

Childcare Challenges Arising from Reliance on Social Networks as a Parental Coping Mechanism Among Women Street Vendors in Nyamagana, Tanzania

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ABSTRACT

Original research paper

Introduction: Street vending is a vital part of the informal economy in Tanzania, with many women balancing income generation and childcare responsibilities. However, women street vendors in urban areas of Tanzania, including Nyamagana District, often rely on social networks such as siblings, neighbors, and daycare centers to supervise and support their young children while they are busy with vending activities. Nevertheless, the specific challenges associated with this reliance remain underexplored, particularly regarding children's moral guidance, social development, and emotional wellbeing. Understanding these difficulties is essential for informing policies and community interventions to support working mothers.

Methodology: Guided by a constructivist paradigm, the study employed a qualitative cross-sectional design. Participants included women street vendors and local government officials. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, enabling participants to describe their experiences in detail. Thematic analysis was conducted using NVivo software to identify patterns and key challenges in reliance on social networks for childcare.

Findings: The study revealed that dependence on social networks exposes children to inconsistent supervision, negative peer influences, limited moral guidance, and weak parent-child bonds. Older siblings sometimes assume caregiving responsibilities at the expense of their own development, while neighbors and daycare centers provide partial or inadequate guidance. Mothers reported stress, anxiety, and concern for their children's wellbeing, reflecting the strain of balancing vending and parenting. These findings highlight the practical and emotional challenges of informal childcare arrangements.

Conclusion: Reliance on social networks for childcare creates significant challenges for women street vendors in Mkuyuni, affecting children's social, moral, and emotional development while increasing maternal stress. The study underscores the need for community support, targeted policies, and interventions that enhance safe, consistent, and structured childcare options for women in the informal economy.

Keywords: Childcare challenges, Social networks, Women street vendors.

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Introduction

Street vending constitutes a significant component of the informal economy, which accounts for over 60% of global employment (ILO, 2018). Women dominate informal

vending across Asia, Africa, and Latin America, primarily selling food, clothing, household goods, and small-scale services (Hassan & Jafree, 2024). This sector is particularly attractive to women because it provides flexibility to balance

income generation with domestic responsibilities, especially caregiving. Globally, over 740 million women are engaged in informal employment, many as street vendors, who rely on this work to remain close to their homes and children (ILO, 2018; UN Women, 2015). While vending allows women to generate income while attending to household duties, limited access to formal childcare often forces them to depend on social networks such as older siblings, neighbors, or daycare centers for child supervision.

Despite the widespread engagement of women in informal trade, little is known about the childcare challenges associated with this reliance on social networks. Globally, women in informal employment face harassment, eviction, lack of social protection, and health risks (Hassan et al, 2024; Pineda Duque et al., 2022). In many cases, they must bring young children to vending sites due to the lack of affordable childcare, exposing both mother and child to potential hazards (Horwood et al., 2021). Initiatives such as inclusive vending zones in Bogotá, Colombia, and India's SEWA program have sought to improve women's livelihoods while supporting caregiving, but the literature rarely focuses on the practical challenges of social-network-based childcare (Chen et al., 2016; Pineda Duque et al., 2022).

In Africa, women represent over 70% of informal traders (AfDB, 2021). Studies in countries like Zimbabwe and Kenya show that children left at vending sites often experience inadequate supervision, affecting their emotional and physical wellbeing (Makuyana et al., 2020&Ssewanyana et al, 2022). While some African countries have introduced regulatory measures and women's market associations to support informal vendors, these efforts have not explicitly addressed the childcare difficulties arising from reliance on social networks (Uzo et al, 2019).

In Tanzania, over 60% of urban informal workers are women (NBS, 2022), and 90% of food vendors are women with parental responsibilities (FAO, 2022). Ensuring children's health, education, and emotional wellbeing requires close supervision, follow-up on school progress, and consistent care, which necessitate adequate time and a flexible, supportive environment (Mwakupusya et al, 2024). However, women street vendors must combine these caregiving responsibilities with vending activities, creating reliance on siblings, neighbors, and daycare centers for childcare. Existing Tanzanian studies, including a study by Kivuyo, S., (2014) and Mtana,M., (2022), have largely focused on harassment, poor infrastructure, policy exclusion, and social marginalization, while leaving gaps in understanding the challenges related to relying on social-networks for childcare as parental copying mechanism.

