

Women in Informal Economy: Challenges and Coping Strategies of Female Street Vendors in China

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Abstract. The informal economy plays an important role in developing countries, contributing to the overall economy and poverty reduction. Street vending, in particular, has created a large number of employment opportunities and enhanced the living quality of the poor. Despite these contributions, street vendors, especially women, are excluded and unfairly treated. This paper aims to examine the challenges faced by women in the informal economy from the perspective of female street vendors in China and puts forward policy suggestions. To make up for the loopholes of existing research, which sees this issue from a macro perspective instead of a micro, or gender, one, this paper draws on the method of open coding to reveal the reality faced by female street vendors relative to their male counterparts. Open coding demonstrates that harassment by chengguan is the most common challenge in the eastern and southern cities, and its degree is closely related to the inconsistent policies in different cities and regions. Meanwhile, there is a lack of effective government response to women's work-family conflict and specific legislation for women. Besides, compared to national laws and policies, the local governments rarely think from the perspective of female street vendors while formulating and implementing relevant policies. The result is followed by relative suggestions including clear legislation, a better role for women's associations, and appropriate regulatory policies. These materials are likely to help explore this issue from the feminist perspective and provide a reference for further research.

Keywords: Women; Informal Economy; Street Vending; Gender Equality; China.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Contributions of Informal Economy

The conventional wisdom in the 1950s and 1960s was that burgeoning economies in developing countries would generate more jobs in the modern capitalist, or formal, economy to absorb surplus labor from the traditional economy that was underdeveloped with small-scale trade and production and a variety of casual jobs. In the long run, the traditional economy would be completely transformed into the modern economy and, thereby, disappear. By the mid-1960s, nevertheless, the widely-held belief in the decline of the traditional economy gave way to a rise in the so-called "informal sector," referring to the low-income activities of the working poor who are on the fringe of the law and public authorities (Chen, 2012). In recent years, an increasing number of people go into the informal economy due to instability and overexploitation in the formal economy. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), informal employment is the main source of income for the majority of the workforce, representing 61 percent of all workers around the globe and 90 percent in developing countries (WIEGO, 2012).

Because the informal economy is not recognized, recorded, or regulated, the public always confuses it with criminal activity and downplays its contributions. It is increasingly recognized that the informal economy is integrally linked to the formal economy, contributing to the overall economy.

Street vending, for example, generates demand for services provided by the formal sector, including transportation and suppliers. Contrary to popular belief, informal workers also pay a range of taxes that become a key source of revenue for the local and national governments (Roever and Skinner, 2016). The Informal Economy Monitoring Study (IEMS) found in 2012 that approximately two-thirds of the 743 street vendors sampled pay for a license, permit, or access to public space and value-added tax on their purchases (Roever, 2014). Considering the linkages to the formal economy and its role in government revenue, the informal economy's contribution goes beyond its own self-employment.

Not only does the informal economy contribute to the global economy, it but also creates employment as an alternative to working in formal employment, thereby reducing poverty and inequality. The National Income Dynamic Study (NIDS) found that in South Africa, informal earnings make up 14 percent of income that keeps households above the poverty line, while earnings make up only 9 percent of total household income. In comparison, formal earnings, while accounting for 57 percent of total household income, account for only 38 percent of income that keeps households above the poverty line (Jungwirth, 2018). The data shows that the informal economy is more important in reducing poverty than the formal economy considering their overall share of household income. It is noteworthy that informal employment only comprises a third of the workforce in South Africa, so for other developing countries where informal employment comprises a larger share of the workforce, the informal economy can only play a bigger role in poverty reduction (Rogan, 2017).

1.2 Women in Informal Economy

Among all the informal workers in developing countries, women's involvement overwhelmingly exceeds that of men. The reason behind this phenomenon is the limited upward economic mobility in the developing world. Many girls grow up in traditional patriarchal societies where they are not given equal access to education because their families prefer boys. Due to low levels of literacy and numeracy as a result of gender stereotyping, as they become young women, they are denied access to opportunities in the formal economy. Hence, although these women understand the vulnerability of the informal economy, they are obliged to engage in it for a living (Otope, 2017).

Around the world, women, especially migrant women, provide the bulk of labor in the informal economy. In the developing world, the ratio between men and women in informal employment is even more disproportionate. In sub-Saharan Africa, for example, 74 percent of women in non-agricultural jobs are in informal employment; in South Asia, the statistics reach as high as 80 percent (UN Women, 2022). Making up a large share of the workforce in the informal economy, women lay a solid foundation for the economic pyramid in developing countries.

1.3 Street Vending: Urban Revanchism and Gender Perspective

Whereas informal workers, especially women, make huge contributions to the global economy and poverty reduction, they are blatantly excluded from society. Street vending, for example, has long been characterized by images of dirt, disorder, and badness, which are at odds with many developing countries' pursuit of sanitary, orderly, and ideal images. In response, developing countries adopt exclusionary practices of urban revanchism, a strategy that aims to remove the undesirables from the urban landscapes to purify the city images, thereby attracting capital investment in the contemporary era of intense interurban competition (Huang, Xue, and Li, 2014). Under revanchism, informal workers are frequently subject to high levels of violence, including coercive evictions from public space, relocations to extremely marginal trading sites, and harassment by state officials (Roever and Skinner, 2016). These exclusionary practices of revanchism reflect the principle of neoliberalism in the globalized world, where government represses marginalized groups of people for city images and economic development (Otope, 2017).

The existing research sufficiently explored the obstacles faced by the informal workforce as a whole, but there is a lack of gender perspective. At present, there is a basic research framework for women's informal employment and a practical proposal to address these women's obstacles. But the existing research still has some deficiencies. First, most of the research sees the issue from a macro

or government perspective while ignoring a micro or individual workers' perspective. Second, the existing research focuses mainly on descriptive analysis instead of empirical analysis, undermining the explanatory power of their conclusions (Xie, 2021). This paper aims to improve the existing research to comprehensively understand the obstacles faced by women in informal employment from the perspective of women in street vending economy in China.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Definition of Street Vending

Street vending is one of the most visible forms of the informal economy. According to ILO, the proportion of street vendors in the non-agricultural labor force is as high as 9% in developing countries (ILO, 2002). In China, the number of urban street vendors accounts for 5.2% of the total urban employment and 15.9% of the total urban informal employment (Huang, Xue, Xu, Yang, and Chen, 2019). Street vendors are distributed on urban sidewalks, pedestrian bridges, bazaars, railway station plazas, subway station entrances, exhibition centers, and other public spaces, forming a beautiful scenery line in cities. Whereas street vending allows the poor to make a living with minimal investments of financial capital and human capital and offer affordable goods in small quantities, contributing to the economic, social, and cultural life of a city, it is also a subject of intense debate. Specifically, street vending is considered an "unsocial element" of society, which encroaches on public spaces and contributes to congestion and pollution, creating difficulties for urban governance and planning (WIEGO, 2000).

