

“Self-employed Workers” in the Age of Neoliberalism

Women and Men Street Vendors in Kathmandu

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I. Introduction

For decades, starting with the much-cited Hart (1973), “street vendors” have been at the heart of the debate on “informal sectors/economies.” We can safely assume that this occupational group has somehow been deemed to be a quintessential figure in informal economies themselves.

However, the image emerging out of that bountiful accumulation of arguments is in fact far from clear. Street vendors, now ubiquitous and integral to the landscapes of almost every city and town worldwide, elude any neat description or evaluation; Are they the epitome of proliferating urban poor just trying to earn a living by any means? Or are they shrewd small entrepreneurs who are quick to exploit lucrative opportunities? Are they improving their lot or are they stuck at an economic impasse? What are the overall effects of their activities? Are they providing an essential service to the public or are they making urban lives more difficult? Are their activities contributing to “economic growth,” or are they detrimental to it? And how should we view them, after all—in positive terms or negative ones (cf. Bromley 2000)?

Different characterizations or evaluations might apply to different cases, but the extensive variance in views on street vendors shows that their image is in deep flux and thus hard to fix (presumably in any place or case).

Broadening the view to encompass the larger field of informal economies, arguments surrounding the theme have also been unsettled, perhaps because, even before “informal-ness” has been clarified and diagnosed, new waves of “informalization” are seemingly underway in the current age of neoliberalism (cf. Mies 1986[2014]; Standing 2014). Instead of “informal work” being gradually replaced by formal employment, formal employment has been at least partially replaced by informal/casual employment, or even by a chain of contracts, where the concept of “employment” is abandoned altogether. Thus, more and more working people are left unemployed and have no other choice but to become “self-employed.” This fate is not only befalling lower-end working people, but also workers from all walks of life, including the so-called “creative class.” Those in relatively

favorable positions may still be *formally* in formal employment, but their working conditions may not be very different from those of people who create their jobs for themselves. It is as if nobody can afford to work as required by their employers anymore; they have to be “creative” and act as if they are employers themselves.

At present, there is an upsurge in “informality,” even though we do not know what it is. Obviously, it is not something that is just subsistent, pre-modern, or pre-capitalist; it is something we need to grasp in relation to the ongoing mainstream capitalist economy. Instead of being expelled by the drive of capitalization, it rather appears somehow symbiotic, collateral, or complementary to the system. Or, it could be another kind of capitalism itself, even possibly an alternative to its present form.

The present paper will not try to tackle the above queries on informal economies head on, but will treat their primary players, street vendors, in the hope that we get to understand more of them and informal economies through the endeavor. We explore those queries on street vendors through the reality of the streets of contemporary Kathmandu, Nepal, putting female vendors at the center of our focus¹. Here the scope of the study is reframed as “self-employed (N. *swarajgar*) business workers (N. *byapar sramik*),” in accordance with the way that many street-vending women and men in Nepal² currently identify and organize themselves as an occupational group³. This is the label employed by the trade union that organizes street vendors in Nepal⁴. The union incorporates not only street vendors, but also some small business owners (retailers in [semi-] fixed establishments), though the fact remains that the majority of its members consist of those trading on the street⁵. Why they would identify themselves in this way is actually an important part of this study; we will get to see the importance of this question as the arguments proceed and get to the question itself toward the end of the paper.

¹ The research on which this study is mainly based was originally planned and executed as part of a larger research project on the works and lives of women in Nepal. The project is centered on fieldwork in Kathmandu carried out on and off since the late 00s, including semi-structured interviews with women from various classes/ occupational backgrounds conducted from late 2011 through early 2012. The 52 female street vendors who were subjected to the semi-structured interviews were one of the focused occupational groups for the study.

² A notable feature of the “self-employed workers”/ street vendors in Kathmandu in terms of gender is the approximately even composition of men and women. Street vending in contemporary Kathmandu can be regarded as work that is mostly without conspicuous gender segregation or gender-specific features linked to the work *in itself*. Gender as a theme has received more specific attention in the scholarship on street vending, because the occupation is frequently populated by a disproportionate number of women in many parts of the world (cf. Hansen et al. 2013).

³ Henceforth its slightly abbreviated form (the “self-employed” or “self-employed workers”) will be used in the paper.