Study Objective

This study seeks to fill the existing knowledge gap by exploring childcare challenges among women street vendors in Mkuyuni Ward, Nyamagana District, in Manza Tanzania

with particular focus on the implications of relying on social networks. It investigates how this dependence affects children's health, emotional development, and school progress, offering insights for policy interventions that support both women's economic activities and child wellbeing.

Significance of this study

i). To Academicians: This study contributes to academic knowledge by providing insights into the intersection of informal economic activities, such as street vending, and parenting practices. It demonstrates how maternal absence, reliance on sibling caregiving, and limited support systems affect children's well-being, moral development, and socialization. These findings enrich teaching and theoretical discussions in fields such as sociology, social work, and development studies. Moreover, the study serves as a foundation for further research on parenting challenges in informal economies, fostering comparative analyses and theoretical advancements on parenting stress and coping strategies in resource-constrained urban settings.

ii). To Researchers: The study offers rich, context-specific qualitative data that capture women street vendors' lived experiences and coping mechanisms. Through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, it provides detailed accounts of how maternal absence influences sibling caregiving, peer interactions, and child moral development. These insights create opportunities for future research, including the design of targeted interventions, exploration of parenting challenges in other informal sectors, and investigations into long-term effects on child development. The study also encourages interdisciplinary approaches, linking sociology, psychology, and public health for a holistic understanding of parenting in informal work settings.

iii). To Policy Makers: Findings from this study provide evidence to guide policy formulation and intervention strategies for supporting women in the informal economy. By highlighting the relationship between street vending and parenting challenges, the study emphasizes the importance of initiatives such as child-friendly vending spaces, accessible and affordable childcare services, structured parenting support programs, and community-based supervision mechanisms. Incorporating these insights into policy frameworks can help reduce parental stress, strengthen family systems, and enhance the social, moral, and emotional development of children in households dependent on informal income.

iv). To the Communities: At the community level, the study benefits women street vendors and their families by raising awareness of the childcare challenges associated with reliance on older siblings, peer influence, and limited moral guidance. It encourages community dialogue on how to support mothers in balancing economic and caregiving roles. By recognizing

the contributions and struggles of women street vendors, community members are better positioned to advocate for child-centered initiatives and create safer, more supportive environments for children. These insights also empower women to adopt coping strategies and seek mutual support to safeguard their children's wellbeing.

Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by the Parental Stress Model, which asserts that parental stress arises when the demands of caregiving exceed available resources, potentially affecting both parental functioning and child well-being (Abidin, R., 1992). A key assumption of the model relevant to this study is that insufficient support, time constraints, and competing responsibilities increase parental stress and can compromise the quality of childcare. Therefore, the model provided a theoretical lens for understanding how the collision of vending responsibilities and parental duties creates time constraints for women street vendors. These time limitations often necessitate reliance on social networks such as siblings, neighbors, or daycare centers for childcare.

The assumption underlying this lens is that dependence on external support, while necessary, may introduce challenges in maintaining consistent supervision, guidance, and emotional bonding, thereby influencing both maternal stress and child well-being. By applying this perspective, the study explored how time pressures and reliance on social networks intersect to shape the childcare difficulties experienced by women vendors in Mkuyuni, Nyamagana.

Methodology

Research Approach

This study employed a qualitative research approach to enable the collection of rich, descriptive data through direct engagement with participants. The qualitative approach is particularly suited for exploring complex human experiences, such as the parenting challenges women face while balancing street vending and childcare responsibilities. Open-ended engagement allows participants to express themselves in their own words, revealing nuanced perspectives, emotions, and coping strategies that structured surveys or quantitative tools might overlook. Parenting challenges are shaped by social, cultural, and economic contexts; thus, qualitative research is ideal for uncovering underlying meanings and the lived realities of women street vendors. As Boddy, C., (2016) observes, qualitative research prioritizes depth over breadth, ensuring that participants' voices are authentically captured, which is essential when exploring sensitive issues like childcare dependence on social networks. By focusing on rich, context-specific narratives, the approach provides practical insights for designing supportive interventions that are socially and culturally responsive.