2.2 Challenges of Female Street Vendors

2.2.1 Work-Family Conflict

Research in other countries reveals that the most obvious dilemma for female street vendors is the conflict between reproductive and productive roles, which results in tremendous pressure and excessively long working hours (Mlambo, 2021). Under gender expectations, women are responsible for the bulk of unpaid household chores and taking care of the children, the elderly, and the sick. To feed their families, however, female vendors also shoulder productive, or market, responsibility (Otobe, 2017). As the simultaneous occurrence of these two sets of pressures become incompatible with one another, these women would suffer from role conflict (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985). A study shows that even when the working hours are the same, street vendors spend significantly more time on housekeeping than men (Tong and Zhou, 2013). So the work-family conflict would jeopardize both the psychological and physical health of female street vendors. To balance their household chores and livelihoods, women in Zimbabwe, for example, have to vend near the home (Langa, 2014).

2.2.2 Violence and Harassment

Female vendors are likely to fall victim to police brutality, and even sexual harassment by municipal authorities. In Masvingo, a city in south-eastern Zimbabwe, a council vehicle crashed into a female street vendor's baby while chasing the woman. The police's barbaric act outraged vendors and residents who burnt a council vehicle and a commuter omnibus (Langa, 2014). The municipal and state police also asked the female vendors to have sex and touched their breasts and backside while confiscating their merchandise. The violence negatively impacted female vendors' livelihoods and psychological health (Ncube, 2014 and Langa, 2014).

2.2.3 Lack of Law Protection and Social Benefits

Female vendors are subject to irregular income, poor working and living conditions, and ongoing harassment. Unfortunately, there is a lack of protection from labor laws and social benefits, such as pension, health insurance, and paid annual and sick leave for them. Although the Street Vendors Act of 2014 improved the status of female vendors and eliminated harassment in India, it failed to regulate

vending landscape. The loophole led female vendors to struggle for space with authorities and compete with trade unions and other vendors. Many of them fell victim to extortions by local authorities and had to bribe for space (Chakraborty, 2018). In addition to law protection of their interests, social security is also missing. It is conceivable that the level of social welfare for the informal workforce, including men and women, is lower than that for the formal workforce. Given the already-low social security, unfortunately, the level of social welfare for female informal workers is still much lower than that for their male counterparts (UN Women, 2022). For example, there is only 14.2% coverage of pension insurance for female informal workers in Guangzhou, China (Duan, 2011). Because street vending comprises one of the largest shares of informal employment, it is conceivable that female street vendors are deprived of social security.

2.2.4 Lack of Women's Association

Whereas the female vendors organized unions or local associations, such as the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in India, to negotiate with local authorities for their interests and rights, the rate of unionization is low. Several studies conducted in Mumbai, Delhi, and Ahmedabad, which are major cities in India, show that less than 20% of street vendors participate in their unions. Besides the unions' poor organizing ability, there is a lack of unity among female vendors: they see each other as competitors rather than allies. There is also intense competition between unions: those with stronger political backgrounds always try to displace others (SEWA Delhi, 2014). The involvement of the informal workforce in labor organizations is also low in China. In Guangzhou, for example, only 20.7% of female informal workers joined trade unions, and only 6.1% of them joined the Women's Federation (Duan, 2011). The lack of organizational resources makes it hard for them to defend their basic rights and keep themselves safe.

3. Method

3.1 Qualitative Research

According to Cooper (2006) qualitative research includes an array of interpretive techniques which seek to describe, decode, translate, and otherwise come to terms with the meaning, not the frequency, of certain more or less naturally occurring phenomena in the social world. It strives to promote understanding through a detailed description.

The existing research in China on female street vendors is still in its infancy, and there is no systematic classification of the challenges and coping strategies. Given the restriction, this study applies open coding to build concepts from a textual data source, in order to examine events and relative responses and summarize problems to specify the challenges female street vendors face in their trade and coping mechanisms government use, further alluding to the reality faced by female street vendors relative to their male counterparts.

3.2 Sampling

Sampling aims to select cases with abundant information to research in-depth, so researchers can gain a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the study (Patton, 2002).

Because of the vital impact on informal economic recovery and management of the enactment of the Unlicensed Business Operations, the study sets 2017 as the starting time for collected reports. Next, the researchers search reports with the keywords "the female street vendor" from Baidu and Weibo, sort the news reports by page views, and select the top 24 news and related official policies as representative samples from diverse cities for coding. According to the report statistics, the female street vendors are aged 30 to 50 and are from both rural and urban backgrounds.

According to the collected reports, the study also search representative laws and policies with the keywords "street vending economy", "the women", and "the female street vendor" from the State Council and local governments from 2017 to 2022 for coding and co-occurrence analysis.

3.3 Open Coding

Khandkar (2009) holds the view that open coding includes labeling concepts and defining and developing categories based on their properties and dimensions. Qualitative data and part of qualitative data analysis methodologies are analyzed through open coding. It is primarily based on original reports and policies for conceptual categorization. After fully extracting concepts, the researchers organize, filter, and combine concepts with the same connotation and delete concepts that only appear once.

This study extracts initial concepts based on original reports, laws, and policies, then categorizes these concepts to remove personal prejudice. The naming of concepts and categories refers to the research conclusions of existing literature (Chunmei, G., Jingjing, L., and Chen, X., 2021). Finally, the study obtains a total of 60 concepts and 17 categories.