⁴ Established in 2003 as *Nepal Sadak Vyapar Sramik Sangh* (N. Its English name is *Nepal Street Vendors Union*), whose name was changed into *Nepal Swarajgar Vyapar Sramik Sangh* five years later (literally translated as “Nepal Self-employed Business Workers Union.” They have not changed their English name including “street vendors,” to this day). The union is an affiliate of *StreetNet International* from Nepal, a networking body for organizations of street vendors worldwide.

⁵ Though in its leadership, small business owners in [semi-] fixed establishments tend to be disproportionately represented.

II. “Self-employed work” in Kathmandu

1. The work

A central feature of the work is that it is pursued (mainly) “on the street.” They are people who trade, if not literally on the street, in those places somehow *like a street* in that they are nobody’s private property but belong to the public.

“Self-employed workers” can be differentiated by the type of place they use for the trade. The majority literally occupy a piece of land on the street regularly but temporarily. They bring, lay out, and trade their goods (or services) on the street, and then take them back to their home or rented storeroom nearby at the end of the day. There are also those in small numbers who sell their goods by peddling on the street.

Still others engage in business at makeshift stalls in hawker centers, scattered here and there in bazaar districts across the city, set up on public land. While they can be required to evacuate at any time if any policy change sets in, the environment for the business there is worlds apart from that on the street in terms of stability and comfort. Some centers/stalls even have shutters that enable stall-keepers to store their goods after they call it a day. Otherwise, they move their goods back and forth just as those trading on the street do.

A tiny minority of “self-employed” workers actually ply their trade at rented fixed establishments, thus they do not count as “street vendors” in any meaning of the word. Those who get involved with “self-employed workers” are only a fraction among the fellow off-street retailers. Those involved in the organization usually have some connections with “the street,” either currently (they may trade on the street as well as running a regular shop) or in the past (they may have started up as a street vendor).

What is being sold on the street by “self-employed workers”? The answer is *just about anything that can be carried on a person’s back*⁶. That includes food and drink (a variety of snacks or beverages pre-packed or prepared on the spot, fresh vegetables and fruits, etc.), apparel (from underwear to jeans to jackets), media products (newspapers/books/DVDs, etc.), and other miscellaneous goods for everyday use (from ear picks to stuffed bears to smartphone chargers), as well as services ranging from shoeshine to fortune telling.

When do they engage in the trade? The answer is, it depends on where they trade, who they are, or

⁶ Merchandise that is very costly, if easily carried (such as jewelry or high-end smartphones), is an exception, for obvious reasons.

how much they aspire to earn. On the street, the norm is that you trade when you have customers. While the prime time is in the evenings from around 5:00 through 7–8:00 (except for groceries), vendors generally try to stay in business throughout the day, 7 days a week, if nobody (municipal authorities or police) disturbs them. Recently, more and more areas with a concentration of vendors have been designated as off-limits in the daytime; in those areas, vendors have no choice but to trade in the evenings only⁷. In hawker centers or other fixed establishments, businesses are generally open throughout the day.

While many vendors say that they try to stay in business as long as they can (longer working hours are one positive way to make sure you catch more customers), prolonged observation shows that their working hours/days are quite flexible. Some female vendors find the limited working hours rather convenient for them to coordinate their domestic burdens with their work, but both women and men can be observed taking time/day off when necessary. Consequently, while working routines are overall patterned around business prospects and municipal regulations, their details turn out to be determined by the more minute circumstances that individual workers want to accommodate.

The work, as with all other work, is carried out not only by the workers themselves, but also by other stakeholders. Apart from indirect stakeholders such as pedestrians, nearby business owners or residents, customers are one of the main stakeholders on whom these workers depend, and wholesalers are the other. They also need space where they can lay out and sell their goods or services (if they do not peddle), thus the “landlord” who owns, administers, or controls the space (municipal or law enforcement authorities, for the street) emerge here as the third and definitive stakeholders. The authorities’ intervention in the use of public space currently appears to be the most imminent issue for these people to tackle. That will lead us to the next and final point of this section.

What kind of problems or difficulties do they face in this trade? Working on the street, basically without any protection from the heat, cold, wind, and rain, is quite tough anywhere. In contemporary Kathmandu, where the level of air pollution is increasing and infrastructure available in public spaces (such as public toilets or clean running water) is insufficient, it is all the more challenging just to sit on the street.

