

# Socio-Economic Conditions and Livelihood Challenges of Women Street Vendors in Erode City

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## Abstract

Women street vendors form a vital yet vulnerable segment of Erode's informal urban economy, contributing significantly to the supply of affordable vegetables, fruits, flowers, snacks, and daily essentials in this textile and turmeric hub of Tamil Nadu. This study analyses the socio-economic profile, income levels, working conditions, and challenges faced by 250 women street vendors in Erode city through a primary survey conducted in January 2025. Findings reveal low educational attainment (42% illiterate or primary level), modest daily earnings (average ₹420), long working hours (9-12 hours), and heavy dependence on vending for family sustenance (68% primary earners). Major challenges include a lack of sanitation facilities, police/corporation harassment, weather exposure, sexual harassment, and limited access to credit and designated vending zones. Despite the Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014, implementation remains weak in Erode. The study recommends the creation of women-friendly vending zones, micro-credit linkages, skill upgradation, and better enforcement of protective legislation to improve their socio-economic status.

**Keywords:** Women street vendors, socio-economic status, informal economy, Erode city, Tamil Nadu, challenges, livelihood security

## 1. Introduction

Erode, often called the "Turmeric City" and a major textile centre, is the headquarters of the Erode district in western Tamil Nadu. As per the 2011 Census, the Erode Urban Agglomeration had a population of 521,891 (males 261,630; females 260,261), with the city proper at 157,101. Recent estimates place the metro population at approximately 690,000 in 2024. The economy is driven by power looms, readymade garments, turmeric trade (Erode Turmeric is GI-tagged), and agriculture-related activities. Street vending is a prominent feature of Erode's urban landscape, especially around the Central Bus Stand, weekly markets, Periyar Nagar, and textile clusters. Women constitute a substantial portion of these vendors, selling perishables that require daily procurement from wholesale markets like the Erode Regulated Market or local farms. While they provide essential services to low- and middle-income households, their socio-economic conditions remain precarious due to the informal nature of the

occupation. This study focuses exclusively on women street vendors to highlight gender-specific vulnerabilities in the urban informal sector.

## 2. Review of Literature

Past studies on street vendors in Tamil Nadu consistently document low socio-economic status. Krishnan & Thirumathi (2023) in their survey of 50 push-cart vendors in Erode town found 36% illiterate, an average daily income of ₹301-400 for the majority, and 72% facing police harassment. A COVID-19 impact study in Erode district (Inspira Journals, 2021) with 200 vendors reported long hours, mobility issues, and hygiene challenges. Nearby Salem district research on women street vendors (IJNRD, 2023) ranked lack of sanitation and weather difficulties as top challenges, with high family workforce participation but persistent harassment. National studies (Bhowmik, 2010; ILO reports) and the Street Vendors Act, 2014, emphasise the need for legal recognition, vending zones, and social security, yet ground-level implementation lags in smaller cities like Erode. This study fills the gap by providing recent, gender-focused primary data specific to Erode city.

## 3. Aim of the study

1. To examine the socio-demographic and economic profile of women street vendors in Erode city.
2. To assess their income, investment, and contribution to the household economy.
3. To identify major challenges and vulnerabilities faced by them.
4. To suggest policy measures for improving their socio-economic status.

## 4. Methodology

**Study Area:** Erode city (Municipal Corporation limits).

**Sample:** 250 women street vendors selected through stratified random sampling from major vending pockets (Bus Stand area, weekly sandhai zones, textile market periphery, residential wards).

**Data Collection:** Structured interview schedule (January 2025), supplemented by observation and 5 focus group discussions.

**Analysis:** Descriptive statistics, percentages, and ranking of challenges using weighted scores (SPSS).

**Definition:** Street vendors operating on footpaths, roadsides, or temporary structures without permanent shops.

**Limitations of the study:** This study is based on self-reported income, and bias is possible due to under-reporting due to fear of authorities.

## 5. Results and Discussion

### 5.1 Socio-Demographic Profile

- **Age:** 18-30 years: 22%; 31-40 years: 38%; 41-50 years: 28%; Above 50: 12%.

- **Marital Status:** Married: 84%; Widowed/Separated: 12%; Unmarried: 4%.
- **Education:** Illiterate: 28%; Primary: 14%; Middle/Secondary: 38%; Higher Secondary & above: 20%.
- **Caste:** SC: 41%; BC/MBC: 52%; Others: 7%.
- **Family Size:** 2-3 members: 24%; 4-5 members: 56%; 6+: 20%.
- **Years in Vending:** <5 years: 31%; 5-10 years: 42%; >10 years: 27%.

Most respondents entered vending due to family financial crisis, husband’s unemployment/alcoholism, or lack of alternative employment.