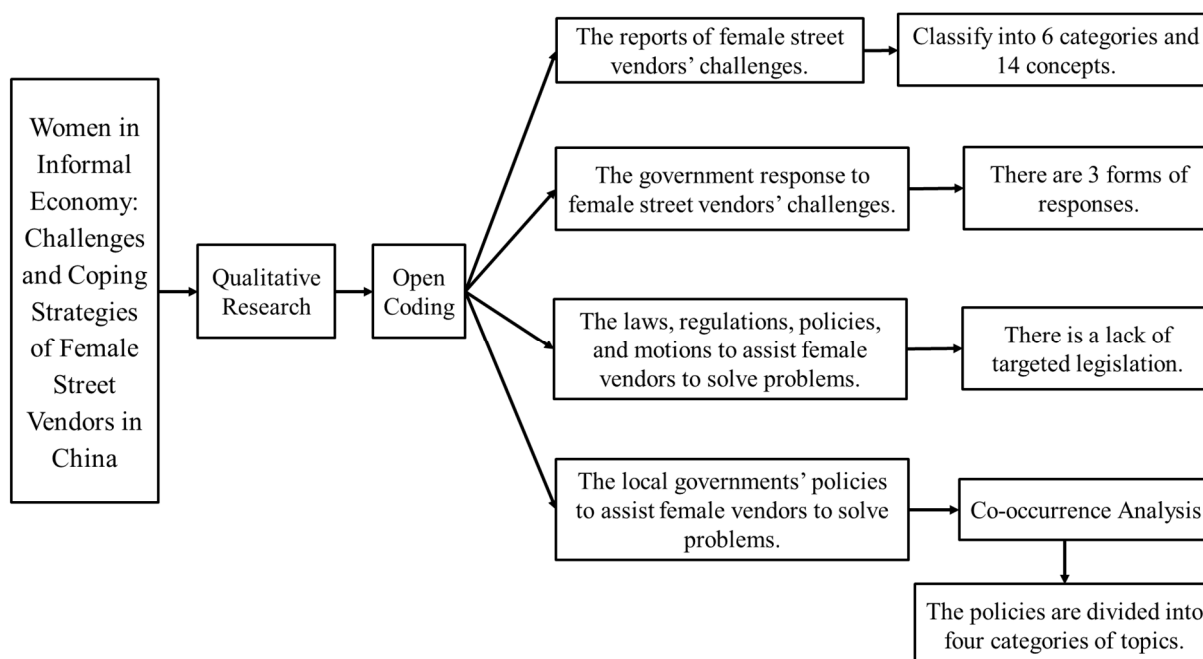


Figure 1. The technical routes of the study
Source: Data collection and statistics by authors

3.4 Coding Table and Analysis

In order to illustrate the challenges female street vendors usually face and coping measures government apply, the following demonstrates four coding tables covering the female street vendors reports, governments' responses and policies.

Table 1 collects 24 news reports from 2017 to 2022. Based on original reports, the study classifies the challenges that the female vendors encountered into 6 categories and 14 concepts. These categories include gender inequality, harassment by the *chengguan*, responsibilities of child and family care, physical health challenges, physical security challenges, and harassment by the customers. The initial concepts are ageism, mandatory confiscation of goods, violent law enforcement, inadequate space, disputes, violent eviction, etc.

Table 1. The reports of female street vendors' challenges

Category	Initial Concept	Time	Original Description	Region	Media
gender inequality	ageism	2020-10-24	1. "Instructions for Settlement" clearly states that "the female street vendors should be no more than 45 years old".	Hubei Wuhan	The Paper

harassment by the <i>chengguan</i>	mandatory confiscation of goods	2017-7-18	2. Several <i>chengguan</i> (street management) forcefully confiscated the goods of a female street vendor, but she refused to comply, causing a dispute between the two sides.	Yunnan Zhaotong	Radio Free Asia
	violent law enforcement	2017-08-23	3. A man in blue uniform gave the female vendor a slap and shouted to her, "I'm wearing the uniform, you have to respect me..."	Shandong Jinan	163 News
	violent law enforcement	2017-11-15	4. A <i>chengguan</i> registered and confiscated the goods of the female street vendor, then they were pulling. The emotionally overwhelmed the <i>chengguan</i> had a physical conflict with the female vendor.	Hunan Yongzhou	The Paper
	mandatory confiscation of facility and inadequate street-vendor space	2018-02-09	5. The oldest female street vendor occupied the street to sell vegetables. Her tools were confiscated by <i>chengguan</i> , then she clashed with <i>chengguan</i> .	Guangxi Guilin	The Paper
	dispute	2018-05-31	6. Two <i>chengguan</i> quarreled with the female vendor and shoved her.	Fujian Xiamen	Sohu News
	violent eviction	2020-07-29	7. The female street vendor owner parked her own tricycle near the stall. Several <i>chengguan</i> tried to confiscate it. Then they had a physical conflict, and the female vendor suffered multiple injuries such as six broken ribs.	Hebei Kaifeng	Da He Bao
	violent eviction and inadequate street-vendor space	2020-09-17	8. After a female street vendor in Chongqing was beaten by the <i>chengguan</i> who rectified the road, the female street vendor slashed the <i>chengguan</i> with a knife and got medical service, handcuffed.	Chongqing	QQ News
	mandatory confiscation of facility	2022-04-12	9. The female street vendor did not place her goods, however the <i>chengguan</i> took away goods. Then, there was conflict between them.	Shaanxi Xi'an	163 News
	mandatory confiscation of facility	2022-05-31	10. After <i>chengguan</i> confiscated a female street vendor's vehicle, they threw the rest of goods on the sidewalk.	Anhui Hefei	Sohu News
	violent eviction and inadequate street-vendor space	2022-06-19	11. The <i>chengguan</i> Mo and Lei had a physical conflict when they persuaded two female street vendors to leave the street.	Guangxi Nanning	The Paper
mandatory confiscation of goods	2022-07-19	12. The female street vendor did not agree with <i>chengguan</i> to confiscate the wormwood, so she held it away, then the officers dragged the female vendor.	Zhejiang Jinhua	163 News	
responsibilities of child and family care	the sole responsibility of looking after the children	2020-08-15	13. The female street vendor was worried about leaving her child at home alone, so she hung the child around her neck and went out to make a living.	/	163 News
	accidental bodily injury of children	2021-09-15	14. The female street vendor Chen sold fried potatoes on a tricycle, but the car overturned on the way home, causing her and her 3-year-old son to be scalded by boiling oil.	Guizhou Guiyang	The Paper
	epidemic prevention difficulties	2022-02-15	15. There was a list of infection cases in the market where the female vendor was, so she went to the hospital for testing due to worry about overlapping footprints.	Taiwan	China Times
	Family conflicts	2022-06-19	16. A husband and wife of seafood seller in Hubei had a dispute at the door of their stall. then the female vendor trampled many crabs to death.	Guangxi Nanning	163 News
	traffic accidents	2017-10-24	17. A truck carrying vegetables had a rear-end collision, and the female vendor's	Jiangsu Zhenjiang	Sohu News

