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**BOOK REVIEW**


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Bhowmik, Sharit, ed. 2010. *Street Vendors in the Global Urban Economy*.  
New Delhi: Routledge. 320 pages.

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Street vendors are the most visible in urban economies, yet they are the most neglected. They are among the most significant contributors to the urban informal economy, yet they are the most criticized. They are in dire need of legal protection and union rights, yet most street vendors have neither. Surprisingly, there are very few academic publications on street vendors though they have existed in all civilizations. Sharit Bhowmik's book has filled this gap with a very comprehensive volume on the "contribution made by the street vendors to the urban informal economy as well as the problems they face in conducting their business" (5) in the era of globalization when world-class cities and shopping malls are the milestones for development. The book's twelve chapters were contributed by people from various spheres of life, including academics, technocrats, and activists, and cover the stories of street vendors from three continents, namely Asia, Africa, and South America, which together house most of the street vendors in the world.

In the forward, Renana Jhabvala, the renowned social activist, writer, and long-time associate of SEWA (Self Employed Women's Association) writes:

The street vendors need champions who will promote a positive view of them ... [O]ne such champion is Sharit Bhowmik ... [T]he combined efforts of these "champions" of street vendors have led to two new perceptions internationally' (xiv).

First is the issue of visibility and the second is to define street vendors as a separate category from other informal workers like constructor workers, domestic workers, or shoe-shine boys.

In the introduction, Bhowmik discusses four basic features of the informal economy as defined by Keith Hart (1973): low levels of skills, easy entry, low-paid employment, and a largely immigrant workforce. He also discusses its places and relationships with the formal economy with three broad theoretical approaches: the dualist approach, which predicts that the informal sector would disappear or reduce considerably as the formal sector expanded; the structuralist approach, which states that the informal and formal sectors are related to each other as informal sectors supply low-cost manufacturing components to the formal sector; and the legalist approach, which argues that the small operatives of the informal sector prefer to stay outside the formal legal framework as they find the legal procedures too cumbersome to follow. According to Bhowmik,

street vendors' place in the informal sector could be best explained by the legalist approach as street vendors are forced to operate illegally because even if there are rules for them to operate legally these are so complicated and difficult to comprehend that they would rather by pass the law and conduct their activities.

Besides the complex legal procedures required to carry out a business in a formal way, the other most important question to street vendors is the right to use urban public places and the associated legality. Bhowmik mentions that there are no clear guidelines regarding the use of public space and the authorities' right to control such spaces is ambiguous. The 1989 verdict of the Supreme Court of India deserves to be mentioned here: "if properly regulated according to the exigency of the circumstances, the small traders on the sidewalks can considerably add to the comfort and convenience of the general public" (6). This landmark verdict was essential to advance the struggle of street vendors in India.

Following the introductory chapter, the book discusses street vendors in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. As Bhowmik puts it, reduced employment opportunities in the formal sector and the lack of gainful employment in rural areas are responsible for the rising number of street vendors in Asia; so liberalization has a role in it. He also mentions that, except for Malaysia, the Philippines and India, most Asian countries have no policies for street vendors and only Malaysia seems to be sincere in implementing their regulations. Another feature is that most street vendors in Asia are not unionized, and even where they are unionized, larger unions are not interested in bringing them into their fold except in Nepal. Unionization among women street vendors in particular is very low. However, in India, SEWA has been successfully organizing the women vendors since the late 1970s. Despite this, women are given inferior places for vending even where women form a majority of street vendors. According to Kyoko Kusakabe, in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, women constitute a significant portion of street vendors but the place they occupy for their trade is still considered a men's place, as they restrict the participation of women on the streets; street vending in Phnom Penh is also considered to be an extension of women's role in the family and society. Those women who are desperate in need of this income have to take their young children with them because there is no one to take care of them at home. Hence the street becomes an extension of their homes. This also means that they divide their time between selling and child care which in turn restricts their business. In Bangkok, Thailand, as Narumol Nirathron shows, the local Thai vendors are also predominantly female and also need to take their children with them, as their husbands have to leave for their work.

The discussion on the street vending in Africa is not comprehensive as there is no research on the street vendors of North Africa and Nigeria, the biggest economy of Africa. Another problem is that all the research papers included in this chapter are written in English and thus there is a bias towards Anglophone

experiences as admitted by the author, Caroline Skinner. Street vending everywhere is inevitably related to urbanization, but in Africa, there is another dimension: international migration within the continent because of political instability in different African countries. As Skinner points out, this political instability also affects the continuity of windows where better practices emerge: with the changes in the bureaucracy, a big event or an election, the regulatory approach changes (190).

The final three chapters, besides the conclusion, address street vending in Latin America. Six out of ten jobs created in Latin America since 1990 have been in the informal sector (193). Rural-urban migration, economic crisis, and neoliberal reform have given rise to surplus workers in cities and they tend to find livelihoods in the informal sector, including street vending. Whereas this is the common trend on the continent, working conditions differ considerably across countries. Street vendors doing business on the streets for many years and with a regular clientele enjoy more informal rights as seen in the countries like Chile and Venezuela. On the other hand, vendors are less vulnerable in those countries which have stable, clear legal frameworks, as in Chile and Columbia.

This study of street vendors in three continents indicates that street vending has a historical presence almost everywhere and, in neoliberal economies, is essential for the survival of a large proportion of the population. It also helps poor and lower middle-class people get their necessities at cheaper prices. A large number of small and medium producers are also dependent on street vending. Street vending also accommodates a large number of women in the context of poor opportunities for formal employment and a lack of social services to support childcare. It is described as a “natural market” because of its propensity to assemble near their customers – near hospitals, bus terminals, and railway stations – not because they like to be there, but because the commuters need their services.

The absence of a clear legal framework to accommodate street vendors in urban planning exposes them to legal actions as well as humiliation, both of which have increased with the rise of neoliberal regimes and efforts to establish so-called world-class cities. Under these circumstances it is necessary for them to have their own organization or advocacy group, which would not only include the street vendors, but also sympathetic state actors, interest groups, researchers, and journalists. One such group is the National Alliance for Street Vendors (NASVI) in India, founded in 1998. As discussed by Dolf te Lintelo, NASVI successfully made the Government of India adopt the first national policy on street vendors, The National Urban Street Vendors Policy, which is regarded as a “paradigm shift” with regard to street vending in India (298).

Bhowmik’s book is unique in the way it delves into the political economy of street vending across three continents as well as its social characteristics with regional features. He and the chapter authors not only discuss the vulnerability

of street vending, but also cite examples of possibilities to overcome this vulnerability. There is no doubt that this novel book is an immensely valuable contribution to the study of street vendors.

*Kanchan Sarker*  
Department of Sociology,  
University of British Columbia (Okanagan),  
Kelowna, British Columbia, Canada