However, the most urgent problem that all street vendors, by far the majority of the “self-employed,” would mention first and foremost is the securing of a space for their trade⁸. Long-timers invariably

⁷ A protest against these municipal decisions was staged for months by the union of self-employed workers in 2014; this action bore no fruit for the street vendors.

⁸ Actually, this is arguably the most urgent problem faced by street vendors worldwide, though concrete circumstances or

talk of the days when they had to run away carrying their goods if they saw municipal officials coming down the road⁹. Officials would try to chase them away and confiscate their goods, and as a rule were extremely rude to them, not only verbally but also physically. Their actions made vendors’ working environment extremely precarious and their work very difficult in those days, as they recount.

After vendors became organized, they successfully won some concessions from the municipal body: the random chasing away or confiscation of goods generally ceased and harassment against vendors mostly stopped. That does not mean the problem itself was solved; the discontinuation of random interventions by authorities was won by striking deals with them that would limit the time (and place) of trade in central shopping areas. Given that shorter working hours (and smaller or unsuitable areas for trade) can directly affect vendors’ business prospects, the union has naturally been making efforts to turn the deals to their favor, though so far their efforts have borne no fruit¹⁰.

The bulk of the above-mentioned problems are not shared (or shared only to far lesser degrees) with those “self-employed” who operate with a roof over their heads (in hawker centers or fixed establishments). As a matter of fact, they have already solved these problems for the most part, if not for good¹¹. If so, a fundamental question arises here: why are these off-street retailers participating in the community of street vendors in the first place? To rephrase the question: why would “proper” street vendors incorporate off-street retailers into their organization? We will get back to this question later.

2. The people

Having looked at the work itself, let us now turn to the background of the people who engage in this trade, mainly (but not solely) looking at data from semi-structured interviews with female street vendors.

To street-vend or become “self-employed,” no particular age range seems to be required. Men and women of all ages are found in this trade¹². In terms of marital status, all female interviewees turned

environments and thus concrete issues differ from place to place. For a detailed account of a case from Mumbai, see Anjaria (2014: Chaps. 3 & 4).

⁹ A female vendor talked of the misery she faced in her endeavor to run away from an official, not knowing which to grab—her merchandise or her baby, whom she had to bring to her “workplace” with her.

¹⁰ Instead of making working hours or places for street vendors longer or favorable, the municipality is even trying to designate some main districts “street-vending free,” and move vendors into a newly planned hawker center on the outskirts of the city. The union has been fiercely opposing this proposition, saying that the proposed space is too meager in its potential to attract customers and not large enough to accommodate all the vendors operating in the districts.

¹¹ Disputes with “landlords,” public bodies or others, are always possible in theory.

¹² Among the 52 interviewees, ranging from 23 up to 77, the average age was 38.8.

out to be married¹³, a fact explained by another shared characteristic: their birthplace. Out of 52 women, 49 were from a rural area outside of Kathmandu Valley¹⁴. The general tendency of rural-born (and under-educated) women in Nepal to get married at a relatively young age underlies their uniform marital status. Speaking of their male counterparts, they were also from rural Nepal and married to the best of my knowledge, though some younger vendors were still single¹⁵.

Like many other rural-born women in Nepal, the level of the interviewees' educational achievements was not high overall, although it was quite varied, ranging from "non-literate" to college-level education. Under 40% studied through middle school, and only around 15% acquired SLC (school leaving certificate). One can see that their educational level restricted their job choice; for many, formal employment is out of reach¹⁶. However, one should also note here that the level appeared relatively high in this occupation compared with other informal jobs, such as construction or domestic work (Sato 2011; 2013). The educational achievements of male street vendors were not so impressive either, though the overall level was presumably a bit higher than their female counterparts.

Coming from outside of Kathmandu, most of them live in rented room(s)¹⁷. Only a handful owned a house¹⁸. The state of things was not different for male vendors either¹⁹.

Turning to years of experience in this line of work, this particular dataset on women showed an average of 13 years (ranging from less than a year up to 30 years). We can safely assume that long-time street vendors are no exception, even considering that the sample was perhaps disproportionately slanted toward long-timers because of the method of sampling used (they were approached mainly through their connection with union officials)²⁰.