### 5.2 Economic Status

**Table 1: Daily Income Distribution (n=250)**

S.No.	Daily Income (₹)	Percentage	Number
1.	Below 300	18%	45
2.	301-400	32%	80
3.	401-500	28%	70
4.	501-700	16%	40
5.	Above 700	6%	15

**Source:** Primary data

**Average daily income:** ₹420 (net after costs). Monthly household contribution from vending: ₹9,000–12,000 in most cases. 71% are primary earners. **Investment:** 64% invest ₹2,000-5,000 initially (mostly borrowed from relatives or local moneylenders at 3-5% monthly interest). **Goods sold:** Vegetables/fruits (44%), Flowers (22%), Snacks/eatables (18%), Others (16%).

**Table 2: Working Hours and Days**

S.No.	Daily hours	Percentage	Number
1.	9-10 hrs	46%	115
2.	11-12 hrs	38%	95
3.	Above 12 hrs	16%	40
<b>Weekly Rest</b>			
1.	Only 1 day (Sunday) for 68%;	68%	170
2.	None	22%	55

**Source:** Primary data

### 5.3 Challenges Faced by Women Vendors

#### Weighted average score calculation

In socio-economic surveys on street vendors, challenges are ranked using the Weighted Average Score. Respondents rate each challenge on a 5-point Likert-type scale:

- 5 = Most Severe / Strongly Agree / Highly Problematic
- 4 = Severe / Agree
- 3 = Moderate
- 2 = Mild / Disagree
- 1 = Least Severe / Strongly Disagree

The weighted average score for each challenge is calculated as:

$$\text{Weighted Average Score} = (5 \times f_5 + 4 \times f_4 + 3 \times f_3 + 2 \times f_2 + 1 \times f_1) / n$$

Where:

$f_i$  = number of respondents giving score  $i$

$n$  = total respondents (250)

Higher scores indicate greater perceived severity, so challenges are ranked from highest to lowest score (Rank 1 = most severe).

**Table 3: Challenges faced by the women vendors (Ranked by Weighted Average Score)**

S.No.	Challenges	Weighted Average score	Rank
1.	Lack of lavatories and sanitation facilities	4.62	I
2.	Difficulty doing business in the hot sun/rainy season	4.48	II
3.	Police/corporation harassment & threat of eviction	4.21	III
4.	Sexual harassment/eve-teasing by anti-social elements/male vendors	4.05	IV
5.	Lack of access to institutional credit/low bargaining power with wholesalers	3.78	V
6.	Storage & transportation difficulties	3.52	VI

**Source:** Primary data

## 6. Discussion

The socio-economic status of women street vendors in Erode mirrors broader patterns in Tamil Nadu’s informal sector: low education and skills trap them in low-remunerative work, while gender roles add a domestic burden (double shift). Their contribution to the local economy is substantial, providing fresh produce at lower prices than supermarkets - yet they remain invisible in urban planning. Income levels are barely above the poverty line for a family of four, and the lack of social security (no PF, ESI, or maternity benefits) heightens vulnerability. Proximity to textile clusters offers some spillover demand,

but does not translate into better conditions. Far from being a story of unrelenting hardship, the lived reality of these women points toward hope: with the right support at the right time, their present struggles can evolve into future strength, security, and self-respect. Investing in them is investing in a more inclusive, equitable, and humane urban future for Erode and for Tamil Nadu as a whole.

## 7. Suggestions

1. **Vending Zones:** Designate women-only or women-priority vending zones with basic amenities (toilets, drinking water, shade) near major markets, as mandated by the 2014 Act.
2. **Financial Inclusion:** Link with SHGs, Mudra loans, and TN Urban Livelihood Mission for zero-interest or low-interest credit.
3. **Skill Development:** Training in value-added products (e.g., turmeric-based snacks, packaged cut vegetables) and digital payments.
4. **Social Security:** Enrollment in PMJJBY, PMSBY, and special health insurance; pension schemes for elderly vendors.
5. **Enforcement:** Form Town Vending Committees with 50% women representation and strict anti-harassment protocols.
6. **Infrastructure:** Night shelters/storage facilities and safe transport for women returning late.

## 8. Conclusion

Women street vendors in Erode city are resilient micro-entrepreneurs sustaining families and feeding the urban poor, yet they operate under exploitative conditions with minimal state support. Their average socio-economic status remains low, characterised by poor education, modest incomes, and multiple vulnerabilities. Urgent implementation of protective laws and targeted welfare measures can transform their livelihoods, promote gender-inclusive urban growth, and align with Tamil Nadu's vision of women's empowerment and inclusive development.

## References

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