Research Design

A cross-sectional research design was adopted to explore the experiences, perceptions, and challenges of women street vendors within a defined timeframe. This design is particularly useful for providing a snapshot of the current realities in Mkuyuni Ward, capturing variations in experiences among different age groups and social categories. The design allowed the collection of data from youths (18–35 years) and adults (36 years and above), providing a comprehensive picture of childcare challenges in informal work settings. Cross-sectional qualitative studies are effective in understanding immediate challenges and patterns, while being time- and resource-efficient (Boddy, C., 2016). The design enabled the study to capture social, economic, and environmental influences on childcare, ensuring that interventions can be targeted appropriately.

Research Paradigm

The constructivist paradigm guided this study, emphasizing that knowledge is socially constructed through experiences, interactions, and interpretations. This paradigm aligns with the study's focus on exploring how women perceive and manage parental responsibilities while engaging in street vending. Constructivism recognizes that realities are subjective, shaped by cultural, social, and economic contexts, and that participants' perceptions provide critical insights into their lived experiences (Clark et al., 2019). Applying this paradigm allowed the study to interpret childcare challenges as socially embedded phenomena influenced by family, community, and market dynamics. It guided the formulation of interview questions and discussion prompts that encouraged participants to articulate their experiences, challenges, and coping mechanisms in their own context.

Study Area

Mkuyuni Ward in Nyamagana District was purposively selected for its strategic location and demographic diversity, blending urban and peri-urban characteristics. The ward hosts major markets that attract women vendors from surrounding areas, offering a rich setting to explore childcare dependence on social networks. According to Mtana, S., (2022), Mkuyuni has a notable population of women balancing informal economic activities with parental responsibilities, making it an ideal environment to study the intersection of vending and childcare. The ward's mix of residential patterns, market density, and social networks provided opportunities to explore both individual and community-level coping strategies.

Study Population and Participant Selection Criteria

The population included women street vendors who were mothers or primary caregivers and local government officials involved in social welfare. Women vendors were essential for understanding first-hand experiences of balancing childcare with vending, while officials provided insights into available community support systems and institutional perspectives on informal work and childcare. Including both groups ensured

triangulation, allowing comparison of personal experiences with broader structural and policy considerations (Kothari, C., 2004). Participants were purposively selected to ensure relevance to the study objectives. Women vendors aged 18 years and above, who were mothers or caregivers of young children, were included because they directly experience the challenges of balancing vending and childcare. Local government officials, including Ward Executive Officers, Social Welfare Officers, and Community Development Officers, were selected due to their responsibilities in managing community welfare, child protection, and support for informal workers. Purposive selection ensured the inclusion of participants with relevant knowledge and experience, enhancing data richness and credibility (Boddy, C., 2016).

Sample Size and Sampling Techniques

The sample size was determined using the principle of saturation, where data collection continued until no new information emerged from participants. Saturation is widely recognized in qualitative research as an indicator that the data collected is sufficient to understand the phenomenon comprehensively. This approach ensured the study captured diverse experiences while avoiding redundancy, thereby maintaining the depth and richness of insights (Kothari, C., 2004). Purposive sampling guided the selection of both the study area and participants. Mkuyuni Ward was chosen because it provided the likelihood of rich, relevant data on childcare challenges among women vendors. Within the ward, participants were identified through walk-throughs of main vending areas, including markets, roadside stalls, and bus stops, ensuring direct engagement with those experiencing the phenomenon. Key informants from local government were approached based on their institutional roles in child welfare and support for informal workers. Purposive sampling was essential for targeting participants with first-hand experience and contextual knowledge, enabling the study to generate meaningful and actionable findings (Boddy, C., 2016).

Data Typology and Data Collection Methods

The study relied on primary data to capture accurate, context-specific experiences. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to provide detailed narratives, explore sensitive issues, and discuss personal experiences related to childcare dependence on social networks. FGDs complemented interviews by capturing group-level perspectives, consensus, and variations in shared experiences. The combined approach ensured comprehensive insights into the phenomenon, enhancing the validity and richness of the findings (Clark et al., 2019).