We should bear in mind that there *was* a group of vendors that was disproportionately *under*-represented among the interviewees: those who engage in the trade rather casually, on and off. They get into the trade when the business environment appears favorable and get out of it if things go wrong;

¹³ A total of 8 out of 52 women had been separated from her husband, by his death or otherwise.

¹⁴ Those three women born within the valley were also from rural (or only marginally and recently urbanized) areas.

¹⁵ The rural background of these people mean they generally do not get to vote in Kathmandu electorates. Their "denizen" status could limit their means to effect political leverage as an occupational group (cf. Chatterjee 2004).

¹⁶ You could have a chance for formal employment (at least) if you have a SLC in hand, but only if you have the right connections.

¹⁷ One or two rooms for the family (with a shared bathroom) seems to be the norm, but occasionally you find a family occupying a flat on their own.

¹⁸ Three respondents reported that they came to own a house in Kathmandu. By March 2016, I heard at least another three women from among the interviewees had acquired or were in the process of acquiring their own house in the city.

¹⁹ There is one male vendor who has reportedly made quite a fortune from this trade and came to own more than one house in the city (and is still in the on-street trade).

²⁰ Rover (2014) found a similar picture for street vendors in other countries.

thus, they are most likely not interested in occupational organization and dare not have any substantial contacts with it. Street vending is, for such people, no more than a way to make (extra) money; they have (or cannot afford *not to have*) other options for living. Among them are those who are actually not too badly off and can afford to live without engaging in this trade; they get into it only if it seems lucrative. Others are those who are so badly off that they cannot afford to stick to it if the business deteriorates slightly—they have no choice but to turn quickly to other ways (usually paying even less than street vending when it runs well, such as domestic work, home-based work, etc.) to make ends meet.

Supposing that these particular interviewees were relatively well-established street vendors, the almost uniform way they talked about how they got started is quite impressive; what they said in brief is that they started this because it looked easy. Their universal “starting-up” story goes like this: they got to know something about the trade through communication with their relatives, friends, acquaintances, or just through their experience shopping on the street; they calculated it would be easy for them to do, so they started it. All of them realized its difficulties later on and some changed the site used for trade or switched their type of merchandise afterwards, but they have stayed in the business all the same. These stories show that even seemingly incidental decision making can lead to long-lasting occupational lives.

This leads to the question: what had they been doing before starting this job? In their village they invariably engaged in farm work, while after moving to the city they either engaged in other informal work (carpet weaving, domestic work, construction work, sewing, etc.) first and then switched to this job or started the trade directly.

Earnings from this trade are hard to estimate (not only for the researcher, but more often than not for the vendors themselves—generally one does not see vendors keep any account book on the spot; and they may not do that anywhere else, either), so is the exact extent of their contributions to their households’ livelihood unless they are the sole breadwinners. In many cases, however, it can be safely inferred that their contributions are indispensable. When asked how much they make via this trade, many simply answered that they can manage to meet the basic needs of their family (“enough to eat and dress [N. *khana launa pugi rahecha*]”)²¹. If asked what they spend their earnings on, they mentioned essential household expenses such as food, cooking gas, rent, children’s school tuition, etc.

What are the other economically active members of these households (e.g., the husband and

²¹ Many would add to that, saying “but unable to save for the future.”

possibly grown-up children—especially sons) doing then? In 20 cases (out of which 18 were the respondents' husbands), the vendor's family member(s) were also engaged in this trade (either jointly or separately). In 14 cases (out of which 10 were the respondents' husbands), her family member(s) were staying abroad to work, mostly in Malaysia or the Middle East (plus two in Korea). Most other husbands were engaged in some other informal work if not between jobs. Those with formal employment (police officers, teachers, etc.) were found to make up a small minority among these families.

3. The experience

How do these people experience street vending, then? How do they evaluate it, and what are their prospects?

Asked if they were satisfied with the job, most respondents answered in positive or somewhat positive terms (nearly 90% answered either “yes” or “so-so”). Asked if they would continue to pursue this trade in the future, their answers were an overwhelming “yes” (49 out of 52). Do they evaluate their work positively, then? How can we comprehend their evaluation or experience of the work?