physical healthy challenge			half-cart of vegetables and more than 1,000 coins were scattered all over the place.		
	violence and abuse	2018-01-19	18. Due to the charging account, a female vendor and a customer had a dispute, and the customer beat the female vendor.	Anhui Haozhou	Sohu News
	diseases	2022-05-25	19. The female vendor who was working suddenly fell to the ground, her heart and breathing stopped.	Zhejiang Wenzhou	66WZ
	diseases	2022-08-16	20. When the customer did not pay for peanuts, the female vendor ran after him and fell to the ground and died.	Chongqing	Sohu News
physical security challenge	violence and abuse	2018-08-19	21. The security guard knocked down the female vendor with one punch and yelled at her 6-year-old daughter: "Your mother is dead".	Guangdong Dongwan	163 News
	deliberate injury	2019-11-01	22. A drunk trader slashed two female vendors with a knife, trying to kill them in revenge.	Liaoning Panjin	Tou Tiao
harassment by the customers	sexual harassment	2018-06-14	23. A female vendor selling fruit in Jinshan District was harassed by text messages with sexual innuendo such as "I hope you are a horse... I will whip your round buttocks".	Taiwan	China Times
	sexual harassment	2022-06-22	24. A man asked the female vendor Zheng to accompany him to drink wine. After being rejected, he chased Zheng with a knife.	Zhejiang Wenzhou	Sohu News

Source: Data collection and statistics by authors

According to Table 1 and the following Figure 1, harassment by *chengguan* is most common for Chinese women in the eastern and southern cities. Especially, the harassment by *chengguan* demonstrates different degrees. From the reports' contents, the degree of harassment by *chengguan* of Chongqing, Guangxi, and Zhejiang is the most severe, mostly caused by violent eviction and inadequate street-vendor space. The degree of harassment by *chengguan* of Heibei and Shandong is moderate, and in other cities like Hebei is mild. These phenomena are closely related to inconsistent policies in different cities and regions. In addition, the inconsistent policies were hard for the *chengguan* to implement, which created uncertainty for *chengguan* in enforcement, and conflicts between *chengguan* and the female vendors might be easily triggered (Xinhong, F., Minjun, H., and Nan, X., 2021).

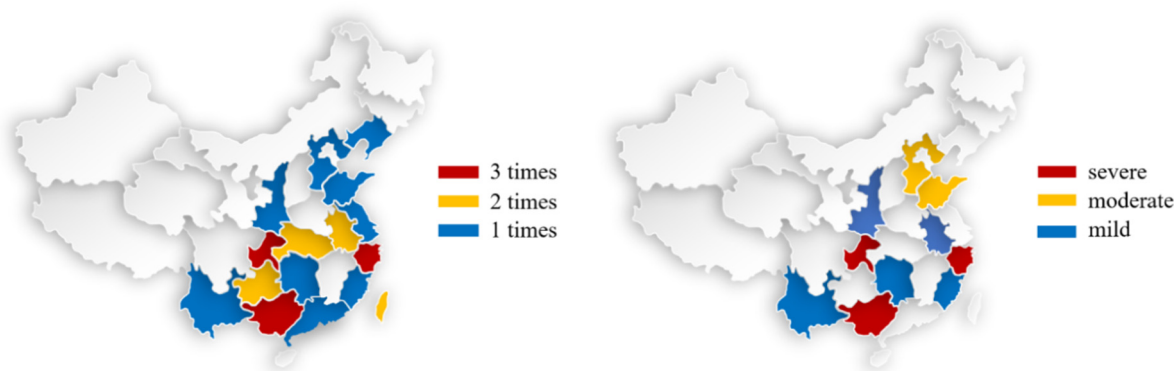


Figure 1. 2017.1-2022.8 frequency chart of the female street vendors reports and different degrees of chengguan harassment in China

Source: Data collection and statistics by authors

Table 2 gathers the local governments and relevant departments' responses to the above challenges. There are 3 forms of responses: responding with measurement, responding with explanation, and not responding at all. Their ratio in total responding is 56.5%, 17.4%, and 26.5%, respectively. The reported events in Chongqing, Guangxi, and Zhejiang of severe degree of harassment by *chengguan* all receive positive responses, such as the justifiable defense of the female street vendor and suspension of the *chengguan*.

In terms of the types of challenges, gender inequality, harassment, and physical security are effectively responded to through laws and regulations. However, the responsibilities of child and family care, and physical health challenges are only responded to with brief explanations, without taking effective measurements by governments and relevant departments, or even neglect, though they play a vital role in the female vendors' life. These reported events are mostly settled with the help of enthusiastic crowds.

Clancy and Tata (2005) found that female street traders often have the sole responsibility of looking after the children and this can negatively impact their personal health and well-being, even impede their ability to progress. At the same time, the balance between work and family is hard to achieve for female street vendors without women's federations or other women's non-governmental organizations' help.

Table 2. The government response to female street vendors' challenges.

Category	Initial Concept	Time	Original Description	Region	Respond to which event
response with measurement	immediate rectify	2020-10-25	The market supervision administration has interviewed the operating company, requiring the company not to set unreasonable conditions in violation of regulations, and ordered the company to make corrections immediately.	Hubei Wuhan	1
response with explanation	further investigation	2017-7-27	The female vendor was not injured and the incident is under further investigation.	Yunnan Zhaotong	2
respond with measurement	administrative detention with fines	2017-08-25	The attacker has been sentenced to administrative detention for 10 days and a fine of 500 yuan.	Shandong Jinan	3
response with measurement	suspension, fine and solemn apology	2017-11-15	①The <i>chengguan</i> will be transferred from their current positions and fined due to rough law enforcement. The captains and instructors will be given admonitions and notice of criticism. ②Arrange officers to accompany the female vendor to hospital for a comprehensive inspection. ③Order the <i>chengguan</i> to apologize to the female vendors in person.	Hunan Yongzhou	4
response with explanation	ambiguous explanation	2018-02-09	Both sides admitted their mistakes.	Guangxi Guilin	5
response with measurement	suspension of the <i>chengguan</i> involved	2018-05-31	①It is basically true that the <i>chengguan</i> quarreled with a female vendor. ②There were indeed irregular behaviors during the urban management inspection process. ③The <i>chengguan</i> involved have been suspended.	Fujian Xiamen	6