Ensuring Validity and Reliability

To enhance validity, a pilot study was conducted in Mabatini Ward, a context similar to Mkuyuni. The pilot allowed refinement of tools, assessment of question clarity, and

ensured the instruments effectively captured the intended phenomenon (Kimberlin et al., 2008). Reliability was ensured by maintaining consistency in data collection procedures, including the uniform application of tools, structured follow-up prompts, and standardized interviewing techniques. Consistent procedures reduced errors and enhanced the dependability of the findings (Kimberlin et al., 2008).

Data Analysis and Presentation

Thematic analysis was employed to systematically identify, analyze, and interpret patterns in the qualitative data. Transcribed data were reviewed to ensure accuracy and familiarity, then imported into NVivo version 15 for coding. Key concepts and phrases were organized into nodes, and emerging themes were refined into broader categories. NVivo's visualization tools facilitated exploration of connections between themes, supporting a comprehensive interpretation of participants' experiences and challenges (Pillai et al., 2022). Findings were presented thematically, with direct quotes from participants to illustrate experiences and enhance credibility. Themes were structured to align with the study's objective and were discussed in relation to literature and theoretical frameworks, ensuring clarity, coherence, and scholarly rigor (Boddy, C., 2016).

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical principles, including being approved and given the permit letter with reference numbers SAUT/VC/RCP/035/38 by the Institutional Research Ethics Reviewing Board of Saint Augustine University of Tanzania after reviewing it. This went hand in hand with obtaining research permits from regional and district authorities, ensuring informed consent, and protecting participant confidentiality.

In addition to that, participants were assigned identification codes to ensure anonymity. Under this coding system, "P01/W/I" would represent participant number 01, a woman street vendor (W) interviewed face-to-face (I), while "P01/W/F" would represent the same participant engaged in a focus group discussion (F). Similarly, "P01/E/I" would represent participant number 01, a ward executive officer (E) interviewed face-to-face, "P01/S/I" would represent a social welfare officer (S) interviewed face-to-face, and "P01/D/I" would represent a development officer (D) interviewed face-to-face. Participant numbers increased sequentially until data saturation was reached. Ethical protocols ensured respect for participants' dignity, safety, and rights throughout the research process (Saliya, R., 2024; Kothari, C., 2004).

Presentation of the Findings

Due to the demands of daily vending activities, women street vendors from Tanzania Urban areas often rely on social networks such as siblings, neighbors, or daycare centers to support their children's moral and social development (Shukia et al., 2020 p. 5). However, the childcare challenges

resulted from this dependence remain underexplored in existing literature. To address this gap, in this study the researcher conducted the in-depth interviews and Focus Group Discussions with relevant questions and follow-up probes with study participants to explore the childcare challenges resulting from this childcare dependence in Mkuyuni Ward, Nyamagana. The findings obtained revealed that women street vendors in Mkuyuni face multiple challenges when depending on social networks such as siblings, neighbors, and daycare centers for the care and wellbeing of their children. These difficulties undermine children's moral, social, emotional, and academic development. The key themes are presented below;

Disturbing Social and Academic Development of Older Siblings

About 37% of participants (n=11) reported that older siblings were often tasked with caring for younger children during vending hours. While this ensured supervision, it transferred parental responsibilities to children, disrupting their personal development and academic focus. One mother explained: "Because vending takes most of my day, I leave my eldest daughter to care for her younger siblings. This makes her act like a parent instead of focusing on her own studies." (P12/W/I) This highlights how high parenting demands, combined with limited adult support, force children into early caregiver roles, negatively impacting their education and personal growth.

Difficulty in Controlling Children's Behavior

More than half of the respondents (55%, n=16) noted that children left with neighbors or community members were often exposed to negative behaviors, such as rude language or inappropriate television content. A participant stated: "When I leave my children with neighbors while vending, they sometimes learn bad behaviors like using rude language or watching TV shows that I do not allow." (P17/W/F). This suggests that inconsistent supervision weakens mothers' ability to instill moral guidance, exposing children to peer influences that may conflict with family values.

