Abstract

This study is an attempt to understand the working conditions of a self-employed section of the urban informal sector workers of Mumbai, namely, the street vendors. It takes the normative viewpoint of ‘decent work’. The main goal of decent work is to promote ‘opportunities for women and men to obtain decent and productive work, in conditions of freedom, equity, security and human dignity’ (ILO 1999: 3). The ILO is concerned with all workers, including self-employed and wage workers in the formal as well as informal sectors. This study is important because it focuses on the concept of decent work vis-à-vis the street vendors. Therefore, the main purpose of the study is to conceptualise the approach of decent work as it applies to the self-employed street vendors. The idea is to assess the extent to which these jobs meet the decent work standard and how they could be improved. Street vendors’ overall working and living conditions have been assessed in the light of empirical data.

The present study surveys 400 individual sample respondents using mixed methods. It focuses broadly on the present income and working conditions, access to credit, public space utilisation and unionisation as major indicators of the concept of decent work. In the analytical framework, the study considers the level of income that corresponds to the decent work indicators of employment and income opportunities. In addition to working hours and safety in the workplace, indebtedness with regard to business activity has also been considered. The factors which have an impact on their incomes and the magnitude of this impact have been discussed with the help of multi-log linear model. Access to social security measures, both promotional and protective, and indebtedness correspond to the decent work indicators of social protection. Social security involves maternity benefits, access to medical facilities, children’s education, and accidental benefits. It also involves their basic rights to food and nutrition, and housing. The present study also highlights the role of membership-based organisations with regard to social security, access to finance, and other issues in order to evaluate the potential of collective action for improving the decency of work.

This study is exploratory in nature showing that, although street vendors form a growing section of the urban informal sector, they rarely get the legal recognition that they deserve. The number of street vendors is growing significantly owing to the fact that
the trade requires a relatively low base of financial capital and offers easy entry-exit conditions. Even wage workers from rural areas are drawn towards this occupation. Low educational and skill requirements are other factors which attract many migrated individuals in this profession.

The study shows that street vendors depend on moneylenders not only for their economic activity but also for social security purposes. It also shows that vendors are forced to borrow money at exorbitant rates of interest which in turn leads them to fall into multiple debt-traps. Bribe payment constitutes an ‘alternative way to sustain at the marketplace’ wherein street vendors pay a substantial portion of their incomes as bribes to authorities.

Although vendors work long hours under grueling conditions, their income is not sufficiently large. There are variations among male-female as far as income, investment and sales are concerned and women are found to be more vulnerable to threats and evictions. The study brings out observation that vendors operate through mutual trust and social network plays a key factor in their business initiation and sustenance.

The major findings of the study converge in the last section of the thesis. It is found that the current working hours of vendors, safety and security conditions as well as harassment at the workplace are contributing to a deteriorating working environment and acute deprivation of the street vendors. A ‘shadow economy’ exists as vendors are exploited by the same persons from whom they get credit and other support. Thus, street vendors need to be provided formal recognition, right to the use of public space, access to institutional credit and the right to collective bargaining through union activities. These basic rights and entitlements could perhaps be a step in the direction of decent work.