no response	no follow-up actual action	2018-08-04	①The urban management office does not assume any responsibility. ②But there is no follow-up result.	Hebei Kaifeng	7
response with measurement	justifiable defense	2020-09-14	Yang's behavior of hurting the <i>chengguan</i> with a knife in the process of being chased and beaten was a justifiable defense.	Chongqing	8
response with explanation	correct enforcement	2022-04-15	①The woman fell to the ground without making physical contact with the <i>chengguan</i> . ② The <i>chengguan</i> repeatedly explained that she would not confiscate her goods, hoping the vendor would cooperate with law enforcement.	Shaanxi Xi'an	9
no respond	inappropriate enforcement and further investigation	2022-06-01	①The urban management department admitted that <i>chengguan</i> sometimes drive private cars to enforce the law. ②The details of other complaints such as whether they do not wear uniforms are still not clear.	Anhui Hefei	10
response with measurement	suspension of the <i>chengguan</i>	2022-6-21	①The police assisted the involved person to go to the hospital for physical examination. ②The police investigated the involved person. ③Meanwhile, temporarily suspend the two urban management officers.	Guangxi Nanning	11
respond with explanation	correct enforcement and inexperience in handling	2022-07-20	①The <i>chengguan</i> followed the corresponding procedures, and did not violate the procedures of civilized law enforcement. ②However, the <i>chengguan</i> did not have enough experience in dealing with situation, and did not stop in time.	Zhejiang Jinhua	12
no response	no related assistance policy	2020-08-15	In order to let the female vendor go home early, customers buy one after another.	/	13
no response	no related assistance policy	2021-09-15		Guizhou Guiyang	14
Response with measurement	timely control	2022-02-15	One-day suspension of school and cram school for the two sons of the female vendors to prevent from COVID-19.	Taiwan	15
response with measurement	immediate help with police	2017-10-25	The traffic police rushed out to clear a lane, and helped the female vendor to pick up vegetables and coins to minimize the losses.	Jiangsu Zhenjiang	17
respond with measurement	administrative detention of the customers	2018-01-21	①The police have imposed administrative detention on the two customers. ②After the female vendor recovered, and the police will deal with them according to the law.	Anhui Haozhou	18
no response	no related assistance policy	2022-07-28	Nearby people called 120 for help.	Zhejiang Wenzhou	19

respond with explanation	mediation	2022-08-16	The police helped to mediate the matter and both signed a reconciliation agreement.	Chongqing	20
respond with measurement	compensation for female vendors	2018-08-19	The security guard involved compensated the female vendor for 1,000 yuan, and both reached a mediation agreement.	Guangdong Dongwan	21
response with measurement	sentencing according to law and compensation for the female street vendors	2019-11-01	The attacker Ma was found guilty of intentional homicide and sentenced to 10 years in prison, with compensation of more than 70,000 yuan and 80,000 yuan to the two injured respectively.	Liaoning Panjin	22
response with measurement	compensation for the female street vendors	2018-06-14	It was judged that harasser should compensate the female vendor 50,000 yuan for spiritual comfort.	Taiwan	23
no response	no follow-up reply	2022-06-23	The office replied that it is not convenient to disclose the specific situation of the matter.	Zhejiang Wenzhou	24

Source: Data collection and statistics by authors

Table 3 shows the related laws, regulations, policies, and motions that may help the female vendors to solve problems and lighten their burden. Among the law and policies, “Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Rights and Interests of Women” is widely applied to protect women’s rights. It covers gender inequality, harassment, physical healthy challenge, physical security, etc. But this law fails to address problems such as the responsibilities of child and family care. Though the NPC deputies and CPPCC members raised several motions and proposals to promote women's employment and entrepreneurship, there is a lack of targeted legislation in the informal economy to protect female street vendors.

Although Unlicensed Business Operations that focus on the legalization of street vendors can reduce the harassment by the urban management officers, there is a lack of specific law or policy to instruct the female vendors to sell goods. A vast package of support measures is enacted by the State Council for small- and medium-sized enterprises (Valodia, 2001), such as providing tax remission and financial support. But these policies are largely irrelevant to the survival of the street vendors, in which most women are engaged, and for the female vendors, there are three questions to ask: How do they know these policies? How can they apply for it? How much they can receive?

Table 3. The laws, regulations, policies, and motions to assist female vendors to solve problems.

Category	Initial Concept	Time	Laws and Policies	Original Description
Laws of the People's Republic of China				
gender equality	equal rights	2018-10-26	Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Rights and Interests of Women	Article 2. Women shall enjoy equal rights with men in all aspects of political, economic, cultural, social, and family life.
women's agency	promote women’s overall status and welfare	2018-10-26	Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Rights and Interests of Women	Article 5. The All-China Women's Federation and women's federations at various levels shall represent and uphold the rights of women of all nationalities and all walks of life, and strive for the protection of women's rights and interests.

	complain about harassment			Article 48. When a woman's lawful rights and interests are infringed upon, she has the right to request the competent department concerned for a disposition or bring a lawsuit in a people's court according to law.
	education and technological training			Article 19. People's governments at various levels and departments concerned shall take measures to organize women in receiving vocational education and technological training.
Regulation of the State Council of the People's Republic of China				
identity legalization	industrial and commercial registration	2017-8-6	Unlicensed Business Operations	If some activities are operated without industrial and commercial registration in accordance with the law, they do not belong to unlicensed and unlicensed operations.
Policy of the State Council				
tax and fee cuts	delay the payment of social insurance fees	first half of 2020	Policies were rolled out by the State Council	Enterprises in severe difficulties due to the epidemic impact could delay the payment of social insurance fees to the end of the year and will not be charged overdue fines.
reform of business licenses	decouple business licenses from operation permits	first half of 2020	Policies were rolled out by the State Council	Deepen the reform of decoupling business licenses from operation permits. Registration procedures of the location (business premises) should be simplified.
convenient financing	halve financing guarantee and re-guarantee fees	first half of 2020	Policies were rolled out by the State Council	Local governmental financing guarantee and re-guarantee institutions at all levels to halve financing guarantee and re-guarantee fees for small and micro enterprises throughout 2020.
support to small shops	legalization	first half of 2020	Policies were rolled out by the State Council	Small shops that comply with relevant laws and regulations and approved by interested parties will be supported to register business licenses.
	bring down rent level			Shared offices, outdoor booths are encouraged to bring down rent level in the market.
	employment funds support			Local governments are encouraged to make good use of employment subsidy funds, unemployment insurance funds, special funds for vocational skills improvement, and employees' education funds and provide support to qualified small shops.
Motions of the NPC deputies and proposals of the CPPCC members				