Harsh Treatment and Neglect by Caregivers

About 31% of participants (n=9) expressed concerns over harsh treatment or neglect from neighbors and relatives entrusted with childcare. One respondent noted: "Relying on neighbors to look after my children when I go to vend has caused many problems because sometimes, they punish or mistreat them in ways I could never do." (P11/W/I). This indicates that dependence on social networks sometimes places children at risk of harm, as caregivers may use disciplinary measures inconsistent with parental practices.

Limited Moral Guidance in Daycare Centers

A smaller proportion, 21% (n=6), observed that daycare centers primarily focused on children's safety and supervision, with little emphasis on teaching discipline,

manners, or moral values. As one woman explained: "The daycare centers help the women street vendors in look after their children physical, while paying less attention in shaping their moral growth in terms of behaviors, they only focus on safety." (P09/W/I). This finding suggests that while daycare centers provide basic physical security, they fail to contribute to children's moral and ethical development.

Weak Parent-Child Bond Due to Absence

Almost half of the women (45%, n=13) reported that spending long hours vending had weakened their emotional connection with their children. One participant explained, "Spending a lot of time on business has reduced the closeness I used to have with my children; now our relationship is weak because I am rarely around" (P12/W/I). This indicates that limited time for interaction restricted mothers' ability to provide consistent motherhood moral guidance and reinforced family values, which in turn weakened the parent child relationship and had a negative impact on the children's emotional wellbeing.

Discussion of the Findings

The findings of the study were organized into five main themes that illustrate the childcare challenges faced by women street vendors in Mkuyuni Ward due to their reliance on social networks. These themes include Disturbing Social and Academic Development of Older Siblings, Difficulty in Controlling Children's Behavior, Harsh Treatment and Neglect by Caregivers, Limited Moral Guidance in Daycare Centers, and Weak Parent-Child Bond Due to Absence. The following is the discussion on the particular themes;

Disturbing Social and Academic Development of Older Siblings

The study revealed that women street vendors often leave older children to care for younger siblings while they attend to vending activities. Although this ensures supervision for younger children, it places excessive caregiving responsibilities on older siblings, affecting their schooling, social development, and personal growth. According to the Parenting Stress Model, when parenting demands exceed available resources, both parental functioning and child wellbeing are compromised, which is evident in the stress and role strain experienced by older siblings in Mkuyuni.

Similar findings were reported by Abebe, T., (2007) in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, where children assumed caregiving roles in low-income households. The difference lies in perspective: while Abebe emphasized children's agency and adaptive strategies, the current study highlights the burden and stress experienced by older siblings as perceived by mothers. This difference may be due to the research focus: Abebe explored caregiving from children's perspectives, whereas the Mkuyuni study examined it from mothers' viewpoints, revealing their concern over the impact on children's development.

The current study contributes to knowledge by framing sibling caregiving not only as an adaptive strategy but also as a stressor resulting from women's participation in informal vending, highlighting the trade-offs between economic survival and children's holistic development. However, the Future research should explore the long-term effects of sibling caregiving on children's education and wellbeing. This is suggested because understanding these impacts can guide policies and interventions that support women street vendors while safeguarding their children's social and academic development.

Risk of Negative Peer Influence from Neighbors

Participants indicated that leaving children with neighbors exposes them to negative peer influences, such as rude language or inappropriate media content. This reflects the challenge of maintaining moral and behavioral guidance while meeting economic demands. The findings align with the Parenting Stress Model, which posits that limited supervision increases parental stress and compromises children's behavioral development. Comparable results were found by Okeke et al., (2016) in Nigeria, where children left with neighbors often adopted undesirable behaviors.

The difference lies in focus: while the Nigerian study emphasized broader long-term socialization patterns, the Mkuyuni study highlights immediate maternal stress arising from vending-related absence. This difference may be due to contextual factors: informal street vending involves unpredictable hours and limited alternative childcare options in Mkuyuni, unlike the settings examined in Nigeria. The current study contributes by providing context-specific insights into how reliance on informal social networks directly affects children's behavior and maternal stress in urban Tanzanian settings. Future research could investigate strategies for strengthening community childcare support systems to ensure safer social environments for children of working mothers. This is due the fact that improving neighborhood-based childcare structures can help minimize negative peer influences and enhance children's overall wellbeing.