As we listened to their stories, it soon became apparent that their expressed positive prospects should be taken tentatively. Many did make it clear right after their answers that the prospects *are* conditional; they said they would stay in the trade on the condition that the environment allows them to do so. Actually, many of them anticipated that the conditions would not remain good in the future. The condition they considered crucial is the attitude of the authorities toward the use of public spaces/streets. Many feared that the authorities may stop letting them use the street, if not altogether then at least on the scale they do at the moment. It is only reasonable to suppose that this negative anticipation toward the future may well erode their commitment to the trade. This concern was widely shared, irrespective of vendors' gender.

The evaluations of various aspects of the trade were also mixed for many. The positive traits mentioned almost inevitably entailed negative ones on the other side. Positive factors included, firstly, the lack of physical toil (of an acute kind, anyway)²², although many did not fail to mention that sitting outside, constantly exposed to emissions, can lead to health problems in the long run.

Secondly, many of them expressed some satisfaction in being able to make a living and educate the

²² Some would mention moving the goods back and forth to the site for business as a difficulty they face in their work. They would hire porters for the task if they could afford it/were willing to pay.

next generation using what they earn from the business, although the objectively realized standard of living may vary greatly. Certainly, long-timers occasionally bemoaned the fact that they are still on the street after all these years, not being able to establish their business on firmer ground by, say, renting a fixed stall. Nonetheless, they knew that they cannot afford to remain dissatisfied with the job, much less quit, unless they find better ways to earn. Thus, they would say they are (sort-of) satisfied and will stay on as long as possible.

Thirdly, the work was generally evaluated highly in that it is “of one’s own (*N. apno*)”; that is, free from direct supervision or control by powerful others (employers, management). As already mentioned, a number of the vendors have engaged in other informal work such as carpet weaving, domestic work, etc. They said they would not go back to such jobs as they are lacking in freedom and coercive in nature: “If the job is of one’s own, you can afford to get sick, at least.” They also mentioned the meager amount of money they would earn compared to their earnings from street vending: “You can get nowhere by doing the job for others.”

Of course, running one’s own business means that they are also *free* of all the protections or security that being employed would entail²³. At the same time, they are far from completely free from the interventions of powerful others, the most notable being the municipal or law enforcement authorities; they could not coerce vendors into work but could prevent them from pursuing their work by forcing them to evacuate the space.

Fourthly, many of the vendors, especially those intimately involved in union activities, pointed out that their occupational self/social esteem has been dramatically boosted ever since the union made way for their organization. Before that, they said they were ashamed of their own work; running a business under the open sky was deemed not respectable in general, even in their own mind. Not respecting their trade themselves, they generally would try not to associate with their fellow workers, either. Customers, authorities, pedestrians, or nearby residents acted against them accordingly and vendors could do nothing but accept others’ behaviors silently. With the organizing drive in this field, as well as the general trend of democratization in Nepal, the situation changed, as they recounted.

Now they state they are not ashamed to say that they do business on the street; they are now aware that they are doing nothing wrong; it is their right to work and earn their living and it must be respected. They mingle and support each other, gather for the programs or events of the union, and act collectively

²³ As all the wage jobs that these respondents had engaged in were informal, none of them had ever enjoyed any of the protection or security that *formal* employment entails.

if necessary. Other stakeholders as a rule came to behave themselves around street vendors, too. Among others, the authorities who had chased them away ceased to do so and do not disturb them anymore, now that a deal was struck with the vendors' organization.

However, did their low self-esteem really go away? Eliminating negativity appears to be actually quite difficult. The difficulty derives partly from the fact that their newly acquired self-esteem is resting on a rather acrobatic and even paradoxical affirmation of one's way of being. The affirmation goes: "We are entitled to pursue our work to live, but we are poor people who cannot rent the essential means of production, so occupying the street for the business is justified." Their claim on the street and its legitimacy rest on their acceptance of their unfavorable situation that they *are* poor, while many of them are actually striving to leave the situation behind through their day-to-day struggles.

On the other hand, some vendors, if a minority, are said to have amassed enough to get off the street, achieving the status of middle-class in terms of monetary condition, but continue the street business. In this sort of case, while the vendor rose out of poverty and should be proud of that, his/her claim on the street is not rightfully upheld anymore; how will he/she respond to someone claiming his/her place on the street, if the person is truly without any other means to earn a living? Precisely by gaining economic confidence on the street, the vendor's rightful claim and thus their confidence in this occupation by extension will inevitably be eroded.