enhance women's employment competitiveness	promote the socialization of housework	two sessions of 2022	proposals of the CPPCC member	Promote the socialization of housework and the balanced development of work and family. The government should introduce a gender perspective when formulating the flexible work policies, and fully consider the specific needs of women in the new era of employment and entrepreneurship.
broaden employment and entrepreneurship channels for women	include flexibly employed women in the scope of maternity insurance coverage	two sessions of 2022	proposals of the All-China Women's Federation	Promote the participation of digital economy employees in social insurance, include newly employed forms and flexibly employed women in the scope of maternity insurance coverage, and promote the introduction of a policy of proportional application for maternity benefits.
accelerate the establishment of a sound family social friendly policy system	reducing the financial burden	two sessions of 2022	motion of the NPC deputies	Reducing the financial burden of home ownership and renting for families with children.
accelerate the establishment of a sound family social friendly policy system	enhance the capacity and voice of women	two sessions of 2022	motion of the NPC deputies	Enhance the capacity and voice of women in management in all fields.

Source: Data collection and statistics by authors

Table 4 collects the related policies implemented in reported provinces and cities of Table 1. The co-occurrence analysis was used to reveal the content association implied by the feature of policies contents. Through co-occurrence analysis of the policies' keywords, these policies are divided into four categories of topics. The first topic is time, which covers implementing management and lengthening the operation of commercial businesses (the street stall). The second and third topics are setting up the temporary area and street-stall economy, respectively. The last topic concentrates on stores and markets with the features of urban, roadside, and night.

Table 4. The local governments' policies to assist female vendors to solve problems.

Category	Initial Concept	Time	Province	policy	content
expand the street vendor venues and time	extend hours of night operations and temporarily occupy the road to carry out it	2022-08-15	Guangxi	Several measures to further promote consumption	Encourage extended hours of operation at night. Encourage places to temporarily occupy the road to carry out night operations and by the relevant management body agreed to use parks, squares, and other public places to carry out night consumption activities, free of relevant fees.
expand the street vendor	further expand the venues and time of the	2021-07-17	Anhui Hefei	Hefei to further optimize the business environment and better	Support all regions to further expand the venues and time of the "street-stall economy" and

venues and time	“street-stall economy”			serve the main body of the market program	implement prudent and inclusive supervision.
implement prudent supervision	no occupation of road operations	2021-05-31	Hebei County-related cities	On the “rectification of dirty and disorderly, create a civilized city” special action work program	In addition to the approved “street-stall economy”, night markets, and convenient street-stall groups, there must be no occupation of road operations, out-of-store operations, road markets, and peddlers on both sides of the main and secondary roads in urban areas.
promote the street-stall economy	encourage farmers to run a stall	2021-03-03	Jiangsu	National urban-rural integration development pilot zone implementation plan	Encourage farmers to use “livestreaming marketing”, “street-stall economy” and other light-asset entrepreneurships, and promote the “six stable six protection” to take root.
expand the street vendor venues	temporarily operate by occupying the road	2020-6-4	Guangdong Guangzhou	Work plan for Guangzhou City during the normalization of the epidemic prevention and control period to allow some regional merchants (self-employed people) to temporarily occupy the road to operate	Merchants (self-employed people) with the basic conditions for implementation in some districts and cities may be allowed to temporarily operate by occupying the road.
promote the street-stall economy	integrate the night economy and the street-stall economy	2020-12-31	Henan Xinxiang	Xinxiang activation of consumer market to release consumption potential implementation plan	Promote the organic integration of the night economy and the street-stall economy.
promote the street-stall economy	orderly development of the street-stall economy	2020-12-31	Henan Zhumadian	Zhumadian star-rated industrial enterprises evaluation and incentive measures	Actively develop the platform economy and the night economy, develop the street-stall economy in an orderly manner.
promote the street-stall economy	develop street-stall temporary public service jobs	2020-10-14	Shandong Qingdao	Notice on the work related to the protection of temporary public welfare jobs in response to the impact of the epidemic	Based on the “street-stall economy”, “small-store economy”, “night economy” and other development needs, each district (city) can reserve and develop a number of health care, street-stall order maintenance and other temporary public service jobs.
expand the street vendor venues and time	release the occupied business	2020-10-09	Fujian Putian	Putian urban function, quality improvement and expansion of new urban area three-year action plan (2020-2022)	Actively implement the “six stable” tasks, research to promote the “street-stall economy” measures to allow in the right place and time to orderly release the occupied business.

promote the street-stall economy	cultivate the consumption culture of street-stall	2020-09-04	Anhui Fuyang	Opinions of the office of the People's Government of Fuyang on orderly liberalization of street-stall operations to help economic development	Through the orderly liberalization of street-stall operations, regularly support the "street-stall economy", expand effective demand, boost consumer confidence, cultivate the consumption culture of street-stall, and release the vitality of the city.
implement prudent supervision	refined management of the street-stall	2020-08-11	Shandong Zibo	Implementation of "Implementation Opinions of the People's Government of Zibo on Continuously and Deeply Optimizing the Business Environment" supporting measures by the municipal bureau of urban management	Implement the refined management of the street-stall economy.
expand the street vendor venues	set up temporary street-stall areas	2020-06-04	Guizhou Zunyi		Set up temporary street-stall areas to achieve the purpose of promoting employment, improving people's livelihood, boosting the economy, and standardizing management.
expand the street vendor venues	temporarily occupy public places for sale	2020-06-02	Guangdong Foshan	Foshan Chancheng district urban management and comprehensive law enforcement bureau of temporary occupation management (for trial implementation)	In the premise of not affecting the urban environment, impeding urban traffic, and affecting the citizens' life, liberalize the temporary occupation of business permits, allowing eligible businesses and individuals to temporarily occupy public places to set up food, clothing, agricultural products for sale.
expand the street vendor venues	set up a temporary stall area	2020-06-02	Guangxi Nianyang	Guidance on doing a good job of occupying the road, street markets, peddles and other services	Allow the opening of temporary stalls near the residential areas, to guide self-produced farmers, peddles standardized operation. Encourage to use the unused areas inside and outside the community, set up a temporary stall area, the allowed place can set up the roadside morning and night market.
implement prudent supervision	clarify the requirements and list of the commercial stalls	2020-06-01	Liaoning Dalian	Notice on determining the first batch of commercial outreach stalls in Dalian and strengthening management	The commercial outreach requirements and the first batch of commercial outreach stall list were clarified, including 37 commercial complexes, 13 special commercial streets, 4 leisure plazas and 3 morning and evening markets.