Harsh Treatment and Neglect from Caregivers

Women street vendors reported that depending on neighbors or relatives sometimes leads to harsh discipline, scolding, or neglect, which mothers would not otherwise impose. This indicates that parenting demands exceed available adult support, exposing children to inconsistent care and emotional insecurity. The Parenting Stress Model explains that such reliance increases maternal stress while limiting effective parenting. Similar observations were made by Kamatala, R., (2021) in Dar es Salaam, though their study focused on physical neglect such as missed meals and hygiene. The difference lies in emphasis: while the Dar es Salaam study framed neglect mainly in terms of physical care, the Mkuyuni study emphasizes emotional consequences such as anxiety, mistrust, and fear.

This difference may be due to scope and methodology: the Dar es Salaam study examined childcare adequacy broadly, whereas the Mkuyuni study specifically explored mothers' perceived emotional impact of unreliable caregiving. The current study contributes to knowledge by highlighting that informal social networks may unintentionally compromise children's emotional wellbeing, adding nuance to the understanding of urban parenting challenges in Tanzania. Future research should investigate the strategies strengthen informal care networks in order to avoid harsh treatment and emotional insecurity for children. This can improve both child wellbeing and maternal stress management.

Limited Moral Guidance in Daycare Centers

Participants reported that daycare centers provide safety but minimal attention to moral education, discipline, or social values. Mothers felt reassured about their children's physical safety but concerned about the lack of moral and behavioral guidance. This aligns with the Parenting Stress Model, as reliance on insufficient care systems increases maternal stress and reduces the effectiveness of parenting. Chove et al., (2020) reported similar findings in Dar es Salaam, where daycare focused on feeding, hygiene, and safety rather than moral education. The difference lies in emphasis: while the previous study highlighted structural limitations of daycare, the Mkuyuni study emphasizes maternal stress arising from these gaps.

This difference may be explained by the focus of the current study: it specifically explores the psychological tension mothers experience, whereas Chove and Mboya examined daycare quality from a more general institutional perspective. The current study contributes by linking the limited moral guidance in daycare centers to maternal stress and concerns about children's social and emotional development, offering a nuanced understanding of parenting challenges in urban Tanzania. However, there is a need to examine how daycare programs can incorporate moral and social value education alongside childcare services. This is suggested because the current findings show that mothers experience stress over the lack of moral guidance, and exploring integrative approaches could help enhance both child development and parental confidence in daycare systems.

Weak Parent-Child Bond Due to Absence

Long hours spent vending reduced opportunities for meaningful interaction between mothers and children, weakening emotional bonds and limiting reinforcement of moral and behavioral guidance. According to the Parenting Stress Model, insufficient time and resources exacerbate stress and compromise both parental functioning and child wellbeing. Similar findings were reported by Kopp et al., (2023) in Germany, where long maternal work hours affected children's behavior. The difference lies in context: unlike formal employment, informal street vending involves unpredictable hours and limited support, intensifying the impact on emotional connections.

This difference may be due to the nature of informal work, which offers no structured support or predictable schedules, unlike formal employment contexts studied elsewhere. The study contributes to knowledge by providing context-specific evidence on how informal work arrangements reduce parent-child interaction and emotional closeness, highlighting the interplay between economic survival and holistic child development in Nyamagana. However, there is a need to explore interventions that help women street vendors maintain stronger emotional connections with their children despite demanding work schedules. This is suggested because the findings from this study show that long vending hours weaken parent-child bonds, and identifying supportive strategies could enhance both maternal wellbeing and children's emotional development

Conclusion

Reliance on social networks for childcare creates major challenges for women street vendors in Mkuyuni, affecting children's social, moral, and emotional development while increasing maternal stress. Children left with siblings, neighbors, or daycare centers often face inconsistent supervision, weak moral guidance, negative peer influences, and reduced parent-child bonds, while mothers experience anxiety and strain from balancing vending and parenting. These findings show how informal livelihood strategies compromise child wellbeing and heighten parental vulnerability. Addressing these issues requires stronger community support, affordable childcare services, and child-friendly vending spaces, together with interventions that integrate parenting and psychosocial support. This study offers insights for academia, policy, and community practice, highlighting the need for measures that safeguard children and strengthen the resilience of women vendors and their families.

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