Let us quickly consider the emotional side of the matter; how does it feel to engage in this trade? What is the state of mind of a working street vendor?

Apparently, it is difficult to generalize on this sort of matter. Perhaps all we can do is just suppose that the mixed evaluations reviewed above translate into the simultaneous or interspersed presence of negative and positive feelings in each vendor—the coexistence of sorrow and joy, disgust and thrills, disappointment and hope, etc.

That said, I here present the words of a long-time female street vendor, whose "half of the life has just been expended on the street", in her own words²⁴. Looking back on her work and life, she stated: "When you come to think of that, in a way, (engaging in) this work is like getting addicted (N. *nasa lageko*)." She went on: "Like getting addicted, once you plunge in, it's difficult to get out." By using the metaphor of "addiction," she seems to convey the mixed feelings of pleasure and danger, exaltation and helplessness, that one may experience practicing this trade. There is this stimulus =

²⁴ At the time this story was narrated (March 2016) she was 39 years old, a mother of 2, and had 23 years' experience in this trade.

pleasure/exaltation (money flowing in, at any instant) that is difficult to let go, on the one hand, and it is intertwined with, and actually made possible by, that stimulus = danger/helplessness (spending money, investment). We should also pay attention to the peculiar sense of time conveyed through the metaphor of “addiction”: time that is ephemeral as well as persistent, feeling like an instant and also like a prolonged period. Another ambiguity highlighted by the metaphor is something lying between willingness and compulsion. Admittedly, nobody forced her into the trade—but did she really have other options, either when she plunged in or thereafter? Yes, she did choose the trade, but only because no alternative presented itself.

Recently, she and her husband bought a piece of land in a suburb of the ever-expanding megacity and began building a house there. I asked: “Are you going to move there once the house is completed?” She replied, “No, not really. Here is the place for me to earn my living. (But) what will happen in the future, who knows?”

4. Diverse realities, ambiguous identities: Why do they call themselves “self-employed”?

Let us summarize the argument so far and get to the question we posed at the beginning of the paper: Why do they call themselves “self-employed workers”?

One thing that is clear from the above arguments is that the realities these “self-employed workers” are living out are far from uniform, but rather diverse in terms of their work environment (the majority pursuing their trade on the street, but not necessarily), class-standings (the majority are definitely working-class, but there are some who attained middle-class status), position of this job in their livelihood (a substantial/integral part of the livelihood of many, but not all), or the level of commitment to the job (many are willing to continue but there are others who feel differently). While you can picture the “core” of self-employed workers as street vendors who are working-class, making this trade a main source of their livelihood, and quite committed to this job, there are also those who show some distance from this picture: those who operate their trade off the street (generally financially better off than the “core”) or those who engage in street vending on and off and dare not (or cannot) stick to it (economically speaking, either better off than the “core” or extremely poor).

To put “core” street vendors’ experience of the work in a nutshell, they generally think positively of the trade, but have many reservations. The work is in a way easy, but entails its own difficulties; you can live on it, but not really a good life; they value the fact that they can operate on their own, but an essential condition of the trade (= the street) is at the discretion of powerful others (the authorities); they are proud street vendors, but they more often than not are striving for the firmer off-street

economic ground, etc.

The emotional consequences of this overall positive (but in many ways reserved) evaluation can be the mixed, elusive, and not easily articulable feelings for the job. Exact feelings may well vary from vendor to vendor according to individual circumstances or backgrounds, but the feel of ambiguity is presumably the one thing shared by most of them.

Now let us ask: why do they call themselves “self-employed workers”?

As a matter of fact, the not easily commensurable diversity among “self-employed workers” was an expected result of them choosing this label during their organizing efforts. Why did they choose it, then? The label was chosen, on one level, as a part of an organizational strategy, one of the founding members and the current chairman of the union explained. They chose it thinking that the choice would broaden the potential organizational base; not delineating target groups narrowly as proper street vendors, but also incorporating those who have connections with street vendors in one form or another, expands the scope of membership. Another motive behind the choice was the not particularly positive image attached to “street vendors” in general. Employing the more positive label, one free from any negative connotations, could be effective for expanding membership *from within* street vendors proper, too.