expand the street vendor venues	cultivate the night economy market	2020-06-01	Henan Zhengzhou	Opinions on Implementing the People-Centered Development Ideology and Further Doing a Good Job in The Work of Benefiting the People	Cultivate the orderly development of the night economy market. All cities, districts, and development zones should clearly plan and deploy points, implement management measures, make full use of public places such as squares, parks, and idle land, and set up markets and special flea markets.
expand the street vendor venues	set up street-stall convenience service points	2020-05-31	Hubei Huanggang	Announcement on the opening of temporary convenience service points in urban areas	In some urban neighborhoods, set up street-stall economy temporary convenience service points.
expand the street vendor venues	carry out "outside stall" pilot	2020-05-29	Zhejiang Ningbo	Notice on the implementation plan for accelerating the development of nighttime economy in Ningbo	By 2021, Ningbo will build 5 night-time economic landmark shopping districts, 10 special neighborhoods, and 40 15-minute business and public service circles with high visibility. At the same time, in line with relevant regulations and don't disturb people, affect traffic and other premises, allow the night economy landmark shopping district, the special neighborhood in a specific period of time to carry out "outside stall" pilot.
expand the street vendor venues	provide people space for free to run stall	2020-05-27	Chongqing Chongqing		The fifth pedestrian street in Nanan district will provide 10,000 square meters of prime commercial space for free to low-income people or young entrepreneurs to "run stall" for three months, to release the vitality of the "street-stall economy" by encouraging residents to work flexibly.

Source: Data collection and statistics by authors

Combining the context of topics, the study finds the local governments' policies focus on expanding the street vendor venues and time and implementing prudent and inclusive supervision to activate the "street vending economy". But policies specific to the female vendors, such as how to respond to their needs, which include addressing the difficulties of childcare for the female vendors, are hardly mentioned. Compared to the above national laws and policies, local governments are less likely to think from the perspective of female street vendors while formulating and implementing relevant policies.

Hence, the key to solving the above problems is to transform the universality of solutions to handle female and street vendors' problems into the particularity of dealing with the female street vendors' challenges only.

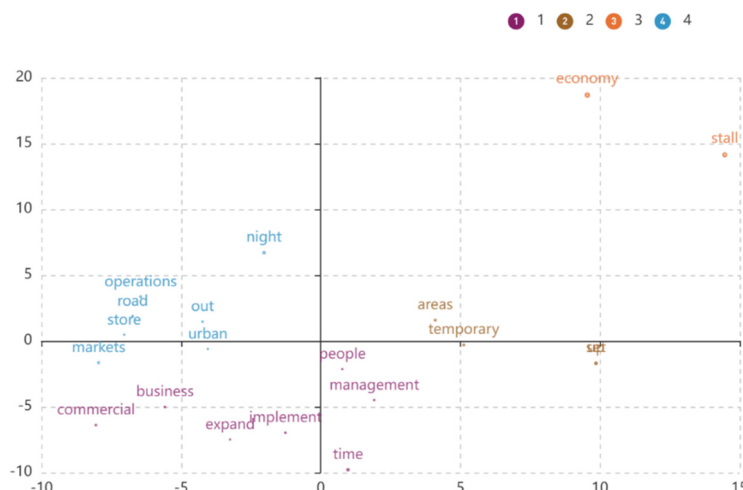


Figure 2. Co-occurrence analysis of local governments' policies
Source: Data collection and statistics by authors

4. Challenges Faced by Female Street Vendors in China and Policy Suggestions

4.1 Vagueness in Legislation and Lack of Gender Perspective in Law

In the process of China's economic reform, women are more likely to experience the risk of downward career mobility than men, lack the opportunity for upward mobility compared with men, and are more vulnerable to the negative impact of the economic reform (Song, 2007). In the informal economy, when women are subject to violence or harassment, it is more difficult for them to resort to legal means to protect their rights and interests.

The fundamental reason is that compared with some developed countries, the legal status of China's street vending is not clear. In the laws formulated by the Chinese legislature (the National People's Congress and its Standing Committee) and the administrative regulations and normative legal documents formulated by the administrative organs (the State Council and its relevant departments), there is a lack of special provisions on street vending (Han, 2021). For example, on April 24, 2015, the Standing Committee of the 12th National People's Congress revised The Food Safety Law of the People's Republic of China, which involves some provisions and ordinances related to food vendors. Article 36 stipulates that small food workshops and food vendors that engage in food production and trading activities shall meet requirements for appropriate size and condition of production or trading and ensure the food being produced or traded is clean, nontoxic, and harmless. The food and drug administration shall strengthen the supervision and administration of these individuals. It is stipulated that county and above level government shall be responsible for the comprehensive oversight of the small food workshops and food vendors by means of strengthening service and planning, improving their production/trading environment, encouraging and supporting them to improve production/trading conditions, and entering into the consolidated trading markets/shops, or trading in a designated temporary area or at a specified period of time. In such laws, only some provisions are related to street vending, and these provisions only focus on food vendors, which are empty, broad, and equally applicable to men and women. This also leads to different degrees of recognition of the legitimacy of street vending at the local government level and in some first-tier city governments. For instance, Beijing has refused to introduce policies to boost street vending, which is not suitable for its strategic positioning of capital city (BBC, 2020).

The existence of this vague space, the uncertainty in laws and regulations, and the differences in local government's policies on street vending not only make it a marginal form of the informal economy in China but also make female street vendors face potential risks at the legal and social levels. The Chinese government should introduce laws and policies to support or legalize street

vendors at the legislative level, especially to protect the human rights and interests of female street vendors from a gender perspective.

4.2 Lack of Women's Non-governmental Organizations and the Functional Absence of the Semi-official Women's Federations

China has no independent non-governmental trade unions for the informal economy. After the founding of the People's Republic of China and before the reform and opening up, the Chinese government also had no specific women's institutions. With the gradual deepening of economic reform, China's bureaucratic system has gradually moved towards modernization, and there have been "mass organizations" such as Women's Federations (The Constitution of the China Women's Federations, October 31, 2008), which is both administrative and non-governmental. On one hand, its funding source is local governments at all levels; on the other hand, it partially overlaps with the functions of women's non-governmental organizations in developed countries, showing a certain degree of autonomy (Tan, 2015). However, these two natures are fundamentally contradictory and tense, which makes the WF's development goals and functional positioning vague. Furthermore, its flexibility and development space is limited to a certain extent, and it is difficult to play its role when the rights and interests of female street vendors are violated.

