serving lady, with the quality of goods and services being secondary factors.

To attract new customers and retain the ones I already have, I will implement various measures. For instance, I will provide high-quality coffee tailored to their individual preferences without increasing the price. Another effective strategy I employ to compete and attract customers is offering additional goods and services, such as selling high-quality peanut tea and ginger tea. These supplementary services help me establish a base of reliable, repeat customers. As a result, my net income has increased significantly.

Social capital, in this case, will be earned by providing high-quality and a variety of goods and services to both new and loyal customers, all within the same price range.

5.7. Threats and Risks of SCV Livelihood

In this livelihood strategy, its practitioners, women, are highly vulnerable to multiple threats and risks. However, these potential risks and threats are not equally shared by all women

engaged in SCV activity. They vary depending on factors such as dexterity, attachment to risk-posing individuals or groups, safety measures, and level of engagement. These factors significantly affect the possibility, frequency, and intensity of threats and risks.

Street coffee vendors face threats and risks from two main sources: natural causes and those triggered by humans. Natural threats include sunlight, wind carrying dust and other particles, and floods during rainy seasons. While natural causes have minimal effects or can be managed to some extent, threats and risks imposed by humans are often more dangerous and challenging to mitigate. A twenty-nine-year-old street vendor with over three years of experience selling coffee on the streets shared her perspective:

...Life on the street is the worst part of my life, but I've become accustomed to it in order to survive. Alongside gentle, humble, and understanding customers who don't even ask for change when buying a cup of coffee, there are also those who behave like pigs, oblivious to the struggles of working to survive. On many occasions, individuals have come to my vending place, I served them what they wanted, and they consumed it without paying. When I followed and asked for payment, they replied dismissively, saying, 'Oh... you poor girl, look at you... we've already paid for your coffees, why are you asking again? Leave us!' I also recall instances where men asked for change without even paying for their order...

5.7.1. Being a Woman

For every business, especially during start-ups, understanding the culture, customs, traditions, attitudes, and needs of local people is very important. Otherwise, the business will fail from its early stages. In the case of starting a traditional coffee business in Ethiopia, considering gender roles is extremely mandatory. Although we have no proof, we personally know only one man who prepares and serves coffee for customers, but only if they are his close friends, as he helps his wife during lunchtime.

Therefore, in the Ethiopian context, particularly in Bahir Dar City, coffee vending service is predominantly carried out by women. This is because there is something that men desire, and they can only get it from women. It is culturally believed and practiced that serving is best performed by women, and it is believed to bring them blessings and grace for their obedience in serving men.

Most female coffee vendors in the target area have supported this experience, saying:

Let me tell you frankly, almost all of my customers are men, who come from different places and social classes. They have various occupations, ranging from street boys to jobless individuals, to office workers, managers of private, government, and non-government offices, and many others whom I don't even know. They all come not only to drink coffee—not because my place is clean, as it's quite messy as you can see—but because I'm a woman. I mean, I'm a woman, you know... They come here to talk to me, tease me, and some even come in groups to banter with each other in front of me, as if I were to choose one of them. But sometimes, women also come here with their friends or family to enjoy coffee together...

Besides the special opportunity of being a woman in this context, it also has its own negative aspects. This job exposes women to various vulnerabilities, which can lead to serious health problems.

6. Conclusion and Recommendation

Although the economic sector is vast and diverse, this study focuses solely on selected street coffee vending conducted by women in the target area, which represents a form of petty trade. As an informal economic sector, street coffee vending is experiencing significant growth in the study area. The number of newly opened street coffee vending places is on the rise. Despite being aware or unaware of the realities of working in the streets, street coffee vending has become a formidable choice for many women in Bahir Dar City since the inception of informal businesses.

What makes street coffee vending unique compared to other formal and informal sectors is that it is predominantly undertaken by women. For instance, while both men and women participate in petty trades such as shoe shining in Bahir Dar City, street coffee vending is primarily a female Endeavour. Although it presents a promising opportunity, especially for

women tired of seeking employment, it also carries negative implications, exposing women to dangers from both natural and man-made causes. Women's health is at risk due to environmental sanitation issues, and they are vulnerable to sexual harassment and theft. Thus, we recommend that, the city Administration to open the other alternative job opportunity like participating in other small micro business enterprises to save them from persistent sexual harassment and to maximizing their economic opportunity.

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