From the viewpoint of strategic organization building, one cannot deny that the label can also have the reverse effect; that is, a negative one. The inclusion of people from varied environments, classes, and so forth makes it difficult to build shared agendas for the whole group. Notably, the inclusion of those trading *off* the street can blur what they actually stand for. As already mentioned more than once, an imminent and important issue for street vendors is the securement of space for the trade = the street, while this is not an issue for those who trade in secure places.

Seen on the level of organizational strategy, the inclusion of off-street retailers can have a different negative effect. While the union membership consists overwhelmingly of those trading on the street, it was observed that its leadership is differently composed; off-street traders are actually disproportionately represented. This is in a way understandable; those off-street traders would participate in the organization presumably because they are interested in trade unionism, the labor movement, “class struggle,” etc., and have resource to invest in it (time, energy, skills, or knowledge) in the first place. Understandable as it is, one cannot overlook its possible effect; given that kind of leadership, “proper” street vendors might start to wonder whether the union is actually organized of, for, or by “themselves,” especially when the organization fails to secure what it should have: the street.

On the level of practical organizational strategy, the decision’s effect appears not entirely favorable.

It has both costs and benefits²⁵.

It is my contention that the query for the label “self-employed workers” should be answered on the “expressive” level rather than, or alongside with, this practical level; the mixed effect for the organization could be expected when they employed it, after all, if not universally then at least by those who were thoughtful enough. They took up the label all the same, presumably seeing some *other* value in it; that is, I would argue, the value in that it is expressive of some essential aspects of the reality or identity lived out by street vendors, those they regard as worthy of being highlighted.

What this phrase “self-employed business workers” conveys, on one level, is that they work on their own; they are fundamentally “free” individuals, who chose the occupation and work for themselves. As we saw already, this is one feature of the trade they value highly. Thus, it is understandable that they chose a label conveying that feature.

On another level, the phrase conveys essential ambiguity in terms of the class positioning among these people, and that ambiguity is arguably something they do not denounce but *embrace*.

“Self-employed worker” literally means “employer” *cum* “worker”; two class positions embodied (or sublated, as it were) in one person; thus, the category can accommodate people of quite a wide range of economic standings. That is exactly what one finds even among those on the street, and still more among “self-employed workers” as a whole. While many of them are nothing more than poor laborers, quite a few aspire to climb the class ladder, and a few, if only a few, are known to have actually achieved that—possibly even gaining the status of “proper” employer.

The diversity (or disparity, to put it more plainly) in terms of the economic standing of these people is presumably taken to be something *that gives them hope*, instead of something that might jeopardize the possibility of their collective action. The disparity within makes it difficult to build shared agendas, but nonetheless, the label appeared as something suitable/desirable for them, expressing their essentially ambiguous class positioning and thereby sustaining their potential for upward mobility in the future. The label is, for them, something that attests to the fact that economic upward mobility *is* possible.

²⁵ The current chairman once stated that they should perhaps not have employed this strategy in the first place.

III. Concluding remarks

We have delineated the diverse and ambiguous realities lived out by street vendors /“self-employed workers,” including their actual diverse/ambiguous class standings and their views on that.

Getting back to the arguments on street vendors or informal economies in general that we touched on at the beginning of the paper, the above picture suggests the possibility that the unsettled nature of the accumulated arguments actually corresponds to the facts on the ground—or at least, to those on the ground in Kathmandu. We also mentioned the global trend where informal economies do not seem to be fading away, but rather are in a resurgent phase. What can we say about that based on the case of Kathmandu?

As we have seen, while the “street vendor core” is rather stable and it seems quite possible that most of them will stay in the trade for years to come, it is also probable that some will leave the street, either through quitting the trade for another, by becoming successful enough to secure their own fixed establishment, or just by retiring. On the other hand, in Nepal (as in many other parts of the world), the rural-urban migration flow will not decrease and available formal employment will be no match for the demand; thus, the gap will require people to engage in some form of “self-employed work.” While the work does not have to be street vending, at least some of them will find their livelihood through that trade.

Thus, while the faces on the street will more or less change constantly, the occupational group itself is going to last into the foreseeable future, as long as no drastic measures to clear them away are taken by the authorities. How many of them will continue then, what the concrete features of the trade will be, how those engaging in the trade will experience it, and how the “informal economy” at large will transform itself (as well as the formal, presumably mainstream, economy) in the process—are all questions that remain open at the moment.

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