At the same time, at the official level, China's governments at all levels have not set up corresponding departments for women's work, and the judiciary has no specialized gender researchers and institutions, resulting in the lack of a gender equality perspective when the government formulates policies and strategic plans to a certain extent. Although the policy research and strategic research on women's development can be undertaken by Women's Federations or some scientific research institutions, they can only put forward policy recommendations, which are difficult to compare with the policies and strategic planning from within the government in terms of macro and authority. (Ding and Ma, 2006). It is very important to improve the participation of Chinese women, especially female vendors, in the process of formulating, revising, and reviewing laws and policies related to the informal economy. Women's organizations can act as a bridge for their voices when their rights are violated. This process requires women's organizations to continue to play a role in gender equality and women's empowerment.

The development of Chinese women's associations can refer to the models of South Korea and Singapore, both of which are Asian countries. For example, Korean Women's Associations United (the KWAU) in South Korea is an alliance composed of 27 umbrella organizations, with the purpose of promoting the amendment of relevant bills to safeguard women's rights and interests. In terms of promoting equal work opportunities, KWAU proposed a requirement for the proportion of women in the workplace with a target of at least 30%, and in terms of job security, women workers should also be provided with the demands they deserve. (Moon, 2002). Singapore has established a complete legal system based on the Women's Charter and has ensured the implementation of its laws through strict law enforcement by the government. In terms of women's protection, due to the existence of the Women's Charter, women in Singapore enjoy equal status with men in all fields of society to a considerable extent. In all the processes of seeking employment, education, medical care, or political rights, women in Singapore have been effectively guaranteed their legal rights and interests (Tan, 2015). Due to the existence of a complete legal protection system, diversified non-governmental organizations emerged as the times require. Various social organizations and charitable organizations are the representatives of this role. It is they that enrich the stability of social structure and the efficiency of operation to a great extent. This is Singapore's important successful experience in social governance.

To sum up, this model has the following advantages and characteristics: first, the government attaches great importance to contact and dialogue with the people; second, the government vigorously supports the development of community organizations and charities. This will help protect women's rights organizations as a policy communication bridge between the state and the people and realize

the protection of women's rights and interests in authoritarian countries dominated by government power.

4.3 Development of Small-scale Financial Loans and Vocational Skills Training and the Limited Policy without Gender Perspective

Since the reform and opening up, China's urbanization process has accelerated, and a large number of rural people have entered the cities. Due to the surplus labor force in the formal economy and the widespread gender and age discrimination in China's economy. A large number of women with low education have entered the informal economy. However, due to the above reasons, women's rights and interests cannot be guaranteed, and their basic rights to life, health, human dignity, personal freedom, and so on are vulnerable to violations. In terms of labor rights, the rest and vacation rights of female vendors, such as maternity leave and nursing time, are difficult to be effectively guaranteed. In addition, under the influence of Chinese social traditions, women still need to do a lot of household chores and child-rearing in the family, which will reduce their access to education, vocational training, and participation in social activities for women's empowerment, and also reduce the possibility of formalizing female street vendors (Wang, 2007).

With the high unemployment rate caused by COVID-19, Premier Li pointed out that the hustle and bustle of city life are always comforting. Subsequently, the central government of China began to put forward an inclusive policy on the stall economy. At the same time, the wide coverage of the challenges such as harassment and physical security faced by female street vendors in public media tends to attract social sympathy and increase the possibility of large-scale collective action at the network level (Table 1). Therefore, local governments in China have started to adopt different specific policies to protect the rights of street vendors in order to maintain social stability and improve the credibility of the government (Table 3). For example, in Qianshan City, Anhui Province (Zhu, 2020), the government has adopted the form of low threshold, low-risk, non-guaranteed small loans to stimulate the entrepreneurial enthusiasm of street vendors. Meanwhile, strengthening the training of laws and regulations and vocational skills can further promote the development of street vending. However, it is undeniable that such policies often have regional differences (BBC, 2020), as well as being limited to promoting the formalization of the street vending economy from the time and space levels (Figure 2). Moreover, most of these policies are reactive strategies to deal with social public opinion and economic recession, and it is often difficult for female vendors to participate in policy decisions. Its implementation effect usually depends on the will of the politicians. The passivity and temporality of the policy lead to no further evaluation and report on its results. More importantly, the lack of a gender perspective makes it rare to mention women's responsibility to take care of the family and reproductive behavior in the text of specific policies. Compared with formal employees, female informal employees also have no stable and universal labor insurance system, which makes Chinese women in a disadvantaged position in the informal economy.

5. Conclusion

Since the outbreak of Covid-19, China has witnessed serious problems of slow economic growth and rising unemployment. Although the informal economy, especially street vending, had been regarded as the "tail of the capitalist economy" by the Chinese authorities for a long time before the reform and opening up, it can play a new role in the economic recovery after Covid-19. Through research, it is clear that although the research on China's vending economy is rich, it lacks a gender perspective. The common harassment by *chengguan* shows different degrees, which engage with the inconsistent policies in diverse regions and further result in the uncertainty for *chengguan* in enforcement. And in the process of legislation and policy formulation and implementation, the special needs of women at the psychological and physiological levels are ignored, especially for children and family care. And there is a lack of gender-based public policy considerations among national and

local governments. This inevitably leads to many exclusionary policies for female vendors in practice in China, which are analyzed and categorized through open coding and co-occurrence analysis.

First of all, the Chinese government should more clearly define the legal status of street vending at the legislative level. In particular, laws targeting female street vendors should be included in the legislative scope and agenda. Second, the development of women's NGOs should be encouraged, in order to complement the functional shortcomings of Women's Federations and better meet the special needs of female street vendors. Third, after the epidemic, more provinces and cities should promote the process of the formalization of street vending through diversified forms, such as finance, science and technology, social media, and other means, and strengthen the vocational skills training for street vendors. But overall, special attention should be paid to the protection of the rights and interests of female street vendors.

Author Contributions

This paper was jointly completed by Shiming Tong, Huiyi Zhang, Zhiyue Zhang. Everyone has made equal efforts in the research of this topic, and their contribution to the paper is average. It is hereby explained.

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